

I ALREADY AM PLACES

Selected Writings from the Moving Pen, 2019



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A Brief Introduction

This little collection contains a small self-selected sampling of writing—poetry, short stories and memoir—created by members of the Moving Pen, a workshop offered by the Creative Center at University Settlement, in 2019.

Each Monday night, we gather in the second floor library of University Settlement, on Eldridge Street in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, to write together, listen to each other's work and support each other's efforts to find our voices and tell our stories. Each writing session begins with a prompt (usually 2 or three in the course of an evening, or between 70 and 80 over the course of a year) that intends to spark the beginning of a story. After writing for 15 or 20 minutes, we take turns sharing what we've created and offering constructive feedback on what we like about what others have written. Then we start again. Each session lasts two hours. Most of us will agree that two hours never flew by so quickly.

This document represents the work of just some of the writers who have shared their writing with us over the past year; we are grateful to everyone who came and participated and wrote and listened. The beautiful artwork on the cover and in the document was contributed by Liz York.

A tremendous thank you goes to the Creative Center at University Settlement and the NY Writer's Coalition, two nonprofit organizations that have given us this opportunity to trudge through snow and sleet and rain and heat to share our stories, together, in 2019.

Here's to many more stories in 2020.

I Have No Urge To Go Places Because I Already Am Places

Nancy Beck

I have no urge to go places because I already am places.

We are creative beings look what we've done with this world if we could only recognize our creativity we can then take responsibility for our creativity because we create this world we live in every moment we live in breathe in it so we do have responsibilities for it we do have the power to make it something of value something that we know we have done that makes it better that makes it more fun why not we're here we're not here to suffer we're here to live and enjoy life and share it with others because we are all here together because I change someone else's perception of what they want to proceed with we can only given opportunity demonstrate our own perception that's what art is demonstrating our own perception with the hope inspiring entertaining pleasing influencing launching all these things can be done with all these things can be done with art and we all have the capacity to do it everyone is interested in the stories of others what goes in the stories of others we see ourselves and our own stories and it is fascinating to us to see what others do how it turns out because we are all curious we are all looking for something when we all see the potential of seeing it in something and somebody else doesn't have to be jealousy or envy it's just curiosity because we are all here together and we are all connected to each other there is no getting away from me everything we do has an impact on others everything we say everything we think it's all connected and we have more control over than we realize we have more options than we know we have other choices that we can make it's sometimes hard to see but all we have to do is look I was told once to keep being a seeker because that's all that's needed and I have been seeking and I think that the seeking is turned to something about to happen and I can't wait to see what happens next I can't wait at all.

On my way to anywhere yes I am on my way to anywhere I just always think it didn't matter where I was everything was still same because I am still me and that is true but it's an expansion on that and that I can be whatever I am wherever I am it's not where I want to be next where am I because where I am now it's all that counts and where I am now it's just fine I guess that's why I've never had this incredible urge to go places because I already am places.

Something Grows Again
Barbara Hohenberg

There used to grow, out in Jersey City,
a most intriguing plant of evergreen persuasion.
Blue-grey were the needles, and prickly to the touch,
and yet it pulled us in, we fell in love with its S-shaped form.
It had about it, something of the heron, immobile,
just about ready to spring, ready to pierce
whatever fish it sensed, swimming there beneath the loam,
beneath its very roots.
It was a feathered creature, dripping elegance along its spine
and down to its several appendages.
It stood there, poised and aloof,
why it died we did not know.
This spring it stood coiled and grey
its needles fallen and frozen round its feet.

Yesterday I helped it to live anew:
it now stands as its own golden memorial,
gilded but not varnished. The two young boys and I
dipped our brushes in the small can, changing what was fated
to be chopped down and thrown into the fire pit – changing it, I say,
from smoke into a work of art.
How long it now will last depends upon whatever wood-weevils
may yet live within its veins.

New York City, June 3 2019

He Was My Brother-In-Law
December 6, 1937-December 7, 2019
Fran Kotkov

I look out my corner window to that place where she would often look for you. When we were both so much younger, and I was just her pesty little sister who admired her and observed her every move. She would peek out that window every evening to see if you were there yet. You, skinny, in your woolen red bomber jacket and jeans, visible from our window on Mott Street, a block away. You, leaning on that mailbox on the corner of Mulberry and Prince, a mailbox mounted high on the lamppost, a mailbox that provided a shoulder high place for you to prop your folded arms upon. Seeing your solid red back, she would find an excuse to take a walk, an evening stroll, a *passaggiata*, a constitutional. This was no aimless walk around the block. She had a purpose.

You were both 17. She was a real beauty; long black curly hair that she set in bobby pins each night to achieve those curls, red lipstick, nails manicured and polished. You were a pimply kid, an outsider of sorts because you didn't come from our block or the one or two blocks around us. You came from at least ten blocks away, from the lower east side. But her brothers knew you. They played stickball with you. They teased you because you always had a banana in your back pocket and once, when one of her brothers snatched it out, your response was a gentle plea. "C'mon, Carmine. Give me back my banana."

The story of that banana and your response would become part of family folklore in future years. And how those brothers loved to tell that story!

You must have passed the Italian brother's test; they must have approved of you, because she continued to look out the window for your red jacket, and she continued to take walks down Prince Street to the corner of Mulberry, until those walks became a walk down the aisle of the church that spanned that same block, having one entrance on Mott Street at the back of the church, and one on Mulberry, at the front.

You were raw material in her hands, willing to please her. Under her tutelage, you learned how to drive her car and became the family chauffeur. You became a part of our family, an older brother of sorts to me, willing to play cards or *Careers* or join me in watching cartoons. You learned how to hold down a steady job, and became a responsible father just nine months after that walk down the aisle, and then again three years later. When your surprise third child came ten years after that, you were delighted and would pat her belly and say, "Joanie, at our age!" You were both only 34. She on the other hand was what---reluctant? embarrassed? unwilling? Whatever was it that led her to wear a coat over her pregnant belly well into her pregnancy which ended in a difficult labor. You would recount the story of her labor, telling us that before he did the C-section, the doctor came in to you to tell you of the complications, asking you to choose, wife or baby, if he could save only one. What kind of a cruel choice is that to give an expectant father?

You chose her. You always chose her.

Most recently, you became her caretaker. At your daughter's wedding six months ago, you radiated pride and happiness. But you didn't get distracted from caring for your wife. I watched you as you held her wheelchair as she hoisted herself up to get into the car that would take us home after the wedding reception.

"C'mon. That's it. Do your turn now."

It touched me so deeply to see that attentive and encouraging care, to see her move herself into position to sit in the car, to see her feel empowered by you.

Just a few weeks ago, you expressed your concerns to us. "The thing that I'm worried about," you said, "is that if something happens to me, what will happen to her?"

We are still trying to figure that out. For her. For you too.

What is this life?

Perched on a Church Steeple

Wanda Dobson

It was full of wings.
Full of wings?
Wings from where—north, south, east, west?
And what kind of wings?
Angel wings—Gabriel’s, Charlie’s Angels?
Or perhaps chicken wings—barbecue, garlic parmesan, buffalo?

No, no, no.
They were eagle wings.
A nest full of them.
Sitting on the ledge.
Right outside my bedroom window.
But no eagles—just a nest full of their wings.

I no longer regretted not having wings of an eagle
To rise high above this chaotic world of poverty,
To rise high above this world of homelessness around every corner,
To rise high above this world of hunger, pain, suffering everywhere,
To rise high above this world of a few haves
And multitude of have nots.

For to see this nest full of wings all dried up
Like a basket of natural evergreen-scented pinecones,
Caused wonderment as to whether it could be so on a mid-summer day.
No! That nest outside my bedroom window—
It was full of wings.
Eagles’ wings.

My body began trembling like those trees
Outside my bedroom window on late-winter nights.
So much that I awakened and stood
Staring outside that window while slowly being calmed
By the warmth of that mid-summer day sun
That glimmered and smiled upon me.

An eagle perched on a church steeple
Spread its wings and soared high
Above this world of poverty, homelessness, hunger, pain, suffering
As the sun brightened and warmed my fretful soul.
And once again I wished for wings of an eagle so that I could fly
Above this chaotic world of poverty and bring back peace, justice, equality.

From the Prompt: The Smell of September
Liz York

I woke up sneezing, grateful for tissues by the bed, grateful for tissues in the living room, and for tissues in the bathroom, too. Outside I was frantic, frustrated when I ran out of tissues. Usually I carry pocket-sized packs of tissues, but I reached in my bag and found an empty wrapper. I also carry a watercolor set. Along with the paint and brushes I had half of a paper towel. That would have to do in a pinch. And so, September began with allergies.

I noticed my head cleared up in certain places, and I could breathe outside. At the thrift store the sneezing started again. I lost my voice before I made it through the store. There was a sales girl by the door who was dressed in an outfit like Lucille Ball. She said she felt so sorry for me as she watched me rummage through my bag with my nose dripping.

That reminded me of the time I went to my friend's grandmother's home in Quogue. We were there for an Autumn festival. LouAnne was a clown who performed at the festival every year. There were artists, rides, food and entertainment. It all sounded great. We drove for hours to reach the beautiful old house. LouAnne made us waffles in the morning, but by that time, my head was congested, and I felt miserable. LouAnne was wearing her clown makeup, with a yellow and red striped outfit, and huge red shoes. She stood there with a look of concern and said she was so sorry. Then she went out the door. She left me at the big old dusty house, with a bad cold.

The house had an extraordinary turquoise kitchen with a collection of copperware. There were copper pots and pans, Jello molds, copper knickknacks and candle stick holders. They all shined in the window with colorful autumn trees behind. I took out my paints and sat in the kitchen with a pile of used tissues growing beside me. I painted all the copper pieces framing the plants at the window. If I had to be inside, at least the place was lovely and comforting.

LouAnne came back and told me about the fantastic time she had. I was disappointed that I had such a bad cold, but that's how it goes. When we left the house I saw what looked like tennis balls on the trees in the backyard. "Black Walnuts" said LouAnne. I didn't recognize walnuts this way, as they naturally grew. As we drove away I started to feel better. A few miles away and I was completely fine. That's when I realized I'm allergic to walnut trees.

Apparently I'm allergic to thrift stores too. I remembered that I felt fine when I was on the street. When I got home and started sneezing again I knew it was time to clean. It's the dust that I'm allergic to. After I vacuumed and mopped I felt better. Yes. I have to vacuum at least once a season, and then I can wake up without a desperate need for tissues.



A New Person
Siu P. Ma

In hesitance, she joins a ring of women
Sitting by the corner of a circle
With a scarf loosely falls on her shoulders
Her eyes are asking questions about life in shadow
Her lips mostly closed, trying hard to conceal secrets in mind
Her hands cross one another, tightly holding on to her strength left from before

After looking at faces of the group as mirrors
She no longer feels like a new person, after all

From the Prompt: The Smell of September
Lou Benard

The smell of September rose up from the woods with its earthy, mushroomy and leafy undertones and wafted through the open windows into our tiny kitchen. My mom, who immigrated here from Poland, smelled nascent mushrooms. Their powerful aerosols were calling her to the woods. The scent of mushroom spores was a natural consequence of the heavy rains we had the week before.

As a youngster, she and her parents plunged into the forest as often as they could, in search of mushrooms, essential elements of all holiday feasts. Her family's ritual was like salmon, returning to the scents of their natal streams.

My four older brothers and sisters left for school hours ago. My mom dressed me in a hand knit dark red sweater that she made for me, put a mushroom basket made of paper-thin wood and a bent wire handle into my little hand, grabbed another one for herself, and we were off.

We walked to the end of our road, squeezed through the farmer's rail fence, and headed to the evergreens at the edge of his Clover field — his woods closest to the lake. That's where you can find the most and biggest mushrooms.

But! The only acquaintance with deep dark woods that I had at that time in my four year old life, was with Hansel and Gretel. I was terrified of getting lost without leaving a trail of white pebbles behind. I didn't have any with me. I shared that frightening thought with my mother.

She stooped down, took my hand, looked into my eyes and assured me that I needn't worry. She explained that while we were walking IN to the woods, the sun would shine over our left shoulders, and when we would be coming back home, OUT of the woods, we would be careful to keep the sun shining over our right shoulders.

So we soldiered on, trudged up the dunes to the enormous pine trees, all the while keeping the sun on our left. After we over filled our baskets with five inch wide portobello mushrooms, we returned home, with the sun shining over our right shoulders. What fun! That evening, all seven of us enjoyed a rich, savory, brown mushroom gravy on our milk and butter-mashed potatoes.

That little outing imbued me with an incredible sense of space that I carry with me today — in the Met, in the country, in new, unfamiliar cities. As long as the sun is out! Then I am comfortable knowing exactly where I am in space. I rarely get lost (unless I'm on Manhattan's lower east side).

Conversations at night
Barbara Hohenberg

The trees converse at night.
They sit out there in the dark after the sun goes down.
That's when they start discussing the family.

During the day they are busy drinking in
sun energy, converting it by their magic arts into green
(or red, if they are maples.)

In the winter they drop their leaves to feed the ground
which is their way of thanking the dirt. They know the dirt
has done double duty for them,

letting their roots grow deep and wide as well
and passing on the minerals that come
up from the very bowels of the earth.

But the work they do for themselves during the day
is stilled at night. They speak then of the beings that sleep
during the night, and of their need for oxygen.

They are happy to supply that for them.
They note that the smallest of the creatures are
very energetic. They notice the high pitched sounds

the young ones make, especially as they race around.
In their low voices (which humans cannot hear, but whales can...
trees living near the sea often hold conversations with whales)

they express their appreciation for the young ones
who throw their arms around their trunks
and even plant a kiss upon the bark.

The Cherry tree spoke in her low dulcet tones
Of the petite young human who climbed up
Into her branches and settled in there

humming a sweet melody, the Cherry said,
something about a Cherry Pie. The Aspen
chuckled over that, but the Pecan understood.

He had heard of pies made from his fruits. Those walking creatures were welcome to his creations, as long as they left a few to carry on his lineage.

The Aspen once again chuckled – what a chortler that Aspen was – not surprising, since his bark was so multi-colored, some of it hanging down in little white strips.

Not that the neighboring Aspens found that strange. But the Oak did. The Oak was the patriarch of them all, out there beyond the stream,

out in the meadow where the cows came during sunlit hours. The Oak spread his branches wide and often spoke only

with his resident Owl, whom he found wise enough to understand him. His answer to “To-whit, to-who” was often just a simple

rumble and only the Owl and the Moon would hear him. Then they all three would quiet down and rest until the sun arose.

A New Person

Liz York

Andrea came to New York to escape her troubled family in Nebraska, with a goal of becoming an artist. She was afraid, but excited to travel to the best city for artists to create their dreams. At first Andrea was intimidated by the loud traffic and subway, the crowded streets, and skyscrapers towering overhead.

It was far from the small arts and crafts style home, near the cornfields where she grew up. Andrea's family always held a tight pleasant facade, but internal wars were oppressive, and they tore her up inside. With long brown hair and shining green eyes Andrea never revealed her feelings, but was always kind.

She loved the community garden in her new neighborhood. It was there she met Patricia thinning out the irises. Patricia was 40 years older, crouched down near the dirt and reaching for a trowel. Andrea was timid, but she loved gardening. "Let me help you" she said, as she introduced herself to Patricia, and from there the friendship grew. I met Andrea when I directed the Arts Stroll in Bennett Park, and later, Andrea became a member of the artist's group that I was a part of.

Patricia was a writer who created community. She started an artist's group called the Transponders. Actual transponders work by receiving signals and then transmitting a signal of its own. In our group, Transponders listen, they become confident in their artistic ability, and then they share their passion to others outside of the group.

Patricia also created the "Wildcat Fellowship." Her Upstate New York program supported new artists, giving them space, time and money to do their work. Andrea won a fellowship and went up in the woods for a summer to create her art.

That was 15 years ago. Recently, Andrea came to visit my new apartment. I showed her the artwork on my walls as we spoke. She told me that I was the one who taught her how to be an artist outside of the classroom, everyday. Andrea remembered what I told her long ago: "An artist is a sketchbook with a person attached."

Andrea has been an art teacher for a decade and she tells all of her young art students the very same thing. "Liz, you've influenced thousands of people over the years."

Then I pointed to a watercolor painting. "This piece was done 30 years ago by my High School teacher, Irwin Greenberg. He was the one who said that phrase to me all those years ago.

He helped me when I was starting out. Now we're helping others gain confidence and become Transponders, too.

Flight

Orietta Aristegui

My sister and I are at Carrasco airport in Montevideo, Uruguay. We are about to board a flight to New York and we hear the announcement: “Good afternoon passengers. This is the pre-boarding announcement for flight 953 to Buenos Aires with destination New York. We are now inviting those passengers to begin boarding at this time.”

We walk towards the plane. We will be flying over *Rio de la Plata* (River Plate). It’s a short flight of one hour to our only stopover in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Then we will board another plane for twelve hours with destination New York. I try to get a window seat so that I can take photos of the changing scenery during my two flights such as the beautiful shape of clouds, the aerial view of the Amazon rainforest, the Caribbean and Atlantic Ocean. Once we are seated I close my eyes and think of our father, aunts, cousins and friends who came to say goodbye to us at the airport. I already miss them. We don’t know when we will see them again. That thought weighs heavily in my heart. We lived with them while our mother was working in New York.

When we packed we put everything we could fit into two large pieces of luggage. Our favorite shoes and clothes. My sister did not take anything to remind her of our past life. I took as much as I could. I packed my favorite doll, Swingy. My favorite photos. One photo when I was a few months old and I’m with my sister who is four years older than me, we were at the beach. I also packed all the letters and beautiful birthday cards my mother had sent me over the many years we were separated. One of the birthday cards with a drawing of a blond girl and the greeting: “to a wonderful daughter”, inside the card mom wrote: “*Querida hijita* (dear daughter), I imagine you must look very cute with the coat I sent to you although I’m not lucky to see you. Well my girl, I hope you have a happy birthday in company of your sister, dad, aunts and cousins. I hope you are big now that you are ten years old. I imagine seeing you with your black hair and your brown eyes, all cuddly with your aunts. I try not to get jealous, I do not want to be like one I know. Kisses for my daughter. Mom.” I was very jealous of my mother’s love. I didn’t like her being nice and kissing other children.

On the plane now, my sister feels sick. It may seem like motion sickness, but I am sure it’s emotional sickness. We have sickness bags in front of our seat. My poor sister, hopefully she will feel better before we land. I walk to the tiny restroom. It’s kind of nice to be here in this restroom away from my sister being sick. I’m being selfish. It’s tiny and uncomfortable, there is a mirror, lotion and cologne. I look at my face in the mirror and smile trying to calm myself and trying to smile to look happy. I tell myself not to feel anxious that everything will be fine in this trip and when we start our new lives in New York. I may be smiling but all the tension is in my hands. Growing up away from my mother made me mentally strong. I learned to take care of my emotions and to bounce back from problems. It gave me the strength to keep going no matter what bad experiences I had to go through.

I hear the captain over the speaker, we are descending into Ezeiza airport. I can feel the air pressure change and I leave the restroom quickly to return to my seat. My sister is feeling better. We wait in Ezeiza airport for two hours before we board another plane with the destination: John F. Kennedy airport.

If the Shoe Fits *Didi Schiller*

My parents were wealthy, but after my mother decided to go back to school and start a career at the age of 51 the money really started to flow. My mother lived for clothing and fashion and had a great sense of style. It seemed natural that she start a women's clothing business. It was the mid 70's and as women headed for the workforce my mom figured she could dress them for success, herself included. She made business suits using the same menswear fabrics that my father used in the manufacturing of his men's clothing company. She was enormously successful, even more so than my father who begrudged her at first, but then welcomed her ingenuity and all that it brought and bought.

She enjoyed spending her money on beautiful things for our home and beautiful clothes to adorn my sister and me. My mother had a thing for shoes and at any one time probably owned over 150 pairs. She even had a shoe closet where her two little dogs loved to nestle in her musty foot smells that only they could find soothing.

When she saw a pair of shoes she liked she would buy it in as many colors as it came in. My mother came from that era where women showed off their *gams* and the shoes she loved most, really accentuated hers. Sexy strappy shoes with stiletto heels and pointy toes. Unfortunately for her they were terribly uncomfortable, painful even, especially for her toes.

I could be out shopping with my mother and she would complain about how much her feet hurt because her shoes were "killing" her. Living in Manhattan, we were never more than a few blocks from a shoe store. We would stop and she would buy a pair of flats which would eventually end up hurting her feet, or a pair of sneakers she would never wear again. She wasn't a sneaker person.

Curiously, although shoe clerks always measured my mother's foot as size 9 she often purchased a size 8 ½ shoe. Perhaps before she had six children she fit into an 8 ½, but those days ended in the 1950's while her feet spread well into the 1990's.

Twenty years after starting her business a paralyzing stroke left my mother a hemi-pelagic confined to a wheel chair. Because she was unable to work, my parents' finances suffered considerably. She could no longer afford designer clothing or collecting expensive works of art and antiques. She tailored her shopping sprees to suit her pocketbook, rummaging through flea markets and street fairs in search of miniature porcelain and ceramic shoes and glass cases to display them in. Her street shoes lay in the bottom of her closet collecting dust and dog hair never to be worn again.

When she died I inherited both collections of real and ornamental shoes. I had to throw out most of the real shoes. Even though I wear an 8 ½, her shoes were a little too big for me. At home I displayed the ceramic shoes in a glass case until I discovered they make an unusual if not perfect incense burner, capable of producing the mustiest of odors, a smell that never fails to conjure up my mother.

Little Girl on a Bike
Frank Haberle

Danny opened his eyes. Light was filtering into the park. For a moment he felt he was shrouded in a veil, or a mist. He was sitting where he sat down some hours before, on a park bench under a streetlamp.

When Danny got here, it was pitch black, and he could see nothing beyond the lamp's modest reach. Now a smudge of blue sky streaked diagonally across layers and layers of ripped gray clouds. One of those big boats, all loaded up with red and yellow cargo bins, slogged across a harbor toward a big bridge. Big pine trees leaned out over the shoreline.

An empty beer can sat on the sidewalk in front of Danny. The can must have slipped out of his cold hand in the night, and rolled to its present position. 'I really should pick that up, before someone comes along,' Danny thought. Then he closed his eyes and fell back asleep.

*

"Is that your beer can?"

Danny opened his eyes. A little girl was sitting on a stingray, about six feet from the bench. She was wearing an oversized Canucks-logo rain parka with the hood tied up tightly around her head. The parka hung down to her knees. Her sneakered toes suspended her above the cracked sidewalk. Puddles of black water spread around her out in all directions.

Danny rubbed his face. "Did you say something?"

"Is that your beer can?" The little girl repeated in a sing-song voice, rocking back and forth on her toes.

"No," Danny said. "No. That is not my beer can."

"Can you move your BEER can, please," she sang.

"But, it's not mine."

"Can you move your BEER can, please."

Danny stared down at the can. Its open pop-top stared back at him. Danny started untangling himself. Somewhere in the night he'd pulled his rain poncho out of his pack and tucked himself into it. The poncho was an army-surplus number and smelled like surplus cheese. This weather, Danny thought to himself. This damp, damp weather.

"Sure," Danny said, reaching down. "Sure, I'll move it."

He stood up, stretched and yawned. He picked up the can, crumpled it, sat back down and closed his eyes. The little girl pushed off and peddled past the bench. She made a whispering sound as

she passed, like the wind, or the little waves lapping on the rocks, or the dew dripping from the surrounding trees—hiss, hiss, hiss.

*

Danny balanced the crumpled can in the palm of his hand. The big cargo boat was still there, but it was under the bridge. It didn't appear to be moving. Why, then, was it already under the bridge?

Danny closed his eyes again. He started remembering things—recent things. A train station at night, a telephone booth, and a cop. Last night, or the night before. Nothing was clear and none of it mattered.

“Okay, bud,” Danny said aloud. “What now?”

“Did you sleep here?”

Danny opened his eyes, startled. The little girl was on her second lap.

“Did I sleep here? No,” Danny said, incredulous. “I didn't sleep here.”

“You don't have to sleep in the park, you know,” the little girl said. “You don't have to be a shuffler if you don't want to.”

Danny looked out toward the bridge. The boat was moving. Then he turned to the girl. The Canucks logo was shimmering-metallic green and blue, a hockey stick and puck, against the slate-grey parka. Her hood was pulled tight with a drawstring, revealing only her two sparkling eyes.

“Thank you,” Danny said.

“You're welcome.”

The little girl pushed off with her toes again, then got her feet on the pedals just in time—she veered left, then right, then straightened out. She made that whispering sound again—hiss, hiss. As she rode past, Danny looked down at the thin wake she created in the puddles. He looked back at the harbor, but the boat had disappeared; then he looked back at the girl.

She had already pedaled into the woods.

The Last Note
Wanda Dobson

I've read your note again...and again...and again Auntie, and I still can't understand what you were trying to say. "*Dear Mayor Koch, it's a 'sh'*"—is all that I can make out. Looks like you were trying to scribble the word *shame*. Were you? I think you were. And it was, and still is, a shame that you worked so damn hard for so many years and ended up with insufficient healthcare coverage and poor medical care.

I can still see the long flaky dried up tear track along your right cheek that once sparkled within your dimple. And I can still hear the steady beep-beep-beep-beep sound of that life-sustaining artificial respirator machine by your bedside in ICU.

The small piece of yellow note paper that you scribbled on now has brownish brittle ragged edges, and DeBlasio is Mayor now. Lots of other things have changed too and not all for the better. Your first social security check did come—two weeks after your burial and it had to go right back to the government.

Oh auntie, I learned so much from you. I took on jobs with better health care benefits and have a plan that satisfies my medical needs. I've got Medicare and have opportunities to switch plans annually during open enrollment periods. Premiums just went up and there are co-pays and costly deductibles, but such is life. Also, I retired from full-time work at age 62 and have been receiving my social security benefit since. The 25% lifetime cut is not so bad for like you, I've been underpaid throughout my working years. Rest in peace auntie.

Dear Sister Marita Regina
Fran Kotkov

Dear Sister Marita Regina,

I know you won't remember me or the things you told me in the seventh and eighth grades, but I remember you and I apologize in advance for not changing the names to protect the innocent. In truth, I consider you and your tyrannical stance on writing and what it should be, "the guilty party." I was the innocent one, and I fully claim that title, so there's no need to change the name of anyone involved.

How well I remember you and all those hours spent in the name of education in those two critical grades. You were so self assured standing up in front of that classroom, clinging onto the rules of grammar as tightly as you clasped the rosary beads hanging from your belted waist. For one thing, you made a big deal about that preposition thing. You got quite dictatorial about it. "Never," you emphasized, "never end your sentence with a preposition." That's a rule I never got along with. It would take all kinds of verbal gymnastics to obey it. Yes, I repeat, one rule with which I could never get along.

And then there was the farther and further rule. Why couldn't you just let me say, "Farthermore"? You were missing the whole idea of what my story was about...or rather the whole idea about which my story was... about which my story was concerned...or maybe about which my story centered upon. Oh wait...upon which my story centered.

And you were so mean about it. Armed with your red pen, you would do battle with innocent sentences that you viciously sucked the soul from. Yeah, yeah, I know: from which you viciously sucked the soul. You have ruined me; every sentence requires a second guess, every word requires a double check.

And then, there was your favorite line to use when threatening us to learn and put into use the rules of grammar. You would hold your little pious hand up in the air and shake it in a kind of, "I'll slap you if you don't listen," kind of way and say, "And I don't mean maybe."

Well, Sister Marita Regina, you should never start a sentence with the word, "And." And you have managed to make me a self-conscious writer, incapable of just letting it flow. And I don't mean maybe.

Pandora's Box of Goodies, not ills!
Barbara Hohenberg

How lovely it is to hear her sing -- her voice box issues forth
with sounds seducing every listener.
Blessed with perfect pitch she warbles all day long.
To hear a song, for her is to know a song.

She doesn't need to hear it twice.
She decorates it with trills. She dances upon
the notes – they shine in silver and in gold.
A low note is a diamond mined
within her heart – polished
in the vibrations of her vocal cords.

High notes shine like rapiers slicing the stars
and sprinkling them upon our ears.
The child knows no stage fright, knows no fears.
She dives into our souls -- she bathes in our happy tears.

New York City, May 2, 2019

Growing Up
Siu P. Ma

You shed your first tear into the ocean
From an ambivalent cloud of storm hanging above
Your heart broken by friends who are not friendly anymore
You bite your lips to squeeze out a secret fear
Of being lonely forever

Parents and siblings are in shadows
Waiting to rescue you, yet waiting still
To see you doing a somersault
Flipping upside down and landing on the ground
Safely, with a curving smile



Ingratitude at Thanksgiving

Wanda Dobson

For all the designated Thanksgiving seasons of my life that I can remember, I recall sitting around family dinner tables awaiting turns to give thanks for something or someone influential in our lives. That's been about six decades of expressing gratitude at Thanksgiving.

And, for the past two Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons of this November, I've engaged older adults in nursing homes and at senior sites in expressing gratitude even amid the not-so-good-moments of life. Why just today I handed out 37 play \$1000 bills and asked each one to share how he and she would use the money to give thanks and to brighten someone else's day if it were a gift of real cash. Now hours later, I must change my positive outlook and write about ingratitude at Thanksgiving. Where should I begin the list of things that I am not grateful for?

The White House might make a good start, but I have neither enough ink nor paper—or time for that matter to express my feelings about what's going on this very day. What about the aggressive recommended medical treatment plan that I agreed to despite wondering if I was part of statistics that say African Americans are often over diagnosed and over treated for chronic illnesses. No, not enough facts at hand. What about my feelings about the 24 year old dad with young toddler in stroller on the “C” train this morning—soliciting riders to help him raise \$300 to prevent eviction two days away—November 20th. No, writing about exploiting little ones depresses me. Bottom line, I am not at all grateful for crooked politics, medical fraud, con artists, abuse in any form, staff to patient ratios in hospitals and nursing homes, slow overcrowded public transportation, and a long list of other things including having to write about ingratitude during this only designated season of gratitude.

Wisdom and Wings
Barbara Hohenberg

Not that I don't have plenty of wise ones
or even wise-acres in my life.
what gets me is how unwise I am.
the oldest, the biggest elephant in the clan,
and still so dumb. I hesitate to talk
when what I heard was garbled. Besides which
my role was dumb soprano. His was
Mister smarty pants. He took no
prizes in the tact department,
though he got better, or else it was I
who forgot and forgave. Perhaps my wisdom
consists mainly of "forgive and forget."

As for those wings, he grew huge wings
large enough to fly away
The last big trip loomed ahead
he prepared to leave his bed
Feet first was the way he planned it
that's the way it all panned out.

My dreams are now bereft of wings.
My nights, my days have shrunk to the size
of that screen in my pocket that keeps me partly
connected to a world of billions of creatures,
two footed four-footed six-footed or finned,
all of us wishing to guzzle the sweetness,
the fat of the land before it melts.
They sense, as we do, the waters are rising
That death dealing storms are whirling our way.
We're lacking in wisdom, we're lacking in wings.
We're drowned in stupidity, we're drowning in things.
All that's left now are the last reckonings.

New York, December 19, 2019