

# Writing Our Lives 2021



Osher Lifelong Learning Institute  
at Auburn University

Auburn, Alabama

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## Writing Our Lives

Except for one term during the current pandemic, Writing Our Lives has been offered by the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) at Auburn University three terms each year since 2004, taught by the two retired educators who organized the course, Cathy Buckhalt and Terry Ley. Thirty to forty class members gather for ninety minutes each Monday morning to remember, reflect, write, and share their life stories. Class members wrote the stories that appear in this anthology during the last three or four terms.

Terry C. Ley, editor  
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## The Poet, On Memory

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### Reverie and Invocation

William Carlos Williams

Whether the rain comes down  
or there be sunny days  
the sleets of January or the haze  
of autumn afternoons, when  
we dream of our youth our gaze  
grows mellow, wise man or fool,  
we were young, the future  
beckoned us.

Now we grow old and grey  
and all we knew is forgotten  
there comes alive in  
the ash of today, memory! a god  
who revives us! the apple trees  
we climbed as a boy  
the caress on our necks of  
a summer breeze.

Come back and give us  
those days when passion drove us  
to break every rule.  
We weren't bad, but good!  
May our preachers find us  
the courage still to sin so  
and win so! and win so!  
a life everlasting.

American poet William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) was also a novelist and playwright—and a physician. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and was United States Poet Laureate.

## Experience and Obsession with Minibeasts

Bonnie Adams

Although considering ourselves veteran movers and adapters, summers in Ohio and New England could not have prepared us for the new world thrust upon us our first summer in Roanoke, Texas.

We had endured many creepy, crawly minibeasts in the Concord, Massachusetts, countryside. First there was the gypsy moth invasion of 1981. It holds the all-time record of defoliation of millions of acres. Unsightly webs hid the large, hairy caterpillars as they fed. Their droppings would create a pitter patter sound like rain descending from the treetops. Our decks, streets and sidewalks became slippery from their excrement. My girls gave up riding their bikes because the caterpillars hung from long silk threads low enough to blow in their faces.

Then for more yuck factor, we were lucky enough to catch the seventeen-year cicada outbreak! It truly was a big show! It's been said that "cicadas have the souls of poets who can't keep quiet." Just try sleeping with jackhammer sounds vibrating outside your window and then skidding on their exoskeletons when getting in your car! Rodents, lizards, birds, and snakes were very healthy that year! New Englanders, being a resourceful people, made crunchy, chocolate covered cicadas, used them in stir-fries, and sold fried cicadas on the street. A cookbook, *Cicadalicious*, became very popular and no, I don't have a copy!

Then as luck would have it, we got to experience a cicada outbreak in Chicago! They were an icky treasure trove of entertainment for the kids in my daycare. I gave them nets to capture the red-eyed creatures and then left them on their own. They raced them up ropes, collected their shells, wore them, and of course brought them into the house. It was cheap entertainment that lasted almost a week!

Now on to Texas and into a world we never knew existed. Our new home was on a street cut out of a meadow. We loved our lovely meadow, loved its musty fragrance, the music of birds singing in the morning, frogs twanging at night, cicadas buzzing and grasshoppers chirping. We loved its movement and colors, the fireflies, the sunlight sparkling on spiderwebs and its golden dandelions. Such harmless idyllic attributes, but we couldn't imagine the challenges ahead!

We innocently enjoyed the butterflies and dragonflies busy in the meadow not realizing their caterpillars attracted spiders, beetles, and, in turn, frogs, crickets and grasshoppers. Then we learned a sobering fact. Five acres of grassland can contain a ton of insects, and that's not including fire ants! We did not go barefooted that summer!

Then came the plagues, not of biblical proportions but close enough! The first invasion was of crickets. Cricket swarms are drawn to light, so we lived in the dark or

risked having our carpet stained or chewed up. But we needn't have feared because soon the thousands of chirping, earsplitting insects dissolved into a funky stink of dead bodies that could just be broomed or blown away into the field. "Meadow" is too lovely a term for it now!

Next came a plague of teeny, tiny frogs or "peepers" as the Texans called them. The streets seemed to vibrate with their jumping and their earsplitting, trilling waves of sound. The high-pitched peeping mating call was so fast and loud at night that we slept with pillows over our heads. Although they did eat the cricket remains, they in turn attracted snakes, salamanders, and birds. Our cat got fat but never once ate at home for weeks!

Next up, the grasshoppers or locusts. They were everywhere, swarming, eating, leaping, hopping and of course mating. Luckily, our swarm had no crops and not many trees to destroy. All they had was the meadow, so we thought, "Go for it!" Luckily, they wouldn't bite you but would incite a terrible itching if landing on you. And again, their harsh, rasping chorus at night made sleep impossible. The neighborhood kids did delight in riding bikes over them, exploding their little bodies. Cars braking too fast would skid on their slippery carcasses and at times run off the road.

Luckily, there were many perks we enjoyed in our new development, which will be the subject of some future writings.

I have traded the above concerns for Alabama's abundance of nuisance bugs and critters. I now get to complain about fire ants, beetles, cockroaches, carpenter bees, wasps, termites, yellow jackets, snakes and mosquitoes. Past experience has toughened me to ignore most of the creepy, slithery, stinky, creatures here at home, but I'm still on alert for spiders with hourglass red on their bellies and for copper-colored and rattling snakes sunning on my drive.



## **Dad's Final Project**

**Ken Autrey**

When my parents visited us, if they planned to stay a while, Dad loved nothing more than a project to work on. The house we purchased in Columbia, S.C., was not exactly a fixer-upper, but there was much to be done to get it in shape. When we'd been there a few years and I told Dad we needed a set of shelves in our hall bathroom, he brought along not only his tools but also some oak planks cut and planed at the workshop he had built years before. He strapped the lumber to a rack on top of the car for the five-hour trip.

The day after my parents arrived, Dad started on the shelves, beginning with a sketch of their dimensions. He was a slow and careful craftsman, so I thought nothing of it as he methodically measured, remeasured, set up my sawhorses, laid out the boards, pondered lengths and widths, then measured and marked again.

But when on the second day he still had not begun the installation, I was puzzled. I noticed he was taking frequent breaks, going into the kitchen for coffee and sitting for long stretches before returning to his task.

Finally, he began positioning the shelving, using angle braces and screws to fix it to the wall. Several times, he took a piece down to recut or level it. Gradually I realized that he was not working with his usual efficiency. A job I expected to take no more than a couple afternoons was stretching into four days, and they would soon need to return home. When I realized he would not complete the job, a failure that would normally be anathema to him, I assured him that I could finish it up, and he did not protest. I was able to complete the work in a day or so, and as I varnished the beautiful oak wood, I realized this might be Dad's final woodworking project.

Another year elapsed before we admitted that Dad's memory was slipping and that he was experiencing Alzheimer's Disease. We eventually realized that his brain, his most valuable carpenter's tool, was betraying him. I had attributed his hesitancy with the shelves to the physical fatigue of an aging parent rather than any cognitive issue.

Even as Dad slowly slipped farther into the confusion and disorientation of Alzheimer's, he retained his habitual good spirits and sense of humor. During one visit with him, well after he lost the ability to construct a fully formed set of thoughts (let alone a full set of shelves), I offered to clean up the clutter in my parents' hall closet. He laughingly protested, "Ken, you're only going to be here a weekend!" It wasn't a big job, but I took that as his wry commentary both on how messy the closet was and on the effort it would have taken him to do the job.

As Dad's mind led him to recede into his own baffled inner world, we were thankful that he remained amiable and cooperative, which allowed Mom to care for him until the stroke that forced him to the hospital and soon did him in. I remain thankful that he was

able to remain physically active well into his seventies, deftly wielding his tools to fashion tables, cradles, shelves, outbuildings, and most notably, a beautiful lake cabin, all of which our extended family continues to enjoy. The version of my dad I prefer to remember is not the enfeebled old man but the adept craftsman who could fell a giant oak tree, electrically wire a house, install bathroom plumbing, and build anything from an end table to a stone chimney.



*I've always tried out my material on my dogs first. You know, with Angel, he sits there and listens and I get the feeling he understands everything. But with Charley, I always felt he was just waiting to get a word in edgewise. Years ago, when my red setter chewed up the manuscript of *Of Mice and Men*, I said at the time that the dog must have been an excellent literary critic.*

– John Steinbeck



# Remembering James Dickey

Ken Autrey

I arrived at the University of South Carolina in 1983 to work on a Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Composition. Until then, I was unaware that nationally-known poet James Dickey was on the faculty. I had seen Dickey interviewed by Dick Cavett on TV back in the mid-70s in the afterglow of his popularity as author of *Deliverance*. I had devoured the book and loved the film, which includes a cameo of the hulking author as a surly sheriff. The more I heard about Dickey's teaching and the more I read of his poetry, the more I wanted to take some of his classes. I'd be crazy not to. Finally, in the fall of 1985, I signed up for Dickey's class in American Poetry. Our assignment was simply to write four papers, each an "encounter with an American poet," two born before 1914, two born later. My first paper was on Delmore Schwartz. Though Dickey liked it well enough, his few marginal comments pertained less to my prose than to Schwartz, whom he greatly admired. "Go, Delmore!" he wrote at one point. And later, "Delmore, I couldn't have said it better!" My next paper was on Adrienne Rich, of whom Dickey was not a fan. Of this effort, he wrote in his spidery script, "This is, I suppose, the best case that can be made for this woman."

For all of the tales about Dickey's debauchery and drinking, I never saw him come to class drunk. Nor, in the various times I saw him read to an audience, did he appear tipsy. Perhaps his most dissolute days were behind him. That's not to say he didn't still enjoy a drink. One afternoon, following a public reading by Dickey, the English Department held an informal reception in the faculty lounge. There was plenty of booze along with a few nuts and pretzels. As the crowd thinned out, the Department Chair, as usual, gathered up the liquor to squirrel it away until the next reception. Dickey, settled in an easy chair and holding forth to a crowd of graduate students, got up, grabbed two bottles of bourbon before they disappeared, and exclaimed, "This bottle is for them, and this one is mine." None of us left until the bourbon was gone.

My friend Gordon Van Ness, aware that I was conducting research on writers' journals and journal writing, told me that some of the poet's early journals (1952-53) were tucked among the many boxes of Dickey material temporarily stored in the South Caroliniana Library on campus. After obtaining the obligatory permission letter from Matthew Brucoli, Dickey's literary executor, I proceeded to the library for some literary sleuthing. The un-catalogued boxes contained a fascinating but disorganized array of Dickey's papers and files—trash and treasure. Stuffed next to a folder documenting the various drafts of, say, "The Movement of Fish" I found a sheaf of water bills or a packet of letters from schoolchildren thanking Dickey for his visit to their class. I unearthed several of the journals, which contained accounts of his reading, notes for his writing, and a valuable record of a young poet's maturation.

After my immersion in the raw material of his journals, I wanted to interview Dickey about these unpublished materials, so he invited me to join him for lunch at the Faculty House. He was one of only two professors ever to issue me such an invitation. As we ate and drank (moderately), I scribbled madly as he patiently held forth. He explained his reason for keeping journals, quoting Henry James: "to tap the deep well of unconscious cerebration." He said he gave up this informal writing because of "time, time, time."

When it was time to wrap up our talk, I offered to pay for lunch, and Dickey didn't object. Well worth it, I thought. I didn't even mind paying for his two martinis.

Dickey's work often touches on music and its power over him. I'm sorry that I never heard Dickey play the guitar in person. The closest I've come is listening to a tape of his playing copied for me by Gordon Van Ness. When I first heard the scratchy tape, I was struck by the quality of his picking, mostly old favorites like "Wildwood Flower." Dickey had a wonderfully sonorous voice for reading but never claimed any ability as a singer, so the music was strictly instrumental. Clearly he brought to the playing of a guitar something of the discipline he devoted to writing. He often said that music was a powerful influence on his writing.

Just as Dickey saw his music and poetry as related, he saw his poetry as inextricably linked to the prose. He wanted his students to grasp this interconnectedness. One day while in the throes of my dissertation, I was in the elevator with him, and he asked whether I'd been writing poetry. Apologetically, I told him I was immersed in the dissertation. He glared at me with a crease in his brow and said, "Don't lose track of the poetry. Everything starts there."

A few years ago, I spent some time with Tracy K. Smith, a wonderful poet who later became the U.S. Poet Laureate. I was startled to find that she shares my enthusiasm for Dickey's work. She was interested when I told her I had studied with him. Her work is nothing like Dickey's, but she counts him as an important influence. Soon thereafter, I read Terrance Hayes's National Book Award winner, *Lighthouse*, and I found there a poem called "The Shepherd" with an epigraph from Dickey's "The Sheep Child." I was pleased that two prominent African-American poets find something to emulate in Dickey's work at a time when his poetry is generally out of favor.

Once when I was in Litchfield Beach, South Carolina, I took a side trip to visit Dickey's grave in the beautiful old cemetery at All Saints' Episcopal Church. The plot, which faces the church across the road, is shaded by huge gnarled live oaks draped with Spanish moss. His grave, next to that of Maxine, his first wife, is topped by a substantial tombstone in the middle of which is carved the same eye surrounded by a circle of foliage that appeared on the first edition of *Deliverance*. I imagine this as the all-seeing eye of the poet who, even in death, casts a cold eye on the work of his apprentices. I think of Dickey's poem "Tomb Stone," one of his last, in which the visitor to the grave asks forgiveness for coming

as I have done  
For a while in a vertical body  
That breathes the rectangular solitude

Dickey liked to quote his former teacher Alan Tate, who said, "The best poetry concerns human situations from which there's no escape." Dickey would say, "I'm with Alan. I'll go with those too." Not a bad credo for any poet. Dickey has been gone now for 25 years, but his influence, perhaps poised for a resurgence among young poets, is a force from which I can't escape—nor would I wish to.

# Way Too Cold

Nancy Bissinger

Drippy wintry mix has morphed into pouring and very cold rain. The red-winged blackbirds and cardinals that were scrambling to get seeds and suet at my feeders have hunkered down somewhere. The young grayish possum with a heart-shaped face scrounging for food scratched from the platform by towhees has found a warm spot to wait for drier moments. Tiny teardrops of ice hang on the bare Bradford pear limbs as rainwater flies from the grooves in the tin roof. All my outdoor plants are lined up inside along the enclosed porch. They will be cold, but they won't freeze.

The heavy rain slows to a misty drizzle as the sky darkens and the creatures outside begin to move again. The red-bellied woodpecker scoots up the pine tree pecking at the bark and the big brown fox squirrel resumes his spot on the feeder of cracked corn—sure that it is there just for him. White-throated and chipping sparrows jump around, waiting their turn for the millet and other small seeds among the corn. The puffed up collared dove sits on the crepe myrtle while the fidgety goldfinches cover the feeder.

Rain drips from the roof as thunder clouds bump into each other like loose bowling balls in the gutters. The teardrops on the pear limbs now look more like small pearls stuck to the branches. Here comes the possum. I've never seen him move so fast, running across the driveway from the woods behind the fence and taking his place under the feeder. He doesn't have long to wait for the birds to flick morsels to him as they try to find a dry meal worm.

Before the temperature drops too low, I put on my leopard-printed plastic rain boots, a heavy coat, smart wool cap and mismatched mittens, jump into the Polaris with two buckets of oats and head to the pasture to feed the two hungry horses. Their manes are flecked with ice, but they are glad to see me and eager for the calories in the oats.

Now I wait for the predicted freeze—a roaring fire to keep me warm, needlework to keep me busy and a movie to keep me company. The forecasted low temperature of 14 has been modified to 16, still way too cold for coastal Mississippi.



## Fractured

Bill Brown

My first broken arm was my sister's fault. The next two were more or less mine.

School playgrounds in those days weren't much safer than a cabinet shop or a slaughterhouse, and the playground at A. E. Phillips Elementary School, the lab school for Louisiana Tech, was the scene of fractures numbers one and three.

The playground had the kinds of things that were common: slides, merry-go-round, monkey bars, and a couple of ball fields. There may have even been a sand box. At recess, everything was in use, and there was one teacher keeping an eye over everything.

I was in the second grade and Sis was in the third, and we were attracted to the monkey bars, where a competition was in progress. The metal monkey bars were like two vertical ladders connected by a horizontal ladder. In ordinary use, you would mount the ladder at one end to grasp the rungs of the horizontal ladder. As you dangled a few feet off the ground, you moved your hands from one rung to the other like, well, a monkey, until you reached the other end.

That was much too dull. So, someone had invented a competition. A kid would start from each end and meet somewhere near the middle. The goal was to wrap your legs around your opponent and pull him or her off the bar. The winner took on the next challenger.

As chance would have it, Sis and I squared off against each other. We met in the middle, and although she was bigger than I, I made the first move and pulled her free. While I was still hanging by my hands, Sis grabbed both of my legs and pulled down. I threw out both arms to break the fall.

When I sat up, my left wrist was kind of sagging, and it hurt, but only a little. The second and third grade medical experts gathered round to render a diagnosis. Several said it was only a sprain, a few others insisted it was broken. I didn't have a clue. Eventually, someone ran to get Mrs. Richardson, the second-grade teacher, who was sure that I should go to the doctor. Dr. Thomas, who I would see more often than I would like, took X-rays and then fashioned a plaster cast that ended below the elbow. I achieved a certain amount of celebrity as the first of our class to break a bone. Some people even autographed the cast.

It's Interesting to reflect now that there was no aftermath, no talk of lawsuits, no removing the offending monkey bars. Accidents happen. I didn't even get mad at my sister.

Fracture number two came not long after the cast came off my left arm. Some bigger kids, probably nine or ten years old, lived down the street, and I often played with them. On this particular

day, I told my mom that I was going down the street. She said that was okay, but she added, “be careful.”

When you’re playing tag, being careful is not at the top of your mind; avoiding getting tagged is, and sometimes that calls for a deft maneuver. That’s what I was doing, deftly darting out of the way of Charlie, one of the big boys. He swiped me just enough for me to go flying headfirst toward the ground. Somewhere between launch and landing, I thought about being careful. I thought especially about being careful of my left arm.

So, I stuck out my right arm. This time the fracture was just below the elbow, and Dr. Thomas’s cast extended above the elbow, making a whole range of activities awkward. Celebrity was becoming notoriety.

I made it almost through the third grade before the playground sprang another trap.

This time it was the merry-go-round. It looked like an upside-down cone. Metal rods angled down from a center pole to support the merry-go-round itself. You could make it go around in a sedate circle, or you could get it going fast, shift your weight and make it move from side to

side while it was going around. If you shifted your weight enough, you could make it bang right against the pole.

We had been told not to do that, so, of course we did it. The side of the merry-go-round that hit the pole was low, and the opposite side high. When the pole is struck, the side-to-side motion stops abruptly, but anything that isn’t securely attached keeps moving, just as things fly around when you abruptly brake your car.

I was on the high side, and I was not securely attached.

This time the fracture on the right arm was right where the previous one had been. Fortunately, the bones had healed.

I haven’t broken a bone since, but as long as any of my elementary school peers are still alive, the legend lives.

In a telephone conversation with my wife’s cousin a few years ago, I told him about a recent trip to the emergency room. His wife, my classmate from first grade through high school, overheard enough to ask matter-of-factly, “Did he break his arm?”

*I love writing. I love the swirl and swing of words as they tangle with human emotions.*

– James Michener

## A Lesson in Management

Bill Brown

When the managing editor asked me to step into his office, I guessed he had a news tip to pass on. I covered city hall for the *St. Petersburg Times*. It was the best local beat on the paper. I was 26 years old.

“How would you like to be the Bradenton Bureau chief?” the boss asked even before I sat down.

“What’s happening with Bob?” I asked. Bob, the current bureau chief, was one of my best friends. He had preceded me on the city hall beat.

“We’re bringing him back up here.”

The bureau chief job caught me by surprise. I was happy with what I was doing and figured I’d be on the beat for another year or two. Still, I had enough ego to think I could handle the job as well as anyone who was likely to be named. “Yes,” I said. “It sounds like fun.”

What made it sound fun was that the bureau competed every day with the *Tampa Tribune*, the *Bradenton Herald* and the *Sarasota Herald Tribune*. In the 1960s, the *Times* dominated St. Petersburg and Pinellas County. Across the bay the *Tampa Tribune* had Hillsborough County sewed up. Tampa and St. Petersburg were so different they might have been in separate hemispheres. So, the two metro papers concentrated on the coast. Both had bureaus in Clearwater to the north and Bradenton to the south. Each bureau had a staff of fulltime reporters and, part-time correspondents farther afield. There were different editions of the paper for each region.

I spent three days with Bob, meeting the staff and correspondents and some of the local officials. Then it was all mine.

Newspapers at the time didn’t spend a lot of time training people to be managers. If you were a good reporter and had an interest in becoming an editor, it was assumed that you would learn what you needed to know on the fly.

It was a lot like handing someone the keys to a Ferrari without giving them the owner’s manual.

In Bradenton, we had four reporters and a clerk. There were parttime correspondents in Sarasota, Venice, and Punta Gorda.

The South Suncoast, as the region was called, was my fiefdom. I directed all the daily news coverage south of the Sunshine Skyway Bridge that spanned the mouth of Tampa Bay. I rarely heard from my boss, and I usually went to St. Petersburg only for a monthly staff meeting. I was proud of my staff and the work they did.

Our daily contact with the main office was with the copy desk, where stories were edited and pages laid out.

We sent our copy and film to the main office in packets via Trailways Bus. Stories finished after the bus run were sent by teletype.

Every afternoon, I sent to the main office a budget—a list of the stories we had coming—and my recommendations on how those stories should be displayed. Every day I checked to see what the competition had done.

Sometimes the copy desk misplaced a story or totally missed the point on a headline. Sometimes they held a story due to a lack of space. Often it was one that the competition had played big.

Most of the people on the desk didn't know our region, and I was not reluctant to try to educate them by pointing out their miscues.

The bureau ran smoothly, and the boss seemed happy.

But a year or two after I'd moved to the bureau, I was catching up with friends in the newsroom after one of the monthly staff meetings. Chick Ober, the copy editor who had become my mentor on precise word usage and other joys of the language, asked if I had time for a cup of coffee.

Chick and I had never socialized. If he wanted to have coffee, he had something important to say.

In the coffee shop upstairs, we found a table. Chick didn't waste words: "I keep telling the guys on the copy desk that you're a nice guy. But most of them have come since you went to Bradenton. The only Bill Brown they know is the person who writes those memos. They don't think SOB stands for Sweet Old Bill. You might want to look at some of those memos and see what you would think."

By the time I got back to Bradenton, everyone had left the office. I pulled the file and sat at my desk reading carbons of memos I'd sent to the copy desk. I tried to pretend I didn't know anything about the author. Some of them I read two or three times.

Of the guy who wrote those memos I thought, what a jerk.

I sat in the quiet office for a while, thinking.

Then I put a sheet of copy paper in my typewriter, wrote a note and put it in a green interoffice envelope:

chick,  
you're right. thank you.  
bbrown

## Teacher

Bill Brown

Chick Ober was a teacher only to those who wanted to be taught. He did not cut an imposing figure: round face, round glasses, bowtie. He resembled nothing so much as a toad that had swallowed a particularly tasty fly.

Chick's title was not teacher. He had, in fact, no title at all. He was just a rim man on the copy desk of the newspaper where I began my career.

On larger papers, copy editors were usually older than the reporting staff. They were almost universally grumpy. Their task was to edit the stories destined for the next day's paper, for accuracy and completeness and for spelling and grammar. They were almost universally grumpy because they regarded themselves as the last defense of the language against the barbarian horde that would debase it.

Chick did what he could to convert the barbarians.

I was the rawest of rookies, working the police beat, when I first encountered Chick. I looked up and he was standing by my desk. "In that police roundup," he said, "you used the word *evidently*. I think you needed *apparently*. There is a difference. You could look it up."

He turned back to the copy desk before I could say anything.

I went to the big dictionary on a stand in the corner and looked up *evidently* and *apparently*. Chick looked up when I stopped by the copy desk. "You're right," I said. "Thank you." He gave me a brief smile.

That was Chick's way. In his mild, diffident manner, he would sidle up to a reporter's desk and offer his suggestions. He had no authority, and it was not in his nature to push. If his help was rejected, he turned his attention to someone more receptive. Many who thought they didn't need advice from a guy past middle age who was just a copy editor did not survive the newspaper's stringent probationary period.

I did not require a lot of polishing in Chick Ober's finishing school for wayward writers. I had had four superior English teachers in high school and had been in honors English classes in college.

Whenever he did find something, though, I always listened. And I always acknowledged his assistance.

Fast forward a couple of years. I was a newly minted manager, and Chick gave me some of the best management advice I've ever received. But that's another story.



## **Huxley, A Pup Full of Personality and Love**

**Cathy Buckhalt**

January 19 is Huxley's birthday. He is now four. Before we went to bed last night, I asked, "Hux, will you wake up a new dog, one who doesn't chase your sister or eat your toys?" He did not.

"His name is Julius," Paul says. "You know, Julius Erving, one of my favorite basketball players. We'll call him Dr. J."

"No, there is nothing I like about that name. Too many former students. He will be Oliver, like Oliver Twist, the orphan."

As we neared the rescue, Paul reminds me not to bring up my dislike of the name Julius to the staff.

At the kennel, a smiling face with beautiful golden eyes greets us. His kennel door is open, and he bounds for Paul and Layla, obviously recognizing them. Tail wagging, tongue lolling, he turns his attention to me. I force out, "Hello, Julius. Come here, sweet boy."

He is no Julius, but he is no Oliver either. A scamp, for sure, but pedigreed and smart enough to know how to win us over. He gives full-body hugs.

Suddenly I hear Paul ask, "Can we change his name?"

"Of course. He hasn't had it long."

"Cathy thinks Oliver, but that doesn't speak to me."

Paul and I look at each other. We had been discussing independent, free spirits from history as we discussed names. Now we knew together.

"He's Huxley." Perfect!

Huxley was supposed to be a bargain rescue. If we paid for his heartworm treatment, there would be no adoption fee.

Now, three years later, if we add up what he has eaten or torn up, I doubt he can be called a bargain. Add several shoes, books, kitchen towels, and half a toybox of stuffed animals.

According to Paul, these losses are our fault. Shoes go in the closet; books are shelved, and the toys are his anyway.

Looking past these losses, Huxley brings so much joy and happiness to our lives. He bounds across the yard like a deer. He hugs us. He makes us chuckle, especially when he sleeps upside down with one arm raised. "I have a question."

There is no doubt Huxley has found his home, and the happiness he brings us is priceless.

Today he is four. He is still the same trickster. He is here with me as I type, and we find comfort being together. Happy birthday, Huxley.

## Delinquent

Wendy Cleveland

Being a good girl wasn't always easy. It took a lot of hard work. I earned my Girl Scout badges, sold hundreds of boxes of thin mints, and weathered the soggy mud bog of a rainy weekend jamboree beside the Delaware River. In Sunday school I memorized the spelling of Moab, Nebuchadnezzar, and Zachariah. In choir I learned to differentiate between *allegro* and *adagio*, *piano* and *forte*. But when I took sophomore geometry, I hit a wall.

To this day I cannot remember my teacher's name. I can, however, still picture her round face and huge black glasses with thick lenses meant either to correct her poor vision or to give her an aura of intellectual superiority. For literary purposes I'll name her Miss X, as in x/y/z.

I was scheduled into her fourth period class on the second floor overlooking the rear parking lot and field beyond where cows grazed. My eyes couldn't help straying from textbook triangles to those large bovine beasties grazing and farting and succumbing to a nap in the shade of a leafy tree. Because our desks were close together in straight rows, it was easy to pass notes, which I did. Regularly. Gossip flew back and forth on folded slips of paper that fell to the floor next to me or found their way to the desk in front of me when I moseyed up to the pencil sharpener. The messages were mundane: *Are you going to the dance @ Mt. Penn on Sat. nite? Did you hear that Sandy and Bob broke up?* Miss X, on more than one occasion, retrieved my notes and

ripped them into tiny pieces and dropped them into the trash can without stopping her boring monotone lecture about the hypotenuse or acute angle. The concept of spatial relations was, and still remains, obtuse. In addition to being a note passer, I was also a whisperer, but only when Miss X turned away to write on the board. Her hearing was excellent, and more than once she stopped to peer over those black rims with "See me after class, Miss White."

I spent several detentions in that geometry room the first marking period of the year, making up for my indiscretions and getting the help I needed to prove a theorem. There was no animosity between us. I was not rude, just bored and frustrated. She was not angry, just establishing her alpha role in the classroom. I did my time and assured her I would be good. However, the notes continued to pass in a more concealed manner, and she continued to mince my messages.

On the Friday at the end of the first ten-week marking period, teachers passed out progress reports in two forms, commendations and delinquent reports, with letter grades and comments. An A might be accompanied by *completes all assignments*, whereas a negative comment would align with a D or an F. I knew my quizzes had not been stellar, but I didn't realize my grade had slipped to a D, and when I saw the box checked *Does not pay attention in class*, I knew I was in trouble. These reports had to be taken home, signed, and returned. My brothers were

consummate scholars, and no one in our house had ever been labeled Delinquent. Forging a signature was out of the question, although the thought did cross my mind.

That night at dinner I gauged the moods of my parents and eased into my explanation of my low grade by saying how difficult the subject was, how boring, how I'd never use geometry in real life. When I produced the report, I expected an outburst, a loud scolding, but all my dad said was "This is a disappointment, not the grade as much as the comment." I preferred being yelled at. To disappoint my father was far worse. I acknowledged my lack of good judgment and waited to be grounded for weeks. Instead, my dad told me to return the signed report, apologize to Miss X for not paying attention, and to redirect my focus to the task at hand, no matter how boring or difficult.

The disappointment of that delinquent report was echoed by Miss X, and I told her I was sorry. Instead of berating me, she accepted my apology

and offered to help me see more clearly the value in geometry's step-by-step approach to problem solving and the importance of a focused line of reasoning. I never developed a liking for the subject or the expertise to earn an A, but I did stop passing notes.

Perhaps I cannot remember her name because I've tried so hard to forget that in her class I earned the title of delinquent, which brings to my mind the image of someone who cheats or steals: leather jacket, cigarette dangling from the lips, and thick, black motorcycle boots. Donning bell bottoms and miniskirts in college was the closest I've ever come to appearing cheeky. There are many teachers I remember fondly and many classes in which I excelled, but only one that still makes me wince. Although I tried hard to make my dad proud, I can still say I have absolutely no use for a convex quadrilateral with at least one pair of parallel sides.



# How God Brought Us Back to Alabama

Betty Corbin

In July 2003, as my husband Carl and I drove the 700 miles from our old home in Houston, Texas, to our new home in Montgomery, Alabama, we talked about starting an exciting new chapter in our lives—new jobs, a new house, a new church, new friends, and visits with family who would now be near. After 27 years in Houston, we had taken a big risk to be making such drastic changes, but we felt that God had guided us on this journey.

It all began on Sunday, December 8, 2002, as Carl and I sat in our usual pew at Memorial Drive United Methodist Church listening to our minister, Chuck, preach. Chuck talked about the supernatural ways that we sometimes hear God's voice, and an urgent thought popped into my head, *It's time to move back to Alabama to be closer to family*. Although this was a thought and not an audible voice, I truly felt that God was speaking to me. It was a message I couldn't ignore.

When we got home from church, I discussed the idea with Carl and was surprised that he was receptive to the idea. He said, "If you can find a job with insurance benefits, I think I can get a job in commercial real estate." So, I updated my resume, got on internet job-searching sites, and started looking for a job within an hour's drive of Auburn, Alabama, the small college town where I grew up. The search area included Columbus, Georgia, and Montgomery, Alabama, the largest cities in the area, but tiny compared to Houston.

This desire to move back to Alabama had started earlier in 2002 when I embarked on a project to update a family history that my mother's two oldest sisters, Nez and Berta, had written in 1979. My mother, born in 1908, grew up in Enterprise, Alabama, the fifth of nine children. After her mother died and her father remarried, two more children were born. Of course, many births and deaths had occurred since 1979, so I was emailing and calling cousins and aunts and uncles to get updated data. As I worked on this project, I was overcome with gratitude for the rare gift of being part of such a large, close-knit family. I also realized that my dad was part of a large close-knit family as well. It would be nice to live closer.

A couple of weeks after my experience in church, Carl and I took our usual Christmas trip to Alabama and Georgia to visit our families. On Christmas Day, Carl, my sister Jean, and I went to my Uncle Philip's house in Enterprise for Christmas dinner. I brought copies of the family history that I had just completed, *James Benjamin Martin Family 1879-2002*. Of course, our families were glad to hear of our efforts to move to Alabama.

As I said my prayers each night, I asked God to guide me and Carl to find jobs in Alabama if that was God's will for us. If not, we were happy to stay in Houston. We knew that finding new jobs at our age, in our mid-fifties, could be difficult, and we needed divine help. I would end my prayer with Psalm 16:5 from the Good New Translation, "You,

Lord, are all I have, and you give me all I need. My future is in your hands."

At this time I was not working full-time but was doing computer training and project management training on a contract basis. Carl was working in commercial real estate leasing office space. We enjoyed the type of work we were doing but didn't like the compensation and other characteristics of our jobs.

After Christmas I bought a new navy-blue pant suit to wear on interviews, but no interviews were coming. Finally, in early March I got a phone call from a company in Alabama that was interested in interviewing me for a computer support job, not my strength. But since I was eager to have an interview, I went to Alabama later in March to do some in-person job searching. While there, I received the phone call I'd been waiting for. "Betty, this is Sue at Auburn University at Montgomery. I have an opening for a trainer to teach PC applications to adults. I've seen your resume, and your experience fits our requirements. Would you like to come for an interview?" Yes! I felt like a kid before Christmas, that feeling that something really good is about to happen. I called Carl to tell him the exciting news.

I returned two weeks later for the interview, which included an audition where I taught a short version of an Introduction to the PC class. I was nervous. I had taught this class many times but never as part of a job interview.

A week later Sue called and offered me the job. Of course, my answer was yes. This is what I had hoped for. But then she added, "I need you to report to work on

May 1." Yikes! That was only two weeks away. But I told her I would be there.

Carl and I discussed our plans. I would live with my sister Jean in Auburn for a couple of months and have an hour commute to work in Montgomery. Carl would put our house on the market in Houston. We would have to pay for our move and the costs of selling and buying a house. But we felt like this was an investment in our future, and it seemed that God was answering our prayers. So, on May 1, I was living with my sister and working at Auburn University at Montgomery.

In mid-May Carl came to Alabama for a visit. We found a house that we loved, a brick, one-story house, a little larger than our Houston home. But best of all, the deck had a view of beautiful woods with Spanish moss dripping from large oak trees, so different from our small lot in the big city.

Carl returned to Houston to continue packing for the move and to take care of getting our house sold. Since our beloved twelve-year-old dog Murphy had died while I was home in April, Carl didn't even have the dog to keep him company as he packed box after box. I thought he deserved the husband-of-the-year award for 2003.

The move worked out better than we ever imagined. I loved my job even more than I expected. Carl went to work for a commercial real estate firm that offered him much greater opportunities than the job he had left in Houston. Of course, the Montgomery traffic was practically non-existent compared to the congestion of Houston. We were only one hour away from my sister Jean, my only

sibling, and three hours away from Carl's twin brother Evan, his only sibling, and his family in Atlanta.

We loved our house and especially enjoyed having dinner on our deck as we enjoyed the view of the woods. It was easy to choose a church because George Mathison, the senior minister of my sister's church in Auburn, had a brother, John Ed, who led a church in Montgomery. His church, Frazer United Methodist, became our new church home. As avid Auburn fans, we were in War Eagle heaven as we attended all the Auburn home football games.

Since our Montgomery house had a large dining room and a large eating area in the kitchen, we invited my sister Jean and aunts, uncles, and cousins to come to

our house for Thanksgiving dinner. Everyone brought food, a tradition in my mother's large family, and it is a joy that has continued for years. My lifetime best friend, Mary Frances Barber, and her husband Jim moved from California to Auburn shortly after our move to Montgomery, and they were able to join us for this annual Thanksgiving feast as well. Of course, in all those years in Houston, we were too far from family to be able to have an event like this.

As I count the many blessings of this new chapter of my life, I'm so grateful that we listened to God's voice that brought us back to Alabama.



*Delay is natural to a writer. I walk around straightening pictures on the wall, rugs on the floor—as though not until everything in the world is lined up and perfectly true could anybody reasonably expect me to set a word down on paper.*

– E. B. White

## **Kitty Who Cheered Me Up**

**Betty Corbin**

For the last three years, 2018-2020, my Labor Day tradition had been going to St. Simons Island to watch the first Auburn football game with Kitty and Don McHugh. Kitty would make the game such a fun event. She would have a flower arrangement with orange flowers. There were always orange and blue M&Ms and other game snacks. Of course, we would wear our Auburn t-shirts to watch the game. If the team wasn't playing well, at halftime Kitty would change into a luckier t-shirt. It must have worked because we won all of these games.

When Auburn made good plays, we would jump up and yell "War Eagle!" Even Sandy, the English sheepdog, had her own version of War Eagle. When we weren't watching football, we'd take Sandy for walks through the flat streets of their neighborhood as we enjoyed views of the marsh and gorgeous old live oak trees. Often Kitty would make homemade lasagna, such a treat for this single lady who is used to Stauffer's version from the grocery store.

Labor Day brings up sad and happy memories for me because my husband Carl died on Labor Day weekend 2015. We had fun watching the first Auburn football game together at home on that Saturday night. Although he was in hospice care, he had his same personality and was able to enjoy the game. We won over Louisville. But happiness turned to sadness and grief when he died the next day. He had been expected to live a few more months. So, this first football game of the season has a special significance for me. I would tell my widowed friends that I was going to St. Simons for Labor Day so my friend Kitty, with stage four breast cancer, could cheer me up.

Kitty and Don and I had other fun Auburn football memories. In 1971, I was dating my future husband, Carl. He was a Georgia State grad, but 1971 was the year of Pat Sullivan, Heisman Trophy winner, and his favorite target, Terry Beasley. Plus, Georgia State had no football team. So, it was easy to turn Carl into an Auburn fan.

At the end of the '71 season, Kitty, Don, Carl, and I went to New Orleans to the Sugar Bowl to see Auburn play Oklahoma. We lost the game by a big score, but we enjoyed drinking hurricanes at Pat O'Brien's and eating great New Orleans seafood. When Carl and I returned home to Atlanta, we decided to get married. Our wedding was four months later, April 29, 1972. Of course, Kitty and Don were there.

In 1972 Auburn's football team wasn't expected to do well since the stars had graduated. But the team surprised everyone. They were known as The Amazins. That year they played Colorado in the Gator Bowl in Jacksonville. Since Kitty and Don were living in Nashville in South Georgia, Carl and I spent the night at their home. Then the four of us drove to Jacksonville the next day. This time the team won. War Eagle!

I can't remember when I didn't know Kitty and her identical twin Betty, the Markle twins. They always dressed alike and looked so much alike that most people couldn't tell

them apart. I could. Growing up in Auburn, we played together as children, hung out together as teenagers, and were Tri Delta sorority sisters in college at Auburn. Betty got married after our freshman year and moved to Birmingham. I seldom saw her after that.

Following Betty's wedding, their parents divorced, and Kitty, her mother, and her younger brother Charles moved into a two-bedroom apartment. Kitty and her mother shared a bedroom, not what any college girl would want, but made more difficult due to Mrs. Markle's depression. But Kitty persevered through difficulties. She remained in school, getting a degree in pharmacy, a difficult curriculum, while working weekends at her dad's drugstore. Following graduation, Kitty had a long career in pharmacy, working both in hospitals and retail stores.

I got to know Don in college, not only because he was dating Kitty, but he and my college boyfriend were fraternity brothers. We had many fun times together, and I was there when Don and Kitty married in 1969 at Auburn United Methodist, our childhood church. My first husband, Marshall, who suffered from chronic illness, was with me at the wedding, but he died the following weekend. The last pictures of him were taken at the rehearsal dinner.

But things were not easy after marriage, as Don had to go to Viet Nam. Again, Kitty persevered. She stayed in Auburn, working, and waiting for Don to come home.

From 1976 through 2003 my husband Carl and I lived in Houston and were mostly out of touch with Kitty and Don. But in 2003 we moved back to Alabama, living in Montgomery from 2003 through 2009 and in Auburn thereafter. One of our many pleasures of being back in Alabama was being able to see Kitty and Don again. They were now living in St. Simons Island, and they would come to Auburn and stay with us when we went to high school Class of '64 reunions. We would visit them in St. Simons and go out in the boat or watch football. Since twin Betty was now living part-time in St. Simons Island and part-time in her fiancée's hometown in Massachusetts, we sometimes were able to see her as well.

Labor Day 2020 turned out to be more significant than fun and football. My sister Jean had died three months earlier, and Kitty gave me a sweet gift in her memory—a tear-drop-shaped frosted glass ornament. It features a picture of a bright red cardinal below the words "A Messenger from Heaven." On the right it says, "My spirit will live on forever there within your heart." Kitty knew I loved cardinals. Now when I look at the ornament or see a live cardinal in my yard, I think of Kitty as well as Jean and Carl.

Also, that weekend Kitty told me that her oncologist had said that sometimes when the cancer comes back, it comes back with a vengeance. She protested, "He didn't have to tell me that! I like being a success story." I had seen that happen to others who were in remission, but I thought surely it would be years before it happened to Kitty. Unfortunately, it came back eight months later, in May 2021, and she died within a couple of weeks. It had been four years since her cancer diagnosis. She was 75 years old.

As I remember my lifelong friendship with Kitty, I treasure how she cheered me up when times were sad and how she added so much fun and love to my life. I miss her.



## **Back Yard Peace and Comfort**

**Betty Corbin**

I find comfort and peace as I look at my back yard. As I sit on my couch in my great room or on my screen porch, I see tall hardwood trees—oaks, hickories, sweet gums, beeches. I think some have been alive longer than I have, over seventy years. Of course, the view changes as the seasons change.

In summer the leaves cover the trees, and the woods are so dense that I can't see the house behind me. Six red begonia hanging baskets on black wrought-iron crooks surround my patio. They sway gently in the breeze. The drift roses bloom in pink clusters on the right of the patio. Sometimes I clip a few of them to decorate my coffee table. Just in front of the dense woods the crepe myrtles droop with deep pink blooms, and yellow blossoms cover low lantana bushes. In the morning I check to see if there are any saucer-sized red blooms on the hibiscus bushes in pots on the patio. These blooms always cheer me up. Their beauty only lasts a day in the summer heat. Sometimes I photograph them with my iPhone and post the pictures on Facebook or as a background on my iPhone or iPad.

I see the birds at the feeder just beyond the patio's edge. I lift my binoculars to see them close up, especially the cardinals, who are my favorites. The male cardinals are a brilliant red with a bright gold beak encircled in black. God created such beauty when He created this creature. I call the largest male cardinal Ray, the largest female cardinal May. Perhaps the smaller cardinals are their offspring. When I walk into my great room in the morning and see Ray at the feeder, I think God is saying, "Good morning," letting me know He's with me today. The female cardinals are golden tan with red accents, not as stunning as the males but beautiful in their own way. I'm amazed when I see tiny hummingbirds hovering around their feeder

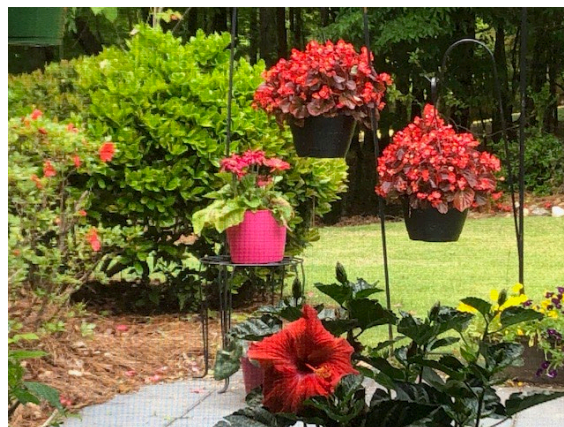
In autumn the leaves start to fall and scatter on the grass behind the patio. Some leaves are bright red or yellow; some, brown. The summer flowers continue until there's a freeze, sometimes not until December. I bring the hibiscus pots and the hanging baskets into the garage on those freezing nights. The humidity of the summer is replaced with crisp air of fall. With the cooler weather the hibiscus blooms last two days or more instead of being gone in a day. Sometimes I have a hibiscus bloom on Christmas Day.

In the winter the bare branches reach to the sky. I see the skeleton of the trees, their very essence. The sunset scatters pink across the sky behind their branches. Yellow pansy hanging baskets replace the red begonias. They shed joy on grey winter days. The cardinals are still here in winter, Ray and May and their friends and kin. Plus, there are many small birds, house finches with their red heads and red breasts, brown chipping sparrows with the lovely scalloped pattern on their wings, tiny Carolina chickadees with their black heads and white breasts. A few plump mourning doves eat the seeds that have fallen to the patio.

Spring comes early here in Auburn, Alabama. Sometime in March tiny leaves emerge on the bare branches. Each day they grow larger, and in two weeks they are fully grown. They are a pale fresh green, not the darker green of the summer. As I take walks through my neighborhood, I see azaleas bloom in various shades of pink and purple, white and red. But the only azaleas that I can see in my back yard are small bushes to the left of my patio. I call them my Auburn azaleas since they are orange, an Auburn University color. For an unknown reason, they bloom very late, not until the end of April or early May.

I have a new appreciation of this view as I've spent more time at home during the pandemic of 2020 and 2021. I live alone, having lost my husband in 2015.

When I lie in bed at night and feel lonely or restless, I picture my back yard and find comfort and peace.



# **The Saga of Mama's Lemon**

**Margaret Craig-Schmidt**

My mother, Mildred Craig, was a dedicated teacher who taught freshman English at Southwest Mississippi Community College located just a few miles from my hometown, McComb, Mississippi. As is typical of small towns everywhere, everyone knew each other. It was common for one of our family members to run into people who had Mama as a teacher years earlier. Even in her retirement, Mama would hear, "Hi, Mrs. Craig! How are you?" in unlikely places such as the hospital elevator as she was being wheeled to a room upstairs.

In 2016, I had returned to my hometown for the 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary celebration of a high school friend. As I sat down with my champagne and wedding cake, a vaguely familiar guy sitting next to me said in a friendly manner, "You are Mrs. Craig's daughter, aren't you? I still have the lemon your mother gave me over forty years ago when she taught me English at Southwest."

"What?" I replied in surprise. "Forty years! Mama retired in 1989 and died in 1997. What does your lemon look like now? Why did you save it for so long?"

So Charlie (I will call him that because I don't remember his name) proceeded to tell me the saga of his lemon. One of my mother's writing assignments was designed to encourage keen observation and detailed descriptive writing. On the first day of class, Mama gave all her students a fresh lemon to observe as it aged throughout the term. They were to write about their observations and record their thoughts about the lemon. Some students even reported that they had conversations with their lemons.

Charlie told me that he had kept his lemon in the glove box of his car and had even transferred it when he bought a new car. It had dried out completely and was a shriveled black mass. For many years he kept his assignment, graded in Mama's handwriting, in the glove box along with the lemon. Somewhere along the way his theme had gotten misplaced, but he still remembered the compliment Mama had given him on his graded assignment. He told me that no teacher before had ever said anything good about his writing. After my mother's class, he decided that he wasn't "so bad after all." Whenever he needed a boost of self-confidence, he pulled out the lemon and looked at it as if it were a trophy of some sort.

Most of Mama's lemons probably are long gone by now, but I imagine many of her students, like Charlie, remember the positive influence that Mama had on their lives. She endeavored to see the good in each of her students. I am sure, however, that she did not know the long-reaching effects that her lemon assignment would have on at least one of them.

## **Our Close Encounter with a Buffalo**

**Barbara Helms**

In March 2019, my sister Georgia, my niece Price, and I went to Salt Lake City to visit my son and his wife, who had recently moved there. They had never been out west before and were excited for the opportunity to see a different part of the country.

On the day we arrived, we had a few hours before my son and his wife would be home from work, so instead of going straight to their house, we decided to do some exploring. My sister loves wildlife. We had a rental car, so we drove to Antelope Island, a state park on the Great Salt Lake. My son had told us there was lots of wildlife on this little island. I had been once before and didn't see much wildlife. Sometimes animals move around, sometimes they don't. But we were hopeful that the animals would be out and about that day.

It was a beautiful afternoon: a crisp cool day that was warmed by the sun, without a cloud in the sky. Antelope Island offers some beautiful views of the Salt Lake, and with the brilliant blue sky, it was gorgeous. We stopped and took lots of pictures of the lake. Then we decided that it was time to start looking for the wildlife. I drove along slowly so we could look. We saw a field full of pronghorn antelope. And then suddenly we saw a buffalo ahead grazing just off the side of the road. I eased ahead, not wanting to scare him away. With the land so flat in the area, we could see a long way, and there were no other cars around. So I stopped the car right beside the buffalo. He was really close, only about five to ten feet off the road. We let down the windows in the car and started taking pictures.

Buffalos are beautiful animals. This one was huge. I guess they all are, but when you are that close, you get a new appreciation of the size. His eyes looked to be the size of a dinner plate, and I was right beside him. He continued to gaze. He must have found the grass to be quite delicious, because he really didn't seem interested in us at all. We got some great pictures. But being that close to such a large animal is a little scary. I kept the car running and in gear just in case we needed to leave in a hurry. And it was a good thing I did.

We were so busy taking pictures of our buffalo that none of us saw the car that was coming up behind us. There was room on the road for the car to go around us, which is what it did. I guess the speed of the car suddenly zooming by us startled the buffalo. He raised his head and started running. I didn't know which direction he was going to go, but I didn't stick around to find out. Within a half a second, my foot was on the gas, and we were headed down the road, faster than the two-ton buffalo could go.

After the adrenaline rush subsided a little, we were three giggly girls, thrilled with our up-close encounter with a buffalo. And ready for our next adventure. Turns out, my sister had her video camera going. We watch it often. We still giggle about it too.

## The Gordo Ranger

Gerald Johnson

*The Lone Ranger: If we ride together, we ride for justice.*

*Tonto: Justice is what I seek, Kemosabe.*

*The Gordo Ranger: Each life has a beginning, middle and an end. What's important is not how long but how deeply and fully we live.*

*Kemosabes: Your model of a full life is what we seek, Kemosabe.*

David Housel may well be our last (I hope not), Lone Ranger. Let's call him The Gordo Ranger. In *From the Backbooth at Chappy's*, his 113 kaleidoscope reminiscences constitute the telling of a full life, resplendent with tales of justice, fairness, goodness and good sense, each and all in the warmth of a life full of kemosabes, including The Lone Ranger.

The collection includes some athletics, not as much as you might expect. And, each ball story is a human-interest story, not a story of wins and losses. There is some politics. Politically, David, seems to me, is clearly a flaming moderate, although some have charged him with being a liberal and some a conservative. Proves my point. He cares deeply.

And, of course, included in the work is Gordo and the Green Wave--two words, Momma and Daddy and Gramma, favorite people—many, first love--Annette Funicello, and, Auburn University, among a string of other pieces on various topics and personalities. All deeply human-interest stories. Well, there is some preaching. He has some opinions.

However, the real story, the compelling story, the story that is right out of Flannery O'Connor, makes up 69, 61%, of the 113 telling moments of a full life.

Flannery O'Connor is one of many Southern authors whose works have been haunted by Southern religion. She writes, "While the South is not Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted." From O'Connor to Faulkner to many, if not most, of the great Southern novel writers, the Christ story, in all of its complexity and simplicity, infiltrates, sometimes overtly and oftentimes covertly, the telling. David is a Southern writer.

There are well over fifty (I lost count with the duplications) biblical text references—OT and NT, allusions to religion, the church, salvation, the soul, prayer, and, of course to God and Jesus, and Abraham, Moses and Saint Paul, as well as Adam, Eve, Mary, Pilate and Barabbas. The two quotations following the dedication page are both of saints and sinners and beliefs. The titles, "Through a Glass Darkly" and "It's Okay to get Mad at God" and "Lord, Gawd, Dave" and "Frustrated Jesus" to "Buddy Have a Drink" and "Running Naked through the Street," are all "religion" stories, some biblical. Even the non-religion,

haunted pieces include the spirit of religion in tone and tenor, warp and woof. Yes, David is a Southern writer.

This major set of David's reminiscences reflect his theology. As with his political character, David, to me, seems to be a religiously flaming moderate—caring, loving, forgiving, sensitive, mostly nonjudgmental. He cares deeply. He quotes Archibald MacLeish, "Religion is at its best when it forces us to ask hard questions of ourselves. It is at its worst when it deludes us into thinking we have all the answers for everybody else."

In the thematic finale, David writes about "imperfect people, people like us, living in an imperfect world, doing the best we can." Living the full life. He quotes my good friend, Dr. Seuss: "Don't cry because it's ending, smile because it happened."

*From the Backbooth at Chappy's* is a good read. More importantly, it is a compelling, funny, warming, and profound accounting of each of our lives—the good and the bad, the joys and the sorrows, the people who have touched and shaped us and make life full.

Friends make life better, Kemosabe.



*For some reason, I got to thinking about Mr. Troy Johnson's barbershop on the way home from church today.*

*I remember as a kid needing help to get into the barber's chair. I barely remember it, but I do remember it.*

*Now that I am old, I need help again.*

*Such is life.*

David Housel  
*From the Backbooth at Chappy's*

# **I Am Here to Tell the Tale**

**Charlotte LaRoux**

What is the greatest risk you ever took? Did you jump off a thirty-foot cliff tethered to a 25-foot bungee cord? No? Me neither. But I did accept a date with Ron.

In 1967 I decided to learn to fly. I figured flying was like driving a car in three dimensions. Dad worked at Freeway Airport in Bowie, Maryland, and knew an excellent flight instructor named Ron. Dad had watched Ron maneuver a side slip landing in a violent crosswind. He was fond of Ron and admired his piloting skill. It was arranged. I began my lessons.

Ron was 22, but for his age, he seemed a mature pilot. He had already logged hundreds of hours as a flight instructor. My first lesson was doing preflight checks. We had to be certain that the ailerons were securely hinged, that the rudder worked, and that the plane had sufficient fuel. Learning to fly a Cessna 150 was more daunting than I expected. I had not known that steering on the ground was done with feet rather than hands. I needed to master a new vocabulary too: *pitch, yaw, roll, stall, crash, die*. Though I loved the space aloft, learning to land seemed tricky, nothing like parking a car.

I had finished my fourth lesson when Ron asked me for a date. He wanted to fly to D.C. for dinner. We would land at Washington National Airport, hail a cab, and eat dinner at a restaurant he liked. Then we would return to Freeway. This was not your standard date: dinner at McDonald's and a movie. I was excited, and Dad gave us his blessing.

After Ron picked me up, we headed down Route 50 toward Bowie. Ron began speeding. Really speeding: 100 mph. I asked him to stop, but he laughed and reminded me that Cessnas cruise at 110 mph. I protested that we were not in the air, but he would not slow down.

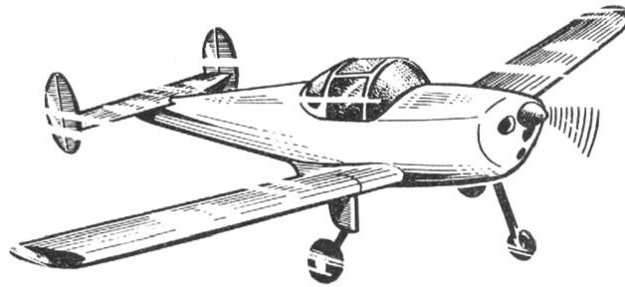
Ron arranged to borrow a friend's Ercoupe, a stable airplane with double rudders, stubby wings, a single engine, and a transparent canopy with a 360-degree view. I was surprised when Ron did a hurried preflight check, ignoring the engine. When I objected, he brushed me off. He had flown the plane earlier in the day. Everything was fine.

We took off heading west. When we had reached a sufficient altitude, Ron began executing aerobatics. He did rolls, loops and even flew upside down. I suppose he was trying to impress me. I felt the weight of the extra G force pulling my body into the seat and stretching my facial muscles against my bones. I was disoriented, but thrilled. The thrill was gone, though, when liquid began pouring onto my left leg and foot. I alerted Ron, and he reached down to touch my leg. He brought his hand to his face and smelled the liquid. He declared that the fluid was water from the radiator. An Ercoupe has an air-cooled engine. There is no radiator. Ron immediately began to fly straight and level. He got noticeably quiet. After thirty seconds, he announced that he would like to demonstrate a "practice" emergency landing.

Luckily, as we had been heading to Washington National, we were already close. He radioed the tower, and a mature male voice cleared us to land. The voice soothed me, and the view out the canopy did too. Washington is beautiful at dusk; the Potomac River shimmered in the reflected light of the setting sun. Street and building lights sparkled brilliantly like a diamond brooch pinned to black velvet. These details I remember as clearly as my terror. And then, we landed safely.

Ron and I slid back the side panels of the canopy and jumped out. We went to the engine compartment and looked in. The right fuel line had come loose; the nut securing it to a central fuel tank was unscrewed. Ron tightened the nut and closed the compartment. The engine and I both reeked of aviation fuel. There would be no return flight in that plane that night. He borrowed a Cessna 150 from a friend, and we headed back to Freeway Airport in Maryland. On the way back, I made a contract with Ron. You drive me home doing the speed limit, and I will not tell my father what happened. We both kept the bargain.

We did not have dinner that night. I never took another flying lesson. I never learned to land, and I never did fly solo. My parents never found out. And I never had a second date with What's-His-Name.



*When you sell a person a book you don't just sell twelve ounces of paper and ink and glue—you sell a whole new life. Love and friendship and humor and ships at sea by night—there's all heaven and earth in a book, a real book.*

– Christopher Morley, *The Haunted Bookshop*



## Houdini Escapes

Charlotte LaRoux

As I put him to bed, Aaron asked how to convince his dad that he needed a puppy. After a year of imploring his father for a dog, my son was at his wits' end. I was too. My son had a learning disability and was doing poorly in second grade. I felt he needed the consolation of a pet. As we all know, dogs never judge; they simply love. "I've tried everything I can think of to convince Daddy. You have too," I said. "The only thing left is prayer. Ask God to help you get a puppy."

"Okay," Aaron answered. "I will."

It was a miserably hot July morning in Lanett, Alabama, with temps already in the high eighties. A half-grown black mutt lay in the shade of a big tree at the edge of the parking lot where I worked. We all wondered where the dog belonged, or if he was lost. After lunch he was still there in the shade. Several of us offered him part of our lunches, but he nosed the food indifferently. We talked about what to do with him, some of us toying with the idea of taking him home. In the end, no one volunteered. At 5:00, our boss told his secretary to call Animal Control to pick up the mutt.

I knew what that meant for a dog in Chambers County. He would be held a day or two, then be destroyed. He stood no chance. I decided to take him to the Highway 280 Lee County Humane Society, where he might be adopted. I went over to the pup, cajoled him with soothing words, picked him up and carried him to my car. He had no collar, and his fur was matted with feces. Clearly, this little Houdini had escaped a dog pen. Open windows and a full-on air conditioner could not diminish his stench. I stopped

at the Humane Society, but it was closed for the day. A cage reserved for dropped-off animals was already inhabited by two snarling German shepherds. They growled and bared their teeth at me and my little black foundling. Leaving him there was out of the question.

I decided to return the next morning. On the way home, I purchased one can of dog food to get him through the night. Luckily, our backyard was fenced and gated. I shoved him back there quickly to avoid my son's detection. The puppy never made a sound. I brought out his food along with a bowl of water. Instantly, the dog got up, went to the water and drank every drop. With a groan, he laid down and rested. My heart broke as I realized the dog had run away from home due to thirst. None of us at work had thought of that. We had all offered food in the summer heat, never water.

Len was furious. I promised him that the dog would be with me when I left for work the next morning. Aaron had not spotted the silent dog. My secret was secure. The pup was quiet through the night. But the next morning when I tried to find the dog, he was missing. Whispering to him, I looked all over the yard. The little black Houdini was gone. That was a fine ending, Len decided. He laughed about how the dog had escaped our yard and Aaron's attention.

So, I got into my car and started the engine. Just then, Aaron popped up at the living room window to wave goodbye to me. He began jumping up and down excitedly, waving his arms. Instantly, he was at the front door in his pajamas

shouting, “Mommy! Mommy! Jesus answered my prayer! He brought me a puppy!” The dog had escaped our fenced-in backyard and had sheltered under my car. When I turned over the engine, he crawled out, wagged his tail, and smiled up at Len.

By that time, Aaron was on the ground, his arms around the dog’s neck. Len threw up his arms in disgust, looked up into the heavens and shouted sarcastically, “Thanks, Jesus!”



*Memoir is the intersection of narration and reflection, of storytelling and essay writing. It can present its story and consider the meaning of the story. The first commandment of fiction—Show, Don’t Tell—is not part of the memoirist’s faith. Memoirists must show and tell.*

– Patricia Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory*

## **The Other Waiting Room**

**Charlotte LaRoux**

"Are you Mrs. LaRoux?" she asked. The young woman met me at the entry. She was nervous, her voice an octave above her normal speaking voice.

"Yes," I replied.

"Follow me," she said. As she turned, I noticed her tightly compressed lips, a tip-off to her anxiety.

We walked through the large general waiting room, where I observed an elderly man slumped in his chair, one foot wrapped in gauze. A mother with a restless, mewling infant sat on the same row. The young woman led me past them through a large set of swinging doors. We took an immediate left into the room I never knew was there.

"Be seated," she ordered. "Someone will be with you shortly." Then she left. I was alone.

I chose a seat near a corner next to a table. For twenty minutes I had time to consider the room. It seemed to have been designed to subdue me, to quiet my fear, which only heightened my dread. The molded glass window in the door obscured all activity outside the room. A droning sound, like an electric housefly, filled the small space. I determined the irritating noise came from a failing fluorescent lamp in the ceiling. The walls were beige, the floor tiled in linoleum. The nine chairs lining the three walls were bad distillations of the Bauhaus geometric aesthetic. The chairs, cubic in form, rested tightly together, arm to arm, like perfect teeth in a set of dentures. The vinyl cushions were dark brown, matching the color of the wooden frames of the seats. In two corners were square brown tables that matched the chairs. On each table rested a brass lamp with yellowed linen shades, like lamps you might buy at a thrift store.

Curiously, there was no clock on the walls, as if the charmed room could freeze time, or maybe reverse it. The dim, flickering light, the beiges and browns, suffocated me. It was a room devoid of life. There was irony in the only distracting objects in the room: two boxes of tissues and two Holy Bibles. One of each was apparently insufficient.

Eventually, the door opened, and a doctor and a woman entered. I noticed the nuances of their behaviors. He took a middle seat; she sat next to him, by the door. Both put distance between themselves and me. She was slender and prim. Her straight angular body conformed to the right angles of the chair. She folded her hands neatly in her lap, and her feet rested flat on the floor, side by side like conjoined twins.

The physician was more relaxed, but the lower lids of his round eyes drooped, exposing the whites below his irises, looking mournful as a basset hound.

He looked at me cautiously, leaned forward and murmured, "I'm sorry, Mrs. LaRoux. We did everything possible. We could not revive him."

"I know," I answered.

"He was dead when the EMTs arrived." Quiet condolences followed and finally, an introduction to the stiff lady, a social worker.

She produced a sheaf of papers, explaining that they wanted to harvest my husband's corneas for transplants. She was formal in her presentation. "Yes." I interrupted her. "Where do I sign?" She wanted to progress through her explanation, to the legalities, but I stopped her again. "Please. Yes. The answer is yes. Just show me where to sign."

The form was lengthy and in duplicate. I could not read it through my tears. The social worker had to point to the signature line with a space for the date. Below that, the line to print my name. Next to that, Relation to the Deceased. I paused. For the first time in my life, I carefully penned the word: *Widow*.



*All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them.*

– Isak Dinesen

# **The Great Halloween Heist**

**Bill Lee**

As the sun set in the western sky in Fort Deposit, Ala. on October 31, 1956, the conditions were ideal for the Great Halloween Heist. It was a clear night. The temperature was 65 degrees, and the waning crescent moon provided just enough light to make a flashlight unnecessary.

Most famous bank robberies began with a plan. It was no different with the Great Halloween Heist. Our plan began weeks before October 31. When Mother brought home hanging items from Durwood McQueen's dry cleaners, the items were covered with a brown paper garment bag. After Mother hung the items in her closet, I requested the bag. I carefully opened the seam of the bag to create a large sheet of paper. I used the paper to draw a street map of our town. I added houses and labeled them with the names of each resident.

At 4:30 p.m. on October 31, my eight-year-old friends and coconspirators Ronnie Wilkinson, Brooks Bates, and Mark Coleman met at my home on Rogers Street. After we agreed on a plan, I used a red Crayola crayon to mark the route of our attack on my map.

We could have dressed as a pirate, hobo, or ghost. However, since we performed as tap dancers dressed in Davy Crockett costumes at the school talent contest in May, we simply traded our tap dancing shoes for Converse All-Stars to complete our Halloween costumes. We looked marvelous in our brown shirts and pants with fringe running down our arms and legs. Our coonskin caps with striped tails in the back were really cool.

Daylight Savings Time ended on October 27. So, on October 31 the sun set at 4:55 p.m., an hour earlier than during the previous week. Therefore, we agreed to launch our attack at precisely 5:00 p.m.

Our plan worked perfectly! We made a frantic dash from house to house on our map and arrived back at my home at 8:00 p.m. to celebrate our success. Our orange plastic pumpkins were overflowing with Butterfingers, M&Ms, Milky Way bars, Hershey's Kisses, Snickers, Tootsie Roll Pops, Red Hots, 3 Musketeers, Krackel bars, Bazooka Bubble Gum, Junior Mints, Kit Kat bars, and Whoppers.

Each of us spread out and sat in chairs at the eight-foot-long, tan-laminate-topped table on the back porch of my home. We carefully spread our loot out on our sections of the table. Then we traded with each other for our favorite candy.

All of us liked candy, but it was always more about the thrill of seeing our plan succeed. We started first grade together and graduated high school together. And, when we've seen each other during the last fifty years, the Great Halloween Heist is one of our favorite memories.

## The Queen of Waste Not, Want Not

Bill Lee

My parents, William and Mary, who were born in 1917 and 1923 respectively, lived through the Great Depression of the 1930s, and, in the 1940s, graduated *magna cum laude* from the school of Waste Not, Want Not.

But they didn't achieve their excellent academic status on their own. They had help. They were trained by their parents, Dr. Ernest and Miss Annie Elva on Dad's side and stone-faced Bob and Sweet Sue on Mom's side. Both sets of my grandparents also survived the Great Depression, and all my grandparents were faithful members of the Alabama branch of the Waste Not Holiness Church. Some tenets of their faith included "A place for everything and everything in its place," "Cleanliness is next to godliness," and "Frugality is a virtue."

The parents of my paternal great-grandfather, Judge Lee, died before he was three years old. He was separated from his four siblings—Annie, John, Ella Mae, and James—and was reared by his Aunt Orinda and Uncle Elijah in Dutch Bend, Ala. They were Waste Not zealots too.

Dr. Ernest died a year before my parents, William and Mary, married. Just before he died, he asked Dad to take care of Annie Elva. And he did. In fact, Dad and Mother lived with Annie Elva for ten years before building their own home. Dad reasoned, Why don't we live with Mother and save our money until we can afford to build the kind of house we want?

Although some relatives might disagree, Annie Elva gets my vote for Queen of Waste Not, Want Not. Since our family lived with her until I was ten years old, I saw her every day.

Annie Elva's hall closet was about four feet wide and about three feet deep with shelves from top to bottom. The closet had two doors. The bottom one opened to access the lower three feet of the closet and the top one opened to access the upper part of the closet. On the first shelf of the upper closet was a basket containing balls of string of all thicknesses and lengths. An assortment of brown paper bags of all sizes was next to the string. Old newspapers were stacked neatly in the back corner. There were containers for rubber bands, paperclips, clothespins, and other odds-and-ends.

Annie Elva's kitchen refrigerator was organized in a similar fashion. It was not unusual to find leftovers from meals in plastic containers, even if there were only a couple of teaspoons of rice, green beans, mashed potatoes, or other vegetable in each container.

And there was a box in one of her kitchen drawers for items that could be described as I-don't-know-what-it-is-but-I-better-save-it. If the sins of the Ten Commandments were rated on a ten-point scale with ten being the worst, wastefulness would be rated a 12 by many of my ancestors. Today, their spirit of Waste Not, Want Not lives on in their descendants.

## Left Hand over Right Hand

Bill Lee

My sister-in-law, Lavonia Jane Mobley,  
has many “youngest child” traits.  
One of her best is her sense of humor,  
which helps her get along with her two ex-mates.

She met an upstate New Yorker named Paul,  
who sold his business and moved to Auburn.  
He wanted to be near his daughter and grandchildren,  
play golf, take law courses, and learn.

Jane asked, “Paul, will you go to Mt. Olive Primitive Baptist with me?”  
Paul replied, “Yes, but my memories of Catholic nuns are not good ones,  
and Baptist churches in the south are very foreign to me.”  
Jane assured, “It will be just fine, there may be guns, but no nuns.”

“The church members are mostly descendants of the 1843 founders.  
Brother Louie will lead the singing, Old School Hymnal style,  
Sister Barbara will be on the piano and Sister Jamie on the organ.  
A prayer, a sermon, and a twenty for the offering when the usher comes down the aisle.

“A closing hymn and dinner-on-the-grounds under the big oak trees.”  
After they passed the offering plate, Jane remembered one more thing.  
She moved over shoulder-to-shoulder next to Paul and whispered in his ear.  
“When the ushers take the offering plates to the back of the church a bell will ding.”

“Why?” Paul asked. With a solemn expression on her face, Jane answered,  
“That’s the signal to bring the rattlesnakes for the passing-of-the-snakes ritual.  
Grab the snake’s tail with your left hand and the snake’s head with your right.  
Pass the snake to the person on your left, left hand over right, very habitual.”

Paul’s facial expression said, “I’m going to wet my pants and run out the door.”  
He fought the urge for flight, braced himself, and waited.  
When the snakes never appeared,  
Paul was elated.

## **Camping in a Yurt**

**Bill Lee**

As early as 600 B.C., Turkish nomads lived in yurts—portable, round tents covered with skins. Our four round yurts sat on the banks of Wayah Creek and were hidden from the sun, deep in the Nantahala National Forest. The babbling creek was the only sound I heard when we arrived. We were truly in the middle of nowhere, basically off the grid—no Publix, no Target, and no CVS within ten miles. The yurts were circus-looking structures with round plastic domed skylights on top. They conjured up memories of Boy Scout camping in the early 1960s.

However, when I went inside our yurt, the Bosch refrigerator, dishwasher, range, and cooktop, along with the Whirlpool microwave, told me camping has come a long way since the 1960s. Gas from a very large propane tank outside our yurt provided hot water. The indoor toilet was a far cry from the two-holer at scout camp. The Jacuzzi hot tub located on the deck was a lot better than skinny dipping in the lake at scout camp. The Wi-Fi made communication a lot faster than the snail-mail letters I wrote to girlfriends from Camp Tukabatchee.

So it was that in July 2019 our family vacationed in this village of yurts on Wayah Road in Tipton, N.C. My wife, Linda, Cousin Thad, his wife Sheril, and I were in Creekside Cove. Our son Austin, his wife Sharon, and their kids, Camden and Kaiya, plus Cousin Bobby were in Spring Ridge. Brother Greg, his wife Heather, and her son, Sam, drove over for the day. Sister Jane, her husband Paul, and her son, Jimmy, and his friend “Flea,” were in Otter Creek.

The Appalachian Trail, a footpath that stretches over 2,000 miles along the mountain ridges from Georgia to Maine, became an official National Scenic Trail in 1968. I enjoyed the smell of the wildflowers and seeing butterflies as we crossed Mile 113 of the trail when we hiked through Wayah Gap, just up the hill from our yurts.

We laughed a lot through the twists and turns of the Nantahala River White Water Rafting trip. The steaks cooked on the Weber charcoal grills tasted great. And, at the end of the day, mini-Hershey’s chocolate bars we placed on top of the marshmallows we warmed over our campfire were wedged together between two graham crackers to create delicious s’mores.

At Lakes End Marina, we rented a Bennington Tritoon Pontoon boat powered by a 150-horsepower Evenrude motor. The kids rode the tubes behind the boat as we cruised swiftly through the crystal-clear waters of Lake Nantahala, surrounded by the Blue Ridge Mountains.

The Mountaintop Zip Line Tour at the Nantahala Outdoor Center was my first zip line experience. Although I trusted our guides, I was terrified, and for good reason. Just when I got a little confidence on the first six zip line runs, I encountered the final run, the



Mega Zip. As I stood on the launching platform, I took a deep breath to slow my racing heart. My screams could be heard for miles as I soared at over fifty miles per hour, 350 feet above the forest floor.

I'm told our camping trip was really glamping, a portmanteau of *glamorous* and camping. We had a great time, and I look forward to our next family adventure.



*Growing old is one of the ways the soul nudges itself into attention to the spiritual aspect of life. The body's changes teach us about fate, time, nature, mortality, and character. Aging forces us to decide what is important in life.*

– Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul*

## **Life Lessons—1948-1958**

### **Bill Lee**

Some people spend the first ten years of their life living with their parents and siblings. However, I grew up living in my grandmother's home with my parents (William and Mary), my three younger brothers (Ernest, Elbert, and Robert), my paternal grandmother (Annie Elva or Momee), and the woman who was our housekeeper, cook, and babysitter (Annie Bell or Bell).

Some life lessons were shared verbally, but mostly I learned them by watching what the adults in my life did during the first ten years of my life in Fort Deposit, Ala. Some life lessons:

- Dad - Provide for your family (e.g. he and Mom paid for college for their five children).
- Dad - Don't plan on next year being as prosperous as this year; save and spend wisely.
- Dad - He worked hard and struggled to find a balance between work and family.
- Dad - He was reluctant to give affirmation to his kids for fear of showing favoritism.
- Dad - Be respectful, especially to people of color. Dad was quick to correct me when I was disrespectful to Mom, Momee, or Bell. And respect people in positions of authority (e.g., pastor, principal, teachers, and coaches).
- Dad - Be loyal. Dad was loyal to Mom, his children, Momee, and Bell among others.
- Dad - Laugh at yourself, not others. Dad had a keen sense of humor. He was not afraid to act silly and childish if it made us laugh. His funny faces often made a party more fun.
- Bell - I learned how to have fun playing cards and laugh a lot while doing it.
- Momee - Waste not, want not. She saved even small portions of leftovers after meals.
- Momee - If it's worth doing, it's worth doing right. And, cleanliness is next to godliness.
- Mom - Table manners matter, and I learned how to write a thank you note for a gift.
- Mom - It's difficult to get your reputation back if you do something to damage it.
- Mom - I learned the value of money and how to earn it. Mom went to the bank with me to open a bank account at age eight, when I started selling greeting cards door-to-door.
- Mom and Dad -
  - Learn to play a musical instrument. I learned to play the saxophone, and I was in the Lowndes County High School band, starting in third grade.
  - Volunteer. Serve others (e.g., Dad was Chairman of the Waterworks Board and Mom was very involved in the annual Calico Fort Arts and Crafts Fair).
- Mom, Dad, Momee, and Bell -
  - Have faith in God.

- Be generous. They were all generous to others with their time and money. They made weekly contributions to church and helped people in need. They were civic-minded and worked to make Fort Deposit better.

Although I learned a lot from Dad, I learned a whole lot about collaboration by just watching three self-assured women (Momee, Mom, and Bell) work together.



## **Hickory Stick**

**Gail McCullers**

Remember this song?

In 1907, Will Cobb and Gus Edwards wrote it: "School days, school days, dear old golden rule days, / Reading and writing and 'rithmetic, taught to the tune of the hickory stick...."

Her hickory stick was a twelve-inch wooden ruler used to rap us on the palm or the top of our hand when we misbehaved. I got very familiar with that hickory stick! I was a new first-grade student, and I was very excited about all the new friends. I talked a lot.

As the year passed into winter from fall, I had experienced a number of hickory stick raps and had also spent time at the blackboard with my nose in a circle of chalk. Several days I went home with chalk on my face.

At the end of spring, Mom and Dad met with my hickory stick teacher. She told them I would have to repeat first grade (and I remembered she was the only first grade teacher). Such a dilemma.

Salvation came when my dad, a carpenter, bought a lot and built us a house in town. I had escaped the hickory stick.

Second grade was wonderful. Miss Lolly was the teacher, and there were no hickory stick rulers in her classroom. The seed was planted by Miss Lolly in her second-grade class that I wanted to be a teacher someday. That year finally became for me, "dear old golden rule" days!

## End of Career

### Gail McCullers

I was sixteen. I know that because I had my own car. As a teenager, I needed money for gas so I tried a number of part-time jobs (after school and on weekends.) The best time was to have a job during the summer months because I could work all day.

I sold shoes for Patrick's Shoe Store, fixed floral bouquets for Kesslers' Florist and sold overalls to farmers when I worked at Joe Sapp's Mercantile Store. My most lucrative job, though, was babysitting. On this job I made more money to spend on gas, milkshakes, and cheeseburgers at the Globe (our hangout).

I enjoyed keeping other people's children and often, after they went to bed, I could study. Usually, I would feed them their supper, play games for a while, maybe read stories to them, and then it was bedtime.

One babysitting job turned into quite an event. I was keeping two young children (ages six and four) for a young single mom. She had a date with a "possible" new boyfriend. Driving across town at 6:00 p.m., I did not want to be late. The young lady's date was for 7:00.

The children and I had a lot of fun. I got them in bed at 8:30. Time started to pass and it got later and later. I knew I had better call my parents, for they expected me home by 10:00 or 11:00. Gosh, she did not have a telephone! It was midnight. I was in an unfamiliar neighborhood, and I did not want to go wake up people that I did not know to use their phone. I went to sleep on the sofa.

I later heard a key at the door. The sun was shining, and it was a new day. She had come home! Her story was about driving to Birmingham (sixty miles away) and having car trouble. It took them all night to find a service station still open.

Driving home that morning, I kept thinking about what my parents would say. When I turned on Fourth Street, I could see someone was sitting on our porch. It was my dad. All he said to me was "Young lady, there will be no more babysitting jobs for you."

That was that. My career had ended!

*Most of the basic material a writer works with is acquired before the age of fifteen.*

– Willa Cather

## My Cat Henry

Charles Julian McDonald

Henry is a beautiful yellow bobbed-tail cat. We got him from the pound about two years ago, around Christmas. We lost our beloved cat Oreo in October 2020, and after Oreo's death our grandchildren, Patrick and Michael, wanted me to have another cat for Christmas.

Not having a tail doesn't appear to bother Henry, as he seems to be more concerned about where he is and when his next meal will be presented, maybe in a dish on a tufted pillow, or just flaked in a favorite dish, or served on the end of a spoon! That's the way cats are, don't you know!

We were curious, however, about Henry's bobbed tail. The folks at the pound said that he was born that way. I couldn't help but do a little research and discovered that there is a breed of bobbed tailed cats called Manx. The Manx cat is a domestic cat (*Felis cactus*) originating on the Isle of Man, between England and Ireland. The Manx has a naturally occurring mutation that shortens the tail. Most Manx have a small stub of a tail that is the most distinguishing characteristic. They can be different colors, with the only difference in domestic short hairs being the tail.

The major problem with Henry was (and thankfully I use the verb *was*) that he was very destructive. He broke many of Sally's treasures such as pottery and china and some gifts from America, France, and Germany. Sally was able to glue some of the pieces together so that it is difficult to tell they were broken. He also tore up plants, greenery and floral. He occasionally would bite and scratch Sally and me when we were trying to play with him. One time he was so bad that we were ready to take him back to the pound, but he has, with age, turned into, I suppose, a nice pet, most of the time, and even with all we have endured, we love him.



## **There Ain't No Catfish in the Panama City Bay**

**Charles Julian McDonald**

In 1954, I was thirteen when Mama, Daddy, and I went on vacation to Panama City, Florida.

We didn't go on many vacations in those days because my daddy worked for the Alabama Power Company, and he didn't get many days off, but that summer our neighbor's mother worked for a place at Panama City Beach Resort where she could get us a good rate at a place called the Panama City Resort, and my daddy took her up on the cut rate for a week at the beach. Well, it wasn't really on the beach. It was across the street and about four rows of individual houses from the water, but you know that didn't matter because we could walk over there, the place smelled like the beach, and there were big white birds flying around called seagulls. Somebody told my daddy those birds were scavengers, and I didn't know what that was, so I called them scalawags, and really, I didn't know what that meant either, but I just didn't care because I was having so much fun at the Panama City Resort.

When we checked in to the room, we met Mrs. Moss. She was a great person because she worked there and gave us a bunch of discount coupons for food and rides at the pavilion. I got some coupons to use at the skating rink and to ride some of the things like the merry-go-round and about a half dozen other rides, the last being the roller coaster called the "Slingshot." I didn't know about the Slingshot until I rode the thing, and it about slung my guts out. I learned right quick that I didn't need to ride the Slingshot anymore.

Mama and Daddy loved taking naps in the afternoons. While they napped, I went across the street to skate in the skating rink and to spend time in a big place full of pinball machines and other games. I had played the pinball games before, but I really enjoyed skating the most.

The second afternoon I was at the beach I met this fella from Birmingham whose name was Julian McDonald. I couldn't believe it! We had the same name! And he thought I was kidding him when I told him. We talked about things such as sports, the beach, deep sea fishing and eventually, girls. We decided we wouldn't call each other Julian. I was assigned the name Junior, and he was to be Buddy. All went well until I couldn't remember who he was. Who? Oh well, we just called each other something. (I became Tiger, and he was Bugger.

My visit was short-lived with the other Julian or Bugger or whoever he was because I was going fishing with Mama and Daddy the next day, in spite of my new friend, the beach, the Panama City beach girls, and the dance they called the PC Bop.

We got up early the next morning and drove to a fishing camp where they rented fishing boats and tackle and sold bait. Daddy rented a boat. We had our own tackle, but we bought some bait—some shrimp. We asked where a good place would be to fish, and the man said go to the Bay Bridge and fish under there. So we did. We went underneath the bridge, dropped anchor, and baited our hooks with shrimp and started fishing. Wasn't long before we started catching fish. Frankly, I didn't know what kind they were except they were pretty—but no catfish? So, being good freshwater fishermen, we started stringing up the fish and putting them over the side of our boat on the string. We caught fish right and left, and after a while we pulled the fish up from string and, lo and behold, NO fish, NO CATFISH, or in some cases only the heads of fish where something had eaten most of our fish. It took a little time, but we discovered our fish were being eaten by Florida blue crab. We felt dumb because back there in Barbour County, in fresh water, we didn't have any crab, and we were used to catching catfish!

Mama had a good solution to our problem. Daddy had a peck bucket in the boat, and mama said let's see how many crab we can catch with the fish on the string, or what was left of them, and we could take the crab back to our apartment in that peck bucket and cook them, so we did. Mama sat there and with the patience of Job she picked out the crab meat with which she made a delicious West Indies crab salad. Oh man, did that fishing trip turn out to be a good one! After lunch we all three had a great nap and tried not to think about going home the next day.

We got up the next morning, cleaned up our apartment, turned the key over to Mrs. Moss, and headed back up the highway toward Alabama. It was no fun leaving, but I had great memories of the Gulf shores, the skating rink, pinball games, the rides at the pavilion, meeting my new friend Julian, and the great fishing trip.

What a great Florida trip!



*I find out more and more every day how important it is for people to share their memories.*

– Fred Rogers

## Movies and Messages

Diane Miller

There's a treasured family picture of my brother and me, taken by a street photographer. Ben is strolling along whistling absent-mindedly, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his corduroy knickers. I'm clutching his arm, wearing a too-short dress and gazing curiously at the picture taker. I'm five years old; big brother, all of eight. It's a sunny Saturday morning in downtown Huntsville, in the days long gone when it was safe for two children to walk to the movies without an adult.

The movies were always standard shoot-em-ups starring Red Ryder or Lash LaRue or even Roy and Gabby. You know the type, films with the obligatory scene in which the white-hat hero vaults from his horse to knock the black-hat villain off his mount, and they go rolling down a hill together. The best part, of course, was the cartoon which accompanied the feature, Porky Pig or maybe Tom and Jerry, always in real Technicolor.

We had to get to the theater early to take part in the Kiddie Klub that met before the feature. We played games and sang songs, and the whole process was broadcast on local radio. Part of the time was devoted to an open mic, when children could tell a joke or sing a song for a moment in the spotlight, and Mommas at home could listen with pride to their talented offspring. That's where I made my solo debut, with a heartfelt rendition of "Jingle Bells." Not the verses, because I didn't know all those words, but the repetition of the chorus made up for that.

Ben was not about to be outdone by his younger sister. He got up on stage and demonstrated Indian hand signals. On radio. But it didn't matter much that no one could see them, because he had made them up anyway. No self-respecting Indian would have recognized his signals, but that didn't matter either, because I'm pretty sure they didn't even use hand signals. Well, maybe in the movies.

I thought about his hand signals years later, when I heard about the casting for the movie *Cheyenne Autumn*. Not your cheesy Saturday morning chase, this was an epic film based on U.S. government opposition to the long trek of displaced Cheyenne Indians returning to their Wyoming homeland after having endured starving conditions in Oklahoma. It had a stellar cast: Richard Widmark, James Stewart, Edward G. Robinson, Sal Mineo, Dolores Del Rio, Karl Malden, Ricardo Montalban, et cetera. It may have been a sincere attempt to take some responsibility for the violent treatment of the Indians, but it was a box-office disappointment, primarily because it wasn't a very good movie.

Perhaps because of buying so many name actors, the producers had to cut corners elsewhere. Most notably, since it was filmed in northern New Mexico, local Navajo Indians were used instead of transporting Cheyennes. The locals didn't speak the Cheyenne



language, but they were told simply to speak the lines in their own language, and English subtitles would supply the “translation.” Supposedly, no one would know the difference.

There is one place in the United States where this questionable film has been very popular: among the Indians of Northern New Mexico. Each October, there are showings in Taos when every pickup truck in the county heads for the drive-in theatre. Sitting in truck beds, the crowd cheers wildly when the Indians speak. No, they are not applauding the performance of their tribesmen. It seems that the Indian actors were poorly paid and taken for granted, and they resented the unfair treatment. Instead of saying, for example, “Captain, sir, we come in peace,” in the Navajo language they are disparaging some of the Captain’s private body parts.

There are indeed more ways to communicate than simply through one’s native language.

## **Eating Watermelon**

**Gail McCullers**

Eating watermelon leaves me sticky with sweet juice running down my face. We sprinkle a little salt and that makes the taste even better. Our way to eat watermelon is to cut it into large chunks, ease out the seeds, if possible, then sprinkle with salt and eat away!

Summer months were our best times to eat the homegrown watermelons from Grandad’s patch. The watermelon juices often got mixed with the pesky mosquitoes flying around.

We indulged this favorite treat at home, at church, on vacation, and actually in the field in the country.

Grandad liked to keep watermelons cold by placing them in a bucket of ice or leaving them in the refrigerator overnight to offer to visitors to the farm, but he reserved trips to the patch for his grandchildren.

I learned, over the years, from visiting the patch, that my favorite was a yellow one!

Today that watermelon patch is gone, as is Grandad, but I still enjoy the sticky juice running down my face.



## The Art of Love, the Love of Art

Diane Miller

Among ourselves, we students at College Park High made fun of our art teacher, Lucy Henslee. She was tall and gangly, with frizzy hair just beginning to gray—certainly not a beauty. Besides that, her ardor for her subject was so intense that it seemed laughable. Braque or Raphael or Hieronymus Bosch, she loved them all. She was determined to instill in her students not only a love of the masterworks, but also an appreciation for serious artistic expression of whatever kind. Painstakingly she tutored us in media from gouache to silkscreen, enameled copper jewelry to soap sculpture, tempera painting to pot throwing. She would exhort, “Make it *yours!*” with far too much fervor.

Almost as much as she loved art, she apparently loved Idus Felder, the portly, apologetic teacher of Latin. That fact, of course, just gave us more reason to snicker behind her back. Lucy and Idus were an item for perhaps a year, attending school functions and serving on committees together. But then we got a new Spanish teacher, Dr. Miriam Thompson. Immaculately groomed and graceful, though not exactly young, she spoke her chosen second language with the charming Castilian accent she had picked up from her study in Madrid. Idus was immediately smitten.

The three of them, Lucy and Idus and Miriam, went around together for a while. We would see them at the Friday

night games, Idus holding down a seat between the two ladies. There they would determinedly wait out even the foulest weather, none choosing to give up their position. What happened was inevitable. By the next fall, our senior year, Dr. Miriam Felder was Coordinator of Language Studies for all of Fulton County, well on her way to becoming Atlanta’s Woman of the Year. Miss Lucy Henslee was left to turn her devotion to art alone.

She became an arts pioneer, supporting new projects. A mobile sculpture had been commissioned for the new main terminal of the Atlanta airport. Hanging high above the terminal floor, it was in-your-face brash and altogether beautiful. It depicted a phoenix rising from flames, the symbol of Atlanta, with stylized birds flying from the center to represent flights in all directions. Lucy announced that its theme represented her own aspirations. Eyes glowing, she predicted that the phoenix mobile would become as famous as Calder’s work and would make the Atlanta airport an art destination in itself.

But not everyone agreed. The sculpture cost \$35,000, which at the opening in 1961 was considered an enormous amount for public art. To Lucy’s disappointment, the beauty and symbolism were lost on the public, and the piece was the subject of much criticism and quite a few jokes. The new terminal had replaced outmoded Quonset

style buildings, where even the walls to the restrooms were simple eight-foot partitions and the stalls within required a dime admission. Enhanced utility was all that was desired, not frivolities like art. Ironically, the “new” airport would prove inadequate to handle the increased volume of traffic that came with the growth of jet air travel. By the time we saw Miss Henslee at the twentieth reunion of our high school class, yet another terminal had already been built. The beautiful but now useless building that had housed the mobile was destroyed. Apparently no effort had been made by the builders to salvage the art, and so the phoenix was consigned to ashes once again, crushing yet another love. By then, our more mature selves could see our teacher more clearly, and so with Lucy we lamented its loss.

The destruction of the artwork was just the most recent in her string of bereavements. She reminded us that her heart had been broken earlier when the airplane crashed in Paris shortly after the dedication of the mobile. That air disaster took the lives of 123 patrons of the arts from Atlanta, many of whom were her friends. To cap it off, even our high school was slated to be closed soon too, a victim of changing demographics and airport growth. With her students gathered around her, Lucy grieved openly. “Nobody cares any more about the things I loved,” she mourned.

Not so, Miss Henslee. All these years later, we do still care—well, not about Idus.



*The research for what you are writing is your whole life—I mean, there is one world expert on it: you....For what you’re writing there is no other authority.*

– William Stafford

## **Lessons on the Bayou**

**Diane Miller**

We entered the decrepit shack where the walls leaned precariously inward, seemingly held together primarily by the pasted-on newspaper wall covering. We could read cartoons of Maggie and Jiggs or the Katzenjammer Kids, right off those walls. My father-in-law had just purchased 40 arpents of land along Bayou Carencro in South Louisiana, to be used as a vacation retreat. It had been a homestead years before, but now had only open rolling fields punctuated by that derelict dwelling and a small cypress pond clogged with algae, home only to mudcats. The place was picturesque but not particularly functional.

That's when Herman Boxie first approached our family with a proposition for a share-cropping agreement. Boxie could look past the decay and see the fertile alluvial soil and the cleared land lain fallow, ripe for replanting. He had his own farm, but he didn't want the crop land to be wasted. He would do the cultivation; 20% of the yield would be ours.

Within a couple of years, we had made Green Acres a pleasant retreat. The shack was replaced by a comfortable new cottage; the pond, cleaned and given over to ducks. A new, larger pond was built and stocked with channel cat, bream, and sacalait. Large open, grassy lawns remained, boasting flowering perennials and decorative trees. Most striking, however, were the cultivated crops that covered much of the available land.

Never before, never since have we been able to enjoy such an abundance of fresh produce, all with no effort on our part besides the pleasant task of harvesting at will. Loaded cornstalks tall as young trees, sun-warmed tomatoes, okra plants with umbrella leaves shading the field peas at their feet, squash of every variety, melons and onions and potatoes and cabbage. Clearly, Boxie had a gift for cultivation—a green thumb.

Except Boxie's thumb wasn't really green, of course. It was black, black in the sense of many African Americans, that is, not white. We came to understand that Boxie was actually wealthy in the eyes of his community. His large farmhouse was sturdy and comfortable, with friendly dogs under the porch and guinea hens in the yard. His own acreage bore abundantly, and he had to buy two freezers to accommodate the slaughter animals, plus fish and game he and his sons brought home. Sons he had in abundance, daughters too, twelve children altogether. He supported them well by working hard and wasting nothing.

He was in effect the local equivalent of a manor lord. He owned several sleek horses that he raced at nearby Evangeline Downs, even winning occasionally. His children took

their pigs and goats and calves to local fairs. He was an ombudsman elected by his community to represent them as spokesman in business dealings and land disputes. Clearly, he was an intelligent and respected man of many talents.

That is why I was surprised when we stopped by with a Christmas gift for his family. He and his wife accepted it graciously and gifted us in return with an aromatic fruitcake moist with blackberry wine. When I handed him a Christmas card with a personal note inside, a look of confusion crossed his face. "You got to read this to me, Prof Miller," he said. "I never had time for schooling."

The friendship between our academic family and Mr. Boxie's worldly wise brood lasted many years. Boxie never learned to read, but he was a great teacher. All of his children went to school and learned to read. They succeeded in life, and several went to college. Under his leadership, his community was peaceful and progressive. I can't claim that we ever learned to farm, but from him we got good lessons in respect for people, for hard work, and for other kinds of knowledge besides book learning.



*Memoirists who lack empathy produce flat, self-heralding stuff....They demonstrate no skill for listening, no eye for nuance, no tolerance for opposing points of view....They fail to speak to the ceaseless tug and release, tug and release that lives at the biological, philosophical, and relational heart of life itself. To write without empathy is to drone; it is to lecture; it is to be the only person talking in a crowded room. It is to accuse, and it is, therefore, not memoir.*

– Beth Kephart, *Handling the Truth*

## **Summer**

**Lili Muljadi**

Technically, there is no summer in Indonesia. Indonesia is a tropical archipelago.

Students get one month off at the end of June. It is a popular family vacation time.

My father worked for an electrical utility company (Perusahaan Listrik Negara). He was the Java and Bali manager. The company had several vacation homes that my father could use for family vacations.

We usually drove to the vacation homes—the driver, a maid, my parents, and me. The car was fully loaded with cleaners, linens, canned food, and our clothes. It was like we were moving.

As soon as we arrived, my mother and the maid got busy, replacing all the bedding and towels with the ones my mother brought from home, cleaning the whole house, washing the dishes and utensils. My mother had a germ phobia. My father and I would sit on the patio drinking tea and eating cookies to stay out of my mother's way and enjoy the scenery.

Soon it was dinner time. After dinner, it was bedtime for me. My parents would join friends who happened to be vacationing in the same area. They played cards, listened to music played on a turntable, played tennis or ping-pong, or just chatted. They took turns hosting the evening fellowship.

I remember several summer vacations during my childhood.

### **Tretes (East Java)**

Tretes is a mountain resort with winding roads, beautiful scenery, and cooler temperatures compared to Surabaya, where we lived. A lot of vegetation and flowers. Very peaceful. We usually spent a week at this place.

I was about four to seven years old (1960-1965). Whenever we were at a cooler place, my mother would dress me in long sleeves and pants. I remember one overall with a rabbit eating a carrot applique that she sewed for me. She told me that rabbits loved to eat carrots and vegetables. If I ate my vegetables, I would be able to run fast like a rabbit.

In the morning, we walked around the flower garden, cut some flowers for the coffee table and dining table. Breakfast was bread with butter and jam. My parents had sweet jasmine tea. I drank sweet milk. Growing kids need milk.

There were horses for rent. It was fun to ride a horse around the resort. The horse owner walked next to the horse.

When the temperature got warmer, we went to the swimming pool. My father would swim. My mother and I would play at the kiddie pool. I did not enjoy the pool very much. It was cold. I shivered and my teeth were chattering. Sometimes we had lunch at the pool restaurant.

There was only one restaurant in town, which was at the pool. Vegetables were fresh and cheap. We bought them directly from the farmers at the market. Tretes is also the place to get strawberries. Our lunch and dinner menu was usually rice, vegetables, and Spam or canned corned beef. The strawberries were very small (the size of a raspberry) and tart. My mother added sugar, slow-boiled them. To eat them, she diluted them with water and put them in some ice cubes.

### **Kiliurang (Mid Java)**

The vacation home where we stayed here was also owned by the utility company where my father worked. I do not remember much about this house. We only went to this place once or twice. It is farther away from Surabaya. My mother overheard that this house is haunted. She is superstitious. I do not know if this was the reason that we stopped going to Kaliurang or the driving distance.

This resort is located near the famous Buddhist temple Borobudur (7<sup>th</sup> century) and the Hindu temple Prambanan (850 CE). There are other temple ruins surrounding this area. As a child, I was really scared of these buildings. The walls were covered with moss and giant statues that looked like monsters. The steps are very tall. My father had to carry me up to the buildings.

Mount Merapi is a volcano located near Kaliurang. During one of our stays in Kaliurang, Mount Merapi erupted, raining ashes on the surrounding area. At night, we saw the hot lava flowing down.

Rabbit kebobs are a delicacy in this area. My parents did not tell me that a rabbit was killed for our dinner, so I ate it.

*Learn to write by doing it. Read widely and wisely. Increase your word power. Find your own individual voice through practicing constantly. Go through the world with your eyes and ears open and learn to express that experience in words.*

– P. D. James

## Dandelions and Clover

Nancy Penaskovic

Dandelions and clover are ubiquitous. Every spring welcomes a new growth of the green and yellow carpet. Clover can be green, red, or purple. Dandelions are always yellow. Coming out of our food pantry at church after packing food supplies for the growing Hispanic population, I stepped in the clover by my car and was delighted to see the blooming dandelions.

I felt reassured the cold temperatures would give way to the warmth of spring. It was a cheerful message to brighten my day. Dandelions and clover reminded me that the common, ordinary elements of nature enrich my life. How glorious is a sunny day after an extended period of rain! It lifts the spirit and delights one's soul.

Clover was the preferred lawn in the early 1900s as it provided food for livestock and grew well in hard, compact soil. It was a component of grass seed up until the 1950s. Dandelions held medicinal qualities in Chinese medicine for over one thousand years. Dandelions have the ability to attract pollinating insects and release ethylene gas that helps fruit ripen.

Regular dirt holds infinite value to the gardener planting a crop of summer vegetables or flowers. The value of clean water is priceless when a drought occurs or water facilities fail, or sometimes it takes a disaster to appreciate a cold drink of water or miss the opportunity to shower or bathe.

Dandelions and clover remind me to appreciate the necessity of fresh air, clean water, and the unseen power of electricity and light bulbs. Rather than see clover and dandelions as weeds, I choose to know them as rich reminders of graces, given to explore with gratitude, the beauty of nature and life.





## **Walking the Tightrope**

**Nancy Penaskovic**

My rotation through the Operating Room (OR) as a student nurse was like walking a tightrope, sometimes exhilarating, many times terrifying. Kay was comparable to a drill instructor on a Marine base like Parris Island, North Carolina. I am grateful, however, for the wisdom and experience of our instructor, Kay, who guided us through this tightrope experience.

I particularly remember our first class. She took us on a tour of the six-room operating room suites, pointing out an item in each room, a special cart, an instrument in a cupboard, the hall storage shelves, certain sterile items, the clean areas, and the sterilizer area. When we returned to the classroom, she pointed at each of us and asked where a particular item would be. It seemed like an impossible task, but it taught us to use our photographic memory neurons. To this day when I walk through a room, I unconsciously note where different items reside. It has proven helpful when my husband misplaces his phone and I tell him where I saw it last.

Kay taught us to prioritize tasks and equipment needed for each case to which we would be assigned. What would one need for an orthopedic procedure? What would one need for a thoracic case, a tonsillectomy, abdominal surgery or a plastic's case? What special equipment would be required for each procedure? Kay taught us to anticipate emergencies that could arise during certain cases and how to respond. She emphasized that we should rarely have to leave the room since we would have anticipated what equipment might be needed. If one were the scrub nurse handing the surgeon the instruments, one should have the correct instrument in one's hand before he or she asked for it.

We nurses had to utilize everything we learned in our anatomy and physiology classes. Kay challenged us to know what was happening as the surgeon was operating. She asked questions like "Why did they follow a particular approach?" "What was the course of recovery for the patient?" "What complications could occur?" "What was the most important thing to check as the patient was taken to the Recovery Room?" Of course, the correct answer was that the nurse must always check that the patient had a patent airway!

Little did I know I would utilize everything she taught me in my first position as a graduate nurse four years later as the Head Nurse of the new OR under her supervision.

## **Advice on the Pursuit of Carnal Knowledge from a Poet-Therapist: No Charge**

**Charlene Redick**

There is poetry all around you to help you find love.  
There is no need to approach love with lazy, crude come-ons—  
Words of enticement such as:  
*Can I hit that this weekend?*  
*When is your period?*  
*Give it up, will you. Geeze!*

Are women such an intimidating mystery to you that words fail you?  
Can you see her as a frozen river yearning to thaw just waiting for the right heat—  
Your words of endearment, of arousal?

Just try:  
Connect to her with words about her impact on you:  
*My throat gets thick when you come into the room.*

Comment on how she challenges you:  
*You make me want to be a better man.*

Quote statistics:  
*Every guy in the room wants you.*

Respond to the challenge of her:  
*I want to know what love is and I think you can show me.*

Speak of your yearning:  
*Oh, my love, my darling, I hunger for your touch.*

There is poetry all around you—words that are a bridge across misunderstanding and mad  
rule  
in this pursuit of being known. You must find the words.  
And here is the secret: *She wants to be known.*

*Carnal Knowledge*, this knowing, is an art, a poem, the essence of ourselves  
That we trust our lover with.  
Nothing can match it.  
You have the key to this profound knowing: *Carnal Knowledge*.  
Find the words.

## Late Insurgencies

Charlene Redick

Should we just end this?

Autumn is an appropriate time for goodbyes.

Look at the cold fingers of winter creeping among the Begonias that cling to the soil.

In this cavalcade of shorter days and colder nights,

The glint of yellow—as gold as coins—clinging defiantly among the crunchy leaves of rust,

Boring in their dying after their showy summer, full of pride, knowing it's over.

*I will hold my head up*; they declare as they jump like suiciders from the branches,

Or cling like desperados as the wild winds slap them, forcing them: *Let go! Give it up!*

I tell you memory will whip your ass:

All your efforts for me when you could not get enough of me,

The days of wine and roses, of promises kept—what an impact those golden times had.

Now look at us: Interruptions constantly because we are afraid we will forget,

Constant complaints about our digestive track, our fear of embarrassment, doctor's appointments.

Amidst the rare mornings of waking and grinning: *Wow! No Pain! And I've got another day!*

You are stealing my existence with your moods,

And I reinforce this behavior by forgiving your utter selfishness,

your forgetfulness, your mess you don't clean up, the lists you forget or drop,

Resisting, resenting, or just not inclined to remember what I ask of you.

What was that Browning poem: *Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be?*

What a con. See, I have misplaced gratitude,

This insinuating plague is wearing me down.

If I walk away, at least I will have the unfamiliar to entertain me

Instead of this tedious routine you cling to predictably like life—this death.

Do not say I am having a dreadful day.

I never liked anything that filched my freedom, my faith in the future.

I have always been that way.

But you are no longer intrigued by my struggles with transformation.

Remember when all I had to do was want it, and you got it for me?

Utter I needed it and there you were with your tools?

Why can't we have the elder version of lover's passion

And come alive again, less intense but on fire?

Isn't it enough that it's harder to hear, and see?

Do we have to give up touch and imagination in this real *stop the steal?*

That puts *the big lie* to shame,

And substitutes outrage for yearning,

And rebellion for truth?

## **An Unexpected Surprise**

**Ken Ringer**

While serving with the U.S. Army in Germany in 1962, a most unusual event took place. It was July, the temperature was in the 90s, and the days were hot and balmy. My wife Joyce's parents were visiting with us in Mannheim, Germany. Nothing was going on in our American community of Ben Franklin Village. Adjacent to our community was an athletic complex of facilities including a football stadium, a baseball field, a large gymnasium, tennis courts, and a running track.

Then one day everything changed in the athletic complex. A large number of U.S. Army troops were doing all types of tasks: cutting grass, then spraying the grass green, painting everything that did not move including buildings, fences, facilities. Men were sky diving out of helicopters; bands were playing and marching, drill teams were practicing. It was a massive effort with everything shaping up for some special event—but what?

This activity continued for several days, with curiosity peaking. I had read in our only newspaper, the *Stars and Stripes*, that President John Kennedy was scheduled to visit Scandinavia with stops in Norway and Sweden in the coming days. Maybe he was going to swing down and add Germany to his itinerary. How exciting this would be for the president of the United States to visit our community!

With my job in the U.S. Army Signal Corps and communications, I was required to have top secret and Cosmic (NATO) security clearances.

The excitement continued for several days with everyone speculating on what was to take place. Then, I was notified of a top-secret meeting that I was ordered to attend. Now, we would get the scoop on what was happening.

Most of the officers in this area were in the meeting with a sense of anticipation and excitement. The big question was "Who is coming to Mannheim for a VIP visit?" I was hoping it might be President Kennedy.

No, I was wrong. You could have knocked me over with a feather when it was announced three Russian generals were to visit Mannheim on a courtesy visit to NATO. The date and time were announced, and everyone who attended the special event scheduled for the football stadium would be required to have a printed ticket with row and seat number. You had to be in your seat by 1:30 with the special event scheduled to begin at two o'clock.

At 1:45, a huge Russian helicopter landed on the baseball field. Four MP's (Military Police) and an American general escorted three Russian generals to the football stadium and their reserved seats. The Russian generals were huge men who looked like the Chicago Bears offensive line. They all wore long overcoats even though the temperature was in the 90s.

The program started promptly at two o'clock. With the bands playing and marching, skydivers diving out of helicopters, runners performing on the track. It was precise, continuous movement for one hour. At three o'clock the generals rose and marched back to their helicopter and departed.

This event was a shock to me and most of the other troops stationed in Mannheim.

We were there to defend Germany from the Russians if they decided on aggressive action against NATO and western Europe.

An unexpected surprise.



*My first notebook was a Big Five tablet, given to me by my mother with the sensible suggestion that I stop whining and learn to amuse myself by writing down my thoughts.*

– Joan Didion

## Dismal Darkness to Shimmering Glory

Jim Rose

The alarm clock's jangle unmercifully jarred me from a deep sleep. Was it 4:30 in the morning already? I turned over in the dark and silenced the alarm.

*"Oh, Lord! Please don't let it be raining."*

It had rained for three consecutive January Sunday mornings. My thirteen-year-old constitution was at the point of rebellion against going out once again on my bicycle—in the rain and the cold—to deliver a 7.5-mile-long *Birmingham News* paper route. If only we had a car, but people like us didn't have automobiles in 1955. It was the bike or nothing.

Listening closely, I heard it; the soft patter of raindrops hitting the roof. I felt my throat tighten up, and then the tears came. There was no way to stop them. I tried to quit, but Mother heard and was soon at my side trying to somehow help. She was followed shortly by my father, who grumpily muttered, "What in the Sam Hill are you whining about?"

Dad was not known for his compassionate nature. He had been raised as a step-child and held no truck with weakness.

I looked up at him and quietly replied, "I have been going out to deliver these papers all month with the rain, and the temperature in the forties, and I just don't think I can do it again."

There was a quick retort, "The Hell, you can't! Get out of that bed and get moving."

My mother had heard enough, "All right, Chester, if he is going to have to deliver the papers, you are going with him to help him put them together before he gets started!" She said it in a way that cowed even a man like my father. He meekly agreed and we were soon on our way. He walked along beside me as I pedaled the bike. We had covered about a half mile when he suddenly stooped and picked up something. Inspecting it, he exclaimed, "Damn! I just found a five-dollar bill." I looked, and sure enough it was a brand new bill, wet but intact. I wanted to cry again. I got five dollars for delivering the darn papers for a week, and he just reached down and picked up five dollars just waiting for him. But it was best to remain quiet. If I complained, he might just go back home and leave me to assemble the papers by myself.

By the time we got to the paper drop-off station, a cold gray dawn was struggling to overcome the night, but the rain still fell. After getting the papers together and loading the bike, my father went home, and I started the long 3-hour ordeal to get the papers to each customer.

Thirty minutes into the route, I was soaking wet and shivering, but the rain seemed to be slacking off. I continued my stops, trying my best to keep the papers dry to throw them to spots that would shelter them from the rain.

Another hour passed, and I realized it had stopped raining. Things were looking up. I was still wet and miserably cold, but at least I wouldn't be getting any wetter. As I threw the paper on Professor Laumer's porch, I saw a light come on in the hallway. Mrs. Laumer quickly opened the door and asked me if I wanted to come in for a cup of hot chocolate. Oh boy, did I ever! She gave me a towel to dry off and ushered me in.

We sat at the kitchen table, chatted, and drank two cups of her delicious brew. Sadly, I soon had to bid her goodbye. There was still more than an hour to go.

Mounting my trusty Schwinn, I quickly realized that large snowflakes were falling. And they were falling thicker and thicker by the minute. I rode on, alone and awed by a world of dancing, shimmering white. By the time I finished the route, the snow was four inches deep. It never snowed in Troy, Alabama, yet there it was.

I did not see another living soul as I beheld the glory. It seemed such a shame that no one else was seeing what the morning had brought. But it was only 7:00 a.m., so I made a vow, *"I will wake everyone up when I get home."*

Then the sun came out, and on the wet ground, the snow started melting. In the twenty minutes it took to get home, it all disappeared.

I performed my usual 180-degree hook slide into the front yard and slammed the kick stand down. Bounding up the steps and into the house, I realized my gloom had disappeared. After all, my Dad had found the five dollars, but I had been given a glimpse of beauty that he could only imagine.

I never let him forget it.

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## On Mary's Wings

Jim Rose

There are angels that walk this earth. They come not from heaven on gossamer wings, but they are here, nonetheless.

In September 1959, we sat down in Mary Hilyer's Senior English class at Henderson High School. She looked at us with some trepidation, and we at her with considerable suspicion. She wondered if there were ways to get Shakespeare through our thick skulls. We pondered who would win the football game Friday night. After the obligatory roll call and other formalities, she began to teach, and as she did so, we were transported from the mundane world of awkward high school seniors to the magic of Beowulf and Macbeth. She spread her wings over and around us, teaching us that life was so much more than a drive-in movie.

In our class was a gangly, rather dull looking kid that played on her husband's varsity basketball team. She looked the nervous young man over and somehow saw something beneath the plain exterior.

She told him he could write book reports that would entertain. He said, "I can't." She countered, "You easily can!" Several weeks later he wrote a report on George Orwell's *1984*. To his amazement, the other students said it wasn't half-bad.

She told him he must learn to write essays. He said, "I won't!" But

she replied, "You most certainly will!" A scant two weeks later, she praised his first submittal.

After class, one fine spring day, she requested that he give a memorial address for our recently deceased Henderson High School principal. He said, "I cannot possibly do that. I can barely stand up in front of the class." Unfazed, she retorted, "You'll do it, or I shall get that young lady you dislike to give it instead." He bristled and then mumbled, "Well, what am I gonna say? I don't know what people want to hear from me about Dr. Smart." Patiently, she responded, "Why don't you just tell us all what our principal meant to you?" A few weeks later, he stood up before eight hundred people and told them of a very special man.

Quickly, the fortunate youth learned that if he climbed up on Mary's wings, he could do and see things that had seemed unreachable. Climb he did, and looking down on the earth, it was not nearly so imposing, so frightening, as he had once imagined. On Mary's wings, going to college no longer seemed impossible. On Mary's wings, being a man was easy.

Throughout our senior year, she taught; she listened; she cajoled. As she did so, he noticed that her strong wings carried not just him, but many others as well. There were children who walked into that class who left it as newly minted adults. As



we stood before her on graduation day, I saw a small tear of joy and pride trickle from her eye.

That was a long, long time ago. Throughout the half century that followed, we all knew those wings were there should we ever need them. Mary taught us in 1960, and she was the honored guest at our class reunion in 2010.

Death claimed her in 2011. Her legacy is an enduring love of the written word. Though her wings no longer lift us up, maybe, just maybe, we have provided a wing for someone struggling as we once were.

I cannot fully grasp the concept of eternal grace. However, there is one thing that seems certain to me: somewhere, at this very moment, someone is soaring on Mary's wings.



*We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospection....We write to be able to transcend our life, to reach beyond it. We write to teach ourselves to speak with others, to record the journey into the labyrinth.*

– Anais Nin

## Goodbye, Augustine and Western Civilization

Mary Ann Rygiel

Remember the hagiographic book about John F. Kennedy by Ken O'Donnell entitled *Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye?* I am writing, not about a period covering a three-year presidency, but about an assault on a period of about 1500 years, the attempt to overthrow all of the Greek and Roman classics. The way I arrived at 1500 years is that by my estimate, Homer wrote *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* at the earliest around 1,000 B.C., and the Roman Empire was in a state of collapse by 476 A.D., by Edward Gibbons' dating. The causes of the collapse were many, ranging from recurring plagues to barbarian tribes from the North invading the Empire to wars to expand the Empire to the cost of maintaining the Empire to sheer cultural weariness. Nevertheless, much great literature and philosophy, laws, and cultural heritage in the West come from these two ancient civilizations, the Greeks and the Romans.

Now an assault on the classics from these two groups is being mounted by a classics professor at Princeton. His name is Dan-el Padilla Peralta. The *New York Times* magazine ran an article about his views in its February 2, 2021, issue, entitled "He Wants to Save Classics from Whiteness. Can the Field Survive?" The subtitle is "Dan-el Padilla Peralta thinks classicists should knock ancient Greece and Rome off their pedestal—even if that means destroying their discipline." I have come too late to a more nuanced appreciation of the classics to mount a defense matched by the deep well of knowledge of Peralta, which his colleague Mary Frances Williams, also learned in the field, mounted against his view in a face-off in 2019.

Nevertheless, I know what the loss would mean to me, a casual but enthusiastic admirer of the classics. It would mean no longer seeing the description of Homer's blue Aegean. No longer feeling the strain, the torsion, of Odysseus' body as he struggles against the mast he is tied to, trying to resist the alluring sound of the Sirens. No longer feeling the weight of Anchises' body as his son Aeneas carries him on his back out of Troy, a city on fire, with Anchises carrying the household gods. The flickering fire on a Roman night as the Apostle Peter preaches to believers and converts, perhaps with young Clement of Rome in the audience. The tang of the metals—copper, silver, and gold—and the pungent taste of the fish sauce called garum made in factories along the coast of Spain in the first century A.D., bringing wealth to the Empire. Greek honey, used as medicine and as strengthener for athletes, and as sweetness in liquid drinks, and the subject of Aristotle's first foray into writing, a work on beekeeping. Olive oil from Tunisia, also a source of wealth to the Empire in the first century A.D. Socrates asking, "And what do men call this?" probing topics centering on justice, law, fairness, knowledge, governance. Augustine's hearing the boys singing "Take and read," and Augustine himself, possibly a Berber from Hippo. The smell of Hannibal's African elephants marching in conquest over the Alps. The smell of the animals in the Coliseum and the fragrance of the bravery of the combatants, both Christians and gladiators, the fragrance described in the martyrdom of Polycarp of Smyrna as he is

immolated, described as the scent of pure baking bread and the sight of a white dove which emerges from him when pierced, the dove flying upward.

No, I won't join in the call for expunging the whiteness from the classics. It isn't all white anyway, and Professor Dan-el Padilla Peralta knows it. Instead, I embrace what I do know of the classics, as a kind of Valentine card from the ancient world to me. In a legend about St. Valentine, he is said to have cut hearts from parchment to remind couples of their loyalty to each other. Valentine's parchment card to me asked me to remember something from the ancient world of the West.



*But the author does not only write when he is at his desk; he writes all day long, when he is thinking, when he is reading, when he is experiencing; everything he sees and feels is significant to his purpose and, consciously or unconsciously, he is...storing and making over his impressions.*

– W. Somerset Maugham, *The Summing Up*

## **“Vinegar Is Your Best Friend”**

**Mary Ann Rygiel**

Her kind laugh had the warmth and reassurance in it that are the marks of a true, long-lasting friend, the kind St. Exupery loved and cherished.

These were the words Jane Clayton said in response to my call of desperation over the incontinent habits of my nine-week-old Pomeranian puppy. “Vinegar is your best friend,” she said, soothingly. “That old towel can be washed and come out clean as new.” With this advice were mingled other tips I have subsequently followed: 1) “Do you know Kong brand? I can picture myself in the aisle at PetSmart. You can take your dog there as part of his socialization.” 2) “Get signed up at PetSmart for their training lessons. They are really for you as much as they are for the dog. When Macie and I went, there was a Pomeranian in the class. There was also a border collie.” The border collie was in reference to a dog I had considered as a rescue dog from a shelter. He was a mixture of Australian shepherd and border collie. I didn’t have what he needed: a fenced in yard, a fellow dog, a cat, and a boy at least ten years old. 3) “Institute potty training boot camp. Choose a designated, controllable area and make frequent forays to it. It can even be done by apartment dwellers in big cities.” I have befriended vinegar; double-toweling, sometimes with the training pad hidden discreetly below the folded towel so as to prevent the Pomeranian from chewing the edges of the hidden training pad; the PetSmart Kong aisle; the PetSmart dog trainer, a lean college student who is probably either a pre-Vet major or an Animal and Dairy Science major, which both come to the

same aspiration—her name is Tabitha; bought a puppy and small dog traveling carrier; bought miscellaneous Nylabones in clear, a manly blue, and a brown one that is chicken and bacon flavored. Is that, incidentally, why my hands have a faint residue of chicken and bacon flavor as I eat my dish of blueberries indecorously with my fingers, even though my hand hygiene was ever scrupulous, then accentuated by COVID, and now underscored by the dog’s presence in the house.

This was a friendly call, but do I always act so promptly, nay impetuously, on suggestions from friends? After all, the training lessons cost a cool \$129 for 6 sessions, and the smart looking traveling carrier was a steal at \$45, versus the store brand in black for \$50. This time I did respond immediately. You may be wondering why.

For a week, I had been taking the dog out to the grass and setting him down without his collar or leash. Again, you are slapping your head asking why. Because the husband of the breeder, who is himself the main caretaker since he is retired and she works during the day, said the dog had not been outside on grass before, and would approach it mincingly. He did, until Sunday morning of Valentine’s Day. I was dressed for church, looking forward to a lecture on the Church Fathers of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, 311-397 A.D. Because my younger son, Robert, whose fiancée is very knowledgeable about dogs, has stressed to me the importance of getting the dog outside to do his business, I have been

going out promptly at various times, beginning with going out at 5:30 a.m. in my pajamas with a raincoat thrown over the pjs for decency. Because grass was new to the dog, it was safe to go out without collar or chest harness and leash attached—that is, until Valentine’s morning. I carried him out. When I put him on the ground, he began to run away. I had to grab him by his fur. I even fell down on my right shoulder, but nothing was broken. I knew I’d better get one of us to PetSmart for training.

I could barely fill out their form correctly, getting tripped up on such simple questions as to what things he needed to learn. My application form is a mess, but it’s filled out and the money is paid. I can also compliment myself on all the learning I have done in the past months, exploring dog breeds, dog breeders, application forms, finding out that it enhances your resume if you can say you’ve fostered a rescue dog, dog gear—ranging from furniture crates to play pens—and dog toys, like the Nylabones, and the great humane website, Chewy.com. As my friend said, you can build up points at both Chewy and in person at PetSmart. She also noted that PetSmart lets you bring in the dog with you, and it can do whatever it needs to do, whereas Talbot’s, which does give dividends for \$500 worth of women’s clothing purchases, gives a \$25 dividend but does not allow dogs.

My future is beginning to dawn brightly with these discoveries, yet I had an involuntary meditation as I sat at Auburn Diagnostic this morning waiting for a yearly mammogram. I was seated in a COVID-safe solo chair next to the aquarium.

These were some of my thoughts: *I’m sitting next to a nice, large, medical office aquarium. Fish are nice pets, aren’t they? Quiet, stay in their lane, etc. Their waste is no problem with the aerator filter; they don’t cry in the aquarium, don’t try to run away, don’t follow the owner to the kitchen to cook a multistep recipe or to the bathroom. Such fine, soothing pets.* Then I remembered Robert’s words of chastisement to me yesterday, after he was nipped by the dog, who is misnamed Mr. Darcy, and who is the most unlike a Jane Austen hero of any living creature. He said, “Well, you were hell-bent on getting a dog.” It reminded me of the words of my husband’s friend applied to a precipitous first marriage of a friend of his, who had had disappointments in love: “If you don’t rush into it, you wouldn’t do it.”

Another thought flooded into my mind from looking at the aquarium. There was a treasure chest at the bottom of the water, with the other gnarled, reef-like pieces. It reminded me of a Katherine Mansfield story I had taught decades ago when I first knew my friend Jane and taught with her in Opelika. In “The Doll’s House,” a little girl is consoled for her poverty by catching a glimpse of a light in a fancy doll’s house. She says to her sister in a closing line of great happiness, “I seen the little lamp.” The treasure chest for me represents the best of the biblical householder fetching things from his storehouse: things old—memory, friendship, and things new—a world new to me, beckoning.

## Odysseus's Dog

Mary Ann Rygiel

One of the most moving scenes in ancient literature is that of Odysseus finally returning to Ithaca after a twenty-year absence, in which he was wandering and trying to get back home. Who recognizes him immediately? His dog Argus, who only knew him briefly when Argus was a puppy. Argus thumps his tail in recognition of his master and then dies, the secret safe and the display of loyalty one whole final action of devotion.

Dogs are known for their loyalty to their masters. We hear various stories even today of dogs going many miles to be reunited with their owner, or of dogs owned by people in the service who are overjoyed when their young soldier returns home. Why, even a story of dog devotion emerged from the University of Alabama's football coaches, an environment in which so many other stories come to the fore all too readily. After one of the coaches—was it Jim McElwain, or does memory fail me—made some bad calls against an opponent expecting to be beaten, he talked about the emotional and psychological pain afterwards. The whole family, wife and children, would not speak to him. The only one whose behavior was still as friendly and loving as ever was his dog.

The loyalty and love dogs give and inspire in their human owners are the reasons I am buying a dog. To reference Alabama one more time, even their scouting reports on high school starred players may not exceed in intensity my scouring of such websites as Woof Avenue and the local Humane Society. I have learned a lot of lessons after an intense search.

One is that my family and lifestyle status have outlived the ability to own certain dogs, no matter how willing I was to try. This is exemplified by my first love, Chase, a mixture between an Australian shepherd dog and a border collie. Chase is beautiful, a tri-colored dog with an intelligent look in his clear eyes. He has a sister named Sadie, who is a merle. If you wonder about that word *merle*, that's one of my lesser learnings. A merle has mottled patches of color and blue eyes, or a blue eye and a brown eye. They are beautiful, too, especially if you have a taste for the offbeat. I wanted to adopt Chase, who was eighteen months old in the fall. The scout person for the Humane Society rejected me in kind but firm terms, saying that Chase needed a fenced in yard, a cat, a fellow dog, and a boy at least ten years old to play with. I was willing to have the fence built, adopt the exotically beautiful Sadie, buy the cat... but there was no prospect of my acquiring the ten-year-old boy. So, Chase is a lost love to me, but quite soon, a family took in Chase and Sadie. If you are reading this with your hands on your hips, thinking, "Why on earth was she turned down, when she was a willing owner?" Consider what the description of Chase's needs implies. Chase is a busy, active dog. His idea of fun is not to sit near a master who spends much time reading and writing. Had I been willing to acquire a little flock of sheep, I might have been a more suitable owner for Chase.

Speaking of sheep, a news ad from Waverly touted a Turkish Boz shepherd, saying she could be purchased for \$400. Never having heard of such a dog, I looked it up. First, they are very large. The Wiki picture shows a dog with its paws on the shoulders of the farmer the dog lives with. Second, they really are like the Australian shepherd, bred for being a work dog, not a pet lying at the owner's feet by a cozy fireplace.

My daughter-in-law was willing to pick up a cute terrier mix for me. His name was Oliver. I began thinking I could read a page of *Oliver Twist* out loud to him every day. But before I knew it, he was off the market. My daughter-in-law said in a cautionary tone, "Small dogs go fast."

She found a dog at the local Humane Society; its name was Cocoa Puffs. Meeting him was another learning experience. The college girls who work at the Humane Society were understandably reluctant to tell me much about Cocoa Puffs, but one did disclose elements of the dog's backstory. He had been living with a dog hoarder with eleven other chihuahuas. That explained to me the look of fear and anxiety in Cocoa Puff's green eyes. I put down a \$50 deposit in hopes that it would work out, and I had the weekend to think about it. The next morning at Sunday church services, three different vets advised me against getting this dog. One said an emphatic "No." The other two, a married couple who are both vets, agreed that the dog would always be anxious and might bite me if I tried to pick it up.

A woman in my neighborhood who walks her beautiful brown and white cocker spaniel told me about her breeder, who is located in North Carolina. I wrote a dozen well-thought out (as I thought) questions, including whether she shipped dogs and what the cost was. She determined my unsuitableness for one of her dogs from that question. I have subsequently learned that other breeders are willing to ship, or even to send someone with the dog. These are all additional charges. A breeder in Gardendale will do these things. But unfortunately, she has already sold all of her dogs.

The monks at New Skete, N.Y., breed and train German shepherds. You can register for one six months in advance at their website. The puppies run \$4300 to \$4700; the retired dogs are anywhere from \$8500 to \$10,000. These monks write books about dog training, too. An order of nuns who are located near the monastery make fabulous-looking cheesecakes. Even though I don't like cheesecake, I did buy one of their cheesecakes through Gold Belly and have it in my freezer, waiting for any social gatherings that may occur in 2021.

One Sunday morning after Thanksgiving, I saw someone in my neighborhood walking a King Charles cavalier spaniel. I could identify the breed because the nurse from the Texas hospital who was treating an Ebola patient and who thereby developed Ebola was pictured with Dr. Fauci hugging her, both dressed in protective gear, and at some point, pictured with her charming little dog. The woman walking the dog confirmed that it was a King Charles cavalier spaniel and said the breeder was located in Atlanta. Having been chastened by my experience with the cocker spaniel breeder, I ventured cautiously

onto the website. The warnings were stern, both implicit and explicit. The implicit warnings to interlopers were contained in the questionnaire that the prospective buyer had to fill out, answering among other things why exactly they wanted a King Charles and what experience they had had with the breed. The explicit warning was worded like this: "If you say you want a dog for Christmas, your application will be automatically disqualified."

I continued looking on Woof Avenue, but little dogs always did go fast. One who hasn't is an adult grey poodle named Franklin Miller Peabody. He is cute but a little stiff-legged. But his backstory is the heart-wrenching story you hear in pleas from animal advocates on television. It said he isn't used to much kindness in his life, is blind and deaf, shies away from being petted unless he knows you, and weighs nine pounds when he should weigh twelve. I would love to help him, but my inexperience weighs against this dog.

My future daughter-in-law gave me good advice on what to look for in a high quality pet breeder. If there were many breeds on the scene, that was not a good sign. If the mother of a litter was not in sight, that was also not a good sign. If the seller seemed overly anxious to sell, rather than interested in the characteristics of the prospective buyer, that, too, was negative.

I talked to retired teacher friends who have been lifelong dog owners and got recommendations on breeders, on suitable crates, and on training techniques, and even half a large package of training pads. It was a relief to see this item officially called "training pad," rather than the other colloquial term too indecorous for use by someone who taught a course on Jane Austen's fiction. I also looked for breeds myself. On my own, I found a Pomeranian breeder near Montgomery. Her two female dogs each had a litter of four puppies at the beginning of December. I am about to become the new owner of one. She calls him Davie. She named her dogs after *Eight is Enough*. I may extend his name to David Copperfield, since I understand that if a dog is AKC-registered, he needs two names. Or Dickens's David. The breeder says he loves to run and play. I have a few days to think about it.

How has all this changed my life? Going forward, I will spend less time reading theology and philosophy and more time reading *51 Puppy Tricks*, less time on websites about news, cooking, and sweaters and jeans, and more time on Chewy.com, and less time trying to remember lines from Shakespeare or Dante, and more time thinking and saying the words from that great one-line hit, "Who's a good boy?" That line is supposed to release oxytocin in the brain and then the eyes of the dog and of the owner, and, as we know, oxytocin is the hormone associated with love, just in time for Valentine's Day.



## **Big, Little; Big, Little**

**Steve Schmidt**

In the early 1970s my wife, Margaret, and I worked as postdoctoral fellows at Iowa State University. During this time, we were invited to a dinner party hosted by our friends, Dave and Janet Stephenson. Dave led an interesting life! During the academic year, he taught engineering courses at the university. During the summer months, he manned a fire lookout tower in northern Idaho. Janet was the technician who ran the cell culture laboratory in Margaret's lab group. Both Dave and Janet liked to travel, and they had invited each guest to bring a few slides of a recent trip to share after dinner. I was looking forward to the dinner party, but little did I anticipate the surprise that was in store for all of us.

After dinner, Dave showed slides of a road trip "out West" that his family had taken in early June right after school was out for the summer. He stopped at one slide. It was a photo of a cattle drive. Cows and calves were trailing almost single file between the highway and a fence. Dave explained why they took this photo: Their two preschool daughters were in the back seat jumping up and down saying, "big, little; big, little," in reference to a cow followed by her calf, followed by another cow and calf.

To my surprise I knew exactly where Dave had taken the photo. The first thing that caught my eye in the picture was a very bright spot in the background a couple miles away near the base of a mountain. In rapid succession the following thoughts ran through my mind.

- I recognized the mountain, Gunsight Peak, the mountain behind our ranch where I grew up! Gunsight is the tallest mountain in the immediate area and has twin peaks side-by-side. From a distance, the two peaks form a "V" similar to the rear sight on a gun. It is from this resemblance to a gunsight that the mountain peak got the name.
- The bright spot that caught my eye near the base of the mountain was the sun reflecting off the metal roof of our horse barn.
- The fence that the cows and calves were trailing along was to a field we called the Alexander field.
- The cows were a breed of cattle called Shorthorns. Floyd Whitaker was the only rancher in our end of the valley who had Shorthorn cattle, and his summer range was behind our ranch.

I blurted out, "Those are Floyd Whitaker's cows!"

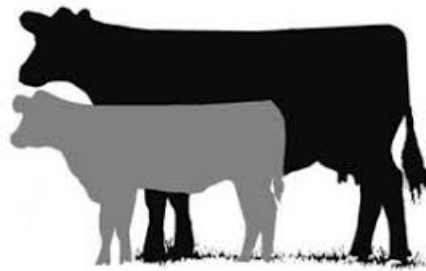
Everyone stopped and looked at me curiously. Dave asked, “Are you telling me that of all the cows in the state of Idaho, you know that those are Floyd Whitaker’s cows?” At this point, Dave had said only that they were “out West,” and he certainly had never mentioned Idaho.

“Yep, those are Floyd Whitaker’s cows!” Then I explained my observations.

A year or two later we had a similar slide sharing party. In the middle of Dave’s slides, totally unrelated to the trip he was sharing, up came a picture of cows and calves being trailed between a fence and the highway with a very bright spot in the distant background near the base of a mountain.

Dave very proudly said, “These are Floyd Whitaker’s cows!” We all laughed!

Being a diligent engineer, Dave had labeled the “big, little; big, little” slide with Floyd Whitaker’s name and carefully inserted it into his current slides.



*Reading your work aloud, even silently, is the most astonishingly easy and reliable method that there is for achieving economy in prose, efficiency of description, and narrative effect as well. Rely upon it: if you can read it aloud to yourself without wincing, you have probably gotten it right.*

– George V. Higgins, *On Writing*

## Dining In? Not Today

William Tolliver Squires

Before the era of COVID and lockdowns, fast-food eateries were temples of healing for me. That's a slight exaggeration, but after divorces, funerals, or lawsuits, dining in at Burger King supplied solace, comfort, and chow. I was gut-punched when COVID banished indoor dining; for me, fast food was an essential dine-in service.

As an early morning riser, before COVID, I was habitually on the lookout for a sunrise meal. I anticipated the hour Burger King fired up its grill to start the day. Like an alcoholic waiting for the liquor store to open, I was eager for my quick-food fix.

Balancing a tray with black coffee, hash browns, and a sausage biscuit, I looked for a corner seat. I opened the biscuit, slathered its insides with yellow mustard. I sweet-and-loyed my coffee.

Enthroned at Burger King, I dispensed "tribute" as I saw fit. Potential "subjects" strolled in and out. Others gathered. I wrote observations of people, food, and conversations overheard. I scribbled grocery lists and plans for the day. I wrote about everything and nothing at all.

I opined about Hardee's biscuits and gravy. I penned haikus about happy meals in styrofoam at McDonald's. I happily belched my clichés at Burger King.

Optimism almost always attended those fast-food breakfasts. I was one of the early morning loners, a charter member of the 'round town biscuit bunch, a muzak-loving, pepper-shaking, egg and cheese geezer. I was a sausage biscuit mustard creep.

Biscuits were a crowning achievement at Burger King. They exited the oven round and risen to a golden mean of one-inch height to a diameter of just over three. The perfect proportions of a biscuit just about mirrored my girlfriend Alexa's size and shape.

I once asked Alexa, "Who loves biscuits?" She immediately mentioned Abraham Lincoln as a biscuit lover. As a student of both biography and biscuits, I was pleased to stand alongside Honest Abe on almost anything.

I asked Alexa again, this time more pointedly, "Alexa, do you love biscuits?"

She said, "Of course I do, especially chocolate chip! Now, if you want to giggle, ask me to tell a joke."

Biscuits, romance, and poetry figured prominently in a fast-food ode written and dedicated to biscuit devotees.

## Sunrise Meal

Rise and shine fast-food lover  
morning's fresh beauty awaits;  
Take her, hot, baked, and risen  
in this biscuit barn of heaven;  
Her gratitude all butter-dripped  
spreads from chin to napkin;  
Love calls you from your bed,  
and you are celestially blessed  
to find yourself at Burger King  
fast-food lover and just a man...

Before COVID, whether I was in the starting lineup for team Burger King, team Hardees, or team McDonald's, I was a breakfast regular. It was happening for me. I had it going on. Alas, not so much today.



*We understand that what we remember dislodges and agitates during the very act of remembering. We recognize that the important stuff may lie in the glimmers and shadows, in the imprecisions, in the misremembered. We know that any dialogue that lives outside a transcript is iffy at best. We know that shaping a life means choosing a life means leaving a lot of it out. Memoir requires of us artistry. Sometimes life is anything but.*

– Beth Kephart, *Handling the Truth*

## **Odd Dream**

**Rudy Vuchinich**

The phrase “odd dream” looks redundant, but this dream was unusual. About two months ago about two or three o’clock in the morning, I was sleeping and woke up crying. It was more than just a run-of-the-mill emotional moment with misty eyes and sniffles. I was just flat-out bawling: tears flowed down my face and my upper body heaved with huge sobs that rolled on for several minutes. That has never happened before. The content of the dream, more like a memory, was an event that occurred very early in my tour of duty as a Grunt with the 1<sup>st</sup> Marines in Vietnam. Over the years I’ve had plenty of dreams and worse related to that experience, but this one contained no physical trauma or fear or terror or brutality but nevertheless packed a powerful emotional punch.

While in the Bush in Vietnam we typically moved around as a platoon, about 35 to 40 Marines. We’d hump to the proper map coordinates, find a good spot, dig in, form a perimeter, and stay there for two or three or four days and run day patrols and night ambushes from that position. And then hump to the next platoon position. A “good spot” typically was away from any local inhabitants and on any high ground. But this one time we set up our perimeter in a cemetery right outside a small village. The reasons why we did stuff was never explained to us Grunts, including why the cemetery, but in hindsight my guess is that this cemetery had a square section in the center with a two and one-half foot stone wall, and the dimensions of the square were just the right size for a perimeter for our platoon. So, with a stone wall we didn’t have to dig fighting holes, which was the routine but nevertheless still a pain in the ass.

We stayed in that cemetery for the typical four or so days. During that time it never occurred to me that it was odd to be in a cemetery, that perhaps it was something we should not be doing, that the villagers may not appreciate it, and nobody around me commented on any of that either. Time came to hump to the next position when word came down that we were going to shoot off our old LAWs. “LAW” is an acronym for Light, Anti-Armor Weapon, and it is a fiberglass and disposable bazooka. It only weighs about five or so pounds, and you shoot it once and then throw it away. We had gotten resupplied the previous day, including with new LAWs, so I guess someone wanted to dispose of the old ones.

Three LAWs needed shot off, one for each squad. The target was a large tombstone or a stone shrine about five feet high and two feet wide, about 40 yards off. The two Marines from the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> squads took their shots, and each missed the target, which twice elicited a chorus of boos, cat calls, and otherwise raunchy name-calling one would expect from a platoon of Grunt Marines in the Bush. My squad leader then happily volunteered me from our 2<sup>nd</sup> squad. I knew at the time it was a test. Being a new guy, I knew I had little credibility and needed to build some fast. So I was feeling the pressure. I stepped up, took aim, took the shot, and blew that shrine into chunks of rock and a cloud of dust. That elicited a chorus of whoops, cheers, and “hell yeahs”, etc., and several pats on

the back from other members of my squad. Having passed the test and feeling really good about it, I was on the way to building the credibility I so desperately needed.

That event was very minor compared to all else that happened during my tour, which I suppose is the main reason I hadn't thought of it in the years since. At least, until the odd dream. During the dream and the subsequent waking moments, I realized for the first time that being in that cemetery and exploding that shrine I was the epitome of the Ugly American. We, and especially I, had desecrated that cemetery and that shrine, without any understanding of what we were doing or the broader context in which we were acting. The shamefulness of those acts and the extreme negative emotions consequent to them broke through during the dream, hence the bout of bawling. Admittedly, at the time I had plenty more pressing things on my mind, I had no authority, I had not freely chosen to do those things, and we had not received any "cultural sensitivity" training. Perhaps what we and I did in the cemetery was an understandable reflection of the general USA foreign policy that was a disaster in Vietnam. But in the dream-moment those and any other possible mitigating factors paled in comparison to the naked enormity of the act itself. And in the world of dreams it is the emotions that count, and they let me know it during the odd dream.



*I have long recognized the power of other people's stories to help us to see our own lives in new ways. One story may speak to a yearning or discontent you may be familiar with; another may help focus your rising sense of optimism and wellbeing.*

*– Jane Pauley, Your Life is Calling*

# The First Boy Scout Law is Trustworthy

Rudy Vuchinich

Learning what NOT to do is a valuable life lesson. My sixth-grade teacher was Mr. Guyer, following Mr. Chester Dillion for fifth grade. Mr. Dillion was the bomb. If you tried to design the ideal teacher for a bunch of rowdy boys in rural southcentral Pennsylvania in the 1950s, you may well come up with Mr. Dillion. Not only was he our first male teacher, “Matt Dillion” was the main character in the hit TV show *Gunsmoke*, which of course everyone watched weekly, and Matt Dillion’s sidekick was “Chester.” Check and check. On top of that, rumor had it that he had a brief career in the NFL, and he often joined us boys in our football games during recess, although we were not allowed to take him down, if that were even possible. All us boys loved Mr. Dillion.

So Mr. Guyer had a hard act to follow. Initially he seemed up to the task. He was tall and fit and athletic, as evidenced by his play in the annual basketball game between faculty and the high school boys. He took a special interest in us boys. He often talked about his involvement in the Boy Scouts, of which my friends and I were members, and occasionally would refer to the Scout’s Law: “A scout is: Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind, Obedient, Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, Clean, and Reverent.” Less auspiciously, he would roam the class during lessons and come up behind us and squeeze our shoulders. At the time I suppose I interpreted that as affection, except when he squeezed a little too hard. Only much later when I was older and less naive did I

wonder what he really was up to, but I had no evidence then or now that it was anything nefarious. Importantly, Mr. Guyer also would sometimes invite a boy in the class, only one at a time, to a weekend Boy Scout function, like a camping trip. I clearly remember he took Danny and Johnny, both good friends of mine, on these weekend excursions, and there were probably more that I don’t remember now. I also remember that I was green with envy that I remained uninvited.

Then late in the fall Mr. Guyer invited me to go with him to the high school football game that Friday night. HOLY MOLY! James Carville described politics in Pennsylvania as, “Well, you got Pittsburgh in the West, Philadelphia in the East, and Alabama in the middle,” or something like that. And southcentral Pennsylvania was just as ludicrously crazy about football as Alabama. I played sandlot football every chance I got and could not wait for the seventh grade when I could play at the junior high school. Being a student in the Northern Bedford County schools, I was one of the ferocious Black Panthers. I didn’t realize how important it was to me to be a Black Panther until two years later when my family moved to Indiana and I was enrolled in McClean Junior High school. I went from being an NBC Black Panther to being a McClean Scotty. Oh, the humiliation! (Back of limp hand placed on the forehead. Sigh.) That Friday night the Black Panthers were facing off against the mighty Tussey Mountain Titans, archrivals for as long as anyone could

remember. So, of course, I wanted to go, I was excited to go, I HAD to go, and my parents said okay, so we were all set.

The snow began falling early that Friday afternoon, and it was coming down fast, one of those heavy, wet snows. It was “sticking,” and it just kept snowing, but I saw no reason to change any plans. Folks in Pennsylvania do not much alter their activities because of snow, certainly not to the point of postponing or cancelling a high school football game, especially a rivalry game as momentous as an NBC-Tussey Mountain showdown. So I remained eager to go. But then the phone call came from Mr. Guyer, telling me that he was very sorry, but because of the snow he was not going to the game. To say I was crestfallen would be drastically to understate my reaction. I was very upset. I don’t remember if I cried, but I probably did. Mom, being the sensitive person that she was, immediately hatched a Plan B. She called her friend Isabell Hall, who lived about a mile down the road and who had a daughter, Carol, in high school who was a majorette. So surely the Halls would be going to the game despite the snow. And indeed they were going, and yes, I could ride along, so crisis averted, and I was back in business.

You probably know by now where this story is going. After arrival at the game, I was ascending the bleacher stairs,

looking for any friends in the stands, and there was Mr. Guyer descending the stairs. I’ve racked my mind but just cannot remember what was said during that encounter. Crestfallen, yet again, but this time I don’t think I cried. Certain I was from then on of a very different opinion of Mr. Guyer. Never trusted the guy again and was never again invited by him to any extracurricular activities.

So the big life lesson was the negative emotion and potential lasting effects of being on the receiving end of violations of the Scout Law. On that occasion Mr. Guyer was not Trustworthy, which increased my motivation to try not to be that way. I didn’t realize it at the time, but the twelve elements of the Law are a pretty darn good code of conduct for life. Nobody adheres to the Laws 100% of the time, and depending on the Law and the circumstances, a violation can have ruinous effects on relationships. I’ve probably done less well adhering to Obedient, Thrifty, and Reverent, but have done better but still far short of 100% on the others. But that snowy night I learned that we hurt others when we violate one of the Laws, and I later learned that we lose a little bit of ourselves with each violation.

A sort of exclamation point on the night was that the NBC Black Panthers lost to the Tussey Mountain Titans 13 to 7 on a late fourth quarter pick-six.

*Caress the detail, the divine detail.*

– Vladimir Nabokov



## **Harvey Haddix and Shiny Black Baseballs**

**Rudy Vuchinich**

I was born late in the bottom of the 9<sup>th</sup> inning of 1949, so during the 20<sup>th</sup> century my age was the year minus 50; 0 in '50, 10 in '60, etc., which parenthetically has always made it easy for me to remember my age. The 1950s were overall a good decade for America, with the enduring glow from victory in WW II, strong economic growth, and lots of kids with the Baby Boom generation. And before the tumultuous 1960s.

I spent those years in rural southcentral Pennsylvania. My family moved four times during the decade, but not too far, always in the same school system, and always close enough to maintain the same friends. Being the Baby Boom years there were always plenty of similar-age boys within walking or biking distance. The 1950s was before the invention of the helicopter parent, so on weekends and school vacations my big brother Sam and I would check out of the house in the morning, meet up with any number of friends, and then seek adventure until sunset. We would explore a new section of the woods, climb nearby mountains, build forts, dam creeks, play Cowboys and Indians or war, have snowball fights, etc., etc. If we had a big enough group, we would choose up sides and play baseball or football, depending on the season. We all had an aversion to basketball at the time, which I later outgrew, because basketball players wear shorts and we regarded that as sissified.

During the later years of the 1950s, as I was becoming aware of the wider world, one of the first national issues I tuned into was Major League Baseball, America's Pastime. We played it every chance we got during spring, summer, and early fall, and MLB in that era had plenty of larger-than-life heroes who were most deserving of our adulation: Mickey Mantle, Roger Maris (breaker of Babe Ruth's home run record), Stan "The Man" Musial, Ted Williams, Yogi Berra (the master innovator of the English language), Whitey Ford, Don Drysdale, Willie Mays, Don Larsen (pitcher of the one and only perfect game in a World Series), Roberto Clemente, and Bill Mazeroski, all Hall of Famers.

Clemente and Mazeroski played for the Pittsburgh Pirates, AKA The Buccos, AKA The Bucs. In southcentral Pennsylvania at the time almost everyone was a Pirate fan, including me. Except, of course, my brother Sam, always the contrarian, who liked the New York Yankees. Roberto Clemente played right field and was known for his bat and his rifle shots from deep in right to home plate to cut off a base runner. Bill Mazeroski, who had the nickname "The Glove" for his prowess on defense, has an even bigger claim-to-fame as the author of The Greatest Home Run Ever. In 1960 the Pirates and Yankees won the National League and American League Pennants, respectively, and faced off in the World Series. The Yankees were heavily favored to win the Series, but the Bucs were a scrappy team that had a knack for coming through in the clutch. It is impossible to overstate what a big deal this World Series was in the community of southcentral Pennsylvania. It was such a big deal that at my elementary school they herded all us kids into the cafeteria to watch the games on a small, grainy, black-and-white television. I have no idea if the school had the

permission from the school board for a three-hour gap in studies on multiple school days, but we did it nevertheless. So we were witnesses to history. The Series came down to a decisive Game 7 at Forbes Field in Pittsburgh. The Yankees scored two runs in the top of the 9<sup>th</sup> inning to tie the score at 9 runs each. Mazeroski was the leadoff batter in the bottom of the 9<sup>th</sup>. On the second pitch, he blasted the ball over the left-center field wall, defying the bookies and winning the Series for Pittsburgh. Hence, the Greatest Home Run Ever. That homer was the first walk-off home run in World Series history and to this day remains the only walk-off home run in a Game 7. When we played baseball, we kids were used to concocting imaginary scenarios in which we could come through in the clutch and be the hero. Probably the most common scenario was: Game 7 of the World Series, bottom of the 9<sup>th</sup> inning, you're at the plate with bases loaded, two outs, down by three runs, with a 3-2 count, and, of course, you can then blast a Grand Slam to win the Series. What Mazeroski did was close to exactly that, and it let us know that just about anything can happen in sports and that our imaginations were grounded in reality. That day was my first real dose of the pure, unadulterated joy of winning a huge game, which doesn't happen often, but the positive emotional results linger and convert into the fondest of memories.

A crucial aspect of our fascination with baseball was the baseball cards, a card slightly smaller than a playing card with the player's photo on one side and his game statistics on the other side. At the Cottle's Corner gas station out on the highway, for \$.05 one could get a Topps packet with a small slab of bubble gum and five (I think) baseball cards. We didn't care about the bubble gum. Just about everyone in my circle of friends had a baseball card collection. Trading of baseball cards was an unregulated market, and it was always exciting to somehow get a nickel from a parent and open one of those Topps baseball card packets. They were sort of like a Forrest Gump box of chocolates, in that you never know what you're going to get. I don't know the exact mathematical formula the Topps folks used, but there definitely was an inverse relation between the quality of a baseball player and the number of his cards that were printed. Also I think Topps has different geographical distribution systems, because when someone in my group went to a distant town, like Altoona, Johnston, Bedford, or Saxton, they often came back with a sought-after card. And getting the card of one of the Hall of Fame players mentioned earlier was a cause for much excitement. A collection of baseball cards is a virtually infinite source of conversations, such as "Remember that play? Oh, yeah. How about that one? Oh, Heck Yeah! What's your guy's batting average in 1958? .312, what's yours? Better than .312," etc., etc.

I had a baseball card collection ongoing for several years, and after that dramatic World Series win in 1960, I decided to see if I could collect the entire Pittsburgh Pirate roster for that year, which is no small feat. Collecting the cards of the journeyman players was not all that difficult, because there were more of them out there either in the packets or on the open market. Collecting the cards of the star players was much more difficult and time consuming, but I persevered and eventually got Roberto Clemente and Bill Mazeroski, and I was almost done. Then I lacked only one player, Harvey Haddix, to complete the roster. Harvey Haddix pitched for the Pirates from 1959 to 1963, and although not a Hall-of-Famer, he was the winning pitcher in Games 5 and 7 in the 1960 World Series and is considered by many to have turned in the best one-game pitching performance in MLB

history. In 1959, against the Milwaukee Braves, he pitched twelve and two-thirds innings of perfect baseball, and then in the 13<sup>th</sup> inning the Braves got a base runner on an error and he scored on a hit. So Harvey Haddix and the Pirates lost the game 1-0, and Haddix had a one-hit loss but no perfect game. I did not get the Harvey Haddix card in a Topps packet, but one of my friends did and so we began negotiating a trade. My friend drove a hard bargain, because he knew that I needed only Harvey Haddix to complete the Pirate roster. He was asking exorbitant prices and the negotiations dragged on for a week or so. Eventually we settled on the outlandish price of 50 of my baseball cards for his one Harvey Haddix card, and we executed the trade. My Mom got mad at me when she heard about the deal, perhaps because she thought it meant that I would never be a successful businessman, which was true. But I was pleased with the deal and cherished my entire 1960 Pittsburgh Pirate roster. Years later, after many moves by all family members, my baseball card collection is nowhere to be found. It saddens me because I was emotionally connected to the collection, and besides that, the entire 1960 Pittsburgh Pirate roster probably is worth a good deal of money. I still have a sneaky suspicion that my brother Sam knows exactly where it is or what happened to it, his effort to seek a bit of revenge for that Yankee loss to the Pirates in the 1960 World Series.

Living in a rural area we did not have ready access to an actual baseball diamond and instead had to improvise. But there were plenty of farms in the area, and so there were plenty of open spaces, cow pastures and fallow fields. Using rocks or pieces of wood as bases, and using trees, bushes, or fence posts as the foul line, we could easily put together a baseball field agreeable to everyone. If in a cow pasture of course one always had to be careful where one steps. For several years my family lived right next to Yellow Creek, one of the best trout streams in the state. On the first day of trout season there was a fisherman about every six feet up and down on both sides of Yellow Creek. I was lucky once to witness the state's trout stocking operation. I was on my bike down by the highway with a bridge over Yellow Creek. A fairly large tanker truck pulled up close to the side of the bridge, stopped, and opened a door on the outside edge of the tank. Out tumbled thousands of silvery, shimmering small trout that splashed into the creek and swam away looking for their new home. Several of our improvised baseball diamonds bordered on Yellow Creek. So it was inevitable that occasionally someone would hit the ball into the creek. When that happened, the race was on. Any number of kids galloping to the creek and then down along the edge, all the while dodging trees, rocks, and briar patches in an all-out effort to get that ball before it got to the rapids downstream. We had a 100% success rate of retrieving the water-soaked ball out of the creek. Which was important because all of us were from families with modest incomes and so maintaining adequate equipment was always a challenge. We shared gloves, one or two bats, and typically just one baseball. That poor baseball could take only so much punishment. After months of being hit, scraped along rough ground, and floating down Yellow Creek, the threads got worn out and began to unravel. And when the threads unravel the leather comes loose from the interior of the ball and begins to flap, which seriously interferes with the aerodynamics of the ball in flight. So our improvised solution to this serious problem was to remove all the leather and then put tape around the ball for a new outside surface. Everybody had access to black, shiny electrical tape, so many of our baseball games were played with Shiny Black Baseballs.

## Cousin Ricky and the Legend of Eva Hayes

Stacey Patton Wallace

I was born on December 19, 1962, in Alexander City, Alabama, or “Eleck City,” as the locals called it. I was the youngest of the seven Patton grandchildren and the only girl; my position in the family was certainly advantageous. My two much older brothers and I lived within five miles of our four cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. We were a very close-knit family and saw each other almost daily.

My cousin Ricky, who was eleven years older than I, relished terrorizing his younger cousins—namely, my cousin Steve, my brother Mike, and me. Ironically, Ricky was the biggest “scaredy cat” of us all. Mama said that Ricky would run and lock himself in his house if a cow had gotten loose. Not exactly a model of courage.

Ricky’s most frightening tale began in the late 1950s in Americus, Georgia. My Great-Aunt Sallie Lou had moved there with her then-husband. Aunt Sallie Lou was one of the sweetest Christian women I knew; also, she had a soft, pleasing Southern drawl, which I loved to hear when I was a little girl. She would say words such as “wa-tuh” and called my Granddaddy Patton, “Bro-thuh.” She totally dismissed the final letter “r” in her speech.

Aunt Sallie Lou had a son called Junior. According to family lore, when Junior was driving down a road late one night, he saw a woman walking by herself. Junior stopped his car to offer her a lift. The woman walked up to his open door and suddenly vanished. At first, Junior didn’t recognize the woman; however, later, he realized it had been Eva Hayes, a local woman who had died recently.

Junior swore to our Georgia relatives that it was Eva, but they didn’t believe him, not even his own mother. After all, Junior was known to drink. However, when Junior told Aunt Sallie Lou, “I swear before the Good Lord that I saw Eva Hayes tonight,” she finally believed him. That did it. The Legend of Eva Hayes was born. The ghostly tale traveled from South Georgia to East Central Alabama, where Cousin Ricky eagerly kept the story of Eva Hayes alive.

Once, he, my brothers, and Cousin Steve were holding a séance at Ricky’s house. They were in the hallway with both doors shut; not even the harsh Alabama summer sun could penetrate the darkness.

“Eva wants to speak to one of us,” Ricky solemnly intoned. Many years ago, my cousin Steve told me about that séance. He said he had known that Ricky would pick one of the two youngest, Mike or him, to speak to Eva. Not liking the odds, Steve immediately jumped up, threw open the hall door, and ran straight through the latched screen door, not bothering to unhook it. He didn’t slow down until he reached the bottom of Sixth Street hill.

Unfortunately, when I was in single digits, Ricky began to terrorize me with tales of Eva Hayes. Once, he told me that Eva was going to come and get me that night while I was asleep. "Eva will tap you on the shoulder once, twice, and on the third time, she'll get you," Ricky hissed.

That night, I lay there terrified, waiting for Eva. Not even my Casper the Friendly Ghost night light helped. Finally, when I couldn't stand it any longer, I cried out, "Mommy! Daddy!" Daddy, half asleep, came staggering into my room.

When I explained my fear, Daddy muttered, "That damn Ricky." Then he lay down beside me until I went to sleep. My poor Mama and Daddy tag-teamed comforting me during this time. One night, Daddy had gone to see about me, and Mama didn't realize he had left. Turning over, Mama saw a sinister silhouette at their open bedroom door. Not realizing it was Daddy returning to bed, Mama emitted an ear-splitting shriek that almost gave them both a heart attack.

When my parents married on November 22, 1951, they had planned to have four children, as their parents had done. However, between Eva Hayes and Barnabas Collins, a vampire character on the gothic soap opera, *Dark Shadows*, either Mama or Daddy was lying beside me for about two years. Since they weren't often in the same bedroom, I never had a little brother or sister. As the baby of the family, I was fine with that arrangement.



*Over the years I have found that putting a play, or even one act, into a drawer and not looking at it for at least a few weeks makes wondrous things happen. Its faults suddenly become very clear. As I read it, what's good remains, but what's bad jumps off the page.*

– Neil Simon

# **An Unexpected Blessing**

**Stacey Patton Wallace**

March 13, 2020...the day our triumphant thirtieth year of teaching came to an abrupt end because of Covid-19. During lunch on that professional learning day (no students), our teaching family, Mike, and I had heard rumors about our school system's possible closing. After lunch, our faculty gathered for a meeting in the lunchroom. Mrs. Glisson, the best principal we'd had in thirty years, told us that we were to clean off our desks and all student desks; our custodians would be completing a deep clean. School would be closed for two weeks. Of course, two weeks turned out to be the rest of the year.

There would be no finishing our Holocaust novels, no teaching poetry for the last time, no hugging our students goodbye, no lining up on the curb on the last day, waving goodbye to our students and counting the number of birds shot at us. Ever again. Instead, the virtual fourth nine weeks occurred, and it was a disaster because we were in unknown territory. Also, as all educators know, face-to-face learning is the best, for most children.

Although our thirty-year teaching careers had been extremely rewarding, my husband Mike and I had been looking forward to retirement: traveling, meeting new friends, reading more than a few pages of a book before passing out from exhaustion, etc. However, pandemic lockdown retirement meant we only traveled to the grocery store and pharmacy.

Even church was closed, we didn't meet new people, and we looked at Mama through a glass window at her assisted living facility while talking via cell phones.

During this dark, depressing time, a white cat from next door in our Auburn neighborhood began coming up to us, meowing, and trying to come in our garage. We shooed him away so that he wouldn't accidentally get trapped in there. Besides, he might have fleas, and I detest cat hair on anything. And most importantly, I'm EXTREMELY allergic to cat dander. Being able to breathe is really important to me.

However, the furry intruder persisted. One evening, while Mike was chatting with friends in our driveway, this obstinate white cat with beautiful green eyes began rubbing up against Mike's legs. That did it. Orion, the intruder's name, quickly began to wrap us around his furry paw.

Michael and Michelle, our sweet new neighbors, were Orion's parents, and they were wonderful about letting Orion visit us. Therefore, almost every day, unless Orion was grounded for bad behavior, he would easily leap the six-foot fence separating our houses when we called to him. Mike and I would sit in rocking chairs on our grilling porch, petting him and giving him the attention he knew he deserved. Talking to him, we'd say, "You're such a handsome boy," or "Who's the best kitty ever?" or similar drivel.

And my allergy to cats? Forgotten. After our grandkitty's visit, I'd just go in the house and wash my hands thoroughly. Yes, we dubbed Orion our "grandkitty." I was Nana, and Mike was Pop. We bought him kitty treats, a bowl to hold his treats and water, and a brush. (That white hair floated everywhere!)

If anyone had told me two years ago, before the pandemic, that we would love a cat so much, I'd have said they were crazy or on drugs. But Orion was an unexpected blessing during the pandemic. I am a Christian, and I realize now that God sent us this grandkitty to brighten our day, giving us joy during this sad time.

After a month or two, we didn't even have to call Orion for a visit. He would arrive at our back door, meowing a request for his morning treat. Sometimes, he made several such requests a day. Orion knew suckers when he saw them. We only minded when he put in his first request of the day before we had eaten breakfast. However, we'd give him a quick treat. As Mama said, "Orion has trained you and Mike well."

Orion also proved to be talented at coming in our house, a no-no because of my allergy. Once, Mike was at our front door, talking to a neighbor's son. Orion rushed between Mike's legs, running into the house.

"We have company!" Mike called to me as I came into our kitchen. Orion walked up to me as if to say, "Hi, Nana. Where's my treat?"

The name Orion comes from classical mythology. Orion was a giant hunter. Our grandkitty was no giant, but he was an amazing hunter, often stalking prey in our backyard. Orion would sit patiently in front of large rocks, waiting for some unwise, slow-moving chipmunk to stick out his head. Birds, squirrels, chipmunks, and once even a baby rabbit were no match when the mighty hunter was in the vicinity. Unfortunately, to show his affection for us, Orion once brought the remains of his victim to our grilling porch; another time, he left it in our yard. His parents, of course, received many more such displays of

affection than did we. That was fine by Nana and Pop.

However, the brave, successful hunter was terrified of one thing: storms. Once when Orion was outside near our driveway with Mike, it started to hail. Those cold, hard, icy balls pelted our grandkitty, and he ran in our garage, under a trailer.

Orion was so terrified; he wouldn't come out when we called him. I had to coax him out with a treat. He tucked his paws underneath him as I gently stroked him, murmuring words of comfort. I called his Mama, who was on the way to Tiger Town, to let her know he was safe and with us. Michelle said, "Before we left, I opened the door to see if he wanted to come in the house. Of course, he didn't." Of course not, cats do what they want. As Michelle once posted on Facebook, "Orion is the king; we just live here."

Thank the Good Lord, the pandemic lockdown lifted, Mike and I received our COVID-19 vaccines, and we were finally able to travel in our retirement. Back on June 15, 2021, Mike and I took an overnight trip to Huntsville, Alabama, to visit our dear friend Tanya and to go to the Marshall Space Flight Center.

When we returned home to Auburn the next day, I told Mike that I would help him unpack after I took care of some personal business. As I entered our kitchen, ready to unpack, I was met by Orion, who was walking around as if he owned the place; I suppose he did.

"Where have you been? Where are my treats?" he meowed at me. Apparently, Mike had gone to take care of some personal matters of his own and had left the door open just enough for a small, furry

hunter to enter. I didn't know it would be the last indoor visit by our grandkitty.

On that Friday, June 18, we visited with Orion on our grilling porch, as usual. That night, our grandkitty was meowing at our door at around 9:30 P.M., demanding a treat. We told him, "Orion, go home now; it's past your bedtime." How I wish we had taken him in with us, at least in our garage.

The next day, Saturday, June 19, we went to a friend's house in Beulah. She was hosting a celebration of life in memory of her mother and stepfather, who had died just months apart. By the time we returned home, a heavy rain was falling. Later that evening, I called our neighbor Michelle to see if Orion was safely inside the house; he was not. However, she assured me that Orion sometimes stayed gone, at times, for a day or two.

The next day, we went to get takeout for supper. When we turned to our subdivision, we saw Michael, Orion's Daddy. He was searching the neighborhood for our grandkitty. Later, Mike and I did, too. Michael called vet clinics to see if Orion had been turned in; he had a chip with his information on it. I called people around the neighborhood and the Auburn School of Veterinary Medicine, asking if they had seen Orion. Mike made a sign with several pictures of Orion, his parents' phone number, and ours. He posted them throughout our neighborhood and at nearby businesses.

We also looked for Orion at the Lee County Humane Society. Michael and Mike looked for him along road sides. Our grandkitty had disappeared.

Michael thinks that Orion got confused in the rain and was bitten by a snake. A nice lady who takes in cats told me that a white cat is a target for large birds. Both these scenarios are too upsetting to consider, so Mike and I hope that a family saw Orion and took him in and that he's living like the king he is.

A few months ago, Michael and Michelle adopted an adorable orange and white kitten from the Montgomery County Humane Society. They named him Queso Conquistador and now call him Queso for short. Thankfully, Queso will be strictly an indoor kitty, so he will be safe from storms, snakes, or birds of prey. And although Michael and Michelle told us to come any time we want to visit Queso, we have only done so a few times.

Mike and I have agreed that we will never have another grandkitty; our hearts hurt too much from losing our first and only one. Orion was only about six, so we had hoped we'd grow old with him. He's been gone for almost six months now, but Mike and I still look wistfully out our back door, hoping our grandkitty has finally come home. However, some blessings are meant to be short ones.





## Welcome to Walmart!

Charlotte Warren

A very close friend of ours practically **lives at Walmart!** He sometimes goes two or three times a day! Whenever his wife and I talk she says, “Guess where D is!” You guessed it. **Walmart!** We have three couples that do almost everything together. One Christmas we decided to give only gag gifts, instead of actually giving real gifts, as none of us needed anything. Toby pulled D’s name, and I pulled D’s wife A’s name. Toby had a great idea to go to talk to the manager at Walmart. He told the manager about how often D goes there weekly, and asked if he could borrow a “Welcome to Walmart” vest, and get a name tag with his name on it? The manager was tickled to death and gave Toby a discontinued vest and made D a name tag. Toby said he would return it the day after the party, but since it was no longer being used, he told Toby he could keep it or throw it away, as long as nobody tried to wear it and pretend to be a clerk at the store.

I wish y’all could have seen D’s face when he opened the gift! He nearly fell out of the chair laughing. We took pictures of him in the vest, and he wore it home under his sport coat, and hung them in his closet. He had to give a speech at AU to his department heads on Monday, and was running late, so he dressed hurriedly and left for the meeting. The meeting went on and on, and when D’s name was called, he walked up to the mike and took off his sport coat to cool off a little. Imagine his shock and dismay when everyone in the meeting started laughing, clapping and whistling. He asked what the excitement was about, and they pointed to his vest. He had no idea that it was under his coat on the coat hanger and slipped into the coat and the vest unwittingly. He was so embarrassed! I gave A, his wife, a plaque that read, “When I die, bury me at Walmart. That way I know I will see my husband every day!”



Beware the word *there*, deadener of prose. There was something that smelled bad. Something smelled bad.

– Oakley Hall, *The Art and Craft of Novel Writing*

## Char's Eulogy

Charlotte Warren

It's 5 o'clock UP HERE! Char's mantra has always been "It's 5 o'clock somewhere!" She's probably "up there" with her Lord and Savior, is pouring the best vino ever, serving everyone in Heaven appetizers and entertaining everybody with her crazy sense of humor and wit.

Her love of people was contagious, as Toby's and her home was open 24/7 to anyone who needed a hug, a prayer, a shoulder to cry on, or a joke. Anyone who entered their home as a stranger left as a friend, always with a hug! No one was a stranger for long.

She loved her parents, sisters, husband, children, and grandchildren. Her close friends became like family to her, as her sisters lived in Louisiana, her children in Louisiana and D.C. Cooking and entertaining were her passions. Her house was decorated for every occasion, as she celebrated life with enthusiasm and purpose. Toby always said she would have decorated for Groundhog's Day if she could figure out how.

She also loved being a leprechaun, having been born on St. Patrick's Day on March 17, 1943. Few forgot her birthday over the years, as every year she would receive at least twenty birthday cards and texts from friends from her high school and college days and from friends from everywhere they ever lived.

Her love of her faith, family, friends, and—don't forget the fourth F in her life—food! She loved to set a beautiful table with linen napkins, sterling silver flatware, and beautiful china and crystal—and of course a seasonal centerpiece and candles.

She married the love of her life, Toby Warren, on September 4, 1965, and after many happy—and challenging—years, they recently celebrated their 55<sup>th</sup> Wedding anniversary. And they said it wouldn't last! Who knew?

She is probably cooking gumbo or jambalaya for her friends way up yonder and yelling, "Y'all hurry up! The food is getting cold!"

*Prescription for writer's block: Begin. (With a pen, not a machine.)*

– Cynthia Ozick

## Holiday Food Traditions

Charlotte Warren

Just writing about all our holiday favorite food traditions makes my stomach growl! Christmas has always been my favorite holiday, starting from childhood. My mom was a fabulous cook, and she started cooking our favorite candies and cookies in November.

We didn't turn on the heat in the dining room area of the house in the cold season unless we were entertaining company in that area, so the cold dining room would hold all of Mom's goodies in airtight cans until Christmas. She always made a couple of batches of her excellent chocolate fudge with pecans and labeled the Christmas cans with the contents. That helped us kids who often sneaked into the dining room to snatch a piece of fudge, hoping she wouldn't find out—but she always did! Maybe Santa told her? She would wait until it was a sunny warm day before making a batch of divinity fudge, so it wouldn't get sticky from the humidity.

Daddy's favorite cookies were Snickerdoodles. (Monty, our eldest, loves them too.) Dad called them Snooglepoozles! We always had whiskey balls—which I have already made for this Christmas! Mom's fruitcake was a staple at Christmas, as she made it early with loads of that special candied fruit, and pecans and NO raisins! Every week she poured bourbon over the cake. By Christmas that cake was very moist, and if a child snuck a bite of it, that kid would drop down, dead drunk, but it was worth it! She usually made homemade eggnog when we entertained. It was delicious too, though we kids didn't get a splash of bourbon in ours.

She made candied yams, mashed potatoes, cornbread dressing, rice dressing, ambrosia, homemade rolls, apple pie, pecan pie, and sweet potato pie. We always had turkey and baked ham. The meal was delicious, and we always had family or friends join us. The smells from the kitchen would drive one wild, waiting to be called to the table to eat some of Mom's homemade dinner and desserts!

I have continued to start traditions with our family by cooking a favorite dish of each of our three children. Toby loved it all, but maybe a later addition of Raspberry Gelatin Layered Salad from our friend Mary took the cake for him. Monty loves my yam casserole with a topping of nuts and sauce made with butter and brown sugar. Stef, our daughter, requests Aunt Gay's Spinach Madeline, which is delicious! Many people who don't like spinach enjoy it. Our youngest, Tucker, always asked for my mashed potato casserole, made with butter, cream cheese, and sour cream, topped with French fried onion rings. The aroma of it baking fills the house and makes everyone ask, "Mom, how much longer? We are starving!"

The day after Christmas was Leftovers Day. Everything that was served on Christmas that was left over would be out on the table for us to choose from. Usually, I

couldn't wait to have a turkey sandwich with mayo and some of the gelatin salad. There would be plenty of everything for supper that night. The next day, Mom would make turkey gumbo from the carcass and add smoked sausage. It was always delicious!

These days, even if we aren't all together for the holidays, I always make our kids' and Toby's and my favorites. Last year, because of COVID, we could not travel. The year before that, I had more surgery in December, so we were alone, just the two of us! We enjoyed our meal together, and, sitting by the Christmas tree, holding hands, listening to Christmas Carols we recalled former Christmases when our kids couldn't wait to empty out their stockings to see what Santa had brought to them. After the stockings, we would take turns opening our gifts. What fun! We hope to be able to make it to Virginia and D.C. this year to be with our kids, if I am able to travel by then.



*A great book should leave you with many experiences, and slightly exhausted at the end. You live several lives while reading it.*

– William Styron, *Writers at Work*

## Family of Fishers

Gail Watts

Our family fished. Janet and I started out as small girls with bamboo poles in our hands and boots on our feet. Our go-to bait? Corn niblets from a Green Giant can. I can still hear the jingle: “Ho, ho, ho, Green Giant!” Our destination was the slough by the Quaker Oats plant. We would step down from the road where the family car was parked. Just a few feet onto rocks we would claim our fishing spot. With the help of our parents, in no time at all, we would feel quite accomplished catching minnows and other little fish.

A year passed by. I remember tromping in our boots through the tall grasses and woods to Lake McBride and Coralville on beautiful but already humid mornings. Sometimes there were breezes but always birdsong...redwing blackbirds, goldfinches, and meadowlark. In the early years, in case of distraction or uncertainty, a red and white bobber aided us in knowing that the tug on our fishing line was indeed real. Later we graduated to rod and reel and learned the art of casting. We mostly caught bullhead, crappie, and blue gill. Once one of us (probably Janet) caught our Dad’s knife, which in a previous year had fallen into the deep water and had become lodged somewhere in the rocks.

We graduated to raising our own bait. Capturing the nightcrawlers at Daniels Park in the evening after a rain was the first order of business. Janet had quick reflexes, as did Mom; I don’t remember how Dad fared. Janet and I

bred those nightcrawlers in a box of loam under the eaves of the house. The sign in our yard alerted passersby that they could purchase nightcrawlers for 75 cents a dozen. This nifty business supplemented our earnings from selling homemade potholders and babysitting.

When we were older, there was the summer we took road trips through Iowa. One of the trips involved travel to Galena, Illinois, notable for being the home of Ulysses S. Grant. We stayed by the Mississippi River, where it was uncomfortably hot and humid. I remember being so thirsty that I was allowed not one bottle of Pepsi but two. It didn’t get better than that! The stairway of locks and dams where the boats made their way up and down the river captivated me. Later, we fished from a small boat, catching several prehistoric looking, elongated fish. Never having seen anything like these rather fearsome armored fish, we quickly cut the lines to rid ourselves of them. On realizing we were surrounded by a whole school of these fish, we moved our boat elsewhere. You can imagine our shock when, eating out that night, we discovered that the highly priced delicacy on the menu was the very species, sturgeon, we had strategized to avoid.

Then there were the summer weeks and weekends spent as a family with Chuck and Marie at their beautiful home on Lake McBride. They were so generous, and their home was beautifully appointed. It was a spacious time. Free

from responsibility, I was able to relax and daydream while lying on the floating dock, the usual angst of being a young teen gone. There were beautiful wooden stairs leading up to the house from the lake with built-in benches for sitting. One particular turn in the stairs became my favorite place to sit and read. The breezes through the tall trees provided shade and cooling. I experienced such deep contentment as I gazed at the water and sky. Janet and I experienced a certain freedom and adventure at the lake. We could walk onto the dock and hop into the boat, start up the motor, and feel quite accomplished as we powered over to the swimming area. On return we used our skills to dock in whatever breeze or wind was blowing. Evenings were spent at the house or on the pontoon boat. We trolled for fish as we grilled and ate our steaks. Later, we all returned to the house to play cards and make music.

Winter at Chuck and Marie's lakeside home yielded yet another experience. Janet and I were introduced to ice fishing. It was the early 60's. Exceptionally cold temperatures resulted in ice of considerable thickness. I remember how bundled up we were

against the bitter cold and how the wind hit our faces as we snowmobiled to the middle of the lake. A handful of people were already gathered. A fishing hole had been drilled and a shelter placed nearby. Folks stood seemingly impervious to the wind chill while waiting for the fish to bite. This required more patience and fortitude than I either had or cared to exhibit. I'm pretty sure I didn't become a regular.

As the years passed, Janet continued to freshwater fish and explore fly fishing while I on rare occasion fished for salmon in the Pacific Northwest. And on a summer trip to Cedar Rapids our parents, now grandparents, drove a young Patrick and Sarah to the Quaker Oats slough where they stepped out of the car and onto the rocks. With the help of their grandparents, each learned how to bait their hooks. There, they fished using simple poles, waiting eagerly for the red and white bobbers to momentarily disappear.



## **Annie and Comp. 101**

**Bill Wilson**

Late-blooming flowers do bloom. Sometimes they just need a little help. That's how my late wife, Annie, became a writer.

By her own admission, my Bronx-born mate spent more time in high school chasing boys and cadging cigarettes from her pals than she did memorizing parts of speech or geometry proofs. Training as a nurse and, later, as a substance abuse counselor brought Annie to the point where she found and followed her path to a productive and fulfilling career. It did not include English grammar.

Annie had studied nursing at Manhattan's Bellevue Hospital when the hospital granted only an RN license, not a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN). In her mid-thirties, Annie earned accreditation as a Certified Alcoholism Counselor. We moved from Northport, Long Island, to Northern Virginia in 1979, and she hired on as a nurse-counselor in the Detox Ward of the Washington Hospital Center.

Annie applied for a job as head nurse on a medical unit and was turned down. Someone with a BSN got the job. "That's it! I'm going back to school!" She did and earned a BA in Education from The George Washington University. Another job opened. Annie applied, but the position went to someone with a Master's Degree. "That's it! I'm going to graduate school!" She did and earned a Master's Degree in Employee Assistance Counseling as a member of the inaugural counseling program at Trinity College.

My role to bolster the late-blooming overachiever kicked in when my wife went to college. Annie had taken typing at Manhattan's YWCA, but never mastered the skill. So, I, a former typing textbook editor and teacher, volunteered to type her papers.

Thereon hangs my tale.

As a nurse, Annie learned to write terse, almost cryptic notes about patients. She did not need sentences, spelling, or grammar. There was no space for such rhetorical niceties for some whoone penned: "Labored breathing. 15 ccs saline solution. Temp 99.7," etc. Annie never acquired the composition skills she had evaded during her rambunctious high school years. For her, writing an essay was like hiking the Appalachian Trail.

"If you love me, you'll write this essay for me," she whined her first week in Freshman Composition.

"I love you, so I won't write that essay," I retorted. "I'll teach you how to write."

I had spent several years as an adjunct in Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) teaching Comp. 101. I had a Master's Degree in English and wrote constantly as a working PR professional. I knew writing and how to teach it. Annie was a quick study. She listened and learned as I took her through the basics of grammar, sentence structure, footnoting, editing, and revision. She became an adequate writer/editor and finished both degrees with a 3.7 index—better than I had done in my own academic career.

In less than a semester, I was able to push the fledgling from the nest. I was proud of what Annie had achieved academically while working two 12-hour shifts each weekend. My one regret: While Annie had mastered the basics of composition, she never conquered the keyboard. It fell to my lot to type every final paper she wrote during our first five years in Northern Virginia.

I probably should have taught her typing while I was at it.



*In the long, silent hours, I am trampled by memories, all happening in one instant, as if my entire life were a single, unfathomable image. The child and girl I was, the woman I am, the old woman I shall be, are all water in the same rushing torrent.*

– Isabel Allende, *Paula*



## Wild on the High Seas

Bill Wilson

We had charted a course to round Montauk Point, intending to tack to starboard and head for Cape May, New Jersey, invisible beyond the squall-cloaked horizon. Poseidon obviously had other plans. Just after we had hoisted and reefed the mainsail, the predicted gale struck. The powerful nor'easter smacked us with 50-mile-per-hour winds and blinding rain. We could scarcely make out the Montauk Point lighthouse less than a mile off our starboard beam.

The Whitby-42, a Canadian-built ketch, was designed for precisely this kind of weather. We elected to continue our course. The gale quickly obliterated our plans. Heading due East was impossible. We could not sail dead into the wind. We could not tack to starboard since Montauk Point was less than a mile off our beam. We could not tack to port because the strong winds prevented us from making a left turn.

Discretion and fear won over inexperience and enthusiasm. We were in fairly deep water in a sheltered cove. We dropped anchor and waited for the line squall to pass. Sometime after midnight, it did. The wind was gone. The gray sky and turbulent sea were not. Reluctant to lose more time, we hauled anchor, raised the sails, and headed for the huge waves dimly visible beyond the point. This time we successfully rounded the easternmost tip of Long Island, hung a right, and headed for Cape May, some 150 miles to the south-southwest.

The remainder of the trip was uneventful, at least compared to the terror that marked our initial departure. For the first half of our sail, the boat lurched from wave crest to wave crest like a manic gazelle. Bill and I, too inexperienced to appreciate the danger, thought this was great fun. Our shipmates had taken the other four-hour watch, so we never did discuss how they felt about the maritime roller-coaster that sped us toward the southern end of New Jersey.

For the rest of the voyage, we slogged about in wet foul weather gear, ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and drank coffee that tasted like it had been brewed with bilge water. Bill and I, and I presume our sailing buddies, considered this dampness and discomfort great fun. Such is the mindset of middle-aged men who play at life like ten-year-olds.

This offshore voyage was indeed a novelty for us. I'm an urban, not an urbane, guy. Wild is seldom in my vocabulary. For me, "wild" is newscasts of drunken frat boys acting out in Ft. Lauderdale during spring break. My friend, Bill Risdon, and I had enrolled in the Manhattan Power Squadron seamanship course with limited goals: I had just bought a sailboat and needed training to handle my new toy. Bill, a skilled hobbyist, had started to build a five-foot scale model of the famed Canadian racing schooner, Bluenose. He intended to sail his creation as a member of the Central Park Yacht Club. Bill needed to learn how to sail.

In our seamanship class, we had met a couple of retired guys who were partners in a Canadian-built Whitby ketch. They planned to take their new boat from Long Island to the Bahamas for the winter. A 42-foot vessel weighing 2,200 pounds was too much for a couple of

blue-water novices to handle offshore. They needed a pair of deckhands. When they asked if Bill and I were interested, we jumped at the chance.

The Power Squadron course ended in late September. We intended to head south in early October over the Columbus Day weekend. Hoping for an adventure, we had not expected to live our personal version of the Perfect Storm. Friday dawned overcast with rain and strong winds threatening. We drove to Sag Harbor at the eastern end of Long Island to prepare for our first deepwater adventure. We loaded gear and provisions as the cloud-cloaked sun headed for the West Coast. One of the guys prepared sandwiches.

Too green to be scared, we cast off our mooring lines and headed east through Shelter Island Sound into the teeth of a gale-force wind. Thwarted by the gale, we rode at anchor from late afternoon until the early hours of the morning. As the storm abated, so did the terror that had marked most of the preceding day. The weather finally permitting, we ran south on a broad reach for the next sixty hours.

We made landfall in Manasquan Harbor, under a bright sunny sky with steady winds of six to eight knots. The skipper motored to the local marina and secured the boat. Bill and I hoisted our seabags, glumly debarked, and hoofed the mile to the Cape May train station. We were Manhattan-bound, headed for jobs and family. Our thoughts were with our Power Squadron pals, pointed toward the Bahamas. Our adventure was over. Theirs was just beginning.



*When you set your stories down, that very act charges up every part of you, makes you feel alive, important, satisfied. You feel enlarged, fed, painted in brighter colors by what you have chosen to say about yourself, by the sheer fun of watching amazing words come out of your fingertip, words that were never in the world before.*

– Adair Lara

## Dad's Blessing

Bill Wilson

As a superstition-prone, ritualistic, tribal society, we Irish have inherited and cherished many beliefs and practices. My dad gifted me with one such a month before he died. This strange experience of paternal love took place a week before I was scheduled to fly to Chicago to begin my senior year of college. Only years later did I understand what that encounter had meant to both my father and me.

At 61, Mike Wilson, a retired homicide detective, should have been in robust health. He grew up a farm boy in Tipperary, apprenticed as a blacksmith to his father. He lived a typical blue-collar life in and close to New York City. It was the blue-collar lifestyle that killed him. Years of smoking and a continuing proclivity for a "wee taste of the stuff" made serious inroads into Dad's cardiac health.

My father was dying of a badly compromised heart. He was a heart attack waiting to happen. I did not know this in August of 1957. I suspected no one in the family but Dad knew how thin his lifeline to this world had become. The ritual he enacted that August Sunday afternoon made it clear that my father knew he would die sooner rather than later.

Dad had befriended a young doctor in his final post-retirement job as a security guard in Roosevelt Hospital on midtown Manhattan's West Side. Security guards tend to be good conversationalists as they stand their posts. They chat with almost anyone who crosses their path. I suspect that Dad, in a casual conversation with his young doctor acquaintance, had described his symptoms, had gotten a

pro-bono checkup and was told he didn't have long to live. The 1950s had almost none of the medical tools that enrich the cardiologist's medical kit bag these days.

Dad knew the sands of time were running out for him. He probably realized that once United Airlines carried me back to Illinois, he would never see me again. The time had come to repeat a ritual that the Wilson men had probably enacted for generations. Michael Wilson was the oldest son of the Tipperary Wilsons preparing to pass his blessing on to the only son in his line.

Dad asked me to stand that sunny Sunday afternoon. He placed his strong blacksmith's hands on my shoulders. I was dumbfounded, not knowing what to expect. My father and I never spoke much. He had always been taciturn, but I knew that, in his fashion, my dad carried me in his heart as I did him.

As nonplussed as I was, I stood. I had never dared question an instruction from Dad. I was to leave the next day for college, so I knew that something important was going on, although I was clueless as to what it might be. I stood quietly, expectantly. I figured he might be about to shake my hand and wish me Godspeed before I headed west.

But no hand grasped mine. Instead, Dad bent forward slightly, traced the sign of the cross on my forehead while muttering a quiet blessing, and kissed me. Too numb to comment, I said nothing, a fact I regret to this day. Dad quietly released my shoulders, grinned a sheepish grin, and went back to his

favorite chair and the San Francisco Giants game.

The torch, or the cross, or whatever it was had been passed. In my befuddled state, I had no inkling that a month later I would be called into the

dean's office and told that my father had passed away the previous morning of a massive coronary.

Dad had departed this life. But not without leaving his most precious gift with me.

*Read at the level you want to write.*

– Sue Monk Kidd

## **New Memoir Books to Read in 2022**

Want to write engaging memoir? Then you might want to read some of the memoir books recommended by BookAuthority, based on recommendations by thought leaders and experts. Here are a few from their list of “59 Best New Memoir Books to Read in 2022.” You can read the whole annotated list at [bookauthority.org/books/new-memoir-books](https://bookauthority.org/books/new-memoir-books).

- *Pee Wees: Confessions of a Hockey Parent*, Rich Cohen
- *Will*, Will Smith and Mark Manson
- *Concepcion: An Immigrant Family's Fortunes*, Albert Samaha
- *The Storyteller: Tales of Life and Music*, David Grohl
- *Autism in Heels: The Untold Story of a Female Life on the Spectrum*, Jennifer Cook O'Toole
- *The Greatest Beer Run Ever: A Memoir of Friendship, Loyalty, and War*, John “Chick” Donohue and J. T. Molloy
- *One-Legged Mongoose: Secrets, Legacies, and Coming of Age in 1950s New York*, Marc J. Straus and Robert L. Lascaro
- *Strung Out: A Memoir of Overcoming Addiction*, Erin Khar
- *Year of the Nurse: A 2020 Covid-19 Pandemic Memoir*, Cassandra Alexander
- *Reborn in the USA: An Englishman's Love Letter to His Chosen Home*, Roger Bennett

