Writers’ Night:
The Downloadable Journal
November 2004

All in the Family
Writers’ Night 1.2
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Edited by Rob Hardy
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Rutabaga Stew
In Seventeen Syllables
And Seven Stanzas

Rutabaga stew
Rutabaga stew — I hate
Rutabaga stew.

My sisters — Patty,
Kathy, Angela — all hate
Rutabaga stew.

Why seventeen syll-
Ables, Mom asks? Because it
is Haiku, I coo.

One syllable more
Or less than seventeen be-
Comes Haiku no more.

But nothing great can
Be said in seventeen syll-
ables, she shouts back.

And why write about
My rutabaga stew? What
Has it done to you?

She’s right. What good is
Rutabaga stew in sev-
enteen syllables?
Walks to a German Peacock Farm, 1967

What was the first animal
I recognized as beautiful?

Not horses, and definitely not
The wild tusked boar, which you loved to frighten

Your daughters with -- your grand tales to make us come in
Before dusk. It is fitting to me, father

That you, in your reincarnated life,
Should come back to me as a peacock.

I remember the walks we took with you
When we lived on the German Farm in 1967.

You would line us up military style --
Oldest daughter to youngest, tallest to shortest,

Marching our way forward, single file,
Our patent leather shoes tapping together on the gravel road

As we did every Sunday, in our best dresses,
To the peacock farm about two miles away.

We gathered purple clover and made crowns for our heads --
For our pilgrimage to the peacock gods.

“Proud as a Peacock,” you would say --
We would keep our backs straight, heads held high, postures perfect

So you would be proud of us.
The bloodcurdling calls of the peacocks, like the mythological sirens

Lured us nearer to them.
Tail feathers filled with a night sky of eyes.

It is said that Hera, mother of the gods, in her fury against her unfaithful
husband,

Scattered the eyes of the defiled goddesses onto the peacock’s tail

To protect and honor them. So it is with you, father, protecting your own daughters in life
And carrying the weight of the eyes of women in your fiery rebirth – like the peacocks, you

Are never gone, never entirely gone.
Newsreel

Our daughter cries
at the suddenness and storm
of her mother’s rage.
It’s rare,
this sound that pulls me forward.
I know the fuel of this fury,
something other than the little girl
launching a spoon,
and tipping out her milk-sopped breakfast.
It’s been months since we’ve been paid.
Hurricanes shake out their wild hair
as the center holds
dancing the Atlantic toward landfall
on a continent, a country
already ravaged by fears, the misuse of capital.

Two thousand miles from the gulf,
the next door yard sign reads:
K A N S A N S   F O R   K E R R Y,
but across the street
I know families worship a vengeful god
and bless the crusader Bush
before potatoes and peas,
a plateful of steak.

I lean back,
exhale as though I’ve set off a heavy yoke.
Sunlight pierces the house at a low angle,
layers shadows of leaves high on the walls,
and from where I sit I see
another projection —
on the bare body of a doll an area of gold light,
remnant, perhaps, of the silent era,
and the silhouette of our daughter’s newt swimming there briefly,
like a tiny newsreel from the peaceful world around us,
then gone.
The Pantry

My mother’s habit was to stock up
on sale items, buying multiples
of non-perishables at penny prices.
Cream can and crockery became time-capsules
stocked with bag after bag of coconut flakes
in bright Fifties plastic, pristine cans
of Weight-Watchers diet chocolate pop,
burst bags of Brazil nuts and rogue
marshmallows fired near to porcelain
by the passing years, and seems now
so small a sin for so starving a heart.

My father, mindset on military matters,
bought into the governing propaganda,
saw the sky tinged red as our planes
dropped their cargo of silver tinsel on civilians
at the height of the Cold War. He wished
to replicate the food-hoard underground,
make safe haven of a bunker
built of chemically-treated, green lumber
to fabricate a bunker of green lumber.
He gave over in the end to quiet pragmatism.
“Who’d bomb a field-less farm
more cattail slough and box-elder grove?”

Empty now, except for the ghosts of apples,
the pantry’s white cupboard doors are smudged
where the dead once placed their fingers.
A deep chip in the layered paint
shows the strata of generations,
and from the bare bulb the string still hangs
just where the hands knew to reach.
Egg Harbor, Wisconsin

The remaining grapes have dried,  
their woody stems gone brittle,  
their supporting lattice soft.  
It's December. All week the winds  
have increased, turning wet and brutal.  
I walk through the arbor toward the sea wall  
to find the fruit trees Father planted in spring.  
Their young trunks, twisted, slick with rain,  
do not block the view, or frame it.  
They disturb, like permanent scratches  
on a known photograph;  
grey smoke, as I approach, before the uneasy bay,  
darker when I circle behind them,  
long smudges on the lighted house.  
They won't survive this wind without cover.  
Father can't now, so no one will tend them.

I think how it's been a hard fall, that perhaps  
they're already dead, yet they stand  
like reproach or hope.
The House on East Broad Street

Did they think it would always be there for them
when they sang around the piano at night
and joked about those new high-rise hems?

The house is still standing here, right
where it's always been, on the east bank
of the Fox River, within easy sight

of the Menasha Dam. As a boy, Grandpa once sank
his skiff, and would have gone over that wall
but he clung to a rail until they pulled him, rank

and boasting, from a frothy squall
of brown water. He had always been a strong
swimmer. Once he chased my beachball,

when the wind carried it like a song
in front of him, to the farthest end
of Five Mile Lake. "A foolish long

way to chase nineteen cents," Grandma said. "He'll spend
his strength." But he didn't. Today, I've
found where the family boathouse stood, at the little bend

where the current slows and ducks dive
through brackish water. Standing here on broken rocks,
in back of a house that was once alive

with songs, I squint to see where the old docks
joined the shore and try to hear
the swish of long skirts, the nightly winding of clocks.

Upstairs, the hardwood floors tilt toward the rear
of the house, toward the river. The small
servant's stairway has steps too high and sheer
for any but a child to navigate, and all
the taps spill rusty water. It's easy to see
why no one will buy the house. Someone might fall
on the sagging porch and sue. Besides, Aunt Izzie
lived here for years with all her cats, and the smell
will stay until the house goes. I have the key
but I don't go in. Some cousins are going to sell
the furniture, now that Izzie's gone.
Everybody's gone, and there's no one left to tell
how the piano sounded out across the lawn.
To My Children

You
Are the stories I tell.
verb, subject, and syntax,
you structure my life into
sentence.

Yes, both
language and penance,
the sentence of being,
always, told by your
being, you three

who tell
my secrets to strangers. Who chant
my mere hum of name
stretching the o in mom
in constant opera

in one, two, three-note

trills. You narrate me,
my children, into the object
of your many affections and you,
you three, are the makers

of all I am,
diction and daring, drama
and dream. Why not?
This is the poem for you.
Like a good story, like the stories

you tell, all three

speaking like overlapping rivers
rushing toward no point but joy
of noise, sheer delight in telling
“hear this, hear this” to a well-tried ear—

this story begins
and begins and begins
with you, each of you, telling
me into the story you have made,
and has no conceivable ending.
Offering Cereal to the Buddha

“Daddy,
Buddha,
over here.”
And I move the small statue
to a dragonfly coaster
at the center of the table
where my daughter sits
eating breakfast.

“O,
Buddha.”
And I take the tiny wreath from her spoon
and place it before him.

“Daddy.
Buddha eat,” she insists.
“Buddha’s don’t eat while meditating.”
She goes back to eating. “That was very kind
to offer him some of your breakfast,” I add
as I watch her.

Outside, the sky is clearing,
a bright silky flower-petal white,
many branches are bent down to earth
under heavy wet snow.
The whole world trembles... and here
there is peace.
Wild About Baseball:  
A Naturalist Plays Catch With His Son

In our common life, we may find the strength not merely to carry on in the face of the world’s bad news, but to resist cruelty and waste. I speak of it as common because it is ordinary, because we make it together, because it binds us through time to the rest of humanity and through our bodies to the rest of nature. By honoring this common life, nurturing it, carrying it steadily in mind, we might renew our households and neighborhoods and cities, and in doing so might redeem ourselves from the bleakness of private lives spent in frenzied pursuit of sensation and wealth.

Scott Russell Sanders, “The Common Life”

My central point is that games in their various versions are social agreements to live by, instrumentalities to make our common life pleasurable.

A. Bartlett Giamatti, *Take Time for Paradise: Americans and Their Games*

In the first week of July, there are wax flowers (*pyrola asarifolia*) growing at the edge of the infield. There are about two dozen of them, frail-looking members of the blueberry family, pale green stalks strung with pink flowers that look like chips of old china. Small suckers of balsam poplar have begun to invade the field where we’ve set up a pitcher’s mound and, sixty feet away, an old boathouse shutter painted with an approximate strike zone. Pitches out of the strike zone bounce into a thick stand of cedar at the edge of the overgrown clock golf lawn. We call it the Green Monster.

Lake Huron is foul territory. Any well-hit ball would land in the woods or in the lake or in the tall grass weighed down with dead mayflies still trembling in the stiff northwest wind off Wilderness Bay. Our games of catch (nine-year old Will ankle-deep in mayflies) are often suspended as we kneel down to eat the last of the wild strawberries, warm bursts of sweetness on our tongues. Will calls time-out to run for the field guide to identify a spider that
dangled into his field of vision, or we both look up at the bald eagle flying over with its noisy entourage of gulls.

Will spits, pumps his leg and delivers a fastball, high and into the cedars. He tugs at his crotch and launches into the play-by-play. Will backs him off the plate with a high, tight fastball... I plunge into the cedars, sending the yellow warblers and the song sparrows deeper into the woods.

I started playing Little League when I was Will’s age, in fourth grade, the year Hank Aaron broke Babe Ruth’s all-time home run record. I was one of those dandelion-blowing, cloud-watching right fielders, always positioned so that the ball would fall at a safe distance from my glove. In my four years of Little League, I never once crossed home and caught the high-fives of my teammates crowding around the plate. I was an easy out, a daydreamer. I was distracted by the shadows lengthening across the field, the rank smell of the woods rising up from beyond the right field foul line.

I come up out of the woods with my fingers across the seams and fire a strike, sidearm, across the infield to Will, who has been picking dead mayflies from his socks. I imagine I look just like a major league shortstop completing a double play. I forget that I was always an easy out, always watching balls fall in front of me, always failing to hit the cut-off man with my weak throw from the outfield.

At the same time, I’m not far from where I was as a boy, when the perfect seamless globe of a dandelion meant more to me than a perfect five-ounce baseball falling into my glove. By inclination, I was more a naturalist than an outfielder, and my games of catch with Will this summer preserve that combination of baseball and natural history. He’s learning how to throw a fastball and identify insects. By the end of the morning, my left hand smells like glove leather, my right hand like cedar.

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Susan Fenimore Cooper never once mentions baseball. Wandering around Cooperstown in the late 1840’s, she took in the trees, the wildflowers, the birds, the diverse state of cultivation of the land. There were still remnants of original forest, with heartwood older than the bones of pioneers buried in the village churchyard. There were fields only recently cleared, stump-covered, as if the frontier had just passed over. There were cornfields going back a generation or more, gardens, neat fences, solid farmhouses. There’s no baseball in Rural Hours, the book Susan Fenimore Cooper wrote about the natural history of Cooperstown, but waxflowers still grow in the woods around the mythical birthplace of the American game.
The Republican Congressman who represents Cooperstown these days, Sherwood Boehlert, is closely identified with the cause of environmental conservation. The national shrine of baseball is set in a beautiful landscape that Susan Fenimore Cooper might still recognize a hundred and fifty years after she wrote her book.

But Cooperstown, the birthplace of American women’s nature writing, wasn’t the actual birthplace of baseball. Baseball, in a form that we would recognize today, really got started by the New York Knickerbocker Base Ball Club in the mid-1840’s. There wasn’t much room for playing baseball in the streets of New York City, so the club took the ferry over to Hoboken and set up in a grassy picnic grove known as the Elysian Fields. They laid out their infield in the shape of a diamond, determined that three strikes would constitute an out, began to bind the game by rules that still hold today.

The writer and abolitionist Lydia Maria Child visited the Elysian Fields in September 1841, a few years before the Knickerbockers took it over for baseball. She describes it as “a small open glade, with natural groves in the rear, and the broad river at its foot.” The scene, she writes, “is one where a poet’s disembodied spirit might be well content to wander; but, alas, the city intrudes her vices into this beautiful sanctuary of nature. There stands a public house, with its bar room, and bowling alley, a place of resort for the idle and profligate; kept within the bounds of decorum, however, by the constant presence of respectable visitors.” Nearby, she found a small encampment of Penobscot Indians, selling baskets.

What Child found in the Elysian Fields was not unlike what Susan Cooper found in the environs of Cooperstown: a middle landscape, comfortably situated between city and wilderness, carefully domesticated. And what the Knickerbockers fashioned in the Elysian Fields was the ideal game for the middle landscape, a game played within a “sanctuary of nature,” yet bound by specific rules and the carefully considered geography of the field of play.

Over the next century, professional ballparks would be built in New York, Detroit, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, and other cities, creating the *hortus inclusus*, the enclosed garden, the perfect pastoral landscape within the city. At Wrigley Field, Jacobs Field, Camden Yards, the city is part of the architecture of the ballpark, standing out beyond the outfield, the context for this stretch of chalk-marked grass and dirt.

To create a professional baseball park these days, the kind with real grass, you need a mix of bluegrass and perennial ryegrass, a soil mix of sand and peat, an underground drainage system, an irrigation system, regular applications of fertilizer and fungicide, and a $7,000 mower equipped with
rollers and blades that cut the infield grass at 1 1/8 inch. Up here where we
spend the summer, on Lake Huron, we only have our gloves, a ball, and a
narrow field infested with young balsam poplar. Will and I don’t need a
ballpark to play catch or bang up an old boathouse shutter with our fastballs.
What we have is more elemental than baseball: a game of catch between a
father and son.

My wife’s family has been coming up here for over a century. Her
great-grandfather, F.A. Seiberling, founded the Goodyear Tire and Rubber
Company and chose this island as his summer retreat. The field where we
play catch used to be the clay tennis court, until ecological succession took
over and started turning it into boreal forest. At the edge of the woods, there’s
a rusted-out metal roller that was once used to pack down and smooth out the
clay surface of the tennis court. Old stereopticon slides in the lodge hold out
ghostly images of nattily-dressed young tennis players from time of the First
World War, Grandfather Seiberling’s buddies from Lawrenceville and
Princeton.

The place was built for leisure. Nature and sport (tennis, sailing, clock
golf) existed side by side, lawns gradually giving way to woods and wildflowers.
In the early years, not too long before the tennis court photographs in the
stereopticon, the landscape architect Warren Manning was invited to spend
some time on the island. He had started out working for Frederick Law
Olmsted before setting up shop on his own. It was Manning who landscaped
the extensive gardens of the Seiberling mansion, Stan Hywet, down in Akron,
Ohio. He spent his time on the island botanizing. He compiled a list of
dozens of species found on the island, many of which are still found there
today: twin flowers and gentians, lobelia kalmii and zygaenus, pearly
everlasting and enchanter’s nightshade. He wrote to the Seiberlings about
their island retreat: “Avoid the landscape man as you would a pest, who would
have you make the wild give way to the rigid lines, the stone and wood forms
and the high colors of a suburban gardenesque place.”

Baseball as we know it today came into being during a time of territorial
expansion, when the wilderness was being pushed back and the cities were
growing and the country was beginning to be connected by a grid of roads and
a network of rails. The geometry of the land survey brought order to the
wilderness. The lines of a baseball diamond could be redrawn on any cleared
land, superimposed anywhere on the vast national grid.

Thoreau was living on Walden Pond at about the same time that the
Knickerbockers were establishing themselves at the Elysian Fields. In Walden,
Thoreau writes a little about sport in America. In his time, hunting and
fishing are still the chief amusements of American men and boys. He writes:
They mistake who assert that the Yankee has few amusements, because he has not so many public holidays, and men and boys do not play so many games as they do in England, for here the more primitive but solitary amusements of hunting, fishing, and the like have not yet given place to the former. Almost every New England boy among my contemporaries shouldered a fowling-piece between the ages of ten and fourteen; and his hunting and fishing grounds were not limited, like the preserves of an English nobleman, but were more boundless even than those of a savage. No wonder, then, that he did not oftener stay to play on the common. But already a change is taking place, owing, not to an increased humanity, but to an increased scarcity of game.

The pushing back of the wilderness and the increased scarcity of game, according to Thoreau, was leading to a change in American sporting habits, forcing men and boys to gather for recreation on the village commons instead of seeking solitary sport in the woods. Organized baseball, of the Knickerbocker variety, was a product of this transitional period in American sporting life.

Half a century later, the frontier was closed and the wilderness was drying up. Beginning with the establishment of Yellowstone in 1872, wilderness began to be set aside and preserved in national parks and wilderness areas. These preserves attracted botanists and nature-lovers, like Warren Manning, as well as sportsmen like Theodore Roosevelt. By the end of another half-century, Aldo Leopold was writing about the need to preserve wilderness for recreation—for canoeing, camping, and backpacking.

At the beginning of another century, we’re still attempting to strike a balance between sport and nature. In 1997, I was fighting to keep the local college from building an 80,000 square-foot recreation center on the edge of the college arboretum, where for the past three decades the native prairie and oak savanna ecosystems have been under careful reconstruction. The recreation center was built, but care was taken to restore the native prairie ecosystem surrounding it.

There are wonderful old photographs of Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone, and Thomas Edison camping in the woods with the naturalist John Burroughs. They sought a refuge in the woods from the world of mechanization which they helped to create. In the cities, Firestone or Ford factory workers could play baseball or attend the games of professional
baseball clubs like the Detroit Tigers. Baseball is an urban game, bound by convention and allied to commerce. As in the assembly line, each player performs a particular and specialized task. In its huge stadiums, baseball is a game for the urban masses; it’s democratic. Unlike the millionaire industrialist, the line worker couldn’t take off two weeks from work to walk in the woods.

Aldo Leopold wrote:

There are those who decry wilderness sports as “undemocratic” because the recreational carrying capacity of a wilderness is small, as compared with a golf links or a tourist camp. The basic error in such an argument is that it applies the philosophy of mass-production to what is intended to counteract mass-production.

We’re privileged to have this summer place on an island in Lake Huron. No question about it. We’ve protected it with a conservation easement to preserve the woods as wilderness in perpetuity. But some have argued that conservation easements subtract from the tax-base which provides schools and services to year-round residents. For several years now, local groups have been working with conservation groups such as the Nature Conservancy to strike a balance between development and preservation of wilderness, which is one of the main features that draws people to this area.

Our old place, bought and built by a rubber baron more than a century ago, is kept up today by a family of academics—a retired English professor, a classics professor, a mathematician, a botanist, an elementary school teacher. It’s do-it-yourself rustic, and some things we just have to let go. The ice house is long gone, and so are the playing lawns. The old blockhouse out on the point leans every year closer to the point of collapse. I have to admit that, even as I replace sections of rotted-out porch or moss-covered roof, I’m rooting for the woods.

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On the night of the All-Star Game, we set up our radio on the south shore, build a campfire, and listen to the sounds of the game swimming up from some sports station in Chicago. Will and I continue to play catch at the edge of the circle of firelight.

Will is what Major League Baseball is counting on: a boy who loves baseball so much, the whole idea of baseball, that not even the greed and
manipulation of the players and owners can drive him away. It’s true that, even at nine years old, he’s becoming as cynical as I am about the business of baseball, about the manipulations of the owners jockeying for new publically-funded ballparks with high-revenue corporate suites. But out on the field, the game is always pure.

Will imagines his picture on a baseball card, the professional shortstop or the National League pitcher with a low ERA and a high batting average. He tells me that he’ll make enough money in the big leagues to bring this place back they way it once was, with a water-tight roof, a new dock, maybe even a tennis court.

When it’s too dark to play catch, we throw stones into the bay, trying to hit the big rock about sixty feet out. In the darkness, you have to listen for the sound of stone hitting stone. I tell Will about the American Indian who pitched for the Cleveland Spiders, who learned to pitch just like this, by throwing stones at a rock out in the bay. It was for him that they renamed the team the Cleveland Indians. I tell him about how the curveball was invented by a kid throwing clam shells. Regardless of what baseball has become, its origins are always inside you, in the natural urge to pick something up and throw it.

But it’s difficult for an environmentalist in good conscience to be enthusiastic about professional baseball. Baseball parks are short grass monocultures supported by massive doses of weed killer and fertilizer. Groundskeeping is the control of nature raised to an artform. In Comisky Park, the groundskeepers used to saturate the ground in front of home plate when they had a sinkerball pitcher on the mound. That would deaden a short hopper in front of the plate and keep it from turning into an infield single. They manipulated the length of the grass according to the strengths of the position players—longer grass to slow the ball for a weak shortstop, shorter grass for a strong second baseman.

Up north, we just try not to trample the waxflowers. We try not to throw the ball into the cedars.

In the morning, through the mist, a friend of my wife’s parents canoes over from Marquette Island. His name is Larry, and he’s a botanist. We get telling Larry about how Will wants to pitch in the Big Leagues so he can afford to fix this place up with his Big League salary. Larry says that where he grew up used to be all fields and wetlands. He used to play in the fields, entertain himself with nature-study in the wetlands, until developers drained everything and built houses and put in baseball diamonds for recreation where the marshes used to be. He doesn’t like organized sports, like baseball, which require that kind of control of the landscape.
Biologist Gary Paul Nabhan tells a similar story of how, as a child, he became aware of the creatures—the lizards and birds—that were displaced from their homes by development around the Indiana Dunes. In The Geography of Childhood, co-written with Stephen Trimble, he argues that children need wild places as part of their development. He cites studies by environmental psychologists, which demonstrate that small children prefer playing in the “nestlike” wooded margins of playgrounds rather than in the open areas of the playground proper. He writes:

It is a loss, then, that so many playgrounds have become dominated by machinelike recreational equipment, structured games, and paved-over areas. According to child psychologist Brian Sutton-Smith, play has become too domesticated and regimented while playgrounds themselves have become more and more barren.

As an elementary school teacher, I’ve observed this phenomenon myself. I’ve noticed small children making nests, exploring the wooded margins. I’ve also noticed how, by about third grade, most of the boys have been acculturated to the playing field. As soon as they get out to the playground, they’re organizing a game of kickball, choosing sides, claiming positions, structuring their aggression.

Will is wild about baseball. He can’t wait to play Little League next summer. But for me, it’s enough just to play catch, to bang up an old shutter, to hunt the cedars for a wild pitch and stumble across the empty nest of a yellow warbler lined with small feathers the color of sunlight. It’s strange that my son and I are so different. He doesn’t stand in right field picking dandelions and longing to disappear into the woods. He’s poised and alert, ready for the ball to come to him. We’re so different, but we both love a game of catch, tossing the ball back and forth, each holding up our end.

Up here, on a mile-long island surrounded by Lake Huron, we begin to see how an ecosystem works through the interrelation of its parts. There’s a sense of community in nature, a sense of teamwork. I want my children to value the common life, which Scott Russell Sanders finds preserved in our relationship to the earth, and which A. Bartlett Giamatti finds reflected in baseball. I find this in the woods, in the delicate ectomycorrhizal fungi which live in a symbiotic relationship with the roots of cedar trees. I find this on the baseball field and in the simple game of catch. Our children need to know how to live together and with nature.
As the sun sets, we have to call another game on account of darkness. The mayflies rise in clouds along the shore, dipping and rising on the invisible currents of instinct. Bats drip from the eaves. Will looks at me and says maybe he won’t be a Major League ballplayer after all. It would take up his summers, and he wouldn’t be able to come up north.

The full moon rises like a fat curve ball from behind Marquette Island. What we need are the things that renew themselves: the moon, the game, the woods, our childhoods. Every time Will tosses me the ball, I’m a kid again, getting another chance to make the play, going deep, into the woods.
Marie and Albert
Mother’s parents
Albert and Marie Dolores Kruse Huber
1895 to 1973

Albert began his tomcat years at 50.
He and Marie sold the farm and soon he was
gone to Sioux Falls,
doing casual labor and keeping company
with women.
Marie kept a tidy house in town.
begonias and electricity, but no plumbing
Ironing, clerking at the grocery,
and counting her pennies.
Albert finished prowling ten years later
and asked to come home.
People said Marie was a better Catholic than he,
though her family had been Lutheran.
She talked with her friends, her daughters,
her priest, her God,
and she finally said yes.
So Albert came home one day, hat is his hand,
and wearing a new suit bought on credit.
They walked in the yard, talked, ate dinner together,
and went to bed,
where Albert’s heart sighed -- and stopped,
and he died that night, at home in bed with his wife.
Marie buried him, and she paid off the new suit.
Her nephew sent condolences and five dollars.
“To have a Mass said for Albert,” the note read.
“He’ll need it.”
The Dowagers
For V’ron, Donna, & Audrey of Holy Cross Church
and Candy & Belva of Al Anon, Faribault

The old women go armed
They carry concealed weapons, and
don’t need a license.
Cast iron skillets, mops, sharp kitchen knives
and that all-knowing look.
You do too much for those kids.
You’ll regret it.  I did.
Drinking in the morning.
His dad was the same.  I remember.
You watch your language young man.
You may be 20, but I know your mother.
Living distills them ’til no guile remains.
They look on the world with unscaled eyes.
Husbands, children, and pastors
Don’t try to outwit them, if they’re smart.
Time and responsibility may tame young women,
but old women are unstoppable by any force.
Even God pays attention.
And at the gates of Mercy the dowagers stand,
implacable, ancient, and wise,
at the right hand of God.
Have a little something to eat dear.
You’ll need your strength.
For a six-year old, life is a challenge, and it can be very confusing. But being a six-year-old first grader in a Catholic school, preparing for the biggest deal in your life, your First Communion, is more stressful than most adults could handle.

The actual eating of the body and blood of Christ seemed confusing and none too appetizing to a six year-old, but the good nuns gave it a super sell job. They would know because, as they were fond of saying "we are the brides of Christ," which was another extremely confusing issue. Our training consisted of countless hours standing in line with our little hands folded in front of us just right; our little tongues stuck out in the precise manner to receive the Holy Eucharist. Our little knees knocked in trepidation lest we should drop the host or some crumbs should fall upon our garments. According to Sister Hildevrand, this would result in the burning of our clothes and the ashes would be used in the anointing ritual of Extreme Unction—once again a confusing concept. The idea of burning our clothes was cause for alarm. Being the second oldest in a family of fourteen I had one good going-to-church hand-me-down outfit and the burning of it would cause me unimaginable troubles.

We practiced on flattened wafers of Tastee bread placing them ever so carefully upon our outstretched tongues in preparation for the big day.

The evening before the Big Day my mom was helping me try on the hand me down First Communion suit when she gasped and said, "You have no white shoes!" My father, sitting nearby, looked mildly concerned, and after rubbing his stubble thoughtfully, he snapped his fingers and said "Why we can fix that; we'll just paint your black shoes white!" It seemed mildly plausible to me. My dad was a sign painter, and was known for his creative use of paint. My mother, however, looked very nervous and said to my dad in a small voice, "Maybe we could buy a pair and save you the trouble." We knew that finding a pair of white shoes in a town with a population of 300 at 9:00 at night, the only retail store being a hardware store, was as possible as walking to the moon. Not to be thwarted in his creative pursuit my dad got out the white paint and a large brush and proceeded to give my black shoes two coats of very white and very smelly oil-based sign paint. Smiling knowingly he nodded and said, "That'll do it, just let em dry and they'll be as good as new."

The big morning came and I donned my white shirt and my white pants and had my dad tie "a good old Army four in hand knot" in my white tie. Because my newly white shoes appeared a little "tacky" Dad thought it
best to wear my tennys shoes to church and then change into my white shoes at the church. He assured me that they would surely be dry by the time we took the eight-block walk to St. Eloi's church. After changing into my lovely pure white shiny shoes on the church steps, my family smiled proudly and released me in the vestibule to join with all the other first communicants. We marched into church, exactly as we had practiced at least a hundred times before. There we sat, we kneeled, we stood and we prayed, until finally it was time for the big event. I glanced at my white shoes. Oh Horrors! The paint had started to chip off where the shoe bent leaving black jagged lines across the top of my now white and black striped Zebra-looking First Communion shoes. Hoping no one would notice, I quickly became preoccupied with the love of the Lord and overwhelmed with serious First Communion anticipation.

As we dutifully filed out of our pews with our little hands folded just right in front of us with appropriate pious looks upon our little faces, I heard these strange sucking noises. With each step I heard a liquid kind of slurping noise, as if someone was walking in deep mud. Looking down I realized my new white shoes were emitting this sound. The paint had not dried and was causing my shoes to stick to the floor creating a slurping sound and causing a tugging feeling on my feet. Mortified, I received the actual host but had a very difficult time conjuring up enough saliva to swallow it. I was happy, however, that I had not dribbled any crumbs on my suit. As we left the church in our pious procession, me scrunching along with loud slurping sounds coming from my feet, I glanced at my family. All thirteen of my brothers and sisters were almost purple in their efforts not to laugh at my demise. My father was looking piously up to the altar, his lips moving in a prayer while my mother had her head down with her mouth covered by her handkerchief. Her shoulders appeared to be shaking. I wanted her to be weeping for my misfortune, but I knew she was laughing her head off.

Afterwards, everyone retired to the church basement for a festive breakfast chosen by the First Communion recipients. It consisted of sweet rolls, chocolate milk, and hot dogs. After my long fast since midnight, and my stressful ordeal with the Zebra shoes, hunger overtook me and I ate too many hot dogs and sweet rolls. Sneaking off to the bathroom I threw up big chunks of hot dogs and sweet rolls and most certainly parts of the body of the Lord. Not having covered this situation in our First Communion indoctrination I panicked and flushed the whole thing down the toilet. Once my mother assured me I would not burn in hell forever, I went home to spend the rest of my big day in bed.
Leslie Schultz

Two Poems:
Heartwork
Midsummer Song

Heartwork

Work of sight is done.
Now do heartwork
On the pictures within you.
Ranier Maria Rilke

"Goodbye," said the fox. "And now here is my secret,
a very simple secret: It is only with the heart
that one can see rightly; what is essential
is invisible to the eye."
The Little Prince

Troubled, I rise to see dawn strike the lake.
Mother is puttering in her own house, trying
to order her thoughts. This surgery is nothing, will make
things better. Just a question of timing.

Below my window, the last begonias cast a pink sheen
across their bricky vase. They focus the lingering greens
with their own fading glow, lighten the verdigris
of kudzu crushing the small pecan tree.

At five she calls to chatter, to spill old news,
to intensify the cloud of white noise.
The womb, like overripe fruit, is past use.
She is, after all, a nurse. She has seen
this surgeon work in his green mask.
Still, fear informs the gathering dusk,
vibrating over two states, poignantly douce.

Mother, once you heaped bright pebbles in a blue dish,
picked grape leaves to steam with rice and fragrant fish,
spoke French to us until we named with ease
the shiniest etoile, the spookiest eglise.

The time is coming; soon, the lake will ice.
Already the begonias are gone, only a dark place
where they bloomed all summer. Now my kettle of rice
boils over. And look how my net fills with bony fish.
Midsummer Song

August 6, 1998

_for Tim_

So now our marriage completes its tenth year. Surely this occasion is consequential, but how to pluck one day apart, to say “Here we celebrate”? Fuss seems tangential, after-thought. Each day unfolds like a rose, gold or crimson in its turn, opening to sun; then, as petals drop, the heart is free to close, to brood and transform, to ponder two-in-one. A decade ago, we publicly pressed our lips together, setting sail into these middle years. A start, but a loss, too. The honey of rosehips tastes of tart autumn, tinged with cold and tears.

Each flower holds its sleek, obsidian seed. I hold fast to you. I know what I need.
A Topography of Love
for Becky on Her 50th Birthday

Just as erosion and receding glaciers
have sculpted alpine grandeur and the majesty
of canyons, so Time has scarred our flesh.
It has chronicled America's obsession
with the Question—to eat or not to eat?—
and etched tracks of crowing laughter
and ravens of despair about our eyes.

In your case, too, the shadow of the surgeon's knife
haunts still your breast and belly,
as do the stretch and sag of pregnancy and nurture.
Your body lives the history of our love
more richly and more beautifully than this lover
(or any) could deserve. Our passion feeds
on liver spots, los besos de amor.

You are becoming the woman I have
always loved and (perversely) ever longed for.
Your once fiery hair, though dimmed by age's ash,
still consumes my sight, still dazzles me.
I love you with a love I cannot utter
in words I cannot write
beyond the thousand shocks that flesh is heir to.

"You are the world to me,"
we say when we are young.
But worlds are not created in a day.
They emerge slowly out of chaos,
like ancient lovers turning in their sleep.
Daddy said no riding the bus from the campus on the hill over town to Virginia Avenue School. He drove me himself. Or Mama did if he had a meeting. They were right: it was dangerous to your dignity, and to your body, to ride the public transportation of Petersburg, Virginia in the 1940’s. On those busses, white people, backed by the law, would require me to sit in the back even if the bus were nearly empty, and if it was crowded, they’d make me give up my seat for white men or women. I was expected to know that trouble would break out if I ignored the “rules.” And I knew it. Daddy’s voice was heavy with emotion when he said he never wanted me to have to relinquish my seat for anyone, never wanted me to be vulnerable to requests that would demote me from a status equal to that of any other human being.

In my elementary years, the kids at Virginia Avenue School walked to school, and later, the ones from Peabody High walked or took the bus like everybody else. Somehow they dealt with whatever happened to them there. I looked longingly at the camaraderie of the kids from Center Street or Ginnyham’s Alley who not only rode the bus home after school, but considered themselves lucky to have bus fare. I consoled myself that I was resisting a loss of dignity for them as well as myself. So I obeyed Daddy.

Daddy said no basketball team, even for a thirteen-year-old almost six feet tall. “Team travel is too hard on women.” What was so hard about it? You get on the bus, you get off, you play, you get back on the bus. But I couldn’t catch a ball reliably. I didn’t care enough to even try to make a basket. So I didn’t dispute him. My cousin Sandra was a “scrappy guard,” short and aggressive, not limited to three running steps like us forwards in high school gym class.

At the Windsor Mountain School, fifteen and on my own away from home for the first time, I signed up for girls’ basketball. Duck Daley’s eyes gleamed when my tall frame strode out on his court. At the end of the first practice he had his teams: Varsity, which included Sandra, the short and scrappy guard, and Junior Varsity which offered its only two places to nearly
six-foot me and to Joyce Stern, a middle-schooler with neurological difficulties. In 1956 it was acceptable to call her “spastic.” Duck Daley said, “I’m always afraid that if you actually get the ball, Mary, you’ll apologize to the other team.” He had a way with the truth. Anybody could see that my being on the team was mainly a badge of independence.

Daddy said no marriage without a diploma. And I did almost all of it the way I was supposed to, no bus riding in Virginia, only two symbolic weeks on the j.v. basketball team at Windsor (I had a paper due), right down to not getting pregnant until after I had graduated, even though that wasn’t exactly what Daddy had meant. From that point on, it wasn’t so easy to stay in the picture he’d painted for me.

The only childhood photo of Daddy that I own shows a little boy with my father’s head planted firmly on his shoulders. He couldn’t have been more than five or six – 1905 or ’06. He has a solemn face, plump jaws and the lower lip he passed on to my second daughter, born after he was dead. His stalwart gaze is directed straight at me. In a sailor suit, high button boots, and short pants that bare his knees, he’s combed and brushed. The knotted tie of his middy blouse flares just right. The insignia on his undershirt shows through the wide throat of his collar. Full sleeves narrow to cuffs wide with starch. They almost cover his hands. These are hand-me-downs he wears from his mother’s wealthy employers.

This is not the way he looked the day his keepers dressed him in girl’s clothes to keep him indoors. Not one of them had to bother themselves to tell the boy to stay put until his mother came to fetch him. He went to the basement in skirt and bonnet, never said a word, or showed his face in the light. He gave no sign to his weary mother when she returned from bathing and dressing the white children, fixing their lunch, making sure they ate their peas, drank their milk. One photograph, relic of his childhood: a formal portrait in fine cloth and expert tailoring, this gaze, this starched image of care. The little boy faces down the camera’s eye.

Daddy, you fought to give me everything I would need to survive the trials of a woman’s world: diploma, career, living wage, and a place to run if all else failed. You wanted independence for me while I wore white gloves, a class act of deep thought and my own money while I nursed the baby, kept the husband and warded off other women’s cattiness. Did you know they couldn’t always go together?
Daddy’s mother, Grandmother Moore, was short and stout, a no-nonsense, brown-skinned woman who nearly always wore a close-fitting headwrap when I was three and four and five. She lived in the North, in Massachusetts. Summer visits took us to her Cape Cod “saltbox,” gray shingles with green trim. She called my father “Jim.” How could that much pride flow out of one short syllable? I’d never heard anyone call him “Jim” before. Mama said “Jimmie” like all his friends at Va. State. Students said “Dr. Moore.”

Maid, housekeeper, nanny, live-in – what did they call Grandmother Moore at work? I know they claimed her, the Thorndikes did, and later the Wards. She was one of “their” colored, and she claimed them back. They were “her” white folks.

I guess she swept sometimes. I guess she did their dishes. For sure, she picked up toys and folded footed-pajamas for their children, proud as can be when Barbara’s picture appeared in the paper for her debut. Saved us a folded copy of newsprint. Looked over my father’s arm at the photo, all white neck and low-cut lace. “That’s . . .” and she nodded, “you know, the Wards” – the nod a bond of understanding between the grown-ups in the room. No explanation needed about this white girl she’d raised from infancy now come out in the society column.

It was different from the pride in her “Jim” voice. Her head stood higher on her neck, no need to nod down at newsprint. She could speak out into any ear. Like she’d responded to the telegram of a high school job offer for her son to teach math, English and history. “Of course he’ll take it,” she telegraphed back, not consulting my absent father. “He can teach them all.”

Daddy, “Jim,” could teach them all and he took the job she’d committed him to. That’s what Grandmother Moore was like. Pride and protection, even from down there on the bottom, maid-service for white people. That’s where Daddy got it.

Daddy, if you had lived to see this second growing, the one where I’m striking out on my own without your net, what would you have thought of the rebellious wife, guerrilla woman set to scorch and burn her way out of all protections, singeing her own skin in the process? What do you say to the lovers, the mad dashes in the dead of night, the lies and deceptions?

He wouldn’t have liked it. His own father, Ellis Moore, left Grandmother Moore for another woman. And from that moment, Daddy split with him, an estrangement that lasted forty years. When I do the math of
their later reconciliation in Daddy’s fifties, I figure he must have been a teenager when his father left him and his mother. Hard times. His Uncle Louis and Aunt Katye stayed in touch so we didn’t lose his whole paternal family. Ellis was a chauffeur for the president of Bethlehem Steel. Legend had it that he was paid in stock bonuses which accumulated over years of driving that long car. Some relatives jockeyed for a better inheritance position. Daddy didn’t want the money and didn’t care who got it – if there was any.

Teaching me to drive, Daddy said, “Start so gradually that your passengers don’t sense a change. Stop the car the same way.” Was he teaching me how to chauffeur rich people, saving for me what his father had taught him?

_Daddy, could we have argued feminism beyond the politics of cooperation? Could we have crossed the boundaries of your concern to knock heads, angry man and angry woman? Would it have split us or could you have maintained the pride you felt in me the first time I defied you with basketball? You thought me a woman, then, with my own mind, and gloated in private that I’d gone against your better judgment, without even bothering to fight. Action stands its ground better than words, you might have said._

_That’s what you did, stand your ground. That’s the face in your childhood photo. That’s what’s in your graduate school scrapbook. It’s got articles calling you “the best all around-athlete ever developed” in your high school, and “a track luminary” in college at Penn State. It’s got the commencement program with your name one of five receiving doctorate degrees in 1938. But it’s got another story, too._

My father kept every official scrap of paper relating to the achievement of his Ph.D. — paid receipts for each quarter, signed in his hand, emblazoned with the bursar’s stamp — “$50,” “Paid”. “$30.” “Paid.” “James A. Moore.” They hold places of honor in his book no less than praises from sportswriters and letters of appreciation from the YMCA and B’Nai Brith for his singing. How difficult it must have been to find tuition for these receipts to be enshrined this way! What sacrifices he must have made to acquire each payment. And when he had to wait, to delay his progress because the money wasn’t there, because times were hard, because he had to support himself, because, because, an endless string of because, what kept him going?

_A deeply creased piece of newsprint flutters from the album, nearly orange with age. In the seam of the scrapbook I discover its mate, not glued down, not captioned or dated. They show no sign of the respect due the letters and poems of congratulation, the lowly bursar’s receipts he so proudly kept._
I read in bold letters

DEMOCRATIC SENTIMENTS

“I shall never obtain the floor Mr. Speaker, but to remind every Democratic member with red blood in his veins, that he shall not have done his duty to his party, until every coconut-headed tree-climbing coon has been put out of the Government Service.”

The startling slap of these words makes my face burn. My father kept this piece of paper. He absorbed it into himself and transformed the insult into sheer knowledge, fuel for dealing with reality. I have known how he can rise above insult, I have seen him keep perspective and self control.

His scrapbook opens with a magazine article titled “Endurance.” Must be the philosophy of a track man-in-training. But when I read it, I see it’s a meditation on the quotation, ‘He who endures, conquers.” The sentence echoes on every page of his scrapbook: he who endures, conquers. I see the seeds of it in his childhood photograph, he who endures, conquers; in his bursar’s receipts, in response to the ugly newsprint. I hear Daddy answer my questions: he who endures conquers.