

CALIFORNIA WRITERS CLUB

THE 2021 ANNUAL MEMBERS LITERARY REVIEW



A STATEWIDE ANTHOLOGY OF MEMOIR, PROSE, & POETRY

CALIFORNIA WRITERS CLUB

FOUNDED IN 1909



THE 2021 LITERARY REVIEW



THE ANNUAL STATE-WIDE ANTHOLOGY
OF POETRY & PROSE BY OUR MEMBERS



A California Writers Club Exclusive

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THE CALIFORNIA WRITERS CLUB is a 501(c)3 educational nonprofit corporation founded in 1909 out of the lively literary scene in San Francisco's East Bay region that flourished in the first decade of the 20th century. The CWC was incorporated in 1913 and has held meetings for over 100 years.

Today the CWC has more than 2000 members in 22 branches throughout the state, and remains one of the oldest organizations for writers in continuous operation in the nation.

CWC's mission is to educate members and the public in the craft and business of writing and opens membership to writers of all interests, levels, and genres. Our website, calwriters.org, has specific information about membership and links to the individual branches.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

FIRST, HEARTFELT THANKS to all who helped with this issue. Knowledgeable poets came out in droves this year to give excellent feedback for the over 100 poems submitted. And a slightly larger number of seasoned authors weighed in on the nearly 200 narratives submitted.

Initially submission numbers were low, but within days of the deadline, we were inundated with 130 submissions. Then the race was on to finish in a reasonable time. The goal was to have each piece read, graded, and feedback given by three readers. Pieces were not sent to judges in the same branch where they originated which assisted in achieving blind judging.

This year members had the option of receiving feedback and only a very small percentage declined. Although it adds work for judges and the managing editor, the following two paragraphs from the CWC mission statement show why I believe so strongly in providing feedback as did the originators of the *Literary Review*.

The California Writers Club (CWC) shall foster professionalism in writing, promote networking of writers with the writing community, mentor new writers, and provide literary support for writers and the writing community as is appropriate through education and leadership.

The branches provide an environment where members can obtain critique of their efforts, attend workshops, and share experiences. Branches are encouraged to mentor writers of all ages by providing educational programs for adults and fostering youth programs.

There's no point in CWC being a club of published authors chatting among themselves while new writers struggle. Shame on us if we're not willing to help each other. Going forward, I'd like to see branches review works members plan to submit. Authors can read each other's work and discuss. Critique groups can review potential submissions even of outsiders to their groups, and editors should donate time to copy/substantive edit. We'll all benefit. —Elisabeth Tuck

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Yuma Cemetary photo by Carol Kearns, Long Beach.



— poem —

The Wordsmith

KELLI EDWARDS — *Orange*

No greater travesty exists
Than an imprisoned word
 Locked
In the heart of a child.

For a child with autism,
The scrape of splintered lead
Across notebook paper's fierce fibers
Shrieks an electrical jolt.

For a child with ADHD,
Ideas swirl and twirl to entice,
Each one calling out for attention,
So dazzling in their dance,
They blind the child into a state of
Paralysis.

For a child with dyslexia,
Sounds in words hold thoughts and ideas in shackles.
The perfect word teases and taunts,
Then refuses to be tamed and penned to paper.

An educator holds the power
To unlock the captive words.
 She sees the story
 Chained
To the heart of her student
And carves the perfect key.

The velvety tip of a marker
Skims
Across a white board's surface
To create a smooth, risk-free landing
For the words that flow
From the child with autism.

A graphic organizer
Becomes the butterfly net
That allows the child with ADHD
To swoop, capture, and contain
His fluttering thoughts.

The stubborn sounds
Damned
Inside the student with dyslexia
Are circumnavigated
When dictation digitizes
The spoken word.

The wordsmith peers deeply
To disassemble and fix blocks.
She designs the perfect key
That clicks open a child's heart,
At last
Releasing a
Waterfall of words
To pour in a synchronized cascade
On the line of notebook's page.

ONLY AN ART CLASS

ZOE DISIGNY — *Long Beach*

NO MATTER HOW MANY YEARS I'd been teaching, the first day of class was always the same—nerve-racking. Did I remember all my handouts? Had I made enough copies? Did I remember to bring the roster, the art samples, the textbook? It was so important to be prepared and professional, to set a proper academic tone, and be welcoming at the same time.

I always felt on trial. I knew the students were trying to discern if I'd be a taskmaster or a pushover. I also knew most of them enrolled in my class because of the name: Fundamentals of Art. It sounded like an easy way to fulfill a general education requirement, and they were seeking confirmation of that assumption. After all, it was only an art class.

This particular semester was no different, except for one student. He had a disturbingly intense aura about him and dressed with conservative military precision—pressed khakis, leather belt, polished leather shoes, and a long-sleeved Oxford shirt. His meticulously cropped blond hair tightly framed his angular face, and a permanent vertical crease separated his eyebrows. He was probably about thirty and offered a striking contrast to the rest of the younger men in the class who wore unbelted baggie jeans, flip flops, and faded tee shirts with hairstyles ranging from surfer-dude casual to punk rock spikes. Clearly, this man didn't fit in. He sat erect, spiral notebook open on his desk, pen in hand, and stared at me. I don't think he even blinked.

At some point during my opening remarks, I typically tried to be funny. It was my way of letting them know they could relax. I was not the type to ruin their GPA just for spite. Although most students didn't laugh at my first stab at humor—they were still too busy sizing me up—many did muster a grin. Of course, he didn't. He continued to bore a hole through my head with his laser-like gaze.

It went on like that the whole semester. He acknowledged no one in the class, stared at me, took notes, and scowled when I returned his written tests with perfect scores. He didn't ask questions, didn't answer questions, and never, ever smiled.

The last assignment of the semester was an art project. I'd asked the students to create an artwork expressing some personal meaning, something they felt passionate about—love for their family, their country, or God maybe. Did they want to protest drug abuse, animal

abuse, or poverty? Were they outdoor enthusiasts, musicians, or car freaks? Whatever their passion, I wanted them to express it in any art form they chose.

The projects were due the day of the final. Some in the class got up to talk about their pieces, but it wasn't mandatory. He, of course, said nothing about his. Once everyone had left, I walked around the room to evaluate each work. As usual, many of the students outdid themselves with their precise craftsmanship or wild expressiveness, but nothing compared to his piece. He had constructed from cardboard a large cylinder placed upright on fins and topped with a cone—a rocket bomb. The entire work was covered with meticulously pasted words carefully cut out from magazines—kill, maim, demolish, annihilate. The message was relentless. In all my years of teaching, I had never encountered such a calculated expression of such extreme anger. It made me shudder. Was it me he wanted so badly to destroy?

The following year, just before winter break, I stood alone in the Fine Arts foyer, hanging a student art exhibit. The door from the parking lot flew open, and a man appeared swept up in a windy blast of swirling leaves and silhouetted by the brilliant outdoor light as if encased in a ferocious halo. It was him. He walked with purpose and looked the same as always: khakis, brown leather shoes and belt, Oxford shirt, closely cropped hair. He saw me—that same stony expression on his face—and walked my way, picking up speed. Was he coming to unleash his hatred on me? My mind went blank, and I froze with fear. He reached me, stretched out his arms, and grabbed me . . . in a bear hug.

"Thank you!" He said, releasing me with a smile. "How can I ever thank you enough?"

I stared at him, speechless. I couldn't believe what had just happened.

My stunned reaction must have prompted him to explain. "That project I did for your class changed my life. Until I made that bomb, I had no idea how much anger I was carrying and how dangerously close I was to exploding. But when I finished the artwork, and saw the violent statement I'd made, it scared me. And I got help. You saved my life. I will never forget you."

And just as quickly as he appeared, he walked away. I remained frozen in place until the warmth of his hug and his words slowly thawed my

fear, replacing it with an overwhelming sense of joy. What a miraculous transformation.

But as I continued to stand in the foyer—the student art on display looking even more powerful than before—I knew it wasn't me who changed his life. I didn't do anything. It was only an art class.



Concrete Love, photo by Monique Richardson, Tri Valley

A DETAILED REJECTION LETTER

RANDALL MCNAIR — Berkeley

Thank you for your poem about
the rust-red and golden-brown
leaves of fall, juxtaposed against
the blue sky and green lawns
of your town.

But, what we really wanted
was more of the thatch-roofed
stone homes, with their smoking
chimneys and warm, glowing
windows.

We were also curious why
you neglected to mention
the 500-year-old pub situated
in the middle of the village with its
lone, singing voice coming from within.

And why did you fail to describe
the town drunk asleep on his
teetering stool beside the fireplace,
his empty shot glass and warm beer
in front of him, a metaphor for his life?

But again, thank you for your poem
and the cover letter describing how
you wrote it at the IHOP on a date
with your mum, but maybe next time
lay off the pancake metaphor.

That really left us flat (no pun intended).
And by the way, while the boysenberry
syrup you used to seal the envelope may
have seemed like a good idea at the time,
next time just use your tongue.

BUT THAT WAS A LONG TIME AGO

JEANNE OLIN — *Central Coast*

WE BROUGHT THEM OVER AS SLAVES. We abused people and profited from their labors. Then the Emancipation Proclamation freed them. We told them to go back to where they came from. That was a long time ago.

We used Asian workers to build our railroads. After a while they competed with non-Asians for jobs. We told them to go back to where they came from. That was a long time ago.

The Statue of Liberty welcomed the Irish, the Italians, and the immigrants from Eastern Europe. After a while they competed for jobs. We told them to go back to where they came from. That was a long time ago.

In 1939 the *Motorschiff St. Louis*, a German ocean liner known for carrying more than 900 Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany escaping the Holocaust, tried to disembark in Cuba. After being denied entry there, they tried to enter the United States and Canada. Both nations refused entry. They were told to go back to where they came from. Some did and approximately a quarter of them died in death camps during World War II. That was a long time ago.

Since those times much has changed. A young black preacher had “A Dream.” A young Irish-Catholic president helped initiate a Civil Rights act, and later the United States elected its first Black president. He did not see a Black America or a white America. He saw the United States of America. The acts of racism and bigotry happened a long time ago.

But wait! In the year 2019 the president told four members of the United States Congress who are women of color to “Go back to where they came from!”

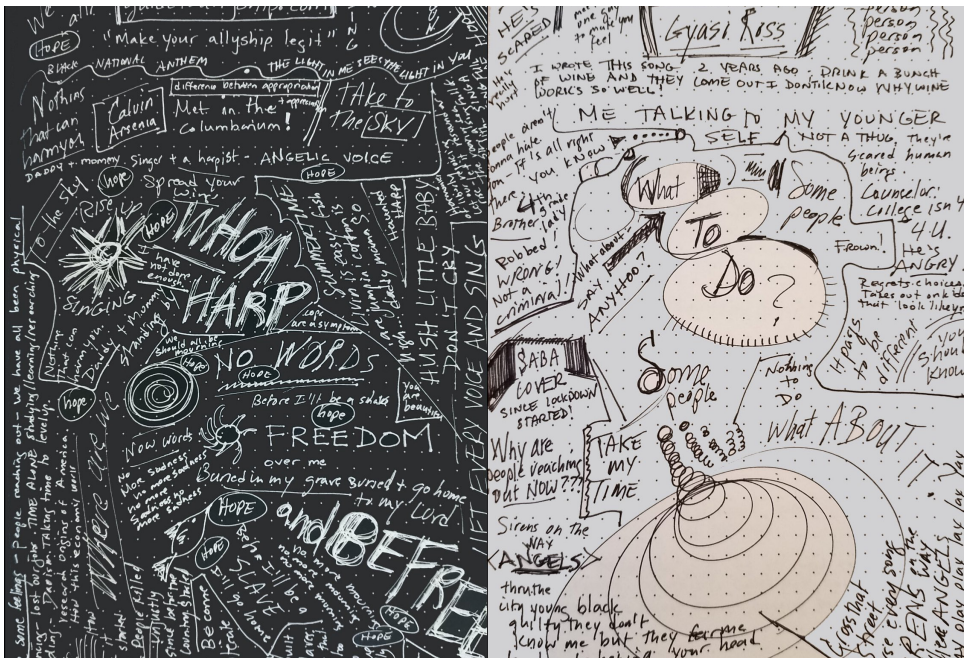
In November of 2019, coronavirus disease was discovered in Wuhan, China, and by late December, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention began developing reports for the Department of Health and Human Services.

The same president who targeted four members of the United States Congress who are women of color blamed China for the virus. Many of his followers blamed people of Asian descent in San Francisco, New York, and elsewhere in the United States for the disease. Violence broke out particularly targeting senior Asian Americans. Unfortunately this still occurs. This did not happen a long time ago.

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”
The Statue of Liberty welcomes exiles from all over the world. I pray that misplaced hate and violence do not extinguish her flame.

We are better than this.

Collage by Audrey Kalman, SF/Peninsula.



A WALK AMONG LEPERS

ANN COOK — *Writers of Kern*

THE NARROW ROAD FROM MURREE wound through the Himalayas, descending 7,500 feet onto the sweltering Indus Plain. The journey in the back seat of a speeding minivan nearly left me revisiting my breakfast. I was a high school freshman on a field trip to the Rawalpindi Leprosy Hospital.

Murree Christian School was a boarding school for children of missionaries stationed in Pakistan. My parents were atheists, and my father worked as a civil engineer on the world's largest earth-filled dam that spanned the Indus River. They agreed to pay higher tuition in return for the best education possible for my older brother and me. When fall term began, Mom gave me a Bible, and I was relinquished to be raised and educated by strangers.

"Lights out, girls," shouted our dorm mother.

Miss Rupe was closer to our age than most dorm parents, more like a big sister than a mother or aunt. Her hair was short and curly, and her cheeks were always rosy from laughter.

"We have a big day tomorrow, girls. No funny business tonight," she said.

In boarding school, after lights out, there was always funny business.

Watching pine shadows sway across the wall above my bunk bed, I wondered if my parents would approve of me visiting a leprosy hospital. Could I catch the disease? What if a leper touched me? Jackals screamed like terrified babies outside my window. My stomach tightened.

It was a hot, dust-devil morning when we arrived on the outskirts of Rawalpindi. The city was a mirage in the distance, with interludes of camel and oxcarts. We stood outside the massive white-washed walls surrounding the Rawalpindi Leprosy Hospital. Towering above, deep-green Himalayan cedars nearly touched a pale blue sky, their canopies full of bickering hooded crows.

We wore off-campus clothing for our outing. Out of respect for Muslim culture, modesty was mandatory for girls. Most of us wore blue jeans and long-sleeved shirts to hide our form. Some wore shalwar kameez, the native attire: baggy pants, tunic, and headscarf. They were the American girls born onto the mission field, the ones who spoke Urdu and could blend in.

A crowd gathered; they always did. Blonde hair, blue eyes, and pale skin

were their beacon. Men and children appeared from nowhere to gawk, but never the women.

The air smelled rank. I knew the stench of water buffalo bathing in stagnant water, dogs foraging through wet garbage, open sewers of urine and diesel, mixed with curry simmering over a fire fueled with cow dung. Those were the familiar aromas of Pakistan.

The hospital gate opened to a Western woman dressed in a pale green shalwar kameez. A white scarf draped over her short, gray hair.

“Welcome to the oldest leprosy hospital in South Asia, founded in 1867,” she said. “My name is Miss Agatha.”

A polite woman in her fifties, Miss Agatha wore oversized spectacles that magnified her eyes.

“Before we go inside, I want to reassure everyone; you’re in no danger of contracting leprosy,” she said.

I still felt anxious.

Miss Agatha was one of the “Pindi-Sisters,” three women from a Christian sisterhood in Germany who had operated the hospital since the late 1960s.

Inside the main gate, the grounds were lush and shaded. Manicured pathways lined with marigolds and zinnias led to white-washed colonial buildings. It was a striking contrast to the miserable, outside world of dusty beige. We followed Miss Agatha to an encampment of colorful tents.

“This is where our residents live,” she said.

I tried not to stare as I walked among lepers.

All I saw were gaping holes where noses used to be and twisted, gnarled lips. Nodules like mushrooms sprouted from their cheeks. I was horrified, yet I couldn’t stop gawking. Contorted hands wrapped in bandages kept flies from lapping infection. Without feet, lepers crawled, or rode on the backs of others.

Miss Agatha relayed stories of their pain and suffering. Although doctors cured their leprosy and taught them how to care for themselves, they couldn’t change how society treated them.

No longer contagious, the lepers could never return to their villages. Shunned as unclean, they were eternally damned and forgotten.

A woman with empty eye sockets rested on her haunches in front of

her tidy home. She pressed a lavender headscarf over her mouth with her fingerless stump and spoke quietly to Miss Agatha in Urdu.

"Girls, I would like you to meet Yasmine," she said, massaging the woman's stump.

Yasmine looked well beyond her years, although she was twenty-six.

"Would you like to touch her?" Miss Rupe said.

I didn't know how to respond.

"Don't be afraid," she whispered.

The woman's stump felt dry and thick like leather in my sweaty hands.

Strapped to a crude wagon, a scruffy man with no legs darted between us. His hands, wrapped in dirty bandages, propelled his ride with dexterity.

An elderly man stopped Miss Agatha, excited to demonstrate his walk. Afterward, she explained his joy. The hospital's shoe center made him a therapeutic boot that fits over the end of his stump to even his gait, and now he could walk without stumbling.

Everywhere I looked, I saw hideous human beings. I felt repulsed yet drawn to them; somehow, I wasn't afraid.

I'd seen lepers in the city before, begging for money. Mostly I looked the other way, covering my mouth until it was safe to breathe. But now, I felt ashamed.

Inside their oasis, away from prying eyes like mine, the lepers flourished. They fell in love and married. Clean, uninfected children were born. They found their usefulness tending gardens or cleaning while others washed bandages.

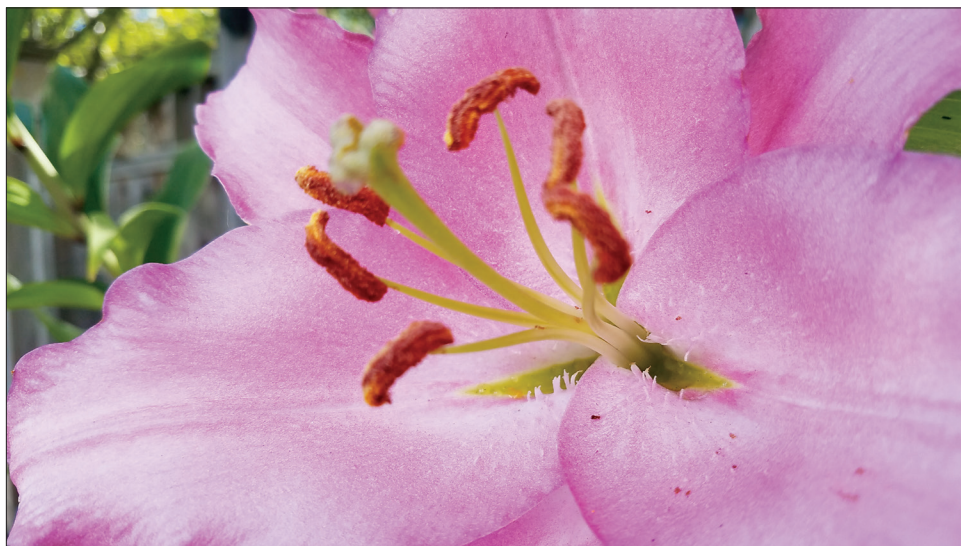
After visiting clinical wards, we toured the laboratory. Through a microscope, leprosy bacteria looked unassuming to my untrained eyes, like tiny grains of rice. Miss Agatha said leprosy was one of the oldest diseases in the world. She called it the "painless disease" because of its numbing qualities that secretly devour the flesh; without pain, cuts and burns decayed, resulting in bleeding ulcers and loss of limbs.

The drive home to Murree Christian School was solemn. There was no singing, only the hum of our diesel engine climbing the Himalayas toward glacier-covered peaks. Far below, green terraces contoured the steep foothills until the treeline returned to pine. The air felt crisp again on my face. It was clean air, and I couldn't get enough. After rounding

the last curve, the familiar old British Garrison Church that housed my school appeared, and I was glad to be home.

Thirty years after visiting the Rawalpindi Leprosy Hospital, I contacted Miss Rupe. Struggling to find a deeper meaning to my haunting experience, I asked her why she took me to see the lepers at such an impressionable age. She said it was a privilege to have physical contact with those who had suffered and put their gnarled hands in the hands of Christ.

I understood. It was never about me touching the leper; it was how the leper had touched me.



Flower, photo by Audrey Kalman, SF/Peninsula.

TRAINS AND DRESSES ON A SUMMER DAY

AMY BURNETT — *High Desert*

IT'S NOT IMPORTANT TO ME to reach 102 years old. A hundred years—yes, that was important. But now the cataract surgery that made it possible for me to read is no longer good enough, and I'm nearly deaf. Because of this, it's difficult for people to communicate with me so they've mostly quit trying. They leave this old man alone with his memories, and I'm okay with that. I don't recall much of what happened last year, or even yesterday, but I remember well what happened when I was growing up.

So, I wonder about things that took place in my life: how some just marched along as I intended, and others took sudden twists and turns that led to unexpected places. Mostly those happened when I was a youngster.

Like that summer day in Central Washington, just before my fourteenth birthday. It was a Sunday, and Al and Sam and I all had one of those rare occasions when there was a lull in the farm work, and we were free for the afternoon until chore time. We met where the road to McPherson's and the lane from Al's place intersected. Without any plans, we wandered downhill along the road then turned along the fence line between McPherson's and Sam's dad's place. The dust rose in little clouds between our bare toes, and the sweet smell of new growth was constant in our nostrils. The sun was warm and beat down with increasing intensity on our faded bib overalls and short-sleeve plaid shirts.

"Good day for swimming," Al suggested, so we took the trail alongside the railroad tracks that ran next to the river. In the still clarity of the air, we could see the afternoon train starting up the grade some miles away and heard its distant whistle as it crossed Hansen's road. You could set your watch, if you were lucky enough to have one, at 2:23 when it crossed the bridge about a mile behind us.

As we plodded along the dusty trail, we talked about September when all of us would be starting high school in town. And wouldn't it be jimdandy to have one of those new autos everyone was talking about? Sam had actually seen one, shiny and black. He told how he watched the owner crank its engine, and then he stared in wonder as it rolled along the street by itself.

Heads down, eyes on the rocky trail where we carefully placed our bare feet, we were startled to hear, "Don't you come any closer." A girl's shrill

voice stopped us in our tracks, and our eyes came up. We were at the edge of the riverbank where the trail led down to the water. Visible in the stream were the heads of three girls with their eyes glaring at us.

"We got here first so you just go away and let us enjoy our swim," one shouted.

I looked at Al; Al looked at Sam. It had never occurred to us that girls would go down to the river to swim. I didn't recognize any of them. They were probably two or three years older than us and maybe lived on the other side of the river.

"Uh . . . Are you going to get out soon?" Sam asked. We knew we had to wait for them to leave as none of us had a bathing suit and had in fact never owned one. And we certainly weren't going to strip down to bare skin as we usually did and join them.

"No. We just got here and we're going to stay awhile." Now we began to get our wits about us and to realize why only their heads were out of the water. They didn't own bathing suits either! And we were more certain of that as we noticed their dresses hanging on the bushes. Sam was never one to pass up an opportunity to tease someone. He grabbed one of the dresses and held it up to his shoulders.

"Wouldn't I look lovely in this, dearie? The color just matches my blue eyes." He minced around in exaggerated tiny steps and went on in a falsetto voice, "It's just the thing for the Saturday night dance, don't you think?"

Not to be outdone, Al and I each grabbed a dress and waltzed around like Sam. As I pirouetted, I noticed that the heads now had bare shoulders showing, and the girls were moving toward the shore. I skipped up the bank to the trail along the railroad track where there was more room to dance. A little breeze had sprung up, and it lifted the pink dress as I held it over my head where it floated like a kite. Al and Sam joined me, and Sam began to sing a wordless tune as he too swung the dress in the breeze.

That's when things began to get out of hand. Maybe it was because the train was approaching, and we three boys were showing off for the train crew. As the engine passed, we danced along with it, twirling, and dipping to Sam's music.

"Elton Nichols, you put that dress back," one of the girls shouted. I

turned and stuck out my tongue at her. Immediately, three girls left the water and rushed toward us.

Stunned, we took to our heels, down the slight hill, alongside the train puffing up grade, pursued by three naked girls. Sam was in the lead, and as a box car with an open door came by, he tossed in the blue dress. Al and I followed his lead. Glancing over our shoulders, we saw the three girls pause. One held out her hands as if she could reach into the boxcar and retrieve their dresses.

We boys didn't stop. The impact of what we had done, and the reality that we couldn't change it, pushed us on 'til the train had gone, and we could cross the tracks and make our way toward home by other paths.

"What'll we do?" Al asked as he brushed the dust out of his eyes.

"I don't know," I answered. "We shouldn't a done it."

"I didn't mean to," Sam added. "It just kinda happened."

"How will they go home?" Al asked. "What would you do if it was you, Sam?"

"Wait 'til dark, I guess. But I'd sure be in trouble with Pa 'cause he expects me home to do chores before sundown."

We shuffled on, all the beauty of the summer day forgotten. When we came to Al's place, we went up in the loft of the hay barn and just talked about other things until time to go home.

I was scared to meet up with my dad at chore time, but I guess I pretended pretty good that nothing was wrong. He said, "How was your afternoon?"

I said, "Okay," and that was all. I hadn't recognized any of the girls, but that one had called me by name. I sure thought her father, or the sheriff, would be calling my father but nobody said anything. For the next week, every time I heard a horse on the road, or our telephone jangled with our party-line ring, I stiffened in fear, my heart racing. But nothing happened.

Why not? I wondered. Did the girls wait 'til dark and sneak home in their underwear? Did their mothers notice that their dresses were missing? Were they just so embarrassed they wanted to forget the whole episode?

That's one of those things you still remember, like a book you were reading that you never got to finish. Even when you're nearing 102 and staring death in the eye, it's a thing you wonder about.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Prank recounted to the author by her father who missed his 103rd birthday by two months.

COSMIC SONNET

MARIANNE LYON — *Napa*

I wonder, gazing at bright stars tonight
if they were born a billion years ago.

What ghosts in corners, dark, lost from sight,
inspire tales in our wide eyes below,
explosions, evolutions, and rebirth
distant suns, lost worlds, white Halley's trail,
laggard extinction of our hallowed earth

Will black space capture daylight, a slow inhale?

By chance these sequins high shall burn away,
but their eternal gases will remain
to other cosmic beings reborn someday.

And I when death appears, earth's hold unchain
will linger and recall bright orbs on course
then whirl to luminous, back to the Source.

SWEPT AWAY

TERRY CONNELLY— *Fremont*

THE DUN MARE WITH BULGING BROWN EYES runs full tilt down a rock-strewn hill, her hooves sliding, slipping, searching for purchase which she finds, then loses, then finds again as she runs harder, faster. Lather forms on her withers, runs down her sides. She swallows again and again as thirst drives her toward the rapidly moving river snaking its way through the hills, the canyons before her.

The headlong descent down the slippery slope slows her headlong dash only long enough to catch a quick breath. She dashes into the water, fear of the mountain lion that had attacked her flanks, and her intense need of water driving her forward.

She should have slowed when she reached the water's edge, but the terrifying roar still rings in her ears, and so she lunges, finding herself in the midst of the swirling river. The current pulls her downriver, tries to sink her under, but she pushes with her powerful hind legs, keeping her nostrils, her eyes, her ears above the waterline.

Massive branches crash into her sides, driving out needed oxygen as together, moving as one, they are dragged into the middle of the melee. Low-hanging limbs scratch her sides, her legs, even her muzzle. She knows she is bleeding, her life-force escaping, yet she fights on.

A sandbar appears ahead just to her right. She paddles ferociously, her head pointed toward the tiny patch of sand, and when her front hooves encounter the first bit of sand, she kicks with her hind legs, forcing herself forward. Driven by fear, by the desire to live, she struggles, but the still-powerful current pulls her away, away from temporary hope.

The momentum of the river is so strong that there's little she can do. Her head dips under water for just a moment, long enough to terrify her, long enough to inspire her to point her muzzle into the air. Blessed air fills her nostrils, but the fear doesn't leave.

The water deepens. Her legs flail, looking for footing but also trying to swim, to coordinate, to institute a rhythm, but it's all in vain as she continues to be swept downriver with branches and other debris that cut, slice, poke, and dig.

Her hooves strike bottom for a moment, for an infinitesimal fraction of time, but even with that speck of success, she understands she will not, cannot survive for the current sucks her under again. Downriver she goes, crashing against huge boulders that appear to her right and left.

Contact steals her breath away, hurts her legs, her ribs, even her neck.

At one point, long after her flight began, her head dips below the surface again, and this time, revealing muddy swirl. Sides heaving she fights for breath, for strength, for a miniscule purchase, just enough to lift her up. But it doesn't come, not then, not in the next moments.

In front of her, all around her, a sound echoes off the canyon walls that rise straight up like granite, trapping her in the river. Quiet at first if a roar could be called quiet. She fights against the pull, the tug toward a precipice she sees looming ahead, but can do nothing about. Her weary legs reach for mud, sand, gravel, anything. All gone. All swept behind her.

An overpowering feeling of doom forms as the current pulls her toward the inevitable end. The drop-off over which she knows she will fall.

With hope gone, she gives up. Her exhausted legs stop churning. Her head dips, pulling her nose, her eyes, her ears below the murky swirl. In that moment her heart stills as she prepares to die a million deaths, for she intuits what comes next.

She's seen it before. Heard it before. Lost companions before. But with one last burst of energy, she squeals as she plunges over the edge.

Down and down she falls, carried by the torrent, deep into the mist, the swirl, tossed over and under until she does not know which way is up or down or sideways. There is no sun, no light, no joy. She knows that her life is no more.

At that moment, at that time, when she has lost the will to fight, peace overwhelms her. A halo forms, a lightness, an unknown spirit. Her legs paddle as if pulled by a puppet-master. Her ears move forward, searching for a comforting sound. Her eyes close, ready to welcome whatever comes next.

The afterlife does not scare her because she yearns to run with her ancestors, romp across grassy fields in joyous rapture surrounded by the herd that has gone before. Her mates. Her comrades that once completed her herd. Every ounce of her reaches out for their touch, their comforting nips.

Suddenly her dream dissolves, without explanation, as her mouth and nostrils pop free of the river's grip. Air, that wonderful blessed air, fills her lungs. Her eyes swivel from side to side searching for the hoped-for green fields and blue skies dotted with fluffy clouds, but, no, only tall,

black clouds mass overhead. She fights just enough to keep her head out of the water, just enough to breathe deeply, to feel the life-giving air pass over her withers, to hear birds singing softly overhead. In and out she breathes. In and out.

She washes onto a sandy shore, her sides heaving, her body exhausted. She struggles to stand but her flanks lack strength to hold her drenched body, and so she collapses again and again until she gives up. She lays there, ears pinned back listening for the lion, her eyes still bulging with fear, expecting to die as claws and teeth dig into her flesh. But there is no roar, no claws, no powerful teeth. She sighs and allows herself to rest.

When she's stronger, she raises her head. Her eyes try to focus on something, everything all at once. Her ears prick forward listening for danger, and hearing and seeing nothing to cause fear, she rolls back and forth until she stands. Her legs tremble, but she stays upright. She wills her pounding heart to steady, to calm.

A few steps ahead, a patch of wild ryegrass lies, a favorite. She gingerly makes her way to the first bunch and nibbles carefully, expecting it to be an illusion. It's not, so she nibbles more and works her way further from the river. Along the way she discovers a variety of tasty grasses and shrubs that fill her belly. Her strength builds and her confidence grows enough that she grazes calmly, as if her wild adventure had never happened. As she's done all her life until that roar sent her flying into the river.

She eats as her ancestors have done, ripping out one nourishing morsel after another. In the background the tumult of the falls recedes.

When she's satisfied, she shakes her head, withers, and back, removing the last of the water. She raises her muzzle and calls for her kind. A plaintive cry for her herd, her companions, her family. When there is no response, she forlornly moves ahead, one step at a time.

A sand dune, a small hill, appears. She makes her way to the top, being ever so careful where each hoof goes, sometimes slipping backwards in the moving sand then starting over, again and again.

At the crest, just when she can see the plain before her, her hopes dim. There is no herd, no comfort, no familiar landscape. With a sigh she plods forward, taking time to choose only the choicest bits of grass now that her hunger is sated.

A familiar sound arises. She neighs, sending out the call of family, the call of need. She waits anxiously wondering if an answer might come.

Her head droops as exhaustion overtakes her spirit. Then off in the distance, a squeal warns her to stay away. She's heard that sound before and knows that a stallion is giving notice that this territory is his.

In a sweep of dust and thundering hooves, he stops before her. He snorts and stomps his hooves, his ears pinned to the sides of his head, making sure she understands his power, his dominance.

She gives no fight, no indication of defiance. He accepts that she poses no threat, and his ears move slightly lower, telling her he is wary, but interested. He encircles her, taking in her scent. Satisfied, he beckons her to follow.

The mare swishes her tail, trudges along into the beckoning prairie, her steps light, her eyes hopeful.

Mustard looking toward Sonoma Mountain photograph, by Shawn Langwell, Redwood



BALLET AT HESPERIA LAKE

LORELEI KAY — *High Desert*

As I jog beside the rippling lake, a gang
of shrieking geese strut past, breaking my reverie.
Effortlessly they lift high into the air above
the silver-tinged waters and sail into flight.

Their white soaring wings slice the evening
breeze, rhythmic as a conductor's baton beating
a startup cue, and with flawless cadence,
the ballet begins—

Sleek feathered tutus fill the air as multitudes
of pitch-black starlings flap above, synched
in perfect harmony as they pulse across the vast
air-filled stage overhead.

An elongated circle of airborne wings creates
a dark streak of life—wild flutterings
juxtaposed against silent soarings as forms
glide against the dropping evening sun.

Wings held out straight, then on silent
downbeat, flap furiously as the leader
pirouettes, first east, then north, west, south,
forming an elliptical orbit above me.

No single bird claims main attraction status
but all perform as one, until breaking into groups
of four, three, two. Abruptly one soloist splits
off in a new direction to steal the show.

Sky freedom reigns—looping, twisting, spinning,
round and round, until all reunite for the finale,
as if always the plan for their final curtain call.
Who choreographed this masterpiece of flight?

Then, just as unannounced as first appearing
above my head, they dive, disappearing
into waiting limbs of a towering nearby elm,
settling in silently for their nightly slumber.

Dusk surrenders to the brightening moon.
A cacophony of chatter breaks loose from ducks
bedded down in the nearby marshy thicket,
squawking their approving applause.

BIG TREES

CRISSI LANGWELL— *Redwood*

I MADE A VOW OF SILENCE against my father. For the whole drive to Big Trees, I studied the passing cars on the freeway, the slow turn of the Altamont Pass wind turbines, and the looming mountains that still had snow on top even in June, all while Pearl Jam blasted through my headphones. Dad tried to initiate conversation, asking how finals had gone and about my summer plans before my senior year, but I met him with stony silence. I even ignored him when we reached the halfway point in Lodi, and he asked what kind of burger I wanted.

“Whopper with cheese, it is,” he said with a forced smile, the way he pretended everything was fine. Then he left me alone in the car. I’d stayed behind in the car last year, too, but with my mom in the front seat. Even though she slept the whole time. Even though she couldn’t sip the milkshake Dad brought back for her.

We reached Big Trees in the gathering twilight. With no streetlights, the neighborhood swallowed us in darkness. My dad pulled into our cabin’s driveway, his headlights flashing across the shadowed split-level home surrounded by large redwoods that gave this Calaveras pocket its name. I nudged the uneaten burger on the dash with my foot as his finger punched the garage remote.

“Damn, the power is out.” He unbuckled his seatbelt and opened the door. “Wait here, Katie Bug,” he said, then jogged up the front steps as I glared after him. I hated when he called me that. The smell of pine wafted through the open car door, the crisp mountain air conjuring early memories of my mom turning around in the front seat to give me an excited grin. Just over a year ago, I’d had to help her up the steps.

One by one, the cabin’s dark windows lit up. I took the moment to peer up at the house, seeing the parts that were visible from the driveway. The side deck where we’d roasted s’mores at night. The potbellied stove my mother had named Lucy. The stairs that led to their bedroom. His bedroom.

“Just a tripped circuit,” Dad said as he slid back in the driver’s seat. He pulled the car into the garage, stopping when the tennis ball hanging from a rope bounced against our front windshield. He shut off the engine and immediately began unpacking. I grabbed my knapsack and pillow and headed for my room on the ground floor. A faint sour scent hit me as soon as I shut the door, growing unbearable as I searched for its source. I

finally found it, a decaying rat in the corner of my closet.

"Dad!" Forgetting my silence, I flung the door open and raced up the stairs. He was loading the fridge with food from the cooler but paused when I stomped into the kitchen.

"There's a dead rat in my room." I glared at him as if it was his fault. The dead rodent. This stupid trip. The late-night phone calls. My mom.

"Where?" He stood up, groaning and touching his back as he did. "That is not a drive I want to do every day," he said with a laugh. As if I'd asked him to drive all this way.

"In my closet. I'm not going back in there."

"Should we bury it?"

"Dad!"

He laughed, heading down the stairs as I flopped on the couch. The red blanket across the top landed in my lap, and my breath caught as I realized what it was. I leaned close and inhaled. My mother's sweet scent filled my nose; tears brimmed my eyes. When I heard Dad's footsteps on the stairs, I wiped my tears and shoved the blanket to the ground. He emerged from the stairwell holding my bag and pillow, his eyes sweeping across the blanket. I noticed the shift in his features, the way his jaw pulsed as he took a sharp breath. He chucked my bag next to me, followed by the pillow, and I thought he was finally going to yell.

"Check for rats," was all he said. He winked before picking the blanket off the ground, placing it on a chair out of my reach. "If you'd like, you can sleep on the foldout couch."

I got up without answering and headed outside to the deck, his sigh following me as I closed the door.

Heavy tarps protected the three Adirondack chairs, with a year's worth of pine needles on top. I pulled the covering off one and looked for any surprises before settling into the sloped chair. A few early stars flickered against the rose-purple canvas, and I watched as dusk enveloped any last remnants of light.

"I brought you dinner," my dad said, balancing two plates as he closed the door behind him. He set one in front of me. "It's just a TV dinner, but we can pretend it's homemade, right?"

I picked at the mashed potatoes, though my empty stomach grumbled at the promise of food. I glanced at him, but he wasn't even looking at me.

His mouth moved in a slow chew while he stared at the darkened sky, the stars now like gleaming grains of sand surrounding the twisting vein of the Milky Way. Sighing, I nibbled the smallest bit of potatoes, savoring the flavor of rehydrated buttery flakes as if they were the real thing.

"It will be a year tomorrow," he said, still looking at the stars. As if I needed a reminder. As if this whole place wasn't a goddamn reminder. Huffing, I rose from my chair, carrying my plate back in the house. For a moment I thought about throwing it in the sink, wasting the food he gave me. Instead, I shoveled the food in my mouth, trying to stuff a void that couldn't be filled. Then, abandoning the plate in the sink, I retreated to the foldout couch in the upstairs family room, already made into a bed. I plugged headphones into my Discman and curled under the blankets.

A few songs in, I jumped when my dad touched my shoulder.

"What?" I glared as I pulled the headphones down.

"I said, I'd like you to clean your dishes when you're done with them. Your plate is still in the sink." The dim lights from downstairs made his sunken cheeks more pronounced. His sweatpants were baggier than I remembered.

"I'll get it tomorrow," I said, closing my eyes and putting my headphones back on.

"Katie, now. Do you want more rats?"

I threw the headphones on top of the Discman, flinging the blankets aside. Then I stomped to the kitchen, swiped the sponge over my plate, and threw it in the rack.

"All right, let's talk," he said behind me, his voice tight. I whirled around, narrowed eyes, the front of my shirt sopping with dishwater.

"Don't you have a phone call to make?" I tried to move past, but he gripped my arm. He let go as I yanked away, his face as shocked as I felt over the action.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Leslie?" I prompted. "Isn't she waiting for you to be done with your fatherly duties so you can have phone sex or something?"

"Katie, watch your mouth." His cheeks were red, anger flashing in his eyes. He ran his hand through his hair. "How do you know about—"

"Leslie? I heard you. I picked up the phone, and you said you'd like to see her again. It's like you never even loved Mom. Were you just waiting

for her to die so you could date?"

"No, it's not like that!" He looked at the ceiling, clenching his hands into tight fists by his sides before returning his tired eyes to me. "It's . . . complicated."

"I don't know what's so complicated. It's been a year, and you're in love with some other woman."

"I'm not in love."

"So, you're using her."

He shook his head, breathing hard through his nose as he matched my stare. We stood like that for a few moments, silently daring the other to spew something worse.

"I'm going to bed." He turned, leaving me there with more barbs on the tip of my tongue. However, my prickly words slipped away when I saw the way his shoulders sank low as he took the stairs to his room.

We ate breakfast the next morning in silence. He washed his dish in the sink, and when I approached to wash mine, he took it and cleaned it himself. I felt a seed of remorse. All these months he'd met my hostility with kindness. It made it easy to fight him. Now, his tired face and heavy walk let me know I'd won. But what had it accomplished? What did I want?

My mom. But she wasn't coming back.

"I'm going for a walk," he said, grabbing his hat before he left. I went to the porch and slumped in the chair. I stared into the columns of trees that took up the back acre of our property, inhaling the mossy aroma. With it, I saw the ghosts of childhood forts and heard the sound of innocent giggles laced with the wind.

I loved being here. It hurt being here. All I saw was her.

I faked a nap on the couch when my dad returned. He stayed on the deck later that afternoon while I read in the window nook. In the evening, he made dinner but only dished up his own plate. I swallowed hard, spooning spaghetti and meatballs in a bowl. Her favorite meal. I snuck glances at him between slurps of noodles.

"We'll leave tomorrow," he said when he'd finished and stood, dish in hand. "First thing."

I stared at my plate, nodding, only looking up when he went for the door to the deck. He paused as he touched the doorknob.

"I miss her," he said, his back still to me. I held my breath, afraid to speak. "I think of her every day. More than anything, I want things to go back to how they used to be. But I'm lonely, Katie, and things aren't going back. I don't know what I'm doing, and I'm just as confused as you. But I will always love your mother."

He shut the door quietly behind him as my tears hit the table. I pushed the bowl of spaghetti aside. Across the room, the red blanket rested on the chair, calling to me. I remembered how it felt to curl up in my mother's lap, her protective arms around me while she draped it over both of us, the snow falling silently outside while Lucy glowed in the corner.

Wiping my eyes, I retrieved the blanket, taking a deep breath before opening the door to the porch. My dad sat in the chair closest to me, his face turned to the starlit sky, the inside lights reflecting off the moisture on his cheeks. I shut the lights off, then shuffled to the chairs by feel. Once seated, I unfolded the blanket, spreading it over my lap before handing him the other end. I felt his hand brush mine as he tucked himself in. Silently, we studied the stars, the millions of stars, the same ones we'd looked at for years when there were three of us.

"Let's stay." I whispered the words so softly, I wasn't sure he heard. He squeezed my hand gently, reminding me how big he'd once been to me. How big he still was.

"I'd like that," he said. Eventually he let go, my hand dropping back in my lap while he held his over his chest. And both of us watched the stars, inhaled the pine, and exhaled into a world that felt darker without my mother, but a little less incomplete.

— poem —

ROOTED

CORALYN MCGREGOR — *Tri-Valley*

Come, she said.
Come with me to the banyan tree,
 with its prop roots dropping—
 to the earth below.

Come, she said.
Come with me to the redwood tree,
 with its surface roots spreading—
 on the earth below.

Come, she said.
Come with me to the black oak tree,
 with its tap root plunging—
 through the earth below.

Come, she said.
Roam with me across earth and sea;
 we have no roots, but—
 are we free?

BERNICE BOBS HER HEAD

KRISTEN B. CAVEN — *Berkeley*

IN 1927, THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE arrived in Alameda, with a silvery laughter that knocked me out of a dream. I was thirteen and not used to sleeping on pincurls. I heard three voices—Daddy’s, Mamas, and a loud, laughing woman. Then music—I sat up straight in bed—more jumpy and alive than any player piano roll.

I crouched on the stairs to peer into the living room, where the most astonishing scene hit my eyes! A bright spirit with skin the color of the walnut Victrola changed a record and was winding it up. Her head wrapped in a bright scarf, she wore bangles on her wrists and seams up her stockings, black on her walnut legs.

She cried out, “Henry, our people, we’re creating our own culture—” The scratch of a needle and the hiss of a high hat, then these slow bluesy horns came out the tinny speaker. “It’s new and electric and will change the course of history!”

On the entry bench, where people tossed their hats and umbrellas, there lay a coat with an enormous fur collar and cuffs. I peeped my foot through the balusters and pushed my toes into the silvery pile. The tickle was delicious and the lady moved her hips in a dance step and waved her arms—shocking I dare say but she was just the most modern of modern girls! Right there in our home! Mama and Daddy didn’t act like anything was wrong.

“There’s this sense of unity like you could never imagine. You know the Negro has never really felt free in America, — And We! Are! Literally! Flying! Chick Webb at the Savoy! Frankie Manning and Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers! Art, fashion, poetry—Black In-tel-lect is on! Dis! Play!” She was dancing with Daddy! They were all drinking wine—a bottle from before Prohibition, from Mama’s Italian cousins. She spotted me with shining eyes and called out, “Bernice! Come down here and meet your cousin!” Confused, I swung down the stairs, feeling dopeless and gay at the same time. Mama reached out and slipped her hand around mine like butter on a biscuit. “Say hello to Miss Lunette.”

I was smashed into a hug that smelled of earth and jazz-mine soap and cigarette smoke, then twirled around three whole times, wheel! I ducked under a strong and graceful brown arm and as I fell into his arms I saw beads of sweat below Daddy’s black pencil-thin mustache, his shining teeth right by my eye. He dipped me deep and I just swooned!

"Maybe someone should go to bed and we'll do proper introductions in the morning," he said, spinning me to Mama. "It's a big surprise for little eyes!"

"I've never seen her eyes that big," said Mama. She led me back up the stairs, arm around my waist, hips swaying.

"Mama, what is going on?"

"Lunette's coming to town to buy a house. She'll be staying with us a while.

"Splush! Mama, she's a—"

"—I know she's a darkie, dear, but she's family."

"Splush! Mama she's a flapper!" I was moony for her, the apparition of absolute newness. I'd read about these free-living women in *Modern Priscilla Magazine*, but never with skin like a chestnut, like chocolate cake, like a hawk's wing. When I finally slept I dreamt of a place called Harlem where boys threw girls high into the air.

When I went down to breakfast the next morning Lunette was holding little Minnie, her pink-faced rubber Kewpie doll on her lap on her lap. They were staring at the toaster, waiting it to pop. Lunette said to Minnie, "You lucky! Most people still got to turn their toast over by themselves. Your daddy always loves his gadgets, all the latest things! You got a Frigidare, we still got an icebox! And oh, my really? Ice cube trays? I heard of those. Making our own ice, what comes next?"

Daddy came into the kitchen, adjusting his suspenders, and set a box with silver metal corners on the table. "Bernice Freeman. Time to learn where your last name came from." The toast popped and Daddy swiped the pieces from the air. As Mama served up breakfast, he splayed out a long line of tintypes and photo cards, pointing at faces and telling us names. There were Negro men in bowler hats, pale women in lace, brown babies in browner arms. There was Lunette as a child, hair in braids, smiling shiny while her parents looked serious. A large family stood in front of a big house, people of all shades and Daddy pointed out his father and her father, boys next to each other, at opposite ends of the spectrum. There was another picture of Daddy as a boy on his mama's lap: Lunette sung out "We called you the Eye-talians!" Mama shook her head and raised her eyebrows at Daddy.

Lunette got serious, looked at me and Minnie. "You kiddos come from abolitionists. And we still got a lot of work to do." I had no idea. I thought slavery was over.

“Yes, keep it a secret, Bernice,” Mama said, wiping her hands on her apron. “Lunette’s working undercover for the National Urban League and will pretend to be our maid—but she is actually our guest and you are NOT excused from your chores!”

Suddenly, I saw my whole life of ballet and piano lessons, jacks and jump rope, study hall and soda fountains as the simple game of hopscotch it really was! Life was more complex and colorful, and maybe dangerous, than I ever imagined.

While she lived with us, Lunette taught us the Shim Sham and Suzy Q, the Black Bottom and the Bees Knees. Mama closed the curtains while we danced. Lunette put a white apron on when company came over and some were impressed we had colored help. My parents told a few close friends the truth—that Lunette was a graduate of Howard University and fluent in French. She was a member of the Zeta Phi Beta and the National Association of College Women and had attended the Exposition on Art Deco in Paris. I’d feel proud when I saw respect creep onto slack white faces as they listened to Lunette talk, her smile shining and inspiring. She spoke eloquently about bringing light to dark times, and detailed her mission to assist colored immigrants fleeing the oppression of the South and migrate to the “Welcoming, Working West.” To those who showed support for her vision of a boarding house and a work force, she’d thank them and hold up her outspread hand and quote Booker T. Washington. “In all things that are purely social, Black and White people can be separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.” As she spoke, she would fold her dark fingers over her white palm, an image of power that stirred my longing for a future where people were truly colorful.

When the stock market crashed, my family would move away and I’d get to go live my dream at Freeman House. My friends would tease me when I’d become ‘Lunette’s white maid’ during the Great Depression, but it was worth it. Not just because I’d get to wear that delicious fur coat when I went to shop for things the stores wouldn’t sell to Negroes anymore, but because I felt like part of history. And there was jazz, every night, and singing. And even in hard times, the silvery laughter that had awakened me from my childhood slumber. Because of Lunette, I’d seek a future where we could all dance together—and fly.

— poem —

BANG!

PATRICIA DOYNE — *Fremont*

It's all built out of stardust,
this leap from nothing to light, law, and time,
from spark to soul.

Our star-fathers marched, not straight—but wildly zigzag,
skewing orbits,
swapping genes,
reaching into seawater and pulling out heartbeats...
Listen! The pulse you hear is nature's backbeat:
all things ticking in uneasy rhythm...
Every proton,
every tentacle,
every lifted wing
sings in this folk-epic
of adventurers gambling with their own bones.

Our torch-bearers are not the noblest,
nor the finest,
but the shape-shifters:
changing habits and habitats,
seizing the main chance,
slicing shortcuts through history...

Look! Furry fingers grasp a stone,
strike a wedge-shaped flake with a wicked edge...

And off goes life at another wacky angle,
a universe writing its own comic strip
in stardust.

NAVAL MANEUVERS

BARRY D. HAMPSHIRE — *Mount Diablo*

THE PROSPECT OF OUR ANNUAL two weeks' vacation, in the summer of 1958, on Hayling Island created an "Oh, please. No" reaction in me. The island was located in the English Channel. Its eleven square miles of desolation and misery was joined to the mainland by a causeway. Hayling was a strange but appropriate name for the island. It may have been an old English spelling of the weather that frequently battered its shores. To me, a nine-year-old boy, Hayling Island had the attraction of a lecture on aging. To my parents, it was perfect. Cheap.

Outside our vacation cottage, the rain poured down—again. I looked out the misting windows at the small grocery store across the road. Beyond the store, I could see sand dunes that lay between me and the sandy beach. Tufts of hardy grasses growing along the dunes fought to keep from being uprooted by howling winds scouring the sand from around them. Such battles for survival presented me with more interesting time-absorbers than the invitation to join another "bored" game. How I came to hate Monopoly was obvious within the first few days. My sister always obtained the two most expensive properties, and I was toast. I savored the thought of meeting the creator of Clue in the library with a candlestick.

Thankfully, on the second Monday of our vacation, my father awoke with an idea. "As the weather has improved a little, why don't we go for a nicey-picey?" His way of saying a ride in the car. "We could cross the causeway back to the mainland and drive to Portsmouth."

Mother wasn't enthused. "Why would we want to go there?"

He countered, "I don't care. Let's just get out of here."

My sister and I looked pleased with the idea.

Mother frowned. "Well, all right, but we need to take umbrellas and rain coats."

We wouldn't be playing on the beach, so a day exploring a local city sounded better than brooding around in our vacation cottage. Before we departed, I was sent to the grocery store to buy a daily newspaper. I felt it a good sign when I managed to cross the road without being blown out to sea.

The drive to Portsmouth was uneventful and somewhat of a relief. Misting car windows instead of misting cottage windows. Life was improving. However, Portsmouth city center in the drizzle had me hankering for the excitement of blades of hardy grasses being uprooted

from the dunes behind the grocery store. Lunch in a little café could only be described as uninspired, with a nod to good old-fashioned, stale white bread. We reloaded into the car despondently wondering what the afternoon would bring.

My father then had his second idea of the day. He suggested, “Why don’t we check out the naval dockyard to see if we can see any ships?”

The Portsmouth Naval Dockyard was the home port for British naval fleets that operated in the Atlantic, and around Europe, Africa, and the Arctic. Many famous warships that I had read about in magazines were anchored there. Thrilled with his idea, I became a little happier, for a while. Finding the dockyard wasn’t difficult as it occupied about a quarter of the city and we found signs to it everywhere.

Mother looked uncomfortable. “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

Father ignored her. “I’ll head to the main entrance and who knows what we’ll be able to see.”

Mother gave him a dismissive look. “Why? It’ll just be big gates and some guards.”

“Well, let’s go and see.”

He navigated through city streets until he turned onto a large main road lined with Georgian terraced houses. Even though I was still a young boy, I had to admit that each house had been meticulously painted in the same black-and-cream style. I thought they looked impressive, despite the fact I viewed them from behind misty car windows. At the far end of the road, we could see the gates to the docks. Huge, black, wrought iron gates straddled the gap between two sections of twenty-foot-high brick wall. A single small section of the gates was open, patrolled by two guards with rifles.

My father drove straight down the road, showing no indication he intended stopping or turning. In the rear-view mirror, I could see he had a mischievous look on his face.

I sensed my mother begin to fidget, before she demanded, “Stop. Dave, stop the car. You can’t go in there.”

“We can try.”

“No. We’ll be arrested. Stop.”

My sister looked anxiously at Mother. I grinned and waited.

Father pulled up to the gate and one of the guards came to speak to

him. "Excuse me, sir, are you expected? The general public isn't allowed into the dockyard."

Father nodded. "I expected that. No, we don't have any business. We're on vacation and feeling a little cooped up with this weather." He looked over his shoulder at me. "This one's getting bored and I was hoping we could take a quick look around."

The guard had a brief discussion with his companion before coming back to my father. "Okay. I don't think the admiral's here today. So make it fast, just a quick look around."

Father drove onto one of the most secure naval dockyards in the world. Mother stared at her husband. "You just talked your way into . . . oh my God."

He drove around warehouses, parade grounds, and office parking lots while my sister enquired as to whether we were safe. When we reached the water, I was disappointed because all I could see were a couple of tug boats and cargo ships.

Undeterred, my father drove along the waterfront in the hope of finding someone to ask where the fleets were anchored. After a short time, we crossed an open area toward a block of offices, in front of which stood a group of officers. They eyed our civilian car with interest. Father pulled up close to them, and one of the officers stepped forward to talk with him.

"Good day, sir. It isn't often that we encounter a member of the public in this part."

"Yes. The guard on the gate said that as today was quiet, it would be alright for us to take a quick tour. I was wondering where we may find some of the battleships. My son would be thrilled to see them."

The officer looked inside the car, nodded politely to Mother before he smiled at my sister and me. "Well, I think your timing is perfect. I happen to be the harbor master and it's time for my daily check around. My launch has just been refueled. Would you like to join me, sonny?" He winked at me. I was a nine-year-old who felt like he had landed his first date, I was ecstatic.

My father parked the car in front of the offices, and we were escorted to the gangway onto a thirty-foot launch. A crew member led us to the wheelhouse, which was just big enough for the four of us, the harbor master, and a seaman at the wheel and controls.

The harbor master told the seaman he wanted to check the North Atlantic fleet. From a distance, we could see the amazing nineteen-inch guns and other armaments on the decks of the warships. I was in awe. But when we moved up close, I realized there was a huge difference between a thirty-foot launch and a battleship. I couldn't see the guns,

I couldn't see anything except for the gray painted, welded wall of steel that reared out of the water, arching high over us.

As we progressed through the fleet, I did enjoy watching the ships that were anchored across the channel as I could see their decks, guns, and superstructures.

Submarines just looked wrong to me. I couldn't tell which end was the front or the stern. Weird black sausages semi-submerged in water. Why would anyone go to sea in one of them?

After about an hour, the harbor master had given us a continuous verbal description of just about every ship in the fleet, how big they were, their crew size, their armaments, where they had seen action, and when they were scheduled to be decommissioned.

He looked at me and enquired, "Would you like to take the wheel for the return trip?"

"Really? You mean steer the boat?"

The seaman smiled. "Yes. Come on, son. Take the wheel. Give it a go."

I stood frozen in place. Me drive? I couldn't drive a car. How could I drive a boat? What'll happen if I collide with a battleship? I could sink half the British Navy in one ill-timed swing of the wheel. I feared I'd be thrown in the Tower of London for inflicting more damage on the British Navy than the Armada had. The harbor master could see the fear in my eyes. "Come on, sonny, it's not that scary." My father nodded and smiled.

With sweating hands I took the wheel and managed to steer around the stern of a destroyer without scraping paint off anything. My shoulders began to relax, and a smile crept across my face when the seaman directed me down a channel. It was blocked by a floating crane. I did my first three-point turn in a launch. After that, I was hooked. My confidence was briefly challenged when a tug came chugging down the same channel as us. He seemed to occupy the entire channel. I aimed at what appeared to be a six inch gap and closed my eyes.

"Well done," commented the seaman at my side. "He didn't leave you much room."

"Probably the tug boat captain has his son at the wheel," suggested the harbor master. "I think our helmsman is much more competent." He reached over and tousled my hair.

I had a blast navigating around Portsmouth Docks inspecting the fleet—not something many kids can say they ever did.

That night, I happily went to sleep knowing that I and the entire British Navy were still afloat and wondering if any blades of hardy grasses still remained rooted in the sand dunes behind the store. That would be tomorrow's adventure, if it wasn't raining.

I MIGHT'VE BEEN A CAT LADY

ANITA HOLMES — *High Desert*

I might've been a cat lady.
There are worse things to be—
a psychopathic mass-murderer, for example—
Except their neighbors always say,
"They were so quiet. They always waved.
We never suspected a thing."
Cat ladies, on the other hand,
elicit eye-rolls and rude laughter,
plus it's hard to wave back
when you're holding a cat
and three tiny kittens.

I might've been a cat lady
and treated strays with respect—
practicing trap-neuter-release—
Except they'd probably recognize
a good deal when they saw it
and stick around for the kibbles.
Cat ladies are held in high esteem
by the local felines—
those experiencing homelessness
as well as the ones next door
who watch from their window perches.

I might've been a cat lady
and spoken in that squeaky voice
and meowed on occasion as well.
Except when family visited
in which case I'd do my normal best
to act as if my world was human-focused.
Cat ladies generally know who's an ally
and who's likely to elicit a visit
from Animal Control and Code Enforcement—
or children packing senior-living brochures
and luncheon tour appointments.

I might've been a cat lady,
filling my days with furry friends
and gatherings of a dozen or more.
Except sometimes I'd have to leave
to go on weekly cat food runs,
remembering to stock up on cat toys.
Cat ladies also know a good deal when they see it:
Today, I had a dozen cardboard boxes
I needed to break down for the trash
but I didn't—because it's never too late
to take advantage of a cat lady starter kit.

DIALOG BETWEEN BRAIN, HANDS, AND MOUTH

STEVE WHEELER — *Central Coast*

BRAIN: I am having some real concerns about the way in which you are handling instructions lately. I'm beginning to believe that what I want written down isn't going too well. So, Hands, how do you feel about this?

RIGHT HAND: Which hand?

BRAIN: Let's start with you, RH.

RIGHT HAND: Not sure, about the dictation part, but it might be easier. Especially since my pinky is so damn crooked it can't do shit on a keyboard anymore.

BRAIN: Okay, okay, I get that. Can you refrain from expletives please? I'm aware of what your pinky can't do. What about the rest of your fingers?

RIGHT HAND: Well, all of my fingers certainly could do with a respite, since they're old and tired, especially my O finger. Currently it has to do the work on keys "O" and "P" since pinky got so messed up. It's a bummer. Not only that. In the good old days my fingers used to go rushing through a bunch of sentences with ease. Now the damn things, oops sorry, the "darn" things are so clumsy, I'm having to go back and replace half the words that come out of your skull.

BRAIN: Hey, it's not my fault you've got clumsy workers!

LEFT HAND: Excuse me. Can I have something to say about this? I'm tired of hearing Right Hand constantly complaining about its issues. I've got my own problems. Take a look at my pinky; it's starting to warp, just like your pinky. Right? How do you think I feel about that? It's having the darnedest time trying to get to "Q." And my thumb, oh God it's so goofy. It keeps slipping onto the space bar and messing things up even more. And yeah! My fingers are getting older too, and my knuckles. Oh God, my knuckles. They creak, they groan, they snap, they pop. No wonder they're so clumsy! This is going on, and you want me to tap out a word like alphabet? Ha! Here's the way it looked the last time I tried, akonsner. Look at it, there's no similarity at all, not a word, just a bunch of sloppily punched out keystrokes. If I could think for myself I would probably go back to single-finger poking.

BRAIN: Well, you don't think for yourself. But I catch your drift. I see Right Hand's gripe as well. So, it looks like I'm going to have to let Motor Mouth dictate from now on.

MOUTH: Excuse me, Brain, but I take umbrage when you refer to me that way. You better have a little bit more respect for me, oh great cerebellum, otherwise, I might get just as sloppy as Right Hand and Left Hand. You'd be in a real pickle then. I mean, what if I were to get something like lockjaw, or trench mouth, or swollen tongue disease, even?

BRAIN: Okay. Sorry, Mouth. I was just venting, you know. I really need you to help me turn my illustrious thoughts into a meaningful imprint.

MOUTH: Fine.

RIGHT HAND/LEFT HAND *in unison:* Hey, you need us just as much as we need you!

RIGHT HAND: Yeah! Somebody has to come along and finger-poke corrections, for all the sloppy translations from your crummy dictations, Brain.

BRAIN: Get a grip, Fumbles. Just a reminder, your Dupuytren's contracture is catching up with you. Last Sunday you had three fingers freeze up on us. We nearly missed getting our writing assignment in on time.

LEFT HAND: Why can't we just all get along?

RIGHT HAND: Oh, how trite.

BRAIN: Hey, chill. No need to be sarcastic. We got enough problems already. Let's not get all out of joint. We need to accept the inevitable. We're gonna have to use dictation software from now on. So deal with it.

MOUTH: Well said, er, I mean well thought.

RIGHT HAND: Fine, I'm in.

LEFT HAND: Works for me!

End of dictation

BEING GROUCHY

PAMELA HECK — *Redwood*

I ADMIT I WAS NOT IN FAVOR of asking her to stay. My brothers outvoted me. She was always singing, and those damn birds were always flying around the cottage, tweeting along, leaving their droppings everywhere. If she hadn't been such a good housekeeper, I never would have put up with it. Women!

I never did set much store by women. My mother died when I was six, and we all did fine without her—my brothers, my father, and I. Oh, Dippy tears up whenever one of us mentions her. Don't understand why. He was only a baby when she died. He doesn't remember her at all, although he's the one who killed her—him and Brainy. Twins. Complicated birth. She died. They lived.

Some folks wonder why none of us ever married—seven grown men living together in a cottage in the woods. If it seems a little odd, think about it. Our names should give you a clue.

Shy turns an alarming shade of red if he even thinks about a girl.

Burpey's stomach issues get in the way. Imagine him closing in for his first kiss and, "Burrp," his breath knocks the poor girl out. "Adios, Burpey."

Snoozey can't stay awake long enough to close the deal. Oh, he's okay in the mine as long as we keep him upright, swinging a pick or hammer. The rest of the time we can't take him anywhere. He snores.

The twins aren't exactly chick magnets either. When they were born, I figure there wasn't enough of everything to split two ways. Brainy got all the smarts. When he's not working, he's got his nose buried in a book. Dippy is all heart but, truth be told, his head seems a bit small for the rest of him. He gets lost a lot. We have to watch him.

That leaves Smiley and me. I already told you, I got no use for women. As for Smiley, he'll go along with anything, including living in a little house with six other guys. Sometimes I just want to wipe that grin off his face. No one should be that happy all the time. But, overall, we've always gotten along just fine. Then, she shows up and turns everything tipsy-topsy.

One of us always builds a fire when we get home. There's never smoke in the daytime. So, when I saw smoke pouring out of the chimney, I thought our place was on fire. Then, "Dang," when I opened the door, someone had cleaned the whole house. I haven't seen my best pipe since.

Later, when I asked “you-know-who” about it, she acted all innocent, but she was always harping on how smoking is bad for you. I know she hid it. Damned if she didn’t. When I tried to find out where it was, she just smiled and shrugged and started singing about her prince. I sez to myself, “You can sing all you want, but your prince is never going to find you way out here.”

Anyway, after the smoke, and the cleaning, there was that smell—someone left food simmering on the hearth. Who was cooking in my kitchen? I always cook the dinner. Of course, I didn’t know, then, that it was her that lit the fire, and hid my pipe, and did the cooking—not yet. But someone was mucking around in my house, and I was determined to get to the bottom of it. Naturally, Smiley was delighted with all the changes. He didn’t even care who did it. Everybody blathered about how nice everything looked, and how great dinner smelled.

I let them have it. “We’ve got an intruder, and all you can think about is dinner. Suppose this is bad magic. Suppose the evil queen is behind this. Maybe she wants the gold from our mine.”

That shut everybody up. Poor Dippy’s knees were knocking.

“Let’s go upstairs,” sez I, “and see what mischief is going on up there.”

Tiptoeing up the stairs, we huddled together at the top. Our beds stood in a line, their covers neatly tucked, except for mine. Someone was in it—Snow White. Dang, she was pretty.

It must have been a shock for her, waking up to see seven men, faces blackened from working in the mine, hovering around her bed. I have to give her credit, She didn’t bat an eyelash.

“Oh, hello. Why it’s seven little men. I thought, from the size of everything, that children lived here.”

I found her comment to be incredibly insensitive, but there were my brothers, beaming at her. Shy was the color of a fire hydrant.

Of course, we heard the whole heartrending story: evil queen, murderous huntsman, frenzied flight through the dark forest, trees ripping at her clothes—a very dramatic rendition. They should make a movie.

My brothers lapped it up like a bunch of starving kittens. She had them wrapped around her little finger, but not me. “Women is trouble,” I warned. Nobody listened.

“My goodness, I’ve slept so long, it must be dinner time,” she said. “The table is set, and food is ready, but you really must wash up before you eat. Why look at you. You’re all dirty.”

First, I’m “little,” then I’m “dirty.” She really knew how to hurt a guy. I had a mind to skip dinner and show her. Sitting in a corner, arms crossed, I glared at everyone. I was making a point, although nobody seemed to notice. It was my stomach that finally did me in. It growled. Only one way to shut it up. I washed.

Later that night, Snow White slept in my bed again while I ended up sleeping with Smiley. I knew he was the only one who wouldn’t mind.

I finally made Snow White her own bed. No big deal. I just wanted my bed back. That’s all. But she made a big thing out of it.

“Oh, Grouchy, thank you. It’s beautiful.”

She actually tried to kiss my forehead. Women!

Things settled into a routine. Burpey kept burping although he seemed to burp a lot less on Snow White’s cooking. Shy blushed every time Snow White looked in his direction. Brainy read on and on. Snoozy took his usual nap before bedtime. Dippy followed Snow White around the house like a puppy. Smiley was his usual annoying self, and I grumbled a bit less than usual. Snow White kept the house spotless, while the smell of cakes and pies filled the air.

We all thought Snow White would be safe with us. We didn’t know about the queen’s magic mirror. Still, it was rumored that the queen practiced witchcraft.

Brainy advised Snow White to be cautious. “My dear, the world is a dark place. Lock the door when we are gone and don’t open it to anyone until we return.”

She promised, but I never placed no store in a woman’s promise. You all know what happened—thanks to that infernal mirror, the Queen found her.

“Even the mightiest finally fall,
Snow White’s still fairest of them all.
She dwells within a forest glen,
the guest of seven little men.”

There was a terrible storm on that fateful day. It intensified as we

neared home. I was looking toward our warm cottage, eager to dry myself before the fire. It was then that I saw it: a shape, dark and tattered like some devilish bird of prey, racing away from our house.

“The queen,” I screamed over the wind. “It must be the queen in disguise. After her before she gets away.”

We gave chase, picks and shovels in the air as the wind and rain intensified. She lost her way in the storm and found herself cornered on a precipice high above the raging river. Looking more hag-like than queenly, she looked toward us, revealing a face turned green by envy. Then, raising her wand in a final act of vengeance, she called down the wrath of heaven itself. Heaven answered. A lightning bolt hit the wand. It and she exploded—gone in an instant.

I found Snow White. She lay crumpled on the floor, her skin as pale as her name. Just beyond her fingertips was the apple, perfect except for one small bite, which had been enough. I laid Snow White upon her bed, the bed I had made for her, while my brothers knelt and prayed to no avail. She was gone.

Days passed. Still, she looked as fresh as a rose just plucked from the garden. We could not bear to put her in the ground. She was too beautiful. And so, we fashioned a coffin of glass and placed her in the clearing just beyond our home—a home that, despite seven little men, suddenly seemed empty.

News spread throughout the kingdom of the beautiful maiden, changeless in the sleep of death. Many came to pay tribute. After all, she had been a princess. It was not surprising that, eventually, a prince actually came. Despite my dire prediction, one had found her after all. He was young and handsome, and he gazed at her with a terrible longing.

“She is so lovely. I cannot leave her. Let me carry Snow White to my kingdom where I shall treasure her as long as I live. My life is forfeit to her beauty.”

“Sire, here she lived, here she died, and here she shall remain with those who loved her in life.” Brainy always had a way with words.

“Then grant me one kiss before I leave, one kiss to remember always.”

We all nodded our consent, even me. Emboldened, the Prince opened the coffin and bestowed a kiss on lips, slightly parted, as if they had been waiting for just such a moment. He kissed her tenderly, stood slowly, and

backed away reluctantly.

I saw it all—the kiss, the faint rise of her chest, the flush of color in her cheeks. I had never been a believer in all that “love’s first kiss” baloney. I was wrong. Snow White lived.

We knew Snow White was never meant to spend her life in a cottage in the woods with seven dwarves. A princess deserves a prince. Still, we were sad to see her go—yes, even me. Before she left, she thanked us all, kissing each upon the head with a promise to visit in the spring. I was last in line. When she came to me, she knelt down and whispered, “In the end, you who found it hard to love, loved the hardest.” She held me a moment before she kissed me.

Dang, I turned pinker than a peony. Women!

GUARDER OF THE NECTAR

LORELEI KAY — High Desert

The red-throated hummingbird
perches on a branch near the patio
feeder, providing daily company
as I peruse my morning paper.

As other hummers fly close,
they are quickly chased
away in a blur of flight
by the defending sentinel.

Hour after hour, day after day,
he guards his territory, bolting
after any intruder who might
threaten his personal supply.

Until—the day she flies by—
the only one to make his manly
heart beat faster. Only his lady love
is allowed to hover, drink her fill.

Is her chirp a sweeter tone?
Her feathers a deeper sheen?
Her wing span more alluring?
Her beak tilt a touch more dainty?

Pushing aside my newspaper filled
with ongoing articles of the worldwide
pandemic, I consider the wiles
that won his heart.

Pondering such fragile ideas,
my thoughts take
wing, and
fly away.

— poem —

KERFUFFLE

BETTY LES — *Redwood*

I want to write a poem
that uses the word kerfuffle
with chickens roosting
in trees and a portly man
curling his mustache

I want to write a poem
about a blue-sequined night
with a sleek canoe
parting water
and the Milky Way
shrinking my troubles

I want to write about owl feathers
their exquisite softness
and sliding into cotton sheets
that have been washed a
hundred times

I want to write about chance
how I stepped outside
into the magnificence of the
Aurora Borealis
blue and green gases
swirling around me
in the cold

I want to write about
the meaning of life
with Magic 8-Balls
floating answers
and little windows popping
open in my dreams

all these things
if only I could find
the words

OUR SILLY HALF HOUR

MARLENE ANNE BUMGARNER — *Central Coast*

WHEN I WAS SIX YEARS OLD, my parents and I lived in a rented Victorian in the Richmond District of San Francisco, and my favorite time of day was the Silly Half Hour. There was no set time when this event would occur, and it didn't happen every day. But once in a while, after Dad and I had cleared the table and left Mom to her nightly task of returning the kitchen to order, we would retire to the adjacent sitting room with the tiny space heater and the radio where, on other evenings we listened to dramas, and suddenly it would happen.

These magical times frequently began with Dad telling a story about a little boy in England. He was the boy in the story, of course. He told me how he used to walk for hours on Shipley Glen with his friends, cycle along the Shipley canal, watch cricket games on Sundays after church, and deliver milk on a horse and cart in the dark hours before school.

While my father was concentrating on crafting his tales, I would stealthily take a black comb from his pocket and begin styling his hair, sitting behind him on the flowered sofa, both actions that were forbidden at any other time. Dad's hair, shiny and fragrant with Brylcreem, was always parted down the middle, and he normally hated to have anyone touch it. Once I had the comb in my hand, however, I would send his hair straight back, trying to make it into a pompadour like the ones I had seen on posters of film stars. When that didn't work, I would comb the strands forward into his eyes, sending my mother, peeking around the kitchen door, into peals of laughter. I can still remember the oily feel and sweet fragrance of Brylcreem on the comb and on my hands.

When he'd had enough of my grooming, Dad would play "horsies" with me. Because we'd left all our furniture in Australia, most of the rooms in the cavernous house were empty, affording us a magnificent paddock. Dad would crawl around the sitting room on his hands and knees with me on his back. Somehow he'd manage to turn the doorknob and burst into the hallway. During that period of my life I was often dressed in my black Hopalong Cassidy cowgirl outfit, the one with silver trim and white fringe on the skirt. Soon I was whooping and hollering and brandishing my two silver pistols.

During Silly Half Hour I was allowed to be physical and loud, and ... well, silly. Those behaviors had been forbidden previously when we lived mostly in no-children-allowed apartments, and especially during the year

and a half we had lived with my grandparents, aunt and uncle, and cousin in Australia.

Down the long hall, Dad and I would gallop, into the empty parlor, through the long dining room, into the connecting great room with the triple bay window, then back out into the hall. As an only child with few playmates, I was in heaven. The thread-bare carpet runner in the hallway must have hurt my father's bony knees, but he never complained.

My mother took no part in this evening ritual except to mutter "tsk tsk" from the sidelines and periodically warn my father to be careful, adding, "She'll never go to sleep tonight." We paid no attention. Dad and I rolled around on the floor together, tickling one another and giggling. We called each other silly names. He gave me piggy-back rides. I gave him gentle noogies. We laughed. Oh, how we laughed.

Sometimes Dad would ride my tricycle down the hallway. I would jump out of one of the bedrooms crying "boo!" and he would feign terror, or I would ride the trike and he would crawl along behind, making wolf noises or pretending to be the Lone Ranger about to capture the bad guy.

At no other time in my life, did my father behave like this. Once our lease ran out, we left San Francisco and moved to the suburbs. Dad began to work overtime at the cabinet shop where he was employed, and then until late at night in the garage, making cabinets and wishing wells or knick-knack shelves for our friends.

My parents acquired a mortgage and a second child, and what had been our Silly Half Hour became a story, a good-night kiss, and a promise to go fishing on the weekend. A promise that was kept at first, but soon fell by the wayside. For the rest of his life, my father remained a dedicated wage earner and a devoted father, but never again did he crawl on all fours or ride a tricycle.

Looking back over his ninety-one years, I realize that this brief time of silliness is probably what sustained my love for him during the difficult times, when I made life choices he didn't understand, or when he began to slip into the confusion and paranoia of dementia. I know now that in those last years, when he grew suspicious and angered by the merest slight, it was the dementia talking, but his words hurt just the same. Now that he is gone, I am comforted again when I remember him as he was during that brief enchanted time: my very strong, very silly, very loving Daddy.

THE STUPIDEST THING I EVER SAID

MIKE APODACA — *High Desert*

MOST OF US CAN REMEMBER the stupidest thing we've ever said, a statement we'd take back if we could—an embarrassment we've kept hidden.

Well, after nearly fifty years, I'm ready to bring mine out in the open.

As a cocky sixteen-year-old, thinking myself as invulnerable as Superman, I joined the high school hiking club. We'd scurry around the Los Angeles Mountains on Saturdays carrying heavy packs and wearing tennis shoes. City kids tasting nature.

None of my drama club buddies were in the hiking club, so they couldn't participate in a hike scheduled for the upcoming Saturday. We wanted to hang out together, so we decided to go camping on our own. I told my mom where we'd be, so she wouldn't worry. We gathered all the equipment we could find and set out for an adventure.

When we arrived, the campground was closed. Steve was ready to go home. Jim and I were frustrated and hungry for an adventure. Our brothers would do whatever we decided.

I suggested we go to another place I knew. We'd park high in the Angeles National Forest at the Chantry Flat Recreation Area and ramble to Spruce Grove, a small campground about three and a half miles out.

Jim, who was a senior and sported a fuzzy, tan beard, liked the plan, so we were off. My brother Rick, a spunky high school freshman, rode with me and most of the gear. Jim drove his younger brother, Bruce, also a freshman, and our friend, Steve, from drama class in his sputtering yellow VW bug.

We parked at Chantry Flat, and in spite of a light rain, jumped out of our cars reeking of youthful enthusiasm. Steve's thick, dark eyebrows tensed when he saw our gear. Our tent was a six-foot-long canvas monster that weighed as much as an adult porpoise. We had packed our food in big ice chests—you know, cans of tuna, sodas, and bread, and stuff. We'd brought lanterns, stoves, sleeping bags, pillows, and clothes. It was clear we couldn't heft everything to the campsite.

"How we gonna carry all this crap?" Steve asked, rain dotting his thick, black-framed glasses.

"We'll make two trips!" I said enthusiastically. Stupid, but not the stupidest thing I ever said.

Jim scratched his scruffy beard, wiping his wire-framed glasses with

his T-shirt. He nodded in assent. "Let's do it."

A plan developed. We'd carry in what we could, then Rick and Bruce would stay to set up camp. Jim, Steve, and I would go back to the car and get the rest of the stuff. When we returned, everything'd be all set up. We grabbed as much as we could carry, and like Frodo and his Hobbit band, we set off on a magical journey.

Rick and I shouldered the heavy tent between us. The route began with a steep asphalt descent which became a dirt trail that wound its way into the forest. When we tired, another pair would take over.

At the bottom of the snaking paved road, we ran into a group of Girl Scouts leaving. One squeaked, "You guys are going into the mountains in spite of the rain?"

I responded with full vibrato, "No, we're going because of it." The guys laughed agreement. Jim whooped.

Stupid, right? Still, not the stupidest thing I ever said.

Rain beat a percussion symphony on the tree leaves, but it didn't quench our spirits. We were five guys in the mountains on a quest, pioneers braving the elements, as tough as Daniel Boone. It was us against nature, and we felt fully up to the challenge.

When we finally reached the hilly campsite, our clothes were soggy, and we were freezing. Our breath formed small clouds.

Steve stared at the empty sites. "Where is everybody?"

"They're wimps," Jim said with a smirk. "We got the whole place to ourselves. We rule this mountain."

Rick's blond hair was soaked. His blue eyes peered around warily. "So whadda we do now?"

"You set up camp," Steve said.

"I've never done that myself," Rick complained.

"Me either," Bruce chimed in, looking as if he was close to tears.

"It's not hard, really," I assured them. "Put the poles together. They only fit one way. Spread out the tent, and put the poles inside. Piece a cake."

"Lighting the lantern and stove are easy too. Just screw on a butane canister, light a match, and turn on the valve. It should fire right up." He demonstrated, making sure they saw it a couple of times.

Rick and Bruce seemed relieved. Rick nodded that he was up to the challenge.

I put my cold hands in my peacoat pockets and said, “We gotta book it.”

“Right,” Steve said, rolling his eyes.

Jim, Steve, and I set off through the sticky mud, trudging back to the car. We ran most of the way, trying to beat the cloud-covered, setting sun, not wanting to make our way back in total darkness.

We never saw a soul.

We did rule this mountain.

The last mile was the steep, paved grade that wound up the hill to Chantry Flat. By the time we reached the top, we were exhausted. After all, we weren’t athletes. We were actors whose greatest exertion was dancing in *West Side Story*.

When we arrived at the cars, we were trembling. Jim had brought some whiskey. I’d never had whiskey, but I gratefully drank it and coughed. It burned my throat and magically warmed me from the inside. Then we were off again, lugging the rest of the gear.

The rain had become a torrent. Night slowly draped us in utter blackness. Exhaustion clawed at us. We dug out our flashlights and tried to keep on the trail but lost our way several times.

At one point, Steve slipped and fell backwards with a crunch. His stocky frame lay there on the muddy trail like an upended turtle. The gear he was carrying in his arms lay on the ground around him.

“Steve, you okay?” Jim asked, extending his hand.

“Just leave me,” Steve groaned.

“We’re not leaving you,” I said.

“No really, just go. I can’t make it.”

Jim and I pulled him up and told him we’d push him if we had to. He clomped forward.

We quivered with cold. Rain thumping on the trees taunted us. It had a persistence that said, “I can do this all night, long after you’ve collapsed.” Each drop became a mocking laugh.

We did everything we could to take our minds off our dire situation. Jim and I talked about movies—especially slasher movies. We talked about girls—ones we’d dated and some we wanted to. We talked about plays and the gossip from the drama department. But mostly we talked about getting off this trail.

"When we get to the camp, I'm stripping off these wet clothes, and putting on my pajamas, and eating until I'm totally stuffed," Jim said.

"Same here," I agreed. "All I can think about is my warm sleeping bag."

Steve had been pretty quiet. The best he could muster was mechanically putting one foot in front of the other.

Our hearts leapt when a flashlight caught an old wooden sign saying we were entering Spruce Grove. By now it was pitch dark, and sheets of rain obscured our vision. We scanned the area for our campsite.

"What the hell? Where's the tent?" Jim said.

In the distance I made out the shape of our massive tent. "I see it. Over there." I pointed my light.

"Why isn't the lantern lit?" Jim asked.

"Maybe they got tired and went to sleep," I said.

Beyond exhaustion, we plodded up to the tent and pulled open the flap. We heard a shaky voice say, "Man, are we glad to see you!"

The scene in the tent horrified us. The floor was filled with three inches of water. Clothes and food floated everywhere. It looked like the hold of a sinking ship. And, in the center stood Rick and Bruce, shivering and almost out of their minds.

"What the hell happened?" I shouted.

"We got the tent set up okay," Rick said, "but the matches got wet. We couldn't light the stove or the lantern. Then everything got wet. We didn't know what to do."

What could we say? We were miles from our Chantry Flat. We were totally spent. There was no way we were going to make it back to the cars that night.

Jim explained that sharing our body heat was our best chance to stay alive. We stripped down to our underwear, unzipped two sleeping bags, not nice down sleeping bags, but the old type, stuffed with thick, uneven padding, and lay down next to each other for warmth.

Shivering in the dark, I felt the water rise above my ears. For some time I found myself in complete sensory deprivation. I couldn't hear or see, and my body was numb. I became a disembodied mind.

In silence I prayed and awaited my fate, slipping off into oblivion.

The glimmer of a shaky light shone against the tent. A gruff voice announced that he was a forest ranger. The next thing I knew, the tent

flap flew open and the man asked, "You guys okay?"

This is where I voiced the stupidest thing I've ever said.

Drum roll, please . . .

Lying nearly naked in icy water, through chattering teeth I blurted out, "We're fine. We just need some matches."

It was obvious to the forest ranger that I was delusional. He told us to get dressed and that he was going to take us up to a nearby cabin where we could spend the night.

Somehow we each found our own clothes floating around us in the dark and dressed. Then we set out for more hiking through mud and slick leaves. It was fine for the most part, until we came to the roaring river.

"We'll have to ford it," the ranger said. "Be careful. It's stronger than it looks. Don't fall. Hold on to each other. If the current takes you, we may not be able to rescue you."

The rushing water rose to our thighs. It pushed our shaky legs and made walking on the slimy rocks difficult. Together we made it to the other side and climbed up onto the bank two feet above the river, the first ones up helping the others. Bruce, Jim's skinny little brother, was last.

As we turned toward the steep, uphill trail and the cabin, the ranger leading the way, Bruce lost his footing. His twig-like arms flailed, and he fell backward toward the raging river.

Jim threw out his hand, grabbed Bruce's shirt, and held him fast—his body leaning backwards over the thundering water, his face painted in panic. Jim slowly pulled his brother back onto his feet.

"You saved my life," Bruce said, nearly in tears.

We slipped on leaves, climbing a steep hill to the cabin where the ranger held the door. We took off our wet clothes and crawled under dry blankets, our heads sinking into fluffy pillows. I fell asleep so fast, I don't remember the ranger leaving or giving us any instructions.

The morning was bright and sunny. The forest had a clean, fresh, musky smell. Our clothes, hung up before we hit the sack, were moist when we put them on, but we didn't care. We straightened up the cabin and headed out.

We made it back to the camp, shocked to see that Rick and Bruce had set up the tent at the base of a slope. Water that ran down this hill came

straight into our tent.

The bottom of the tent was so full of water it looked like an inflated wading pool. We emptied it, picked up everything, dumped the ice chests in the trash cans, packed as best we could, and slowly made our way out of the mountain.

Once home, my mom informed me she'd called the rangers, asking them to find us. Unfortunately, she called the rangers for the campsite we had planned to camp at, not the one we ended up hiking to.

On Monday the big news on campus was that the hiking club had been in the mountains over the weekend and had to be helicoptered out. I've often wondered if they used the emergency services my mom had asked for.

It's been almost fifty years since I said, near the point of hypothermia, that my buddies and I were fine and just needed matches.

I wrote this to embrace those stupid words said in my youth, but buried under a carpet of shame. They're part of my life story. Maybe writing this will motivate others to find someone they can share their embarrassing stories with, someone they can really trust.

I hope they find it as liberating as I have.

THE GIVER

DITA BASU — Mount Diablo

*“The more you accepted, the more you indebted my soul.
So my friend, farewell...”* Rabindranath Tagore.

AS I STARE AT MY BLANK JOURNAL page this morning, collages of imagery, strings of consciousness appear at random. I’ll try to present it just that way, unadorned, unpolished and figure out later what it was that my soul tries to tell today.

My dear friend Wayne died last night. I met him in a writing class, oh, over ten years ago. Since then we kept in touch. As I think of him, I feel he left a message for me—a feeling of deep caring, a camaraderie he had for his fellow writer friends.

His face shone with pride when one of us won a contest or were published. He threw surprise parties to celebrate, and when we thanked him, he used to nod with eyes closed and whisper, “You’re welcome,” as if we indebted him for accepting his giving. It was this humble magnanimity that touched my heart. As I look faraway with this thought, an image flashes from memory.



I am in India choosing an Indian outfit to buy for my daughter, fit for a wedding party. In mid-August the weather in Calcutta is torturous. The atmosphere is humid, as if we are cooking inside a steaming, covered pot. Sweat trickles from the back of my head down the spine.

The air is heavy. Smoke hisses from the exhaust pipes of ancient double-decker buses. Horns blare from irate cars, impatient, stuck in traffic jams. A young vendor boy approaches me with a packet of incense sticks in hand.

“Please take one. Please. Just ten rupees a packet.” He says.

I brush him off. “No, I don’t need them. I have it.” I say.

“Please. Just one. Only ten rupees, Ma,” he pleads, trying to be part of my family, addressing me as “Ma.”

Ten rupees is equivalent to fifteen cents, yet I say, “I told you, I have it.”

Holding my daughter’s hand, we step up to take refuge in an air-conditioned store. A tall man in a three-piece suit and tie opens the heavy door, inviting us.

Inside, it's nice and cool. Fit for wearing a three-piece suit. Who'd say the outside world is such a madhouse? Serene sitar music plays in a low hum. An expensive foreign perfume whiff—the smell of musk mixed with exotic spices—lingers in the air.

"We have just the perfect lahenga for you." The salesman winks at my daughter, a self-conscious tween. He must have noticed us looking at the dresses that were hanging at the cheap stalls outside. He turns to his assistant, "Bring the special lot," he says. Bending towards him, he hisses, "NRI" (non-resident Indians.) I overhear it, but he doesn't know.

A young boy brings two ice-cold Coca-Cola bottles for us, "From the house," he smiles.

The assistant opens an enormous box and unfolds dazzling dresses. A scarlet, georgette, floor-length dress shimmers with antique silver sequins. Then he holds up a milk-white, two-piece outfit decked with intricate Kashmiri embroidery and a veil like a gossamer scarf with tiny French knots. My daughter is mesmerized, enchanted, and confused. I swallow when I see the prices hidden on tiny round pieces of paper hanging by gold, silk threads.

"Take both if you are undecided," the salesman says. "I'll give you a good price." He brushes his stylish, French-cut beard. "We'll fix it and make it just for you." He calls a tailor who appears with a measuring tape hanging from his neck.

"Ready in twenty-four hours." The old tailor smiles, holding the skirt-blouse piece in front of my daughter's body, guiding her toward the mirror. And I end up buying both, extending my plastic credit card to the salesperson.

"You must need coordinating accessories." He smiles, shaking his head, knitting his brows. "The jewelry, the shoes, the purse... no?" he asks in a tone, like what a naïve mom. "Mustafa will take you to our sister store," he says, winking again to his assistant.

As soon as we come out of the air-conditioned store, I am bombarded with the reality of the outside world. The young vendor boy appears again.

"Mother, please. Take it. Buy just one. Only ten rupees . . . please." He pleads with hands folded to his chest.

I ignore him and gesture my daughter to board the waiting car,

slamming the door in his face.

“Just because you have one,” the boy glances at my daughter, “you won’t look at another kid?”

I turn my head and for the first time really look at his face. The boy, almost as old as my daughter, with sharp features and a headful of messed-up, overgrown curls, resembles the image of Lord Krishna in our prayer room.

I notice the beggar boy’s torn shirt, streaks of dirt on the dark cheeks, and his beautiful eyes with unusually long lashes.

“Okay, give me one. Just one.” I say and hand him the coin.

Through the window he drops five packets on my lap and turns.

“Hey, I said just one,” I yell, “At least take your money.” I don’t want to owe a beggar.

“I give you. You give me one. I give you four. I can give too,” he yells back and merges into the crowd.

The light turns green. The car speeds up.

The more you accepted, the more you indebted my soul, dear friend.

— poem —

OR IS IT YOU?

JOHN PETRAGLIA — *Napa*

The near new scimitar moon
slices the blackness tonight
with a milky slash.
Rising in the southern sky
after eleven now
its horned sliver will not blanch
the coursing starry Orionids
if I can make it past midnight
to view at peak
meteors shooting glittered dust
a second or two across the sky
just long enough
to take my breath away
in this annual October wonder.

Or are you the breath-taker ...
Sidled next to me on the deck
chaised and already sleeping
wearing a smile of contentment
in my old grey sweatshirt.
Shielded from neighbors
ambient light
by a tetrad of redwoods
oleander hedges
and blanketed in the darkness
in a blessed shared ritual
you will later describe to friends
as if you were awake til two
counting pearly streaks
along with me ...
who steals my heart's air
still these years later?

THE TOWN CRIER

JULAINA KLEIST-CORWIN — *Tri-Valley*

MY STUDENTS WITH CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS surprised me every day during my teaching career. One time after recess, I came into the classroom to find fourth grader, Motka, had taken everything out of his desk, and spread the folders and papers around him. He sat cross-legged in the center and stared out the window.

“Motka, what are you doing?” I asked.

“I am a castle.” He swept his hand over the papers and folders. “This is my moat.”

Special education teachers learn to make decisions quicker than a hummingbird flies. I stood as close to him as I could, stretched out my arm, and with a pretend sword tapped him on the head. “I am the king,” I said, “and I demand my castle turn into Superman who will slurp up the moat and everything in it.”

Motka reacted to the magical declaration with a serious expression, stood, spread his arms, swooped down, and crawled around in his moat, lifting papers with his teeth. He spent a long time clearing the moat by crawling and pulling the papers in his mouth back to his desk. Maybe slurp hadn’t been the best word for me to use.

Every other year I had the same students for two years. By the time they were in their second year with me, they appointed themselves disciplinarians for the incoming students. I did my best to develop our mini community with values of respect for each other and me, and to accept everyone for who they were. Often when a problem arose, we’d have a class meeting and I’d ask input from the authoritarians.

Danny, a newbie, had difficulty sitting during any group activities. Not even story time would keep him in his seat. The students complained. I tried every behavior modification I had learned, but nothing worked. I called a class meeting. Each year I arranged their desks in the form of a crescent with my desk facing them. The positioning enabled me to give individual guided assistance, and it prevented unobservable inattention in the back of the room. Next to my desk, I had a wooden rocking chair that made for a cozy reading time.

For this meeting, I told the students that we had to come up with a solution for Danny. They gave suggestions like “Tie him in his chair,” or “Make him write, ‘I will stay in my seat one million times,’” or “Tell Rodney to sit on him.” Rodney was the biggest kid in class. I thanked

them, but I said, "Danny wouldn't like those ideas."

He kept walking in circles behind my chair and echoed my words, "Danny wouldn't like those ideas."

Then quiet Alicia said, "He could walk clockwise around the outside of our desk circle."

Danny immediately went to his knees and crept from behind my chair to the end of the desk crescent, stood, and walked behind the desks to the other end. Then he went on all fours again to cross in-between the students and me, stood, walked the crescent again, and repeated that pattern as we watched.

Motka said, "Done. Now can we hear a story?"

"We need to vote first. Is everyone in favor of Danny being allowed to walk in a large circle during our group times or whenever he needs to keep moving?" The vote was a unanimous yes.

The rest of the year, Danny complied, and always in a clockwise direction, and always crawling when he came to the front of the class so as not to block the students' view. He wasn't a distraction to the students, but at first, he was to me. His little blond head bobbed passed me too often to count, but I finally got used to it. One would think he wasn't paying attention, but he learned the lessons, passed every test, and then, his second year, he moved away with his family. We missed our orbiting friend.

Harry, my one blind student did not speak, and he had temper tantrums. He would grab whatever he could secure in his hands and throw it. He had an uncanny way of aiming at the person closest to him. I wondered if he had invisible antennae that could see us. At one of our class meetings, the students proposed that if anyone noticed Harry's tantrum starting, they should yell "fore" as golfers do if an errant ball is headed toward someone.

One day my principal came to observe. A student yelled "fore," and everyone, including me, ducked and tucked. When we heard the book land, we rose and continued what we were doing.

"What was that all about?" my boss asked.

I explained that during the last couple of months, Harry had succeeded in throwing a book at my head, giving me a headache. He had thrown his lunch box at another student that produced a bruise on her arm,

and the frequency of his tantrums had increased. Calling out “fore” was our survival. The principal took notes, and a few weeks later, Harry transferred to another school.

The students didn’t want to give up the warning call, so we brainstormed when we could use it. I suggested that once a week, I would announce “fore” as a surprise earthquake drill. Of course, the students wanted to be in charge of yelling “fore” too, so I added a town crier to our list of jobs that rotated weekly among the students. The town crier could yell “fore” twice a week but not during my presentations. Favorite times included first thing in the morning and the quietest times of the day.

Our school had a mixed population in the general education classes. It was in the suburbs, and in most of the families, both parents had jobs. The sixth graders often skipped school during the afternoons since no one would be home for a few more hours. A police car parked on the side street was supposed to be a deterrent. The officer, from his position, could survey not only the front door but the playing field in the back of the school as well.

One day I happened to look out the classroom window to see the physical education (PE) class where my students were included with the general education children. Everyone in the class had ducked and tucked. I guessed that one of mine had yelled “fore.” I should have made the rule to use “fore” only inside our room. The PE teacher had squatted and looked around as if cautious about some danger he had missed. I was ready to go out and corral my town crier when I saw the police officer running through the gate toward the students. He had his hand on his gun and peered into the corridors on his way probably thinking they had seen an intruder.

Oh, great, I thought, I have to clarify this mix-up immediately. I stepped out of my room to speak to the officer when I noticed four people in suits and ties at the gate behind him. It was the day school district members had scheduled a visit to our campus. They planned to close a school at the end of the year since the district budget was in jeopardy. Our school was one under consideration. I groaned. The scene before them most likely would create a quick decision.

By the time I talked to the officer and assured him that one of my students had tricked the PE teacher and the others in the class, the

laughing students were already doing jumping jacks. The officer scowled at me, shook his head, and returned to his car. When the students came back to class, I made a firm rule that in the future the privilege of saying “fore” would be taken away if ever used outside the room.

After school, I let the PE teacher rant and rave, and then I promised him it wouldn’t happen again. I apologized to my principal and told her my concern that the district members may have had a bad impression of our school. She said on the contrary. They were impressed that our students knew what to do for an earthquake drill during PE, and that we had a conscientious police officer on campus. Our school was not the one to be closed. I silently thanked Harry. Without him, we wouldn’t have had a town crier who saved our school from closure.

ROUGH

DEVEN GREENE — *Mount Diablo*

“ROUGH.”

That was a good word to describe Rocco, the man sitting across from me at the table. Dressed in a Hawaiian shirt that brought out the steely blue in his eyes, he was a mountain of a man. His large hands, scarred from previous injuries, exuded power. I needed to outsmart him, or this wouldn't turn out well for me, and we were nearing the end. That part was clear. I felt his eyes on me as I looked down, not wanting him to see my face bearing the defeated expression I was powerless to suppress.

I was frantically trying to formulate my strategy, but the more I tried to concentrate, the blanker my mind became. Everything I'd tried so far had been trumped by his show of superiority at every opportunity. I glanced up momentarily and caught him staring at me. Was he planning how he would destroy me, or was he simply trying to intimidate me? I wasn't sure as I averted my eyes downward again.

Think! Think! Try as I might, my mind remained empty. I sensed him watching me, already congratulating himself on what he saw as a sure victory. I tried to calm myself by taking in several long breaths, letting each out slowly. I'd been in similar situations previously and tried the same technique. It never worked, but I tried it again. As before, it provided no relief.

Rocco started tapping on the table with his right hand. I glanced as he repeatedly raised the second, third, and fourth fingers a quarter-inch, then lowered them, making a noise so quiet it was almost imperceptible, yet, no doubt, carefully executed to unnerve me.

I wasn't about to allow him to emerge victorious. Still looking down, I put my elbows on the table and cradled my head in my hands. As I did so, I pressed my second fingers on the little backward-pointing protuberances over my ear canals to block out the noise. I still heard his god-awful tapping, but it was dampened somewhat.

I glanced up, only to see him looking right at me. *Dammit! He knows I'm trying to block out the noise he's making. He can tell he's managed to get on my nerves and distract me.* Sweat trickled on the side of my face as I stared downward. I pressed harder with my fingers. Even so, I could still hear it. Tap, tap, tap. There had to be a place in hell for anyone who would resort to such a tactic. I glanced up again. His cool, calm outer demeanor only enraged me. Tap, tap, tap.

I did my best to conceal how I felt, even as my muscles tensed, and I sensed my blood pressure rise. I needed to concentrate. What had I done before that helped? *Focus! Focus!*

The tapping stopped. Finally, I was getting a break. I looked up in time to see Rocco take a swig from the brown bottle to his right on the table. The bottle looked dry on the outside, the condensate on the glass having evaporated a while ago. In keeping with his big man persona, Rocco returned the bottle to the table with a louder than necessary thump as his heavy hand hit. Almost immediately following, it started again—tap, tap, tap.

More sweat trickled down my face as the heat from Rocco's steely blue eyes bore into me. *Get a hold of yourself!* I closed my eyes to escape Rocco's piercing stare for a few seconds. He would feel he had me psychologically defeated when he saw that, but I had passed the point of caring. I opened my eyes and looked straight ahead at him, now fearless. That's what I had needed to do all along—stop caring. I was so relaxed, everything was a blur. The tension in my back and arm muscles dissipated, then my neck and shoulders loosened up.

I looked down, and my eyes started to focus. What I needed to do became crystal clear. I hadn't realized it before, but now I saw that the solution was right there, in front of me. Rocco was still tapping, but I was no longer disturbed by it.

"You're not gonna like this," I said with confidence. One by one, I slowly and deliberately placed the tiles on the board. "That's triple word and a fifty-point bonus for using all seven letters." I had spelled "question" using the "u" from Rocco's last move, "rough."

I picked up my warm bottle of root beer and took a swig.

HOLDING ON FOR DEAR LIFE

CONSTANCE HANSTEDT — *Tri-Valley*

Brass trio of geese, pewter platters,
plastic tabletop tree bearing artificial fruit.
Mom's things are stored so she can see them again
if she wants, her room at assisted living too small
for objects more decorative than essential, except
for a few teddy bears, photos of grandchildren
and Grandma mounted on her horse.

She doesn't remember her ranch-style house,
but I still see her scrubbing shag carpeting
on her hands and knees, vacuuming curtains
and dark recesses of closets. After Dad died,
possessions replaced human voices.
Yet now she dangles her feet on the edge
of the twin bed and hangs on to my every word,
even though I'm a stranger with a name
she doesn't recognize, a name erased
like letters on a chalkboard.

How does one live without memories?
Her wedding day, Dad in his crisp Navy uniform.
Holding one baby, then the second and third,
when we all became too much, when time moved
slow as honey. Religiously flipping buttermilk
pancakes every Sunday morning. Now when I ask
what she had for breakfast three hours earlier,
she frowns, the memory not even a dull shadow.

How will I live without a mother?
Our weekly talks from two thousand miles away.
Her political views, stories of who is ill, or died.
My reports of grown children in college or working.
How can I carry all of our memories?
Tell me, how does one go on?

FROM THE SIXTIES TO THE SIXTIES

TERRY TOSH — *Fremont*

I REMEMBER, for now, the rad days of my youth.

A product of the era when things transitioned from the birth of rock 'n' roll to flower power and freewill, peace, love, dope . . .

Yes, the Sixties. Old enough to remember that fateful day in Dallas, but too young to get why it was.

So much turmoil and change, so much growing up and becoming.

Decades swoosh past.

Kids magically become young people, then adults with their own stuff to contemplate.

Time marches on like an unstoppable demonstration.

Ideals and goals morph into complete opposites.

Reality manifests itself in the most disturbing ways.

Life spirals ever faster, twirling like an inverted vortex, a whirlwind!

How can that image in the mirror be the same being from back then?

What happened to that feeling of unending energy and passion that was our eternal youngness?

So, here we are, again, in the sixties. Carefree, once more, with no worries of appearing in control.

A CLASS DIVIDED

SUSAN DLUGACH — *Sacramento*

I’VE NEVER EXPERIENCED being sent to the back of the bus because my skin color isn’t dark like Rosa Parks, but long ago I was another kind of outcast when my family moved to Houston, Texas, a few months into my first grade year.

Mrs. Camden wore an olive, buttoned-up suit and practical, low-heeled shoes, her lightly salted hair tidily up off her shoulders. She quickly surmised that the skinny girl with dark, curly hair, me, belonged at the back of the room with the slowest reading group. Maybe she didn’t see the A’s on the report card from the rural Louisiana school my mom showed her. Maybe she only saw our homemade, calico dresses. Or perhaps she was annoyed by our deep, Southern drawl that didn’t follow grammar-book rules.

Whatever it was that got her dander up, dismissing my young mom was easy. I learned as I grew older that Mama felt smaller than her five-foot frame. Her voice trembled when answering to strangers and sometimes to those she knew well.

Quickly Mom left, and I was sitting in a desk with worksheets and a fat pencil. All too soon I learned that for us in the birdbrain group—for isn’t that what this teacher must have thought of the children she placed there—it was worksheets all day while the other two groups took turns sitting in semi-circle chairs at the front near the board. Direct instruction for them. Us at the back, military quiet. Joey by himself at a desk by the wall all year. Time out. For being Joey.

There was no recess, no games, no rewards. The only break was lunch in the enormous cafeteria where I felt like a foreigner without a tongue. I had no idea how to navigate in the strange land of food choices and a meal ticket. After all, I’d come from a country school that served us family style. No choices. No meal tickets. Just clean your plate and drink your milk. So in this food hall that seemed like a giant bazaar, I just took a dish of golden carrots. They were pretty.

Mrs. Camden strolled to the back of the classroom every so often to remind us in this hinterland to get busy and quit talking.

A tummy ache each morning only brought me one day of reprieve. Mama made me go to school each day after that. Oh to be pretty, blonde Paula with the shiny, blue ribbon tied around her ponytail. Sometimes she even wore fancy patent leather shoes to school. Or to live next door

to the family that drove the cream-colored station wagon with wooden siding.



Spring arrived and my mom, baby brother and I went back to live with my grandparents on the gravel Johnson Road, and I returned to my class at the school tucked back in the piney woods of Ouachita Parish. My saddle oxfords and dresses made from Butterick patterns were good as anyone's. Mrs. Luttrell graced me with her welcoming smile and sat me back in the first reading group. Our desks were lined along the right side of the classroom. The second group, the biggest, was in the middle. The last group sat in a row along the wall by the windows. No group was stuck in the back. We all had turns to sit in the circle of little chairs and read stories to our teacher.

Colorful animal stickers were continually added to my progress chart. My friends and I played jacks, dodgeball, red rover, and jump rope outside at recess. We all hopped on the yellow school bus at the end of the day.

I didn't know about Rosa Parks or the word segregation back then, though I knew we were all divided by skin color. I didn't know why I lived in white neighborhoods and went to school with all white children except that, as the grownups told me, that's the way God meant it to be because it said so in the Bible. And I didn't know why Mrs. Camden, without listening to me read or seeing what I could write, put me in the back of the room. I didn't know why any of us were there or why Joey had to sit by himself. After all, he kept a pencil in his hand and at least pretended to work. Smiled at others easy, too.

But I was lucky. Being absolutely invisible had only lasted a few months. Then I was back where it seemed I ought to be with the privilege of an education that encouraged me more often than not. And I gradually learned how to speak textbook grammar.

— poem —

SUNDAY DRIVE

BETTY LES — *Redwood*

My family took a drive
in the country every Sunday
all six of us piled in the car
I don't remember any squabbling
just the smooth ride of the V8
purring along uncrowded roads
my father's left arm draped
across the window frame

My father loved the country
felt its pull even after
he moved to town
especially then

Not that it had been ideal
poverty, isolation
the unrelenting Texas sun

Yet there was the view
off the sleeping porch
long and gently rolling
the kitchen garden bright
with new green leaves
the soft sandy loam
to pour through his fingers

I usually fell asleep mid-ride
roused only if we passed a hay
truck and my father shouted “hey”
or he broke out singing “I Met a
Gal Named Susie” and threw
himself into the yodeling part
without really knowing how
to yodel

Sometimes I woke but
pretended to be sleeping
when we got home
knowing he would gather
me up in his arms
pad lightly through the house
lay me down with the
tenderness of someone
right with his world

THIS MAN IS MY SON: A PARENT'S VIEW OF HOMELESSNESS

MARJORIE WITT — *Mount Diablo*

YOU WAKE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT to the sound of somebody rustling through your garbage can. You get out of bed, peek through the window blinds, and see a disheveled white man, hands blackened, calloused, the size of boxing gloves. You watch as he loads cans into one garbage bag, glass into another and balances the bags on the sides of his shopping cart.

He finds the pizza left over from the party you hosted a week ago and eats it with ravenous appetite. He reaches further down, retrieves your old baggy jeans and puts them on over his layers of clothes. As he walks away his gait falters and you may think he has the unbalanced shuffle of a drunk. You return to your bed and listen to the fading clamor of glass and metal as the cart rolls on to the next dumpster.

The man is my son. He is forty-two years old and has lived on the streets of West Oakland for four years. Legs painful and swollen tight under baggy jeans, he lumbers down the streets in the darkest hours of the night, towing that shopping cart with a car-sized load of other people's trash.

He turns the trash into money at Alliance Recycling Center, hoping to earn enough to survive another day. At dawn he returns to his home: a lean-to of plywood and tarps behind the freeway, away from the majority of the homeless. He is an outcast even here among his peers.

Our son was raised in a middle-class home within a wealthy community. He struggled with the haughtiness of his peers, failed to meet the standards of one of the best school districts in the area, and looked for a way to escape. Not able to change his physical environment, he found a way to change his mental environment.

He discovered drugs — on the streets of Lafayette. By the time he was fourteen he was in a drug rehab program, followed by years of family therapy. Nothing worked. He dropped out of school, could not hold a job, and couldn't stay out of trouble.

Trying to live with addiction, ripped the family apart. Tired of drug dealers knocking on the door, middle of the night rampages, and fearing for our safety, we needed to let him move on. For years we found places for him to stay: mobile homes, apartments, a house in West Oakland, a van, a car. Each time he faced eviction for one reason or another.

Our resources have diminished to the point where our help is no longer possible. Our son refuses to stay in a shelter or go to another rehab facility. We can't force him.

"There are too many rules and restrictions," he says. "I don't need that kind of help."

It's denial of the disease that prevents recovery; his denial further complicated by a severe head injury sustained when he was hit by a semi-truck.

One day he tells us he is content to be living on the streets. The next day he begs to live with us. This is not an option. We cannot live with his hoarded trash, lapses of sobriety, and an uneven temperament. He cannot live with our ideals, restrictions, and rules. I keep my distance, physically and mentally, for my own well-being.

My relationship with our son is tenuous, careful, and cautious, hinged on years of conflict. I am heartbroken when I see our son. This sad, unkempt man is not the happy, fastidious child we raised. I have grieved the loss of that child for nearly three decades. His sky-blue eyes are now sunken behind the gaunt mask of his hardened face, his breath reeks the odor of rotten teeth. His immune system is compromised by hepatitis C and heart valve damage from endocarditis, resulting in frequent hospital visits. These are the most difficult times. Each time he is hospitalized we visit and we wonder, will this be the last time?

When he is well enough by the standards of our government's policies, he is forced to leave the hospital without a follow-up plan. With nowhere to go but the streets, he struggles until the next time, sometimes days later, sometimes months later. We wait for the next phone call.

I watch as my husband's health declines. He chooses to stay connected with daily trips to Oakland, ensuring our son gets his methadone dose and a hot breakfast, bringing him home to bathe when his body oozes with infection. Too many missed daily appointments at the methadone clinic results in removal from the program. The addict ends up in withdrawal and seeks street drugs to ease the pain, exacerbating the problem.

This is not only our story. Every one of those homeless people that you see has a family somewhere. Homelessness, like addiction, affects the entire family.

We live with guilt when we sit down at the family table with the empty chair and as we tuck ourselves under warm covers on a cold and stormy night. Holidays and birthdays go by with regrets. What could we have done differently? We know we did the best we could, but the guilt still haunts us.

What can you do? Advocate for the poor. Help to keep the recycle centers open. When you see a homeless person, talk to him (or her.) Remind them there are people who care. Acknowledge them.

Share what you can even if it is only a smile. Spare change, food, toiletries, even clean socks can be a godsend. I have a cousin who spends his money on a new jacket before it's needed and then finds a homeless person for his old one. He was homeless once. He knows.

Remember there is no guarantee that you will always have a roof over your head.

Kerry Coast photo by Jordan Bernal, Tri-Valley Writers



LETTING GO

CONSTANCE HANSTEDT — *Tri-Valley*

In the brick-lined garden under my old kitchen window,
the calla lily asked so little for itself. A deep plot of earth
to spread its spidery roots, space to rise and breathe,

a sprinkling of rain from time to time. It wasn't fussy.

Neither were the wildflowers along the fence, pushing
their heads through dark earth like tiny telescopes.
California poppies, cornflowers, forget-me-nots,

all claiming what was theirs.

Even now, as I look out on this backyard, lemon trees planted
in clay pots welcome winter rain, scoop each drop as if to say
we still live. I envy how they lean into the wind, their smooth

green leaves and tender yellow globes swaying with assurance.

I want to be the lily that craves sunlight and cleansing.
I want to feel nature's lightness in simplicity, let go
of what I can't control. Perhaps then I can accept myself,

every scar, every dark crack between my bones.

NEVER ON SUNDAY

Jeanette Fratto — Orange County

OUR PLANE TOUCHED DOWN on time, and the airport pick-up arrived as scheduled. All my husband, Ben, and I had to do was check in to our beachfront hotel in Puerto Vallarta, and we'd be ready for a week of sun, sand, and margaritas. When we made reservations months ago, our Sunday, December 28th departure seemed much too far away. Now we were here, enjoying the coastal scenery as we rode to our hotel anticipating New Year's Eve in this colorful, Mexican town.

The courtyard of the Playa de Oro welcomed us with gurgling fountains and exotic plants. Many of our fellow airline travelers were making their way in, including a man who could have doubled for the British actor, Laurence Harvey. I'd always found him attractive. If someone had told me I'd be sleeping with his look-alike tonight, I'd have thought they were crazy.

We made our way through the spacious lobby to the front desk, gave our names to Manuel, the clerk, and were stunned by his reply.

"We have no reservation for you."

"Impossible," I responded. I reached into my purse for a copy of our travel agent's confirmation and handed it to him.

The desk clerk was not impressed, but he looked through his registry and found our names. He told us we had been booked last July but then cancelled in September.

We were dumbfounded.

We had made reservations and paid in full in July, and we'd never thought about canceling. Who did it? Manuel had no explanation. Worse, he could not offer us another room as they were fully booked due to the holiday. We couldn't follow up on this obvious mistake until the next day because the local travel office was closed on Sunday. Our only hope for a room was a last-minute cancellation or another hotel. Manuel agreed to call around but believed most hotels would be full. It was the busiest season he said, but offered to stow our luggage in a locked room while he checked.

We waited in the lobby, praying for a cancellation or a room somewhere else. Was the desk clerk even working on getting us accommodations? I checked periodically, but his distracted look suggested he had forgotten his promise. If no room came up, it looked as if we'd soon be on the next

plane home. Desperate, we watched other contented travelers heading out for sightseeing while we fumed. As time slowly passed, our hopes sunk lower. A deep voice interrupted our thoughts.

"We have an extra bed in our room." It was the Laurence Harvey double! He introduced himself as Brian.

I'd noticed Brian and his wife on the airplane. He was dressed in a suit and tie. She was large, brightly dressed in a flowing purple caftan, and a wide-brimmed hat. They didn't look like they belonged together. Now we were being offered a night in their room.

"We couldn't help but overhear your dilemma," he said. "Sharon and I have two double beds. You're welcome to share our room until you can get this straightened out tomorrow."

What a nice gesture! But I couldn't help wondering what kind of weird people would offer to share their bedroom with total strangers. And what kind of people accepted the offer? For all they knew we could be the weird ones. Surely a room would turn up somewhere before the night was over.

We thanked the couple for their generosity, convinced we'd have a room eventually. By 9 p.m. we knew better. The desk clerk's best suggestion was that we could sleep in a chaise lounge by the pool. This was completely unappealing, but so was sitting in the lobby all night.

"Maybe we should take that couple up on their offer," I said. "At least we'll have somewhere to shower and change clothes."

Surprisingly my husband agreed. Just as we made this decision, the couple spotted us and came over, dressed in casual clothes, looking like they'd already enjoyed some sightseeing. We greeted them self-consciously in our now sweaty and wrinkled traveling clothes.

"If your offer still holds, we'd like to accept it," Ben told them.

"Of course, come with us." With that we followed our future bed partners to their room.

Awkward barely described our feelings as we entered the bedroom of strangers. They had already rumbled up one bed so we assumed the other would be ours. It was. Navigating the usual simple bedtime/bathroom rituals was made complicated by our unique situation. Stumbling around in near darkness, we changed into bedclothes as quickly as possible and jumped under the covers. Our new best friends did the same. The four of us

lay in our beds, chatting in the dark, until sleep silenced everyone but me.

I was no longer worried about our roommates. Surreal as this was, they had done everything possible to make us feel comfortable, and I was pretty sure we'd be safe. I was now worried that when we checked with the travel agency in the morning, they too would show us cancelled. Unless a room became available somewhere, we would have to fly home. That would be a disappointing ending to a trip barely begun. These thoughts kept me awake until exhaustion took over, and I finally drifted off.

The next morning, we arose early and dressed while our roommates slept. We left the hotel and hurried down the narrow street to the travel agent's office in order to arrive when it opened. Rosita, a beautiful brunette who looked no older than eighteen, heard our story, looked at our travel documents, and then called Mexico City. As she spoke in Spanish, occasionally nodding or shaking her head, we helplessly waited. Our vacation this week hinged on this call.

She concluded her conversation and confirmed that yes, indeed, we were booked at the Playa de Oro, no matter what their records showed. She called the hotel then advised us to return to get settled. There would be no problem.

We were still wary as we made our way back.

This time we were welcomed with profuse apologies and given a beautiful oceanfront room. We didn't ask where this room had been the night before. Later in the day we received flowers and wine, with further apologies for having to sleep by the pool all night.

The gracious couple who had rescued us the night before became our companions as we toured Puerto Vallarta, enjoying the sights and the many restaurants. Each time we passed the reception desk, Manuel nodded and smiled as though he'd given us the gift of a room.

We never revealed our true sleeping arrangements the first night. And we never traveled to Mexico on a Sunday again.

UNIDIRECTIONAL FLOW

PATRICIA J. BOYLE — *Tri-Valley*

Thin stream of burbling water responds
to gravity's pull, tumbles downward,
ever downward, weaves with dancing
mountainous flows. Growing wider, deeper,
rushing white-foamed over sandy bottom,
stirs and churns loose particles, transforming
sparkling, clear water into a muddy ocher matrix
bearing tangled branches and debris.

Downstream, coursing placidly, wavelets
curve, embrace weathered humps of rock,
lap the shore of midstream
islands, ripple over quiet pools
where fish linger in the shade
and leaves collect in multi-colored
heaps, nestled between soggy
roots of overhanging trees.

Meandering, eroding,
incrementally altering the landscape,
a ribbon of wide, lazy loops
caresses earth's flat bosom and slowly,
slowly, spreads glimmering, thin fingers
across a fan-shaped delta. Weary, tranquil,
released from confinement, the river's fresh waters
swirl into the welcoming current of a vast, briny sea.

ONE HONORABLE SOLUTION

JOAN PREBILICH — *Redwood*

OKABE SET HIS WHISKEY GLASS DOWN gently on the highly lacquered surface of the low table in the upstairs room that was reserved for his group. Five companions from his company gathered at a small restaurant hidden in a Shinjuku backstreet on Fridays after work to drink and talk. They mostly spoke about their jobs or politics, but sometimes the talk turned maudlin, like tonight. They'd got to telling about people who'd played key roles in their lives or about events that had influenced them strongly. For some reason, it was Kimura, normally the most reticent of their group, who had started that session of self-revelation. They told their stories in the third person, as if the events they described had happened to someone else and not to them personally.

Kimura hastened to light Okabe's cigarette as a way of urging him to tell his story. Okabe didn't know quite why he was telling that particular one, except that it was his turn and they were waiting expectantly. Anyway, they'd all revealed something private about themselves, and as he wasn't quite sober, he hadn't been able to think of anything else. Perhaps it was because he was feeling melancholy as he always did on cold March nights like tonight. Okabe took another sip of his whisky and leaned against the wooden pillar of the Tokonoma alcove, feeling woozy and warm from the alcohol.

"Today, twenty thousand yen is nothing. But then, it represented a fortune. Especially for the people I'm telling you about. They were poor. At that time Hakkodate wasn't so prosperous. The father of this man came from a poor farming family. There were many children, and after returning from the war, there wasn't enough land to provide a living for everyone. So the man sold his share to his brother and took his wife and two children to live in the city.

The man wasn't trained for anything except farming and fighting. He had been drafted into the army and somehow managed to survive the war. He refused to talk about his experiences, and the son had the impression that his father was ashamed. Of course, what we know now is that his life as a soldier must have been miserable. In any case, he took the money from the sale of his land and opened a small grocery store, stocking it with the usual goods one finds in a neighborhood shop.

They were simple, hard-working folk. They devoted themselves to the store, opening early and closing late. They had pride in their shop. The

wife kept it spotless. Customers often commented that it was a pleasure to shop in such a clean place. The people they served were also poor so the store didn't earn much profit. Unfortunately, the parents had little education or business sense, and their investment slowly trickled through their hands.

The son had no idea that there was anything amiss until one day, instead of playing after school with his friends, he came home early. His father was talking outside the store with one of his suppliers. The boy quickly hid behind some sake barrels outside the store next to theirs and listened.

The father pleaded for more time to pay the bill. The salesman regretted deeply that he could not make further deliveries until the present bill was paid. In fact, the New Year had passed, the time when traditionally one paid all one's debts. The boy felt sorrow and fear as he listened. He waited until the men had parted then entered the store as if nothing had happened.

The parents made no mention of the difficulty and the son was afraid to raise the matter. His parents were heavyhearted as their shelves emptied. One of the boy's classmates commented on the empty shelves, and the boy's cheeks burned with shame. Everyone knew. Still, his parents remained silent. His little sister was too young to understand. How he wanted to talk with someone, but it wasn't his place to bring this up with his parents.

Then one day towards the end of a cold March spring, the parents sat down with the children to explain their situation. They had to move out of the store in a few days as it was already leased to a new tenant. They owed twenty thousand yen and had no money to pay the debt. They had lost everything and more. It would be impossible to repay the money. Furthermore, they couldn't impose themselves on their relatives on the land. It seemed that there was only one honorable solution to the problem. They would commit suicide as a family. They would do this in two days after they took care of some last details. The boy and his sister were cautioned not to behave differently. They solemnly promised to obey.

At first the boy was shocked to hear of such a solution coming from the lips of his parents. There had never been the slightest doubt that they

were deeply cherished. Yet, as his father explained, leaving them behind would create a hardship for someone else. The boy became accustomed to the idea, even taking a certain pleasure in it. It made him feel superior to his classmates as he played with them for the last time.

On the day, they bathed carefully then ate a special meal. Their mother prepared their best clothing for them. They prayed in the temple for a long while before boarding a bus for the cliffs. They looked like a typical family dressed up for a Sunday outing. The father explained that he had left letters for everyone concerned. The remaining goods could be sold to repay some of the debt. He apologized deeply to everyone for the trouble he had caused. By taking their own lives, the most precious things they had to offer, they were showing their sincerity. They were honorable people.

The boy remembered the day as being overcast, dark with a strong wind. The tide was coming in. The father had calculated that the tide would carry their bodies out to sea, thus sparing the cost of a funeral. The boy remembered feeling pride in his father's plan. Strangely, he felt no fear of his impending death. He remembered his parents as being calm. His sister had complained of the cold, but her mother soothed her with a piece of candy. Once more, the parents apologized to their children. Then they linked hands, the parents on each end and the children in the middle. They ran the short distance to the edge of the cliff and leaped over, onto the jagged rocks below.

Only the endless fall remained in the boy's memory, to startle him out of his dark dreams as he grew up. The rest was told to him later, after he left the hospital. He was the only survivor. It was speculated that perhaps a wave had crested under him to break his fall at the point of impact. Miraculously, nearby fishermen returning to port because of storm warnings witnessed the event from their boat. They rescued the boy. The parents met their death as they had planned, cleanly and neatly. Their bodies and that of his sister were never recovered."

"What happened to the boy?" asked Kimura.

Okabe looked at him in astonishment.

"Oh, the boy! At first he was ashamed of having survived. He became a local celebrity for a while. It was very unusual to have survived such a thing, but he was an orphan all the same. One day an American

missionary family took him in until he was old enough to live on his own. So I guess you could say the story had a happy ending, couldn't you? Yet . . ." Okabe's words hung. Kimura understood and roused their co-workers for their homeward trips.

The men struggled to their feet, yawning, and filed out, scattering in all directions at the train station. Okabe lived in a newly purchased apartment on the outskirts of Tokyo and had the furthest to go. As he stepped into the empty compartment of the train, his left side ached, as it usually did this time of the year.

TICKET TO BLISS

PAM VANALLEN — *San Joaquin*

MY MOTHER WOULDN'T leave the bowling alley, and it was already noon. She didn't understand it was the most important day of my life—I wanted great seating. The show started at 3:00 p.m. and the doors were already open, according to the ticket held firmly in my hand, my ticket to bliss. There was no assigned seating for this show. It was first come, first served.

"If we don't arrive early, I won't be able to see their faces, even with the opera glasses Nanny gave me last Christmas." I complained. These performers had changed my life a little over a year ago.

My mother had said I couldn't attend the concert alone because I was only eleven years old. It would be too dangerous for a little girl to go alone, but she understood how important it was for me to be there, so she agreed to chaperone us. She bought two five-dollar tickets for us and another for my best friend, Candy. The money for mine came out of my allowance.

Now Candy and I were antsy at the bowling alley, sweating it out while my mother finished talking to her friends before we could leave for the Houston Coliseum. We pointed at our wrists and fidgeted, but we knew better than to interrupt again. Finally, she responded to our impatience, and we left.

A million cars blocked the streets downtown. Candy and I spent the agonizing wait in traffic discussing the relative merits of our favorite group members. Mother finally found a parking space, and we dragged her toward the venue door.

"We have to hurry. We'll never find good seats now," I said.

Mother was surprised that so many people had already arrived. At last she began to match our pace. We joined the entry queue and had our tickets torn.

"See, I told you we should have left earlier." I nagged her when the best seats we could find were high up in the nosebleed section, two-thirds of the way back.

Ninety minutes remained until show time. Candy and I talked about fashion, hairstyles, and our favorite songs with the other teen and pre-teen fans.

When we thought we would all burst with anticipation, the lights went down, and our idols took the stage. A deafening roar ascended from the

crowd. The scoreboard hanging from the center of the ceiling shuddered and threatened to fall on the mass below. We could barely hear the music and singing, but we were unconcerned. We were in the same cavernous room with these four people we had loved from a distance, breathing the same air. The screaming thundered throughout the twenty-five-minute performance.

My mother slapped the top of my head. “Stop that screaming, or you won’t get any supper,” she shrieked over the din.

Tears streamed from my eyes at the rebuke. “You don’t understand,” I shouted, “I can’t help it. Their music expresses everything I feel.”

Fifty-six years later my memory of the Beatles in concert is as crystal-clear as if it had happened yesterday. Thanks, Mom.

At the Crazy Zoo!

GLORIA PIERROT-DYER — *Sacramento*

One day I visited the crazy zoo.
My ticket was taken by a pink kangaroo.
“You’ll like it here,” she said with a wink.
Then hurried me in before I could think.

The crazy zoo was a happy place,
For all of the animals had plenty of space.

None of the animals lived in a cage.
And a bat hung upside down to read the sports page.

A little red mouse chased a screaming cat.
And a fluffy armadillo wore an orange top-hat.

The strangest things were happening there.
And I wondered where all the people were.

A turtle and a cougar were having a race,
While a camel put powder on her face.

A whale was singing as he sat on a chair,
While a peacock put on lipstick and combed her long hair.

“Please tell me where all the people are.” I said.
But the blue owl merely giggled and shook his silly head.

A goat and a gorilla were doing a dance,
And a goldfish was wearing polka-dot pants.

I saw all sorts of animals having great fun,
But I didn’t see any people, not even one.

“Are the people all hiding?” I wondered aloud
It seemed strange to be in a zoo with no crowd.

A striped giraffe leaned down to whisper in my ear,
“I really don’t think you should have come here.”

“But it’s a zoo!” I exclaimed. “This is where people go
To watch animals play and put on a show.”

I wandered along till I saw a penguin taking a hot bath.
“If you really want answers,” he said, “just follow the stone path.”

“It will lead you to what you’ve been searching for,
And you won’t have to bother us anymore.”

So I followed the path, and soon I could hear,
Such beautiful music from far and from near.

A few minutes more and finally I could see,
A happy group of animals around a broom tree.

They were singing and dancing and having such fun,
I hated to interrupt, but it had to be done.

So I held up my hand and signaled the music to stop.
And all of the dancers fell with a plop.

The head musician gave me a stare,
I knew he was annoyed, but I didn’t care.

“Please, sir won’t you tell me where the people are?”
I said to the monkey who was playing his guitar.

“Why, yes, come this way.” he said with a grin.
He laid down his guitar, and I followed him.

“NO, NO NOT A CAGE,” I yelled as he slammed shut the gate.
“People don’t belong in cages!” But it was too late.

Now I know where the people are in the crazy zoo.
Would you like to visit the crazy zoo too?

