

The Sky and Me

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Personal Essays

Ruth Lercher Bornstein

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for my family and friends with love

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It's 5:30 a.m. Ralph just reached over, touched my back, and said, "What're you doing?"

"Nothing. Just writing."

Like I did for a long time on that stormy night in Iowa when I watched the buffeted tree from the safety of the motel room. Just writing when I could be nestled next to his warm, tender body. Just sitting up in bed in the cold, trying to "Say It."

Just writing by feel in the dark.

"I get up
I walk
I fall down
meanwhile, I keep dancing."

—*Hillel*, Jewish scholar, 1st century

Landscape with Yellow Birds

In the sixties I discovered a poem, translated from Japanese, in East-West magazine. In the seventies I toyed with the idea of writing to the author—if I could find him—and asking if I could illustrate his poem and make it into a picture book. But then, as I got busy with my own work, I let the idea go. Still, I needed to share the poem, and, beginning in 1980, I included it in one of the “inspirational” handouts I gave out to my classes in Creating the Picture Book at UCLA Extension.

In 1984, Ralph and I were at the end of a six month Pacific Rim trip that began in New Zealand, and continued to Australia, Bali, Singapore, Hong Kong, and briefly into China. Our last stop was Japan.

In Tokyo I decided to visit Holp Shuppan Publishers who had translated and published three of my picture books. I was surprised; their offices in the busy Skin-ji-ku area were cramped, disorganized-looking, downright messy. Reassuring. So I got up my nerve and asked the portly, somewhat reserved editor-in-chief if he'd heard of “my” poet.

“Oh, yes.” He smiled. “He is our busiest, our most in demand, our most famous poet. Would you like to meet him?” Before I could answer he went to his cluttered desk and came back with a phone number.

Well, I wasn't about to contact Japan's busiest, most famous poet. But I did yearn to tell him how much I loved “Landscape with Yellow Birds.” I told a friendly, local woman I'd met about it. “He's a friend of my brother-in-law's,” she said. “No problem. I'll arrange a meeting.” I had to wonder. Does everyone in Tokyo know everyone else?

The next day I found myself nervously sitting at a table in a small corner cafe. Why did this famous poet consent to meet me?

And would he? At the appointed time I looked out the window and saw a small, ordinary looking man about my age—but probably younger, I thought—wearing an old, torn tee shirt and wheeling an equally old bicycle. He parked the bike, came into the cafe, walked over to my table, and introduced himself. My new friend must have described me. Or maybe it was because I was the only foreigner there.

I was tongue tied. He was relaxed. I managed to tell him—he spoke perfect English—how much I liked *Yellow Birds*, the only poem of his I knew. And suddenly—out of the blue—gazing at his open face and into his mild, dark eyes, I blurted, “Were you thinking of the painting by Paul Klee?”

Yes. “Yes,” he said.

I felt a shiver down my spine. My heart thumped. Here I had loved this poem for so many years and until that second it had never occurred to me that it had been inspired by a painting I’d known and loved for many more years.

It was only a small moment in a long journey filled with exotic scenes and exciting happenings, but reliving it still gives me the shivers. That moment with the man in the torn tee shirt in the tiny corner cafe in Tokyo was the highlight of my trip. That moment with the poet Shuntaro Tanikawa who wrote the poem, “Landscape With Yellow Birds.”

Landscape With Yellow Birds

there are birds
so there is sky
there is sky
so there are balloons
so children are running
children are running
so there is laughter
there is laughter
so there is sadness
so there is prayer
and ground for kneeling

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there is ground
so water is flowing
and there's today and tomorrow
there is a yellow bird
so with all colors,
forms and movements
there is the world.

Threads

If I were to close my eyes and draw a picture of my life, I'd make a small figure of a woman on a horizon, looking up at an enormous cloud-filled sky. The sun would be low, the clouds dark with light glimmering underneath and around the edges. The woman would be holding a child in her arms. Or would it be the child who is holding the woman?

I don't remember being touched or cuddled much as a child, though I must have been. I do remember that there was a thread between me and a tiny, invisible person who looked exactly like me. She was always with me, always protected me, never left me. She helped me feel safe in my world. Then one day my faithful friend was gone. I felt empty space all around me and knew that I was not connected by a thread to anything. I was probably four.

Did I reach out to drawing as a way to be connected? I don't know. I did like to draw. In kindergarten I also ran after other children, trying to hug and kiss them. In second grade I drew a picture of a heart with arms held out for a hug. The poem underneath ended with the words, "I want you near, I love you dear, my Valentine."

I became a painter. Marriage and four children didn't diminish my need to keep filling up, keep spilling out in line, color and shape. When I wasn't able to work in my tract house garage-studio, I drew zillions of portraits of my children. We'd all sit around the kitchen table with pens, paper and clay and have art "workshops." When my children played outside and I painted, I made sure they stayed near the pecan tree in the front yard by supplying the whole neighborhood with popcorn and kool-aid. The summer my last child was born I kept him in the studio with me, often getting paint on his blanket.

With each new period of painting I pored over my past work

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needing to find the thread, needing to make sure that what I was creating was true, that it was “me.” Sometimes I searched so hard—adding, subtracting, destroying whatever I felt was not feeding the whole—that I painted everything out.

In 1970, I was forty-three years old and my youngest child was eleven. Now living in beautiful Pacific Palisades, I began to create strange, funny drawings, one after the other: rabbits peeking out of the ground, little green elephants talking to flowers, flowers flying away. I didn’t know what was happening but I was having fun, and, as always in my work, I followed my instincts and let it happen.

The following year, out of the blue—I didn’t know why, I’d never thought of it before—I became obsessed with growing a vegetable garden. With help, I dug up a big space in the back yard, hauled out the rocks, spread manure, brought in bales of straw to remind me of Wisconsin, planted the seeds. The garden grew. Like a wild green jungle. Like a celebration was going on, everything growing, stretching out, spreading beyond the borders, putting out buds and flowers and a constant flow of food. Surprises—plants I didn’t plant—came up, like the corn stalks that produced real corn. Amazed at the surging life around me, I spent more time holding hands with the cucumber vine, feeling the tendrils curl around my fingers, than I did in my studio. I even wondered if there might be a little green elephant hiding among the zucchini.

In autumn, the plants—still struggling to squeeze out shoots and tendrils—began to wither; the vines turned brown and sank into the ground. I sat in my garden, holding the dry stem of the cucumber vine. I had witnessed a whole cycle of life and death in one season.

And then, on a windy November day, sitting on my second story deck, I reached up and found words. It was as if they had always been there, floating around, and now that I was ready, I could pull them down. Simple words, like Seed and Green and Grow felt as round and real and solid to me as paint. My first poem that autumn was titled, “I Love My Garden.”

I couldn’t stop writing, kept a notebook under my pillow, barely slept. I knew what was coming out of me was from the same source as my painting, that it must be part of the thread I was

always searching for. A little green elephant became an on-going character in a sketchbook. The rabbit came out of the ground and wandered the woods the way I liked to wander; a flower flying away became the germ of a story. Thoughts, feelings, wishes, kept piling up. I was inspired by what was happening around me; the sun rising, the sun going down, the moon coming up, my children in a green tree. I filled up sketchbook after sketchbook with words and pictures.

I'd always loved gorillas; when they were small, my tumbling-around three boys reminded me of robust little gorillas. But I had never wanted to do a portrait of a gorilla...until now. For the first time, a bud on a bush made me wonder, what could be in there? What is trying to be born? I couldn't explain it to myself. All I knew was that I was saying in words what I couldn't say with paint. It was through writing that I came to realize that there is much more inside of us than we know.

It's 2003 now; I'm seventy six years old. And there is a filling up, a putting out of shoots and tendrils, a spilling out from my fingers in crimson and magenta, pearly gray and pink, scumbled purple over burnt sienna, ceruleum, cobalt, cadmium yellow, green. Black. My eyes not quite focused, looking a little off to the side, in intense attention so I don't lose the connection—so I don't lose the courage—I plunge in with fire-engine red. Another beginning. A time of following my instincts and letting it happen. A time of trying to say in paint what I can't say in words. Of knowing at last that whatever comes out is “me.”

Whether in painting or writing there is the adding, subtracting, the destroying, the surprises. There is the dark. But there is also light. Underneath and around the edges.

Joyful Participation in the Sorrows of the World

(from a quote by Joseph Campbell via Buddhism)

When I wake before dawn and think about the terrible events in the world, or slip back into sadness about my own past or fear of what will be, these words—“joyful participation in the sorrows of the world”—help me. And sometimes it works—to do the only thing I can do, that is to live in the “Now.” That is, now. Like now, Dec. 20, 2001.

I give myself three good stretches and take three yoga belly breaths to prepare myself for the day. Then, after I see what I’ve scribbled during the night, I get up and walk down the hill to the beach. Looking out over the horizon and up into the wide sky and repeating my mantra, “joyful participation in the sorrows of the world,” helps to clear residuals of sadness.

Yes, sometimes it works. But not always. My daughter, Noa, who knows me well, recently gave me a long look and said, “Mom, don’t you really mean, “Sorrowful participation in the joys of the world?”

Noa and I used to have debates about such matters. Which reminds me. When I was sixteen I was on the debate team in high school—the B team. The subjects were often about government and politics, of which I knew nothing.

My twenty-three year old grandson, Jacob, now studying evolutionary biology in graduate school, was a skilled debater in high school—the A team. His brother, Joseph, sixteen years old, is captain of the A team and is going to be an environmental lawyer. I can see either one of them in twenty or thirty years at the highest level of the government (that is if good men named Jacob or Joseph Bornstein could be president).

I don’t think that Gabe, age sixteen and living in Australia,

or Bekka, fourteen, a talented poet and performer with her guitar, have political ambitions. But then, there are my youngest grandchildren, Kalia, age four and Olivia, age two. Olivia ends every other sentence, such as “I’m a big girl,” with shoulders up, hands upraised, and the words, “And that’s it!” Already a brilliant orator. I can see either of them in forty or fifty years years up there at the very top—that is, if half Korean-American females named Kalia or Olivia Bornstein could be president.

And yes, the only way that I know to live, that I *try* to live is: “Joyful participation in the sorrows of the world.”

And it’s December 20, 2001, and “That’s it!”

The Jackal

*For this I will lament and wail; I will go stripped and naked;
I will make lamentations like the jackal...*

(Micah 1:8 Revised Standard Edition)

It was spring, 1950, and in the Emek valley, on Kibbutz Bet Alfa at the foot of the Gilboa Mountains, the baby goats were being born. After my stint harvesting carrots and cauliflower I hung out in the goat shed where there was good humored banter and snacks, and fresh, warm goat milk. Mixed with chocolate for me. Best of all, in the goat shed, I could pet the babies.

I was such a frequent visitor that when the kids were ready to be weaned, Kuba, the boss of the herders offered me the job of taking the little ones out to a nearby field. I eagerly accepted. No more carrots and cauliflower at 4:30 a.m. I reported to the goat shed at 4:30 a.m. instead. It took me some time to learn the high trilling sound used to call the young ones but at last, with a staff and the trill, and at the head of the line of kids, I began to make my way through the kibbutz and out to the field.

No wonder the herders had laughed when I said I wanted the job. Goats are not sheep; they have minds of their own. When I tried to chase one kid out of the roses, all the others ran every which way. As I desperately tried to gather my brood together there was more laughter from onlookers, even from the elders, the founders of the kibbutz, who lived in little houses, not shacks and tents like the rest of us, and who had planted the roses at their doorsteps.

It got better. I learned. The kids learned. Whenever a shadow passed overhead—a hawk or an eagle—all the goats rushed over and crowded around me for protection. When I lay down to rest they'd pile on top of me. I was happy alone in the field with my sketchbook and family of beautiful kids.

The goats grew stronger and I was allowed to roam further. We ventured up the slopes of Mt. Gilboa to find patches of green, the valley already dry stubble from the searing middle-eastern sun. As

we climbed, I imagined the young David hiding from King Saul in one of the caves I saw among the boulders. The kibbutzkniks had reminded me—and the Old Testament is seen as history in Israel—that Mt. Gilboa is where King Saul's son, Jonathan, came to warn David about his father, and where he himself was killed.

One day, high up on the mountain, I saw vultures circling and came upon the still shape, it's fur beige-colored like the boulders and rocks. Ready for the scavengers and the elements, but as yet untouched. I stood over the dead animal, thinking: I'm on Mt. Gilboa surrounded with a herd of goats, each of whom I know personally. A jackal—beautiful, vulnerable—is lying at my feet. I am not dreaming this.

I heard a sound and glanced up. At the crest of the mountain a boy stood staring down at me, a kafiah...the Arab head scarf... wrapped around his head, a flock of goats milling around him. I knew Israel was surrounded by Arab lands, and Mt. Gilboa was so high and so sharp an edge, I was sure the boy was from an enemy country.

I waved first. He waved back. Then he and his goats disappeared.

The encounter happened fifty-three years ago; the borders have shifted many times. Still, today, looking at a map of the area, I realize that the boy must have been from one of the many Arab villages within Israel. However it was, standing over the dead jackal—he with his goats, and me with mine, both of us waving to each other across some kind of border—was a moment I knew I would not forget.

I didn't dream it. I haven't forgotten.

And that boy. Does he remember me?

Finding a Way with “Beryl”

In 1987, on a trip to New Zealand, I visited my friend, Beryl. Beryl was dying of cancer. On the long flight home, inspired by her courage, even her humor facing her death, I began to write about her. The few pages became an outline of a story. I sent it to Charlotte Zolotow, the editor-in-chief at Harper and Row and she wrote back, “This is not a picture book. This is a novel.” I wrote back that I knew it wasn’t a picture book, I didn’t know what it was... but a novel! How do you do that? Still, I found myself continuing to jot down feelings, thoughts, memories, ideas. Slowly, some kind of shape emerged.

In 1989, I sent the new story to Charlotte. Her gracious—and generous—reply: “...wonderful idea, beautiful writing, powerful emotions, but there is a tremendous lot of work to be done.”

In 1991, from her third letter: “There is something very wonderful deep inside this story but...we really can’t be teachers for you. Good Luck.”

Thus began the gestation of *Butterflies and Lizards, Beryl and Me*. I wrote volumes. I went to sleep with *Beryl*, woke up with it, tried to make order out of the jumble of thoughts in my head.

I was discovering that I needed to tell a story of receiving and of learning to give back. I needed a time when trains ran between small towns and hobos rode on them. I needed lizards. Eleven-year-old art-hungry—and angry—Charley began to come to life for me; her absent father, her hard-bitten mother; the “crazy” old woman, Beryl.

Friends and colleagues made suggestions, gave me encouragement. Twice I paid writers to read it. I exchanged a painting for a critique, sent a donation to a writer’s favorite charity. There were picture books and the illustrating of them in between, and months of getting back to painting, but *Beryl* was always there, waiting in the wings.

I didn't count the endless revisions. Or the many rejection letters from various publishers that only made me dig deeper. In 1996 a respected agent agreed to take me on. Besides the "not right for our list" form letters, the following is a sampling—snippets—from the next rejections:

"I do like the atmosphere and setting Ruth has created and I'm wondering if she would be able to apply such a setting to a picture book."

"...tendency toward being melodramatic and treachy.... The homilies, the crying and ranting all get tiresome. The morals are shoved down the readers throat. Given these problems I'm passing but I do agree this is a writer with talent and I'd be glad to consider other projects by her. I enjoyed our lunch last week."

"Sweet story, nicely told. Just not outstanding enough to do well for us in today's difficult market. I probably could have published it successfully some years ago."

And then: "Fabulous characters, magical, lots of promise but lacks tension. With revisions we'll definitely consider it." Yes! And I did agree with their suggestions. From the second letter: "Much stronger. Unfortunately it's too similar to a book one of the editors signed up for our next list."

I put the story aside, then delved in again; more walks with notebooks, more notebooks under my pillow. I still loved the process. But...was it any good? I knew it needed more (or less), knew I had to watch out for my "treachly-ness." But I also knew that I still woke up in the night smiling about it.

Then in March 2000, from a friendly editor: "I love Charley and Beryl and Don, and dear old Walt and Mikey, too. A really touching story with wonderful characters. Definitely saleable. However it needs fleshing out. How about flashbacks?" Yes! The story needed more layers. But this wonderful editorial director no longer had a job. She'd been fired when her firm was swallowed by a bigger one.

I kept expanding, honing, deepening. The only tangible things remaining of my friend Beryl were a bit of her brave spirit and the butterflies she "grew." And then, in April, 2001, in New Zealand, I got an e-mail from my agent. "Dear Ruth, I don't remember where you are. But it's appropriate that yahoo is part of the address because

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the news is: I just got an offer for *Beryl!*

Yahoo! I stood up from the computer in shock.

Butterflies and Lizards, Beryl and Me was published in spring 2002. Writing it has given me the chance to be both the child, Charley, and her old woman soul-mate, Beryl. It's given me a second chance to grow up, a chance to be able to say with Charley at the end, "the space inside of me is big enough to hold it all."

Iowa Tree

I'm sitting in a straight-backed chair before a wide-open second story window in a motel room outside Iowa City. The window frames a stately tree out on the lawn. It's June 4, 2002. The tree is tall and dark in the night. A cool wind has come up, lightning flashes, thunder explodes, cracking, making me jump. And now the rain. I love this. I'm barefoot, in my nightgown, a notebook on my lap, spilling out words. *Tree. Rain. Grass. Green. Storm.* I'd forgotten this smell of wildness, of cool grayness. Just as I'd forgotten that pure, heart-stopping Midwest green we'd been dazzled by all day.

Ralph is reading in bed. Finally he says, "Okay, that's it, I'm turning in. Coming?"

I shake my head, keep staring out, keep writing. He switches off the lamp. It's better in the dark. But I feel guilty. After a long day of driving he'd like me in bed with him. He puts up with the way I am, but he doesn't understand these needs of mine, doesn't know why I'm sitting here in the dark. I don't know why myself.

Why do I always want this? I write. *A large tree filling a window. Clouds of green dipping, bowing, praying, hoping.*

Whispering, I write. *Rustling like silk.* How lucky can a person be?

The more I watch, the more I see a pattern in the tree's movements. The trembling, small whispers in the upper branches; the bending and bowing of the larger branches below.

It's just a tree, you say. I know that. Just a life, too. Just one more organism in this crazy world. And this organism needs to sit here. With cold feet. With a cool wind blowing in on me. With a tree that's speaking to me. *Tree. Wind. Rain. Grass. Green.*

Paul Klee compared the creative process to a tree. The roots are nature, life. The artist is the trunk. The crown of the tree is the art itself. The crown is not a mirror image of the roots. But it, too, is organic. It, too, is a part of nature, of life.

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It's a good thought. It's beautiful. I believe that it's true. But I'm not thinking about art now. It's just me with this one tree. Just me in this Iowa motel room trying to get it, say it, put it into words.

Tree. Rain. Grass. Green. Green whisper. Green leaves. Green against gray freshness of sky. Rain on roof. Me, safe inside, looking out.

Me writing.

Wherever I've gone, it's the trees that speak to me. The sea is too vast. I can't encompass it. I can touch a tree.

I breathe in the freshness. My bare feet are cold. That's okay. It doesn't matter if my feet are cold. Just to sit here. Thank you. Feeling the wind on my face. Breathing.

What causes a storm? What causes peace?

Here it comes again. The wind rocking the tree. Cool, cool rain.

A childhood memory: a soft night, clouds hiding the moon, trees tall and dark, a wind, dark leaves rustling. Murmur of voices from front porches. "Did you ever see such a scorcher as we had today?" Sighs and smiles. "Well, that's how summers are up this way." Ice cubes clinking in glasses of iced tea. "Pray for a heat storm tonight." And then the lightning, the crack of thunder. Running outside, catching the first fat drops of rain. The wet lawn, wet feet, grass sticking to feet.

Should I? Yes. I can bend; I won't break. I run down the motel hallway, down the stairs, past the desk where other travelers are gathered over a coffee cart. They look at me, startled. Oh boy. I'm still wearing my ratty old nightgown. Well, so what.

I run outside onto the wet grass, wet grass sticking to my feet.

I circle the tree. For the first time I see its leaves. Oblong. Pointy. It's an elm! Years ago, I'd heard that Dutch Elm's disease had wiped them out. It's the same kind of tree that tried to get into my second story bedroom window when I was a kid. A tree I mourned when it was struck by lightning in a storm and fell.

The rain falls and whispers. I breathe in the damp greenness.

The elm tree bows and sways, uncomplaining, every which way the storm blows it.

My feet are wet. I bow and sway. I laugh.

I shed a few tears with the rain.

A Small Portrait of a Man I Met About Twelve Years Ago

On My Daily Beach-front Walk in Santa Monica

I think of him every morning. Tall, ruddy cheeked, twinkly eyed, sporty. I don't remember how our conversations began, probably with a smile, a good morning, a "how are you," a "how's it going," and soon after that, with a hug. He was part of a loose and diverse group of men—my age and older—who seemed to have met on the beach, too.

You could see Myron striding briskly along from a distance, swinging his one arm, the other amputated close to his shoulder. Poor guy, I thought, he probably lost his arm in WW II.

"Where you off to, Myron?" I'd ask.

"To the library, Ruthy." He meant the main Santa Monica library, three miles away.

"You walk there and back?"

"Yep, it's my daily routine."

"What do you do there every day?"

"Well, first I read the daily papers to keep up with current events, then I do my research."

"Research?"

"Yup. I didn't get to go to college so there's a lot to catch up on. Right now I'm studying world history, going back to ancient times. Fascinating stuff."

I was pleasantly surprised. Not only was Myron a nice guy, but a scholar, too.

"And you, Ruth?" He wrapped a big arm around me in a one-armed bear hug. "What do you do?"

I told him. He seemed really interested. Gee, not only was Myron a nice guy and a scholar, but he was lovable, too.

I'd run into Myron on Main Street. When we'd spot each other across the street we'd yell, "Hi Ruthy." "Hi Myron." When he

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learned my last name, he proudly told me he was part Jewish. He didn't say which part.

Once we met in line at our local health food store; we were both buying a couple of bananas. He mentioned that he lived in a room above the store.

Once I asked him, "Did you lose your arm in the war, Myron?"

He laughed. "No, nothing like that. It got whacked off in a stupid fishing accident after the war."

"Oh." I was a little deflated.

One day his grin was wider than ever. Patting his sizable paunch he told me he'd lost two pounds.

"Good for you, Myron. How'd you do it?"

"Apple cider vinegar. One tablespoon every morning. Been doing it for months. Finally got results."

Apple cider vinegar. I made a mental note.

Another day, about eight years ago, meeting Myron on the path to the beach, he paused beside a spindly eucalyptus tree leaning a little to the west, the smallest of eight eucalyptus planted on the narrow stretch of grass.

"I've decided that this is my memorial, Ruthy," he said, stroking the tiny trunk. "Don't forget. This is my memorial tree."

The tree was so skinny I could circle one hand around it. I squeezed Myron's good arm. What a nice idea. Not only was Myron a nice guy, a serious scholar and lovable, he was a tree lover, and spiritual, too.

And then, there was the day, about five years ago that one of the men, the Russian emigré, the one of limited English and the phrase, "America the best," stopped me on my walk. "You know about our friend, Myron?"

"No, what about him?"

"Gone." He snapped his fingers sadly. "Like that."

I didn't want to believe it.

I learned more from Tony at the health food store. "His pacemaker had accelerated (I never knew Myron had a pacemaker), he went to the hospital to get it tuned up, or whatever they do, and while he was on the table, his heart stopped. Just like that."

Myron, the nice guy, the serious scholar, the lovable character,

the satisfied apple-cider dieter, the spiritual tree-lover? Just like that? Gone?

A couple of years ago I took my granddaughters, Kalia, then aged five and Olivia, aged three, to the tree, "This little tree," I told them, "is called Myron. It's named after my friend who died."

The girls inspected the dozens of tiny green leaves sprouting up and down the trunk. They put their hands around it. Good, it'd grown a little.

Kalia, the five year old, believed in angels, she believed there was a tiny-sized angel inside of her. "Myron is an angel now," she said, patting her stomach. He knows that we visited his tree."

After a bit we were off to get a treat at the health food store. "Goodbye, Myron," we all said. Goodbye Myron, one-armed lovable character, serious scholar, spiritual tree lover, apple-cider dieter, and now, Myron the angel.

"See you later, Myron," Kalia said.

Last week I made a detour from my errands on Main Street. The tree, not so spindly now, still tilted a little to the west. Its trunk was covered with hundreds of tiny green leaves. Funny, I didn't see that on the other, bigger trees.

Putting my hands around it, I looked up at its few branches silhouetted against the blue sky, at its glossy-green leaves trembling slightly in the breeze. Then I saw something else that was different about this tree. A couple of the branches had been cut-off, close to the trunk.

I think of him every morning as I carefully measure a tablespoon of apple cider vinegar into my vegetable juice. Here's to you, Myron, lover of life.

I lift my glass. See you later.

A Day in the Land of Oz

May 10, 2004

The birds are silent... as I am silent... They are silent and waiting in the trees... as I am waiting in my bed. Then it comes. Precisely at 5:30 a.m. the Kookaburra's wild laughter. Then the whip birds, the bell birds, the bold black and white magpies with their warble oodle doodle oodle. It's the hooting, the calling, the screech of cockatoos sailing out of the bush. It's the dawn chorus, the gray sky lightening, the light creeping over the canopy of gum trees, wattle trees, tea trees.

We go out of the facing-the-rising-sun house that's been given to us to use and walk up Wattle Road, turn right at the Yandina dirt road and trudge the two miles up and down hills. Drops of dew rain down on us from tall gum trees. "Good morning Aussie trees," I call. "Good morning any of you Koalas up there."

Once inside the green flower-painted gate on Adam and Nila's property, it's another half mile up the new gravel road. I count nine flattened Cane toads, run over the night before by the truck hauling in lumber. Cane toads were imported from South America to kill pests in the sugar cane fields. They didn't do the job, only proliferated into poisonous pests themselves. I wonder if their skin is still poisonous when they're dead.

At the tarp shelter we're welcomed by my son, Adam, and two worker friends, Eric and Karl. They're sitting at the wooden table inside, sipping steaming mugs of Rootibus tea and milk. Stopping work often for tea time, we've learned, is a must. Ralph and I are served tea and Adam's special cooked-with-ghee oatmeal. Nearby, the steel pilings are already supporting the floor joists of Adam and Nila's new home. "In Queensland, we build high off the ground," Eric tells Ralph and me. "To keep away termites, flood waters, pythons."

“Pythons?”

“Yes,” Eric says. “Just last week I discovered a python under my refrigerator; he probably wanted to keep warm near the motor. I was too tired to deal with him and went to bed. The next day he was still there. The third day I called the police to come and take him away. And do you know what the bloody cop told me? He said, just do what any normal person would do. Stuff him in a sack and haul him away.”

We all laugh. “So what did you do?”

“Well,” Eric pauses for effect. “I reached under the fridge, grabbed him from behind his head, stuffed him into a sack and hauled him away.”

We laugh again.

I scan the tall grass outside. “Where did you haul him to?”

“Oh, I just let him out in the bush.”

I breathe in a slight skunk smell. It’s from a tree named, “Smell of the Bush.” My daughter-in-law, Nila, loves the odor. I like it, too.

I glance around again. No pythons in sight. Adam tells us he once saw a python in a banana tree. “You see them there only when the bananas are ripe. They’re after the small animals that are after the bananas.”

It’s May, going into winter now. Adam has already planted a banana grove, papaya and mango trees, and has outlined spaces for vegetable and herb gardens on this thirty acres near the Sunshine Coast.

I’m content to not walk the beautiful beaches today, to not travel to the art museum in Brisbane, two hours south by train. I want to sit here, sip tea, look out on the rolling land, and watch the Kookaburras fly into a nearby thorn tree. I love these big birds with the spine-tingling cry who sit still as ancient icons.

The damp days here have curled my hair. I feel loose and free strolling the rolling hills and valleys of my son’s land. While the men hammer down the floor joists of the new house, Nila and I walk with Bodie, their beloved German Shepherd, to a bunya tree. “This land is on one of the power points on earth,” she tells me. “In a line to Uluru.” (Uluru is the aboriginal name of mythical Ayers Rock in

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the dead center of Australia.) “The Aborigines say that this area of Queensland is where you come to heal your heart.”

I’m glad Adam and Nila have found their place in this wide-open land with platypuses living under the overhanging ledges of the wild Maroochee River, and with towns nearby named Gympie, Emundi, Woombye, Coombye, Mooloola, Mooloolaba.

Evening comes early. At six p.m. we climb to the highest point on the land and make a fire in a circle of stones. Australian friends come with guitars, flutes, drums, and children. I watch their faces circled in firelight. I look at my son. His face is lifted up; he’s watching for the moon.

The full moon rises and the music begins. Wrapped in blankets, the youngest children fall asleep on the ground. I have a request. I want to hear a favorite Australian song. My granddaughter, Bekka, is an Aussie now, she knows the words and sings, too.

*I come from the dreamtime, from the dusty red soil planes,
I am the ancient heart, the keeper of the flame.
I stood upon the rocky shore and watched the tall ships
come, for 40,000 years, I am the first Australian.*

They pause. I can almost hear the throb of a didgeridoo, a droning song of the first people.

*I came upon a prison ship, bound down by iron chains, I
cleared the land. endured the lash, and waited for the rains.
I’m a settler, I’m a farmer’s wife, on a dry and barren run, a
convict and a free man, I became an Australian.
We are one but we are many, and from all the lands of earth
we come.*

I gaze at the silvery moon, high in the sky now. I look at the dark land below, at my son, sitting back a little, at his profile in the moonlight. What is he thinking? Is this land healing his heart?

I look around at the circle of Australians. Their arms are spread wide, they’re laughing as they sing. And tears come.

Why? Because the firelight is shining on their smiling faces? Because the sky is so big? Because the moon is so full? Because they’re

singing the song all children learn in school? They shout out the last lines.

We share a dream, and sing with one voice...

I am...you are...we are...

Australians!

An owl hoots. The dark night surrounds us. We sit together in silence.

I stare into the fire. For a moment I feel that I could heal my breakable heart here, too.

Driving. . . and Writing. . .

To and from Helen and Jacob's Wedding
in Carbondale, Colorado, June 2004

June 16. Notebook on lap, water and trail mix beside me...and Ralph driving...I'm eager to continue recording our recent six-week trip to New Zealand. I want to get it down; the walking up the green road, the green trees, the shifting clouds, the first light rising over the hill that outlined the white horse who let me pat his massive head, the peering into the trees for glimpses of songbirds... but Las Vegas gets in the way.

I admit I asked Ralph to drive through the Strip; I've never seen it. I swing my head, gawk at the in-your-face facades: New York, Paris, ancient Egypt, ancient Rome. I stare at the hordes of people on the street at noon.

Okay, that's done, we're on U.S. 15 again; on NPR from Dublin, it's the 100th anniversary celebration of Bloomsday, June 16, 1904. Oh good, I'm going to learn something. Oh, no, static. Radio reception is cut off by the hills on either side. I never read *Ulysses*, not even most of Mollie's soliloquy, but yes, yes, thank you, I'm seventy-seven years old and I'm just beginning.

But where was I? Oh yes. I bend to my notebook. *At sunset the low light glows golden on the young bull down the road who will be slaughtered for his meat by his owners soon. He raises his head from the grass and gazes at me. Does he know?* In an old New Yorker I read about a brilliant autistic woman who could speak to cows, who understood them, who said that just before they were killed they did know.

The radio sputters alive to a discussion of Utah decisions on organ donations. Both my folks donated their bodies to UCLA. I click off the radio, slip in a tape, shout out "One More Song" with Kate Wolf, who died young.

In St. George, Utah, our overnight stop, we leave the motel at 8:00 p.m. to look for a restaurant and have to laugh—it must be 100 degrees, plus we're caught in a desert sand storm. Battling our way across the highway to a Dairy Queen—thank god for air conditioning—I bite into a cold “no-fat, no-calorie” chocolate ice cream bar. As I open my notebook, I notice a darkly handsome man at another table talking animatedly to a young boy. Nice to see a man so interested in his grandson. I begin to write. *My Senior-Child priced ticket on the hour long, eleven stops train trip into Auckland. Watching people, all colors, sizes and shapes, get on and off.*

I look up from my paper; the man has stopped at our table. “I saw you oogling my new red convertible parked outside,” he says to Ralph.

Startled, Ralph looks up from his sundae. “Well, actually, I didn't notice...”

The man bends over me now, stares into my eyes. “Tell me, why wouldn't I buy myself an expensive red convertible? I'm seventy years old and I'm dying of cancer.”

“Oh.” I look at the twelve year old boy standing behind him. “I'm sorry...”

He laughs. “Besides the car, I'm leaving my wife a rich widow.” And he strides out of the Dairy Queen, into the blistering heat with his grandson.

It's 9:00 p.m. At the motel Ralph and I lie back on plastic lounges beside the ridiculously small pool. The sky above us is filled with sunset colored clouds, a row of scrawny palm trees stand guard. *We will all die*, I write, *we are all connected, every one of us, as we are to trees and clouds and sky.* Ralph's eyes are closed; his face is covered by his New Zealand baseball cap. Someone should take a picture of us: typical aged tourists. A few feet away two sub-teen boys plunge into the pool and noisily toss a beach ball back and forth. I guess we won't be going in.

I loved swimming nude and alone at night in our pool in the Valley. We were having a pool party on a hot afternoon when Jesse, two years old, slipped off a step and was gone under the water. In my muumuu and from across the deck I took a superwoman leap and brought him up sputtering and crying.

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Funny how that dessicated body I found in the wadi below Safed always pops into my head. I'd picked up one of the wrist bones; is there something I should be writing about that?

June 17. In the car, air conditioning on full blast, water and trail mix at hand, I write. *I dug my toes into the cool black sand at wild Te Henga beach on the Tasman sea, stooping every other minute to pick up pearly treasures.*

"Look," Ralph says. I raise my head. The Utah Canyonlands have loomed up on either side of us and we pull into view points to marvel at the force that has upended the earth and created these immense, lifeless formations. Looking down into the vast canyons, I visualize dinosaurs roaming there, and they did once; it says so on the information stand.

After Exit 130, back in the car, Ralph points out a long freight train in the distance. *On the train to Auckland, an army of grandmothers hauled on prams and strollers. So many kids, so many full time grandmothers, wearing sensible shoes.* I'm a grandmother, I wear sensible shoes. Recently, my seven-year-old granddaughter, Kalia, looked at me and announced, "Grandma, most grandmas don't write books or paint pictures." Really? Is that true?

Damn it, where's my pencil? Where's my water? Why am I always so disorganized? I look under the car seat, in the back seat. Okay, settled again; *I'm in the orchard, I write, the fantails are flitting in and out of the pear tree; the tree is so heavy with pears that the branches bend to the ground. The white horse is waiting down the road, the bull has the sunset in his eye, the clouds are moving, the house is darkening, the wind in the tops of the trees is whispering, whispering. I stand under the Southern Cross, under the glittering pin points in the dark; am I part of it all?*

Oh god, next Kalia is going to ask me if I believe in God and I'll have to say I don't know what that word means.

Tom Chapin is singing one of his children's songs. I join in with him and Judy Collins. "This pretty planet, spinning through space. your garden, your harbor, your holy place...golden sun going down, gentle blue giant, spin us around...all through the night..."

Ah yes, as we are to trees and clouds and sky, we are all connected.

June 18. Here in Carbondale, in the Comfort Inn motel beside the Roaring Fork River, we're the first ones down to the continental breakfast. The TV is on. "Are you one of the millions who doesn't feel just right, does nothing lift you from your fog of sadness? If you are one of the millions of Americans who suffer from depression, try Zoloft. In Iraq, 35 killed, over 100 injured."

June 19: At Helen's mother's home, we're instructed by Rabbi-folk-singer David, here from Ashland, Oregon, to stroll slowly down the stone walkway to the chupa framed by snow-covered Mt. Sopris. Ralph and I, the elders of the procession are first in line. As we walk hand in hand toward them in the audience, I know my children must be thinking about their beloved father, Harry, who died ten years ago.

The white clouds darken, a wind comes up. Rabbi David rolls with the weather: "the Hebrew word for wind is Ruach," he says. "Ruach also means spirit.... Here it's the spirit of our ancestors, of our two traditions, Jewish and Christian, coming together." Under the chupa Jacob and Helen recite their vows. All at once, it's hailing ice, everyone looks around nervously and titters. Thankfully it's over in a minute.... Then we gasp as a robin wings past our faces. Two wonderful signs, Rabbi David says. I make a note to write about that.

Before Jacob stamps on the napkin-covered glass, David tells us that the breaking of the glass symbolizes all the broken hearts in the world. "Hearts that we all must help heal," he says. "It's also like homeopathy; breaking the glass is a little sorrow; may it protect you, Helen and Jacob, from the larger sorrows in your lives."

Under the white tent, at the wedding dinner, Helen's uncle, wearing Navaho jewelry, recites a blessing for the newlyweds in Navaho. "Thank you," he translates. "Thank you. Blessed be you." The groom's mother, my daughter-in-law Janice, stands and says that she hopes she'll be as good a mother-in-law to Helen as I've been to her, that I'm her inspiration and her friend. I am thrilled at the compliment.

And then with the dancing, I fling off my jacket. To hell with hiding crepy upper arms, I gyrate with the best of them.

"Go Ruth! Go Ruth!" Oh, no, the young people have circled

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around me, chanting. I slip out of the circle, grab a throw-away camera from a table and retreat to snap pictures of my granddaughters.

June 20. Goodbye, goodbye; bird seed is flung at the newlyweds sent off to Hawaii with rounds of hugs and kisses. And we're back in the car. Where is my notebook? Okay, panic over. Ralph says a decision has to be made. "Should we detour off #15 and stop at Cedar Breaks National Monument?"

Yes. We drive up to 10,400 feet, stop at lookouts over deep red and gold canyons, drop in a dollar at the trailhead for a brochure and take the two mile walk to Alpine Pond. The brisk air reminds me of New Zealand. On the cliff edge we stop at a 1,650 year old Bristlecone pine tree, #7 in the brochure, then walk single-file through a meadow filled with lupine, larkspur, Indian paintbrush. Fifty-five years ago, Lod airport was covered with wildflowers; it was my first glimpse of Israel. No ugliness, no horror, no killing; just a field of wildflowers.

We skirt past dozens of dead trees. "A bark beetle epidemic has killed many of our spruces," we read in the brochure. "It may take hundreds of years to regrow the mature spruce forest." In the Visitor Center I slide my fingers over samples of Cedar Breaks rocks—black basalt, purple manganese oxide, red iron oxide, yellow limonite.

Why are my eyes suddenly wet? Is there something I should be writing about that?

June 22. In the Best Western motel in St. George again. After the pizza parlor and the Dairy Queen—no dying man this time, no red convertible—we watch Larry King on CNN; it's a repeat of his hour-long interview with Mattie Stepanek, the thirteen year old poet-philosopher who's just died; we're rivited by this adorable, very sick boy's humor, hope, courage.

June 23. Water. Trail mix. Notebook. Rest stops, stretches, I-Hop pancakes. And we're home. I stand on my tiny deck and look up at the dark. The moon is hidden. Eight days of mail and the LA Times are waiting. Night traffic is going by, the news is on the radio. "In the name of 'God,' another beheading in Iraq."

"This Pretty Planet" is spinning in space. "All through the

Ruth Lercher Bornstein

night,” Tom and Judy sing, “safe till the morning light.”
And yes, we are all connected. And yes, we will all die.
And yes, I’m seventy-seven years old and I’m just beginning.
And what can I write about that?

What I Find on Santa Monica Beach

June 7, 2004

It's low tide at 8:00 a.m. this morning. I see a rose in the surf, white, still perfect, whole. I keep walking and see another. Then another. Three long-stemmed white roses in the water. I stand over them for a minute then keep walking. A deflated pink balloon, a blue ribbon entangled in wet-dark seaweed; a black feather. And sticking out of the sand and littering the surf, what are these strange things?

On beaches Down Under I'd found interesting shapes; the spiral insides of squids, the triangular feet of mollusks. Well, it is still the Pacific here, still the vast ocean, still the sea. I scoop up a handfull of the transparent, beautifully designed sail-shapes and take them to the lifeguard. "What are these? There are so many."

He looks down at me from his perch. "Sail jellyfish. You see them bobbing on top of the waves when you're out there on a surf-board; they sail onto the sand with the west wind."

"Only to die?"

He shrugs. "Yep."

In with the west wind. There's something catchy about the words, something poetic. I gather up a dozen of the fragile, slightly rubbery dead creatures. Is it the Good Witch of the West, I wonder, or is it the Wicked Witch of the East? But where are the bodies, the insides? What made these jellyfish alive?

Years ago, on Lady Elliot Island on the Great Barrier Reef, I collected and gloated over unusual shapes of coral. On a rainy day on the Oregon coast I collected hundreds of sodden sea gull feathers that suddenly seemed precious to me. At home I washed them, smoothed them out, made them perfect again, then lay them to dry on paper towels spread wall to wall in my living-room with hardly

a place to step around them. Every time I opened the sliding glass door, feathers flew and I had to straighten them out again. Finally I couldn't keep them underfoot any longer, gathered them all up and copied them at the copy shop—to preserve them, to remember them, the survivors.

I'm a survivor. Though I've never known real war, or "real" suffering. I never had a real talk with my mother and she lived, ill with congestive heart disease but sharp as ever, till age eighty-nine. We never discussed my abortions, my failed marriage, why I became almost what one might call promiscuous after managing—barely—to stay a virgin till twenty-one. "All downhill from there," I told my daughter when she wanted to be fitted with a diaphragm at age seventeen. My mother hated sex, didn't like to be touched. I needed touching, needed to be filled up, needed love.

I look at my hands holding the jellyfish. Aren't hands amazing things, too? Aren't we all amazing with our fingers and toes and teeth and tongues and vaginas and penises and breasts and buttocks and nipples and belly buttons? And ears. And noses. And nostrils, and hair. And eyes! You can't get any more miraculous than eyes.

I stoop and dig a half-buried shell out of the sand. Oh, wow, this one's really lived. It's discolored, corroded, covered with encrustations, thickened with age. Isn't this one worth picking up as well as the smooth perfect ones? Isn't this old shell that's lived a long hard time in the sea worthy of being saved?

Is this a period of poetry coming on? Is it old age and needing to spill it? Or is it like that other beginning when my garden was dying and I couldn't sleep for writing, pouring it out, that period of mad blooming. Even here, looking up at a spindly palm tree by the beach, it's stiff fronds delicately waving in the wind, the same west wind that brought the sail jellyfish. Even now in the car, in the parking lot of Santa Monica beach, my Senior Beach Pass hanging from the rear view mirror, the high rises behind me, the Pacific spread out before me.

I want to share all this. I'm glad I don't have a cell phone, I'd want to call Caroline, Judy, Lyn, my son, Jesse, and tell them to get down here. Jesse, get the hell down here. See what the sea has brought us.

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Never mind. It's all right. I'll hold it. Keep it. Here. In my gut.

Besides, I did tell someone, a young woman on the beach who came up to lifeguard station #26 after me, who also wondered what the transparent shapes were, who stood with me looking up at the genial handsome young lifeguard. "In with the west wind," he said again. "Sail jellyfish."

The woman and I looked at each other, shook our heads.

Amazing.

We walked over the sand to the parking lot together.

We smiled.

We said. "Have a good day."

P.S. Mary Jane, who lives by the sea, has told me that the real name of the jellyfish is "By the Wind Sailor" (talk about poetic!) and that it does have a body, a blue one, that it's only the skin that's washed up on shore. That's a relief to know, that there's a body to them.

P.S.2 My daughter went ahead, got a diaphragm on her own.

P.S.3 "Don't you remember, Mom?" my son, Jonah, visiting from Oregon, said last week. "There were two wicked witches. The Wicked Witch of the East was killed off in the beginning and the Wicked Witch of the West wanted to get revenge."

I bend my head, concentrate. Slowly, I dredge up a picture; a witches feet sticking out from under Dorothy's house. There was something magic in there, wasn't there? Were there magic shoes, too?

Boy, am I slipping. How could I forget that?

But isn't it all magic?

Isn't it?

The Reunion

September 18, 2004

It's been a busy year so far. Our country is divided. The Sudan is ravaged. The Middle East is in flames. Scientists are still debating the Big Bang theory of the beginning of the universe. New planets have been discovered beyond our solar system; the search for alien signals from space goes on. Are we rare? Are there other "just folks" like us out there? We even learned that we're not so special. Octopi have complicated brains, too.

Earlier this month I flipped through my 1943 diary and saw many love-lorn references to a boy who graduated a year before me. I thought about going on a diet. I got my order of Fosamax from Canada. And Ralph and I flew to Wisconsin for what I hoped would be a big bang of a party, my 60th high school reunion.

Seat belts fastened, we lift off from LAX. Gazing out at a sky full of elliptical Georgia O'Keefe clouds and grazing non-stop on my trail mix loaded with chocolate chips, I can almost imagine that nothing can really be so bad in the world.

At the Milwaukee airport we pick up our rental car and head for Waukesha. I'm eager to visit Pete (as she was called; her real name is Maxine), my oldest best friend. Despite entries in my high school diary that we bickered a lot—once I even wrote that I wondered if she was my friend at all—Pete's the one who came over when I got my first period at age twelve or thirteen, who filled up the hot water bottle and fed me aspirin, who stayed with me during the hours of excruciating cramps. She's the one who surprised me a few years ago when I was in Wisconsin doing research for my second novel. A poster with my favorite quote, "joyful participation in the sorrows of the world" was on her wall. And she's the one who now sits with her hand on her husband's arm—her poor Ken who's completely paralyzed and blind.

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I mention that Dave Smith, chairman of this year's reunion, had called and asked me to say a few words. I'd said no, but when he told me that our old pal, Pat Kellogg, who had such great parties when his parents weren't home and who lives in Florida now, would be toastmaster, I'd given in. "Okay Dave, I guess I could share a couple of memories. But don't forget, just for a few minutes. And just a few words."

Pete has ideas about what I might say. "First of all, you should tell them when you moved to New London. Then tell about the time we rode our bikes out to Poppy's Rock and I tried to tell you the facts of life but you were so sure babies were born from your belly button you almost had *me* convinced. And how about when we Girl Scouts camped out at Long Lake and our nutty leader, Allie, said we all had to swallow a live minnow if we wanted to be part of the gang and you gagged so long that your minnow was dry and dead by the time you got it down. And don't forget ice skating on the Wolf River and skiing down Mosquito Hill. And marching in the Band, doing crazy maneuvers at half-times at the football games. Crying buckets when we lost. And, oh yes, you doing all the art work for our class yearbook."

"I'm sorry you can't come to the reunion, Pete. You could give a really good speech. But anyway, I forget, who was your main crush in high school?"

Holding onto Ken, Pete thinks a minute. "That would be Les Springmire. For years. How about you?"

"I was madly in love with Leon Graupman. Apart from some drunken kisses in Bob's Bar one night, he hardly knew I existed."

"Bonnie (my old nickname), I still remember in 6th grade when Les Frank and Donnie Brown both asked you to go steady and said you had to choose between them, and you told them you were too young and that you'd only go steady when you turned sixteen."

"Yeah. They both dropped me cold after that. And I never did get to go steady with anyone."

Pete laughs. "Well, one thing for sure. You have to talk about your books."

"Oh, I never thought about that."

"You have to, Bon. Our classmates will be thrilled to hear about your success."

Success? HmMMM.

The next morning Ralph and I drive north, past pastures and corn fields, past neat farmhouses, red barns and silos, and Holstein cows watching us from under trees and along fences. Four hours later, we're settled into our motel opposite Wal-Mart on the outskirts of New London. Carol, at the desk, remembers us from our last visit.

First on the schedule is a class tour of our red-brick high school, now remodeled into a retirement home by St. Joseph's hospital in town. I don't recognize the bald, stooped man at first, who greets me with a hug. Ten years ago, at our fiftieth, Les Frank had a full head of dark hair. And here's good old Pat with a big fat hug. And Mary Francis and Eileen, two of the large contingent of jolly Irish farm kids, all of whom had at least six to twelve kids apiece. We follow our guide through the wide, elegantly carpeted hallways. It's all so changed I'd never be able to find where my locker was. We peek into the tastefully appointed (not my style) rooms; we can tell the guide's trying to recruit us.

Ralph grins. "Can you see yourself living here, Ruth? It's one half the price of a retirement home in L.A., plus you get lots more extras."

HmMMM.

At the New London Golf Club, I open the program that Dave Smith hands me.

60th REUNION, CLASS OF 1944

COCKTAILS: 5:00 P.M., DINNER: 6:00 P.M.

MUSIC AND CONVERSATION: 7:00-9:00 P.M.

INVOCATION: Guy Holliday.

(Guy, married to my friend, Christy, is a retired Methodist minister, the son and grandson of Methodist ministers and he's told me that he hates organized religion now.)

TOASTMASTER: Pat Kellogg.

MEMORIES: Bonnie Bornstein.

I'm stunned. And not only by the strange juxtaposition of my

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name. What happened to the “few words?” I’m the only speaker! Smiling slyly, Dave seats me at the head table next to his wife, Bette. I’ve been duped.

Ex-minister Guy mumbles something inaudible for two seconds into his dinner plate. We’re served fried chicken, beef stew, mashed potatoes, cole slaw. Dessert is small cups of mint ice cream. Bette Smith whispers, “Dave thought a heavy dessert like pie wouldn’t sit well with us oldsters.”

Hmmmm.

Chairman Dave nudges Toastmaster Pat. Pat gets up. I fumble for the notes I made with Pete. I’m glad now that I borrowed my picture books—donated by me—from the town library. If all else fails, I can talk a little about how my painting led me to writing.

“So here we are at the big Six-Oh,” Pat is saying. “Counting our blessings but missing the fifty-nine of us who are gone.”

What? I look at the “Deceased Classmates” page of the program. Fifty-nine out of one hundred and fifty graduates. I remember hearing that seventy-seven is the current median life span in the U.S. Still, it’s shocking. I knew that Jim Bodoh had died, Jerry Freiburger and Donnie Brown. But I didn’t know about my friend, Norma. Or Tom. Or Pete’s old love, Les Springmire. “Just last week,” Bette Smith whispers to me, “Les got off his tractor and fell down dead.”

“Did you hear about Charlie,” Pat is going on, “an eighty-two year old man who went to the doctor to get a physical? A few days later the doctor saw him walking down the street with a gorgeous young lady on his arm.”

Oh, no. A joke.

“The doctor said, ‘hello Charlie, you’re doing great, aren’t you?’

“Charlie replied, ‘I’m just doin’ what you told me, Doc. Get a hot mamma and be cheerful.’

“I didn’t tell you that, Charlie. I told you you’ve got a heart murmur and be careful.”

A sprinkling of titters. I stifle a groan.

Pat raises his wine glass. “So be careful and be cheerful and see you in five more years. And now Bonnie,” he gestures toward me, “it’s all yours.”

That’s it? That’s all he’s going to say? I’m on? I look at the forty

or so mostly white heads staring at me from tables around the room. Should I apologize because I'm not gray yet? I don't want them to think I dye my hair. And why would I dye it this mousy color, anyway.

I get up. "Well..."

"We can't hear you!"

There's no mike and I have to step into the middle of the room. Have to plunge in without the notes I've left on the table.

"Well, on our way here we stopped in Waukesha to see Pete Maxted; she's sorry she can't be with us, but she can't leave her ill husband. And, oh yes, I moved here from Milwaukee when I was ten. And even though I'd told my parents I wouldn't move, even though the day was cold and rainy, I loved that the road was muddy and that there was no sidewalk. I said, 'Yippee, I'm living in the country now.'"

A few smiles and nods.

"And the next day at school, when the teacher asked me my name, I told her, Bonnie because I hated my name Ruth. And Bonnie stuck. Even with my folks. Only when I went to Israel when I was almost twenty two did I change back to Ruth, because I thought the name Bonnie was too frivolous for such a strong pioneering country. But I still feel like Bonnie Lercher, and wherever I go I carry my home town with me."

More smiles and nods. So far, so good.

I mention the Girl Scouts and swallowing the minnow. Faint titters. I realize that there are only a few Girl Scouts present. I mention riding bikes out to famous landmark, Poppy's Rock. Blank looks. "You don't know Poppy's Rock?" Shaking of heads. Another realization. Most of the people here were farm kids and were bused to school from other areas. I plunge on. Ice skating on the Wolf River. Marching in the band and the football games.

"And, oh, I had a big crush on Leon Graupman who lived on a farm and who graduated a year ahead of us. Anybody know him?"

More blank looks.

"Really?" I keep scanning the room. "Nobody knows Leon Graupman?"

"Well..." I sit down. I hope I at least said thank you.

The Sky and Me

Next to me, Bette Smith says, “That was a nice speech, Bonnie.”

I don’t agree. I’m sure I must have left out some important points. But I’m thankful that I forgot about the picture books under my seat.

Dave Smith stands up and raps on a glass; it’s announcement time. Les Frank gets a box of chocolates for being married the longest. Someone else gets a box of chocolates for being the youngest; I’m only the second youngest. I get a plastic-silver cup for traveling the farthest. Then, “The party’s over, folks. But just to let you know, our next reunion will be in two years, not five. And it will be a lunch. Drive home carefully now and see you all in two years.”

There’s a shuffling of chairs, a stampede out the door. Even Christy and Guy beg off, say they have to get home. I look at my watch. It’s only 7:00. What happened to the music? What happened to the conversation?

Ralph and I slink to the bar. He orders a beer. I’m still holding my glass of white wine from dinner. Happily, Pat and his wife appear, then Les Frank and his wife. Pat has pinned a Kerry/Edwards button on his suit jacket. Les gives him a pained look.

“So, Les,” Pat jibes, “tell me, where are the weapons of mass destruction?”

Les counters, “I don’t like Kerry; he has too much money.”

“And Bush doesn’t?” snaps Pat.

“Well,” Les retorts. “I don’t like Kerry’s wife.”

Les’s wife of fifty-eight years turns to me and says with a sweet smile, “Les and I never discuss politics.”

Oh, lordy. The party *is* over.

The stars are brightly visible here in my home town, population 4,000. I think of the ten million rocky planets in our universe that may have the carbon, nitrogen and oxygen to spark life. I think about the Big Bang theory of the beginning. So our 60th wasn’t exactly a big bang. I’m not flying away from here with a whimper, either.

But I still have to wonder—as I stand in the dark and look up—where in the universe is Leon Graupman now?

A Walk In the High Country

October 18, 2004

I knew the signs of depression; a heavy breathless feeling in the chest, no appetite, unable to sleep. But it was Ralph's last chance—his only chance this year—to roam his long-time favorite streams, to search his favorite water holes, to wade in and cast for trout. So I agreed to make the seven-hour trip with him. Maybe a retreat would help.

Breakfast, as usual, was at the cheery Denny's in Mojave. Two-and-a-half hours later we drove past the sad ghost of Manzanar and the wind-swept dust bowl that was once Owens Lake. I took the wheel for an hour. My Trust was in order. My Living Will and Neptune Society papers were taken care of. What if I speeded up, turned the wheel sharply and plowed over the side of the road? I glanced at Ralph beside me, at his red, scabby, treated-for keritosis face and head. No, of course I wouldn't do that. Not to him. Not to our families. We stopped in Bishop for gas, then Ralph drove us to the high desert and into the clear, crisp air of Mammoth Lakes.

Yesterday, settled into the condo at Tyrol Lane, Ralph set off with his rod and reel and I sat down at the table to work on my second novel, now titled *Remember the Boys*; I've lost count of the vast number of revisions.

Success! A few hours later, his head even more bloodied from an encounter with a tree branch that almost knocked him out, Ralph walked in carrying four handsome trout. After finishing off the delicious fish dinner—my appetite slightly revived—we watched a 1997 Larry King interview with Christopher Reeve who died this past weekend.

Smiling, sitting stiffly in his wheelchair, Christopher took short, gulping breaths as he talked. Much like that other brave and amazing human being, thirteen-year-old Mattie Stepanek. Who also spoke up

The Sky and Me

for life; who also died this year. We watched that interview in June, in a motel in Utah on the way to Jacob and Helen's wedding.

"Does your hope ever wane?" Christopher Reeve was asked.

"No. In my dreams I'm whole."

"Either you give in," he said, "or you go on."

This morning Ralph came back, happy but empty handed. "Tonight we'll go out for dinner," he said.

I said, "Fine," and went downstairs to take a nap.

It's 6:00 p.m. now, and we're bundled up and on our evening walk. The last light of day is shining on peaks of the Sierras; trunks of golden-leafed aspens are reflected in the bright water of Mammoth Creek. Ahead, the White Mountains are bathed in pink. It feels as if we're walking toward Shangrila.

"Ralph, did Ronald Coleman ever make it back to Shangrila?"

"Yes, I think so."

That's right, now I remember. After a long and tortuous search, at the end of the movie *Lost Horizon* he was shown standing on a blizzardy mountain pass looking down on that mythical paradise where people live forever. I shiver, thinking about young and lovely Margo who in an earlier scene followed Ronald Coleman and his love-smitten brother out of Shangrila and, before our eyes—with the help of the new technical magic of movie-making—dissolved into a withered crone and died.

We stop at a metal bench facing the mountains. Enscribed on a plaque are some words.

Kiki, our angel
September 19, 2001–March 16, 2003
Enjoy this Bench
Kilene Celeste
our peaceful beauty
She taught us love, acceptance, and living
in the moment.

We stand, read the inscription over, then walk on. The light is fading. A cold wind has come up. And we've come to the end of the path. Before us, the pink glow of the White Mountains is still

Ruth Lercher Bornstein

in the distance. We're not going to make it to Shangrila; we knew it all along.

Side by side, two benches face the view.

Jim Erb

February. 27, 1933–August 8, 2000

He loved the wilderness places.

He walked where others held back.

Theresa Parker Sweeny

Here in this special place. forever next to Jim,
her companion, her love, her friend, her Jim.

Dance on these mountains forever, Mom.

Love, Kim, Dawn, Tanya and Brett.

No dates for Theresa. But it looks as if she and Jim might have died together.

The sky is almost black, the wind has grown stronger; I'm grateful for my cap and gloves. Turning, bending to the wind, the interview with Christopher Reeve pops into my head. "A random accident," he said. "It could happen to anyone, any time, a tree could fall on you."

"Are you ever jealous of others?" Larry King had asked.

"No, not anymore. it takes too much of my time. But I look at people getting up out of chairs and want to tell them, 'Look at what you're doing. You're moving. You're walking. Appreciate it.'"

I stretch out my legs. The mountains around us are dark. The aspens are dark silhouettes in the stream. I think of Ken, our friend in Wisconsin, who is completely paralyzed and blind. Ralph is eighty-three. I'm seventy-seven. We hurry to where our car is waiting.

Sitting in a booth opposite Ralph in Giovanni's restaurant, I reach over, fork three quarters of a spicey meatball out of his spaghetti, and plop it into my Minestrone soup. I gaze at his bald head wounded by the tree branch, at his scabbed nose and blistered face from the pre-cancer treatment.

"Thanks, Ralph," I say. "This is fun. I'm having a good time."

We awake in the morning to a sky full of snow. The trees and mountains are, softly, stealthily, being enveloped in a clean white blanket.

A Case Against God

Mammoth Lakes, 2005

I'm sitting on a second story deck watching how the pine tree needles shine silver in the sun. A soft wind is rustling the tree. The sun feels good on my near-naked body. And an NPR program, a Terri Gross interview I heard this week, pops into my mind. Some singer-songwriter—I can't remember his name—spouted, "I'm a Christian. Anybody who doesn't love Jesus can go to hell." Huh? And later, there was a news report about young Christians going to Thailand to help the tsunami victims; they don't know much about building houses, they said, so most of their mission will be to convert the native Buddhists into Christians.

What is it with these people? And speaking of Buddhists, I remember reading that a large statue of Buddha in Sri Lanka, had escaped the rising water. This was seen as a sign from God. Oh really? Thousands of Buddhist lives lost and your saved statue is a sign of divine intervention?

Why do I need to write this? Because I'm mad. The tsunami came because we were guilty of something, a collective guilt, newborn babies included. The Holocaust happened because of karma; we must atone for our sins.

The random killing in nature, the senseless deaths that have to be "explained." And need I even mention the not so random killing in the name of one god or another, one religion or sub-religion or another? How about the devout peasants that turned in the Jewish family that had helped them? How about the neighbors in France who turned in my lovely friend, Frieda, to the Nazis?

Maybe I'm missing a god gene. Oh, I wanted to believe. As a kid, I prayed, "now I lay me down to sleep." All through my teens I was a seeker of faith. I knew every Christmas carol by heart, envied my church-going friends in my small mid-west town, who kneeled

down, bowed their heads. I love to bow my head, too. Dancing the Paralikios, I bow to the haunting Greek melody. Swaying to the Macedonian Makedonsko Devojce, to the prayerful Israeli dance, Mi Yiten (who will give) I bow my head. To this pine tree I bow. To the sun, to the smell of sagebrush at Mono Lake, to the trembling aspens by Mammoth creek. I press my nose into the deep furrows of the Jeffrey pine, inhale the vanilla like a prayer.

And oh yes, I bow down to the majesty of Chartres, to the compassion of Giotto and Fra Angelico, to the beauty of the Buddha's, Shiva's, Bodisattva's of historic religious art. I do not bow down to a god we created out of our fear of wild acts of nature, fear of wild animals, back when we were cavemen. Why haven't we changed, why do human beings still need to hold onto groups that make people in other groups wild animals, make them the "other"?

When I was very young I imagined that I was protected by an invisible thread attached to a little person just like me. When I realized that there was empty space around me, that there was no thread connecting me to anything, it felt scary to be alone in the world. Aren't we all afraid of being alone in the world? Don't we reach out to each other, help each other as well as kill each other? And don't we non-believers work for justice and peace and live a life of the spirit, too?

Driving home from the mountains, I watch a radiant full moon slide out from behind a dark cloud. Nearing L.A. on the radio: an accident on the slow lane, on the fast lane, on the eastbound, on the westbound; dozens of Iraqis, Israeli's dying in suicide bombings; a young couple shot in their sleeping bags in Bodega Bay.

Holding onto the physical earth, I bow down to the mystery of the pine needles shining silver, to the moon sliding out from behind the cloud, to the leaping fish, to the taste of trout just caught. I hold onto breathing, as long as I can breathe. As for god, maybe that little person I invented...who was just like me, who was always with me...was god. Maybe she's still there.

The Bone

I can't tell you about the bone until I tell you about the dress. I can't tell you till I tell you a little about the wandering lonely and lovely months I spent in the Gallilee, in Safed, in 1949. Till I tell you about taking showers in my dress and a man named Bar Yosef; he's the one who saw the bone after I found it.

It was my only dress. My young cousins had crowded around me, their fabled relative from America, touching me, touching my clothes. I was ashamed for having so much; gave them my pretty dresses. Except for this one. Plain white cotton, small puffed sleeves, gathered at the waist, printed with tiny flowers. I wore it on the rattley bus ride up the tortuously winding road to the mountains. Wore it when the artist Moshe Castel gave me a small bare room to live in. I swept out the goat dung, was told that an Arab family had recently vacated it.

The room had no window, just an empty space in the wall overlooking Mount Atzmon and the wadi below. A mattress, candle holder and candles were provided by the army stationed on the hill. I had my sketchbooks, I had my watercolors; I didn't need much, I was twenty two. Artists befriended me, mostly men, mostly older (at least in their forties) who came up to Safed from Tel aviv and Haifa to spend the summers away from their families. The writer, Bar Yosef, said I could take showers at his house. Which I did, my one dress and me, every few days. No problem, we dried off in the sun.

I found my way among the twisting lanes of this mystical-medieval village perched in the hills. I lay on the roof in nights of longing, the stars so big, so close, I felt that I could reach up and touch them. I floated along the narrow alleys peeking in at lamp-lit families sitting around their supper tables, floated down into the lush wadi below Safed. I painted the people, the town, the landscape, the

views; all was wonderful to me. Once I wandered down the road to Meron, discovered a stream and sat there watching little fish, gathering small stones, all day feeling like part of the landscape.

And then one day, deep in the wadi, I stumbled upon it. The body. Human, the head face down, still covered with a kafia; mostly bone, mostly dessicated. The bone lay a little apart. A wrist bone. clean, and I picked it up. Just as I had picked up the beautiful ball of amber, just as I picked up twigs and shells and stones.

A day or two later Bar Yosef paid me a visit and saw the bone. He asked, "What's this?"

I told him.

He stared at me in horror, then shouted "Blasphemy!" grabbed the bone and flung it far out of my room. It flew high into the sky and fell into the wadi below.

I was surprised, puzzled at his vehemence. It was just a bone, wasn't it, an interesting shape, an object, something to draw. But now, sitting here fifty-six years later, thinking about Bar Yosef's anger, I wonder. What kind of amoral girl was I? What kind of person looks down on an unknown body, picks up a human bone and feels next to nothing about it? Should I judge that girl? A girl on the loose, living in a dream world, wafting through a dream land, understanding little of the language, ignorant of the politics, a girl who found a bone never thinking about the human being attached to that bone.

These days I read the newspaper obituaries daily, think about the people who died, about the loved ones who mourn them, who bury them. The person I found, he probably had a family, too. Would it have made a difference if the body was dressed in an Israeli army uniform? In a kibbutznic's shorts and sandals? Yes, no doubt I would have notified the army stationed on the hill. Yes, even in my ignorance, he was the enemy, the attacker, he was probably sneaking up from the wadi to kill.

But what if he wasn't?

Listen, I'm not an historian, all I know is that it's a tangled, tragic story. I met Holocaust survivors in Israel, refugees from Europe, Jews from the surrounding Arab countries who had no other place to go.

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But still, that unclaimed body. Still, that man. However he came to be there, there lay a human being with a sad and bitter human story to tell.

Mind Spins Before Dawn

April 25, 2006

It's late. The sky is dark. I have to meet someone; who? I'm delivering something important; what? I'm in a big city, I can't find my way. Where? I wander into a hotel to ask the manager; he's busy with customers and waves me off to the elevator. I take it up to the top floor and step into a gym. A pretty young blond girl smiles at me and says, "Try the treadmill."

"I can't," I say. "I have to go to the bathroom."

I wake up and go to the bathroom.

Back in bed I check the clock. It's 4:00 a.m. I've got to get back to sleep. I didn't get to bed till after midnight.

I'll be eighty in three days.

Accept what comes.

Breathe.

Ashland. Could I live in the retirement village up there? Would I be a burden on Jonah? What about my friends? What about the ocean? By the time I decide to move I might not be so fussy. I guess the long-term health insurance is good anywhere. And my kids can spread my ashes wherever they want. I'm not fixated on the ocean. Or am I?

It's hard to imagine never to see the sky anymore.

Get back to sleep.

Breathe.

Someone once told me I looked matronly.

I'll go to the "Y" tomorrow; get onto the treadmill, get back into shape. Oh boy, I made a mistake. I'll only be seventy-nine in three days.

Only.

Breathe.

Think about my story. About that seminal scene near the end

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where the moon is sliding out from behind the clouds. About what Janet says. What her dad says. Near the end, my own dad wanted to share his life, wanted to be known. I guess, me, too.

I've depended so much on others. For acceptance. To get published, to exhibit.

Oh, for god's sake, just do it.

Breathe.

Son Adam gave me that book, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*. Sorry, Adam, matronly or not, I don't think being a sage is possible for a beginner like me, always starting over.

Beginners mind. Isn't that Buddhist?

Once, Ralph looked over at me in the passenger seat, endlessly writing, drawing, and said, "Can't you ever stop?"

I told that to Lea and she said, "Tell him one day you *will* stop." I relayed her comment to Ralph and he hasn't nagged me about it since.

When I'm *really* old and run out of ideas, I'll lay out my hundreds of stones and shells on the carpet and say hello to them and feel their shapes and choose which ones to draw.

Nice and quiet. Peaceful. No angst.

Breathe.

Think about my story. The crescent moon disappearing behind the clouds. What Janet says. What her dad says.

I don't know if it's me or not, but someone is talking about her life; she's going on and on and on. And someone in the audience says, "Give this person some paper and a pencil."

I wake up again. It's almost eight.

The sun is shining. The sky is blue.

I take a deep breath.

After Mailing Off My Second Novel...Again

Inching my way down Ashland Ave (compromised by ten more pounds on top of my arthritic knees) I carry the priority mail-flat rate envelope close under my arm.

Six years of gestation. What will be my reward? LICORICE! I haven't had any for ages. I'll go to the health food store on Main Street after the post office; a whole box of Panda black licorice; my mouth is practically watering.

Question: how come I want a treat when I've just eaten? Maybe non-fat ice cream? Maybe I'll wait till I get home and make a big batch of popcorn.

Handing over the package at the post office, I tell Richard, the smart-alecky clerk, "It's precious, can you please put some extra tape around the edges?" No response. He's poker-faced as he slaps on the tape. Oh well.

I walk out of the post office and wait for the light on Neilson way. NOW. Will I be strong and go straight home or will I be weak and turn right on Main Street? My step doesn't falter. Four blocks uphill is too long to wait. I turn right.

At One Life health food store I feel a little bit strong. Instead of a whole box I buy only one stick of black licorice. And seven of those fat Medjool dates.

Starting up the hill I try to take small bites but the licorice is gone within a block. I dig out a date. I deserve it. Didn't I work like a dog to finish this story (again) so I could get back to painting and writing short essays?

I cross the street to view the wall of wisteria outside a house. Darn, the brief blooming is already over. Chomping on another date, that sister—one of the three sisters in Kyoto who owned the ryokan named The Three Sisters—pops into my head. She'd spied

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us eating on the street, maybe it was ice cream (there were lots of street vendors), and had lectured us that nice people do not eat on the street. Odd. Odd lady. I love eating while I walk.

A few doors up, a tree fern has created a lush green-lit undergrowth. Funny, I never noticed it before. It's like a miniature fairy glen in there. Peering in, I almost feel like I did when I suddenly began to write thirty-five years ago, when my vegetable garden was dying and I couldn't fill up sketchbooks fast enough, this time with words as well as pictures. When, at forty-four years old, I imagined a little green elephant hiding among the zucchini, a tiny green gorilla among the cucumber vines. I want to keep standing here. I also want to take a nap. A long one. Maybe I won't even set the alarm today.

I walk past the home of my neighbor, the painter. You could have knocked me over with a feather when she told me she was voting for Bush.

I never used to huff going up this hill.

I pass the low cost housing units, built on the empty corner we in the neighborhood had wanted for a community garden. The grounds here are nicely kept. Violet jacaranda petals litter the deep green grass. Overhead, a bird.

Only a pigeon. But the way its round shape is outlined against the sky, and the way it balances, its wings catching the wind. There *are* miracles in this world.

The bird sails away. I walk past the front of our condo building, inspect the new plantings Ralph and I are taking care of.

Up the steps, open the gate. I will not think about my story, I will not wonder about Janet, my fifteen-year-old heroine. I will put her out of my mind. I will forget her for now. I will think about anything but.

And I will go on a diet tomorrow.

Songs for Lorna O’Leary

It’s June 6, 2006. I’m on the treadmill at the “Y” listening to a tape of favorite songs I made over ten years ago.

*Bye bye, bye bye, bye bye, bye bye, bye bye my Roseanna.
Bye bye, bye bye, bye bye, bye bye.*

I sing it silently along with Pete Seeger. The woman on the next treadmill looks over at me and smiles. Uh-oh. I thought I was just mouthing the words.

I’m aiming for 100 calories on this machine; for me that means over a mile.

“Bye bye, bye bye ... sing it out,” calls Pete.

Like Lorna and I used to sing it—it was one of her favorite songs. Like the rest of us sang it at her memorial.

In 1965, as she lay hooked up to IV’s and oxygen, pain killing drugs dripping into her, her voice slurred—dying of cancer—Lorna O’Leary held onto my hand, smiled and said goodbye.

*Bye, bye, bye, bye, I’m goin’ away and I won’t be back
tomorrow.*

Oh, to get away from my kvetching self, my never-ending need to be excited about my work, my constant need these days to keep shoring myself up.

“Let’s hear it!” Pete is yelling. “Sing it, all together now. Let it out, sing it again.”

Sing away the sadness, the humiliations, the mistakes, the regrets.

At the monthly hootenannies at the Valley Center of Arts, Lorna and I, strumming simple chords on our guitars, harmonized on the songs we both loved, songs that felt true.

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*Row row row your boat, gently down the stream,
merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream.*

We sang it as a round as we did “Shalom Haverim” (goodbye, friends) and “Hiney Ma Tov” (“lo, how good and pleasant it is for friends to sit together”). It’s been forty years, but today every song is making me think of her. Has to do with her.

She was a tremulous alto, I, a slight soprano. We practiced; we tried. But it really didn’t matter too much what we sounded like.

We sang: “Who Killed Cock Robin?” (“I said the sparrow, with my little bow and arrow, oh it was I, oh it was I”); “Who’s Gonna Show Your Pretty Little Foot”; “I Gave my Love a Cheery”; “’Tis a Gift to be Simple, ’Tis a Gift to be Free”; “Oh Waly Waly”; and “I Know Where I’m Going.”

People opening up their mouths, letting it out, all together: “We Shall Not be Moved.” “Deep Blue Sea.”

Pulling on the rowing machine I think of “Little Moses,” another of Lorna’s favorites.

*And away by the water so blue, the ladies were winding
their way, when Pharaoh’s little daughter stepped down
to the water, to bathe in the cool of the day. Before it
was dark, she opened the ark, and found a sweet infant
was there...”*

Lorna never had any children. Crippled by polio and years older than the rest of us, she was a loving presence to her friend’s children. My boys loved to whack at the pinatas she hung from a tree in her front yard. Adam, eight years old when she died, treasures the Indian drum she gave him. My daughter, Noa, thirteen then, remembers Lorna leading us in “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.”

“Freedom, Oh, Freedom.” We sang it at her memorial. All together.

“I’m on My Way.” “I’ll Fly Away.”

At home the first thing that greets me is the L.A. Times Ralph has left for me on the stairs. The front page features a photo of fifty-one women including a fourteen-year-old girl, squeezed like sardines into a cell for months in a Manila jail, The article says the

girl was hungry and was jailed for stealing a fish, Another horror on top of all the other horrors.

I carry the paper upstairs. It falls open to the business section: a photograph of well fed men, partying CEO'S of some surfwear company. Big smiles all around, big slaps on the back. Big money. I want to scream.

I want to be true. But I don't want to write about all the sadnesses now, the world's or my own.

What would you say about the world now, Lorna?
I know one thing. You'd keep on singing.

Maybe the children's round on my tape is true.

*All things shall perish under the sky,
music alone shall live,
music alone shall live,
music alone shall live,
never to die.*

Left Over Right

Left over right.” That’s what she said. The woman on the machine next to me, the one where you twist around to reduce your waistline. I stopped bending forward and backward on the stomach-reducing machine, and looked at her. “Woman left, man right,” she said. Ah, the accent. She’s Russian. But, what in the world is she talking about? She sees my confusion.

“Not me,” she says, “I read in book.”

“Oh.” I smile and go back to bending forward and backward.

“No!” She nods vigorously. “Woman left, man, right.”

I look down. I see that I’ve got my right leg over my left.

I change.

She nods approval.

I stifle a giggle and make a mental note to write this encounter down.

Russian. Russian women, of whom there is a cluster at the “Y.” I’m not sure why, but I assume they’re all Jewish, and I’m right. Russia. Mother Russia. Russia, our brave ally in World War II. That seminal photo of Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin at Yalta. Those poor Russian refugees we kept seeing on the March of Time newsreels before the feature film. My beloved records of the Red Army Choir bought at age fifteen. Those thrilling, powerful, passionate songs.

My mother was born in Russia. At age twenty seeking a new life after WW I, she followed two brothers to Milwaukee. She had no kind words for her native land. I never heard her speak about the past, never heard her speak Russian. Except once. She was standing at the kitchen sink, the melody was soft and sad. “Oichee chornia, oichee guchnia...” She stopped when she saw me.

The other day, on the stationary bike, I talked with Marguerita, a buxom blue-eyed, attractive blond woman. Her English was ex-

cellent and I asked her about her former life in Russia. She told me that thirty years ago, her husband, a strong man, had volunteered to work in the mines where strong men were needed. When he told the other men he was Jewish they thought he was joking. Later, after they got to know him, they said, "If we had known you weren't joking, we would have cut your throat."

I stare at her. She goes on. "Because of the strict quotas I could not enter the university. For a job you fill out your nationality. Never Russian. You must write Ukranian, Bellarussian, Siberian, Jewish...."

"Jewish, a nationality?"

"Yes. And if you don't put it down they find out anyway and you don't get the job." She smiles, her blue eyes sad. "It's even worse now. It's in the blood, you know, hating us. "

And suddenly, I remember. Quotas. The University of Wisconsin, 1945. I was bewildered. What had I to do with the New York girls they placed me in a segregated house with, girls who talked so fast that I, a small town Wisconsin girl, could barely understand what they said? And their constant chatter about anti-semitism. What did that have to do with me?

From a new friend I found out soon enough. "Bonnie, you're cute and we like you but you can't join our sorority because you're Jewish." My Navy officer date told me, magnanimously, that he'd overlook my being Jewish. My true love, Ed, didn't speak up when his friends spouted, "They Jew you down," and "Those money grubbing Jews."

Sometimes I lashed out, sometimes I kept quiet. Mainly, I turned it inward. Was there something wrong with me? My friends didn't know how lucky there were just to be born Christian. They didn't feel this fear, this shame. They didn't have to go around with a big weight on their heads. I knew I didn't have horns under my blond hair, but I certainly didn't feel white.

Everything feeds into everything. The damage done then...and the guilt; who was I to be so traumatized (though I never would have used that word then)? After all, I wasn't in Europe during World War II. Could it be that what I didn't get then has to do with what I am now—my need to express, to get it out, to connect with the past that I know little about?

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Whatever it all is, back at the “Y” getting onto the machine that’s supposed to make your stomach get smaller, I catch myself, make sure my left leg is over my right.

Listen, you never know. Who am I to question this short, round, elderly Russian-Jewish woman who’s on the machine next to me again? After all, I’m a short, round, elderly Russian Jewish woman myself.

The Sky and Me

what i'll miss most when i die,
is saying i love you, love you
to the sky.

It's a big subject for me, the sky. It's about lying on the roof in Safed, gazing up into the boundless night. It's about that small perfectly round cloud I saw in the distance while on that beach in Australia, that I kept gazing at—there was something strange about it—that I watched speed toward me growing larger, rounder, darker, till it loomed over me, till it filled the sky and burst, and soaked me to the skin. It's about hauling myself up ladders to sit on roofs wherever I was (my kids knew where to find me), to watch the sky change. And it's about these days, standing at my kitchen sink, watching the sky blaze color upon deeper color over the sea.

The sky has to do with how I began to write. It's about painting and space and horizons and my ambition at age six to paint the world's most beautiful picture of a sunset.

Well, okay, enough preamble. It's time to set it down; the real reason I began to write this essay—and somehow, when I thought of it, my little “I love the sky” poem popped into my head—is that my novel, *Remember the Boys*—after eight years of digging, dreaming, cutting, honing, of kill that, add that, of printing out and holding and going to bed with it and smiling in the night about it, after all the revisions; diary form, poetry form, prose form, past tense, present tense, third person, first person; after eight years of trying to be clear, trying to make order out of chaos, eight years of moon watching, of trying to fold the moon into my story of secrets and war and betrayal, of one girl doomed and one redeemed...and after anxiously waiting to hear from my agent about the latest revision...of praying *please god, please get back to me*, and the next minute telling myself to calm down—that my story was not the most earth shak-

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ing event of the year, even of the hour. *Still... please... I'll try to be good...* praying, even though I was sure my agent would realize that my novel was really important and would love this latest version....

After all this, I heard. The missile came flying across the sky via e-mail. "Ruth, your work is honest and poetic BUT it's still much too episodic and no young person will stick with it. Ruth, we have a problem. I can't send it out in its present form."

I clumped upstairs, plopped down on the couch beside Ralph (for weeks I'd been complaining to him that I was depressed) and said, "Sue Cohen has rejected my story."

He said, "Oh."

He was watching a football game. I sat there awhile. Slowly, as I watched big hulks smash each other on the tiny screen, it dawned on me. Relief. Lightness. Freedom. Freedom from waiting. Freedom from being at the mercy of someone else. I got up and went to my kitchen window. The sunset was glorious.

And again...I knew, as I've always known, that it's the idea, the spark, the work, the doing, that brings me joy. That the outer world's validation, publishing, exhibiting, selling, is lovely, but it's like honey on good solid whole wheat bread—sweet, delicious, but not life sustaining.

The filling up, the spilling out, the reaching up, the longing for I know not what, to know again, and always, that I'm most alive when I'm working, when the tiny white cloud in the distance has grown full and ready and dumps again, most at peace with myself when I'm trying to push out tendrils and blossoms, even if no beautiful ripe watermelons are born.

To know again that no matter what the daily news brings, no matter what is happening in my own life, I will keep on trying to say it, to say it right, that no matter what, I'll keep looking at the sky, keep saying I love you to the sky, that I'll keep on pulling down words and images, that the sky will keep on raining down its burden of words and images. And I also know that one day it will stop and the sky will keep on spinning around the world without me, changing from dark to light and back again without me, and on that day I will have to say, at last and always, amen to that.

What's Left

The light is shining on your face," he says. I look out the window past Ralph and see the three-quarter moon shining straight into our bedroom. Oh, good, I think, our condo is squeezed cheek to jowl to the house next door, and the moon still found us.

"The moon is shining on your face," he said. And I say, "I wish we were lying outside right now, like we did in Idyllwild and I didn't want to close my eyes all night."

Once, when I walked up into the hills in the Palisades to see the full moon rise over the city, suddenly—it seemed from out of nowhere—a huge shape floated up over the hill in the dark; an apparition, red, green and blue lights flashing, flashing over me, a vision. I was a little scared; was it something from outer space? Then I heard it, the otherworldly breathing. I stood there watching the blimp flash its lights and sail slowly north up the coast.

So much to wonder about; so much that's baffling in our own minds. Like the dream I had this week. I went to Alaska because I wanted so much to be in the cold, wanted so much to forget my arthritic knees and run a long race in the cold. And I did, triumphantly. Or the dream night before last. I wanted a blond wig, but it belonged to a child and I didn't know how to get it away from her. Or last night. "I'll walk," I said. But it's far. I'm not on 92nd Street in New York, I'm above 102nd street and the streets are dark, there are no cabs and I hear noises, maybe a gunshot.

Finally, lights, a grocery store, an old man who seems to take pity on me. I tell him I do Armenian dances. He's overjoyed, gives me a big slice of Armenian bread and directs me to an old woman's house (another long walk through dark streets, still no cabs) who takes the bread from me, saying that her bread is better than his and giving me a slice of her Armenian bread. I sit with the old woman a long time. It seems I'm supposed to stay with her until she dies.

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I don't know how many kinds of Armenian breads there are; in my dream they were flat and full of dried fruit and nuts.

Ralph is sleeping now. Breathing. In and out. Steadily. Do snails breathe like that? Do butterflies? I guess everything alive breathes in one way or another. When we don't, we're dead. Flowers die cleaner than us, they just curl up, fall off stems, wither away. We decay, our guts rot from the inside. Trees shed leaves, bark and twigs. We shed hair, skin and nails, mucus, smelly excrement.

But human waste and decay is not what I wanted to write about. Hard, clean solid stuff is the topic here. What's left after everything else is gone. Like bones. Like the cow skull I found while hiking on the cattle ranch in the Santa Inez valley. At home I keep a cow's vertebrae in a bowl filled with still faintly aromatic rose petals.

Shells and stones from everywhere fill baskets and bowls. And feathers, driftwood, eucalyptus seed pods, maple tree wings. Pine tree bark, Kauri tree bark, rolls of birch bark to write letters on (I made little canoes out of them as a kid in Wisconsin). Inside the impassive mask of the Peruvian pot in my kitchen window is the biggest gull feather I ever found, and a twig that looks like a dog dancing. On the mobile that's hanging from my living room ceiling are dozens of shells I gathered on a beach in Israel; I titled the work "Flotsam and Jetsam."

When my kids were small, my friend Fran wrote a poem about me. The gist of the poem was that in the middle of all the chaos, all the breathing life of a growing family, here I was surrounded by all of the dead things I collected.

Once, walking with me at low tide, Shirley said, "Why do you have to pick up every single sand dollar?" And I cried out, "They want me to!" I laughed then, but I meant it. I don't know why I have these needs, but at home I washed every one: the whole ones, the new and barely lived ones, the scarred and broken ones.

I'm holding Ralph now. He who is still breathing. The moonlight is outlining his bald head, his big ears, his strong shoulders.

How strange it all is. But let the chaos of the world be. What's left now is to put my arm over his warm, comforting body. To feel his bones under his smooth warm skin. To rest. To give up my rambling thoughts. To go to sleep, too.

Ruth Lercher Bornstein

Dancing Leaves

May 9, 2007, 6:00 a.m.

The first thing I notice are the leaves. On my floor. The shadows of leaves on my second story, living room floor. Shimmering. Swaying. They're shadows of the leaves and branches on my only tree; it's a Melaleuca, growing in the small space outside my condo front door.

The shadows are more beautiful than the actual leaves, the magnified shapes more clear. I've never seen this before. The shadows like this. The early sun shining through the glass doors into the room like this. The wind shaking the tree like this.

I step into the shifting patterns. Into the leaves. Into the flickering light between the leaves. The light just right like this, the wind just right like this; I'd have missed it if I'd stayed in bed.

Once I thought if only I had a little round table covered with a red and white checked tablecloth like Penelope's, I could sit in a little kitchen like hers, next to a window like hers, and make myself a cup of tea and write, and be happy. If only I had my big vegetable garden and could hold hands with a watermelon vine again. If only....

I have only one tree. But today the patterns of the leaves are shifting and swaying and I'm stepping in the spaces between the shadows, and the light is just right, the wind is just right, and I got up early, and I'm dancing with the leaves on my living-room floor.

