

So Far



POETRY BY JEANNE CHASE

ART BY GEORGE CHASE



So Far

*F*rom child-prayers
to child mishaps,
from learning of life
to its living,
from finding a voice
to embracing silence,
from the heaviness
of grasping to
the relief of
letting go.

From parent-love
to grown-up love,
from feelings hurt
to sweet forgiveness,
from caring for self
to caring for others,
from young in years
to young at heart,
from wistful
to thankful

How far
we've come,
how far.



Poems & Pages

The Artist in Us.....	9
Saltbreeze Days	11
Expected as a Unicorn	13
Taos Eclipse	15
Monastery Bonsai Garden	17
Like a Lover	19
Al Capone Slept Here	21
Peach Stone Days.....	23
I Saw My Parents Dance	25
Chestnuts Falling	27
The Car That Caught a Young Man's Fancy	29
Periwinkle Dreams	31
Beekeeper Priest.....	33
Last Bicycle Ride With My Father	35
Euphoria	37
Praying With My Father	39
Flagman.....	41
Gift of Purple Velvet.....	43
The Grey Sweater	45
How Cold?.....	47
Heaven on a Sunday Morning.....	49
Hurricane and the Orchid Lady.....	51
The Lie	53

Key West Early Morning Rain	55
Best Friends Prepare to Move	57
Beehive Huts Explored	59
A Land's Lament	61
Nags Head Beach	63
Julia's House	65
Child Wisdom	67
Midnight Watch at the Homeless Shelter.....	69
Quarrel With My Husband & Last Fight.....	71
Petunia Pride.....	73
Sweet Corn After Harvest	75
Sherbert Colored Rainbows.....	77
To My Weary Husband	79
Young Men at the Beach.....	81
Sweet Epiphany of Soul	83
Swimming Lessons	85
Saying Goodby	87
Sand Dollar	89
Pine Cone Ginger	91
Daffodils	93
Painting Lesson	95
First Footprints in the Sand.....	97



We dedicate
 this book with
 thankfulness
 and love to
 all of our family
 and friends,
 and especially
 to God,
 the giver
 of all.



The Artist in Us

*E*ach of us is an artist
in our own little way,
a sculpting Michelangelo
battling resistant clay.

Spinner of tales,
singer of songs,
poet, mystic, muse,
weaver of thread,
breath of flute,
magician, healer,
drummer of dreams,

Author of legends,
awakenings, beginnings,
middles, ends, beginning
again and again.

We're the artwork
we're creating in this
ethereal place of time,
each moment stamped
indelibly, in humbled,
tumbled, spirit-clay.

Shyly we'll present it
one unannounced day,
thinking we're
the artist,
finding we're
the clay.



Salt Breeze Days

*I*n saltbreeze days
when I was young
and nothing happened
of consequence,
I wanted to write.

I threw my thoughts
up to the sky.
They tumbled back,
crumpled at my feet,
a paper kite in a
too-soft breeze.

One day I felt a
light breeze stirring.
I raised my kite,
gave it line,
watched it fly
high and swift
to hover with
the clouds.

It floated dreamlike
over foamy waters,
soft white sand of

saltbreeze days
when nothing
happened and I
was young.



Expected as a Unicorn

*B*eyond the hedgerow's
soft pine needles one
hot summer afternoon,
I waded waist-deep
in cool bay waters,
seaweed ribboning
my toes.

A brown treble clef
with a pony head bobbed
inches from my hand.
I touched the knapsack
of its spiny back, its
tapered armored tail.

To a young girl
who tiptoed daily
through the everyday
of horseshoe crab
helmets lazing
in the sand,
fiddler crabs
industrious
as children with
shovels and pails,
coquina rainbows,
pink and blue,
blowing bubbles
in tide-swept
sand –

expected
as a unicorn,
this seahorse
in my hand.



Taos Eclipse

*E*arth, straw, water,
molded by artisans'
pliant red hands
into bricks, sunbaked,
place one by one
until adobe dwellings
swelled side by side
around a courtyard
of earth and sky.

Gathering place
of men in bold blankets,
women baking bread,
children at play, young
eyes seeking each other
a thousand years ago.

In the pueblo
under the shadow
of holy mountain
their descendants yet
tend art, fields,
children, bread.

Five dollars a camera,
five dollars a car,
young man with
wounded eyes and
alcohol breath
asks for coins.

One cool summer night
earth's shadow eased upon
the fullness of the moon
and the moon allowed
its brilliance
to be consumed.



Monastery Bonsai Garden

An oak of a
hundred years
grew in a small
blue dish on a
wooden table
in the monastery
bonsai garden.

An unknown monk
trimmed trunk and
branch and leaf,
eyes sheltered by
a dark grey cowl,
deft hands hidden
in long, rough
sleeves.

He passed his
skill on to other
nurturing hands,
and they again,
and yet again.

Inside the chapel
thirty monks chanted
ancient psalms of thankful
praise in low tones smooth
as the quarry-stone floors.

At four A.M.,
we joined them in
dark pews tall as walls,
three pilgrim friends
who did not have
a hundred years,
we only had
one day.

Just before dusk,
our time to leave, we
followed the lake path,
past geese and mallard
ducks that honked and
waddled excitedly.

Were they thrilled
this day, as we, to trade
cold grey waters for soft
pine needle blankets?



Like a Lover

*F*or ten years we met,
eyes locked in mirrors,
as he combed and snipped,
flourishing flowing sleeves.
I learned to laugh without
moving my head.

He told me the tale
of Madame Butterfly,
adopting a cat,
roommate spats, his
wardrobe for a wedding
down to elegant
black socks,
the disappointment
in his father's eyes,
the sorrow in his own
when a close friend
took his life.

Now, no prisms of light
dance on the beauty shop
windows. Laughing voices
no longer escape the
unopened door.

Pneumonia
complications,
I was told.

Like a lover,
on our last visit,
he told me what
I wore first time
we met –
Laura Ashley
frock, burgundy
with navy dots.

But he never
told me
he was dying
and I never told
him goodbye.



Al Capone Slept Here

We lived next door
to Harbor Lodge,
run tightly by
the McHales.

The yard was grass
instead of sand,
hibiscus bloomed.
They offered guests
a dozen rooms,
week, month
or season.

I remember
winter guests
the best.
I'd pass them
in the afternoon
as I walked home
from school.

The ladies
wore dresses, the
gentlemen, hats.
They chatted
easily with accents
from the east,
laughed gaily
against
shuffleboard
clinks.

I wondered
if they'd heard
the rumor of the
early lodge's most
famous guest.

Were stories
passed with
cranberry scones
at afternoon tea—
or was it a secret
only children
knew?



Peachstone Days

One summer morning
before the milkman came,
my sister and I planted a
peach stone in our front
yard using popsicle
sticks for trowels.

Exultant, we yelled
“bloody murder!”
That day our mother
taught us young ladies
did not scream.

Before dad came home
at the end of the day,
Mom would put on
sandals and a pretty
dress. We would
dress up too.

We’d watch and wait
from the highest step
for Dad to stroll into
view, then we’d race
into his open arms.
I remember the taste
of mom’s lemon meringue,
soft and warm and sweet.
And her tuck-in at night
that came with an angel
prayer and a kiss.

Long ago we moved away.
I never returned to see,
but surely a peach tree
must stand there now,
sheltering, at least,
a robin’s nest.



I Saw My Parents Dance

A parrot perched in a silver cage in front of Egan's Nautical Bar squawked at me as I peered through the glass to see if my father was inside.

He waved for me to come in. I sat on the stool beside his, mesmerized by a jug of pickled eggs while the bartender polished glass and old Mrs. Egan smoked in the dim at the end of the bar. Mr. Muldoon on the stool next to mine wore gold-wire spectacles and a red bow tie. Alice wore clips on the pockets of her pink beautician's smock. Big Al had skin like brown leather. I was twelve with freckles.

I was twenty when Dad invited my mother and me to join him at Egan's to bring the New Year in. It surprised me that he asked –

he always went alone – and that my mother said yes and wore a new red dress. Dad led us like a host past the backs of boisterous patrons to greet his friends and Mrs. Egan at the bar. Mother smiled when Mrs. Egan took her hand.

We went into a side room strung with streamers, put on pointed cardboard hats and unfurled snail-like paper horns with laughing breath. Dad sent me to the jukebox to play a Wayne King waltz. When I came back they were dancing.

It's been ten years since my father died. The parrot and nautical bar are gone. I asked my mother if she remembered dancing with Dad at Egan's.

"Your father was in great form that night," her voice trilled like a girl's.



Chestnuts Falling

*I*n a large grassy field
of a monolithic monastery,
Chinese people gathered
in early light under a
stand of chestnut trees,
full leafed, bounteous
with precious fruit
hidden in sharp stickered-
balls of apple-green.

They clutched plump bags
as they nudged suspected
whole ones with their shoes.

My brother joined in.
He pried, bare-handed, stung
fingers ignored, to claim two
small chestnuts for his pocket.

We returned in early evening.
I retreated to a nearby bench
while my brother stood in rapt
concentration, then walked
with deliberation.

An hour passed.
Great raindrops
pattered against
the canopy of leaves
above my head
as my brother
walked toward me,
a smile in his eyes,
peace filling the
air around him.

He said he just listened
for the chestnuts falling,
then followed the sound.
The ripe casings burst open
unaided, some even
had two. He shook
his heavy bag.

At the Holy Spirit
Monastery, my brother
stood in silence and in
trust as God dropped
abundant fruit in his
open, ready hands.



The Car that Caught a Young Man's Fancy

*I*n honeymoon days,
before God brought
four children to his table,
Dad bought brand-new Betsy.

Saturday morning
he chamois-shined her
smooth steel curves like
Mother's wedding silver.

Afternoons, Dad drove us
to glorious Springfield Pool.
Windows down, our long
hair flew, while bare legs
prickled at the scratchy
wool backseat.

The winter we moved
to Florida, poor Betsy,
beast of burden, trekked
the many-thousand mile
journey twice with Dad.

Her ample trunk
brimmed full of books
too precious for
a moving van –
mother's Dickens,
Shakespeare,
encyclopedias
engraved in gold.
“Those trips were her
demise,” he said,

Dad left old Betsy
at a used car lot,
parked in a willow's shade,
headlights averted from
the red station wagon
we children picked out
that had no name.



Periwinkle Dreams

*P*eriwinkle profusions of
lavender-pink and white
grew wild in the sand
of our front yard.
Five-pointed blossoms,
petal stars, I counted
as I yanked them
roots and all.

Pain clouded
my father's eyes
when he came home
to wilted blossoms
gathered in a heap
at child-feet.

His soft voice cracking,
he asked me why—
“Because they grew
wild, wild as weeds.”
He accepted.
Did not scold.

Designing gardens
had been my father's
dream. A second job,
a second child,
had intervened.

The child who
plucked his wild
periwinkles
roots
and all.



Beekeeper Priest

A thin yellow net
covered his white safari hat
as he tended to his hives.
He pumped sweet pine needle
smoke to relax his workers,
the honey bees, then lifted
panels high to smile admiration
at his ladies who built the hives,
produced the honey,
guarded the queen.

Dozens swarmed around him,
inhaling his essence of
pine and earth and sweat.
He knelt, agile and strong
for his seventy-eight years,
to trim a clearing in the grass
as a flight path for his friends.

A bird shower, built by his hand,
offered its spray to birds and bees.
“They come when they’re not busy,”
he explained to the neophytes,
my friend and I.

Before he tended bees,
he tended us. He fed us
with life-giving bread,
washed us in absolving waters,
trimmed away the long grass
of our worldly cares.

Bees took refreshment at
his fountain, let him pat
their little backs.
At his hands we drank
the wine of God’s
sacramental love.



Last Bicycle Ride With My Father

Smiling like a youth,
wind lifting his still-dark
hair, my father pedaled
three wheels to my two
as we rode down
palmy back roads
to our peeling turquoise
sanctuary at the pass
where Gulf meets bay.

We left our bicycles to stand
among sea oats in the sand
and found a faded table
in the sun.

We lingered over
hot dogs and root beer.
Watched seagulls waft
on a salt-filled breeze.

Listened to waves tap
a rhythm on the seawall
near our feet.
Talked of biking, fishing,
a forecast of rain, not that
soon I'd be moving a
thousand miles away.

As rain clouds came
to laze upon the sun,
we tossed our stubs
of bun as one to
waiting gulls.

We pushed our bicycles
through warm white sand to
the road where we would go
our separate ways.

I blew my father a smile-kiss,
he jingled his bell in jaunty reply,
as though I would not move away,
as though he would not die,
as though our rendezvous
on bikes would last forever,
we did not say goodbye.



Euphoria

“Maybe we died
and went to heaven,”
my husband beamed,
his fork light with
lettuce and ringlet
of plum, poised
in mid air.

We dined that noon
at a table by the window
of the Eagle Ridge Inn,
perched high above
a patio where

industrious children
dressed in lollipop colors
drew in the shade
of pink umbrellas.

Beyond, Lake Galena’s
cerulean waters lapped
lush green banks
dappled with wildflowers,
sheltered by hickories
and broad leafed oaks.

The July 4th
Firecracker Footrace
was held that morning
My husband won.



Praying With My Father

*L*atin rumbled soft as distant thunder toward the old priest's back. Smells of mothballs mixed with incense as, perched on padded kneeler, I strained to see beyond the coats in front of me.

When all about me joined in hymn, with child-lisp I whisper-sang, "*Davy, Davy Crockett, king of the wild frontier.*"

My father went to church that day, I remember.

He told me later, smiling, he heard my song.

The starched nurse called his utterings delirium. I stood at my father's side the day before he died, listened to his urgent mantra of broken words.

Like a song learn young, they played in my mind. I joined my voice to his, his face relaxed, he seemed to smile.

"Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Pray for us sinners...."

"Davy, Davy Crockett, King of the wild frontier."



Flagman

*H*e lived in a cottage of rounded, variegated stones culled from the bottom of a lake, stones worn smooth by adversity and time – God’s tools. Our oaks reached out to his above the winding road where we joined him one day on his morning walk.

We passed canoes in jellybean colors that hugged the rocky shore. Crossed island-to-island on a bridge that creaked as it swung. Followed a narrow path through wildflower menageries alive with butterflies and bees until we came to where the old white flag pole waited.

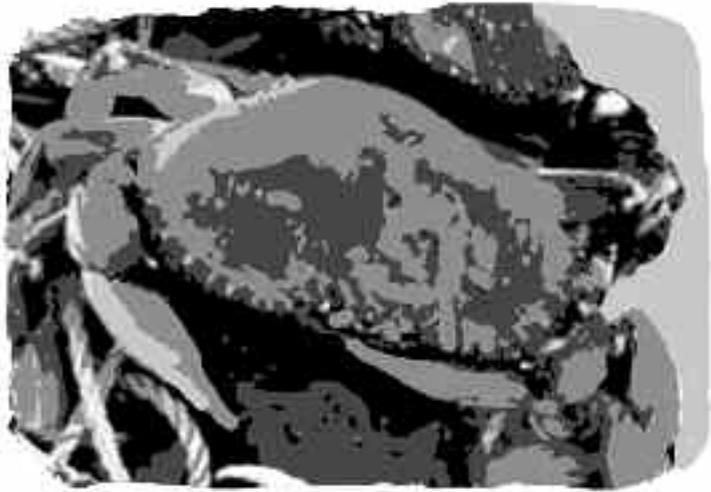
We watched as he raised the flag and secured it below.

He told us his dream to one day return to a grassy hill in France. The red, white and blue crackled like gunfire in the breeze, a sound familiar to a wounded hero-youth who watched his comrades fall trying to secure a flag.

Did he still hear the mingled, muffled, unstained prayers that rose that day from a hill dyed red? Or psalms that escaped barbed wire walls?

And was it a prayer when he returned at dusk to lower the flag and carry it home – a ritual which favored neither day nor season?

As we stood together, ankle deep in buttercups, we wondered at this man, stalwart yet gentle, like a rock worn smooth.



Gift of Purple Velvet

Our mother had a gift of
purple velvet, yards and yards,
from a lady with an accent
who once owned our house--
with eighteen rose bushes
and a cherry tree we children
could reach from an upstairs
bedroom window.

We drove for hours to visit
her the summer I was eight.
She lived in a cottage nestled
in pines on the Jersey shore.

Dad promised we'd go
crabbing if we were good.
He must have thought
we would be, he'd already

bought chicken necks,
a wire cage and string.

She had us for dinner,
kissed our mother goodby.
Mom carried the bundle
tucked close to her heart.
She gave us each a touch.
I ran my fingers down
its nap, soft as kitten fur,
drank in the heady grape
of its royal color,
imagined my mother
dressed in a gown
adorned with rhinestones
and peacock feathers,
dancing with our dashing
father at a ball.

Mom secured her
treasure on her lap.
We caught three crabs.

An old woman's gift to
our beautiful mother with
raven hair remained full
of possibilities unsewn.



The Grey Sweater

*I*n a wheelchair
of turquoise leather,
my mother sat bundled
in soft blue fleece as I
shivered in thin cotton.

I asked if I could borrow
a sweater just for the visit,
and found a grey one,
neatly hung.

In my mother's special
tongue, which sometimes
only she and I could
understand, she invited
me to try it on.

As if dementia
had never come,
she spoke in a gentle,
loving tone,

"I want you to keep it.
It's a gift, it's yours.
You've done so much
for me, I am so glad to
have something
to give you."

The next day
mom's helper, Monica,
shook her head, bemused.
"I don't know what's come
over your mother, she's been
humming all morning.
I've never heard her
hum before," Monica spoke
in a deep, melodious,
South African tone.

A few days later
I returned the grey sweater.
When I saw my mother shiver,
I tied it shawl-like around
her shoulders and bare neck.

She patted the sleeves
that hung softly free,
like ribbon streamers at
the end of a bow, and
whispered in wonderment,
"Is this mine?"



How Cold?

*H*ow cold was it that night
a child was born in a cave,
laid in a crude manger
on prickly straw,
wrapped in a blanket
his mother had woven
by candlelight?

What animals had
the privilege of warming
the smiling newborn with
their warm, moist breath,
gift to the infant who gifted
them with life?

Their vigil kept,
gift for gift,
love for love,
breath for breath.

Would that I, too,
warmed him with
my gift of breath.



Heaven on a Sunday Morning

*I*n the warm,
smells of toast
and last night's fire
drifted to our noses.
Glistening grapefruit
spurred surprise
at prodding spoons.
Kettle hissed invitation
to another cup of tea,
and fat, fresh-inked news
laid seductively
before us –

but new snow
had fallen
in the night.

We walked the wide
white path leading
only to its end
through woods of
shag bark hickory
and cedars plump
with snow.

At our feet lay
flower petal prints
of deer and fawn.

All around us
white snow crystals,
flushed with sun,
dazzled purple, yellow,
red and blue, like
diamond dust,
or star dust,
or heaven.



Hurricane and the Orchid Lady

*P*inned in a white lace apron,
armed with a wooden spoon,
I stirred spaghetti from a can
in a stainless steel pot
at the pristine stove
of the Orchid Lady.

She was a maiden lady
who worked with my dad.
She had offered us shelter
in her mainland home until
the hurricane passed over.

I regretted her kindness
as she stood at my elbow,
her smooth dark hair
tightly knotted at her neck,
a damp cloth in hand, ready
to pounce on a speck of red.
I willed that sauce
to stay inside that pot.

Dishes done to squeaking,
it was time to check the
flowers, I could come.

We walked through
wooden double doors
to a room of windows
lightning lit, wet with rain.

There potted orchids in tiers,
votive candles at a shrine,
blossomed virginal white,
shy in shelter of leaves.

She dipped
an alabaster finger
in the antiseptic soil
and said, "My dear, you
stirred so well today,
you can water
tomorrow."

Her words of trust
and praise floated
about my head,
sweet orchid
perfume.



The Lie

*P*ainted pansies
on gossamer curtains
wafted across our faces
as we lay in bed
tucked to the chin
in white chenille.
I tossed as my older sister
breathed the quiet rhythm
of untroubled sleep.

Earlier that evening
my father had returned
from Egan's charged
beyond any beer
on his breath.

Ignoring the couch,
his favorite seat, its
tweed worn shiny thin,
he paced the room,
stopped, cleared his
throat, paced again.

My sister
noticed first, she
touched my arm.
At last he spoke,
"Girls, I've been
meaning to ask,
do you know
the facts of life?"

As if she knew
the question
before he asked,
she whispered
the command,
"Say yes."

"That's good,"
he said, and took
his place on his end
of the couch.



Key West Early Morning Rain

Yesterday's ocean
brilliant as turquoise
lined with coral ribbons
laid fieldstone-grey
in early mist.

Last night's rumble
of low steel drums,
laughing voices
in exotic tongues,
hovered dreamlike
over sleeping streets
as rain clouds
ripened.

First drops pounced
on pastel porches of
gingerbread mansions.

Rain streaked down
the banyan tree's
many-stalked trunk,
organized as
asparagus.

Outside my window,
a youth danced
in the street, his
face the color of one
who had slept too
often in the sun.

His tattered pants
rolled above bare feet,
arms swayed to embrace
raindrops on forehead,
cheeks, tongue,
his dancing feet.

Beneath him
sidewalk cracks,
like rivulets to river,
rushed rain to curb
to shiny pool as
first light broke.



Best Friends Prepare to Move

My husband and I
raised hummus to our lips
with golden pita triangles,
lifted taboule grains,
holiday-merry in bright
parsley green, tomato red,
with silver forks dulled
by the patina of
the every day.

From our dining alcove
window, through March-bare
trees and hedges, we glimpsed
an old fashioned panel truck
parked in our friends' drive.

Sun shone on the sideboard's
brightly colored letters –
Whipple Tree Antiques,
Your Junk, Another's Treasure –
like a spotlight on
carnival dancers.

On this day of transition,
no longer winter, not yet spring,
the van before the moving van
had come.

A robin fluttered
inches from the glass,
then stopped,
mid-air suspended,
beak stuffed with twigs
for its new nest.

Lunch finished,
the panel truck gone,
we walked two doors
to our friends' home
to witness the proof
of packing boxes
for ourselves.



Beehive Huts Explored

Beehive huts
sat perched
on a slope
of the rugged
coast of the
Irish Sea with
its wild, barren
simplicity.

They were
built by hand
by holy men
who lived apart
to fast and pray,
three thousand
years ago.

We stopped
on our Ireland
tour to see.

A woman stood
nearby, tired,
chilled, bent,
her face wizened
by cold and
wind.
“Two euros
to explore,”
she said.

I gave her
my euros and
walked inside,
impressed by
a hardship
I could only
imagine,
not just in
the past.

Back in
the warmth
of a luxury van,
I wished I had
given her
more.



A Land's Lament

*Too many left,
too many stayed,
too many died.*

Stonewalls crumbled,
thatched roof gone,
chimney fieldstones
lay upon the heather
where they fell.

A home once stood
tall and proud upon
the rugged cliff.
I could almost see
a fire in the hearth,
potatoes in the pot,
a mother hanging
wash with a child
at her feet.

“That’s a famine house
you’re seeing,” said John,
our Irish tour guide,
his lyrical voice cracking,
“The queen apologized
not long ago.”

As the road
curved round,
we saw another
famine house,
shambled like
the last,
slumped upon
the hillside,
another silent
witness to a
land’s lament...

*Too many left,
too many stayed,
too many died.*



Nags Head Beach

Our hair
dripped cool
saltwater.
Clumps of sand
and bits of shell
clung to our arms
and legs like
like barnacles
on pilings.

I was sunburn-pink,
you were neatly tanned
and handsome wet.
For hours we played
in waves taller than
your six-foot frame.

Rolling waves
would lift us up
and set us down
gentle as a hello.
Cresting waves we'd
jump astride and ride.

Thunderous waves
would make us fly,
pliant bags of sand
tossed by a juggler's
wild hands, to bounce
and drag against
the sandy bottom.
Our throats
hurt from
joyous
screaming.

Do you
remember
the way you
looked at me
when you told
me my freckles
were dark as
pennies?

We were
twelve again,
in first love
with each
other.



Julia's House

Where paved road turned to sand,
sharp shells, soft footprints led to
Julia's house of wood, white-baked,
clad in hibiscus pinks and evergreens.
Thin pillars framed the old front door.

Inside a wide white wicker chair
presided. Our mother read there
by window light while treasures
in porcelain and brass whispered
their moments from assigned
wooden shelves.

A massive brick hearth wrapped
a cranky old stove in clumsy embrace.
We children warmed our pajamas on
its proud brow on cold winter nights.

Great stuffed chairs surrounded
a table dressed in lace, as it was
for holidays and wedding feasts.

French doors opened to a
screened-in porch where crusty
folding chairs took their leisure
in humid air.

Outside was smooth white sand.
Our mother would hoe and rake
errant grass into neat piles
we children would gather.

An old seawall guarded
home and sand and lace
against wind and waves
and tide.

Our mother and the
house grew old together,
overlooking each other's
faults, like an old married
couple who'd learned
to love well.

One unrecorded day,
the home we children
once called *ours* had
changed its name.



Child Wisdom

Children from
the Montessori school
paraded hand-in-hand,
sidewalk-wide,
one blue-skied
November morning.

I passed them as I
turned the corner
toward our house
after my jog.
One voice broke
like a roar above the rest,
“Don’t step on a crack!”

All heads looked
down, even mine.
As ordered, I surveyed
the slipshod placement
of my feet on the old,
cracked sidewalk.

Curious, I looked to see
who spoke. Not a leader,
but a child, three feet tall,
lush brown curls flowing.
She bellowed again,
“It’s either a hot dog
or an alligator!”

There it was.
Life with its dangers
and narrow escapes;
careless moments
and lucky ones;
joys, punishments
and silent regrets.

Cracks everywhere,
let the wise beware,
it’s hotdogs and
alligators out there.



Midnight Watch At the Homeless Shelter

The old brick church,
once abandoned
like an outgrown shell,
welcomed its homeless guests
with new white windows,
walls, carpet in a subtle
shade of gray.

Volunteers huddled
at the table in a corner,
attracted like moths
to the only burning light.
I sat apart, cross-legged
on the floor.

In dark shadow I saw
homeless men and women,
lying prostrate on the floor,
in blanket bundles,
elbow-close,
head-to-toe in rows.

A woman propped
on an elbow, her long black
hair half-covering her face,
whispered softly across bodies
to a friend. Walls rippled
their gentle laughter.

Sound trickled down
to a gentle rhythm
of sleeping sighs,
punctuated by
the occasional,
unprotested snore.

Humility hung
in the air like grace.
I was in awe, the
embarrassed guest
who this night
shared their
space.



Quarrel With My Husband

In a room crowded by two,
we who seldom differed stood
quarreling a point of view.

Voices broke and bellowed,
louder each in turn.
Rightness burned white,
like ice upon my face.

Toothbrush still in hand,
“Leave,” I shrieked the
command, too superior
to surrender or go on.

The word slapped
his cheek, then mine.
He turned and left,
door blowing to
an almost-close.

We sought each other
through the crack.

Last Fight

Twenty years have passed
since our last fight, my love
and I, our edges all worn smooth.

We remember the shouting,
the heat that cold winter morning
with fond, funny smiles, we were
practically youths.

Some events in life we know
will never come, and others,
never come again.
For my love and I, that fight
shall be our last, our edges
all worn smooth.



Petunia Pride

On the deck of a house
on a limestone bluff
on a midwest lake
I planted petunias
in four clay pots,
large enough to grow
at least a tree.

I watered them daily,
plucking by hand
unsightly brown shards
of blossoms spent.
And so they grew,
lush, gardenia-soft,
cascading up and over
one-another, then down
and around the sides.
Those petunias
were my pride.

I went away one week.
It didn't rain.
The one left in charge
of watering forgot.

Ten years have passed.
This spring four clay pots
sat on the deck of a house
by the beach holding
a weary, wind-battered
palm tree each.
All winter, I had
forgotten to water.
What to plant instead?
Pink petunias!

I pluck each
shrivelled remnant
as I sprinkle,
like a fault I need
to banish, the
thoughtless word,
a vain extravagance,
a kindness left undone –
whisked away forever,
or at least until
tomorrow.



Sweet Corn After Harvest

Once soft
translucent leaves
greedily gathered
morning dew.
Willowy stalks
strained sunward,
thickening.

Spears of corn
grew, hidden in
silken sheaves
until fullness
demanded the
giving up.

Now stalks,
dried and dusty,
like sun-browned,
wrinkled hands
upraised in
prayer, keep
their vigil
of season's
end.



Sherbert Colored Rainbows

“I made this,” my mother told me,
glancing at the heart-shaped purse
sporting polka dots big as lollipops
that hung dashingly from her neck,
a spectacle in lavender and pink,
she wore every day with everything.

I admired her skill with oohs and aahs,
remembering the green chintz skirt with
white ball fringe she really did make
for a dressing table a lifetime ago.
I was too young to praise her then.

She looked down at her shoes.
“These are my favorites,
I’ve had them for years and
never cleaned them,”
she beamed.

My gaze fell to the well worn shoes
she could manage herself,
soft white leather, like a child’s.
I agreed they looked amazingly new.

“Are those your favorite socks?”
I asked, to prolong the happy
inventory. She heard the smile
in the question and expectantly
looked down.
Sherbert-colored rainbow socks
peeked out. She laughed
a delighted child’s laugh.



*To My
Weary
Husband*

You've worked
hard my love,
so hard, with
too much time
accounted for
without the
counting.

Renew,
my sweet,
at home
where love
fragrant as
hyacinth
blossoms
fills every
room.

And in your
other heart
find energy
for two.



Young Men At the Beach

*D*ressed in dark shirts,
blue jeans rolled up,
two lean young men
gathered a conch shell
each, from the soft white
sand of Pass-a-Grille
Beach, and dropped them
in a styrofoam cup.

They looked up
as I passed on
my morning walk,
Their smile tentative,
as if unsure that
they should take
such treasure.

I smiled back,
hoping to reassure.

I too,
had unasked
questions.

At the end
of the day would
they take a bus to
the park downtown
where young men
go who have
no home?

Sleep under stars
on dry winter grass,
as vulnerable
and out-of-place
as sea shells in
a coffee cup?



Sweet Epiphany of Soul

My lungs burned the plaintive
ecstasy of chasing and being chased.
My heart pounded as if it would
escape my narrow chest.

As I paused in our schoolyard game
of tag for breath, a woman I called
“Sister” walked behind the
chain-link fence.

She seemed to glide, her shoes
hidden by her long black dress,
down the concrete corridor that
wound the narrow path of
convent, church and school.

At her forehead a lock of hair,
still sun-touched, softly curled,
escaped her starched white wimple.
A gold-leafed prayer book,
open in her hands, held her
downcast eyes, though the sky
was blue and softly fleeced.

A pang of pity for this
imprisoned soul, so tethered
by her prayers, struck me
like a hand.

Sound around me stopped.
My breath rushed in and out.
I asked in silence, why?
Then the game swept over
me and the question washed,
unresolved, away.

Years passed.
I saw a young nun walk
in the shadow of a
schoolyard fence.

Somewhere between now
and the blur of long ago
I had found the answer.

In her downcast eyes
I saw the joyful passion
of her surrender.
In her silent solitude,
I heard the prayer of
constancy and courage
of one who dared
play tag with
the Divine.



Swimming Lessons

Twice each week we gathered like minnows in the shallows of Pass-a-grille Beach for swimming lessons.

When test day came, I waded to the back. My arms churned, my legs thrashed, head upright, giraffe-like, eyes shut tight.

The sound of other swimmers fell to silence. I peeked out. The beach was not where it should have been. I could not touch bottom.

A dolphin rose in front of me and turned toward shore. As if pulled by his wake, I followed.

In the safety of the shallows he left me. I waded ashore unnoticed, ashamed. I'd gone off course, failed the test.

Only later did I see, rescued by a dolphin, I'd swum in a miracle that day.



Saying Goodby

I did not really say goodby
to my mother, daughter,
my best friend -- all one.
Her name was Julia,
I called her mom.

She wore that title for fifty years,
until one day, it no longer fit.
Like good cashmere she no
longer wore, she hung it away
in the back of her mind.

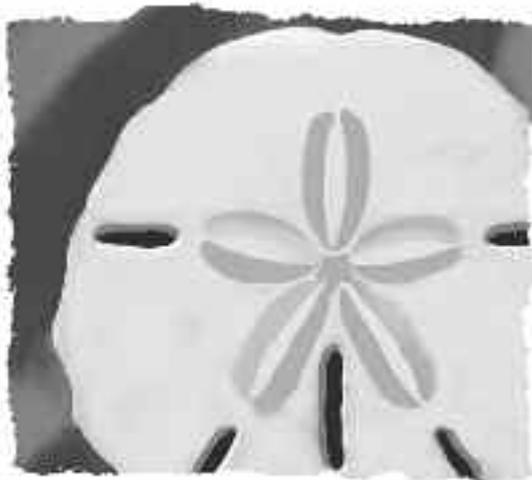
I called her "girlfriend" then.
Free and easy, it made her smile.
She could give her whole attention
to the moment, no one wanting
or expecting more.

She liked to dress all in pink,
wear a straw hat with a flower.
When I called her "little girl"
she would smile an impish grin.

She propelled her
wheelchair expertly
with pointed toes.
Gazed upon her garden
view in grateful awe.

So full of life at ninety-four,
I was not prepared for her
to go. She was.
She lay unresponsive, as if
already in another place.

Outside, alone, I cried
my sorrow to the heavens.
When I returned, as if she'd heard,
she squeezed
my hand.



Sand Dollar

*B*arely burrowed in soft wet sand,
this valued coin of watery realm
tempts child toes to capture it and
bring it home to bleach and dry
to smooth white stone.

New life in death,
its markings now reveal
a guiding star, a Christmas flower,
five holes, (hands, feet and side),
outline of the Easter flower.

When broken, five white doves
break free their fragile tomb.
Five-fold the treasure God placed inside
a mollusk sliver that has no eyes.
Imagine the treasure He's hidden within
the childlike one who seeks and finds.



Pine Cone Ginger

*I*ve walked a path
where grapefruit trees,
tall as oaks, grow wild
on a sliver of grass that
lines blue inlet waters.

Where cypress knees
congregate like families,
in almost-human form,
and peacocks flaunt
their plumage in any
yard they choose.

Where pine cone ginger
grows tall as me, sheathed
in green, its cone-shaped
fruit, maraschino-red.

“Islanders use its milky
cream to wash their hair,”
my brother said, as he
picked some for me.

I don’t have to
travel far to find
a magical place,
just visit my brother’s
Alafia River
wooded retreat.



Daffodils

After summer's
brightening, blossoming,
ripening

After fall's
fulfilling, transforming
surrendering

After winter's
freezing, pelting,
darkening

Spring's
shy harbinger
awakens



Painting Lesson

I remember my father
painting window trim.
I watched mesmerized as he
dipped smooth black bristles
just so far in dazzling white
paint. Then, with the grace
of a music conductor,
raised his arm and lowered
it as paint flowed seamlessly
from brush to waiting wood.

I was a child, not much taller
than the window ledge.
He noticed me watching
and invited me to try.

He placed the brush
in my small hand as
though it were a treasure.
He guided my hand as we
dipped the brush,
dragged the bristle edge
against the rim to whisk
off errant drops,
then neatly brushed
the paint in place.

I'm twice the age
of my father then.
I still love to paint.
I know my father
taught me much,
he must have, he was
so good and kind, but
the painting lesson
stands out from
the rest.

Thanks for
everything.
I love you,
Dad.



*First
Footprints
In the
Sand*

The cottages were small
and squat, plunked close
on a patch of sandy grass
in two neat rows,
like cloverleaf rolls
on a narrow plate.
My friend's house was
second from the end,
two blocks from the beach.
I slept over one night.

From the opened window
I tasted salt-air freedom.
With a boldness
unclaimed before,
in pre-dawn dark
I made my way to
place first footprints
in the sand.

I trod the narrow
moonlit street
to Upham Beach.
Crossed a creaky boardwalk
over mounds of sand
where sea oats grew.

I left my sandals
where wood met sand
and passed the dozen yards
to water's edge. Foam,
the color of moonlight,
glistened on my toes.

Consciously, with
an artist's intent,
as if God had been waiting
for just those prints,
I impressed each footfall
with my young girl's weight.

I thought
they wouldn't last
the next tide's rising,
but here they are,
a lifetime later,
fresh as ever.

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