The book cover features a background of autumn leaves in shades of yellow, orange, and brown, set against a soft blue sky. The title 'MORNING WORK' is written in a large, white, serif font with a slight shadow effect, positioned in the upper half of the cover. Below the title, the subtitle 'A Memoir in Poetry and Prose' is written in a smaller, white, serif font. At the bottom, the author's name 'PATRICIA WEBB' is printed in a dark brown, serif font on a solid brown background.

# MORNING WORK

A Memoir  
in Poetry  
and Prose

PATRICIA WEBB

# MORNING WORK

A MEMOIR  
IN POETRY  
AND PROSE

PATRICIA WEBB

*To Jim + Karen  
Loves  
Pat  
2022*

Morning Work

Copyright © 2021 Patricia Webb, All Rights Reserved.

Published in the United States

This book may not be reproduced in whole or in part, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, or other without written permission from the author, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.

Published by KDP Select

ISBN 9798769907067

Silence Foundation Press  
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma  
USA

Cover and interior design by [InnovationDesignGraphics.com](http://InnovationDesignGraphics.com)

*This book is dedicated to all the children  
and the young at heart*

*beginning with the great guys  
who've kept me smilin' all these years:*

*Kirk, Craig, Titus, Lauchlen and Turner*

*Love, Love!*

*Joy, Joy!*

# Contents

Introduction .....	1
Morning Work.....	4
<b>CHILDHOOD</b>	
Happy Birthday .....	6
The Farm Place .....	8
The Library .....	9
Mud Puddle Happy .....	10
The Lawn .....	11
Hands .....	13
The Stowaway .....	14
Grandmother's Decanter .....	16
Monty .....	18
Rocking and Hugging .....	20
Flying .....	21
Tornado .....	23
Leaving Oklahoma .....	26
Communing With Trees .....	28
<b>MIDLIFE</b>	
Outback Classroom .....	32
Trying to Sleep .....	35
Bumpy Re-Entry .....	36
Disillusionment .....	38
Eucharist .....	40
The Capitol Steps .....	41
Night Sky Meditation .....	44
The Bombing .....	45
Night Rescue .....	47
Dear Son.....	48
Hippie .....	49
Peggy Johnson.....	52
Dear Jacquie .....	53
The Necklace .....	55
Medicine Woman .....	57

Failure Pills .....	58
Honestly .....	59
Seedlings .....	60
<b>ELDERHOOD</b>	
Dawn .....	62
Neruda .....	63
In The Silence .....	65
The Silence Retreat.....	66
Fire .....	68
Jack The Matchmaker .....	69
Four Pebbles .....	71
What Is Happening in This House .....	74
Regarding Widows .....	76
Boarding the Train .....	77
Visitations .....	79
Winter Poem .....	83
Strokes.....	84
Allowing Grace .....	87
Finding the Furrow .....	88
Tea After Forest Bathing .....	90
Two Promises .....	91
Lauchlen's Kiss .....	95
Acknowledgments .....	96
<b>APPENDIX:</b>	
A Few Notes on Memoir Writing .....	98

## Introduction

How do we stay young as the decades roll on? I love this question. I'm grateful to all the children over the years who've kept this question alive in me. In fact, I wrote the title poem "Morning Work" for children and it's dedicated to the young one in each of us.

For years I walked through the classroom door at a new school four days a week. That was my life as an Oklahoma Artist-in-Residence. I'd greet the teacher, find a spot in the back of the room, take a breath and just watch the students scribbling away silently at their desks. On the board I'd find an assignment neatly printed. In Oklahoma it was called "morning work"—a few minutes of quiet concentration with pencil and paper for the kids as the teacher counted milk money, took attendance, collected homework or handled any number of other tasks to prepare for the day.

I was always curious to see the assignments and was amazed at the variety. Since I offered creative writing lessons to every grade (first through twelfth), I enjoyed the writing prompts. But on some days and in some grades the board held simple addition or subtraction problems. One thing remained constant, however – the time. Morning work rarely lasted more than ten minutes. Brief, yet unrushed, it lasted about as long as the pre-dawn meditation I did at home each day. And it was almost as quiet except for the scraping of chairs and the wheezing caused by all that wind and pollen Oklahoma is famous for.

I once asked a small group of children in the lunchroom if they liked morning work. They were surprised by the question and shrugged their shoulders. One boy piped up, "We're not supposed to like it! We're just supposed to do it!"

I wanted that boy and his friends to hear a poem from someone who wildly *loved* their morning work, someone who couldn't wait to get to it. So, just a few days after putting that idea out into the ethers, a poem

just came to me. I didn't plan it. In fact, the words started to "arrive" while I was at the kitchen sink looking out my open window toward the neighbor's open window and inhaling the fragrance of bacon that wafted through the morning air. My hands were still half wet when I grabbed my pen. The ink on the first few lines smeared but I loved the words as they tumbled out. I've recited that poem a hundred times and most every time it's new. And I'm young inside – a child, a bird.

For me, poetry and stories have the power to bring young me, the part that's still deeply connected to wonder, alive again and again. The poems and stories that follow are little bits of life lived and then re-lived through the process of putting words on paper.

For this book I selected only short pieces written in spurts – generally scribbled longhand. Many arrived in early morning when I sat on what I call my crayon porch. There words often come quickly. I like them best for this book because of the joy of that pure, tumbling out state of being. I love how surrendering to that flow opens the floodgates of memory with its surprising details. Reworking happens later on the computer or, more often, in the company of fellow travelers (students, teachers, and friends) who listen and whose faces tell me when the words connect to their experience and when they don't.

I hope these pieces connect with you. Maybe they'll bring back your childhood or remind you of a child you cherish. Perhaps they will ignite that rare energy of the child in you. May the floodgates of your own memory be opened. That's my wish for you. Life goes by so quickly and, though the body ages, the young one inside never leaves us.

That I've lived 74 years amazes me. So many things might have taken me out -- from the tornado that demolished our house while we were in it, to the dangers of the Australian Outback, to the COVID threat that keeps me masking up. But I'm still here! Collecting these poems and stories has awakened the kid in me. And, it's brought me a measure of awe for this day's precious and unique gift. This gift of wonder sits right here alongside the mundanity of doing dishes or paying bills.



It's my practice to recite a poem aloud every morning. Mary Oliver, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickenson, David Whyte, Thich Nhat Hanh – all greats. Their words fill my house or porch, landing nicely on the furniture and plants, and me. Occasionally I let my own words fill the air. Maya Angelou said that words are things ... as substantial as a house. I agree. I hope you'll read these pieces aloud. Perhaps you'll find that the voiced version lands differently than the version you met in silent reading. After all, isn't your own voice a spectacular thing?

I hope you'll be inspired to write a few pieces of your own. I hope you'll discover the joy of your own morning work as words tumble onto your pages. And in your own wonder-filled moments, I hope your child heart will sing and keep you young forever, my friend.

Pat Webb, from *The Crayon Porch*  
October, 2021

## Morning Work

Don't bother me in the morning.  
I'm already busy stringing words together,  
Busy with my beadwork.  
Nobody assigned me to do it -  
I just awoken to it every morning.  
Like a bird pulling worms from the moist earth,  
I peck around in the early morning,  
Pulling words from the damp soil of my sleepy mind.

The crickets just fell silent - and that is a poem.  
The neighbor is cooking bacon - and that is a poem.  
Among all the green, green leaves,  
One leaf is yellow - and that is a poem.

I'm so busy, you see, in the morning.  
The words have to be hung on the lines  
Like clean, sweet-smelling laundry,  
Now, while they are fresh and unsoiled by the day.  
In the morning, when they feel as new  
As the world feels at first light.

I'm so happy to be busy like this,  
Like a child with crayons out on the porch,  
Filling the lines with bright, delicious words  
And licking my lips, for it's better than breakfast  
To be a poet in the early morning  
And to be so lost in my work, so forgetful of care,  
That my child heart, my bird heart,  
Unbothered, sings.

# CHILDHOOD



# Happy Birthday

I was just fifteen months old when I saw the Atlantic Ocean for the first time. We vacationed every summer of my young life at the Jersey Shore. On that first summer for me, the whole gang arrived one blistering hot July afternoon -- Mom, Dad, Pop and Mom Webb, Uncle Ed, Aunt Peggy and cousin Marty. Of course, I don't remember it. This story was told to me.

The story goes that once we had all stepped off the Boardwalk and made our way down the long flight of wooden stairs to the beach, Mom removed my little red sandals and stood me on the soft sand. While she was taking her own shoes off, I took off like a rocket toward the surf squealing "Happy Birthday! Happy Birthday!"

I walked at nine months and was yacking away (God help them!) by twelve months, so my vocabulary was pretty good. Tiny, energetic me connected that ocean to the grandest and happiest thing in my life thus far, which would have been my first birthday party a few months earlier. My jubilant race to the water became an oft-told family tale.

Our family visited Cape May, The Boardwalk of Atlantic City and the Atlantic Ocean every summer. I never grew tired of that wild surf -- even though I nearly drowned in it one year. If it hadn't been for Uncle Ed and Marty, I likely would have been food for fishes.

It was delightful to float for hours just beyond the surf and then to roll in with a big wave time after time. And later that night, in bed, to feel the rocking of those waves within my body sending me gently off to dreamland.

My little sister Barbie was four years younger than me. Once she was old enough to come along, Marty and I had a mascot. I remember her small brown feet and the way she dug her toes down into the sand deeper and deeper, how the sand covered the bottom of her bathing suit as she swung her yellow bucket round and round near the water's edge.

I remember salt water taffy and orange soda and SkeeBall on the Boardwalk. I remember the three of us at dusk, trudging back to our lodgings weighted down with soggy towels and smelling of Coppertone – absolutely famished and totally happy!

## The Farm Place

They call me the Farm Place.  
I would have liked a fancier name.  
But my name is plain,  
Plain like the creaky wooden floor boards,  
Plain like the layer of red dust between the cracks,  
Plain like the faded curtains  
Aunt Marcella made in 1949.

Despite my plainness, I have a feeling  
That kids really like me.  
I have a damp and spooky root cellar  
Great for hide-n-seek.  
My windows are open all the time.  
The Oklahoma wind starts a tune in the back room,  
Carries it down the long hall  
Past the front porch swing  
And into the yard  
Where it mixes with happy bird sounds  
Day and night.

Kids do like me! I'm sure!  
I've got an old maple sugar smell,  
And my yellow daisy wallpaper with wrinkled seams  
Is fun to look at, more fun to pick at  
Where the edges are coming loose.

Kids really like me, alright.  
I'm full of meaty farmhands with belly laughs  
Always ready to play a game of checkers,  
Always ready to sample Aunt Marcella's chocolate pudding  
Off her big wooden mixing spoon.

They call me the Farm Place,  
And though I'm not fancy or big,  
I'm big-hearted and friendly,  
And fun –  
Especially for kids.

## The Library

All the other fourth graders lined up at the classroom door to go to art. But not me. The last time I was in the art room, I had not followed the directions. I had smeared the paints with my hand instead of using a brush. And I'd knocked a paint cup onto the floor. This was not my first offense.

My mother was an artist and I'd grown up watching her play and experiment with clay and paints. It felt natural to me and I was very surprised to be scolded (rather harshly I thought!) for enjoying myself in art class.

I wasn't a troublemaker, so I was flat out shocked when my teacher told me that I would not be allowed to go to art with my classmates. Since I couldn't be left alone in the classroom, I was sent to the school library.

As I walked up the long hall, the feelings of isolation and shame were almost unbearable. I took a seat as far from the librarian as possible. She frowned at me and I felt she surely knew my awful secret.

My cheeks were hot and my heart pounded hard in my throat. My head was swimming. I tried to calm myself, tried to look interested in the shelves nearby. I slowly, slowly began to calm and breathe more naturally.

I don't know how long it took, but gradually something began to change. The spinning stopped and I felt the wide wooden chair holding me like a sturdy friend. I found I could focus on one shelf of books at my eye level. I discovered I could read the titles on almost every spine – intriguing titles, worlds I could visit.

I seized the better part of myself, the part that had always stood on little flat feet and demanded justice. This library punishment was clearly a great injustice to my creative self. Hmmm, what did I think about that?

My inner voice, though very young and barely formed, came up with an answer: "I'll fix their little red wagons," I said to myself. "I'll be a writer."

## Mud Puddle Happy

I am mud-puddle happy today -  
Full of uncooked pies  
Here on the inside  
Where nobody can see.

I am rain barrel full of sudden ideas.  
My muddled-puddledness spills  
Over the edges.  
It splashes my ankles  
And shines up newly noticed pebbles  
Under my feet.

My toes are squishy and cool.  
My mind is muddy and warm.  
I am one wet incubator.

And I want to hold this moment  
And let it be  
Without having to build a bridge  
Or sail a boat ...  
Just yet.



## The Lawn

Our house in Cincinnati had a long backyard that sloped down for what felt like miles. The first section of the lawn was smooth, barely sloping at all from the end of the covered patio to the terraced garden area. The grass was green and soft as a cushion.

I could lay there, face down, with a Mark Twain novel (I read them all that year) while Dad busied himself hoeing the garden plot nearby.

“Chop, chop, chop.” His steady rhythm sometimes lulled me to sleep. Other times the chop seemed to punctuate some action or dialogue in the passage I was reading.

Sun and shadow played on the pages – making them blinding white or sometimes a blue-green-gray. When I needed to rest my eyes, I played a little game.

I flipped over onto my back, eyes shut tight, and counted to one hundred. Then, I opened my eyes to see what magic was playing out in the sky above. Following the clouds, I often felt like I was moving on a magic carpet ... floating up to be closer and closer to those clouds in that wide blue sky.

In every season, Daddy’s garden gave out intoxicating fragrances. I remember the sweet scent of strawberries – also the tang of green parsley and the aroma of yellow honeysuckle vines on the nearby fence. Even the smell of black earth, just turned over, was perfume to me.

Looking back on it now, it was a heady time. I was given permission to nurture my imagination, to travel in Twain’s landscapes – the river, the woods, the streets of a small Missouri town.

And my love of words – the wild inner and outer worlds they created – was nurtured.

And, even more than that, I got the feeling out there on that lawn that life is this: people happily doing what they love for hours – me with my book and Dad with his hoe – until someone hollers “Hey, dinner!”



# Hands

My father's mother was a nurse.  
She believed in the laying on of hands.  
She used her hands to rub my legs when they ached.  
I remember her skillful hands, healing hands.

And her husband's hands were long and thin  
On longer arms that held a well-used book.  
He raised his hands when he raised his voice  
To give me Shakespeare's lines or a science lesson.

My mother's father had huge, red-brown hands –  
The color of earth. They looked out of place indoors.  
I loved his leather boots and hatband and his leather hands.  
His grip was strong and made me feel protected.

His wife had hands with painted fingernails,  
And shiny stones on golden rings.  
She held things in her hands with grace,  
And held her hands as if she were a queen.

Now I stare at my own hands moving in the light.  
They are small; their lines remind me of a map.  
I wonder at the healing, teaching, laboring, loving  
Legacy they are and how the power gifts were passed to me.

## The Stowaway

My dad's father, George Harry Webb, Sr. ("Pop Webb") was born in 1891 in Ashton Under-Lyne, a suburb of Manchester, England. His father, a choirmaster, died of pneumonia one bitterly cold December. Pop Webb was only twelve, but necessity demanded he become man of the house. Over the next nine years he attended school and on his off hours ran errands and helped out in his mother's candy shop. He, his mum, and his aunt all lived in a tiny apartment above the shop – a place he described as "too full of women, work, and worry."

When Pop Webb turned 21, his mother began to receive "the dole," a pension larger than her widow's pension. He saw his chance for freedom and his mum was supportive, so he decided to go to America and make his fortune there. Without enough money to book passage on an ocean liner, he became a stowaway. He managed to eat, sleep, and stay healthy as he crossed the Atlantic. When he arrived in America he had no friends, no relatives and almost no money.

He scratched out a living as best he could, picking up odd jobs in Philadelphia. One day, he passed a garment factory window and saw a beautiful young woman operating a loom. In those days, young girls worked looms in windows facing the street as an advertisement for the factory. Pop Webb soon discovered her name, Charlotte Smith, and asked her out. Since she was only 17, he had to come to her house for dinner and meet her mother.

Besides being young, idealistic and poor, Charlotte and George shared a history of working hard in childhood. Their early married years were more of the same. Pop told us they sold rags, a job I'll never quite understand. But, through it all, they devoted themselves to education, checking out library books and reading them far into the night. They never failed to remind us what a gift the public library was!

Pop Webb delighted in quoting Shakespeare to us grandchildren. Charlotte quoted the Bible, a book she learned to read with Pop's help.

Since she'd been pulled out of school at age ten to work in the factory, she read poorly and learning to read the Bible brought her great joy.

Eventually, Pop Webb became a scheduler for Bethlehem Steel, a job he held for forty years. He wore the gold pocket watch given at his retirement in his waistcoat. He and Mom Webb never complained. They had a three-story house in Chester, Pennsylvania and enough money to take us all on week-long vacations to the Jersey Shore. Children and grandchildren. What more did a person need?

If I was lucky, I got to accompany Pop Webb on his evening "constitutional," a stroll through the neighborhood after dinner. As he walked, drinking whiskey from a tiny silver flask, he told stories of his school days in England and his dangerous passage to a new world – funny, poignant stories that linger in my mind even now. I smile when I think of Pop Webb, glad to be descended from a stowaway.

## Grandmother's Decanter

My mother's mother, Vinnie Lee Story, was so proud of that decanter. During the holidays, it was filled with bright red cherry cordial. It decorated her walnut buffet table, sitting on a forest green crushed velvet runner. Today it sits empty on top of my refrigerator, glistening cut glass, round, with a metal spout on a slender neck, a small black ball on the top for pumping. The silver rim around the neck holds tiny shot glasses as it did all those years ago.

In the middle of a card game, she or Grandpa Frank would cheerfully announce "Time to hit the pump!" and one of us grandkids would rise to the task. We loved to fill the tiny glasses with the festive liquid and get a big thanks from them. Others at the bridge table rarely asked for a pump. I suspect the liquid was too sweet for them. Frank and Vinnie loved sweet things.

My grandfather put two teaspoons of sugar on every tomato slice I ever saw him eat. He stood in front of the stove in a frilly brown apron and fried a half pound of bacon every morning of his adult life. A stroke at 68 slowed him down a bit physically, but his voice and will remained vigorous. The doctors, he said, were "dad-blamed fools" if they thought they could get him to change his diet. "I'd rather die tomorrow than give up bacon, cigars, or your grandmother's gravy," he said. He died of a second stroke six years later.

Grandmother told us at the funeral that his ghost was still in the house, looking after her and giving her "messages". A few relatives thought she sounded crazy, yet my grandmother was one of the sanest persons I had ever known. My cousin Paul suggested we all indulge Grandmother's fantasies. Paul went to see her every day for lunch after Grandpa died and she would relate some message or other from Frank.

One day, many months after Grandpa's death, Paul asked one of his usual questions about the messages and Grandmother looked at him as if he were out of his mind. "What on earth are you talking about,

dear?" she said. "Frank's dead and buried, darlin', down the cemetery." That was the end of it - like it never happened. To the day of her death, my sensible grandmother refused to discuss her unusual form of personal grief.

Looking at the decanter always sparks some story about Vinnie or Frank. I'm surprised at how many there are - and each one evokes the warm memory of that house, always bathed in yellow light, full of aunts, uncles, cousins, laughter, animated conversations, abundant food, card games, and all those breaks to "hit the pump." Christmas these days is quiet by comparison - just a handful of us instead of the twenty or more at grandmother's house. But the decanter is still here - a reminder of the spirit of childlike playfulness, the legacy of Frank and Vinnie.

## Monty

I was ten, helping Mom prepare for the Women's Club luncheon. She asked me to find a scarf in her bottom dresser drawer. Moving the scarves around, I uncovered a large photograph of a little boy sleeping, his sweet face surrounded by white satin. It gave me an awful shiver as I gently pulled it from the drawer.

"What's this?" I asked, holding it up. Mom's face turned white. "You're not supposed to see that." She reached out her hand, took it from me and held it to her chest with stiff fingers. I recognized that look of hers, the one that says "This is private." But I needed to know. "Please, Momma!" I begged as she looked off into the distance. At last, she answered "This is your brother Monty on the day of his funeral."

Brother? Funeral? I had a million questions starting with why I'd never heard about this. But Mom wouldn't answer that question. She allowed me three questions. Yes, he died at age ten and very suddenly. It was polio. And, yes, she hadn't planned to tell me about it. But now there was no avoiding it. And since he was my half-brother, she guessed I did deserve to know although I would never know him.

The entire conversation lasted only a few minutes. Mom put the picture back in the drawer, carefully covering it with scarves. As she left, she made me promise not to tell my younger sister and not to ever mention it again. I was confused. Why the secret? And why no tears from Mom ... just this strange stiffness? Even at the tender age of ten, I knew my mother had suffered a great loss and that she must be hiding the picture because it made her sad to see it and terribly sad to talk about it.

But I had questions. At the next opportunity to be alone with my grandmother, I asked her about Monty. "Oh," she said, wiping a tear from her face, "That was a pitiful sight. You were only nine months old. We found your mother day after day rocking you in that old wooden rocker, rocking you in a stupor, grieving him. You were such a docile child that you didn't seem to mind, but I often worried that her sadness surely soaked right through your skin."



The news of Monty's death and Mom's big secret hit me just after I'd memorized the Twenty-third Psalm. The line *Valley of the Shadow of Death* took on new meaning. Did we all have to walk that valley? Did Monty disappear into that valley? Why would God do such a thing to a ten-year-old? I was ten. Could it happen to me? Life felt fragile, partly due to mother's hyper-vigilance. And it was an uphill battle to keep me and my sister well.

Little Barbie had frequent asthma attacks, sending us all to the ER in the middle of the night. I had chronic tonsillitis and bronchitis that put me in the hospital more than once. That valley felt ever-near. Yet we survived ... thrived actually!

I was in my twenties before I saw a picture of me as a baby with Monty. My older half-brother Richard had come home for a visit and I was home, too, on a break from college. So, the worn photo album came out. I saw Richard, Mom, and Dad all holding me. And then to my surprise ... a photo of me happily snuggled in Monty's arms!

I was nervous to ask even then, but I couldn't help myself. "So, Monty loved me?" Mom's face froze. I had broken our agreement. She looked at Richard and at my Dad before she turned her eyes back on me. And then, something amazing happened. Her face softened. "Oh yes," she said, "He adored you. He was so proud of you with that bright red hair." And suddenly Monty, who had been a secret, sat right there in the middle of us.

In that moment I saw him almost as if he were breathing next to me. And I saw my mother's unguarded pain and love and courage. I saw her rocking me with all that inside her. And, it may be a stretch, but I imagined her reciting the Twenty-Third Psalm while I drifted off, soaking up some wordless knowing about Life and Death and Grief and Love.

Nowadays I think of Monty sometimes when I'm rocking my great-grandson Lauchlen in the big red rocker I bought just before his birth. I love how the chair's soft swoosh matches his gentle breathing. And sometimes when I'm alone, I rock in that chair by myself ... recalling how young I was when the big questions of life found me.

## Rocking and Hugging

You can sign up right there on the bulletin board  
At my church ... there in the hall ...  
To rock and hug babies

for an hour each Sunday.

Now I'm in my forties and nobody in my house  
Wants rocking and hugging, but everybody in my house  
Needs rocking and hugging

especially Momma.

So, my name is on the sign-up sheet  
And I put in my glorious hour:  
Love flowing out, love flowing in

to the child within.

A child that needs all that snuggling and staring,  
Touches of loving and whispers of sharing,  
Blissfully warm and wonderful caring,

hugging and rocking,  
rocking and hugging.



## Flying

As a child I awoke often having just dreamed of flying. I talked to Mom about it. She was concerned that dreaming like that would keep me up and compromise my school day. This was not an acceptable notion to her. Her question was always "Did you have enough ice cream before bed?" Mom firmly believed that ice cream was a cure for insomnia, dreams of any kind and ... well, just about anything! Truth be told, I always had enough ice cream – too much in fact! I knew it didn't help.

As I aged, dreams of flying faded. However, one dreamtime experience in broad daylight haunts me to this day. I was just a girl of nine, happily accompanying Grandpa Story as he checked his wheat fields near Enid, Oklahoma. He walked the rows examining fistfuls of soil which he smelled and smoothed through his two hands, watching the dirt fall to the ground as if it told him something valuable.

I was soaking up something valuable myself as I enjoyed the fierce wind gusts from a spot near the road, my feet planted on either side of a long straight furrow. Suddenly, the wind carried a voice, a strong and assertive male voice. It asked "Will you fly?" Without a thought I answered "Yes!"

Immediately, my body was lifted higher and higher and hurled forward for a very quick trip around the entire Earth. I felt not one trace of fear, only exhilaration! I returned in a flash breathlessly landing upright on the very spot I had left. The voice said "See, your true nature is this free – free and wild as the wind right here in the center of the world. Clear around the world is a quick trip and you can take it whenever you like." I stared at the red dirt beneath my shoes. I shook all over. I tried to steady myself, closing my eyes in hopes that would help me somehow.

I felt a comforting presence over my left shoulder. I opened my eyes to see Grandpa right there chomping on his Rotan cigar. He took my

arm. "Wind about to knock you over, girl?" he asked. I nodded as we slowly turned toward the dusty old truck parked nearby. Did I tell him what had just happened? Nope. Not him or anyone else. I was bursting to share. But I was quiet over dinner. Grandmother noticed it. "No tales to tell?" she said. "That's a first for our Patsy girl!"

But I had been warned. This was not my first experience in what my parents called Patsy's wild imagination. I'd been told not to talk of such things, to remember crazy Aunt Polly and her tea leaves. We don't believe in that kind of thing. People who do that get taken to the funny farm. So, my adventurous trip around the Earth has been kept secret all these years.

Somehow, I feel I can tell you, though. Maybe such a trip has been yours. Maybe you've been accused of having a wild imagination or even (God forbid!), been threatened with the funny farm. If so, my hat's off to you. If you have a memory of something rare and inexplicable, may it be with you as long as you live.

Between you and me, I think we were born to fly like birds. Just somewhere in the evolutionary journey, we got a little off track and stopped believing in it. We invented planes as a substitute. They certainly have their gifts, but we all know it's not the same thing.

# Tornado

Night after night the dream woke me.  
My room was a dark lake  
My pink taffeta curtains swimming with balls of cotton candy.  
The nightmare sent me, shaking, to the forbidden doorway  
Of my parents' room.  
Mom always led me back to my own bed.  
At age twelve one manages their childish fears,  
One is aware that tomorrow there is work and school.  
Tomorrow the April morning will bring refreshing breezes.  
The bad dream will vanish in the cloudless Oklahoma sky.

Then it happened.  
Just after dinner one night the sky grew black.  
Dad flipped on the TV to check the forecast but it exploded  
And the living room windows followed suit,  
Sending a million pieces of flying glass across the carpet.  
Sis screamed and grabbed her tiny brown feet.  
But she was not cut. Not a scratch on any of us.  
Dad herded us quickly toward the back door.  
The storm shelter was only a few feet away  
But the hailstones were thundering down, big as fists.

The next thing I knew we were under the mattress  
In the corner of my sister's room,  
Huddled there as Dad peered out her window.  
"Gladys, I can see it!" he shouted partly in awe  
And strangely detached, ever the weatherman, studying it.  
"George, get under here now!" yelled Mom.  
The roar was louder than any freight train, loud as a plane overhead.  
It was dark and dank under the mattress.  
Mother's breath was so close it felt like my own.  
Her large arms held me and Barbie  
And Dad's arms held her. We were all so close  
We became one person, one breathing terrified person.

As the boards of the roof screeched and cracked  
I prayed silently "Dear God, let us live. Let us live  
And I will be yours forever."  
And then ... strange silence.  
And slowly the numb realization  
Of heavy but even raindrops,  
Each drop punctuating the moment.  
We were alive.

The door to Barbie's room had come unhinged and lodged itself  
In the middle of the narrow hall, blocking our exit.  
Dad swore and pulled at it until it gave way and fell to the floor.  
As we stepped over it, Dad pointed up.  
No roof, only sky.

The car was covered with boards but it started.  
We drove out of the wreckage through dark streets  
Past the demolished homes of our neighbors.  
Cappy and Ethel met us at their door with blankets and water  
And beds for the night.

The next morning, we drove back in  
Passing Red Cross trucks and dazed neighbors  
Picking through the debris on their front yards.  
The twister had taken half our house.  
Only Barbie's bedroom and mine were recognizable.  
As I stood in the doorway of my room,  
I saw my nightmare come true.  
Mom stood behind me, handing me a trash bag to collect my things.  
"What's that floating pink stuff that looks like cotton candy?" I asked.  
"Fiberglass ... insulation," Mom replied, pointing to the exposed wall.

"Mom, Mom, this is my dream!" I exclaimed, "This is what I saw!"  
Mother turned on her heels and put her arm up

In a familiar gesture that meant "Not now."  
As she turned and made her way up the hall  
I waded into the shallow lake that was my room  
Searching for what might be saved.

## Leaving Oklahoma

The four of us were finally settled in the car, the trunk full of suitcases. Barbie and I were sad, but we'd been given the pep talk about how we were going to just *love* the rolling green hills of Ohio. We didn't want to leave our friends in Oklahoma, but we no longer had a home and the US Weather Bureau wanted Dad up north to forecast weather on the Great Lakes.

We'd been staying in motels for months and the moving truck held the few things that survived the storm. It was a day or two ahead of us on the road. It felt to twelve-year-old me that we were refugees. We'd just studied refugees at school, so I was replaying the images from the textbook when suddenly I heard the strangest sound from the front seat. It sounded like a wild animal gasping for breath. What could it be?

I saw mother's arm go out to touch Dad's shoulder. "George ... don't," she said, her tone full of concern and reproach. But he was already sobbing loudly. I'd never heard my dad cry, never even seen him in tears.

"It's just so sad," he said quietly, continuing to sob for a long stretch of road. The silence in the car was thick and heavy. Mother's body was so stiff. I remember her rigid back, her head aimed steadily forward. She believed you cried only alone and only in your room – never where anyone could see. And you never talked about sad things, never let your guard down or exposed weakness.

As for me and Barbie (who was only eight), we sat stiffly too. I wondered "Is Dad okay? Should he be driving a car? Are we safe?"

The day passed and the next morning over breakfast Dad seemed himself again. At the roadside café table, he spread out the map and showed us all the roads leading to our new home in Cincinnati. He was cheerful and Mom looked relieved.



Dad's been gone many years now and Mother too. I regret never asking them about that particular move. We made many moves in my childhood, one every few years. Now, looking back, I think that move was the hardest. Our charming house, custom-built, was the only brand-new home we ever owned. Mom designed all the tile work herself. I still have two of the bathroom tiles ... little mermaids she made in 1959.

Maybe my parents had planned to stay in Oklahoma. Maybe the tornado traumatized and grieved them until they just had to move away. Maybe ....

I'll never know. But I'm so glad Dad didn't bottle up his feelings on that moving day. He may have been overcome, but I think of him now as being so, so brave to express on that dark day what the rest of us couldn't.

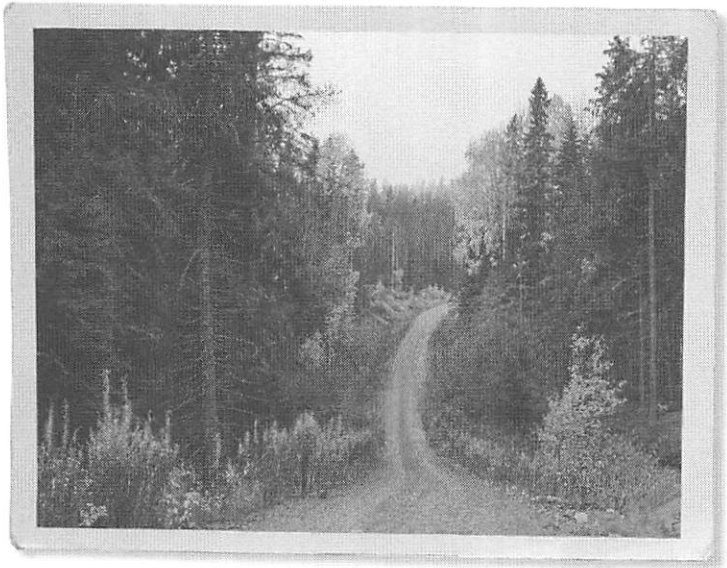
## Communing With Trees

Blistering heat stifles the breath.  
I'm seventy now and I've got no business  
tramping in the out-of-doors today.  
So, I prop my feet up on the window sill  
and sunbathe like a hothouse plant.  
I drift off, dreaming of cooler childhood days  
in the deep woods of Ohio.

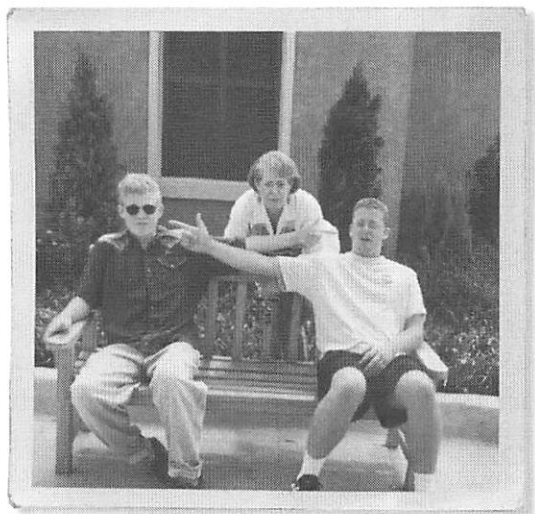
**I am a sure-footed girl,  
racing over a well-worn path with my treasures:  
in one hand strips of colored paper  
and in the other lengths of white string.  
I have written a prayer on each strip –  
a word or sometimes a drawing  
on the bright blue or red or yellow paper.  
I'm glad to be out of that crowded and noisy house,  
glad to be with the silent trees  
whose prayers go straight to my heart ...  
no need for words or the ears to hear them.  
I do listen in the woods though.  
I hear God's footsteps, solemn and slow,  
checking on those trees and on me.  
I tie my colorful papers carefully with string  
to the branches I can reach.  
I watch the higher branches  
sway gracefully in the breeze.  
I wave my arms to imitate them  
and to say with my body what I imagine they know:  
That it is good to be silent, to be rooted,  
and to people the forest on a summer morning.  
Good ... the word drifts on air so handsomely.**

A bird cries, waking me.  
I am back here, now ... my old bare feet on the window sill.

The robin sits, just beyond my window  
warbling from a delicate branch.  
This moment holds past, present, and future  
in this one breath.  
I am, once again,  
in the Great Good Silence of the forested Earth  
where God and I walk, communing with trees.



# MIDLIFE



## Outback Classroom

The room was almost empty of furniture so I claimed a small table near the front. The walls were expertly painted with colorful murals. Wide windows with screens promised some air flow, but there wasn't any. I was getting used to sweating through my clothes; the Outback is a hot and dusty place. Nevertheless, I was charged with teaching at the Murrin Bridge Children's Camp and I planned to do my best. Hopefully one lesson on these scribbled pages would do for a start. Maybe. I'd only been on this continent a few weeks. What did I know about aborigine children?

I knew they were the dirtiest batch of kids I'd ever seen. Their already brown skin was smeared with mud, head to toe. But tomorrow they would grace the halls of this one-room community center and I wanted to do right by them. Just as I was wondering how on earth to do that, Margaret walked in. I brightened. A native Australian, she'd spent time with these children. "What's this?" she asked, looking at my papers. "My lesson plans for tomorrow," I answered.

"And do you suppose they are going to come right in here and sit down for you?" she said in an authoritative tone. "They don't know you. They haven't met you or tested you. You're in the Outback, dear. Let me tell you how it is. They will not follow you into a building, any building, just yet."

I had my back up by then. "Well, that is unacceptable because this is their classroom!" I stated as emphatically as I could manage. Margaret walked to the window. "See that out there?" she said, nodding toward a scrubby tree nearby. "That will have to do for a start. And I'll tell you this. They'll steal your sack lunch to see if you will laugh or scold. And don't you dare tell them to wash. That mud is protection from all manner of bugs and you'd do well to try it yourself."

My face felt hot. Suddenly I felt completely exhausted and out of my depth. "Can I do this?" I asked. Margaret squared her shoulders, cleared her throat and (finally!) slowly ... smiled. "Of course you can."

Somebody thought you competent or you sure as hell wouldn't be here. Trust yourself. Trust them. They are great kids. Let them see you as a person. See them as persons. It's that simple really." And out the door she went.

We spent two days under that tree, as she predicted. It was one strange classroom! And, yes, the kids did indeed steal my sack lunch every day. I learned that a raised eyebrow, hand-on-hips, and a *hey you rascals* smile got me my lunch back with giggles from them. I never got used to perfect Australian accents coming from faces that looked as ancient as time itself. But we communicated well. Their stories were wondrous; their on-the-spot poems delightful. I learned enough about weather, terrain, and animals to last a lifetime. I fell in love with each and every child.

And I fell in love with silence, too. Many believe aborigines are telepathic and that they're silent because they don't need to hear you speak to understand what you're thinking. And they don't need to speak to tell you what they are thinking. I believe it! Between stories, we often observed long periods of silence when birds might call, or the wind speak, or small animals message us from the underbrush. In the Outback, everything belongs ... bird and human, sound and silence. As we sat together, we just let it all weave right in. And I fell down, down, down into the Land Down Under. And the world never looked the same way again.

The last day of camp we'd arranged a miracle! Buns, real hamburger patties, and all the fixins had been procured and we set up a grill on the flat bed of a truck. I was glad the children wanted a feast for their closing celebration. They'd have little use for certificates and burgers were a rare and exotic surprise!

We'd just lit the charcoal and begun to grill when village children who hadn't been to camp began to appear. As they came close, I explained,

"This is just for the children who attended camp." Their crestfallen faces were hard to bear. And these kids weren't leaving. In fact, more came out, shyly surrounding the truck. As I nervously watched the numbers grow, I wondered where the heck Margaret was. I needed her!

Then, one of my camp boys named Teddy sidled up beside me. "We can't leave them out," he announced. "But we don't have enough," I countered. Then he pulled a large knife from the back of his trousers. I was alarmed. Was he angry? Would he hurt me?

Looking closely, I saw not anger but only resolve and confidence. "We cut them up." He said flatly. And in a few minutes, every burger was cut into fourths. I didn't have time to wonder if the knife was clean or if hands were clean (which they weren't!). However, soon every single child partook of our celebration. "Rules can't be that important." Teddy said, smiling from ear to ear as he handed me the very last chunk of a hamburger.

That was a good day, one for the memory books. The Outback was so mysterious, so hard, that much of what happened there is buried in some dark corner of my mind. But I remember this day clearly. As evening fell, several mothers came round the truck bringing me small tokens: a piece of colorful cloth, a small jar of Vegemite, a tube of skin ointment. It was sweet to meet them. They'd been very scarce the entire week of camp and their presence now was a blessing.

Nearly a year later, when I left Australia, it was the aborigine women who gave me the finest send-off. It was not a big affair, not even a ceremony really. But they placed their bodies all around me and the eldest one, a magnificent and powerful woman, put the palm of her hand on my chest, her long fingers reaching up to the hollow of my throat. "We cast a spell on you," she whispered, "that you will love silence all your life." And that spell took.

## Trying to Sleep

The village at night is full of sound.  
The hot wind moans, flies whine around.  
Someone stumbles, cans clang,  
an angry fist! I hear it bang against some wall.

Shhhhhh .... Try to fall ....  
Fall into the ancient deep-set eyes,  
to some time in peace, before these cries,  
before the law's indignity robbed people of their history,  
before the pain.

If only it would rain.  
Maybe that would clear the air.  
I know we need a rain of care.  
But my insides are a desert dry.  
The tightness in my throat crawls up  
and makes me cry

I am rain.

Later, I will rest in some gentler place.  
It will be quiet, full of grace.  
But even then, when it might be easier to sleep,  
I will recall the village, feel this pain again  
and weep.

(I was young and naive when I lived with the Aborigines,  
beautiful land-based people forced off their sacred home  
so others could mine precious minerals.

I was depressed many months.  
But spiritual gifts arrived, including a new capacity to care.  
It took me years to write this poem.)



## Bumpy Re-Entry

Only two years in the Outback and we were forever changed. Now everything we once called “home” felt foreign – the noise, the commercialism, the unrelenting pace. The US felt crude, materialistic and dull. Although the Land Down Under had been dusty and demanding, it had brought something magical into our lives and we missed it profoundly. Everyone around us seemed to be scrambling to make something happen. In the Outback, everything just seemed to flow. That’s what I missed the most ... the flow of life.

Our marriage was on the rocks. We each sought wise counsel from our parents. Terry’s dad advised “Keep your woman!” My mother gave me some version of “Stand by your man!” All of it sounded like bumper stickers. Since I was pregnant and we weren’t about to split up with a child on the way, we pressed on. The Institute of Cultural Affairs (the organization that sent us to Australia) thought we might do well leading a project in Dallas.

But the glitz and glitter of that place sent me deeper into depression and gave Terry bleeding ulcers. This second pregnancy was difficult, requiring many weeks of bed rest. Of our three-person family, only little Kirk was thriving. He learned to ride a bike, loved second grade and couldn’t wait to be a big brother.

When it was at last time for the baby, my body wouldn’t go into labor. Baylor Medical Center was a research hospital and I became Case No. 974, the woman who wouldn’t give birth. Imagine my frustration and rage as five young male doctors surrounded my bed and talked about me as if I weren’t even there! Good grief!

Finally, tiny Craig (who’d been banging around for weeks saying *let me outta here!*) arrived by C-Section. Kirk pressed his face against the windows of the newborn nursery telling everyone who passed by “That’s MY brother!” It was late February, but for Kirk it was Christmas,

Easter and Fourth of July all at once. His joy echoed our own and we rode on that for a year.

But in the end, we had to do something different. So, we left Dallas and the ICA with the decision to become a "normal" American family. Our only mission: to make ourselves financially solvent. Since we'd lived lives of service since college, we walked away with only suitcases, a tiny stipend and two little boys who deserved better. Our fierce desire to make it financially and be a family kept our crumbling relationship alive another seven years. But we argued about everything. Our shouting matches sent the boys flying into the yard with our dog Kelly. It broke our hearts.

When at last we let the marriage go, Terry gave me a carousel music box that played Stephen Sondheim's "Send In The Clowns." On the darkest nights I played it over and over, crying inconsolably. What clowns we were! Yet even in the midst of grief, I knew both of us had grown during our long and bumpy re-entry. Maybe, just maybe, we were strong enough to face the next chapter of our lives. And, if we weren't, surely whatever we'd need would be given. I felt ready to live Outback style -- to trust the flow of life, listen for messages, and stay as open as I could.

# Disillusionment

## I.

You were the best illusion that I ever owned.  
Everything about you was so finely honed  
To meet my needs.

You were the wildest Other and you drew  
Me by that Otherness when love was new.  
I was your Other, too.

But with the ring I gradually began  
To clothe you carefully with my own hand  
To suit my tastes.

And designing all my outfits was your goal  
Until I wasn't me, but just a role  
Assigned by you.

And we went out, so proud, holding hands  
In our designer originals. Funny ....  
Since I wasn't me and you weren't you  
Who were we showing our "selves" to?

## II.

Then you dressed in jeans and I in sexy blouses.  
We walked around in other people's houses.  
We went out with strangers who didn't know our roles  
On fruitless shopping trips to find our souls.

Mine was all in pieces, and none of them were it.  
I came home to find my Self enlarged.  
The old wardrobe wouldn't fit.

I stood inside the closet searching through the rack.  
You stood beyond the doorway, looking at my back.  
I turned and saw you staring in bitter dis-illusion.  
Fantasy died. That moment was perhaps our best communion.

It might have been a golden, naked love event.  
But we closed our eyes, shook our heads,  
Turned our collars up and went –  
Dressed only in our lonely disillusionment.

## Eucharist

Jack was a really skinny guy.  
His wife was rather fat.  
And yet these simple souls had learned  
Exactly where it's at.

Using each gift is honor's way  
Sharing the wisdom found  
Daily re-creating  
Their own covenantal ground.

They weathered storms, made grand plans  
Over many a meager meal.  
In joy and sorrow, peace and strife  
They struck their famous deal.

Who knows what finally became  
Of their dietary symbol?  
But I like to think they smiled a lot  
And at compromise were nimble.

For though it's just a nursery rhyme  
When I hear it I have to wink.  
You can tell so much, even today,  
By the way folks eat and drink.

So, here's to a man and to his wife  
And the meal at which they sit –  
A feast for all who have the love  
To make a feast of it.

## The Capitol Steps

The Outback wouldn't leave me. The children's dark and deep-set eyes haunted me. I had dozens of yellow pads with the scribbled lessons I'd given to them. I wanted to try those same lessons in Oklahoma classrooms. But more than that, I wanted to share what it was like to work with the Aborigines, what I learned just being with them. I wanted to teach again the way I'd taught in The Outback.

Instead, as a newly divorced single mom with two boys to raise, I was "making a living," banging away on a computer in my cubicle at a law firm. I wanted to "make a life" and my close friends knew just how lousy and unsatisfied I felt without a way to realize my dream. One friend took up my cause and introduced me to Shirley Vickers, head of the Gifted and Talented Programs at Putnam City Schools. My friend said "Now Pat, it's time to stop belly-aching and show somebody your Outback lessons." An appointment was arranged and though I had little hope that anything would come of it, I gathered my lessons, samples of the children's work and a handful of photos to prove that I'd actually lived there.

After a few pleasantries, I spread everything out on Ms. Vickers' conference room table. I rattled on with my "show and tell," all the time watching her face. She nodded often, held the children's poems, and looked at me with genuine interest.

Finally I paused, afraid I'd said too much. Shirley folded her arms, leaned toward me and asked "So, what are you proposing?" I said "Well, I think I could give these poetry lessons to children here."

She smiled "Yes, I agree. What ages?" I hadn't given that question any prior thought. In fact, I realized I hadn't expected her (or anyone) to be that interested. It took me a minute. I gulped and answered "Oh, we can adapt the lessons to go down to second grade and up right through high school." She tapped her fingers on the table. "You understand I will need a written proposal, but I'm prepared to offer you two years and twelve schools."

I was completely unprepared for her response. It took my breath away. After pausing for an uncomfortable stretch of time, I slowly formed my sentence and punctuated each word: "I'll send you something later this week."

I left elated and terrified. This was going to happen. I did, indeed, work with twelve schools over two years, wrapping it up with a Teacher's Guide and Student Poetry Workbook.

Weeks after the project was complete, another friend called to tell me that Oklahoma had an Artist-in-Residence program. "Pat, they take poets! You can work in the schools and get paid for it!" Was it real, I wondered? Could such a thing actually exist? The answer was yes. Could I go for it? Yes again.

So, go for it I did. After the required phone calls, I was granted a meeting. In those days, the Artist-in-Residence program officed in the State Capitol, an imposing structure with steps that went on forever from the parking area up to the giant doors. Up the steps I went and through the long corridors to the director's office.

My interview was brief and he barely glanced at the contents of my portfolio. I was so nervous that I recall very little. As we wrapped up, he told me that we were at step one of a many-step process which included an extensive interview by a panel next month. For today, I only needed to be fingerprinted. "Normal procedure. We run you through the system. I'm sure you understand."

I was returned to the front desk where a lively young woman led me to a tiny room with only a desk and a fingerprint machine. My print wouldn't print, darn it! My first glitch. What did it mean? She smiled. "Don't you worry. I know what this is. You're a paper artist, right?" She pointed at the card in her hand. "It says here Poet/Paper Artist." I was startled. I'd never been given that designation. A strange chill ran through my body as I acknowledged for the first time the hundreds

of hours I'd spent folding and tearing paper and gluing collage style words and images together, and my days binding small books, helping hundreds of children do that.

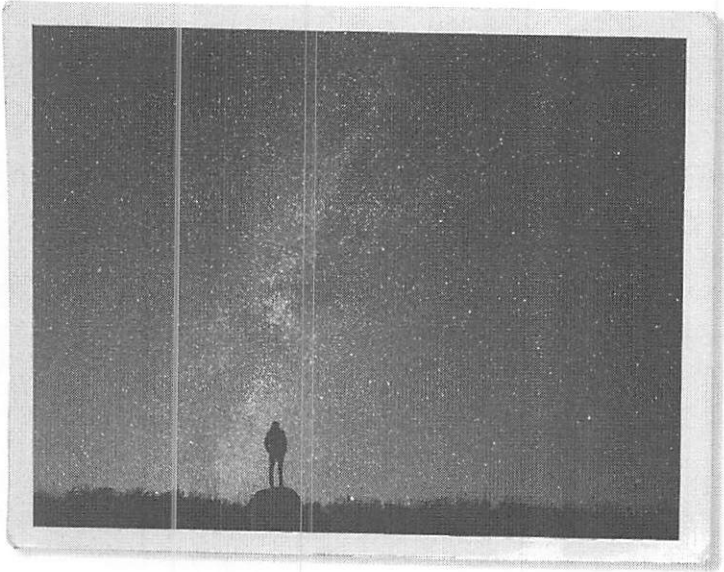
"Your hands have taken quite a beating," she laughed. "Not a decent print to be had except probably your left thumb if you're a righty. Let's try it." It worked. Mission for the day accomplished, I made my way back through the corridors, out the giant doors and down those endless Capitol steps. My knees shook and I felt weak all over. I stopped half-way down, puzzled by the feelings coursing through my body. "What the heck is this?" I wondered.

A kindly voice in my head answered "Kid, this is the feeling of wanting something so bad you can taste it. And the feeling of fear that your dream won't come true. There's nothing to do but go home, eat a good meal and play a game with your boys. Let Life take it from here." So, that's exactly what I did. I made it down the Capitol steps and into my car. I plopped down in the seat and just before I turned the ignition, I thought "Hmmm I'm a poet and a paper artist. Good to know."

A few weeks later I had my panel interview. And a few months later I found myself climbing the steps of the first school I served as a teaching artist. My new career had officially begun.



## Night Sky Meditation



I look for my star in the magic night  
To wish I may and wish I might.

As a child I learned to trust the sky  
And wish for things I could not buy

Tonight my star glows warm, not cold.  
Tonight the sky feels young, not old.

Its peacefulness conveys one thought -  
Every wish has been already bought  
And stored in my soul's hiding place ...  
The sky its ceiling, lit with grace.

## The Bombing

Every Oklahoman remembers where they were when they got news that the Alfred P. Murrah Building in downtown Oklahoma City had been bombed. I was in a writing residency with ninth graders at Midwest City High School. The second-floor classroom was very large with giant picture windows on the side facing downtown. We all heard the crack like a baseball being hit. We all felt the tremor in the room. We all saw the billowing smoke that formed a black column in the distance.

I was in mid-lesson when a teacher came into the room and turned on the large black screen in the front. All eyes went there, there where we saw people running toward us and away from grey-white dust that threatened to envelope them. What had happened? The lesson, of course, became irrelevant. We watched in horror as a reporter tried to tell us what he didn't know ... which at that moment was a lot. It was just after nine am. A thin line of text identified the Murrah Building but we couldn't see a building at all, only smoke.

Student hands flew in the air. Most wanted to leave the room to call home. One girl was in tears. She had an aunt who worked there. One boy said his grandfather had an office there. As the morning went on, one student after another was called out of class. Most didn't return. Classes grew smaller and smaller. The mood was heavy. It was hard to focus on anything.

I was numb. What to do? I turned the sound on the monitor down low and finally off. We didn't need news every minute. It was all chaos and the repetition of it ... utterly traumatic. Because it was a writing class, we wrote, wrote what was up. I can still see some of the white pages with large question marks and menacing black lines, words like WHY and WHO. Soon, I invited students to simply draw or do busywork or rest their heads on their desks. School closed early and I was relieved.

I drove home with radio news which provided more detail of the unthinkable tragedy. Dinner was tasteless and the April night was numbingly cold and damp. I lit a candle and prayed for the rescue workers. The poems that follow honor those who perished and the brave ones who devoted days to the rescue effort.

## Night Rescue

In numb disbelief and aching dread we stand,  
Night filling every soul.  
What light, what breath, what good  
Can be found in this tangled wreckage?

Night makes a hollow sound.  
Shoes echo on the wet pavement.  
Whispered voices plan the rescue  
While safety lights cast shadows on our questions.

Night workers, we are with you,  
We who hold watch this night.  
Our silent hymns seem lost  
In a cruel and empty wind.

Night workers, we are with you.  
Our shoes echo on the stone floor.  
We light our fragile candles  
And stand, feeling our breath,

Releasing, in our hour of weakness,  
Strong heart prayers  
For rescue.

## Dear Son

Dear Son,

I can't protect you.

Momma can't keep you safe  
from shattering windows,  
from acts of violence.

Life can cut you deeply and you will bleed.

I gave you a totem animal, my odd way of letting go,  
giving my job to angels, to God.

Truth is, I never could protect you,  
except in the most superficial ways.

You have your lessons,  
painful as they may be,  
and I have mine.

You have your roads to travel,  
dangerous as they may be,  
and I have mine.

And I ache, I ache  
because you will go far  
and we are close,  
blood of my blood,  
and I am the Momma  
and I want to keep you safe  
and I cannot.

(written for my youngest, Craig,  
age 15 at the time of the bombing)

# Hippie

Yes, I'm an aging hippie! I was a flower child who wore tie dyed shirts and bell-bottom pants. I protested the war in Vietnam and graduated from Kent State University the year before the shootings.

But that's not what I'm talking about. I'm a big-hipped girl. Got that from Momma. Big hips looked great on her 5'8" frame and not so good on my 5'1" frame. My big hips were just a curse, or so I thought until I was schooled a bit in self-acceptance.

In 1995 I traveled with Gene and Joyce Marshall to a Bioregional Congress near Guadalajara Mexico. I was glad to be invited. I wasn't an environmentalist, but I wrote some poetry that honored the Earth. I secretly hoped that visiting a new place, seeing new people would give me a boost. Maybe I'd even meet someone. I'd been divorced for years and my dating history was an unqualified disaster. I blamed it on my big hips. The model of femininity at the time was a size two Vogue model and that just wasn't me.

To my surprise, the women of Kalpulli, Mexico looked nothing like Vogue models. In fact, although they were quite a lot browner, they looked a lot like me! They weren't particularly tall and their hips were wide and loose. They wore colorful skirts and moved seductively, their hips swaying so easily that their walking looked like dancing. A ceremonial people, they swayed and drummed and sang to greet the sun each morning and the moon each night. As I chanted and moved with them, a childhood memory came to me.

I was five years old and we'd only been in Hawaii a few weeks. My mother put me down on the ground right in front of the hula dancers. Their grass skirts swished and their brown feet touched the sand so sweetly. I was spellbound by their hips ... that sway! It reminded me of the waves on the beach. I begged until I got my own grass skirt and hula lessons. I practiced day and night, perfecting my moves. Although we left Hawaii before I started first grade, my body and my spirit never forgot.

These women, descendants of the ancient Mayans, brought that childhood memory alive. Their men, too, were warm toward me. I belonged. In this culture, big hips were an asset. And my red hair and fair skin was a bonus, making me an exotic person! What a surprise! Mexico was a life-changing experience. Joyce said the trip brought out her “lawless side.” I knew what she meant.

Then, in 1997 I traveled again – this time to Wales with a women’s dream group. There, I celebrated my 50th birthday on ancient Druid ceremonial grounds. The cold mist added tons of atmosphere, but we were all soaked to the skin by late afternoon. We’d barely dried off when we got news that seats had been arranged for us in the balcony of the town church. We would hear the Choir of Caernarfon rehearse – a great honor.

This world-class troop of 100 men transported us with their songs. And their director, a tiny but commanding woman, had those guys in the palm of her hand – impressive! After practice, we were invited to join them for their weekly wind-down at the local pub. The Welshmen flirted with each of us outrageously and innocently. They acted more like teenage boys in their unguarded fascination with us.

By midnight we were all so tipsy that we didn’t mind the guys patting our bottoms playfully as we left the pub. We giggled like school girls at something that would have caused outrage back home. The next morning, as our bus rolled out, we saw the short ruddy-faced women of town. They were out early sweeping their walks and weeding their gardens, their big hips swaying all the while, affirming the glory of womanhood.

As a child I bothered my parents with the question “What if I’d been born in China? Who would I be?” After these travels I wondered “What if I’d been born in Hawaii or Mexico or Wales? What would I think of my big hips?”

My dharma teacher, Peggy Rowe-Ward helped me with that question. She'd practiced meditation for many years and I trusted her completely. I had a little trouble getting the posture right. She gently coached me, placing a hand on my shoulder or upper back now and then. "Why so tight?" she wondered aloud one day.

"Well, if I sit like you do, it doesn't look so lady-like," I answered honestly. Her face registered surprise and then she began to chuckle. "Oh! Forget lady-like! Breathe through your hips, girl. They're gorgeous ... good grounding! Relax and be the Earth Mother you are. That suits you a lot better than being lady-like, don't you think?"



## Peggy Johnson

She swung the big guitar around  
And made a backpack of it.  
She threw her head back and let her soul  
Pour out a song like I had never heard before,  
Smoother and with more kick than any drink:  
A song about a mountain she and her mother owned.

Now that wasn't the title.  
I'm not sure that phrase was even in it.  
But that's what I heard, you know.  
Through the smoke that message came to me.  
She looked funny there, guitar almost bigger than she was.  
I laughed at her, and me, and Mom, and ... owning a mountain.

Later on in her performance  
She told a joke about Janice Joplin.  
I hoped she wouldn't go down like Janice did  
And I hoped I wouldn't go down like Janice did  
'Cause that's not the kind of thing you do  
When you own a mountain.

That was a couple of years ago.  
I didn't know her then and I don't really know her now.  
But I recall how electricity came out of her fingertips  
And danced on the floorboards near her feet.  
And I remember how fine it felt to think about women  
Owning a mountain.

## Dear Jacquie

Dear Jacquie,

Thank you for coming into my life as I became a teen.  
You were the most exquisite model of a woman I had ever seen.

You met me eye to eye, asked me questions  
and patiently heard my stumbling answers.  
Your wardrobe alone made an impression.  
I can still see the shimmering silver short-short dress  
that clung to your perfect size four body.  
Your bare tanned arms so glamorous, your white Go-Go boots  
and long dangling white earrings – amazing!  
Your black false eyelashes, your silver blue eye shadow and frosted pink lipstick.  
Your hair dyed champagne blond, teased tall and oh, so elegant!

You were a movie star to me, bringing movie magazines on every visit.  
I poured over them in my solitary hours.  
You had a cool response when Daddy called them “shameless gossip.”  
You put your hand on his shoulder, rolled your eyes and said  
“Lighten up, George. Let Patsy have the few simple pleasures of a teenage girl.”  
Turning your back to him, you gave me a conspiratorial wink.  
Your look was strangely powerful and seductive.  
Momma never spoke like that.  
Dad said nothing in response – a first!

We spent hours in front of your brightly lit portable make-up mirror  
as you “dolled me up.”  
One Christmas you spent an afternoon showing me how to wrap presents.  
I was especially proud of all my glittering gifts that year.  
The packages themselves – which glowed with my creativity – were my  
real gifts.

Thank you, Jacquie, for leaving my brother  
when his shenanigans became too much.  
Thanks for not drawing me into it or making me a confidant.  
I kept your last letter for a long time.  
The way you signed your name *Jacquie* with a little star over the "i"  
and a long squiggle after the "e" inspired me to write my own name *Patricia*  
with similar flare on many a sheet of pink stationery.

You were in my life such a few years.  
Yet in that time I went from being the brainy, awkward ugly duckling  
to a girl who'd seen true feminine allure and confidence.  
And, though I've never fully mastered wearing clothes  
or sporting make-up like you,  
I still "doll myself up" from time to time.  
And as I check myself in the mirror  
I give myself a sly wink and think of you.

## The Necklace

The school bus driver asked each girl  
To give him a little peck on the cheek  
As they got off the bus.  
He pointed to the exact spot on his stubbly face.  
Jane didn't like it, but everyone did it  
So she did it too.  
Often the bus driver gave her a little wink.  
    It was nice ... maybe ... to be singled out,  
    To be seen, to be special.

The bus driver was an important person.  
He not only drove them to and from school each day...  
He also drove the church bus.  
He and his wife were very active.  
One Sunday, the bus driver asked Jane's dad  
If he and his wife could take Jane to lunch  
And maybe help her buy a little something for school.  
A kindly gesture. Jane's family was large and they were poor.  
Jane's dad said okay so long as two of her brothers came along.  
    Jane thought it was nice to be singled out,  
    To be seen, to be special.

The bus driver bought her brothers a ball  
And Jane got a shiny necklace with a pink butterfly.  
The bus driver helped her put it on.  
Jane glowed. The necklace was very special,  
Not the kind of thing she ever received.

As she and the bus driver watched her brothers toss the ball  
In the bus driver's backyard,  
He slowly drew her close ... then ... put his hand up her dress.  
Jane pulled away – red-faced – and demanded to be taken home.  
It was a long and quiet ride. Jane trembled.

Later, in secret,  
Jane took a spoon from her mother's kitchen.  
She dug a hole near the fence in their backyard.  
Hot tears of shame burned her cheeks as she buried  
The shiny necklace deep in the black dirt.  
    It was not so nice after all to be singled out,  
    To be seen, to be special.

She would remember.

(for my friend who will always be special)

## Medicine Woman

Lay soft skins over the crusty earth.  
Put a blanket over my weary shoulders.  
Bid me sit while you stir the fire.

Furrow your brow, tighten your lips.  
Lift your dark eyes to gaze at me.  
Measure my sickness and my health.

Summon the flute and drum.  
Brew a drink to make our words like honey.  
Teach me to breathe, to fall into a trance.

Let me dream my ancestors' dreams.  
Let me be my grandmother's spirit  
Or my great-grandfather's playful lover.

Give me a mystical union  
With the Sun God or the dancing butterfly.  
You know the dance I need to try.

Pick a pattern from the earth or sea,  
Or wind! And let it fall on me  
Like a robe of blue serenity.

Your silver necklace flashes spirituality.  
Your half-raised hand, in blessing,  
Sets my own hawk free --- to soar, to see.

Medicine woman, touch of strength,  
Medicine woman, I come to you.  
Medicine woman, be there for me.

(for Rev. Anne Clement, my medicine woman)

## Failure Pills

Goodness! We can't believe you waited –  
Waited so many months to take your failure pills!

But don't worry. Your family is here –  
Here to administer our common prescription.

You don't know how you receive it.  
We don't know how we give it. It's a family secret.

We'll smile, and pass it to you late at night  
In a cup of warm milk – Just the right amount.

Not enough to kill you, or keep you from going on.  
Just enough to convince you that you can't succeed –  
To keep you hopping from dream to dream in restless vanity,  
Starting projects that you never finish,  
Forming plans that never quite come off,  
Certain that it's always your fault:  
A delicate blend of guilt and debilitating unworthiness ...  
A mix for failure.

So, drink up now, dear, and remember!  
We're your family and we know  
What's good for you.

# Honestly

Honestly, I never thought –  
(And I held our entire relationship in my head) –  
But I never thought you felt  
As you said you really did ... feel.

I stood behind a chair  
So your little word arrows wouldn't hurt me.  
But they got me, somehow anyway  
Poking holes in my well-constructed exterior.

I feel sort of lacey now, so full of holes,  
And not at all so well put together.  
You, too, seem more loosely woven, more complicated,  
Uneven, and overall ... oddly ... more fascinating.

They say in contracts to read between the lines.  
In relationships we must have to read into the holes  
Our little word arrows make.  
I read a light there in yours.

Honestly ... a dancing light!

What do you read in mine?

(for Joyce Marshall, honest and true)



## Seedlings

The light is coming up on the woods  
And I am looking for my freedom.  
Birds call, hinting at it, leaves sing, inviting it.  
Gray sky asks for blue clarity,  
Restless wind cries for peace.  
A tiny bird feather clings to the window pane  
Free flight broken by an obstacle.

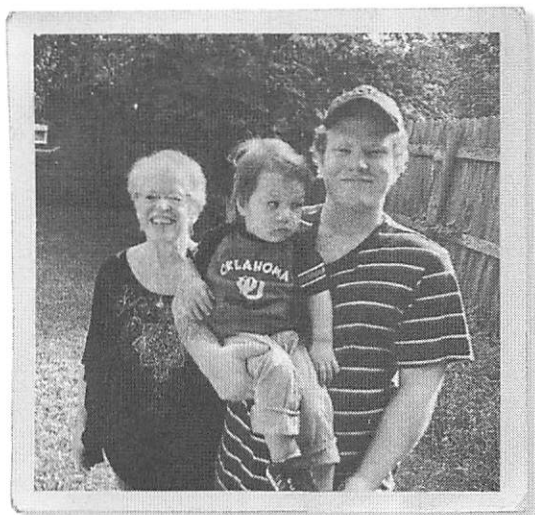
It's a cold day in the woods,  
A good day for the awareness of confinement  
And discomfort.  
Nothing has been planted in the hot box outside.  
It is not time.  
Seedlings are nursed in the house.  
In the black earth, do they breathe?  
In the black earth, do they know they will bloom?

I do not think seeds are very aware of the green things they will be  
Or how their harvest will feed life and bless it.  
Of their one hundred percent of being I think less than one percent  
Might even know what lies beyond the house bed.  
Yet it seems foolish to pity the seedling,  
Worry for it, or ask it to be otherwise.

No, let it have its January day in the seed bed,  
Dark, silent, uncertain.  
For its silence, too, is blessed.  
As blessed as its rootedness or its wild blossoming,  
As blessed as the burst of fruit or the sacrifice of harvest.  
As blessed as all moments of dormancy ... and growth.

It's a good day in the woods -  
A cold, gray, January day -  
A good day for the awareness of confinement  
and discomfort.

# ELDERHOOD



## Dawn

I would have been useless on the farm in early morning.

I would not have done my chores,  
milked cows or opened pasture gates.  
They would have found me hiding, still as a stone,  
lost in the cry of an owl.  
Pen poised above paper  
waiting, waiting,  
to catch the silent, awesome being  
who creeps with light into the new world.

Dawn is an amazing thing.  
So amazing that we should be awake,  
awake and still,  
catching, if we can, what it does to the trees ...  
catching, if we can, the subtle hues of grass  
in changing light,  
hearing how birds gain confidence  
from dark, tentative cries  
to bright and fragrant symphonies.

Dawn is an amazing thing.  
And I am still, so still, catching it today,  
wishing I had never missed it, even once,  
in all my life ...  
wishing I had given this much attention  
each time, each time.

Thinking how the world could be so whole  
if we could see how easily dawn  
weaves a new day from the darkness, from the stillness ...  
If we could see how dawn, sweet and subtle daughter,  
leads us into day  
without a single false step.

## Neruda

I'd been an Oklahoma Artist-in-Residence for years, visiting schools all over the state. If variety is the spice of life, my life was spicy – always a new school, a new batch of young writers, eager eyes greeting me. I delighted in introducing them to the adventure of writing poetry, journal keeping and creating small handmade books.

Only one thing consistently troubled me: the constant hubbub! Schools can be such noisy places, full of interruptions all day long! I wanted to wrap the kids in a bubble of silence, to provide an atmosphere where they could go deeper, express themselves more fully. Just because someone is young does not mean they aren't profound. I was after profound. But how to get there?

The answer finally arrived in a film called "El Postino," a story of the unlikely friendship between poet Pablo Neruda and an Italian postman. I was enthralled by the film, but even more enthralled by Neruda himself. Pouring over his works, I found "Keeping Quiet," a gem of a poem and right on topic. I decided to try it out with fourth graders at Ida Freeman Elementary in Edmond. If it could create silence that would hold for even ten minutes, I knew I'd be happy.

We gathered in a circle on the floor and I read the poem. Deep silence came upon us. In hushed tones, I asked each child to write "In the Silence..." at the top of the page and let any thoughts or feelings pour onto paper. Awe filled the room as children scribbled away with intense concentration. The teacher wrote as well ... and wept. It was pure magic.

After only ten minutes we began to share. Each author read from their paper followed by a few seconds of silence. There was no comment, no need for it. The world stopped and we were bathed in the richness of pure Being.

The silence poetry exercise became a watershed in every school residency from then on. After writing our silence poem, we were all more reflective, softer, kinder. The teachers often seemed more deeply affected than the students. Our time in silence created community. Some teachers told me they began to see and even love certain kids for the very first time.

As the months rolled by, I collected poems from elementary and high school students and even adults at the psychiatric day treatment center where I worked. In each setting I wondered *What is the gift that silence gives? If all our words were preceded by this type of silence, how would our relationships feel? If all our solutions were found in this silence, what would they look like?*

These were the questions I held in my heart. I was willing to hold them there for years. But time is a funny thing. When you hold a question that dear and that close, other things that don't support the question begin to unravel. And that is part two of this story. But first, a poem written one September morning on the school playground, dear children surrounding me, sweet awareness visiting me.

## In The Silence

In the silence,  
I notice my own heartbeat.  
Thank you, heart, for serving me so well  
All these years.  
In the silence, I notice my own breath.  
Thank you, lungs, for your good service.

In the silence,  
I notice the small things -  
Tiny rocks beneath my feet,  
Insects that land on my arm.  
I am aware of how much goes unnoticed  
In my busy day.

The sun makes my paper neon bright,  
Bright as my life is  
When I can breathe my thanks  
And beat my heart thanks  
And know that though I am a small thing  
In this vast universe,  
I am not insignificant.

And my noticing  
Is not insignificant.  
For its strange and silent power  
Makes me thankful.

## The Silence Retreat

I loved every hour spent in silence with children. I loved holding my precious questions close to my heart. I wanted to stay in silence and ponder these questions. But life didn't give me that. The Silence Workshop was just a brief moment in time. Each participant had many other noisy hours in their day - as did I. Each person left the workshop to go back into a dizzying fast-paced world - as did I. The transition from sacred, nurturing silence to its opposite was harsh -- an emotional and physical jolt.

I became more and more frustrated, agitated and angry at the world I lived in and the impossibility of changing it. What did I want? I didn't know. I couldn't sleep and I lost my appetite. I began to have heart palpitations and twice the EMTs had to be called. They never found the cause and neither did my physician. Without a clear answer, I just kept trying harder -- my familiar coping pattern.

Until ... very early one Sunday morning I left a speaking engagement in Tulsa to drive back to Oklahoma City. I was so drowsy that I accidentally turned into oncoming traffic on I-44. With a jolt I saw an 18-wheeler barreling down on me. The next thing I knew, a kindly police officer was tapping on my window. "Ma'am," he asked, "Are you alright?"

As he gently guided me to his patrol car, I turned and saw my little Dodge Neon smashed to bits. "You are one lucky lady," he said. "Another few inches and we wouldn't be talkin' right now."

Medical exams revealed nothing but whiplash. Once home, I went straight to bed thinking a good night's rest would be enough. After all, a new school program began the next morning. But Monday morning came and my mind wouldn't work. My body wouldn't stop shaking. A week went by. Then two, then three. My unwanted but badly needed convalescence began.

An artist friend gave me a small, blank page book, perfectly stitched with gorgeous paper. I rested, dreamed, and filled the little pages with my hopes and dreams for more silence. I was bone-weary of my heavy, tangled life. An angel visited me in my sleep, telling me that my life was full of stones and it was time to lay them down. Over many months, I saw that the "stones"

were a metaphor for the heaviness, the noise and the complexity of my life. I wanted, more than anything, to lay them down.

I was just 50 and women in my family lived to 100. I reckoned “Well, I’m half way through. I can afford to give a year to Silence.” So, I put my house up for sale, sold or gave away all but a few things, canceled my school programs, and said my goodbyes.

I headed first to Mom’s condo on the Marco River. There, I sat on her porch and stared out at the Florida Gulf for days on end. In a few weeks I found a great doctor and got my gallbladder removed. It was full of stones! My niece Judy finalized her divorce and offered me her fully furnished house near the beach. Once settled, I began to write about the Great Silence that was claiming my life.

Every day from rosy dawn to late morning, I filled yellow pads with words about my personal longing for silence and my sense of the world’s great need for it. Then I walked the beach and edited my pages in the lobby of one charming seaside hotel after another. It was an exquisite existence. Where else could you walk the beach, sit with a tropical drink and wordsmith all afternoon?

Evenings were computer time. Mom insisted on a weekly phone call. Otherwise, I kept silence. I even used a tiny notebook to write questions for store clerks when I went out for provisions. Maybe they thought I was mute. I didn’t care.

The enchantment of silence was complete. I contemplated becoming a nun. But I knew I’d be the kind of nun who wore rainbow-colored socks and caused trouble. What I really wanted was a partner – someone who loved silence as much as I did. It was 1997. I was a ship without a harbor. I felt on the verge of either the end of everything or a wild new beginning I couldn’t imagine.

My house back in Oklahoma finally sold, bankrolling me for six more months on the island. As I walked the sandy white beaches, I imagined Neruda walking with me ... calmly telling me to keep quiet, to keep dreaming, to keep writing and to trust the magic.



## Fire



Deep in your innermost core  
shines the light of your Original Source.

When you nurture that fire  
you move into the world  
with such single-pointed focus  
that you become pure energy.

It does not matter what you do,  
only that you trust the fire.  
Learn to gaze at the truth it brings  
like a star shining in the night sky.

Burn with that truth  
and every morning  
the golden sunrise  
will seek you out  
and make its home  
in your heart.

## Jack The Matchmaker

Marco Island turned out to be a great place to wrap myself in silence and write like crazy. On the day I put the last period on the last paragraph, I floated happily from the island copy center to the post office with a thick envelope addressed to my friend Jack Gilles in India. The Wisdom of Silence was at last a manuscript and I wanted his eyes on it.

I'd just arrived home and kicked off my sandals when the cell phone rang. It was Jean Hendricksen, a principal I greatly admired. She had a five-week residency beginning in January at her school, Deer Creek. My manuscript was finished and Thanksgiving was near. I missed my sons. Wouldn't it be lovely to see them for Christmas? Could I manage the long drive from south Florida to Oklahoma? If I could, it would be good to earn money again.

I began to slowly come out of silence. I packed slowly too, because I didn't have a travel date or travel plan. Jack called to say he loved the manuscript. Soon he'd fly from Mumbai to his winter home in Mexico, stopping in the US just one night in Chicago to visit David McCleskey at his digs at The Admiral Senior Highrise. He wanted to show David the manuscript. I said "Absolutely not!"

Jack can be a real rascal. When he dashed out to catch his red-eye flight, he "accidentally" left my manuscript on David's easy chair. David began emailing me. I knew him from our days in the ICA but we weren't close, so I was a little ticked off at Jack. However, before long David and I were happily immersed in daily marathon phone conversations. Weeks later, we were walking the Florida beaches together ... falling totally and desperately in love. David helped me drive to Oklahoma --- a "first date" that lasted 13 days! He had to fly back to Chicago, of course, but our separation would be short.

Late life love is precious and we lost no time. We were destined to be together – no question about that. The question of where to

live was tougher. I was homeless really, but very free. David was in senior living and that no longer fit. It didn't take long to solve our dilemma. When magic is afoot, practical things tend to work themselves out. Silver-haired friends at The Admiral treated us to a combined engagement and goodbye party. David became the first resident in the history of that place to walk out on his own two feet, bride in tow. We were quite the scandal... and we liked it!

Our next chapter held eleven happy years of traveling, writing, teaching and building our dreams. Pursuing silence, we attended retreats with Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. We lived in Colquitt Georgia and Naples Florida before settling in Oklahoma City. There we created The Silence Foundation, started Prairie Wind Sangha, and taught dozens of courses in the contemplative arts. A wonderful tribe of fellow travelers joined with us – people of extraordinary passion and purpose. David became grandpa to my grandson Titus and a good friend to my sons.

We stayed in close touch with Jack, visiting him and his wife Judy in Litibu, Mexico. As you can imagine, that rascal beamed with pride at having so expertly matched us up! Life is strange and wondrous. Jack was the first person I called after David passed. And I was one of the first people Jack called in the precious minutes after Judy died in his arms. We live on, good friends, matched still to our beloveds who live now in that Great Silence.

## Four Pebbles

The hall was huge, big as a concert hall for a rock star. But then again, Thich Nhat Hanh was a rock star of meditation, having toured the US many times by now and having gained quite the following. The biggest spaces at the University of California in San Diego were hardly big enough for the crowd.

An enormous banner at the front read "This is It." David and I were newbies. We stood, holding hands, watching hundreds of people roll out yoga mats and place their cushions in orderly rows. We had no cushions. In fact, we didn't have a meditation practice. We'd come a long way by plane and bus to this, our first retreat.

We searched the front of the hall for Larry. We were a football field from the stage, but we hoped to spot him there helping with set up. A long-time follower of Thay (teacher in Vietnamese), Larry had invited us here. How would we find him among this throng of people? Then ... we saw him! And, at almost the same moment he looked up and saw us. Larry didn't smile or wave, but just began ever so slowly to turn and make his way toward us. I marveled at the grace and purpose in his movements -- as if each step held great meaning. I'd never watched anyone walk like that.

David's eyes were on his old friend. Was he remembering their days together on the streets of Calcutta or the months spent in sweltering hot tents training the "barefoot boys" of rural India? I watched David's brown eyes go soft and liquid, a sight I'd come to enjoy in these early months of our marriage. David had been one of the "top dogs" in the Institute of Cultural Affairs, head of Global Research. His aloof and stiff personae was all I saw when I met him years ago. David was unapproachable, an intellectual giant. By now I knew it was all an act to cover up deep shyness and a tender heart. Love changes a guy. In this short year, the sweetness that was David came out to greet a waiting world. As Larry came close, David let go of my hand and reached out to embrace him. "True friends," I thought as I watched them hold one another.

And I got my hug, too. Larry and I were friends years ago in Cleveland when he was Mr. Angry Black Dude and I was a twenty-something secretary at Case Western Reserve University. Right before he left for India, we shared a cup of tea. I sighed and wondered "What if we never see each other again?" He smiled and said "And what if, Plan B, we're friends for life?" His Plan B had come to pass. Here David and I stood together with him in a bright new adventure none of us could have imagined back in the 70's.

The next morning, I sat in that great hall in silent awe as forty brown-robed monks and nuns chanted for half an hour, transporting us. Then, Thich Nhat Hanh began to speak about the four pebbles. He pulled a tiny pouch from his robe and held each pebble as he told us how each stone represented a human quality – a quality that lived within us: freshness, solidity, calm and freedom. I began to weep. Every word he spoke seemed directed totally at me, pouring into the center of my being, inhabiting my heart, creating a rapture I'd never known before.

Which made the next moment quite surprising as Thay stopped, got up and gracefully walked to the edge of the stage. "Now children," he said "Please follow your teachers outside and find your own pebbles." Two dozen children, who'd been seated in the front rows, stood up, bowed to Thay and headed out with several monks and nuns.

"What the heck?" Oh, I got it. This was his customary opening talk for the children! As he took his seat again and we paused for three sounds of the giant bell, I realized the "main" talk would now begin. But I didn't need another thing. The whole trip had already been worth it. The child in me had received the gift of a lifetime and this newly married woman in her 50's was looking at a whole new life.

The retreat leaders invited us to keep Noble Silence. David and I did pretty well. Actually, it was magical to BE with one another silently as newlyweds for five whole days. As the dharma says "The communication between us was perfect." We walked silently hand-in-

hand, two in a river of a thousand souls mindfully walking the spacious green lawns of the campus. Such awe in those steps! We flowed!

On the last night, microphones were placed in the aisles as long lines of retreatants stood to wait their turn to speak with Thay. The questions were good and Thay's answers were brilliant. Near the end of the evening, David whispered in my ear "Do you have any questions?" I looked into his soft brown eyes. "Not a one." I answered. "Me neither," he sighed, pulling me close, kissing the top of my head.

The next day we each received the Five Mindfulness Trainings and a new name. Mine was "Silent Service of the Heart," a name that set into motion the life I live now. As I write these words, I look down at my pebble pouch lying on the bed. I've held these pebbles through so many moments – through the wonderful travels David and I enjoyed, through the early days of Prairie Wind Sangha, through the death of David's daughter, David's own death, my two strokes, the birth of my grandson and twenty years later, my great-grandson.

All of it, all of it ...  
and still these small stones  
invite me like the sweetest bell  
to love the child within  
the one who never grows tired of hearing  
how fresh, how solid,  
how calm, how free  
I truly am.

## What Is Happening in This House

In this house we are taking refuge in each breath.  
We breathe and know we are alive.  
We know this moment is precious.  
Every moment is precious, every life so precious,  
So ... we breathe.

In this house we are cultivating peace,  
A peace which celebrates completed lives,  
Those we love who are now at rest in the Eternal,  
Those who hold us in the harmony  
Of a never-ending circle of love.

In this house we speak not of disease  
But of healing, for we know healing flows  
Like a river whether earthly life continues or ends.  
Healing opens our hearts, transforms our suffering,  
And creates a beauty we can rely upon always.  
In this house there is space enough for laughter  
And for tears, for joy, for grief, for honoring  
Every emotion that arises in the process of goodbye.  
The space we create by being still and aware  
Is sacred ground and it blesses everything.

In this house someone rare and wonderful is deciding  
To journey on and depart from his body.  
This one, like all of us, gave his best to Life  
And Life returned to him abundant blessings,  
Blessings we can share in this unrepeatabe Now.

In this house, we invite you to just Be.  
For when all our tasks and roles are no more  
Our Being stands like a tree, magnificent,  
Sufficient, needing nothing to enhance itself  
Or complete itself.

In this house you are welcome, dear friend.  
May your life be rich in Spirit  
And, when death comes to your own house,  
May you know that the love you have poured out  
Returns to you and all the Earth a thousand fold.



## Regarding Widows

Widows should be allowed to go crazy,  
Wear their husbands' old shirts  
And walk through their houses weeping over ordinary objects  
His coffee mug, his watch, his journal  
Glowing now with meaning in his absence.

Widows should be allowed to sit at the window  
Watching white birds float over the grey lake for a long time  
Contemplating the coming of winter.  
Widows should be allowed to become poets,  
Singing songs of the treasure they had, now gone,  
Of their treasure lost at sea, of their own storm-tossed nights.

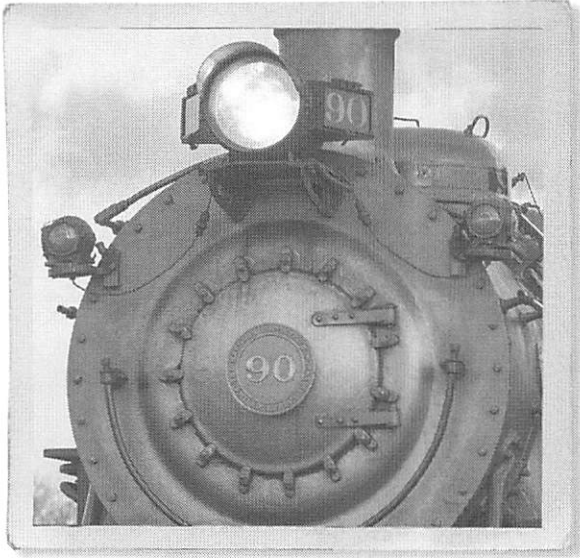
"Yes," we should say to the widows, "We have time for your poems.  
For they are our own dear losses recalled,  
Our own precious aliveness remembered."

Widows should be allowed to go crazy  
And waste time and be unproductive  
Because life is too short and we do not serve the widows  
By asking them to "let go" or "move on" or "get busy".  
These words are violent as a rape.  
When we visit violence upon the widows we visit violence upon ourselves.

Let us give the widows time for their good grief.  
Their world has ended and this is sacred time.  
Let us stand near and bow to the sorrow that is the human journey.  
Let us be ready with a warm blanket because loss is cold and hard  
And widows bear it.

Widows should be allowed to go crazy  
While the rest of us are too busy or distracted by our projects,  
Too enamored by our sanity, to stop.  
Let the widows stop for us all and let us trust  
That from this unlikely source  
A tear-stained but shining sanity will emerge to bless the Earth.

## Boarding the Train



Where I am in my life now is  
Boarding the train.  
I have a few bags with me.  
Others are in the baggage car,  
Still others have been shipped  
And some given or thrown away.

The whistle sounds.  
There is a groan and a hiss of steam.  
Someone gently takes my arm  
To help me climb the metal stair.

I look back - not sure exactly what  
I hope to see -  
Is it a familiar face ... a piece of  
Forgotten luggage?  
But the platform has been swept clean.

I pat my hands against my coat pockets.  
What I need is there.  
I see that my hands are shaking  
But there is nothing else to be done, is there?  
I'm ready, I think – as ready as I'm going to be.  
My heart pounds in my throat  
As I feel a strange pull  
Like strong current in ocean water.  
"This is leaving" I say to myself "Oh, my."  
Then I hear another voice,  
A clear and steady voice in my head.  
"Passages are disorienting dear" it says,  
"So ... place your foot upon the stair.  
It's solid as a mountain  
And so are you.  
You are here, now –  
Arriving,  
Arriving,  
Arriving."

(Thank you godson Turner for how you read this in October 2010. Remember?  
Your mom and dad stood with us as we said goodbye to the house on Kathy Court.)

## Visitations

It was a long travel day from Oklahoma City to Marco Island, Florida and I was exhausted. I lay down, without fear, on Daddy's side of the bed, in the very spot where he had died the night before. Mom reached out her hand from her side to grasp mine. "Is this too strange for you Patsy?" she asked. I said "No, Mom, it's okay," because it was. Whether I was worn out from the trip or numb from his sudden passing, I didn't know. I only knew I was at peace. Within a short while, Mom's breathing was steady and I, too, drifted off.

I awoke a little while later and saw a slit of blue light coming through the half-closed bedroom door. Thinking Mom had left the TV on in the living room, I got up and went to turn it off. But the light wasn't the T.V. It was a wavy blue glow all around Dad's easy chair. I rubbed my eyes and looked again, shivers going up my spine as I saw his once human body, translucent and shimmering, standing in the narrow space between the chair and the wall. This could not be real.

"Dad," I whispered, knowing full well he had passed, "Where are you?" His iridescent body trembled. "Kid, I'm everywhere!" he answered, his smile sending wave after wave of love into my heart. Then, in a breath, the light gently faded from silvery blue to dull gray and finally to black.

I stood, alone and trembling, trying to grasp what had happened. I don't know how long I stood there before quietly slipping back into the bedroom and crawling under the covers. Mom was sound asleep. I was sure I'd wake her. My body tingled head to toe with the excitement of the encounter. However, soon a great calm enveloped me and I slept deeply ... so deeply that when I woke the next morning, I was sure it was all a dream.

As I opened the bedroom door, I found Mom on the living room couch with her newspaper. The minute she saw me, she put a finger to her lips and pointed silently and excitedly toward the porch. There,

on the other side of the glass doors, sat a magnificent white egret, settled comfortably on our round table. He was so close – only a few feet from Daddy’s chair and nothing between them but the glass. And he stayed there all day. Mom and I tiptoed around in the condo, afraid we’d disturb him. But the egret rarely moved except to occasionally nod toward Dad’s chair.

The next day he was gone. This appearance was so rare that it had never happened before nor has it happened since.

Was it a dream?

Do I care?

Only that Dad was everywhere.

Fast forward a few decades. Again, I’m at mother’s place on the Marco River. This time Augustine is with me and we’ve come a long way by car. Mom passed at age 103 after two very difficult years – losing her eyesight first. Then losing one faculty after another with the exception of her brilliant mind which was alert to the end. Her memorial was in July and now it was December.

As I turned the key and stepped inside, I felt a terrible ache. For the first time in forty years, I crossed that threshold without hearing mother’s voice saying “Patsy, is that you?” And for the first time there was no Momma sitting like a queen in her robe in the recliner near the porch. I looked around at the many treasures that made it her place. Shells from the beach gathered by her, paintings on the wall created by her, lacquered Chinese boxes she loved.

The porch was there, the river, the swaying palms, pelicans flying low over the water outside. Everything was there, everything but her. I turned to Augustine. “Wow! I can’t feel her anywhere! This place is just real estate now.” As my eyes filled with tears, Augustine nodded. “It was the same at my mother’s. Once she was gone it was just an empty shell.” I was so glad for my friend. Her words made the unbearable more bearable.

We got ready for bed, too exhausted to say anything but "goodnight." Augustine took the living room couch, but I chose to lie down once again on Daddy's side of the bed. Empty on Mom's side. It was a restless night. At one point I whispered "Momma, why can't I feel you here?"

To my utter surprise, she answered "I am so gone from here, Patsy, but I'll give you this. When dawn comes, let the seagulls tell you what to do. You always wanted to know what to do." Mother's tone was so familiar, so no-nonsense. She knew me well and I felt comforted. Soon I was sound asleep.

Around six a.m. I was awakened by the cry of many seagulls. I opened the bedroom curtains hoping to see what had always dazzled me. Sunrise can be stunning on that river. *Floating gold* we used to call it. At first light the gulls always arrived, sailing just above the river's bend, their white wings like so many angels over a molten golden highway of water. And the way the sun spun off the water made every color pop: corals and aquas, pinks and purples magically bleeding into each other like a stunning watercolor painting. This morning was no exception. I gasped as I remembered Mom's promise. I listened.

The birds called out, their cry as clear as the lyrics of a song: "Goodbye, goodbye...Go home, go home!" I stood there taking it all in, completely awestruck.

It's wild to hear words from Beyond. Wilder I suppose to follow them. We'd planned to stay several days, but when Augustine woke up, I told her what I'd heard. She said "Yes, I heard the same. Let's get done what has to get done and hit the road." I hauled a carload of items to the island thrift store. Augustine carefully packed up treasures I would keep. We burned sage and blessed the place. I said a tearful goodbye to Mother, though clearly she wasn't there. The condo was too small for her now.

It was sunset as we headed out. Three blocks from Mom's place, the early evening sky put on a display of extraordinary colors. We stopped

the car and took a dozen photos. It was a party in the sky and oh, how Mom loved a party! I stood on a sandy patch of ground near the road and bowed to her vast presence in the dancing brilliance of the December sky. Like a bird flying free, she left me a million golden colors so I could find her again and again.

## Winter Poem

A poem for you today, my friend,  
While the roads ice over  
And the traffic crawls  
And the fire crackles  
And the kettle sings

A poem for you today, my friend  
While the sky is grey  
And the earth is white  
And Spring is held like a dream,  
A quiet dream behind our eyes

A poem for you on a day  
When dreaming is invited  
And silence is nurtured  
And the dead sigh and say "Thank goodness...  
We thought you'd never come to visit."

A poem for you to hold  
In that certain place within your heart,  
That cupboard you keep for dreams come true,  
Full of sacred silence and the gentle awareness  
That we are finding ways to stop for tea

A poem for you today, something to lift you up  
When your work feels too hard or prayer too difficult...  
Trust, my friend, that under all the frozen places  
Seedlings breathe and sleep their winter dream,  
Full of green shoots and bright flowers,  
Yes, bright flowers,  
Even today.



## Strokes

Sitting in my hospital room, journal on my lap, I tried to meditate. But my breath was shallow and my body wouldn't stop rocking. I put my hand on my high heart and noticed that I was sweating. My palm was wet, my throat pounding. "Well now," I said to myself, "What a fine mess you've gotten us into!" borrowing a line from an old Laurel and Hardy routine.

I'd had a busy August, traveling to the East Coast and back, gearing up for Fall programs, hardly stopping to rest for many weeks. Over brunch with Maria and Turner my face began to spasm. A quick trip to the ER revealed a stroke in progress. The skillful doctors got me stable before any real damage was done. But my night in the hospital was sobering. I realized I was in trouble. Waiting on the doctor's assessment I had time to feel real panic, scary uncertainty. And in those hours, I also began to chastise myself.

"Patricia, why can't you listen to your own body's distress signals? Is this what it takes to make you slow down? Dear Body, let me be here for you. Show me what I need to know." I sat as still as I could and listened.

The moment was fortunately timed, because just then my small, brown-skinned doctor swept gracefully into the room. On a blank page of my journal, she drew her careful diagram of my two strokes – the one on the left posterior cerebral artery that happened the previous February (a stroke that was never diagnosed!) and the one on the right posterior cerebral artery that took place during my Labor Day brunch with Turner and Maria.

"See here?" she said, pointing to her drawing on my journal page, "The left side is completely closed. But over these months your body found a way to create collateral flow. Today, the right side became dangerously narrow, but you acted quickly and we stopped it from blocking just in time. You have flow here." Her delicate hands made a map I could easily read – a map of salvation!

“You are one lucky lady,” she said. “You can walk, talk, and make sense of the world around you. Take it easy going forward. You will likely have trouble with balance and vision. You may have trouble with routine tasks. We need to monitor you closely. But we can send you home with meds.” She patted my knee and smiled.

A few hours later my son Kirk took me home from the hospital. The walk from his car to my couch was ridiculously long! On that day, that walk was one huge accomplishment! I sat on my couch and promised myself to listen more to my body and rest, rest, rest. But I was home free! I slept like a baby that night.

So, the next morning turned out to be one huge shock, because when I got to the kitchen, I couldn’t figure out how to make breakfast – something I’d done a thousand times. I called Kirk crying, “This is just too awful! I want life to go back to how it was before.”

There was silence on the other end of the line. Then, Kirk quietly said “Mom, I think you have to just go forward from where you are.” I was proud for a minute because I realized I’d taught him to think like that. I knew it was a growth mindset thought – something I’d taught for years. So, even in the midst of my panic attack, I focused on that thought.

Kirk slowly walked me through the steps of making breakfast: getting out the pan and the butter and the eggs, turning the burner on and turning the burner off, getting out the plate and serving up the food, finding a napkin and a fork. Who would’ve thought a grown woman would need such help?

The doctor told me later that my problem was common. I had trouble with other things for a while. In a few months, I recovered enough to resume work at a much slower pace, a pace more aligned with my new body and my new life.

In the meantime, I practiced growth mindset often. Little mantras served me well, little mantras like:

**“Hey girl, ask for help. You have helpers in abundance. Ask. Receive.” and “It’s okay to rest a minute and re-set. You’ve got this.”**

Turned out, these proved good mantras for life in general and I’ve kept them to this day as faithful servants when life delivers stressors of various kinds. I think of the doctor’s sweet map of salvation in my journal, showing me that keeping the flow alive is everything.

## Allowing Grace

“Surrender to Grace.  
The ocean cares for each wave  
until it reaches the shore.  
You are given more help  
than you will ever know.”

Rumi

Each day I ask myself  
Am I willing? Willing to be in this body?  
I ask for the gift of hospitality –  
the ability to welcome what’s actually here,  
to greet the unexpected conditions, sensations ...  
to see the thoughts that try to cling, solve, fix,  
or make *what is* disappear ...  
to welcome feelings of fear, guilt, sadness  
without being swept away by them.

Of course, I do what’s recommended by the doctors.  
I’m faithful. And it’s a dance to take good care  
while trusting outcomes I can’t control.  
This new collaboration of mind, body and spirit  
takes energy.

Healing takes energy  
and a full embrace, an activated heart to send  
Light and Love to every cell.  
And I need to activate my inner witness  
to tenderly hold the pain,  
noticing everything with fierce gentleness.  
Sometimes I’d rather let old patterns of defeat take over.  
Yet I can release them, shed that old skin.

Something new is being born in me ... Trust.  
*Ask and you shall receive* is the Truth about Life  
and I am living it.  
I am the wave surely coming to shore  
and today I’m given more help  
than I will ever know.

## Finding the Furrow

Back on our Oklahoma farm near Enid  
Grandpa thoughtfully puffed on his Roi-Tan cigar.  
He had determined I was old enough to plow.  
I was twelve and I was afraid.  
My feet barely touched the pedals of the gigantic green tractor.

*"What if I can't steer it right?" I asked.  
"It's easy." Grandpa said.  
"Just let the tractor down into the furrow.  
The furrow is always there to guide you.  
If you pull out of that furrow,  
This old tractor will shake so hard  
That you'll lose your breakfast  
Like your cousin Clifford did the other day.  
Stay in the furrow and you'll be fine."*

So, I stayed.  
It was scary, powerful, and I was fine.  
My cells still remember it.

Everyone digs their furrows.  
Like grooves in an old record,  
We plow into them all the time.  
Some furrows are angry or sad.  
Some, though familiar, make us feel quite miserable.  
The trick, I'm thinking lately,  
Is to wonder about those furrows,  
To walk them and ask if they are healthy -  
Maybe even cut some fresh ones.  
I'd like to let quiet and kindness make a strong furrow.  
I want compassion dug deep,  
So I can ease down into it whenever I need to.

Then, when my being feels shaky  
And I'm about to lose my breakfast,  
I'll know what to do.  
Without too much effort,  
I'll return to that well-cultivated furrow,  
And plow my life's field  
With serenity.



## Tea After Forest Bathing

For weeks now I've had to focus hard  
on the very next most necessary task.  
I'm so exhausted that today I hardly focused  
on anything except perhaps the cold wind.

It feels good now to pour a cup of hot tea  
and sit here with paper and pencil  
feeling my breath after walking the woods ...  
remembering the forest path strewn  
with broken limbs.

A storm roared through here,  
powerful winds tearing branches  
from sturdy mother trees,  
hurling them to the ground.

An apt metaphor for my life this past year.  
While I was ill, Life simply took  
what wasn't useful and tore it from me.  
Today I'm just now well enough  
to notice the debris of fallen limbs.  
The scattered remains confirm the lightness  
I feel in my body and in my heart.  
Useless habits of thought are dead wood to me now.  
I don't miss them.

A bright wind of freedom pushes me onward.

The path is new, unknown. But I'm not afraid.  
Deep in the woods I did my ceremony.  
I held the smooth stone that was given to me,  
feeling it heavy and worn in my hand.  
I found a hollow space at the base of gnarled old tree.  
"There you go," I said quietly as I laid it down.  
"Rest here, darling.  
The storm has passed.  
You are okay."

## Two Promises

It is the time of COVID. I honor that fact with a small altar in this house as I “shelter.” David’s been gone a dozen years now and yet he is here. This story may seem out of place chronologically in this little memoir, yet somehow it belongs here. Life, death, grief, joy ... a song our souls were born to sing over and over.

\*\*\*

That hot August morning I journaled in my chair at the side of the bed, my bare feet propped up on the mattress almost touching David’s warm body as he slept. Throughout our twelve-year marriage we journaled together every morning, sipping our coffee then sharing our dreams until it was time to make breakfast.

All of that was no more, so I scribbled away on my own, glad to be near him as I captured the details of his shockingly rapid decline, his Zen practice of conscious dying and my life as a witness. The words poured out. Tears too ... ink swimming in pools of grief.

Suddenly David’s breathing stopped and I looked up. His eyes were open. “Am I still here?” he asked. This was not the first time he’d “returned” like this.

“Yes, honey, you’re here. Where were you?” A slow smile, a far-off gaze. “Not here,” was all he would say. In that moment, resentment grabbed me. I slammed the journal onto the floor and pointed the pen at David. “How can you leave me?” I stormed, my words hanging in the air like an accusation.

David’s eyes flickered. He’d seen me plenty angry before. His response was always to take a breath, look me in the eye, and calmly meet me right there. I loved that about him!

“Patricia, I will never leave you. I promise. I can *never* leave you. That’s impossible.” He sounded so confident. How could that be? I was overwhelmed by the inevitable sad ending of our fairy tale. We’d



often said our late life marriage was a fairy tale come true. But this last chapter looked all wrong and far too tragic. I was still upset as I asked “What about our fairy tale, our happy ending?”

“Patricia,” he said softly, “This one has a happy ending. Wait and see. Promise me you’ll wait and see.” He reached out his hand and we just breathed there, holding hands. We silently made our little lover’s pact that day: *He would never leave me. I would wait and watch for the happy ending.* I tried to believe it was real, that our promises had substance and strength. But that was hard as I watched David slip away.

David died as he wished. Stage four liver cancer took him within forty days of his diagnosis. He refused all treatment. Instead, he said “I’ve practiced meditation clear back to India. It’s good preparation for this. We all get to do this dying thing, Patricia. So, let’s do it for all we’re worth.”

His days of conscious dying hold so many stories it will have its own book. But I want to share this much here. On the night of his death, our house was filled with twenty friends who came to offer a loving kindness meditation. They filled the living room, dining room and upstairs loft, leaving me and David the privacy of the bedroom where he breathed his last just as the meditation ended.

When he was gone, they knew. One by one they silently came up the hall and passed through the bedroom reverently saying their farewells. Someone found me a chair and a shawl. So many candles were lit that I can still see their glow in my mind’s eye. It was a golden, sacred time and I was completely at peace. Was it shock or the work of angels? Perhaps shock is the work of angels.

Oddly, the calm feeling stayed clear through the memorial service. But months of grief and disorientation followed. David had been my anchor and now I was lost at sea. I clung to everything of David’s – the clothes he wore, the mug he drank from, his drum and sage feather –

everything became precious. Every holiday I thought of him. I figured this was how he kept his promise ... in my remembering.

But Life had something else in mind. David began to visit me in dreams, vivid dreams, teaching dreams. In meditation I felt him very close. Whenever I asked for guidance, he seemed to whisper in my ear. Like the strange Outback spell connecting me to The Great Silence, David connected me to The Eternal. Maybe they were the same thing. Whatever I called it, there was a *Something* that pulled me up out of the mundane so I could see the vastness of his life, my life, every life. Seeing things from that perspective changed everything.

And for fun, David came into my mind with his characteristic down-home Texas humor – popping hefty one-liners or verses of scripture. He'd "appear" wearing his favorite Hawaiian shirt or the goofy green apron he used to wear in the kitchen. I'd laugh and say "Dang, David!" or "Thanks, honey." Did I tell people about this? No, not for months! I'd look as nutty as Grandma Story who saw Grandpa in her house for a year after he passed!

But of course, this secret was too good not to tell, so I risked it with a few close friends. They didn't judge. And they wanted to hear from David, too. They also had a need to be pulled up beyond the mundane, to connect with something vast and wondrous. And Life gave them questions. Could this vast perspective provide new answers for them?

Probably, assuredly. So, I began to bring messages from The Eternal realm, starting with a small safe group. As the years rolled by, I continued to practice until now it is the life I live. People phone me in sorrow and confusion and we get still, very still ... and we listen. And The Eternal offers us what we need in the moment. Or sometimes it arrives a bit later. People thank me for my wisdom. But I'm not all that wise. It's more truthful to say I have access to wisdom. And that's possible for everyone. David was my way in. Others may have another way. But it's there, there like the best kept promise.

This way of helping people is so consistent with who I am now that it's become my happy ending ... just to be with people in this tender way. It's transformed my life, which is enough to bring boundless gratitude. But there is one thing more ... a bonus that comes into the most ordinary of days like a moonbeam of magic.

Recently my 22-year-old grandson Titus and I were pulling weeds in the garden. He has his Dad's love for philosophy and, like my son Craig, he enjoys contemplating life's questions. He'd just discovered Alan Watts and wanted to talk about the meaning of life. "So, Grandma," he asked, "Who do you think we really are, here on Planet Earth?" I listened to the wind for a minute. David's voice was often there. David whispered "Ask him." I paused and stared at the green shoots coming up through the red soil. "You first."

"Well," Titus ventured, "I think we're made from stars. I think we're mostly light, but we forget." I paused in wonder. Didn't that sound just so right? "Wow," I said, "Yeah. Stars. Light. Love. That's us." He nodded and we stood up and felt the wind whoosh through the trees. I looked at his blue, blue eyes ... like his Dad's. And I thought "What a bonus!" Then, we were back at it, pulling weeds.

## Lauchlen's Kiss

Today we're on the floor,  
crayons strewn all around us,  
giant poster paper between us.

We're scribbling, scribbling.

His chubby hands, so strong, fiercely meet the paper,  
traveling its surface over and over.

His industry captures me completely.

I am spellbound.

I recite the color words, murmur some encouragement

"Nice, Lauchlen, nice green ... is that your tree?"

It doesn't matter what I say.

He seems not to hear me, so absorbed is he.

We are together. That's what matters.

Suddenly he lifts my hand with his ten tiny fingers  
and draws it to his face,

planting one perfect kiss on the back of my hand --  
then ... back to scribbling ...

The moment so brief, brief as life itself feels to me lately  
and as precious,

as enduring as seven decades of love, family love,  
that moves inside this still beating heart.

Today is a very good day.

## Acknowledgments

I'm ever grateful to you, my sons Kirk and Craig, and you, grandson Titus and godson Turner for all the memories, laughter, tears, challenges and victories that are part of family life. You guys received the first few stories and poems in that little booklet that got this ball rolling. I treasure each one of you and little Lauchlen. Thank you for your uniqueness, and your unconditional love and support. It means everything.

Next, a deep bow to Doug Paulsen, wonderful writer and compassionate editor. Thank you for reading every word and giving kind and constructive feedback over many months. And thanks for your steady leadership of our writing group. Thank you to Annabelle, Dave, Debbie, Dee, Carol, Pam, Stevie, Susan and Terrie. You each heard many first drafts of the stories and poems. Your heartfelt responses kept me going.

Thank you Joyce Marshall, my faithful friend and brilliant editor, for your keen eye, kind heart and honest comments. Mayet Leilani, you inspired many good changes in direction as well as important feedback. Thank you. I offer my thanks to Rose Braun, Elizabeth Augustine, Don and Gwenna Betsill-Brush, Larry and Peggy Rowe-Ward, and Rob Work for your hours of reading and your much needed advice and encouragement.

Thanks to my cousin Marty Spotts, my childhood memory-keeper and supporter through all these years. What a treasure you are! I'm so grateful to Maria and Robert Rubino-Watkins, dear friends and patrons of my fountain, who gave me a peaceful place to write. Thank you, Jack Gilles, matchmaker and Spirit Man. You have helped me keep magic alive.

I want to acknowledge the healers and skillful intuitives who kept me sane over the past few years: Bill Woodward, Kathy Weber, Shiitake Mama, Matthew Gibbons, Ellen Tart-Jensen, Rick Bastine, Keith Coulson, and Denise Childress. And Rev. Anne Clement, my medicine woman,

who kept the land and the lodge ever ready to welcome me. Each of you has helped me walk my talk and stay on my path. You have contributed much to the brightness of this work and you are deeply appreciated.

Without the faithful support of The Silence Foundation Board and Advisory Board this book might never have been completed. Each of you gave of your time, your resources, your wisdom and encouragement over and over again. Our non-profit is icing on the cake of splendid friendships grounded in Spirit. Thank you to Tiffany Patterson, Eric Starkey, Sue Scott, Doug Paulsen, Sheree Hukill, Maurice Hoover, Rev. Helen Taylor, Cathy Coulson, Joyce Marshall, Scottie Gee Hines, and Joni Menard. You have shared your lives with me and helped our world celebrate the power of stories.

And thank you, Tony Iatridis, for your brilliant formatting and the addition of meaningful photos. You made it a book and you were a joy to work with!

I offer respect to this long quarantine we've all experienced. May its uncertainty and painful losses continue to give us a deep sense of the precious nature of every life.

Lastly, I thank you, dear reader, for allowing your life and mine to meet right now. A bow to you, dear heart.

## APPENDIX:

### A Few Notes on Memoir Writing

One of my favorite lessons with children was called “The Grand and Special Use of Words.” It was magic time as we sat in a circle and called out our examples of “ordinary words” like “please pass the potatoes” or “that dog is brown.” Then ... the “grand and special words” like “the sun melted into the ocean” or “the moon has fallen into the creek.” It was funny how often sun, moon, stars and clouds ... also trees, fireflies and wind were on that special list. I realized over time that it wasn’t the words exactly that made an impression. It was the feeling and the meaning my young writers gave to the words and the way they said them. It was also the community of our little circle, the way the sharing created beautiful and unexpected connections.

So, as I invite you to create your own stories or poems based on your experiences, I invite you to fall into each experience. Let yourself trust the grand and special words that come to you. Don’t worry what they will be. Trust them. Trust the magic of your own unique and unrepeatable life ... a life filled with mystery, depth and greatness. Comparing your life to someone else’s will derail you or even stop you. So, give that up. Memoir writing is knowing your story has value, is worthy of sharing and will reach your fellow humans, giving them a much-needed gift. We need each other’s stories to remember how amazing we are, how precious our experiences are.

So, for me the trick is having a bit of fun with the rush of details that pour out onto the paper. This “rush” is something that can be counted on. I’m not sure how it works. It seems that if the mind can grab ahold of the smallest detail, it can use that thread to make the whole dang quilt!

As a mindfulness coach, I’ve come to respect the needs of the mind and its powers. For the mind to be ready to experience that rush or even the tiny thread of a good detail, it has to have some open space. This means time when you are open, relaxed and available. This may seem obvious, but for me I’m either open enough to let something in

or ... I'm not. If I'm not, I'll procrastinate. I'll distract myself. I'll create blocks. If I'm open, words just flow. The first draft is no work at all, just a scramble to get something onto the paper before it vanishes like a dream in daylight. I never mix editing in first draft. It's urgent, messy, pouring out. The work of sharpening or crafting the piece happens later. It's a part of the process, but it has no place in that first draft.

The following tips might help. Follow them if they do. Discard them if they don't.

1. Keep the job small. Telling the whole story of your life feels overwhelming, right? Grab a little easy-to-remember piece. Nothing has to be sequential. A small sketch, a vignette, may feel doable. Start there. You can string a bunch of them together later if you want.
2. Show up with an intention to receive. Ask for images and words about the life you have lived. If it helps, pick a period like childhood. Ask: What wants to come through? Be ready for the picture or the words. Where do they come from? I don't know. I'm not sure I want to know. I like that it's beyond my grasp. I just take myself to the couch or the fountain or under the redbud tree with a pen and paper. I ask and I wait.

Prompts can be useful because they can take you to a place of surprise. It's wild how they prime that pump. I like "I remember," a very basic prompt. But any prompt can help: places you've lived, an important first, a risk you took, a person who loved you unconditionally, a big scare, a time you didn't belong.

Or ... sometimes I'm already in the writing process without meaning to go there. An image or detail has "popped in" to that



strange mindless place I'm in when doing the dishes or mopping the floor. The detail has energy, so I quickly grab a pen. I can feel the signal, the green light to get the words down without much thought about where it's going.

3. When first drafting, keep the pen moving. Allow for stumbling, for awkward, for lousy. Don't be afraid to write badly. Trust your start because once you have something on paper you've got something to work with. That bright first thought has its own trajectory. Allow one detail to lead to another. The mind contains a huge library of visual images and feelings that are begging to find their way, with your help, to the page.
4. Read what you've written out loud. Feel into the sound of it for yourself. Your first edit will happen here and you'll most likely be energized by it. Believe me, even when I want to trash the work, I'm energized. Go figure.
5. Now you might put this first edited version on computer and you'll likely edit again here. This is good, honest work like digging ditches. Trust it just like you've trusted everything up to now.
6. Find a safe person to read what you've written. I like face-to-face and out loud best. But you could let them read it on their own. Some of my writing buddies read my words aloud to me and that's fantastically helpful! A safe and gentle reader can help you clarify the material. This is important. Equally important is the way a good reader can tell you how the writing touched them emotionally – connected with their own experience. If you have a writing partner, make an agreement to always give one another kind and constructive feedback. And, hey, give them a listen even if you don't agree. After all, you asked for it.

7. Picture your audience and believe in your audience. Although I may write at the foot of the fountain, I'm not writing to the fountain. I'm writing to myself first and this audience is vital. When I read a piece, I notice what I'm giving to myself. Is it a memory, a feeling, a learning, an encouragement? If I can sense this and name this (simply, without analysis) then I know my words will connect with the broader audience of fellow humans.
8. Don't second guess yourself too much. A little of that can help sharpen the piece. Too much of it can kill the piece. Some pieces may need to be killed, mind you, but don't be too brutal at the beginning. I try to imagine myself a kindly grandmother here. I try to give myself confidence. And this goes back to my first point: You have lived a life of mystery, depth and greatness. That life lives now in wildly personal details. Those details are in images and pictures and in the grand and special words that have found you. Believe in the magic that you are and in the powerful gift of your stories. The world needs them.

I hope this is helpful to you. If you need a coach, I'd be delighted.  
webbpat1@cox.net

# What If?

What if we're here to find the good, the absolute perfection,  
in everything that comes our way in this life?

This book is an energetic transmission of that idea.

It radiates out into the world charged  
with the intention of helping my fellow travelers.

This book is one among many,  
one story of how we, vulnerable, amazing humans meet life  
and let it transform us time after time.

It's about how we find our way forward,  
embracing new, life-giving energy  
again and again,  
no matter what.

This book is about how Love, Beauty,  
Resilience and Simplicity are lived in the details  
of an ordinary life.

## About the Author

Patricia Webb is a mother, grand-mother and great-grandmother who has devoted her adult life to teaching mindfulness and creative writing as companionable arts. As an Oklahoma Artist-in-Residence for thirty years, Pat has encouraged writers of all ages to share their lives in short stories and poems. As a mindfulness coach and director of The Silence Foundation, Pat brings a passion for meditation, spiritual inquiry and journaling. Her PLAYshops activate that Wise One Within (WOW)! Pat is a coach in memoir writing and harvesting the power of life events.

[www.mindfulnessokc.com](http://www.mindfulnessokc.com) or  
[www.thesilencefoundation.org](http://www.thesilencefoundation.org).



ISBN 9798769907067



90000



9 798769 907067