A Woman's Journey: Not Done Yet

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With a wry, penetrating, and lucid eye, Karen A. Waldron presents her journey in a dynamic array of lyrical poems, travelogues, stories, essays and interviews. Humor abounds in this book as well as grief, a feisty and unapologetic anger at the inequity women confront daily, whether they reside in San Antonio, TX, or Baghdad, and a refusal to settle for the limiting roles to which women have been traditionally assigned. A scholar and educator, Waldron’s life is one of movement—travel to different continents, a restless traveling of the mind, and a travel none of us can avoid—that of time. In an early poem in the collection, “My Own Landscape,” the speaker observes: “How odd to be seventy / and living alone for the first time / Parents, husbands, children / gone ahead or away.” From a stance of loss and wonder, Waldron begins the telling of this journey. A 200-page lyrical argument against ageism, complacency, intolerance, and sexism, Waldron’s poems and stories burst with a life richly and attentively lived. In the poem “Life, Re-Written,” the speaker plays with the idea of rewriting her life: “I’m eliminating Pop’s debilitating Parkinson’s shakes, recalling only his steady callused hand leading me up indented, chipped steps to Ebbets Field.” In other moments, Waldron’s lens widens to encompass the most challenging questions of our times. On the day of the 2019 shooting at the El Paso Walmart, she can’t accept how violence so casually and irretrievably intersects with our lives and seeks refuge in a local San Antonio Mexican restaurant, La Gloria, where she finds a reprieve from “TV’s eviscerated images” in the ambiance and foods of her home city: “Enchiladas Verdes. Pastel de Tres Leches. Margaritas de la Casa. Body-swaying music.” In “Soul Bullet,” the speaker recalls the tragic 2022 shooting at Robb Elementary in Uvalde, TX, and asks if societal healing is truly possible: “Can we weld / back together / this stained glass / of broken pieces?” Through dark humor and a love of language and discovery, Waldron takes her reader on an unforgettable and candid journey, and the reader who experiences it with her is treated to a gutsy, affectionate, and unforgettable look at life in all its painful and marvelous facets.

—Alexandra van de Kamp, Author of Ricochet Script and Kiss/Hierarchy

A powerful, reflective, and poignant journey regarding the perspectives of womanhood and those moments that shape who we are. Karen uses prose and poetry that meanders through her heart and mind sometimes like a gentle hill and other times like a majestic mountain. This journey is both personal and universal. You feel the depths of connection, inner spirituality, and growth that remind us of our humanity and how we fundamentally have more in common with one another than we do differences.

—Michelle Vasquez, Essayist and Storyteller

What an understatement to say that over the decades, Karen Waldron has seen a few things. As traveler, teacher, and writer she has been an intrepid observer of the human condition around the world. Pour yourself a cup of tea, sit in a peaceful spot and learn how “one woman’s heart overflows with another’s sorrow.” Hear the ringing of “the next seductive note” in those “time baked bodies.” Explore why her “house isn’t really empty” and how “maybe like yeast bread, Care rises.” Enjoy this celebration of what matters—for Waldron is clearly “not done yet.”

—Lucy Griffith, Award-Winning Author of We Make a Tiny Herd

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A WOMAN’S JOURNEY: 
NOT DONE YET
A Woman’s Journey: Not Done Yet

A Collection of Poetry & Stories

Karen A. Waldron
In Memory of my Mother,

Mary Murray Powers
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Through insightful teaching and mentoring, Poet and Gemini Ink Executive Director, Alexandra van de Kamp introduced me to Prose Poetry’s breadth as a way to expand words and sensory images while avoiding traditional genre limitations. Her expert editing and design suggestions are evident in many pieces of this work. Alexandra’s words as a Reader of the completed manuscript speak of the Spirit she infuses in us all.
Michelle Vasquez’s review tells of her own journey’s goal to bring us all together personally and professionally in commonality despite differing life experiences. As writer, storyteller, and coordinator of Leadership Women Texas activities, she invites us to join her welcoming Circle.

Lucy Griffith’s reflections on this book mirror her powerful, contemplative Poetic spirit and support of others’ work. After we first met through Gemini Ink in 2017, she immediately located a lovely weekend Writer’s Retreat for me in Comfort Texas, with invitation to join kindred spirits to read and critique each other’s pieces at the beautiful Comfort Public Library. (I have a hand-made heart next to this computer keyboard, with Comfort Poet Judi Youngers’ script from our very first meeting: To a new literary friend with poetry in her heart.) Sundays, their Book Club included me in engrossing discussions across genre. They welcomed me as only writers can do.

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In response to participants’ skillful on-line critiques from Tina Barry’s Poetry Barn in New York, I explored micro-fiction’s possibilities as a means to abbreviate, while relate, life’s multitude of experiences.

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I’m incredibly blessed by amazing family, who always expect and encourage me to take that new, inviting path forward.
A WOMAN’S JOURNEY:
NOT DONE YET
INTRODUCTION

In my writing, I start with the wound and then take it forward to see what we can do.
—Amanda Gorman, Interview, after Reading for a United Nations Delegation

“You have to find light in the shadows,” my husband, Mike Kutchins, observed as we wandered about shaded historic corridors at San Antonio’s Mission San José that heat-simmering Sunday. Long-lens cameras dangled from our braided shoulder straps in wait for the perfect-picture blend of welcome light to peer through near-impenetrable shade.

While directed toward photos that subdued day, his words have remained with me as a means to also envision Life’s images, to find light in the shadows of our personal and collective journeys. As Amanda Gorman notes, we need to start where the wounds are and then go forward to heal them.

With violence and discrimination raging globally and at home, in my poetry and stories I walk through the many shadows of our turbulent times to consider ways that we can move ahead to light and lighten our way and that of others. Themes in this book evolve from personal, but humanly shared, experiences across gender, race, ethnicity and geo-politics.

I have to focus my own lens, so I write about Woman because that is my experience. I explore who we women are throughout our earlier years, how we can continue an exciting, involved while evolving, journey as we grow older.
Who am I now? Who can I be in the future? We may tend to ignore these personal questions and introspections, as we typically spend our lives giving care to others, from birth to death.

How difficult to be the solid Rock of family and society when our days are constantly split into pebbles, as unsalaried “task managers.” But because our bodies and hearts continue to call us to be Nurturers, we don’t/won’t/can’t turn our eyes away from Domestic and Global issues.

Yet it can be very hard to take risks and set a new path when we as women are so often overburdened by being told how we should behave or by cultural rules and laws that prohibit or severely punish our calls for equity for everyone. Gender stereotypes result in overt and covert discrimination—They damage and sour our sense-of-self.

And perceptions of older women can be extremely limiting and painful, as esteem and sense of worth are so often based on how others regard us. Elderly hearts are broken and spirits damaged by comments such as, “You must have been pretty when you were younger,” or immediately after the loss of a spouse/partner, “Will you move from your home now that you can’t take care of it by yourself?” Such stereotypes make us feel unappealing physically, and incompetent, helpless. As we move through life, women of all ages want to be vital to our precarious community.

In these writings, I encourage women to embrace risk and courage, challenge stereotypic Ageism, along with its perceived roles and restrictions that may limit self-worth in later years. Poetry and prose pieces encompass personal, regional, and global themes across our shared experiences in diverse environments,
with a focus on moving ahead through these tumultuous times and overwhelming life events with which we’re all faced.

The Theme *If Not Now, Then When?* begins with this search “toward an unpredictable skyline,” in discovery of “The bond between women, /extremely powerful” and “How odd to be seventy/and living alone for the first time.” Personal reflections consider how we might like to see our “Life, Re-Written” without inevitable loss and tragedy. But the focus is that we have to put those past events behind and finally confront “Who I can Be.”

*Where Can a Journey Take Us?* explores commonality across continents, of listening to voices as we commune with nature, cry out for change to overcome oppression. In Ireland’s mystical silence, Kinsale Harbor’s history and The Burren’s barrenness bring introspection, meditation. Meanwhile, voices from Vietnam and Mexico ask, “Why do only we women always seem to stay?” Cuba’s *Damas de Blanco* rally, notify, horrify, as they wait in their personal prisons for the release of husbands, sons, governmental protestors incarcerated for their belief in free expression. And educators and parents across Australia and New Zealand share their hopes and endless work to improve lives of children with disabilities, to move them from isolation to inclusion.

In *Tumultuous Times*, I reflect on the impact of regional and international violence and our need to integrate stability and equity into an angry world. *No Hace Falta Morir* and *Soul Bullet* explore mass shootings in El Paso and Uvalde and how we must push beyond their unfathomable senselessness. I share the rage outbursts of verbal attacks I received as an American speaking at an international conference of women in Baghdad—and how afterwards we still were able to talk with each other civilly and caringly in spite of mountains of difference.
In *When Our World Speaks the Unspeakable*, I first consider the diaspora present in my own home from my mother’s witnessing the brutal outcomes of Magdelen Laundries and Mother and Baby Homes during her childhood in Ireland, and then share her ways of moving forward in life, despite them. This theme also includes pieces on women’s courageous support of others during their own severe illness: “With weight far greater than mine,/ how does their spirit re-charge,/ remain outside Cancer’s long fingers,/ to lift up me, a Stranger?” Additionally, the pure strength of women is magnified during and after the finality of losing a spouse, partner, or family member. We go forward because Rocks cannot shatter if they’re going to provide a foundation.

These thoughts flow into the Theme *Take the High Road*, to consider “What makes a good person,/ a person be good?” What are the loving qualities of our family members, mentors, friends, that sustain us as we pass through life’s paths? And when others disrespect and take advantage of us for money or power, our own introspective anger can feel very justifiable. My interview with Dr. Maya Angelou encompasses her own courageous actions while overcoming profound racial discrimination.

In *Hold the Hand of a Child*, I consider the nature of child abuse in words from the abused and abuser, as well as from my own professional and volunteer experiences in child advocacy: “So we won’t always look away.” I include my conversation with Dr. Doris Kearns Goodwin, who recalls how the support of a warm, caring family guided her from a childhood overwhelmed by her mother’s chronic illness toward a brilliant personal career. Additional stories of children with physical and emotional needs explore ways we might help them reach their potential—because, as Charles Dickens reminds us, “... it is not a slight thing when they who are fresh from God, love us.”
The concluding theme, *Women Are Not Done Yet*, emphasizes that as we age, women can continue to make a profound difference in our immediate and global communities by putting our increasing physical limitations in perspective with the critical experiences still ahead, ones that can impact us all. My thoughts here vacillate between the wisdom of Barbara Kingsolver, “The longer a sauce cooks, the spicier it gets,” and that of Coleen Grissom, “Let’s face it: You’re too old to procrastinate!”

Throughout poems and stories, I share my belief that we can direct our future, that in the shadows of these times, no matter age or where previous paths have taken us, we still have many more candles to light for ourselves and for others.
If Not Now, Then When?

Lift up your eyes
Upon this day breaking for you.
Give birth again
to the dream.

—Maya Angelou, “On the Pulse of Morning”
MORE CANDLES TO LIGHT

I’m an addicted Candle Lighter. This chubby childhood body was dragged into chapels, cathedrals, countryside churches by a stoic nun-like Mother, the Ultimate Candle Lighter. It’s in my gene pool, like milk and sugar in bottomless cups of Barry’s Gold Blend tea.

While I’m not traditionally religious these days, I think Mom was onto something. With the right agent she would have reaped profit from minting a 1950’s “Mindfulness” movement before anyone knew what it was. Together, we inhaled musky incense, smelled dying flowers left over from weddings, meditated without becoming monks.

So it was no surprise when many years later, I wandered into San Fernando Cathedral to think, not think, light a candle to La Virgen de Guadalupe in my Mother’s memory. Creeping dark shadows belied both saintly holiness of this place and August’s grilling Texas sun outside.

Uniquely private, candle-lighting is communal with unspoken rules: Shared space, so you wait your turn. And be quiet, really quiet—like when handing your Dad tools as he works deep under the hood of his car. In churches’ sacred settings, I recalled Mom’s (very loud) “Shhh . . .” if I tried to whisper anything at all.

Those directives followed me that San Antonio day. So I was jolted by grieving sounds as a humbled woman—aged somewhere between 40 and 50—knelt at looming Altar’s base. Her streamed tears poured hope as trembling hand ignited a frail fire-stick.

Better or worse, one woman’s heart overflows with another’s sorrow. Was it illness, divorce, death of partner or child? Elevated by steadfast silence, she swallowed murky air’s narcotic, completed her task, left in quiet dignity.

*Maria, Madre de Dios* . . .

*Maria, Madre de Dios* . . .

*Maria, ................

Face still smeared from raspberry Raspa, a tiny grandson rested his hand on her shaky arm while his mother guided quivering flame to candle’s wick. Many untold stories there as love glowed.

My own turn now. How ironic that with stick held steady, eyes searching, I could find no more candles to light. Why did I feel relieved?

Had my imagined burdens melted, now only a flicker in comparison to others’ more significant needs?

Perhaps too much contemplation had brought me distortions in Reflection’s mirror. No time now to push Life’s *Pause* button.

With lighter steps away from San Fernando’s dusk and into blasting heat outside, paths beckoned as I recognized my own untold blessings.
Several years later, visiting New York one chilly, cloudless morning, I felt pulled toward the “Ground Zero” Monument. Its wings soared into Heaven’s reach, Time’s spiritual re-ignition. Phoenix born from ashes.

Observation Tower glass engulfed hushed foreign-tongue melodies as tourists gestured in awe. Tiny ships meandered cold calm Harbor. Then stark quiet. We saw the Statue still holding her huge torch—a mammoth candle.

In 1927, that light had welcomed my Mother, age 17—a scared, hopeful Indentured Servant from Cobh, County Cork. Risking entry to America’s unknown world, how could that young girl imagine that her own daughter, now an old woman, would someday look upon those tragi-triumphant waters?

I felt awe at Mom’s plight and pride in this city’s welcome. Smiling inside, I recalled her stern voice, undercut by Irish humor. With unyielding New York loyalty, she’d observe, “Anything west of the Hudson River falls off the face of the Earth.”

Recent decades contrasted, bespoke Hell’s hatred. Pathos. September 11 was a day we’ll never forget. Buildings fell, bodies burned close by this very spot.

Now, immigrants and immigrant children gathered, stood tall from this re-built Tower height as hope again poured a grateful beacon onto those choppy waves. Bravery may flicker, but it’s hard to extinguish.

Have seared souls who passed through here left still more candles to light?
I guess you can’t take the Irish-Catholic out of this woman. Afterwards, my inevitable taxi ride to St. Patrick’s Cathedral. “White-washed, clean now,” the driver nodded in approval at the glowing architecture.

Oblivious—or not—that his beard, Arabic name on hanging ID tag, might have focused false alarms when he picked me up earlier at the Trade Center, he now dropped me off close by the massive church.

Yet, we shared both places. Two humans putting aside centuries of turmoil.


Standing here these decades later, I saw through my own childhood eyes that stiff Sunday Choir chair next to friends, re-heard giggles, quieted shouts as bodies jarred with each blared jolt of Organ pipe pronouncements.

In our small-town embryonic Long Island church, the Priest had been so big. So scary. We lived in fear of his thunderous voice, more intimidating than any sustained bass note. Mortal Sin always loomed. Fear kept us in line as within a pulsating womb.

I re-felt panic chills as my mind flashed back to age thirteen: A huge, intimate crowd of families. Staccato camera-clicks burst through pristine stillness. My white organza dress flowed up church’s aisle, one of petrified goslings in Processional. Our awkward toddler-like movements jerked toward foreboding black Habits of Priests and Nuns.
At Altar’s step, eyes lowered as practiced, I still recalled my bride-like reflection as it bounced off a Clergy’s shiny black shoe. With solemn nod, he anointed me Mary, the Confirmation name I’d chosen in my Mother’s honor. Having passed the test, I re-joined the young celebrants’ line.

Now, sixty years later, far longer lines formed in St. Patrick’s Cathedral, as worshippers’ lowered heads passed by me to receive their Communion. Returning as solemn pilgrims to pews’ kneelers, in chorus they chanted *Thanks be to God.*

Within minutes, they rose, departed in satisfaction out huge front doors to embrace city bedlam. New crowds poured inside as a different Priest rushed onto Cathedral stage to open the next Mass. Assembly lines to Heaven.

I wandered alone in search of more subdued chambers, other secluded areas behind the Cathedral’s main Altar. Silence. An open door beckoned me into small, near-swallowed space.

*Lady Chapel* was inscribed on its unpretentious plaque.

Inside, several inch-high candles burned, exhaled smoke upward from a worn, patterned wood stand. They pulled at my heart. I walked down the short main aisle, just several abbreviated pews for prayerful wanderers.

With an odd sensation of being observed, I looked up.

Mother Mary.
Her serene statue greeted visitors, peaceful non-complacent wisdom chiseled into soft, fleshy face.

Soul-opiate. Rainbowed stained-glass windows towered behind, yet faded in contrast to her body poise. She seemed the only Presence in the Chapel.

Home. I felt home. Delighted, I pressed dollars into the copper candle-stand’s bronzed slot, and then scorched a coffee-stirrer-sized piece of wood into a deep red flame. Finally, I would light that candle.

My eyes searched about. Except for the miniscule number already burning, every other glass candle holder sat empty. No more candles!

God humor. Through barely restrained tears of amusement, I re-heard my Mother’s Irish accent in her frequent, exasperated sigh at Life’s impossibilities: “Jā-sus, Mary and Joseph!”

My brain observed: You can’t make this stuff up! I covered my mouth to keep from laughing.

Close by me in Lady Chapel, I heard a father whisper to his two pre-teen sons: “You need to look around for the candles to put in those holders. They’re hidden over there.”

We tracked his pointed finger toward a carton immersed in deep shadows. Virginal, unlit candles awaited, spilled everywhere.

While a few other Chapel visitors followed us, no one dared move that box into plainer sight.

Perhaps each had to experience some darkness to discover these lights.
In that obscure, quiet corner, while sorting through the box’s prolific overflow, I grasped a candle with sculpted wax rounded underneath, like a teacup. How familiar it felt!

My eyes jolted to the candle box label. I inhaled irony at the foreign shipping stamp’s bold block letters:

**MADE IN IRELAND**

My heart roared in delight at the obvious: *Of course, Mom!*

Flame poised in silent salute, I lit a candle to my Marys.

Without penance, I strolled past an open Confessional, slid through Cathedral’s front doors, and followed my Mother’s Journey into an unpredictable skyline.
A WOMAN’S JOURNEY

You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them.
—Maya Angelou

Your journey starts
with the baby doll you hold
in your own cradle.

Prompted by outside
to love and nourish inside,
your lifetime walk begins.

Watch, counsel, guide
brothers, sisters, friends,
clean up messes seeping under life’s door.

Do well in school, yet not so very well
that you won’t be liked.
It’s important to be liked.

And beautiful, to allure boys,
while just a bit thinner, so girls won’t hate you.
Then you’ll be in control.

Learn what to text, not to sext,
when to taunt, stop, how to hold men,
then push them away, stirringly.
Profession? Spouse? Kids? All can be yours, yet they’ll seem to clamor at once.

Nascent, fluid, fragmented, esteem constructed from roles Academy-played while wittingly loving the Dance.

Tenderly holding a child, soothing a lover, fulfilled, unspilled together.

Exhilarated, tired, aching heart emboldened by shared laughter and tears.

Outwardly social, pulled by introspection cherishing the Woman in your soul.

Lying alone in bed these late years, you wonder who you became while you never found who you are.

Where have you really been all this time while you’ve just been there taking care?
THE BOND (NO DISRESPECT)

What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?
The world would split open.
—Muriel Rukeyser

January, 2017

The bond between women,
supremely powerful,
lets us touch, feel, share
depth beyond reason.

Criticized for charged emotions,
these very embers
ignite us, burning with passion
to feel more, do more.

Bonds become bondage though,
when afraid to risk
or urged to compete with those
who sense us best.

We hear, “No disrespect intended,
but a woman boss?” or
“Women aren’t team players,
just a cat-fight waiting to happen.”
So what do I tell my granddaughters—
Compete with other girls,
be prettier, get dates, marry richer?
Plan, hope, but don’t do.

Avoid math, science, arts, the poor.
Know, yet never raise your hand, voice,
or stand alone, proud on Life’s risky stage.
Dare nothing, lest others disapprove.

Does bondage bring blame
that we’re not tough enough?
Why can’t we be personally driven
without driving each other away?

After Inauguration Day
as women marched in protest,
no violence, yet raw, charged fear
slit again oppression’s open wound.

From 5th Ave. to Eiffel Tower,
their presence said *No more!*
*We can be held back no more!*
*Don’t just tolerate, but respect us.*

The new President preened,
boasted of his own sexual assaults,
again victimized us all
by mocking, tweeting, ignoring.
Yet how immeasurable that day was,
women together to remove limits,
share, push back hard
without losing heart.

Life will be tougher for us now as
we move from style to substance,
embrace different kinds of beauty,
shared souls holding each other’s hands.

We’re no longer objects.
This new bond, genuine, real,
can’t be sliced by cleavers
wielded by the powerful or rich.

As pretty becomes petty,
women knowingly nod at each other,
in tacit encouragement
for the role we each play.

My friend is not my foe.
We are a rock who can’t be split.
As we dare, we move our feet,
carry daughters, granddaughters

Forward . . .
MY OWN LANDSCAPE

*She was looking for a landscape of her own, a new park. A life where she was no longer anyone’s daughter or sister.*
—Alejandro Zambra

*San Antonio, Texas—2015*

How odd to be seventy
and living alone for the first time.
Parents, husbands, children
gone ahead or away.

Quiet, peace too quiet,
urges to talk, touch
compelling me outward,
somewhere, anywhere.

No need to be responsible,
yet craving responsibility.
Time melts into candle wax
after we’re given gold watches.

What’s in this new landscape—
Naps? Bingo? Cruises?
Maybe dinner at 4:30,
with TV in the backdrop, for noise.
What a dinosaur park,
leaving the brain unsalvageable.
Binoculars missing,
distance cataract-blurred.

How about not knowing
if the landscape is safe,
uneven, scary,
or even handicapped-accessible?

No longer daughter, wife,
who will care
if I leave home without notice—
Why should it matter?

It’s not running away,
just not doing or being
what the world expects
at a certain age.

Not having to explain
an inexplicable need
to be absolutely necessary,
caring for, while not being cared for.

A word to strangers:
Don’t call me “Sweetie” at the grocery,
or dismiss my reflections as “Cute,”
lest your surreal pummel my real.
Must a bucket list define my future, or can it overflow with give-back, not pay-back?

Trees bear sweet fruit in my landscape, or might-have-done’s become charred-glass potholes.

Laughing, as a child corrects my Spanish, soothing battered women’s bruises, enabling, not disabling another’s dreams.

I’ll need more time in this life, especially to tell my family and friends how I love them immeasurably.

So while I live alone now, my house isn’t really empty. Each night I come home no longer asking “Who Am I?”

Finally confronting Who I Can Be.
Life, Re-Written

I’m eliminating Pop’s debilitating Parkinson’s shakes, recalling only his steady callused hand leading me up indented, chipped steps to Ebbets Field, then eons later, The Shea. And my cringing embarrassment at neighbors’ shared smiles as those same rough hands proudly comported each new report card to their speckled-vinyl kitchen tables.

I won’t move to a Levittown-type track home this time, amidst rows of identical boxes with stick trees planted by a bored God. No plowed-flat dead potato fields. I’ll remain in Brooklyn’s bus-screched, third-floor apartment, crucifixes of tormented Jesus on every wall, neighbors shouting, gesturing wildly, laughing, crying together, together. And no Polio.

I’ll stay where Aunt Josie’s tomato vines sprout from rectangular dirt boxes clinging to a fire escape outside her half-open kitchen window. Marinara bubbling in the pot as she guides my chubby fingers to press pulpy dough squares, ricotta spilling everywhere. We’ll sing dramatically in Operatic Italian to my favorite doll—a frilly pink arrogant Lady poised on her padded plastic chair.

And I’ll walk that city block home with my dear friend, Petsi, her mother’s body overflowing as she boisterously hoists us together onto a huge lap, pops tongue-burning puertorriqueño treats into begging mouths, our words mimicking hers in a language we don’t know is foreign. Bellies burp-filled, she’ll give us those final fleshy hugs, skillfully dropping us downward to be replaced rapidly by more of her clamoring clan.

I’ll move my Long Island friends to Lafayette and DeKalb in Brooklyn, have us skipping rapid rope, chanting *A my name is Alice, I live in Alaska, and I raise ant-eaters*, jumping across Potsy squares chalked on cracked sidewalks, sitting on stoops at sunset gossiping...
about cute boys at school. Shared adventures, giggles, love would remain. Except for those who bullied me: *Fairy tales can’t come true, it can’t happen to you if you’re fat like Karen.*

In my life revision, they’ll have Leprosy or at least Syphilis, experience chronic snack-attacks, sand kicked in their faces as they breach their own bikinis at Coney Island. I’ll be svelte, wearing sunscreen as I mock them, wise with early understanding that tans are not lobster red. They will pay now and later. . . .

My grandparents won’t all have died before I was born, but spoil me with laughter, always laughter, in exaggerated stories about life’s lessons learned. During endless Pinochle games, they’ll regale with tales of cousins who fought in the IRA, a great-grandparent crossing Russia by foot to escape the Czar’s wrath, indentured servitude to get to Ellis Island where somebody would misspell their family name, changing it forever. Over countless cups of milk-and-sugar tea, years later sips of Taylor’s Port, they’ll teach me how to wrap life’s arms around my own tiny grandchildren someday. And advise me to buy stock early in AT&T.
ENDLESS POSSIBILITIES

*Anyone can die. But living?*
—Nina George

We all need places
of endless possibilities,

where unleashed
  mindscapes
form solitude’s
  perimeter.

Outlier banks compel me,
inner ones too,

mysterious evolutions—
spiritless, fleshless, timeless . . .

Must frightening,
  enticing cliffs

claim us, like lemmings
lured to precarious places?

Why are life’s lessons
written with invisible ink?
We find the perfect spot, person, until

midnight chimes ring on our iPhone.

Next day, new decisions, panoramic porch,

seductive views in all directions . . .

Is someone really at the door or just that stray wind knocking?

Morning’s cleansing sponge wipes away

nightmares’ narcotic lulls, as

mind’s horizon countertop glistens, reckons, beckons.

And in a finger-snap, it’s time to travel on.
Rimless ocean?
Saber-toothed mountain?

Personal peace?
Private war?

Perhaps fond, familiar,
destructive, disturbing.

unbanked rip-tides tow, toss us
into waves’ crashing onslaught.

Endlessly . . . .
AN ODE TO CHANGE

When I’m lying
on life’s cushy
sofa, dozing
in afternoon
lazy-girl sun

that blinding
Change-attack
erupts, spews
volcanic lava,
scorches, buries

my heart-empowered
universe, tumbles
me floorward, shouts
“Get your lazy arse up—
Nothing is forever!”

Rotating my dial
from Classic
to Jazz
to Hip-Hop
just when

I’m humming
my favorite old
song, in-tune.
Change carries me to
crazy crises unanswered,

haunted strangers’
stories, friends,
enemies in-waiting,
random risks,
cliff-diving risks.

While the Joker’s GPS
yells “Make a U-Turn,”
Change’s torch
excretes exhaust smoke,
expels flame-darts
at frailty, hurls me

into compassionless
night. Its belly-laughs
echo. My go-forthedness
sprouts from necessity’s
scorched seed.

Searching past embers,
painful memories clear
a path, find footprints
around chaotic debris,
leading me back to
temporary comfort.
The moment I taste
perfectly chilled wine,
tantalizing bitterness deludes

as sofa’s sorbet
warily awaits
new morning-expresso’s
soul-fracturing
earthquake.

So Change,
I swim in your
ocean, swallow
salty water,
spit it out.

Unforgiving
rip-tides pull me
further, further,
each time to drown
in invisibility.

If shape-shifting
delights you
that day, will I
encounter Jonah
in a whale’s belly,
hungry sharks
snapping at
my sailboat,
or horizon’s
rainbowed hue?

Enough character
building yet?
I’ve earned
Scout’s broken-
dream badges,

felt a child’s
enchanting hugs,
known life’s torturous
disappointments,
its mesmerizing pinnacles.

How about calm
currents, lulling
waves to replace tsunami
crashes?

Once. . . .

Just once. . . .

Change, I’ve grown fond of you,
but can’t you change too?
Where Can a Journey Take Us?

*When we don’t know where life is taking us, we are never lost.*

—Paolo Coehlo, “The Spy”
KINSALE HARBOR

Kinsale, Ireland, July 5, 2000:

Jellied water’s plump ripples,
a fat bee attacks my perfumed hair
as motors overtake
lines of rainbowed sails
weaving warily home.

Hoses spray emptied fisher-boats,
nets pour glassy-eyed Cod onto
dock-side trucks, amidst
gull-attack screeches,
dinner demands for spoils.

Kinsale Harbor settles in
boisterous cacophony,
as town dogs, car horns
duel dusk sonatas—before
Fiddlers’ stomp begins.

Trill birds laugh as
Pubs drink in money—
Yacht sails lowered
when day-life ends,
tourists spend, spend again.

Fat clouds threaten,
recede as if a Rain-Joke,
while Faerie mist envelops
lush Irish land . . .
then evaporates as
red-black streaks
permeate muted sky,
portend another day’s
rough ride.
While fisher-boats exhale,

Lighthouse Lullabies recall a
torpedoed Lusitania,
sunk close by, in the
Old Head of Kinsale—
1195 passengers died.

Memories embalm calm,
Litanies for those lost.
Rosary-prayers beseech
no more World Wars,
for Sailors’ safe waters and
good Catch, despite Climate’s
ever-changing choices.

Noisy Nocturnal Novenas
swell now with rising breeze, as
tomorrow’s tide beckons,

Beckons . . .
THE BURREN (BOIREANN)

Endless waves of flat Great Rock
horizon-less desperation paying
tomb-like tribute to
civilization's green denial.

Huge daunting stones squashed
together like awkward marshmallows
belie unfathomed lush beauty of
Ireland’s West Coast.

The Burren is a lonely place.
It tells you when your soul’s in order
or needs an amphetamine fix
of Pub laughter, Fiddler’s chord.

Raw, wild, feckless,
Atlantic shore beckons
with Siren’s call,
never to be trusted. Never.

The Night too is a lonely place.
Haunting, devoid of all but stealth,
phantoms creeping into mind,
decisions undone by dawn’s light.
I’ve been on Burren’s cliffs
and in Night’s abyss,
vertigo toward drowning sea
or vortex sucking ever inward.

Are sleeping, drowning so different?
Lulls of temporary or permanent rest
beyond mindfulness, whispering *Inhale . . . Exhale.*
As we age, such pull to escape it all.

Danger wears night goggles.
Complacency holds our fragile, blue-veined hand,
feeds fear of falling on rocks.
Chair replaces challenge.

But we can re-birth
that tiny child in us,
pushed freshly from God’s womb
into Possibility’s rip-tide.

Jolted away from blurred vision,
immersed naked, sensual,
as Burren *and* Night swaddle us tightly,
restoring, never swallowing.

Wonder overcomes exhaustion.
Without danger there is no life.
We need to risk, walk over rocks into the sea
so that we can rise again in the morning.
LAS VOCES DE CUBA

There is no agony like a story that goes untold.
—Maya Angelou

Havana, November, 2015:

From Cuba’s subduction
Sirens’ voices pour forth,
bone-marrow dance rhythms entice,
inhale, swallow even reluctant souls.

Vintage Chevys, Fords reek, leak.
Asbestos water sickens.
Dream-disillusioned Elderly decay,
stay, while those who can, move away.

Our group had gotten good at
“Entitled Tourist Shared-Shudder,”
so with disdain, we whined,
Where’s a Wi-Fi connection?

Nothing works here.
Nothing’s available.
Can’t believe I have to pay
for a piece of toilet paper!

Un sueño malo.
Whose bad dream is it,
Cuba’s blinding rum hangover
pounding, resounding for decades?

Without electricity, can this
dis-illuminated path be lighted?
Will Socialism or Capitalism
surge, emerge, converge?

Yet, less fear on streets than I’d feared.
Homes now galleries,
tiny kitchens as restaurants,
animation amidst destruction.

And always the taunt of body music,
pressing movement despite
skin-scorching sun, with
Military eyes focused on everyone.

Seductively, Cuba’s rich blood still
pours paint onto worn, un-crushed canvas.
Frenzied pulses thrill, throb, as
Voices climax over dead seas—

Our spirit isn’t broken!
Permitanos, let us tell of
Fidel, the unyielding God
who wraps our lives in chains.

Allow us to be heard. . . .
Fidel is Dead

Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison.
—T.S. Eliot

Havana, November 25, 2016:

Granma* News Report:
“Cuba’s great baseball slugger left the realm of this world for immortality . . .”

Less metaphorically,
Fidel is dead,
perhaps really dead this time.

Yet, for Damas de Blanco**
unfathomed soul-death continues,
bare tinges of profound hope.

Heart holes: Husbands, sons,
activistas in prison, buried for decades without gravestones.

Finger-worn photos pinned onto
sun-bleached dresses: Cherished faces,
living/dead, Sunday Mass ghosts.
Damas de Blanco rally,
sanctify, notify, horrify,
dump raw anger into empty containers.

Miren a mi esposo . . . a mi hijo!
What do they look like today after Hell for twenty years?

Will our daughter ever see them?
Me, never hold them again?
We march, we spit at Fidel, Raúl!

Just one year ago,
in our reclining seats, air-conditioned van,
local tour guide’s microphone squealed:

Crazy women, just ignore them!

Illegal cigar shops, rum toasts over lunch—
Can’t drink the water! How easy
to forget those who must not be forgotten.

Why were we, our First-World “smart” phones,
so stupid to not record Las Damas’ pain, loss,
in our idle pictures? How seductive to forget . . .
Back home now, we read on-line that Fidel is dead. Mourning allowed, but no Marches for nine days, while *Las Damas* wait in their own prisons.

*Granma,* official newspaper, Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, was named after the yacht that carried Fidel from Mexico to Cuba in 1956 to support the Revolution.

**Damas de Blanco** or “Women in White,” have marched for many years in Old Havana after Sunday Mass, protesting the long-term incarceration of Activist family members by the Castro government.
OUR CANVAS

High-backed standard-quality office chair creaks in tilt-mode. Wide desk absorbs all available space. My bare feet rest on translucent plastic cover over coarse carpet of mid-stage-ripe avocado green, caramel brown flecks. Paled windowless walls.

Close by others. Close to no one. My office door always open to hallway’s paned glass view of Mesquite and Red Oak branches. Cumulus hats perch on blue Texas skies.


Those women’s turquoise beads flow like the water they carry in etched clay pots. Breeze-swayed terra-cotta-colored gauze garments float sensuously above subtle, liquid bodies.

Charcoal black slits for eyes gaze beyond sand into inner distances. No mouths to tell of happiness, sorrow.

Yet, hidden languages pass between us, as we

- work
- wonder
- worry
- wait

My mind wanders back to

*Easter Sunday Barbecue at Buddy Mullan’s home. Sunburned crowd rotates picnic tables.*
My four teenaged sons’ laughter as onioned burgers, salsa, guacamole drip from their mouths, plates.

Boys then. Men now. Moved away.

Why do only we women always seem to stay?

Mai Hiên’s Oil Self-Portrait pulls me back to my desk’s right-hand wall. With shocked color in canvas-splashed background, her hugely present, dignified woman regards me with knowing, unknowable eyes.

Profiled face shadows interrupted by scarlet paint splashes. Black-hued hair up-swept from un-furrowed forehead. Teasing tendrils dangle.

Sandstone skin tones, down-swept to near-bare breast. Yet, hard to tell: Is she or isn’t she fully exposed? And to what, or whom?

Her elongated hands, fingers extend across the canvas, become paint brushes: Magenta. Fire-orange. Military Khaki.

Her deep-set gaze stares into mine, reveals heartbreak within amused, bemused stories—From a haughty personal distance to observe it all.

From my own memory’s pictures, I recall . . .

That precarious ladder in Mai Hiên’s tiny, sun-lit Hanoi Studio. Her swift business-woman-pull of that Self-Portrait, down off the steep painting-laden wall.
Pride that it was just home from the National Gallery’s Exhibit.

Yet, her immediate refusal to also sell another very different painting:

Placed away from the others, balanced on a large easel close by her own desk, while impossible to hide.

“This one is special to me.”

“I understand.”

In her favored painting, through muted blends of green-blue rural isolation, a pony-tailed mother carries one child, as her other protective arm guides a back-packed son forward.

A Journey . . . Toward school? Daily field labor? Both?

Beneath a Fuchsia canopy, the family walks into Vietnam’s unforeseeable future.

Together.

After pacing privately, stopping, hesitating in deep consideration, Mai Hiên makes a phone call to her second husband. In my ear-shot he speaks with kind persuasion, convinces her to sell it to me.

I object: “No. You don’t want to sell this painting. You should keep it for yourself.”

“It’s time to let it go,” she reflects.
Her tear-brimmed eyes pour volumes as she tenderly lifts that brilliant portrait from her Studio easel. Into my arms.

Is it ever right to ask someone to give up something she loves so much?

Today, I look at that treasured painting now hanging to the left of my desk.

As she leads her children through Life’s path, their mother speaks to me silently of care, compassion, concern, change.

My worn computer keyboard exhales a familiar magnetic perfume.

It beckons, reminds me

We speak Woman here
AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND:
SUBSTANCE AND SURPRISES
ON ACADEMIC LEAVE

Fall, 2004

As we walked through the Rocks quarter of Sydney, the lovely cafes and boutique shops belied the English prison settlers who built the city in the 1780’s along the harbor’s edge. They could not have imagined that centuries later this splendid city would be known to the world for its remarkable Opera House landmark and New Year’s display of fireworks over the harbor bridge. During these first two months of our four-month journey, my husband, Mike Kutchins, and I couldn’t anticipate the personal and professional friendships that would soon develop, the openness of a people where even teens on the street stopped and chatted, or the markets ranging from stalls full of collectibles to the elegance of Queen Victoria’s shops with international models posing for photographers. Indeed, over time Sydney developed before our eyes as a city of contrasts, and each of them remarkable.

I was on Academic Leave for the fall semester, collaborating with my 30-year colleague and friend at Renwick College, Dr. Mike Steer, as we created on-line handbooks for teachers of students with vision and hearing impairments to use in mainstream classrooms. We felt the project to be meaningful in several ways: Due to meningitis and deliveries of very premature infants, more children with vision and hearing impairments are appearing in schools. Yet, with funding cutbacks in the U.S. and Australia, fewer specialists are available to teach them. He and I share a passion for Inclusion, believing strongly that despite a disability, all children have the right to be educated with their peers whenever possible.
But in order for teachers to be successful, they need state-of-the-art information, abundant in the Renwick library.

The college sits on a small suburban Sydney campus, part of the Royal Institute for the Deaf and Blind that also houses a campus school, assessment, and research centers. Despite its unassuming appearance, it provides one of the best training grounds in the world for Master’s and Doctoral programs for educators of children with sensory disabilities, who arrive annually from throughout Australia, New Zealand, many African counties, Papua New Guinea, and East Timor. It was on this lovely campus that I spent intense hours reading and visiting with educators living in small dormitory rooms distant from their families in order to become teachers, researchers, and professors. Some were accompanied by their own children, deaf and/or blind, who wanted a chance for fulfilling and productive lives. Far from his London home, Mike Steer is the Director of Programs for the Vision Impaired. Also collaborating on the handbooks is Breda Carty, the only regional Deaf professor preparing educators of the Deaf. Currently completing her own doctoral studies at Galludet College, she presents brilliant lectures in rapid sign language, an interpreter at her side. My first week at the college, we were joined in the writing and editing by graduate student Dolly Bhargava. The daughter of a family from India raised in Africa and relocated to Sydney, she has been working on the project as her Master’s thesis. Truly diversity at its best!

But the professional adventure that subsequently took me across Australia and New Zealand began when colleagues learned that my research typically focuses on children with behavioral problems. In addition to lectures at the college, I became a frequent guest speaker at conference sessions and dinners. A warm memory is of attendees at standing at the conclusion of one of my Sydney
sessions, each sharing what my presentation had meant to them personally as educators. They then honored me with “deaf applause,” hands raised high in the air as if to clap, but never touching. Another day, during my dinner speech to regional administrators and instructors of the visually impaired, to my amazement champagne corks popped and the group afterwards serenaded me with *Give Me a Home Among the Gum Trees*. Delightful!

Presenting at a Sydney conference on deaf-blind children, I met Sharon Barrey-Grassick, an energetic and passionate American, relocated to Perth. The profound need for behavioral training in isolated Western Australia resulted in Sharon’s invitation for my subsequent 3000 mile trip to lecture and consult with educators of children with medical and physical syndromes. The Perth audience ranged from those working with young children to geriatrics, teaching in schools or residential treatment centers including the cognitively and physically impaired. But it was my luncheon meeting with mothers of babies with severe disabilities that reinforced their commonality with parents in San Antonio. Their stories encompassed painful stares at their children in grocery stores along with amazing support from compassionate strangers, describing the love and concerns of families everywhere.

After arriving on an overnight ship from Sydney to Tasmania, I sat drinking coffee with the Directors of Early Childhood, Behavior, Autism, and Vision Impairment in a picturesque square in Hobart. I thought of my San Antonio colleagues who would have fit right into the conversation. A remote Australian state (dubbed the “down-under Down-Under”) given numerous legislative changes, Tasmania is grappling with best methods for inclusion of the disabled. In contrast with the natural beauty of the setting, the Directors’ intense comments mirrored U.S. concerns about the impact of rising rates of divorce,
substances, and abuse on today’s youth. They also excitedly planned their role as hosts of the upcoming nation-wide Australian Special Education Conference.

As a result of that afternoon’s conversation, the following month I found myself flown back to Tasmania, delivering a keynote address and concluding remarks to a lively audience of 600 educators. Included warmly as a colleague, I observed once again the wonderful contrasts of the Aussie personality. At the banquet dinner, attired in formal British-style attire, class turned into a scrum as warring rugby factions continued their dispute over the results of a recent championship match. They burst balloons the color of the winning team, and women in sequenced gowns grappled with rugby competitors across tables and floors. A bit subdued the next morning, they cheered and some wiped their eyes at the beautiful musical portrayal of Trinity faculty children and grandchildren that began my presentation, created earlier with the help of Pat Ullmann in Instructional Media and fortunately still stored on my computer. But as I branched into discussion of my newly considered comparisons of the needs of families for support and of educators for leadership, audience mood turned serious as they asked intense questions about U.S. culture and the impact of materialism and violence on our children. One school Principal commented, “As Australians, our blessing is that we’ve been isolated from many of the world’s problems. But as media images and international turmoil begin to hurt our children, it’s also our curse, as we have no practice in knowing what to do.”

As I had been amazed at the size of Australia, I was similarly surprised at the hugeness of New Zealand. Truly Lord of the Rings territory, I found New Zealand’s natural beauty surpassed only by “Kiwi” friendliness and the compassion of educators literally to reach their children. On the South Island, while visiting in Christchurch with teachers of the visually impaired, we discussed the
hardships faced by families of students with disabilities in remote areas of the West Coast. A stunning World Heritage region with few paved roads or public transportation, schools are a far distance from home and special programs even scarcer to find. Typically, teachers from the populated East Coast leave their own families for weeks at a time to live in the remote areas and demonstrate techniques instructors can use with children with visual impairments. They foreshadowed the amazing educators my graduate students and I met recently at the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired, making personal sacrifices daily to reach out across the region and even the world, sharing research and practice so the blind can live with dignity in a sighted world.

Now as I leave Trinity to focus my work more intensely on children, families, and practicing teachers, I’m collaborating with my students as we write our own chapters for these international books. While geography may preclude their ever meeting co-authors in Australia and New Zealand, our commonalities of spirit have enabled us to join hands in out-reach across broad oceans.

Tumultuous Times

One person’s life is everyone’s life.
—José Saramago, “All the Names”
LIFE’S COMMOTION

unfiltered angry news, views,
retaliation rhetoric blares

blares beyond loudspeakers
hacks brains

spits
dissolute disdain—

outwitted hostages,
our clouded arrhythmic

neurons scatter,
lemming stampedes

hurled off

cliffs

in mute urgency toward
Quiet’s cocoon—

noise abatement as
minds struggle, passionate

dispasion compelled
to sort out random particles
hindsight

insight

foresight

senility’s blindness beckons

but

glares of

sunlight clarity

shimmer, desert heat

waves display

what we’ve become . . .

are we strong enough to press

*Pause*

inhale unbuttressed breezes

intuit meaning’s intention

exhale existential breath

calm cancerous commotion

before it invades

life’s lymph nodes?
HELLACIOUS HUMOR

Are You laughing yet, God?
Having fun in pervasive spiritual
amusement as we
leap, do cartwheels in
life’s gymnasium?

Daily chaos of distraction
diverting meaningful movements,
playing with alliteration’s dark humor—
malignant melanomas metastasizing
mean-spirited mentalities.

Whew! I’m exhausted, God.
I’ll bet You are too.
Are You napping now,
spreading universal ennui,
contagious, calamitous yawns?

Looking down easier than looking ahead,
have You misplaced those crystal-ball bifocals
as we Gestapo-march into future’s blindness?
Need a friend?

When You find Your cellphone,
maybe I’m not in Favorites,
but hopefully at least in Contacts.
Call me.
Other students stared in concern today as I grabbed my scattered pages, shook my weary head, and made an abrupt exit from our Poetry class.

Unable to inhale more of their beautifully written, emotion-laden Readings, I fled.

But to be fair, my heart had departed before I arrived. This morning’s television blared El Paso’s pain. Its pierced screams.

Shooter drives 11 hours to kill Hispanics at a Border Walmart as victims shopped for school supplies, clothes, and ice cream. Indiscriminate rampage with an assault rifle—22 dead, 24 injured.

A day to leave TV’s eviscerated images, intense Poetry enjambments, behind me. Time to go to Life’s, not Death’s, re-vision.

Brain on automatic, my car drives to “La Gloria” restaurant. Refuge food.

Outdoor tables brim with couples’ caring conversation, babies’ hungry yells, patio dog barks. Wait-staff hustle, fill emptied glasses, carry over-flow plates. Bistec Taco smoke trails behind.

Laughter, so much laughter here . . .
Fresh air finally flows through today's aromas. Fan blades whirl. I shortstop catch a paper Menu in flight from my table. Its color-filled words shout:

!No hace falta morir para llegar a La Gloria!
You don’t have to die to go to Heaven!


My mind whirls . . . whirls . . .

Memories stray back many years to my holiday in Geneva.

To that haunted Train Station across the street from my grungy motel, so very different than its beautiful Photo-Shopped images.

My after-dinner walk back to that motel, along un-lit, cracked pavement.

Then, a drug-crazed woman’s anger-screeches. Racing from the Arriving Train’s platform, she sprinted across the shadowed street, driven toward any victim.

Just as I walked by.

Her hurled, hard-sided suitcase propelled my shocked body into a mortar-creviced brick wall.

Snatching back her dented luggage, she ran toward a side alleyway, leaving only shrill screams in her wake.
My ribs roared from fresh bruises. My head had rammed into the sidewalk. I lay there in pain fog. So much pain!

Muted shouts from the Train Station! Foreign tourists raced to engulf me.

Their gentle arms lifted my leaden body and soul.

Safety overwhelmed my concussed skull.

Sounds of Home:

¿Está bien, Mamá? ¿Está bien?

You doin’ OK, Mamá?

The waitress’ gentle shoulder-touch pulls me out of my reverie.

Voice-volume vaults over La Gloria’s Mariachis and buries these pain-filled times.

Laughter, so much laughter here.

¡Qué ambiente! This noise calms me.

No hace falta morir para llegar a La Gloria.
SOUL BULLET

... hate cannot be terminated,
It can be transformed
Into a love that lets us live.
—Amanda Gorman

Uvalde, Texas
May 24, 2022

If we were to love again
our words would have to
bloom beyond
grow greater
forgo erupting egos . . .

Our shamed hearts
    halt
    hurt
    long
to love
to love us all

While it takes a Village
to raise a child,
it takes angry ammo’s
one soul bullet
to kill a child
An enraged Globe questions
sanity
stupidity
semi-automaticity
self-immunity

of a society that gifts
“Long Guns”
for 18th Birth-day
joy-rides

Can we weld
back together
this stained glass
of broken pieces,
meld into
morning’s sunrise, our
grief
gloom
purple?
May sheltered spirits
hold healing hands
with Uvalde’s Living,
All Our Living,

so we hug no child
for the last
time today
as we stitch closed
gun loop-hole
gaps

move to
mend immeasurable
memory holes—
Times broken
Horrors unspoken

What if words
as weapons
would move us,
win this war?

Care We?
Dare We?

*Pop... Pop... Pop...*
UN-STABLED

Under near-Midnight moon, a man got shot behind my house last night, after we neighbors had all been ordered to stay in our suddenly un-lit, shuttered homes, in shut down lock down melt down for five hours after he’d opened fire, shot randomly at first, then directly at Police.

Ongoing Facebook facts focused on a hostage he held in his own now-encircled home, just doors away from mine.

Scores of Police, Militia formation,
guns, rifles drawn,  
marched across  
my front lawn—  

How their hearts  
must have raced—  
Targets of his derangement,  
mental illness gone Mad.  

Forms dusk-shadowed,  
barely evident, darted  
behind our parked cars,  

daring him to shoot,  
be shot.  

My cell phone rang—  
eerie, calm female voice,  

Police Dispatch:  
*Keep staying inside. Make sure all  
lights are off and you’re not near  
any windows. Right now, he’s  
running down the back alleyway  
toward your house.*  

**CRACK**
A single deafening thunder
un-silenced, un-leashed
dead night.

Inside darkened room,
my dog’s startled, shriek bark
matched volume with
my tight chest’s

*Thump, Thump, Thump!*

Uniforms raced
out of lock-step formation,
around street barricades,

into the now-blocked
narrow alleyway
behind my house.

No more shots echoed
as pierce machine sounds rang out:

Ambulance siren screeches

Helicopter propeller thuds

*My cell phone:*

_The incident appears to be over._
Warily re-ignited
neighborhood lights,
shades re-opened

in tribute to
some sort of safety.

Next-day Hospital News:
*He’s in critical but stable condition.*

How can he be stable,
this man with a gun?
If you aren’t in over your head, 
how do you know how tall you are? 
—T.S. Eliot

A storm blows in, 
raw nerves dance, 

brain bongos thrum, 
disturb our blood.

So many storms lately, 
not all in night’s sky—

Global pandemics 
poisoned politics

bombs brandished 
as we pray, study.

Afraid of AR-15’s, 
adults don’t step into 
the line of fire. “Sorry,” 
they say, stay safe, while 

children practice drills 
to hide from shooters, as
cataclysmic wrath destroys
embryonic innocence.

Do we ride out these storms
or do they ride us?

Winds at our back
or blowing us backward?

Whose storm is it anyway—
A Master’s in the sky?

Climate Change charging out of
Hell’s Derby gates?

Maybe it’s time to change
our own Climate,

chase a storm or two,
no longer as victim—

Time not just to give Man,
but Woman, Everyone,

the potent Power Switch to
re-generate tornado’s siren

*On... Off... On... Off...*
toward canons of creation
as we counter destruction.

Let’s see what happens
when the Bold act, not react,
when grandchildren don’t hide
but feel pride in an Earth that
thrives, not just survives
when the next storm arrives.
WHEN

When Peace rests its embattled head
on sands’ billowing pillows,
Hope side-steps broken boulders,
refills thigh-deep potholes
up-heaving war carriages,
pale pink silk curtains, once torn,
dirtied, now reappear unsullied.

When Love emotes,
drought-deadened bodies
pour moisture forth, startled clouds
erupt, drenching parched deserts,
rain forests hoist apart cleaved rocks,
willows weep with wonder, un-raped
vaginal milk quieting fortune soldiers.

When Peace and Love procreate,
immortal children abound, scatter
Dare Me! fearlessness
awakening do-ers, doves,
shakers, staunchly unshaken,
brazen heads held high, joyous tears
melting time’s tragic candle.
When Past and Future copulate,
naked shirtlessness calming chaos,
we trust, believe again—in family,
each other, divergent paths
toward God, not godlessness,
your way, my way, our way.

When?
I have never been so hated and terrified in all my life. As I walked alone into the Baghdad conference center, six enraged women approached me, one with her fist raised, others with voices shouting unfamiliar languages. A striking, dark-skinned woman grabbed my sleeve and yanked me close to her face.

“Our country is poor, our people starve, and you look away,” she hissed. Another pushed her aside. “Your Hollywood is more important than our children’s lives!” A third, “You are not welcome here. Why did you come?” Obviously, she and I had the same thought.

It was August, 1989, the year before the first Persian Gulf War and American bombing of Baghdad. All visions of a fascinating, exotic trip to Iraq banished, I would have given anything to be in class with my students, home drinking tea, or even having a root canal.

Thoughts of escape vanished as I was abruptly shoved by a North Vietnamese reporter. “Murderer! Butcher! You have nothing to say that we want to hear!” Hiba, the Iraqi woman assigned as my “interpreter” pushed the reporter aside, and firmly holding my arm, moved me down the aisle of the modern, cavernous auditorium to a front row of tables. She seated me behind a card with my name and “United States” written in Arabic and English.

As much to escape the tirade of loud voices following me as fascinated by the simultaneous instructions in seven languages, I put on the headphones and studied the speakers’ tables. Wiser than I, another American arrived through
a side door and slid in next to me with a weak smile and wave at the annoyed-looking interpreter.

Hand outstretched, “Susan Bolton, Columbia University. I’m filling in for a colleague in Arab Studies who couldn’t come at the last minute. But I’m not a speaker and will try to leave sooner if it gets too unsafe. Are you as petrified as I am?”

“Absolutely! I’m Karen Waldron, Trinity University, San Antonio. I’ll be speaking the last day of the conference. Hopefully, things will settle down by then.”

She observed, “There are two more American women attending, one who’ll be presenting, and another, working in Paris for the State Department, who’ll be here in a few days just to keep an eye on things.” I already knew what that meant.

“Have you noticed that our ‘interpreter’ doesn’t speak much English but never lets us out-of-sight?” I asked. “She’s in several pictures with Saddam in the lobby. You know the Americans are the only ones staying at the Al Rasheed hotel?”

“Right,” she exhaled. “Who invited you to speak?”

Ironically, I was a guest of the Iraqi government. The phone call had come suddenly at home, during the chaos and pizza of my son’s fourteenth birthday party.
“Dr. Waldron?”

“Yes.”

“I am calling from the Iraqi Embassy. The Council on U.S.-Arab Relations here in Washington gave us your name as a potential speaker at the Conference of the General Federation of Iraqi Women next month. We would like you to speak on issues around providing quality care for children world-wide.”

As I motioned for my son to finish serving his friends, flashes of my visit earlier that year to Saudi Arabia and Bahrain immediately piqued my interest in this new adventure. The Council had sponsored a fascinating tour for a dozen college professors to further our understanding of the Arab world. Yet, as we travelled from Jedda to Riyadh to Dharan, I was sure that I had disappointed their expectations by openly questioning the Saudi leadership about their harsh treatment of women. So I was very surprised when the Council recommended me for another foray into the Middle East.

He continued, “The conference will include approximately 1000 women from around the world. While most will be from Arab countries, predominantly Iraq and Egypt, others will come from North Vietnam, Lebanon, and as far away as Brazil and Finland. You will be one of two American speakers during the week. At the end of the conference, you will be our guest for tours of Basra and other areas along the Arab River.”

As he waited, my mind moved quickly. It had not been a typical day. That morning, I had received a call from former neighbors in New York that my
mother had suffered a small stroke. I would have to visit her immediately and arrange for her care. Always an independent woman, she would certainly resist, initiating a new and heartbreaking chapter in our lives.

I related to Susan other events of that day. At my sons’ encouragement, during the party I visited with two brilliant brothers who desperately needed an American sponsor. With unclear visa status, they would otherwise return home and possibly lose opportunities for future education. As I told my story in that Iraqi auditorium, I couldn’t realize that just months later, these teenagers would become a permanent part of our family, kindred brothers to my sons, and eventually, American citizens and Ph.D. engineers, one with an additional degree in law. Nor could I have known that I would come to love them as my own, welcoming thoughtful daughters-in-law, and becoming “Grandma” to their beautiful children.

Also, single parents don’t make quick decisions on the telephone. I would be gone almost two weeks and would have to arrange care for my sons and organize the start of their school year. But that hot Texas afternoon, I was startled when the Iraqi caller interrupted my thoughts. “We need to know today so we can begin to process your visa.”

Later that day, with arrangements made and sons supportive of my venture, I heard myself say, “I’ll be honored to speak,” followed by a deep personal sigh acknowledging my craziness.

And now I was in Baghdad, again questioning my safety and sanity amidst the fury of women who just wanted my blood. Why? What had I done, what had the U.S. done, to provoke such anger? I learned over the next days, that
often their rage was over what we hadn’t done. The Brazilian woman who confronted me at the door announced heatedly that the U.S. could save her country’s economy from bankruptcy, but we didn’t care. The Palestinian delegate had lost a child who could have survived with treatments of basic antibiotics. She reminded me at every turn, “We are a homeless people. Why do you support rich Zionists and ignore our poverty?”

Hearing that I was from Texas, more anger was directed at me than the other Americans. I appreciated their response, having recently seen re-runs of translations of the TV show “Dallas,” even in censored Saudi Arabia. The wealth and degradation of the Ewing family had become the benchmark for gauging Americans. I felt like Sue-Ellen in their eyes.

That day, I understood easily that a native Texan who was also U.S. President would be one of the most despised men in this region of the world. But I’m not sure what my emotions would have been had I also known that years later my own son would become an Army officer and risk his life on Iraqi soil. In the midst of such pervasive hatred, it was far better that only time brings such after-knowledge.

After the morning’s ironically-entitled “Welcoming Session,” Susan and I headed for lunch with the interpreter in tow. Seated by ourselves, we were delighted when two Bangladeshi women dressed in brightly colored saris asked if they could join us. The conversation that followed opened my eyes to my own naïveté about life in other countries.

In excellent English, one woman commented softly, “We look forward to your talk on care for children. At times, our situation at home seems hopeless.”
Our parents love their children as much as you love yours. Yet, many are starving and uneducated and it seems better to sell their children for a meager amount to help the family. Other times, children are simply kidnapped as they walk to the market or school, never to see their families again.”

“Why?” I asked in disbelief.

“Primarily for their body parts. There is a huge market for organ-donors, too great to be supplied by normal death rates and availability. So our children are bought for a pittance or stolen to be killed. Their hearts or kidneys sell for a fortune to wealthy families or medical foundations that are ignorant of the source. We hear that the biggest market is the United States.”

I was horrified. And I slowly had a sinking realization that the paper I planned to present was all wrong. Listening to these women dedicated to saving children’s lives dwarfed my proposed priorities of lengthening daycare hours and providing more training for workers. Back home, these needs would be applauded. Here, these issues would seem trivial, even laughable, when so many lacked a home, a parent, even a daily meal or hospital bed.

Afternoon sessions over, Susan and I walked back to the hotel, passing 20-foot pictures of Saddam on almost every corner. Saddam, the soldier in uniform, sternly holding a rifle. Saddam, the kindly father, smiling as he gently held a child on his lap. Saddam, the religious leader, looking blissfully toward heaven. Street vendors plied us with watches with Saddam faces. The interpreter hung close behind, never speaking.

But she couldn’t be in two places, and when she left to meet the American arriving from Paris, Susan and I decided to see Baghdad for ourselves. Earlier,
while on an official tour, as we stared upward in amazement at the Hands of Victory Monument, huge arches of crossed swords made from Iraqi and Iranian guns and helmets, a cabbie had approached us quietly. He promised that he would give us a personal tour of the bazaars and watch over our safety. But only if he were paid in American dollars, clearly a black-market item. While Hiba was preoccupied, we spent a morning with him in several loud, crushed marketplaces bargaining for crafts. He was our Arabic voice, interpreting prices by a shake of his head and walking away, returning with us later to bargain some more, with vendors shouting that our low offers were an outrage and he yelling back that their prices were exorbitant. When we ultimately reached agreement, smiles and quiet friendliness returned to their demeanor.

While clearly we were recognizable as Americans and unlikely visitors, I didn’t need to wear my hijab from Saudi Arabia. Baghdad was far more liberal, with many women un-scarved, sporting casual but modest clothes as they laughed, visited, and shopped. Those in traditional Muslim dress wore colorful silk head-scarves along with bright pant-legs or longs skirts peeking out from under abayas. Somehow these glimpses of flair added to the women’s sensual allure. While never seen evenings in outdoor cafes, daylight and the marketplace openly belonged to the women.

There was an understandable curiosity, as vendors brought crates for our seats and poured us steaming coffee. Looking around nervously, the cabbie translated their questions about America.

Furious ones: “Do the Zionists run America? Is that why the U.S. lets Palestinians die?” “Why did your husbands let you come here without them?”
Yet, more were interested in clarifying their impressions: “Is Michael Jordan really that good?” “Do U.S. women have sex with everyone?” “Are all Americans rich?” And, most often, “Why are you in Baghdad?”

We knew that we were taking a chance by travelling with the cabbie and that he could be imprisoned for taking American money. Yet, over subsequent years, that remarkable 110-degree morning, made even hotter by the Turkish coffee, returned poignantly in stunned moments as I watched bombs erupt in Baghdad. The marketplace is gone, but the sounds and pictures of the people remain recorded in my memory.

Waiting vigilantly that early afternoon, Hiba saw the cabbie leave us a few blocks from the hotel with our goods and friendly farewells. Shouting furiously and following us, she threatened in very broken English to have him found and us sent home. Since it was typically difficult for us to understand her, we feigned ignorance and rushed off to the afternoon’s solemn meetings.

Almost all the speakers elaborated the pitiful neglect of children. We saw slides of baby amputees in Lebanon and ten-year-old prostitutes in Bombay. A visceral sense of dread spread over us at grotesque pictures of circumcisions on young Northern African girls. Describing the child-kidnapping market for U.S. adoptions, the speaker stopped abruptly, stared at our table, and plaintively asked, “How can you steal our families from us?” My stomach turned.

As sessions ended that day, we met “Kay,” the newly-arrived American from the embassy in Paris. While giving us sparse information, she informed us that she was attending the conference “to keep an eye on things.” Consistently and rudely, Hiba interrupted our attempts at conversations. She heralded Kay back
to an isolated hotel away from all of us. Amused at her quiet acknowledgment as a spy by everyone, Kay managed to sustain Hiba’s attention often enough for us to meet more of the conference women.

By now, anti-American sentiment had poured over into a tidal wave. Fueled by days of speakers’ animosity and perceptions of U.S. negligence and materialism, Susan and I felt the risk of our very presence increase. With Kay’s isolation, we were unsure of our alternatives. And the other U.S. conference speaker stirred the pot with a broad spoon.

As the Party Chair for a southern Congressman, her heart-felt bitterness erupted in this supportive environment. In her speech, she described an America full of racial hatred and dismissive of the disadvantaged. She told countless stories of personal persecution as an African-American woman. Adding that U.S. freedom and equality are mere propaganda, she described a country carried by the rich on the backs of the poor.

Listening in horror to details of dates and locations, I realized that these terrible experiences had indeed happened to her. She condemned the United States as powerful, threatening, and imperiously directing foreign policy to occupy and corrupt other nations. She ended by saying that she was ashamed to call herself an American. The audience cheered and applauded loudly, awarding her a standing ovation as she left the stage to scores of hugs and handshakes.

Leaving the auditorium worriedly, Susan and I discussed the speech. In her talk, the delegate had generalized her own experiences to those of all American women, minorities, and disadvantaged. Despite my childhood in a working-class family and Susan’s ardent feminism, we hadn’t shared these experiences. But we
also knew that the racism she had endured was real and, clearly, that others have suffered poverty and gender discrimination for generations. Since few in the audience would have travelled to the U.S., she supported their worst fears and stereotypes. Irrespective of Susan’s and my liberal personal and political beliefs at that moment, the speaker had indeed fueled an increasingly dangerous fire.

A tour of the Baghdad Museum and dinner at the Convention Center followed that day’s sessions. Despite some glares, we quietly joined a small group of women conversing in English. When the Lebanese delegate asked me my reaction to the conference, I told her honestly that I was horrified by what I had seen and heard.

I added, “I develop programs for children with disabilities, and I was particularly upset to see the number of child amputees in Lebanon after the war. Where are they being cared for?”

“Mostly at home or in orphanages, since there’s no room in the hospitals. But they won’t be able to go back to school without assistance. Others, who suffered burns or mental trauma will be cared for by any living family members. Sadly, we have nothing for the disabled.”

She studied me carefully. “I can’t imagine you would be willing to go there and help after we re-build?”

“Of course. Keep in touch and let me know when the time is right. Then we’ll work out the arrangements.” I gave her my business card.

“Then perhaps you would also do a smaller favor? My son lives in New York. We have lost mail and telephone service in Lebanon because of the war. I want
to let him know that I’m alive and that I miss him. Can I give you a box of cigars to send him when you’re back in America?”

Susan laughed. “I live in New York. I’ll call him, tell him you’re fine, and give him the cigars personally.”

“Thank you!” as she wiped away tears streaming down her cheeks. She invited us to sit with her and a Brazilian woman for the dinner.

Despite her angry comments about the U.S. on my initial day at the conference, Celia turned out to be delightful, with an outrageously bawdy sense of humor. A stately and stunning woman from a wealthy family enmeshed in Brazil’s conflicted government, she sacrilegiously joked about every political and social institution possible.

“Our men, they like women Rio-style. They wouldn’t last here an afternoon!” We roared, finally remembering how to just laugh and enjoy the company of other women.

Even in the evening’s more relaxed atmosphere, I worried about my speech. I had spent late nights writing revisions, but the message didn’t have any heart. Since I was shunned by most women at the sessions, finding an Arab speaker to help personalize it was difficult.

But I remembered Rana, a friendly young Iraqi conference assistant who had greeted me with her story of fond memories of a childhood with her family in California. Slipping away from the table, I caught up with her as she left the hall.
Her open smile disappeared when I made my request. Inhaling, “Yes, I’ll work with you on it, but only if no one’s around. If you give it to me early tomorrow with your questions, I’ll hand it back to you later. But don’t tell anyone. It is a risk.”

As I thanked her and returned to the table, my thoughts reflected on her world here in Baghdad. I have always felt that the air feels different in non-human-rights countries. From the moment we step off the plane, to subsequent observations of people coming and going between work and home, and even between those engaged in friendly conversations, there’s a watchfulness, a sense of looking around to see who may be listening. But I was learning that even in such threatening environments where we exhale fear and anxiety, the commonalities among all of us are far stronger than that air we breathe and can certainly enrich our relationships.

Yet, it became obvious to me that the lack of open and honest personal and cultural exposure among the many nations represented at the conference had corrupted any sense of commonality. The only woman I could turn to for help had lived in California for years and had come to love Americans.

I realized that the conference delegates’ hatred toward us was evident not only because of strong political and religious differences, but from their perception of America and its women. Not only the Iraqis, but the majority of delegates from around the world knew only MTV stereotypes and the conspicuous materialism they saw on filtered news reports. A universal trait that women share is their nurturing love for family. Yet, along with a divorce rate of almost fifty percent, images of many U.S. women dressed very sexually and of others as over-worked professionals appeared to be convincing evidence that we promote the break-down of the family.
Or even if we did care about our own children, it ended there. So we supported kidnapping for body parts or adoptions and looked away when Palestinian teens died from violence and third-world children suffered poverty and disease. With profound personal loss and tragedies in so many families, anger and hatred had moved onto a need for revenge.

Samira’s invitation to work with child amputees had been genuine, but also a test. Yet, her longing to contact her adult son and send him a present was universal. When Susan and I responded, she sensed that we cared. How could I reach the remainder of this huge audience? I pondered this after midnight as I completed my speech.

The following day sped by. Early, Susan and I waited on a line extending outside the building as we tried to change our Iraqi Air flights to leave the next day, immediately after conference closing ceremonies. Fearing that the ugly sentiments in the lecture hall might only worsen outside, we had decided to skip the tours of Basra and Babylon. We waited two hours behind women checking on their own flights home, apparently all too familiar with frequent changes and cancellations. But with one weary, irritable woman scheduling flights on a single computer, our chances were non-existent.

“Flights to Frankfurt are full. No other flights in Europe for two or three days. Next?!!”

To further engage her in our plight, I made a foolish attempt at humor as I placed a lollipop on the counter in front of her.

“Baksheesh?” I asked with a smile.
Not amused, she threw it fiercely in front of me and watched it smash on the floor.

“Next?” never making eye contact. We moved on.

I found Rana as we entered the conference hall and quietly handed her my next-day’s speech.

“Here it is. I’ve re-written it completely. Just one request. Can you translate the sentences I’ve underlined into Arabic, giving me their phonetic pronunciation in English so I’ll say the words properly?”

Surprised, “Are you expecting the simultaneous translators for the sessions to translate this new speech for the first time as you read it tomorrow?”

As I nodded, she gave an apprehensive headshake.

“They will be furious with you. They request speeches days in advance to cross-translate. Then they just read them at the sessions, maybe even tape them.”

“Is there a chance that they’ll read my former speech instead?”

“Not if we intervene. I’ll contact the conference coordinator right now and ask her to let them know. But don’t expect a present this holiday!” Rana smiled uneasily and moved on.

Finally, the day of my session arrived. I was certain that my paranoia had grown out-of-proportion and that things would go just fine.
“Perhaps no one will even show up,” I mused hopefully as I made my way into the auditorium, noting scores of beautiful children waiting noisily in the lobby. They were all between five and ten years old, busily chatting with their mothers, many of whom were conference delegates. It appeared that the children would be part of this afternoon’s closing session.

I was wrong about both the attendance and the children. For the first time that week, the auditorium overflowed to encompass more than a thousand women. The first morning speaker artfully elaborated potential social and health proposals in less-developed regions to increase mothers’ survival in childbirth and reduce infant mortality. Her programs sounded wonderful, well-considered, and, as the audience was too well-aware, unlikely to ever happen because of lack of funding.

As she finished, with a deep breath, I gathered my notes and rose reluctantly to walk to the stage. Susan grabbed my arm.

“Wait!” she warned.

The doors opened and several delegates marshalled the large group of children into the auditorium and onto the stage. Only now each child carried a brightly written sign, written in Arabic and English:

“American pigs!” “Zionist-lovers!” “Child-murderers!”

My heart pounding loudly, I watched in disbelief as the women led the children in wide circles on the stage screaming and shouting anti-American slogans.
To audience delight, the simultaneous translators found no problem immediately informing us of these words of hatred.

At first, I was confused. The only previous demonstration I had witnessed personally had been earlier that year in downtown Riyadh. Saudi officials had good-naturedly rounded up workers out of their offices, handed them signs, and coached them to shout anti-Western slogans, louder and louder for the news cameras. Glad for the break from work, the demonstrators had participated with gusto, some raising fists in mock or real anger. With the cameras turned off, they joked and laughed immediately, making their way back to their offices.

But this was different. During the eternity of the fifteen-minute protest, I comprehended in horror that this demonstration had been carefully orchestrated to occur just before my speech. And there were no jokes or laughter this time. The organizers were using children purposefully to provoke revengeful anger through reaching the hearts of an all-female audience. It worked.

Most women stood, shouted along with the children, stomping their feet and clapping hands in cadence with the chants as the resounding decibel level increasingly filled the conference hall. Looking toward Celia and Samira, who sat with heads lowered, I realized that I had few supporters.

The demonstration ended in a fever pitch with a continuous standing ovation as the children marched out of the auditorium with their signs. Then the stomping continued impatiently. It was my turn to speak.

Moving almost robotically, I climbed the stage steps and approached the lectern. My eyes searched the wide audience vigilantly for any sign of violence.
Along with hisses and apparently name-calling shouts, I noted that many of the women sat down, but removed their head-sets. Considering what might have occurred, I felt a sudden relief, smiling internally at this mild gesture of contempt.

At that moment, in order to re-engage their attention, I decided to open the speech with the words from Rana’s Arabic translation. While my accent would be terrible, hopefully my intent would carry and even the more hostile delegates would decide to listen to the remainder of the speech. As I waited for the quiet to spread, I also saw others who sat and nodded at me, head-sets intact and interested. With their encouragement and Celia’s broad grin, I began in Arabic:

أشكر احترامكم لكوني ضيفكم و المتحدثة في هذا المؤتمر. وعلى الرغم من خيفتي و ثقافتنا المختلفة اختلافاً عظيماً، فنحن كنساء نشارك التحدي النقدي في تربية أطفالنا ذو صحة جسمانية و عقلية على الرغم من العالم المضطرب. دعوت هذا اليوم للكشف سويا عن ما أعرفه عن تطوير رعاية الأطفال، و لكن جدته أي لا أعرف شيء: هذا النسيب على الإطلاق.

(I thank you for the honor of being your guest and speaker at this conference. While our backgrounds and cultures may differ greatly, as women we share the critical challenge of raising physically and mentally healthy children despite a troubled world. I was invited here today to explore with you what I know about improving children’s care. But I’ve found this week that I really don’t know very much at all.) At this comment, there were both laughter and hisses from the audience.

To great audience surprise, my opening words in Arabic were broadcast across the auditorium. I waited as loud murmurs responded along with some light applause. As I continued in English, a number of women picked up their discarded head-sets and quietly held one earpiece in place to follow the speech.
So I’ll share what I’ve learned:

I’ve learned that governments hurt all women and children when they don’t support them. We women bear and nurture our young. In turn, our children lead nations and become the future. But a mutilated or prostituted woman cannot bear or raise a healthy child. And a child who is malnourished or lacks an available medication dies or is under-prepared to become a leader. Each day of her life, a mother feels the trauma of losing her child or of seeing amputated limbs. Her anger and grief lessen her ability to nurture and guide her remaining children. She and her family turn to survival instead of hope. Without hope in the future, our resilience to withstand the present is lost.

I’ve learned that blame and lack of understanding breed hatred. If we women don’t have each other and congresses such as this to share our ideas and negate stereotypes, we have nothing. While our cultures and religions differ, our love and concern for our families do not. Until more women are leaders of nations, we and our children will rarely be a priority over greed and politics. But as long as hatred prevails and divides us from the very commonality we share in raising and nurturing our families, we move backward and more children starve or play with land mines.

I’ve learned that revenge doesn’t work. It can’t bring back a lost husband or son, or give us food for our families. Revenge is bitter-sweet and momentary. But when it passes, our original pain returns even stronger. The only thing that remains after revenge is the message to our children to expect to live their lives in anger and suffering and to hurt someone else first. The children of revenge become poisoned adults at a young age and view their sole purpose as injuring or killing others. We as mothers can do better than this for our families and our nations.
And I’ve learned from you, who sadly know it best, that war hurts everyone. There is no real victor, no country that comes away unscathed, none without wounds inflicted on its families forever. Who is the child that benefits from his father’s death, his mother’s rape? War is not the answer.

While negative emotions were still powerfully present in the room, I could feel audience attention and even agreement with my comments. Over the next minutes, in the body of the speech, I explored specific physiological, emotional, and educational needs of young children, enabling a solid foundation for a healthy adulthood. Back on my “daily turf” here, I was able to relax more and focus on elaborating the content.

Yet, as I concluded, I was very uncertain what the audience response would be when I left the stage. Unsure that I could safely return to my seat, I decided to end with the prayer Rana had translated and then leave the auditorium immediately.

Let us conclude with a prayer. The audience stood, heads bowed.

(When a child dies, a mother cries. The child’s nationality and race don’t matter. One mother cries for another mother’s pain, which may someday be her own. Let us join our hearts together here today to vow to end the harm and death of children and to share all resources through peaceful means.)
As I looked out on this sea of strong women who wanted only a better life for their children, I added the words that had been filling my heart that remarkable afternoon:

*Despite our different beliefs, may religions and governments come together to feed the mutual roots that will support our children as they grow. For today’s friends and foes alike, Insha’Allah we will meet again in peace—Next year in Jerusalem.*

To the echo of “Insha’Allah” across the vast room, I left the stage quickly and slid out the side door. As I heard some applause and progressively louder conversations, I realized in dismay that when ascending the stage, I had left the purse containing my passport on the speaker’s table.

Another thing I had learned this trip was that without a passport, a person was country-less and in deep trouble. I saw Susan rush past delegates pouring out of the auditorium.

“Here, I thought you might need this!” I hugged her in gratitude as she solidly handed me the purse.

Before we could move outside to discuss the audience response, the North Vietnamese reporter grabbed my arm.

“Can I interview you?”

“Why?” I asked in surprise, afraid that my comments would be used as propaganda.
“Most of my readers will be surprised. Your words and ideas were respectful and important.”

“OK,” I agreed hesitantly. “But no political questions. The article can be only about women and children.”

Abashed, she nodded and moved me to a quieter corner. But individually and in pairs, a number of women followed us. As I stopped to visit with them, they thanked me for my comments, several having their words translated into English by others:

“We are ashamed that they used children in the protest.”

“You’re right! We have to focus our attention on what we can achieve in our families.”

And mostly, “Thank you for being here and agreeing to speak.”

I was taken aback most strongly as a Palestinian woman in a solemn black abaya waited for others to leave and then commented, “My English is not good, but I want to tell you that my son died in the antifada last year. My family mourn him each day and my younger sons plan their revenge. But we must not let this happen. I cannot lose any more children. Thank you for your words.” Stoically, she walked away.

So the sentiment changed in a small way. Did most women there still feel anger and even hatred toward Americans? Of course. I knew that even if I were the cleverest of speakers, I couldn’t change that. But I felt that the tide was
moving again, that the earlier waves of sentiment had been buttressed for awhile. Despite their rage, they had invited me and allowed me to speak. And putting their emotions aside, they had listened.

But it was I who learned and changed the most. In the following days, as we boarded planes and vans to tour Basra, I sat with different women and heard stories of their families, of death and disappointment. As we observed the Iraqi and Iranian troops standing with weapons steadily pointed at each other across the Arab River, they spoke of fathers, brothers, and husbands still missing after seven years of war. We drove past men stripped to the waist in 119-degree desert heat, pushing boulders without equipment as they re-built roads and villages. At the ruins of Babylon, we stood together and marvelled over the brilliance of its architects and scientists, yet recognizing that a civilization had been lost.

There were light moments as well. We all watched two totally cloaked women dutifully follow their husbands as they walked down the street in conversation. Yet, each was holding out the front of her dark veil so as not to burn a cigarette hole.

On a tour, Celia and I were each grabbed by the arm and pulled roughly from a mosque by an angry man who felt it was blasphemy to allow us to enter. Shouting, he snatched off our abayas and yelled seemingly horrible things at us in Arabic. Seeing this, several Iraqi women from our group came to our assistance and chased him away. How we laughed afterwards when he stood in the receiving line in the reception hall. He was one of the hosts! Yet, as we passed through, all the women in our group moved by him quickly, none even acknowledging him or returning his now-friendly greeting.
It was time to go home. The conference and tour over, we were boarding the bus for the airport. Samira pressed a box of cigars into Susan’s hands.

“I wrote my son a long letter too, with his address on the envelope. You’ll see he gets these?”

“I can’t wait to meet him,” Susan responded, “and let him know about his wonderful mother.”

Hugging me tightly, Samira whispered, “Insha’Allah, next year in Jerusalem.”

“Insha’Allah,” I prayed.
When Our World Speaks the Unspeakable

If I should pass by the tomb of Jonah
I would stop there and sit for awhile:
Because I was swallowed one time deep in the dark
and came out alive after all.
—Carl Sandburg, “Losers”
THE SHAME

“And where did you say you’re from, now?”

“Texas.”

“But you’ve the map of Ireland written all over your face.”

“My Mom’s from Dunmanway.”

His deep voice resonated, echoed: “Come here with me now. You need to meet my wife!”

Sudden quiet as he posted a handwritten “Be Right Back” sign on the lovely Potter’s Studio blue-shadowed door, just a few miles outside the Town of Kinsale.

We walked behind their welcoming hundred-year-old house as jolts of red, yellow blooms poured onto true-green ferns. Garden’s lushness overloaded a sturdy stream, blossoms floated in busy succession behind trees’ private wall.

As if friends forever together, with jam-sweetened biscuits, we sipped boiling coffee and milk-white tea. Unknown raucous bird chirps, rustling critter sounds replaced the thump of trucks on The Kinsale Road.

Her rich voice poured forth stories of her youth—huge, caring family raised close by my Mother’s home.

That’s one of many things I love about Ireland. Almost everyone’s related by friendship, family, or place.
Her sharp mind immediately recalled Mom’s isolated childhood farmhouse, as she stitched their timelines of shared personal history.

“Would you like a tour of where your Mum grew up?”

Weeks later, we sped toward West Cork’s countryside, car gears grinding, profuse arm-wave exchanges not always Irish-friendly.

We veered from one and another market towns’ main streets onto a small, somber dirt road.

Enveloping Nowhere.

Sudden slowed speed.

“This is the way your Mum walked to school,” she observed solemnly.

We stopped as she pointed to a deserted square of now unstable rocks—all that was left of a fallen dwelling.

“Each day, your Mum would have to walk by this cruel place where Nuns and Priests kept pregnant girls locked up and hidden.”

My gut wrenched as the history of those huge rocks permeated, penetrated fresh air with palpable poison.
“They’d send the girls away to Cork, Dublin, or somewhere else to toil at a Magdelen Laundry.

They were never to see their wee baby or their own Mum or Da’ again.

It was all because of The Shame.”

I felt an explosion in my head . . .

Memories of my grim but loving mother in New York.

She was horrified when I dated, never allowed any near-mention of boys or sex.

At our tiny kitchen table, my attempts at discussions were ended abruptly by her loud

“Shhh!!!”

Mom’s pointed forefinger, shuddered head-shake silently shouted, “Stop!!!”

Her worried stare then travelled far beyond our tightly shut windows to check if neighbors were listening.

She would whisper with anguish, “The Shame! The Shame!”
IF JESUS WERE BORN IN
A MOTHER AND BABY HOME

(Final Report of the Commission of Investigation, January 12, 2021): The Government of Ireland found ‘a shocking number of deaths’ and widespread abuses at religious institutions for unwed mothers and their children: 9,000 children died in 18 different Mother and Baby Homes. Between the years 1922-1998, “some 56,000” pregnant women were sent to these institutions. Mass graves of hundreds of children are still being uncovered and their identities may never be known.

Mary said to Joseph, so meek and so mild/
“Joseph, gather me some cherries, for I am with child...” Then Joseph flew in anger, in anger flew he, “Let the father of the baby gather cherries for thee!”
—“The Cherry Tree Carol,” Joan Baez

Exhausted, belly-bloated Mary, in-waiting Mother of Jesus, was denied room at the Inns, they say.

Even with Joseph beside her weary donkey, was their ancient plight rejected because he wasn’t real father to her unborn child? Surely Innkeeper gossip galloped across deserts.

Everybody knew...

Centuries afterward, Mary’s Irish-Catholic namesakes couldn’t make it through Dublin, Belfast, or Dunmanway streets if their school uniforms even tensed at puffed waists.
Hidden in Mother and Baby Homes, their newborns died or were stolen for adoption, invisible Humans in the Church’s Eye of God.

Then spurned as illegitimate themselves, these grief-stricken mothers often were sent to Magdalen Laundries, sentenced to clean soiled Clergy and government Officials’ clothes, to scour under notorious Nuns’ soured, scorn-filled supervision.

Yet, could any elbow-greased brush or washboard scrub away sanctified stains, blood of dead or abandoned babies, from Priest, Nun frocks?

If Jesus had been born in a Mother and Baby Home, would he have been torn from Mary, placental pourings her only memory of lost Infant?

His tiny bones buried in a mass grave with other Unwanted?

Unmarked?

Unremarkable across History’s continuum?

Mary, to be lost in Laundry Legends?

---

Imagine His premature death for our sins:

No Wise Men or Women following His bright star
No Apostles
No New Testament
No tortured body sagging from weathered Cross
No Crusades
No Pope
Elevated Eucharist depicting dead Baby, not lost Savior

_Mass_ meaning generations gathered to shout “Shame! Shame!”

If pregnant Mary, Mother of God, had been sent to a Mother and Baby Home, instead of a stable . . .
DOWN THE DUBLIN ROAD

Judged sinners by the Church, thousands of Irish women were locked behind the walls of the Magdalen Laundries for bearing children out of wedlock, leaving abusive homes, or just living in poverty. Most had their children taken away forever, spending their own lives in harsh, spartan conditions, laundering for often-abusive Sisters of Charity.

The child inside her young body
    shakes in violent fear,
borne as woman’s grim burden
    to a Laundry down the Dublin Road.

Her feet carvery-sliced and bleeding,
    at last numbed to chiseled rocks,
swollen belly and sickled-back crushed together,
    her unborn’s awakening to hatred’s scorched flesh.

Behind, she drags childhood and shattered heart
    in a tattered, dirt-clogged sack.
Mum’s tired frown and Da’s grave sigh abandoned,
    as must be this quaking globe inside.

Rosaries in hand, strangers will tear it from her sullied body,
    weeping eyes and leaking breasts denied their painful prize.
Both orphans, she to cleanse raw in a laundry of abuse
    and her child to know no Magdalen Mother.

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As powerful kicks alert to the solemn gate ahead,
muted resolve awakes a Druid chill.
Her unseasoned hand pensively circles taut belly-skin,
a mother-child song surprising hoarse lips.

Sing hush-a-bye loo, la loo, lo-lan,
Sing hush-a-bye loo-la-loo.

Bring no ill-wind to hinder us,
   My helpless babe and me,
Dread spirits of the Blackwater,
   Clan Owen’s wild banshee,
And Holy Mary pitying us
   In heaven for grace does sue.

Sing hush-a-bye loo, la loo, lo-lan,
Sing hush-a-bye loo-la-loo.*

Spitting rain sinks into impending dark,
as she rips skirt-rags for bloodied feet.
Two mortal sinners slipping silently to Life or Death,
past a Laundry down the Dublin Road.

*October Winds (Traditional Irish song)
FIRST-GRADE LESSONS

Brooklyn, New York, 1951:

Tear rivers stained freckled cheeks, Barbara’s hiccupped giggles an IV-line to my Irish-laughter brain. As two close-by boys made silly sounds, our six-year old bodies all quaked in mirth, hidden (we imagined) behind fifty-plus squiggly backs tortured by hard metal chairs attached to fake knotty pine desks.

Any such noise was forbidden, except October, when Sister raised radio volume—Brooklyn Dodgers’ Pennant. Unison screeches, “Duke Snider—The Duke!!”

A sudden eeriness engulfed our classroom. I looked up from my laughter as waves of black vampire shroud loomed over me, Capt. Hook at prey.

Surprising speed. Sister’s same hand lashed out at my still-smiling face. Her Bride-of-Christ ring slashed my chubby cheek. Uneven fingernails carved innocent skin.

Never do that again!!!

My startled sobs. Head hung in Public Humiliation. . . .

After-school pick-up. I’d prayed it was Barbara’s dear Polish mother’s day to walk us home.

Dried blood, cut face, I must have been quite a sight as my Mom’s stern gait, navy sweater approached sheltered stoop.

“Don’t tell—She’ll kill me!”
But Barbara screeched the tale, wailed, “She didn’t do anything! We just had the giggles!!!”

“Wait here!” Mom’s military posture, staccato steps did not reassure, as she strode up the chipped stoop, marched into the building.

Minutes passed as painful hours before we felt her callused palms’ hand-clench.

“Let’s go!”

Only my *Hail Mary, full of grace* . . . redemption whispers broke the silence as we walked briskly by those familiar cracked-stone apartment rows.


With Mom’s unsmiling shoulders hunched over our small stove, I awaited punishment.

Pop and Kevin shoveled in potatoes-and-something, intense mumbles about Campanella’s batting average. *Wait ’til next year!*

Second Mortal Sin that day: I couldn’t stomach supper in this immigrant’s “clean-your-plate” household.

Alert-jolt. My full plate disappeared, replaced by a huge bowl of weekend-only chocolate ice cream. I devoured it.

Teary-eyed contact. Mom gave me that “You’re good” nod, her most supreme compliment.
I stood taller as I carried my second emptied bowl to the sink.

Then her West Cork/Bedford-Stuyvesant take-control-of-life voice commanded,

*That will never happen again!!!*

And it won’t, under Mom’s Watch or mine.
TEA TIMES

I love tea. I’ve always sipped on hot, steaming cups all day long, teaching classes, writing, during meetings with colleagues. Afternoons, students sipped tea in my office, our conversations often beginning with class and ending with their personal issues around family and friends. In my clinical practice, parents share their concerns about children and teens as the tea kettle simmers.

I also collect teapots from around the world. Some come from my own travels; others are gifts from family and friends. Each pot has a story or person behind it, making it special to me, such as the one from my Aunt Kitty in Ireland. When in her eighties, this family matriarch impulsively pulled out a new metal teapot from the cabinet in her farm kitchen.

“Take this one. I hear you collect them.”

“Aunt Kitty, I can’t. You bought it for yourself.”

“I did. But one day I’ll be gone. Then you’ll look at it and think of me.”

That shiny little teapot has a place of honor on my window sill. With the charming store sticker remaining in full view, I look up, smile, and do think of her often.

The blue enameled pot tells me my husband remembered me in China. As did my children at Christmas, with a hand-painted Japanese tea set, a woman’s face delicately molded into the porcelain bottom of each cup. A tiny silver teapot dangling on a necklace reminds me of the student whose problems we worked out together those quiet afternoons. And the note cards that arrive with designs of friends sharing steaming cups carry messages like “This one had your name on it!” or “I miss you.”
Tea sustains me because it reminds me of shared times with my mother. After I started school, she worked as a custodian in aircraft factories, cleaning until her raw, rough hands bled. With washing, ironing, and other chores at home, her days and evenings were very full.

But sometime each day, she would quietly ask, “Cup of tea?” During those special conversations, we sat at the kitchen table and talked. Sometimes my brother or father joined us, the first cup leading easily to the second. Other times we visited alone, discussing small things and large. School pressures, friends, gossip. Some discussions were work-directed, where she sternly quizzed me on spelling words and math facts, or listened intently as I read an essay aloud. “I don’t like the way you describe that character. And you need to relax more and be less formal. I like the history part, though. Never be afraid to back up what you say.”

From her I learned the Irish respect for the written word.

My grandmother’s rheumatoid arthritis forced my mother to quit school early to mind her many younger brothers and sisters. But the trip from an Irish farm to a working class neighborhood in America didn’t change Mom’s values. Two things mattered most: her family and an education. Today, my steaming cups and my teapots bring her back, when she can no longer to listen to my thoughts or critique my writing. They remind me of special times.

HER PLACE

In Memory of my Mother, Mary Murray Powers

Her bed a constant companion now,
eyes closed by time gone on too long,Shaken alert, frail hand pushes angrily away.

A departed mother still with us,she carried an umbrella on sunny days,life’s weighty fears in a fully stocked purse.

That purse lies empty now,its contents scattered like ashesacross our universe of doubt.

Faithfully, she lived on and on,no worry of chill in this hospital bed.Heart still strong, conscience summoning Beyond.

Wasted frame forced fetally into trust,she’s in a different home these days.Body a memory, soul a tantalizing promise.

They say she’s alive, yet she’s been gone awhile now.Ivory wrinkles dissolved into rare softnessat odds with timeworn Rosary Beads indenting her flesh.
Is there an end to this journey, 
another beginning to sweep away the tiredness?
And if she finds nothing, where will she go?

When Your Husband Dies

The end is where we start from.
—T.S. Eliot

When your husband dies
parts of you die too. Heart holes form
from Necrotic chunks, memory-dust
specks dissipate, disappear.

Like a child’s sustaining grip,
loyal family, friends linger in life’s kitchen,
ever let your tight-rope waver.
Never.

They walk with you to Death’s
somber bedside: Fatigued advice, nibbles at
cold-food platters, fragile hug-bubbles
encase your grief shoulders.

Take care of yourself—I’m here for you,
love-words linger, proliferate.
Yet, no GPS for un-uttered, un-expressed.
Un-done.

Others, earlier neglectful, but now omni-present,
shoot out swift, controlling greed tentacles,
spew projectile vomit, de-sanctify lost life.
Dollar-worship their God-space.
Instead of Spurs’ *David Robinson Legacy*,
they suffer *Kawhi Leonard Disease*:
Demand money, cry “Foul” from Compassion’s
back-court, don’t show up for Finals.

But “He who sups w’ the De’il
needs bring a long spoon.”*
You’ll always remember.
Always.

After-Death balances both harm and warm,
prompts quick divorces from these sucking leeches,
emboldens electrified borders, complexity jolts.
Does Future hold brutal baring? En-circled caring?

Life-to-be’s a fat onion un-peeling, layers naked.
Shapeless, surreal shadows beckon behind shaded windows.
Wizened, wisened, you teeter cane-less
amidst dream-making/breaking cobblestones.

Taunting road intimidates, exhilarates,
mocks Death’s overstretched arms.
Is it backward, forward, or now-where
when your husband dies?

*Scottish Proverb (Oxford University Press adaptation)
(ABOUT) THIS DEATH THING

Rather upsets a man’s day
a funeral does.
—James Joyce, “Ulysses”

There must be
something wrong with me
about this Death Thing, Lord.

My heart is broken,
husband, parents, brother gone,
it doesn’t, won’t stop.

My friends are younger,
surprised at surgeries
when limbs give way.

But I don’t feel
betrayed by my body,
just an end-of-life without dignity.

It’s not that we die,
but painful ways we die,
cry out for intervention.

Deceptively, maybe ridiculously,
I imagine that someday our spirits
join Monet’s poppies in the fields.
Do their blooms stir from
Last Rites of Brilliance we’re denied?
Your Impressionism? Pointillism?

*Your Point?*

My brother received his Last Rites
six times, so I guess he went
to Heaven, eventually.

Yet in case those Gates need WD-40,
I put my hand on his coffin as it passed by
to reassure him I’d pray/pay for Overnight Express.

*Trust in Allah, but tie your camel (Arab proverb)*

Is there something missing here,
a spiritual group hug?
Right now I need one.

Are you in that oft-observed
napping mode, Lord, when
our foolish antics exhaust you?

You know, I’m tired too,
really tired, and perhaps
sometimes afraid to sleep.
Can’t we leave this world
with a bit less pain,
softly meld onward?

A friend once told me
my life would have been easier
if you and I had more polite conversations.

So give me a little help here,
I’m asking respectfully, Lord.
Why go through Hell on our way to Heaven?

And how, in Heaven’s or Hell’s name,
will we ever know
when we’ve finally arrived?

*I’m just asking.* . . .
**DRIP, DRIP**

The cavernous Cancer room engulfed me like a Shark’s jaw ruthlessly yawning at its daily catch. Death-fight again, again.

Intuitively named *START*, is this Center where we begin Treatment, Recovery, or Transition?

Scarves, hats atop Patient heads—Auras defining courage, no one assumed safe here, no one at all. Wait, wait . . . drip, drip

Yet, their strength prevailed, poured, filled this waiting space with quiet dignity louder than Chemo’s monotonous drip.

I’d waited in this very room often, engulfed in my husband’s Pancreatic Cancer, palpable Dread-Litany to unspeakable Loss.
At first this pristine orderliness, 
Patients’ patience unsettled us—.
Over time, their shared stoic strength 
comforted, understood word-less language.

His recent Departure, my own turn now. 
Raw panic stalked reason, 
but these defiant heads held high 
spoke volumes to my heart again.

Wait, wait, amidst others’ drip, drip, 
inner voice musing “Not sure I can do this.”
Kind nods assuaged my pain, 
“Yes, of course you can.”

Cadre of caring nurses re-asked questions, 
“Bad diagnosis, that why you’re here?”
By then surreal aloneness, 
Wait, wait . . . drip, drip

Cheery doctor, far too young, 
stared at my glowing body parts: 
Mechanized. Computerized. The monitor revealed 
ambiguous blend of familiar with foreign.

“Nothing there . . . No mass after all.”
I stumbled in guilt past tipped heads, 
my eyes lowered to hide shame of Relief.
Voices arose in that vacuous waiting room:
“How did it go?!?”

My sigh:
“False Positive.”

Cheers, fists in the air:
“Yes!”
“Wonderful!”
“So happy for you!”

With weight far greater than mine,
how does their spirit re-charge,
remain outside Cancer’s long fingers,
to lift up me, a Stranger?

When our own hearts hurt so much,
how can each of us also hold
another’s hand with such gentle,
genuine love that is

No False Positive?
F I N A L  R U N

_The spirit never goes anywhere without its legs, and the body would be incapable of moving without the wings of the spirit._
—José Saramago

When there’s a will to live
with no way, symbiosis

merges Life and Death,
only one the Long-Distance Winner.

Who could have predicted?
Health, anger consume,

medical sprints test fragility,
essence replaced by essentials.

Stooped over swollen legs
we trip, trip forward.

Maintenance becomes our victory,
Body to outlive Soul.

Yet, as we prepare leaving papers
can we imagine running tandem,

Death’s marathon companion to a
Finish Line unseen?
To spurn platitudes, embrace realities, co-join spiritualties:

Dr. King’s *Fierce Urgency of Now.*

Can we talk less about everything, no mantras, just dizzying temporality?

Life, Love, Laughter,
Soothing, Singing, Soulfulness,

Natural alliterations,
up-lifted dances upon our Earth.

*And so I write . . .

But this is the ideal
not the real.

My hole-ridden shoes
feel unknotted for

Death’s Final Run.

Shall I drag leaden feet,
cagelings of broken wings?

Where’s the wind
when you need it, Lord?
At four in the morning
I reflect to my Self,

You and I’ve had our adventures—
We’re in this together again.

My Marine Spirit
refuses to leave my Body behind.

As simple as that.
Runners take your mark.

Let the Race begin.

Take the High Road

When someone shows you who they are, believe them.
—Maya Angelou, Interview with Oprah Winfrey
In Memory of my Father, a beer truck driver who saved his daily lunch money to buy Saturday night ice cream for neighborhood children. They all loved their “Uncle John.”

What makes a good person, a person be good?

I’d say genuineness, uncloseted compassion,

warm showers of care raindrops, without expectation’s umbrella.

No hunger for applause after audience exit,

parents’ proud past whispers echo, their

smiles, nods, linger in life’s Later Auditorium,

while Conscience remains even when nobody’s looking . . .
I do believe our spirits seek solace, hijacked moths to Good-ness flames.

When we’re unable to swerve, avoid obstacles.

Dispute-Resolve moves, sways us like sturdy wind.

*Good* teaches us to pray, not prey,

thrums our bodies on endless sail-ship voyages upon floating Earth.

*Thump . . . Thump . . . Thump . . .*

Rocking waves don’t diminish the drum of shared love.

So does this bone conduction become soul conduction?

Or have I confused Symphony tym-panics with my own sentimentalities?

I don’t know.
Perhaps Good-ness is born/borne
only within some people’s
fetal soul, an inescapable
Compassion Gene
stitched into random DNA fabric,
chubbier distributions splitting
their seams, adding weighty
Care Chromosomes.

To find these
special people,
do we need walk
to faraway woods,
Meditate in order to grasp
their Good-ness paths?

I don’t think so.

Maybe like yeast bread, Care rises,
doubles volume in warm kitchens,
draft-less doors left open to shelter those
hungry during life’s bitter winter.
From my Birth home, I was sent
to carry my Mother’s warm

Irish Soda Bread
to teasing, loving neighbors

who made sure
I crossed the street safely.

They returned re-filled plates,
then overflowing with

their creamy Cannolis,
or Apfel Kuchen,

taught me that Kindness
makes Life taste sweeter.

Often, for Sunday dinner,
Irish immigrant families, friends

from New York City,
Brooklyn, the Bronx, arrived

through our front door, to the smell of
simmering Lamb or Pot Roast with onions.

Transported Laborers, many had
endured hunger’s hardship.
Punished by poverty’s memory, 
we always had potatoes.

Lots of potatoes.

My Father, the kindest person 
I’ve ever known,

would say, say again to all, 
with his impish smile,

*I’m a poor man, but I won’t starve you.*

There was always extra food 
for anyone at our table.

Always.

Home
Heart
Hearth

can leave deep 
very deep 

Footprints,
*Goodness Guides* for us to follow. . . . . . . .
My mischievous mind courts undercover thoughts outrageous,
pitiful puns, twists of tongues, tantalizing wicked gold,
stretching beyond checkpoints, criminally courageous.

What is it then that makes me so splendidly sagacious?
Despite nihilist neurons arguably anticipated in one so old,
my mischievous mind courts undercover thoughts outrageous.

Not for me quick soundbites: fantastic YouTube videos, tweets tenacious,
WikiLeak wanderings, HBO fatal fashion flaws, Trumpeting thresholds
stretching beyond checkpoints, criminally courageous.

With soul silliness bursting, bubbling buried laughter re-ignited, specious
joyful jokes, exaggerated Leprechaunish stories re-told, re-told,
my mischievous mind courts undercover thoughts outrageous.

Smiling’s art, like flirting’s, willfully contagious,
bizarre belly-laughs erupting, cherished memories to uphold,
stretching beyond checkpoints, criminally courageous.

Irrepressible Dad gone now, no one here heartily hellacious,
I’m grateful he planted playful ridiculosity seeds so bold
my mischievous mind courts undercover thoughts outrageous,
bolting lengths beyond Derby gates, uncontrollably courageous.
ALEXANDRA ANGEL

With fun and love—In Honor of Alexandra van de Kamp, my brilliant Teacher and Mentor.

The first night she floated into weekly Writers’ Class, our ephemeral Muse spoke quotable tongues:
Poetry can be whatever you decide.
Content tells you form.

Her black hair, translucent skin, classmates’ sagacious nods, all added auras of seriousness—while my own confused stares exposed ignoble ignorance.
Me—a barnyard poet at best.

From Haikued Haibuns to incantory Villanelles, continuous confusion over private vs. personal, we trailered enjambments,
came alive as alerted to a linguini of

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alliterations,
assonances,
consonances.
Poetry’s luscious landscapes.

Alexandra Angel
praised, prompted,
even shared her own
brilliant pieces, musical
images immersed in
sensualities of moments.

Extensive examples weighted,
bowed my aging back,
meddled with my muddled mind.
I whined, How can I write
in these freakish forms when I don’t
even get what they are?

Nonsense, she soothed, I love
your wonderful wit, caustic comments.
She didn’t mention chagrined chaos.

At times, Apologetic Angel:
It may just be me, Karen . . .
but I counted forty-three adverbs
in fourteen lines. Only if you want,
perhaps, only perhaps, reconsider
ending every line with “-ly.”
What?!!!
I took her daring disapproval

depressingly,
devastatedly,
disappointedly,
moving rapidly
to write a poem, excitedly
entitled "Adverbially Me."

But wide wings enveloping
even her most difficult student,
always a Mentoring Angel,
she spoke calmness
over calamity, birthing
words for the impossible.

Meanwhile, hovering above,
she arranged artful
writing conferences, dazzled
with effortless details, somehow
never spilling her steaming Latte.
Well, maybe raining a drip or two. . . .

Ah, it was great to catch
an Angel on the ground.
Like the time she mis-read my
poem, thinking sainted Aunt Josie
boiled marijuana instead of marinara.
   Pot in a pot.

   Or when, looking quizzical, she interpreted my Dad taking me to the Shi’a, when in fact it was The Shea to watch Jim Bunning pitch a perfect game. I’m sure it wasn’t my images courting confusion.

   So when AA reflected,
   *The English language
   is full of amazing words!*
   *Always choose the best one,*
   I no longer fumed,
   *Why choose a poor one?*

   I now put aside poetic pride,
   keeping my tongue in cheek,
   as Humane Angel guides BIC Velocity pens, battery-charges our blossoming wings, inviting us all to fly, to fly . . . .

   *But just a suggestion,* she prompts.
   *Do it only if you really want to!*
TINA’S COMMUNITY

Dedicated to Tina Chang
(Aspen Summer Words, 2018)

Cellphone precarious on
cloth-worn hassock,

group laughter erupts,
auto-flash records an ending.
Or is it beginning?

What a group it’s been!
Driven by car, promise,
flown heights,
descended depths,

words inadequate to
tell painful personal journeys,
Friendstival of minds
melding meaningful moments.

We’re Tina’s Community:
Camaraderie, Compassion,
Compulsion. Her wisdom a
tornado funneling us into
fresher air, change,
like Cottonwood snow
falling onto thirsty fingers,
limbs reaching, searching.

She’s an Accidental Blessing,
Answered Prayer as her heart
homework heals our bending
but unbroken branches,

sling-shotting us beyond Aspens.
2019 NBA FINALS

We San Antonio Spurs Fans were so sorry, seriously sorry, when Kawhi Leonard sat on the Sideline during our 2018 Basketball Season and Playoffs. We had loved him. But in demand for more money, with weak excuses, he refused to play.

After leaving our team in a rich Trade to become a Toronto Raptor, he led them to their 2019 Championship. They too then heralded him as their Hero.

But we Spurs Fans knew better . . .

Like Jon Snow, with no Kingly deal from We The South:

Those whose temperatures no depths know
wrapped him in fur-like dough.
Unlike Jon, he never looked back,
had mocked San Antonio him to sack.
Spurs-fan spears near-impaled
as “the next Michael Jordan ” was hailed.
Texas crowds jeered,
Jurassic Park’s cheered . . .

O Canada!
Kawhi sat out our ’17–’18 season
with “Issues . . . Stuff,” no good reason.
Healthy enough,
just not wealthy enough,
he’d skipped our Playoffs
(perhaps a cough?)
in wait to resign
so he could sign.

He wanted a trade—
a rich deal to be made,
like a bee to honey,
*Bzzz . . .* toward the money.
Beloved Coach Pop
couldn’t make this nonsense stop.
Kawhi didn’t want Toronto,
but West Coast—not San Antonio.

O Canada!

Bitter, We The South whine
as King Of The North dines.
You Won—
We’re done!
Enjoy your time.
He’ll soon resign.
Across The North
frozen tears will pour forth.
He’ll be scheming,
California-dreaming,
ever looking to plunder on.

See you in future Finals, Toronto,
when he’s gone.

After one season with Toronto, Kawhi left again in a Trade to the Los Angeles Clippers. When not seated on their Injury Bench, he enjoys the rich California sunshine.
RATIONAL RAGE

I drink scalding poison over schadenfreudic insincerity delivered with whine, whine, narcissistic design.

Children blacked-and-blued by life’s hits from bullies who don’t kill themselves.

Blueberry bagels.

Lettuce, fresh or fuzzy as rabbit food, while we’re distracted by cellphones compiling Wikipedia research during dinner.

Kale too.

Forgotten passwords.

Being called “cute.”

Stalkers, including arthritis.

Insensitives sharing worse stories with people who have cancer.

Blindly devoted wives willfully spouting -isms, fake diamond friendship’s blown kisses.

Ungeziefer—Politicians hiding behind foggy windows, deporting, trafficking, feeding fevered spirits religion on lop-sided plates.

Personality-disordered parents whose helicoptered kids hype on games, never take naps.
Barking dogs, except for my own Beauty.

Negligent neighbors who only show up for necessary emergencies like car wrecks.

Death, especially on my crashing computer.

TikTok.

Facebook high schoolers hoping to keep in touch when we’re all so friggin’ old.

People who stop by without calling first.

Hugs from strangers.

Friends who say “That’s not really you,” when it is.

Others who email every day, expecting a rapid response.

Cold food in “good” restaurants with vile vinegar on the plate after you told them not to.

Country clubs closed on Mondays.

Room-temperatures pulpy Chardonnay.

Clearly no one’s in charge.

And did I mention whining?
WAITER/WAITING

At the end of the game, the King and the Pawn go back in the same box.
—Italian Proverb

Long-awaited dinner—brilliant women gather, share spirit, time, talents as an Honored Guest returns.

But awkward table arrangement: Rectangles restrain, extend endless acres beyond comfortable conversation’s arms.

The women need to walk to talk.

Then a solo male “Waiter” voice startles: huge, brass, impatient above fond female word-hugs.

Now! Choose your seat Now, and Do Not—I repeat Do Not—move your plate anywhere else after I write down your dinner order!
At His convenience.

Followed by...

Quiet sighs, iconic,
ironic servitude.
Familiar obeisance floods
female feelings—key-less inside
condescending Keeper’s cage.

Controlled seat-taking,
subdued talk limited by
his stare’s proximity barricade.

One rises, attempts to
carry off her plate, share
Honored Guest’s space
for co-celebration, conversation.

Another loud-hissed female voice pleads:

Don’t move your plate!!!
Just don’t, please!
He said not to . . .

Shuttered sigh.
No foolish fuss follows.
With acquiescent nod,  
the Mover leaves emptied chair as  
her untouched food gels  
on abandoned plate.

Honored Guest observes, stands up,  
walks to visit with other women,  
share Specialness.

Her own food cools  
as she follows His Rule.

Yet, friends’ presence pours  
gold-shadowed glow.  
Sister-hood beacons as  

fragile hands force,  
forge ahead  
across frigid harbor.

Ice melts,  
Peace shatters, as  
He speaks deep volume  
above their in-valid Voices:

*I’m going to bring your checks.*  
*I will Only—I repeat Only—*  
*take your credit card in the*  
*same order I served your food.*
Due home now,
one guest exhales,
hands him her credit card.

_This is out of order._
_I will take it when I get to you!_

She presses,
He smirks,
turns his back.

Another gestures the
Honored Guest’s need
to leave.

_You’re out of order too!_
_So I’ll only take cash from you._

At His convenience.

Frantic search through her purse.
Staccato Gestapo steps as
He takes obeisant others’
cards first.

Dis-eased hierarchy:
Rule vs. Resignation
Condescension vs. Community
_Final Score: Waiter–2, Women–0_
Are our Handmaids’ faces
so used to abuse,
numb to Achtung voice-slaps
that we remain
captives to Convention?

Are we afraid that
if we say “Enough!!!”
we’ll be branded as

*Mood Feminists*

seeking special-ness
instead of Equality?

Fluid gasoline
ignites subdued Anger Sparks.
We can’t want and wait

It’s all about what
*We* bring to the table . . .
SOURCES OF COURAGE:
AN INTERVIEW WITH
DR. MAYA ANGELOU

She knew poverty and racism intimately as a child in Stamps, Arkansas, hiding her “crippled Uncle Willie” under sacks of onions in a truck to escape his lynching by “The Boys.” A brutal sexual assault at age eight, with her attacker beaten to death afterwards, sent her into silence for years as she feared the power of her own words. Yet, Maya Angelou learned that words were the way to set herself free. Encouraged by “Mama,” her grandmother who knew that this voiceless child would become a great teacher, she has been awarded 56 honorary doctorates, several Golden Globe awards, and nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for her poetry in Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ’fore I Die (1971). She wrote graphic accounts of her young years in award-winning I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1970), followed by scores of books and dramatic outpourings evidenced by her role as the first African American woman screenwriter and director in Hollywood.

Touring internationally in Porgy and Bess, she embodied pure musical tradition, crediting her success to listening to “Mama’s voice, like that of Mahalia Jackson,” and to the power of “my inherited art”—African American music. Her passion for social justice brought a close friendship with Martin Luther King, whom she memorialized in her lyrics “King: A Musical Testimony.” But it was her four years in Africa that allowed her to embrace the vibrant history she felt had been lost by so many in America. She writes, “African culture is alive and well. An African proverb spells out the truth: The ax forgets. The tree remembers.”

In my interview with Dr. Angelou, she reflects candidly on courage, exploring life’s dreams to the fullest, and her vision of freedom for all women.
In your life, where have you found the courage to take such phenomenal risks?

**DR. ANGELOU:** Years ago, I deduced that it costs everything to win, and that it costs everything to lose. So, if I didn’t take a risk, if I didn’t take a dare, then I would lose everything. And if I did take the dare, if I lost—I’d lose the same thing. But I might win. So since everything is always at stake, I may as well risk everything for the good thing.

So when I was asked if I would conduct the Boston Pops, I said, “Yes, of course.” Now it’s true I’ve gone to a few concerts at one time in my life, and I’ve been conducted, and I’ve put together choirs. But the Boston Pops with Keith Lockhart as the Maestro?!! I said “Yes” because ten more years might pass before another woman might be invited, and twenty years might pass before another African American woman might be invited. I said “Yes,” and I got a book and I read, and I found out what music they were planning to play. I put that on my tape recorder, and I played it all around my house. I played it in my bus. I played it in my car. And on that day in Massachusetts, I stepped up and conducted the Boston Pops.

I sent a message that I enjoyed it so much that I’d be glad to do it a second time. But I was told they’d never invited anyone a second time. They had Ted Kennedy there that evening. So I said, “Well, that’s alright then, but I’d be glad to do it.” And I was invited the next year to do it again. So, had I not risked, I could always say, “Well, you know I was invited,” but not what it felt like. Would I have opened the door for someone else who’s coming behind me? No, I wouldn’t have. As it is now, I’ve opened the door and had fun doing it too.

*Has this thought that if I don’t do it I’ll never get there, and if I do it I may get somewhere, been a predominant theme for you in taking risks, then?*

**DR. ANGELOU:** Yes, absolutely, since my early adulthood; yes, in fact, late teens. Yes.
What advice would you give other women about how they can demonstrate courage and explore their life dreams?

**DR. ANGELOU:** I would encourage women to know first that I don’t believe that anyone is born with courage. I think you develop it. And life’s inventions can help you or discourage you to develop courage. If you’re born in a silk handkerchief and all you ever have to do is wonder about powdering your nose, then of course, you may not have to have courage. Of course you may be a lackey and not know it.

But if life offers you difficulties, that’s the time to develop courage. You use each one of the disappointments, each one of the insults, each one of the rejections as a time to develop courage. You don’t develop courage, and all of a sudden you just burst out and say: “I have the courage to do this or that.” I think you develop it the same way you develop muscles. In the physical muscles, if you want to pick up a hundred-pound weight you don’t go there and pick that up. You start with five-pound weights, ten-pound weights, twenty. You continue to strengthen yourself and sooner or later you will be able to pick up a hundred-pound weight.

I think that a woman ought to start with small things. For instance, don’t stay in a room where women are being bashed. If somebody says, “Well, you know that little chic? That little blonde chic’s a bimbo.” Get out! Don’t stay in the room where there’s racial pejoratives bandied about which are meant to demean or diminish and de-humanize people. Don’t stay in a room where sex and sexuality are a mock. “So the gay . . . or straight . . .” and this and that. No matter what device you have to use: Get Out!

And once you’re out, you don’t even have to say anything right away. You may not have the courage to say anything. But Get Out! And then you’ll like yourself so much more. Once you’re out in the street, in your car, on the subway—once you’re out, Wow! I really got out of there. I lied and said I had to be
in Bangkok, but I got out of there. And little, by little, by little, you develop the courage. Sooner or later, and probably much later, you will sit in that room and say: “I’m sorry I don’t welcome this kind of conversation.”

Do you have a dream or a vision for women?

DR. ANGELOU: Well, I have one great-granddaughter and I have a granddaughter-in-law. I have a daughter-in-law and I have so many daughters. So many . . . of every race you can imagine. You think only God could have brought those together! And I’m Mom to a lot of people: Asian, Latino, White, African, and African-American, Jewish. Mostly, I wish each one the vision to see themselves Free.

I was married for about two hundred and fifty years to a builder. It was my best marriage. And he taught me to build. He said, “Building has nothing to do with strength or with sex, with gender. It has to do with insight. If you can see it, you can build it. But you must see it.”

So I wish women could see themselves Free. Just see and imagine what they could do if they were free of the national and international history of diminishment. Just imagine, if we could have a Madame Curie in the nineteenth century, suppose that twenty other women had been liberated at the same time? Is it possible that we would have gotten small pox and chicken pox and measles and other un-social diseases obliterated? Just imagine, try to envision if, in this country, African Americans were not in a holding position because of racism. Imagine if all that energy and intelligence and enthusiasm could be put to the use of the school system, to the economy: If they envision.

So that’s what I wish for women: See it. Try to see yourself Free. What would you do? One thing, you’d be kinder. You’d give over gossiping. A plague. Yeah, you’d stop it. If you could see yourself Free, you would know that you
deserve the best. And if you deserve the best, then you will give the best and you will only accept the best.

Do you feel that one individual can begin to make a difference?

Dr. Angelou: Oh, I know that one individual can make a difference. I know it because I know so many people made differences in my life. And then, I have gone on to make differences in a lot of people’s lives. And so, some of the people who’ve made the differences for me were an African American grandmother who’d gone to the fifth grade. An uncle who was crippled, who never left the town because he was ashamed of being crippled. But the difference he made in my life and in the lives of others can’t even be computed. We don’t go that high.

So, as the one person, first you have to start to be good to yourself. All virtues and vices begin at home, then spread abroad. So you must, women must, be good to themselves. First off, forgive yourself for the stupid things you’ve done. And then go to the person whom you may have injured and ask for forgiveness. If the person says: “I will never forgive you,” you say: “Well, that’s your business. My job was to ask for it. And I ask it with all my heart and you can’t forgive me. I’m finished with it. I’ve done what I was supposed to do.”

But you have to start with yourself first. Forgive yourself. And then see yourself as you want to be and then begin to work toward it. With a will and a way, and with laughter, with humor, with strength, with passion, with compassion, with style, and with love.

Hold the Hand of a Child

The heartbeat is a bracelet of holes.
—Alexandra van de Kamp, “The Magician Speaks”
FROM RISK TO RESILIENCE AT HOME: A CONVERSATION WITH DR. DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN

She slept in the Winston Churchill Bedroom of the White House. She was the first woman journalist to ever enter the Boston Red Sox locker room. As assistant to Lyndon Baines Johnson during his final years as President, Doris Kearns Goodwin completed writing his memoirs and moved on to create works probing the psychological character of the Presidency. She was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1995 for No Ordinary Time, a brilliant analysis of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt.

In Wait Till Next Year, her book about growing up as a Brooklyn Dodgers fan in a city impassioned with baseball, she reveals her other side, one not reported in her Harvard Ph.D. studies or insights as a popular news commentator. The youngest of three sisters, Doris recounts a difficult, but loving, childhood. She knew her mother only as an invalid, bound to the house with a heart badly damaged by rheumatic fever. In her early thirties, her mother had the weakened arteries of a seventy-year old. Doris became obsessed with having mother tell stories of her own youth before the illness. She believed that remembrances of healthier times would allow her mother’s mind to control her body and keep the heart condition from worsening. Despite these fervent efforts, when Doris was 15, her mother died.

Even with tragedy in their home, Doris’ parents managed to create a sense of family resilience, one that would allow their children not only to cope with daily crises, but also to gain self-confidence and carry stability and competence into adulthood. When I interviewed Doris Kearns Goodwin about her childhood and the factors lending her strength, she reflected candidly on the many people who shaped her as she developed a wonderful enthusiasm and excitement for life.
What did your family do to help you to cope with your mother’s illness?

DR. GOODWIN: I think watching my father deal with my mother’s illness was probably the most important model. If he had been laid low by it, if he had been depressed by it, if he had really made it seem as if our lives were constricted by it, then I’m sure that the children would have taken their signal from him. But somehow, the most important person in her life, her husband, was able to still have vitality, excitement, and a love of life, and somehow be able to never make us feel that he was constricted by her.

Here was a man who was so social, as I later learned when he got married the second time—loved to go out to dinner, loved to go to plays, traveled to Europe, all these things that he had never done when he was married to my mother because she couldn’t do that. And yet, never once did he make us feel that he was being prevented from things that he wanted to do. It seemed like he made the things that they were able to do the things that he thought he loved. So, they would have a card game on Friday nights and they would listen to the ball games together.

The only vacation I ever remember taking is we went to Lake Placid once. It wasn’t because of money necessarily, not that we would have had a lot to take, but because she couldn’t have traveled. He made it feel like it was more fun to just be home. On the weekends you could listen to a game or go to the beach or do whatever was possible around the house. He would have all sorts of projects—painting around the house or wallpapering, so that in a certain sense . . . what he did was shape what made him happy by what was possible.

It must have been dreadfully difficult for your mother to want to be doing things with her children, but be physically unable. How did she handle this?

DR. GOODWIN: She didn’t have the same type of resilience temperament that my father did. Especially by the time I came along she must have been worn down in part by the illness which had gotten much more severe. She was pretty
healthy during the childhoods of my older sisters, so they remember a somewhat more active mother than I knew.

... There were times when I remember as a child feeling sad that I couldn’t have a lot of kids over to my house. You always wanted to have the kind of house where the kids felt welcomed, but we had to be quiet—not that she would be sleeping, because she really did not sleep that much. But, you just somehow knew that she couldn’t be disturbed and the house had become such an important security domain for her that having a lot of people run through it would have been troubling I guess.

The interesting thing is sometimes later in life you are able to make up positively for the things that you missed when you were young. When my kids were growing up in Concord, we lived on the main street of the town and our house became the place where everybody came. It was probably not a coincidence. I’m not sure I did it consciously, but all of our boys’ friends would call it The Clubhouse because everyone wanted to gather there. There were times when I would come home and my kids wouldn’t even be there. There would be a dozen kids just waiting for the other kids to come in. And the door was never locked. We had a pool table and a jukebox and a huge room they could all come into.

In addition to your parents, were there others in your life that helped make you resilient?

Dr. Goodwin: ... We had a real neighborhood so that there was a sense in which there were other adults, and children, who were a part of your everyday life. Even if, for example, my mother were in the hospital, I knew that the mother of the girl who lived next door to me would take care of me when I came home. So, you could feel loved by a larger number of people than a nuclear family might have allowed.

Not only just the parents of my friends, but the owners of those stores—you
know, the people who worked in those stores around the corner—who became really just as close to you as your parents’ friends and your own friends did.

There was a sense as you walked in your small world of being affirmed all the time by the neighbors who knew you, who respected you, who teased you, who really were part of your daily life.

The extension of that were teachers at school. You walked to the elementary school nearby. I always loved school, so that meant probably being a good student . . . getting the reinforcement of teachers. I always talked too much so on my report cards would always be “Talks too much in class.” But aside from that I always did well. There was a sense of feeling, a sense of wonderful teachers who made you feel special.

We had that group of our own friends and we always did get along really well. I guess for some reason I didn’t feel a sense of worry about how I was being accepted by the other kids. . . . I just always felt I was liked by them, by my peers in the classes.

I think part of that is if you go into a room imagining that people will like you, and if you are open and not caught up in your own worries and are interested in them, it almost becomes full circle that it works out that way. Obviously, that confidence has to come from the home and from the temperament to begin with. But once its there, it is the greatest gift you can have, because when you move into larger and larger circles, each one requires your starting all over again. But you bring the confidence that it had worked out pretty well in the last setting.

In gaining this sense of confidence and resilience during childhood, how important was your positive temperament in comparison with parents who taught you how to deal with adversity?

Dr. Goodwin: The temperament gives you a certain kind of stance toward the world, in a sense. But if the world continually knocks that away from you,
the world being parents or friends or the environment or poverty, or whatever it is, without reinforcement, then its almost like the fire needed to keep burning isn’t given any sustenance. Think of that positive temperament someone is given as part of their makeup: It is a gift, there is no question. But it can be diminished or squandered or lost if the environmental factors don’t allow that fire the keep burning... 

I think it was the luck of growing up with a father who reinforced it, with a mother who I always felt loved me even though she was so ill. She could really concentrate on me because I was the only child left at home. My sisters were older, and because she wasn’t dividing her attention between a social life or a professional life, she was always there when I got home. She was the one who would rehearse the catechism questions or my school stuff with me.

There was always a sense that both parents were deeply caring about how well I did when I went to school. And then, growing up in a stable environment where there wasn’t divorce at the time and there wasn’t violence. It was a time when childhood could be something that we could all enjoy.

ANOTHER FOSTER HOME

Where are you, Mama? What happened to you when that sicko in brown clothes took me from school?

They called my name in English class, yelled *Bring your backpack!* Then it got real quiet.

Am I coming home?

Or do I stay here now with this weirdo guy and skinny woman? She’s got a phony smile.

Will they slap me if I swear? Send me some other place?

Where’s my sisters? Brothers?

The baby needs me to hold her.

They have a dog—He licked me today—I don’t think he’s mean like Papa’s.

They have three kids. The big one said I stink, laughed at my clothes.

It’s really small here. No place to sleep by myself.

Can I go back to my same school? Friends?

I told this girl we’d hook up. Now I’m gone.

I miss my teacher. I’m sorry I told her what you did. She asked.
They said I need to see somebody, some strange lady. I won't say nothing.

If they make me talk to the Judge again, I'll tell him you didn't mean it.

Drugs and your friggin' boyfriend made you hit me.

Like, you cried. Said you love me.

The CPS lady fakes that she's nice. Liar.

When do I see you?

Somebody said, maybe “supervised visits.” Am I a zoo animal?

Are my Fosters just keeping me for money again?

If I run, will they put me back in Juvie with those sickos like last time?

CLANG!!!

That door made me puke.

I can't sleep there. Can't sleep here.

My back tooth is killing me.

Food here sucks! Gross chicken and lettuce with lumps of stuff on it. No fries. No chips.
I miss my stupid cousins, most of all Carla. She thinks she’s my mother. And Fat Freddy hits me when I thump his gut. Funny!

I need money. Lots of money.

A while back, Papa wanted to send me some. The cops got it all when they busted him.

Is he still in jail?

Said he’d bring presents when he’s out, ’cause he missed my birthday.

If they don’t let me stay with you, can I stay with him?

They said you’re not allowed to text or call. Yeah, right!

So I’ll keep the phone in my pocket.

But if they take it, Mama, I’m gonna run . . .
Ma’am

I watched her climb slowly
from a sleek silver SUV in
Church Center’s parking lot—

Her pinned red-gray hair fell on
poker face, old-lady eyes, ones
that drill with fake surprise.

Of course, my humble
nod showed her

All due respect.

With full-tooth smile,
I held classroom
door open perfectly wide

for this crazy lady,
who talked “Recovery,”
getting back our kids.

My kids, not her kids,
taken, stolen by CPS,
given to friggin’ Fosters.

All due respect, Ma’am...
I raised my hand:
If you don’t slap ’em,
how do you make your kids mind?

She picked up a stained black marker,
wrote two columns on the wall’s white board:

What do kids do that makes you mad?    How can you fix that?

Right! I laughed at these “Ex-Cons”
at our boxed-in conference table.
No one dared look at me,

Me, finally let out again,
back in touch with the losers today.
I know what they really need:

A Fix!

Lily’s charcoal stocking circles
mocked her tight-crossed ankles,
usually open perfectly wide,

Afraid of my steady
stare, Mad-Marco studied
his dirty, chewed-up nails,
Joey twitched, convulsed, lip-quivered.
his shoe’s heel told of terrible need.

Right Now.
Time to get all this Crap over with:
So, of course, I raised my hand—

All due respect, Ma’am . . .

I’m done bein’ busted—
Now can be trusted. When
do I get my kids back again?

Kelly’s contagious
cough spewed spit,
Tina’s Abhh . . . jolted

collapsible tables—
I have Candy for these babies
who can’t deal

I deal.
STREET MUSIC

The most beautiful melody in the world will become a monstrosity if the strings are out of tune.
—Paulo Coelho

I heard a lot through young Brooklyn ears, but still can’t tell Sparrows from Robins, Mozart from Tchaikovsky.

I’d love to know those things now in Adult Land, where friends detect bird-shrills, octave-reaches from Violas, Cellos, while I classify “Pigeons or Others” and “Big or Really-Big Violins.”

Early on, though, I did learn a rat’s hiss, high-pitched squeak, felt terror at unmistakable patter of resounding mice scurries echoing across each night’s darkness.

At age five, I learned about taking walks in our Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood, as gangs laughed, beat up my seven-year-old brother—

I recall the sound of Silence when no one heard our screeched screams. Powerless, grown-ups later advised:

Cross the street.
Don’t make eye-contact.
Ignore them.

168
But we can’t always look away

Like in my Adult Land,
when we see bruises on a child,
Everyone says in staccato speech:

Report it!
Let people know!
Always report it!

Then exonerated, we feel we can walk away

Yet, as the same child appears from home, neighborhood,
week after week, cut upon yellowed-bruise,
repetitive reports dissolve our resolve:

His sister scratched him with her nails.
She’s awful to my boyfriend. The kids next door are rough.
Arrogant responses mock our meager gestures.

How much proof do we need
to find other ways to hit back,
create safe places to heal, hold, love, listen?

How can Life’s Music, any bird-song,
ever enter skulls, hearts so badly battered,
Life’s soul/sole spirit fist-pummeled?
My wish is that the hum of quiet hugs
silences guttural shouts, that
Violins beat violence,
so a child can walk outside
without being hit or shot—can hear
Harmony at home, as neighbors ask:

*Hey! How’re you doing?*
*What do you need?*
*How can I help you?*

May we fix the strings that are broken,
wrap these tiny Gifts from God
in Life Music’s magical resonance,

soften the bleak of
tone-dead streets with
sun-rimmed heart Symphonies

So we won’t always look away
THANKS GIVEN

A gaggle of little children
swarmed around me that day
as I left their clamoring classroom.

“Goo-bye, Miss Karen, goo-bye,”
adding teachers’ tender prompts,
“Habby Tanks-gibbing!”

I blew kisses into chilled air, praying my
exhaled warmth could replace absent jackets,
bundle bare, bony arms, lacerated hearts.

Fledglings pushed from nests far too soon,
their dirty finger-tips touched puckered mouths,
flinging back awkward baby sparrow sounds.

My arms stretched inadequately open,
they raced to me with knee, ankle hugs,
scores of germ-ridden sticky kisses.

His violent storms cause for my weekly presence,
a troubled, battered boy finally forgot attack-mode,
screeched my name in fever pitch.

Grown-ups smiled, delighted chuckles
as child chaos evolved into unexpected joy—
daily crises pushed aside, on Holiday for now.

These babies don’t arrive with much beyond physical, emotional wounds, ones we can bandage for only a time.

Words lacking, faucet-like anxiety pours forth virulent language, street survival bites, fists, spits.

This bright school is safe space, unconditional caring space, where adult touches don’t hurt.

There are climbing rules here, not on how high you can go but how you use your hands to help others.

Relentless soul-costly teacher love carries fragile, damaged bodies away from poverty’s prison to raw richness.

Grateful for baby besos, abrazos, kisses, hugs from endangered spirits, I departed with their gifts in my heart.

Thanks given.
HAND OF A CHILD

*Who takes the child by the hand takes the mother by the heart.*
—Anonymous Proverb, quoted across many nations

Even in the large meeting room at the group home, mother and child appeared isolated but proud. With silent dignity, they sat separate from conversation. Yet the mother quietly studied the other children at play, listening to adult admonitions to share toys and hold younger hands.

She tried to ignore me as I approached them, glancing down at the bulky child in her lap. Noisy breathing filled the room, frighteningly loud and uneven gasps as the child’s chest heaved.

But it was not the breathing that anyone would even note. It was the tumor. Huge, pushing beyond skin capacity, it appeared that the left side of his face would break open with the size and weight of it. It conquered his eye and ear, and squashed the nose aside, forcing his mouth to hungrily suck for air. The tumor truly was alive, angry, and mean in its grotesque distortions.

Clearly, the mother sat away to avoid stares and questions. *The desolation of isolation.* This child had no playmates. Other toddlers fixated on his face, denying any commonality in childhood, despite their own bald head or machine-accompanied bodies. As they rocked, mother and son seemed as one, their own universe. “And the tumor’s,” I thought.

It was hard for me not to stare as well. I too was physically overwhelmed, despite my weekly counseling here with families of chronically ill children. Trying anything to engage his mother in conversation, in Spanish, I asked, “How are his treatments going?” She wouldn’t have it. She just shrugged. “Will he be able to stay an outpatient?” The woman looked away.

My frustration grew. I sensed that the mother wanted company, even coun-
suling, but not all the questions about the tumor. But how could I help if she wouldn’t talk?

One more try. “Do you have other children?” Most mothers were concerned about the impact of illness on siblings, hungry for any parenting ideas. She shook her head and rested it on her son’s curly black hair. Wrong question. I touched her hand and left.

The next week, mother and son sat closer to the group, but could have been galaxies away. Still holding him in the rocking chair, she avoided all eye contact. The office staff reported she asked for nothing after registering that first night a month ago. She spoke to no one, even during meal preparation, usually a noisy, shared time at the House. Their isolation had worked. Both she and the boy had become invisible to all but side glances or the stares of newcomers.

She rose and fixed her son’s bulky body into the stroller as she walked toward the kitchen. I followed, unsure of my reception, but sure that she needed a friend. I decided to ignore the obviously physical and concentrate on the real child. It surprised me that I didn’t even know his name, that I just thought of him as the child with the tumor.

His mother ignored me as she fried beans for dinner. Until I knelt down next to the child and held his hand.

“¿Su nombre?” I asked.
“Jesús,” the mother replied without looking up.
“¿Y de donde es?”
“De Monterrey.”
“¿Cuántos años tiene él?”
“Tres.”

All of a sudden Jesús became a real three-year old child. Not that he touched or even looked at me. But the little boy inside became more important than the tumor.
I playfully grabbed his toes resting in the barely-worn sandals. He startled and stared at me. I grabbed them again. He studied me intently.

His mother began to speak softly as she cooked.

“Es muy difícil para nosotros. Mi familia está en México, y no hay nadie aquí. Cuesta demasiado que mi esposo viaje. Y, en Monterrey, me ayuda mi madre.”

I wasn’t surprised that part of her pain had been living in a strange place without her husband’s and mother’s support. But I couldn’t imagine how difficult it would be to make it alone in a different country with a very sick child.

“Pero la semana pasada, buenas noticias. No es el tumor maligno. Dicen los médicos que podrán eliminarlo. Necesita mas cirujía, y meses, o años, para reconstruír la cara. Por fin, será posible que mi hijo tenga una vida normal.”

Her chest heaved with relief that the tumor was benign. She was able to put aside concerns about the months, or even years, of surgeries to rebuild his face. Her son would live. Now he could have friends, and maybe someday even a family of his own.

While Jesús sat, seeming to slumber, we spoke of other things. The trip from Mexico. When she would next see her husband. No more mention of the tumor or illness.

As she spooned steaming food onto their plates, I moved to leave. I waved at the child, who only stared back. Twice more. More stares.

I started out the door but heard his mother’s summons. I turned to the stroller. Jesús regarded me solemnly and waved his small hand slightly. His mother’s face streamed with tears.

The Thief

She glanced around her own classroom surreptitiously. Within easy view, Annie sat quietly, though looking up frequently from her math. Inviting distraction, her birdlike body seemed ready for flight in any direction. Janet Macaulay moved toward her, placing a gentle hand on the child’s fragile shoulder. “Glad to see you here working on those fractions today. Looks good so far, Annie.”

As she spoke, Janet looked directly under the desk and at the open backpack. Nothing visible. But that didn’t mean the new Dr. Seuss books weren’t there. Or Michael’s missing multi-color sports car.

“You’ve been out a lot lately. What’s going on?”
“Nothin’. Jus’ sick.”
“Anything bad? We didn’t get a note from your Mom.”
“No. Jus’ sick. She been busy.”

Annie returned studiously to her computations, body language indicating they had suddenly become incredibly important. The conversation was over.

Janet shook her head as she walked to another desk. Instinctively, the other fourth-graders ignored Annie. Yet, she had never been a behavior problem. She was absent often, sometimes for three or four days. No phone at home. No notes from parents. Social Services had gone to the apartment a few times, but no one was ever there. Or no one opened the door.

From the beginning of the year, Janet was concerned about Annie’s appearance. Disheveled, often dirty, she had a few wrinkled clothes that she wore without washing, stains and all. Annie’s tiny body resembled eight, not her eleven, years. Always a kind child, quietly she helped a few slower students, from checking difficult classwork to reminding them to button their jackets against the cold.

Despite absences, Annie was not that far behind in her own work. While
she used street vocabulary and occasional sexual terms beyond her years, she loved to read. For completing onerous tasks such as writing and math, Janet discovered that Annie’s most favored reward was lying on the beanbag with a colorful book. She reveled in brilliant pictures, laughing aloud at Curious George. But Seuss was her favorite. She recited *Green Eggs and Ham* by heart and sometimes whispered lines from *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas* as she practiced spelling or math facts. Amazing contrasts as her small body quivered in amusement inside her dirty dress. She didn’t seem to need anything else.

And then things disappeared. A knit cap. Magic markers. Colored rods for math. Favored scratch ’n sniff stickers. And books. So many books were missing.

Quickly, the aura changed in the room. At first, pairs of students had whispered about *The Thief*. Then wide-scale disgruntlement set in, a semi-paranoia about perceived possibilities.

“The Thief took my pencil.”

Located inside the desk minutes later, “The Thief put it back.”

“The Thief could take the gerbil, Miss. Spot would be real scared.”

“Do you think He’s here in the morning waiting for us?”

“Has He ever hurt anybody?”

Reluctant to assign blame, Janet watched the children carefully. It was obvious that no malintended thief slipped into the room at midnight, stealing Legos from the game table, exiting quickly into darkness while leaving everything else intact.

No clues until Monday, when Michael whispered angrily, “It’s Annie, Miss! She didn’t want to give back my sports car Friday. Later it was gone from my desk.”

“Did you see her take it?”

“No. But she’s sneaky.” It was obvious from intense onlooker eyes that Janet was not the first Michael had told. Annie wrote her spelling words studiously.

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As the children walked to lunch, she kept Annie in the room. “Did you take Michael’s car, Annie?”

“Bastard’s a liar.”

“Don’t swear. Did you take the car?”

“NO! And if that stinkin’ S-O-B says it one more time, I’m gonna sue his ass!!!”

The vision of a suited-up attorney standing behind Annie in her dirty blue dress and smudged arms almost made Janet laugh aloud.

“Well, right now, fair or otherwise, you’ve been accused. The best way to prove you didn’t do it is to help him get it back and to be sure you’re not around anything else that disappears.” Janet wasn’t prepared for the old, cold eyes or the strange response.

“There’s a lot you people don’t know. About this or anything.” Fiercely, she ran out of the room.

Shuddering uncomfortably, the teacher went through Annie’s desk quickly. Nothing. She decided the law probably didn’t allow her to search the backpack. But curiosity prevailed as an eye seemed to peer from inside the half-zippered pouch.

“Oh, Lord.”

It was Lucky. Spots everywhere, they adored him. The class Dalmatian looked out-of-place inside the tattered school bag. Certainly, Lucky was more than a stuffed animal, even more than a mascot. Janet bought him for the room after the class earned the “101 Dalmatians” video through a week’s good behavior. Still excited by the movie, at first they fought over holding him.

When Shana found out she didn’t have to move, and when nobody in their class caught chicken pox, Lucky earned his name. If good things happened, it was because of him. When Bob broke his arm and later, Katie’s cat died, the class decided that they could have Lucky on their desk. So other bad things wouldn’t happen.
Great! We learned superstitions this year, Janet had reflected uneasily.

Then Crystal’s precarious health worsened. Absences for dialysis became more frequent. Worries about finding a new kidney. Holding the stuffed dog above the small desk, Janet remembered with a start that it was Annie who suggested Crystal be allowed to keep Lucky with her whenever she was at school.

In her interesting combination of wisdom and street talk, she said, “Ain’t nobody needs more luck.” Since then, Crystal and the Dalmatian became inseparable, the child even rubbing him absent-mindedly as she did her schoolwork.

So why would Annie steal the dog now, knowing that Crystal would be inconsolable when she returned from this round of treatments?

Happily, the class hadn’t noticed his absence from his home on the shelf where he awaited Crystal these days. Returning from lunch, Annie didn’t blink when the teacher pointedly referred to Lucky. Studying the non-reaction, Janet sadly remembered Michael’s words. “She’s sneaky.”

Her after-school conversation with Annie encountered only disbelief and denial. “Wasn’t in my bag. Why’d you go in my bag anyway? You do that to everybody when they’re not around?”

She’s good, thought Janet. She’s got me feeling like the thief.

Since that episode, no Annie for three days. Then she reappeared this morning, looking like a beggar woman. Strangely old, edgy, and stooped. Janet decided to let the situation sit for awhile. Hopefully, it was over.

Math completed, she told the group about her parent conferences this term. “I’m sending home the schedule for your parents to come to the school. But if they’re working or can’t come during their time, have them call me or write down a better time.” I'll bet Annie runs home with the schedule. She immediately regretted her sarcasm, since no one had ever seen the mother at the school.

As Annie left that day, she stopped at Janet’s desk. “Teacher, you ever go to somebody’s house?”
Jolted, Janet responded, “Sure.”

“Come Saturday morning then.”

“Don’t you want to check with your Mom first?”

“She’ll be home. Come on . . .”

Saturday dawned chilly and overcast. *I bet no one’s even around when I get there,* Janet worried. But her mood softened as she surveyed the filthy complex. Trash and broken bottles bespoke an active Friday night, as Janet walked around a young man, his head resting in sleep on a plastic bag in the alley. *What a place for children to grow up . . .*

Annie opened the shabby door, holding a baby on her bony hip. Television blaring, more young eyes quickly appeared at the door.

“This your teacher, Annie?”

“Janie, stop pushing so I can see!”

“Then move, stupid!”

Janet could see a ragged boy of about seven angrily shove a younger girl. Dancing with excitement, the small child observed Janet through huge brown eyes, her near-naked body shivering.

“Can I come in, Annie? Your sister looks cold.”

“She’s always cold. Needs some clothes.” Annie turned and they moved into the tiny living room.

Loud television predominated, with a filthy sofa opposite, no carpet on the dirty tile floor, scattered toys, and empty bags from chips and pretzels. Children’s magic-marker drawings brought surprising shocks of vivid color to low areas on otherwise neglected, smudged walls. Roses in a basement of rats.

Two more children scurried over, one attaching herself immediately to Janet’s leg, while the other stood back and looked mistrustfully.

“Is your mother home?”

“Right behind you!” Annie laughed.
Janet startled to see a huge woman seated on a chair in the tiny kitchen. “Momma. Get over here and meet my teacher.” Surprised by Annie’s bossy tone, Janet watched the woman rise slowly and move awkwardly toward them. She had a friendly smile, but vacant eyes. “Miss Macaulay, somethin’ you need to know. My momma likes everybody but she don’ say much . . .” Attention abruptly turned to Annie’s hip. The small body she held exuded pain suddenly, coughing violently. As his hacking chest expanded with interspersed wheezing, he pitched his curly head back and forth gasping for air. The mother moaned. Yet she made no attempt to take the baby, who by now almost threw himself out of Annie’s grasp. “Make him stop it!” she shouted at Annie from her huge frame, tears coursing down her face. Janet quickly grabbed the baby, whose rasping breaths were now the only sound in the room. She walked about the tiny quarters, rubbing his back, talking to him softly. “Where’s his medicine, Annie?” Her head hung. “Don’ have none.” “How long has he been coughing like this?” “Awhile. A long time.” Thumb in mouth, the two-year old climbed into Annie’s lap, her slightly older sister watching from a distance. Janie and Sam resumed argument over the television channel. Annie’s mother went back to her chair in the kitchen, saying nothing. Janet’s glance began to take in familiar objects. Next to crumpled stickers, assorted Dr. Seuss books on the floor. Annie appeared disinterested as Janet walked over to pick up some familiar math manipulatives, noting a box half-full of magic markers on the sofa.
The wheezing baby needily close to her body, Janet felt especially moved by the children’s pictures hung jauntily on the bare wall.

“Who did these?”

“Janie and Chrissy. I teach them numbers too. Chrissy’s real quiet, but she’s smart. And it keeps Janie out of trouble with Sam.”

“Do you read to them?”

“Yeah. The girls like it, even little Boo here.” She tickled the toddler curled in her lap. “I wish Sam could read better ‘cause he could help. But he don’t go to school much. We take turns. But since the baby’s been sick, I’m afraid to leave Sam here. I think he’s sorta’ slow anyhow, like Mama.” She nodded across the room at her mother, now relaxed back into watching television.

*How old was this person in a skinny child’s body?*

The tiny chest on Janet’s shoulder heaved mightily as a new coughing round began.

“Teacher, the baby’s really sick. My brother Tommy, he died awhile ago after coughing a lot too. And he was big, even older than Sam. I’m scared the baby’s gonna die too.”

Looking back, Janet would remember this day as a blur. A home call to a Child Protective Services friend brought two adults to interview the mother and stay with the younger children. While shadowing Janet’s every step, Annie refused to relinquish the baby until the emergency room nurse promised she could stay with him. Quickly diagnosed with pneumonia, he was admitted to the children’s hospital. The nurse’s eyes questioned Janet’s when Annie claimed she was old enough to sleep in his room. The teacher nodded. Clearly it was both or none. With a shrug of resignation and a quick word, Janet decided it might just as well be all three of them.

On Monday, her classmates each wrote Annie a letter wishing for the baby’s recovery. (Janet made Michael change his “Dear Thief” opening.) Newly back
from her dialysis, Crystal insisted Janet take the Dalmatian to Annie. Again, Lucky worked his magic.

Ensuing weeks saw each of the younger children, even little “Boo” and the baby, enrolled in neighborhood daycare. Annie and Sam re-entered school. A temporary court order kept the children together with their mother during a trial period when a social worker visited the home to teach shopping, cleaning, and cooking. The Court hired a neighbor to take the children to daycare every morning. A final decision was pending.

Annie had other changes awaiting her at school. On her first day back, she seemed nonchalant as she noted the returned Seuss books and Michael’s car. But her usually nonplussed countenance started when Janet led the class to the school’s newly initiated Care Room. A huge closet, its floor to ceiling overflowed with an amazing array of jackets, dresses, shoes, and pants of every size and color. Bookshelves spilled over with a cornucopia of books, colored paper, markers, and toys.

Astonished gasps. Annie and her classmates hungrily gaped at a Thanksgiving feast.

“Can we have these, Teacher?” Michael asked, eying a Rex Sox cap greedily. His face fell when she shook her head.

“No, you can’t have them. But you can earn them.”

“Oohhh.” Delight turned to caution.

“The Care Room is full of donations from parents and friends of the school. The clothes are barely worn and the materials brand new. But people worked hard to bring this to you. You have to work hard to earn these things.

“You’ll see that everything here has a number of points attached. Let me know in advance what you’re working for, and you have one week to earn those points. If you do, it’s yours. If not, the article goes back for someone else to earn.”

“How do we get the points?”
“Through work and behavior that you and I set together.”
She noted the direction of Stacey’s stare.
“If math is hard for you, but you crack down and answer questions without skipping any, you can earn this great sticker book.”
A glance at Chris.
“If you have trouble finishing your homework every night, but you do it anyway, you’ll get this Yankees shirt.”
A look at no one.
“If you don’t steal anything, but earn it instead, you can take home this whole collection of Dr. Seuss. It’s your choice.”
Humbled, the class walked back to the room quietly contemplating options. As more seconds passed, their hearts bursting, they shouted, “Miss, I want the bear . . . the Legos . . . the pink shirt.” Annie said nothing.
At the end of the day, Janet Macaulay watched Annie linger as others departed. “Did you decide what you want to earn?” she asked quietly.
“Miss, you done a lot for me, but I gotta ask one more favor,” her eyes peering hopefully from beneath weary eyelids.
“Yes, Annie.”
“If I promise I won’t never steal again, will you hold those Seuss books for me ’til later on? Right now, I got a sister who needs some clothes.”

Women Are Not Done Yet

All we have is time, is now,
Time takes us on.
How we are moved says everything
about what we are to each other
and what are we to each other
If not everything.
—Amanda Gorman, “Closure”
ALMOST

Last night, I looked up,
saw an almost-moon,
like me, close to finishing
but not quite done.

Alone in solitary sky.

I’ve felt that way too,
star-less, muted darkness,
camaraderie only with
scorched struggles.

 Ambient particles above
comforted my deep
hollow wariness,
whispered

*Wait awhile, awhile,
for to rush is to miss the Journey.*

I hoped my children
wouldn’t look up too soon,
but wait, partake,
in Full Moon’s arrival,

promises of startled possibility
in Halloween nights.

Chills of near-fulfillment
cloaked unimagined understanding.

My almost-being refused reflection,
anticipated mystical closure.

Just one more day . . .

Tonight, I went outside again.

Like thick cigar smoke,
pillowed clouds blocked my view.

But in seconds, sky curtains parted,
exposed a shocking, brilliant Full Moon.

Startled stillness for grand Final Act,
I co-joined its wholeness in cosmic calm.
Then, as if never there, it was instantly gone
behind huge puffs of willowing air.

Frustrated by hidden secrets of
dark night chambers,

an aching, angry
pungency permeated me.

Mad Hatter’s trick?
All in this dreamer’s mind?

Or perhaps . . .

Had even this most complete moon also felt unfinished,
off hunting now for still something more?

I almost smiled.
EVE WAS RIGHT

Of all sad words of tongue or pen,
the saddest are these, ‘It might have been.’
—John Greenleaf Whittier

Future beckons, prances
around our time-baked bodies,
an unlikely puppy
with a savory bone.

Do we gnaw at or know,
chew on or choose
what lies ahead
in these indefinite hours?

Indefinite, not finite,
as endless choices ripen,
temptations to be plucked
from life’s tree.

No sense denying our Self as we age.
Forget should, drink Life’s wine.
Let memories fade, fade into shadows,
their dust scattered by Clarity’s gale wind.

Regret only a chin parched
by un-dripped sugary juices.
Eve was right—
Just take a bite.
Wednesday

Hump Day is no match for your music.
—“Pandora” Radio

I feel like I’m unearthing a fallow field, pushing mind’s weightiness into fresh-plowed rows, digging deeper, deeper below life’s fertile pastures. While hands and heart nurture re-birthed seedlings, just-discovered thoughts, experiences, urge: Inhale sunshine. Suck in water. Sprout.

Enticing myself away from Complacency’s bear hug is hard work. Even harder than when I really worked.

Indeed, today would have been Wednesday. Hump-Day. Yet, as I pause to count my 77 years (Imagine what they’d be in dog years!) big and little hands of my Bio-Clock read Midnight. Saturday. Tick-tock . . . Tick-tock . . .

Better hurry, I warn slowed legs as if they could march faster along mulchy paths.

But wait!

Are my eyes cataract-blurred, or do silver Maserati’s and Lismore Waterford glasses still gleam, beckon?

Is my hearing harder, diminished, so I now ignore Taps at dusk, Midnight cathedral chimes’ calls?

So maybe it still is Mid-Week for me, not Week’s End.

It’s true that my heart pumps, struggles harder to reach hilltops these days. But while my walking is less steady, it’s more assured.
What if there’s no If, but only Then, following each road’s fetching fork?

What if my God was more inventive when She created Earth?

On Her Third Day of Genesis, decided it was more fun-filled, interesting, to mold imperfect Humans that day—Wednesday. Why wait for Saturday?

And perhaps in Her Genesis, Adam gave the apple to Eve, who was hungry in that unfoundering focus to fill our Universe.

Maybe it’s Hump Day for my God as well, still working hard to perfect us “Later-in-Life” Human creations.

Is She listening to Her own kind of music, not ours?

Does She too feel like Today’s fallow fields will re-birth in Tomorrow’s Song?

Does She resent being called “Silver Sneakers” as much as I do?
THE NEXT NOTE

It’s not the note you play that’s the wrong note. It’s the note you play afterwards that makes it right or wrong.
—Miles Davis

It’s hard for my body to dance anymore,
or some days even to walk

Like that stranger in night’s dark,
Arthritis hangs out in favorite joints

Very favorite ones, it seems

Music plays a slow dance now,
measured rhythms, painful steps as

I look downward, floorward
always fearful of falls

Life-Altering Falls

But we weren’t meant to look down

What if I look up instead?
Anticipate the next note
Ignore approaching night,
Inhale through unshuttered windows

Soul-refusal to be subdued

Why can’t Spirit glide gracefully
above Life’s physical debasement?

Bone-marrowed visceral music
empower, stent arteries?

Unmuted capillaries trumpet with joy

Fantasies and memories merge now,
insight wiser than regret

The next seductive note pours forth,
Sacred Arias sway me into

an Andrea Bocelli night
TEAD OFF

Astonishing how tea opens the ears.
—Michelle Franklin

Head jolting upward, that eccentric, odd old woman finally shuffles slowly back to me.

As her most used, abused, irreparably-stained teacup, I almost shake my handle in dismay.

She’s delayed by the daily disappearance of her outdated smart phone. Smarter than she is, perhaps! Maybe she’s mad that her memory’s gone missing.

Water inside me now a tepid lukewarm bath, over-soaked leaves decaying moss in that bloated, floating tea bag. I recall, long for real, lovely leaves.

Delicious Darjeeling, captivating Ceylonese, savory Lapsangsouchong, exotic Indian Spice, wafting, filling home’s-air, expanding rich ruddiness to Christmas hearty.

In those bygone days, birthed by perfectly boiled water, wriggling leaves first luxuriated three-to-five minutes, settled lovingly onto teapots’ patterned floors. Plants come home to rest, fragrances from far-off kingdoms steeping us all with exotic tradition.

Next it was my turn. Poured through sensuous teapot spout, beckoning brew slid forth, swirled into my cup bottom. Dual spoons of sugar stirred in me with care, compassion, topped off by tantalizing warm milk.

I miss those memorable moments, mellowing my mood and hers. Elegant, patient tea time. Ahh . . .
Lazy now, pot-less, she drops a drooping tethered bag inside my etched, elevated curves, pale pink rosettes painted on porcelain, English Bone China so delicate it denies dishwashers.

No longer whole-hearted Harrods, she’s onto Irish tea these days—Boring Barry’s Gold! Evening even brings decaffeinated bags—how embarrassing!

She’d soon be mutilating me in that murderous microwave if her mother hadn’t taught her a modicum of manners. I hope even she’ll be disturbed at today’s disastrous brew, dump it out in disdain, at best boil a new bursting bag, begin again.

Reaching toward me while she shakes a good bit, her wrinkled hand’s steadfast fore-finger holds tight inside my arched handle.

Pensive pause, brow furrowed, focused—She sips, sips, sips, head tilted sideways with intent, as if hearing sea-shell’s roar.

Still listening, elevating me gaze-high, her face breaks into conspiratorial grin. Paled-blue eyes twinkle, sudden laughter erupts, out-sizes her now gaunt frame.

She smiles at me, her finest friend these final years and speaks in that annoying, gentle way:

“Simmer down,” she says, “or everyone else will know we both have a chip on our shoulder.”
AGEING FORWARD

Don’t dwell on disease. Sipping over-ripened orange juice, bee-sugared honey, joined with jiggers of Jameson, cures coughs, cancers, constipation.

Always remember your enemies. Bless them with the need to be stronger than Job, more towerful than Trump. No grudge too grand. Imagine the possible: Body-biting blood bugs; putrid scaly skin scuffing, scraping; family, friends spitting on their spirits.

Exercise often, demonstrating a dominant digit. Walk away from withering weakness while you wave at kindred wanderers on dirty off-road paths.


Hug a hurt child. Raise your hesitant hand to be counted on. Remember—March isn’t only a month. Squatters can bend to honor sacred grounds, not only grimy gym floors.

Climb high: Canes, Walkers, Wheelchairs work wonders. They let you look up, not only down.

Continue to look up each night. Go outside. Take cellphone photos of reddened-orange sunsets, Moon immersions beyond Cumulus clouds, surreal objects in Constellation’s ocean. Text these pictures to those you love. They’ll always respond with thanks and virtual hugs.

Avoid inhaling heady Lavender—Naps are for babies. Instead, each afternoon, check on-line for that night’s possible sky-photos. Then, eyes closed, just put your feet up and determine your own universe’s undeniable direction.
Get a pet. Best savagely chew on break-in burglars, uninvited guests, but also cuddle cozily, lavishing licks with warm raw tongue in jointly-affixed fascination for Dallas Cowboys’ Game Day. They intuit when to cheer, ear-wag, and remain eerily still during 4th Down Ref calls.

Plant a gorgeous garden. Water well when you can. Immediately throw out, replace any who don’t talk tenderly back.

Join social networks. If you can’t cheat at cards, be bossy at Bingo. Annually attend religious services whether or not you need to. Crash courses in Chinese calligraphy can be catastrophically challenging, but better than crocheting cobwebs. Instead, consider sexy Marlon Brando cinemas, cigars included.

Looking ahead may feel potentially problematic, scarily short-lived. Heavens, what if you should eventually die? Let reflections, recollections recall only memories that matter most. And then, create new ones . . .
UNDER-RATED

Thus it was that the dawn of sensibility was mistaken for the onset of Senility.
—Alan Bennett

Despite common misconceptions, getting Old means more than Medicare:

Because you get to be called “Grandma” by squiggly, sticky lap-borne little ones who beg you to tell the same stories: Please! Please!!!

Because friends, neighbors worried, missed you during COVID, they left Pot Roast, Mashed Potatoes, Pecan Pie at your doorstep, checked on-line frantically to finally find your Pfizer Vaccine. They celebrate with you as life re-emerges.

Because everyone’s surprised that you still plan for the future, like wanting a lifetime warranty on your new washing machine.

Because when you’re both old and from New York, they understand you hyper-ventilate, not meditate.

Because you no longer conceive contradictions between your Irish side

(It’s as easy to be nice as nasty)

and genuine glee generated at coffins bearing your Medusa-like enemies

(What goes around, comes around).

Because while others can’t carry your worries, they carry groceries. When you carry a cane, crowds part paths around you, don’t shove, avoid stepping on your seriously sore left foot.
Because people expect you to drool, drip food on your protruding stomach, you can eat S’mores ice cream, tell tales, gesture all at once.

Because medicinal chocolate-covered cherries and Chardonnay work wonders.

Because your more meaningful life moments occur outside clothes-closet choices, others observe that you look comfortable in red diagonal stripes, worn with green-black Scottish plaid pants, suede Velcro shoes.

Because Techies nod in respect when you don’t cry anymore over crashing computers, take perfect photos on your new iPhone 14 Pro.

Because on FaceTime, grandkids teach you Pokémon, Minecraft, solve problems with Zoom, and accidentally call from school on their Smart Watch.

Because you no longer have to explain why creating children’s childhood is your most cherished charity.

Because you have the Honor of being a Caregiver for both Young and Old.

Because you know the difference between annoying inconveniences and painful life problems: Terminal cancer is worse than traffic congestion.

Because wheelchairs waiting at airport gates are more welcoming than flight attendants calling you Young Lady with a smirk.

Because extensive eye contact is more telling than a Tweet, in disdain, you can stare down anyone who says, You must have been beautiful when you were younger.
Because moving in slower motion, you have more time to think.

Because, afraid you’ll falter or fall, friends and family give you the front seat in their car, touch your fragile arm in tender tribute these days.

Because you choose to chase rainbows, not drive into darkness’ dim-lit highways.
WILL-KOMMEN (WELCOME)

How odd to review my Will in old age. Daunting decisions now, not after I’m dead. No one will want my Mother’s gleaming Waterford, tiers of towering teapots travelled home from Champs-Élysées shops.

Now draped upon gray bricks above my fireplace, that fearsome wildebeest tapestry I bargained for at Tasmania’s Salamanca stall will someday be snatched up at an estate sale. Two dollars, tops.


I can imagine your conversation. . . .

Anyone want these?


Kids—You like car pictures? Grandma was really into cars!

We should keep this stuff. Anyone have room?


We should print some of these if you don’t already have them. Anybody?

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Then comes the real Will part. Clear. Concise. Cash. With bullion, I’ve had Golden Years; without, it could have been gelding a racehorse.

I hope you’ll save whatever’s left for your own retirement, times together to tease.

Encouraging my lavish lifestyle, you declined what many would call their inheritance, pressing me to spend it. On me.

So while you won’t fight over my cracked, antique Saudi window frame, bronzed Babylon birthing plate, or Japanese Jingu House, I Will you

sun days, moon beam joys,
laughs, head shakes, no might-have-beens,
always know my love
A ROSE’S HEARTINESS

God gave us memory so that we might have roses in December.
—J.M. Barrie

There’s such heart in a rose’s outpourings—
Sensuous petals yearn, unfold,
spread savage emotions. Torn edge
false fragility belies hidden, hardy intent.

As honeycomb’s syrupy spell
seduces tongues, promises sweetness,
rose’s fragrance floats, woos, draws
inhalable colors—stormy, sanguine.

Beckoned by dawn’s rooster, sleepy buds
unfurl into noon’s welcome brilliance,
dusk curtain lowers, dark tips quiver.
Nighttime heads refuse to nod at day’s fulfillment:

Not yet. Not done yet . . .

In youth, we too are un-afraid of blossom’s failure.
Arms open to embrace rapturous risk, life’s un-foiled
kaleidoscopic hues, sumptuous Siren calls.
We never expect Nature’s party to end.
But acrylic experiences can stitch fabricated lives. Apathetic buds drop onto gritty soil, weeds devour dreams, spit childhood *Dare Me!* into adult abyss of

*I can’t, I won’t, I shouldn’t.*

Or when disappointment-thorns puncture blood holes, our gray heads droop, less-lofty, wisdom-weary. Un-fed, un-watered souls fear hidden shears to prune us away from un-climbed trellises.

Alternative to Elder-Leaves in dread of tragic fall? *Age-Blind Recklessness—* life-wound’s rose food, fertilizer to remind that we may not be dead even when onto the ground.

Memories lie ahead, not behind. Morning scents steady our shaky legs, resolute stems of earth’s forgotten coffee. Why would we miss an awaiting day? Why?

Resilient as roses, we can confront any almost-lost next chance. Night Vision permeates cataract clouds as we stare directly into life’s split-second eye.

*Not yet. Not done yet . . .*
NOTES

I was honored to read the following poems at Aspen Summer Words (2018): “My Own Landscape,” “Outrageous Inpourings,” “The Bond (No Disrespect),” “Rational Rage,” “Hellacious Humor,” “Life Re-Written,” “When,” “Welcome (Will-Kommen),” and “Tina’s Community.”

“Life Re-Written” was inspired by David Shumate’s wonderful piece, “Revising My Memories.” Upon my reading of “Life Re-Written” at a Gemini Ink workshop, Poet Vijay Seshadri’s insights and reflections were very impactful in setting its tone and direction.

I was invited to present “The Thief” for critique and review at Ireland’s remarkable Doolin Writers’ Festival (2015). This gathering of gifted and delightful artists gave great support and encouragement for my ongoing story-telling of life’s experiences.

Aspen Writers’ Network members (2022) responded with extremely helpful comments and observations after my reading of “No Hace Falta Morir.”

I wrote a number of these poems from themes and prompts in classes at San Antonio’s “Gemini Ink” and New York’s “The Poetry Barn.” We all remain very grateful for their support of our Writers’ communities.
All of the stories in this book are true, actual experiences. In “The Thief,” “Hand of a Child,” “The Shame,” and “Next Year in Jerusalem,” I have substituted fictional names in order to respect each individual’s confidentiality.
THE AUTHOR’S JOURNEY

With thanks to Dr. R. Douglas Brackenridge for writing much of this Life Story in his article “Karen Waldron: Professor Emerita, Education” (Winter, 2016), for Trinity: The Magazine of Trinity University, San Antonio, TX.

Karen Waldron was born in Brooklyn, N.Y., where she loved the diversity of post-World War II immigrant friends, languages, foods—while fearing daily outcomes of gang violence, poverty, Polio. Her family moved to Long Island when she was age 7, and she then began babysitting infants and children. At 12, she and a friend opened a summer daycare center in her backyard and developed their own language and arts curriculum.

As a student, Waldron won writing competition awards and anticipated becoming a journalist—until a New York Times reporter told her that a career in journalism wasn’t possible for a woman and that she should become a teacher. However misguided, that advice sent her along a different path, where she became that teacher and found a lifetime of fulfillment through her love for children.

A pivotal moment occurred in 1971 at Syracuse University, where she subsequently earned her Doctorate. During an elective seminar on Special Education, she was profoundly impacted by seeing the dignity a teacher afforded a vulnerable young girl in the midst of a seizure. Waldron then dedicated her professional life toward caring for children with special needs, focusing on low-income underserved families.

In 1977, she joined Trinity University, San Antonio, as a Professor and Director of Special Education, a position she held until her retirement in 2005.
She also directed Trinity’s *Special Education Clinic* and their *Special Education Certification Program*. She founded the community *Psycho-Educational Clinic* for the University of Texas Health Science Center (Dept. of Child Psychiatry), and developed *The Inclusive Network* consortium of 200 educators from 65 schools, proposing a national model to include children with disabilities in general education classrooms.

Through support from Trinity University, the Fulbright Foundation, and international governmental agencies, she has consulted across Northern Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong, and the Czech Republic, presenting hundreds of lectures and professional training workshops to design delivery systems for families at risk of poverty, illness, and abuse, and to expand programs for students with special needs.

Waldron appeared regularly on television and radio, also as a magazine columnist and frequent news contributor, engaging media to promote public awareness of necessary interventions for at-risk children and youth. In 2005, she received the *Headliner Award for Professional Achievement* from the San Antonio Women in Communications for her international, community, and media work to develop programs for children with disabilities, as well as for her efforts to break down common misconceptions about student limitations.

She has published five previous books, numerous research articles and handbooks. Her 1996 book, *Introduction to a Special Education: The Inclusive Classroom* (Albany, NY: Wadsworth/ITP) has been an international university textbook for teacher and administrator preparation programs.

Moved greatly by the horrific shootings of students at Columbine H.S. in 1999, she traveled to the quietude of Kinsale Harbor, Ireland, and wrote *Unleashing Kids’ Potential: What Parents, Grandparents, and Teachers Need to Know* (San Francisco: Robert D. Reed Pubs.), a research-based book incorporating practices to raise resilient children during difficult times.
Waldron’s collaboration with Co-Editors Janice Brazil and Laura Labatt (2007) resulted in *Risk, Courage, and Women: Contemporary Voices in Prose and Poetry* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press). In this work, 37 women authors explore when they or someone they admire took life-changing risks despite seemingly overwhelming obstacles. This book received the national “Best of the Best from University Presses” Award, as well as Honors from the American Library Association. It was nominated for the Amelia Bloomer Award for Young Feminist Books.

Waldron has presented her poetry and stories at the Aspen Summer Words Festival and Ireland’s Doolin Writers’ Festival.

She served as a Trustee for the George W. Brackenridge Fdn. and as a member of the Board of Gemini Ink. She was a Founder of Winston School San Antonio, and honored by WINGS (Women Involved in Nurturing, Giving, and Sharing) for her support of uninsured women with breast cancer. She is a Mediator for the Bexar County Dispute Resolution Center, and in 2015, received the “Alamo Area Mediators’ Association Distinguished Service Award” for her work to resolve Community, Family, and Child Protective Services disputes.

In 2017, the Family Service Association recognized Waldron with their “Volunteer of the Year Award for United Way and Bexar County,” for her ongoing involvement with children and families in Head Start preschool programs. She is a member of Leadership Women Texas (2018), and for almost 50 years, has counseled individual families in successful parenting methods for children with unique learning and behavioral needs.

In 2014, the death of her husband, Mike Kutchins, came as a great loss. Waldron cherishes continuing to explore life’s future and special journeys alongside her loving family, dear grandchildren, and amazing circle of friends.

In current poems and stories, she encourages women to also continue their
vital role as the “Rock” of family and society, to dismiss restrictive Gender and Age stereotypes that limit their self-confidence and personal esteem:

I share my belief that we can direct our future, that in the shadows of these times, no matter age or where previous paths have taken us, we still have many more candles to light for ourselves and for others.

We’re not done yet . . .
With a wry, penetrating, and lucid eye, Karen A. Waldron presents her journey in a dynamic array of lyrical poems, travelogues, stories, essays and interviews. Humor abounds in this book as well as grief, a feisty and unapologetic anger at the inequity women confront daily, whether they reside in San Antonio, TX, or Baghdad, and a refusal to settle for the limiting roles to which women have been traditionally assigned. A scholar and educator, Waldron’s life is one of movement—travel to different continents, a restless traveling of the mind, and a travel none of us can avoid—that of time. In an early poem in the collection, “My Own Landscape,” the speaker observes: “How odd to be seventy / and living alone for the first time. / Parents, husbands, children / gone ahead or away.” From a stance of loss and wonder, Waldron begins the telling of this journey. A 200-page lyrical argument against ageism, complacency, intolerance, and sexism, Waldron’s poems and stories burst with a life richly and attentively lived. In the poem “Life, Re-Written,” the speaker plays with the idea of rewriting her life: “I’m eliminating Pop’s debilitating Parkinson’s shakes, recalling only his steady callused hand leading me up indented, chipped steps to Ebbets Field.” In other moments, Waldron’s lens widens to encompass the most challenging questions of our times. On the day of the 2019 shooting at the El Paso Walmart, she can’t accept how violence so casually and irretrievably intersects with our lives and seeks refuge in a local San Antonio Mexican restaurant, La Gloria, where she finds a reprieve from “TV’s eviscerated images” in the ambiance and foods of her home city: “Enchiladas Verdes. Pastel de Tres Leches. Margaritas de la Casa. Body-swaying music.” In “Soul Bullet,” the speaker recalls the tragic 2022 shooting at Robb Elementary in Uvalde, TX, and asks if societal healing is truly possible: “Can we weld / back together / this stained glass / of broken pieces?” Through dark humor and a love of language and discovery, Waldron takes her reader on an unforgettable and candid journey, and the reader who experiences it with her is treated to a gutsy, affectionate, and unforgettable look at life in all its painful and marvelous facets.

—Alexandra van de Kamp, Author of Ricochet Script and Kiss/Hierarchy

A powerful, reflective, and poignant journey regarding the perspectives of womanhood and those moments that shape who we are. Karen uses prose and poetry that meanders through her heart and mind sometimes like a gentle hill and other times like a majestic mountain. This journey is both personal and universal. You feel the depths of connection, inner spirituality, and growth that remind us of our humanity and how we fundamentally have more in common with one another than we do differences.

—Michelle Vasquez, Essayist and Storyteller

What an understatement to say that over the decades, Karen Waldron has seen a few things. As traveler, teacher, and writer she has been an intrepid observer of the human condition around the world. Pour yourself a cup of tea, sit in a peaceful spot and learn how “one woman’s heart overflows with another’s sorrow.” Hear the ringing of “the next seductive note” in those “time-baked bodies.” Explore why her “house isn’t really empty” and how “maybe like yeast bread, Care rises.” Enjoy this celebration of what matters—for Waldron is clearly “not done yet.”

—Lucy Griffith, Award-Winning Author of We Make a Tiny Herd

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