

THE JOURNAL OF Creative Aging

SAGE-ING

with Creative Spirit, Grace & Gratitude



A PUBLICATION OF
THE OKANAGAN INSTITUTE
NUMBER 55, WINTER 2026

KNOW YOURSELF. BE YOURSELF.
LOVE YOURSELF. SHARE YOURSELF.
ONLINE AT www.sageing.ca

FROM THE EDITORS

“Even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination”

– philosopher and political theorist,
Hannah Arendt

As we were gathering the articles and planning the layout for this December issue there was a brilliant moon out the window. Chat GPT reports this full moon was closer to the earth than normal and so appeared larger and brighter. This seems appropriate as this tumultuous year draws to a close. There is hope in the light of the moon with this louder voice, and how it resonates with our suggested theme for this issue: “The dark night of the soul is a journey into light, a journey from darkness into the strength and hidden resources of your soul.” - Caroline Myss. The articles in this issue are personal, vulnerable reflections, and we hope you, our readers, will feel their power as personal stories are shared. We learn from each other’s reflections. This learning brings in the light.

Many articles in Issue 55 voice ‘the light’ found in writing about and sharing our stories. MY DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL by J. P. Wenn offers heartfelt poems that helped her overcome the struggle of finding her identity. Jacques G. LeBlanc, md, frsc reflects back on WHEN THE SCALPEL FAILS. With softened memory he shares the ‘light’ of understanding that: “Those quiet acts of compassion mattered as much as a successful operation or a flawless incision.” Regular readers of The Journal will recognise contributor Penn Kemp. The poems and Penn’s reflections in ON THE ABSENCE OF PRESENCE: Homage to Gavin Goodall Stairs bring ‘light’ to death as she celebrates her husband four years after his death. In TWO YEARS LATER Penn’s daughter, Amanda Chalmers, shares the pain of her search for “my girl, who I lost, and how to put together my broken heart.” “I am a lost

boat in treacherous waters, but writing about my grief helps.” Perhaps a role of mothers is to teach how to feel the ‘light’. Patricia Keeney invites our readers into the life of her mother, a war bride and her resilient struggle to be herself despite the setbacks. In A WOMAN’S JOURNEY Patricia shares her mother’s story and the legacy of finding ‘light’ in poetry which she passed on to Patricia. In WITH A STROKE OF MY PEN June Hawkins shares: “Strokes tear away the familiar, and can leave us in chaos. Writing and sharing stories opens a pathway to human connection, which I believe opens a pathway to hope. The telling of the story helps heal the teller; the listening to the story, helps heal us all.” Ellen Lewinberg, delighting that “I was finally able to do what I was really interested in” shares her journey in MY PUSH FROM THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL. Creative mentor and poet Antoinette Voûte Roeder contemplating WHEN ARE WE MOST CREATIVE? suggests the paths are many but concludes “One’s creativity comes from one’s passion.” Joy comes when we discover our own, perhaps unusual, paths. REVIEW by us shares how Susan McCaslin’s recently published poems in NAMED AND NAMELESS are thought provoking invitations to reflect on lifelong experience and perhaps to see with new eyes into past associations and assumptions. WRITING TOGETHER is an introduction to BRAIDING LINES: Opening Memory a pullout by a writing group who looked with new eyes and combined their discoveries intentionally juxtaposed in métissage format to open things up – to make space for questions and creative (re)visioning to arise for themselves and for you.

“Creativity is intelligence having fun.” – Albert Einstein

For our next issue, as we move into spring, please share how levity and humour lighten your spirit and influence your creativity.

HOW TO SUBMIT

The theme to consider for our next issue will be in the FROM THE EDITORS in each issue. Your story is to be original, related to creativity in any of its many forms, as a path to gaining self awareness and wisdom, and/or the act of harvesting your life’s wisdom as a legacy for future generations.

Please attach it as a word document (.doc) – not a PDF - to enable editing, using calibri font, 14 pt, 1.5 spacing. 500 – 1500 word maximum (use word count).

Please attach 3-4 photos, separately, including: Your headshot, 2-3 photos related to your article. All photos should be numbered, given a caption, and attached in high resolution jpg. format. Insert the word “photo #” with its caption within the article where you would like each image placed (we’ll try to honour this request as layout permits). Please include a brief bio note, written in the third person (one or two short paragraphs of up to 200 words). Your bio will be placed at the end of your article and is intended to give the reader an idea of who you are, your passions and/or what you do and have done with your life that feels relevant to the article. Please include your preferred contact information, including email, website, blog address – whatever you want included in the publication. In your cover email, please share how you found your way to submitting to Sage-ing. Please email your article and photographs to Karen Close at karensageing@gmail.com

Quarterly issues of The Journal go online around a solstice or equinox: March, June, September, and December. We need to receive your intention of submitting an article by the first day of the preceding month or earlier. **Your complete submission is required by the first day of the month preceding publication.**

WHO WE ARE

Karen Close, Editor,

taught English and Visual Arts for 30 years. Retirement in 1995 gave her the opportunity to meet vibrant senior Canadian artists and to hear their stories.



Indigenous cultures teach us, “All Elders have medicine—physical, emotional, musical, story. Let’s give our unique medicine to the world.” In 2011, believing in the medicine inherent in creative expression, Karen began editing the free online arts and aging journal *Sage-ing With Creative Spirit, Grace and Gratitude*. She is the author of two books. *Unfinished Women: Seeds From My Friendship With Reva Brooks* and *The Spirit of Kelowna: A Celebration of Art and Community* profiles a community art project in Kelowna, BC. In January, 2015 Woodlake Publishing released *Creative Aging: Stories from the Pages of the Journal Sage-ing With Creative Spirit, Grace and Gratitude*. Karen is the recipient of the 2016 City of Kelowna Honour In The Arts award.



Johanna Beyers, Copy Editor, is a poet and mixed media artist. She began her career as a marine paleontologist, and holds a PhD in environmental policy

and a Master’s of Social Work. She is a certified sandplay therapist. Johanna is the author of *Sandbar Islands* (The Caitlin Press, 1988) and *Wearing my Feathered Hat* (Wind Oak & Dove, 2013). Her work has been published in *The Capilano Review*, *Sage-ing*, *Room of One’s Own*, *CV2*, *Waves*, and elsewhere. She has been copy-editor for *Sage-ing* since 2018.

Laura David (Foster), Assistant Editor,

Artist Laura David (Foster), MPS, CCC, formerly a registered art therapist and clinical counsellor (with Foster Art and Wellness in Edmonton/Kelowna) is now retired and enjoying life as a grandmother. She has worked therapeutically with individuals and groups in various organizations, but now has chosen to return to her first love: to focus on her own work as an artist. She has developed a passion for the healing power of art that stems from her lived experience of mental health issues, recovery, spirituality, and creating and teaching art. She pursued this passion by completing a Master of Psychotherapy and Spirituality degree at St. Stephen’s College with an Art Therapy specialization. Laura agrees, “Feeling is the power that drives art” (1991, David Milne).



Robert MacDonald, Designer and Publisher, has lived by his wits, some hard work, and a good lashing of luck. Almost completely

unschooled, he has, over several decades, invented identities as graphic artist, typographer, printer, community activist, publisher, information architect, program director, programmer, and designer. He hasn’t finished with inventions. Having spent most of his life thoroughly urbanized (Toronto, New York, San Francisco, Vancouver) he is now nestled into the grasslands and orchards of the Okanagan valley. He finds profound solace in the virgin wilderness upland from his habits. His works have appeared in the journals *Kosmos*, *Image*, *Sage-ing*, and more, and he has chapbooks: *Dead Drop* and *Headwinds*, with more anticipated. He is transcribing several decades of writings from notebook to manuscript, and is otherwise biding his time.

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NUMBER 55, WINTER 2026

ISSN 1920-5848

A PUBLICATION OF THE
Okanagan Institute

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This publication is available for online viewing and downloading at:

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Cover image: *My Arrangement* by Ellen Lewinberg

Please note: not all browsers can use the hyperlinks on our PDF pages. If you encounter that issue, we suggest you copy the web and email links, and paste them into your applications.

MY DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

Jennifer Wenn



The “dark night of the soul” is a well-known phenomenon, often in conjunction with spiritual or creative journeys. It has become associated with a difficult, painful period, perhaps a time of separation from God or from one’s creative wellspring. For me, as a trans woman, my own dark night was, I think, the decades-long period during which my true, feminine spirit was buried deep within, inaccessible.

The idea of being “in the wrong body” is an oversimplification, and does not represent the experience of some transgender people who do not identify strongly with any one gender or whose identification is fluid, but for me this is a reasonably accurate description. As is often the case, my sense of something being not at all right goes way back to feeling as a child that my anatomy was wrong, to the point where I tried to alter it myself with a razor blade.

(from my poem “Scarlet Letter”, in *A Song of Milestones*):

A flash

Revealing a dance on the razor’s edge,
revealing shame, desperation,
confusion, suffocating in a foreign shroud,
one thought: maybe I can get rid of it
(the symbol, the focus)

Flash

Blade quivering in my hand,
wielded, blood drawn,
then stopped by a force unknown,
a message that this was not the way

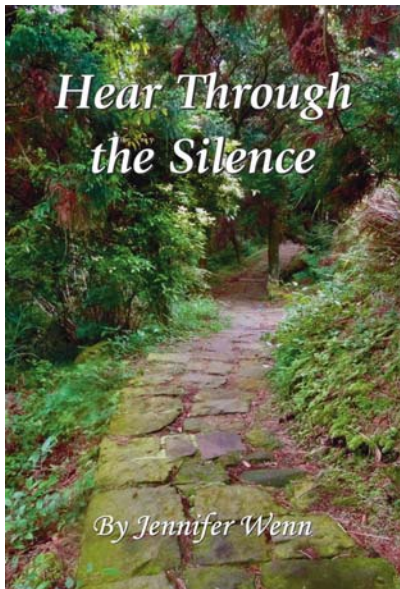
I had no concept of what was going on, but I did know that I was absolutely not supposed to feel this way. The shame I consequently experienced was immense, and I simply buried this part of me deep in my subconscious. But, for a while, it fought to be released:

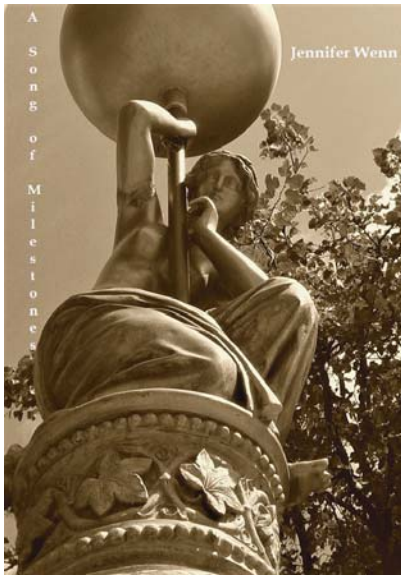
(from my poem “Intimations of Incompatibility”, in *A Song of Milestones*):

Memories piling up, fleshing out, filling in,
fusing and coalescing into a hologram,
a simulacrum of a life;
But just here, and here, distortions,
intimations of a primordial incompatibility,
seen in fleeting glimpses like evanescent
will-o’-the-wisps amidst a marsh...

My identity reasserted itself when I was 18. By then, I had the vocabulary:

Cover *Hear Through the Silence* (2022)





Cover *A Song of Milestones* (2019)

“Maybe I should have been born a woman.” But I still could not deal with this realization. And so I buried it again, this time so well that I was not consciously aware of it at all, and some childhood memories were completely repressed.

What were the ensuing decades like? There were external ups and downs, darkness and some beauty, but always something was missing, something was wrong. I was, in essence, not complete, the core of my spirit having been lost, although there were times it continued to fight to come forth. Eventually, finally, it did break through. For the best portrait of some facets of this extended night, I will turn to various excerpts from my poems.

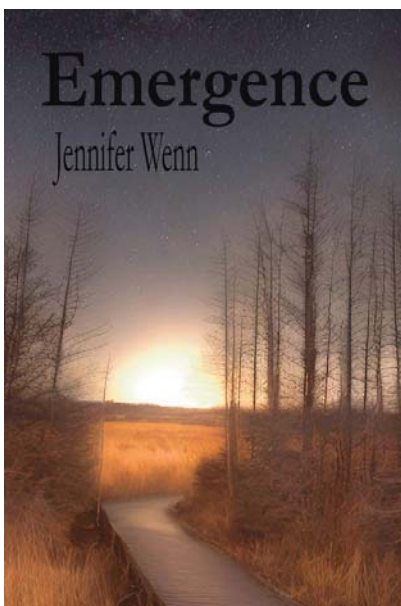
From my poem “Looking-Glass” (in *A Song of Milestones*):

Drifting through my life’s
rooms and hallways,
five decades of spaces
apparelled in a wide variety of décor,
(university days [degrees chosen by default],
places and cultures sampled,
marital sorrows and joys,
wonders of parenthood,
career changes and tribulations,
all those precious souls who passed through,
(loved ones who have passed on),
looking in many mirrors but not seeing,
not seeing what was beckoning
like Alice’s Looking-Glass House,
urging me across.

From my poem “Memento Reverie” (published in *Emergence*):

An age slips away under
brilliant, blinding night,
much seemingly gained,
much apparently lost,
new veneers piled layer on layer
over truth forgotten but
yearning still for release,
waiting for advent of revelation,

Emergence (2025)



From my unpublished poem “Clowns at Night”, which is after the painting by Marc Chagall (1957) and the musical response by George Crumb (2015-2017):

A tinny, callow, bluesy tune
languidly waltzes over abyssal resonant chords;
a frost-streaked vocalist frames her mouth into
song that mutates to mocking moans;
a medley of stares that toy and taunt
in turn detonate knocks on a door,
whacks on my bedpost
that spawn shivery memories
of a long-ago, still-present child
ever fearful of a deeper,
misunderstood fire,



Clowns at Night, painting by Marc Chagall

**to a realm beyond
thought, beyond
reason, until instinct
and a rising swell turn
me round.**

From “Hatchlings” (in *Hear Through the Silence*):

Fetal, cowering under a black haze,
shrinking from the oncoming day
insistently knocking at the window,

As time went on I was close to glimpsing my true nature, but simply could not do it not for decades and so I retreated to the familiar space. Here is my complete poem “Moonglade”, previously unpublished:

Wandering a Stygian shore, gloomed eyes down
to search a path amid stumbles and depressions;
then a horizon nudge and a cloud cleft
birth delicate revelation,
coax vision up just a bit to
a moonglade –
radiance tangoes on gentle ripples,
a diffuse search for coherence,
for the true source,
stretches to the horizon.

Force gaze up a little more,
brave the lunar orb itself, still hanging low,
a yin-yang of lustre and shadow,
mysterious and tantalizing,
but incomplete, with an aura of deception:
It is not the genesis, the ur-light;
this demands confrontation with overpowering day
that blinds as it reveals,
suppresses direct view,
represses subtleties not released even by the moon
which now seems to mock as it beguiles.

Withdraw, then, to the moonglade
for gentle, phased epiphany,
safety and peace,
though but a humble
reflection of a reflection.

Day must wait.

This is an excerpt from my unpublished poem “Somewhere Over the Rainbow”:

for I know what it is to have glory deeply interred,
light and lustrous chroma sicklied o'er
by physicality's dismal pall;
and I also know what it is
to rent the shrouds,
roll away the stones and
at long last find truth.

And from my unpublished poem “Deep Dive”:

deeper and deeper
to a realm
beyond thought, beyond reason,
until instinct and a rising swell
turn me round...

...higher and higher still
to finally break through.

This is part of an unpublished piece, “Kronos-Kryptos”, after the four tableaux in George Crumb’s percussion quintet *Kronos-Kryptos* (which he translates as *Time-Secret*):

From “Look Homeward, Angel”:
Liberated wayfaring maiden spirit
searching for soul’s true abode,
cast aside the endless wilds of exile,
listen for familiar birdsong,
look for beloved trees
 still rooting deep,
and then – music,
bits and snatches lead onward,
grow and fuse; the melody sings,
and suddenly – you are found.

From “Easter Dawning”:
Bells float over verdant silence,
 promise that epiphany arises from depths of shadow;

...

Bells announce it is time,
 a trial is nigh,
 the new era is at hand;
Sunrise, terrifying and glorious, is here.

**a trial is nigh,
the new era is at
hand;
Sunrise, terrifying and
glorious, is here.**

From my unpublished poem “Trans-Metaphorical Cascade”:

Rip Van Winkle revives.

Luke Skywalker, when Darth Vader forced on him the revelation he was Luke’s father.

Jimmy Stewart in *Vertigo*, climbing the tower.

Princess Leia’s subliminal divination confirmed: she is Luke’s sister.

In the end, I did become whole. One result was my ability to write poetry, something I previously had no possibility of doing. I have no better way to close than with these excerpts from “Phoenix”, the final poem in *A Song of Milestones*:

Sadness, moments past never to return,
days and years slipping by
and chances not grasped,
joys I never truly felt,
time here growing appreciably shorter,
so much time irretrievably lost
awaiting the liberating fire,
bleak suspicions I do not truly fit in anywhere,
so many feminine marvels and trials,
great and small,
I will never know;
Grieving with silent tears for
a girlhood I will never have;
Clouds of regret for what was, or wasn’t,
that shroud the view back
and obscure the vista right in front;
Humiliation for the incomplete metamorphosis,
masculine ghost still sporadically bleeding through
to draw the dreaded he’s and sir’s;

...

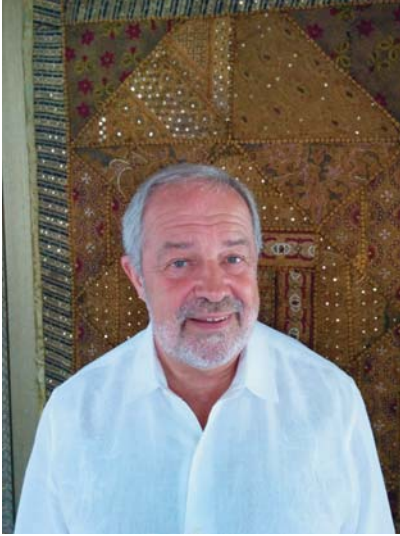
Jennifer Wenn is a trans-identified writer and speaker from London, Ontario. In 2023 she was honoured to be chosen honorary Grand Marshall for London's Pride Parade. Her first poetry chapbook was *A Song of Milestones* (Harmonia Press). Her first full-size collection was *Hear Through the Silence* (Cyberwit). Her newest collection is *Emergence* (Wet Ink Books). And just out courtesy of Public Reverie is an online chapbook called *Ekphrastic Doubles* (<https://publicreverie.com/ekphrastic-doubles-a-chapbook/>). She has also published poetry, reviews and essays in numerous journals and anthologies; has spoken at numerous venues; and is the proud parent of two adult children. Website: <https://jenniferwennpoet.wixsite.com/home>.

Public Reverie Mag is pleased and proud to publish our first digital chapbook, Jennifer Wenn's "Ekphrastic Doubles." We are being somewhat elastic with the term ekphrasis. Only one of Wenn's poems, "Les Pâques (Easter)," clearly has a painting as its root inspiration. Nevertheless, the others all respond in an immediate sense to another poem or text. Please check them out! <https://publicreverie.com/ekphrastic-doubles-a-chapbook/>

And then, through the suffocating gloom
 creep tendrils of light:
 Comfort from some who have walked
 many miles beside me;
 New friends found in unlikely places;
 ...
 Startled by the unlocking, deep within,
 of another door,
 my voice modulated again,
 evolved, revolutionized, poeticized,
 verses piling up in my soul's inbox.
 Sweet, stolen hours spent translating the cosmic emails
 while life's noise abates,
 psychological demons retreat,
 physical ghouls slacken their grip,
 while pain transmutes to poetry,
 nothing existing except me and the phrases.
 Floating in union in an eternal present,
 I am suffused in a power and peace
 dreamt-of but not hoped for.

But why now, so far into the journey?
 I have asked that question,
 and received shards of an answer:
 The twists and turns, both experiential
 and literary, conferred a measure of wisdom;
 Only the purifying fire could liberate
 my imprisoned feminine muse
 and bestow rest on the male persona
 who had carried me so far.
 ...
 And thus I passed through the fire,
 not in an instant, but over many miles,
 and reborn out of the ashes of the conflagration
 a Phoenix rose on poetic wings to
 strike out for the way untravelled,
 knowing the great unification lies
 around a bend unknown,
 perhaps near, perhaps over the horizon;
 This Phoenix, my Phoenix,
 battered and scorched
 but soaring at last and finally
 bound to sing my own special song.

WHEN THE SCALPEL FAILS



Jacques G. LeBlanc, md, frcsc.

Coping with death as a surgeon is a deeply personal and professional challenge. Surgeons are trained to save lives – but they are also routinely confronted with the limits of medicine. Death, in this context, is not just an outcome – it is a presence. It can cause grief, guilt, self-doubt, or numbness. Coping requires both internal resilience and systemic support.

The relationship surgeons have with death is complex, deeply human, and often paradoxical. Surgeons work every day on the boundary between life and death. Their role is to prevent death, yet they must also accept its inevitability. Surgeons are trained to fix problems. The culture of surgery often prizes decisiveness, precision, and control – values that clash with the uncontrollable reality of death. Every surgery is a confrontation with mortality. Even routine operations involve risk. The surgeon holds a life in his or her hands. To function in high-pressure environments, surgeons often learn to manage or suppress emotions, which is emotion-oriented or emotional compartmentalization. This can protect them – but may also isolate them from processing grief or failure.

Many may think that medical schools prepare future doctors to face death. We take an oath of non-maleficence: the obligation to avoid causing harm to patients. During my training in the 70s, there were no specialized courses on dealing with the death of a patient. My first encounter with dying patients was through my teachers and mentors. As students at the time, a dying patient was the responsibility of the medical or surgical staff. It did not mean that we did not care; it may have been a way of shielding us from the reality of our profession. Unfortunately, I am not sure that the curriculum in that area has changed much.

My first real encounter with children's deaths as a pediatric cardiac surgeon was in July 1984. Finally, I was in practice, in full charge of my career. I covered my mentor and colleague to take a well-deserved holiday. He was to be away for a month and was a little nervous about leaving me in charge. Whatever you call it, "Murphy's law" or something else, I experienced not one but three deaths during that month. I was devastated. I was 34 years old and in practice for one year. Even the VP of Medicine, an amazing, compassionate woman, came to see me to make sure I was alright. There was no avoiding this situation; I had to face it and own it. This was not training, but the reality of medical practice.

A 14-year-old adolescent came to the hospital complaining about shortness of breath. After a series of tests, she was diagnosed with an intra-cardiac tumour. I operated on her and removed the tumour successfully. At pathology, it was labelled

There was no avoiding this situation ... the reality of medical practice.

as malignant cancer, so she received chemotherapy. One afternoon, 2 years later, at 4 pm, I was asked to see Isabel. She had just been admitted with severe breathing difficulty. The echocardiogram confirmed my suspicion of recurrence of the intra-cardiac tumour, affecting the back of the heart. I urgently took her to the Operating Room. I wanted so much to make her cancer-free. The surgery was difficult and long, as I was as aggressive as I could be. Isabel was in the ICU for 5 days but recovered well and went home. She visited me in my office 6 months later with new difficulty breathing. This amazing 17-year-old teenager was calling me Jacques and had so much trust in me. I was touched by her demeanour. With deep sadness, I had to tell her I could not do anything else as the cancer had recurred and was obstructing her lungs. We both cried. She composed herself and asked if she could go to New York to visit the Empire State Building. It was her last wish. I told her I would organize the trip and provide her with medical support. The trip went well. She came back to my office to say thank you and goodbye. She died two months later.

Mike was 14 years old and already had the physique of a football player. He had undergone an operation for bone cancer in his right leg. He also had cancer in his lung, which I removed successfully, shortly after his leg surgery. Mike was bigger than life and had a very cheerful outlook. He recovered quickly from both surgeries. He came back 9 months later with more cancer in his lungs. I operated and removed the cancer lumps. He went home in 3 days. One morning, a colleague oncologist called me to his clinic. Mike, the big, sturdy guy with a large smile, was there with his parents and his younger sister. I was not sure why I was called in and felt caught off guard. The family was there for Mike's follow-up. He had a lung scan, which... showed multiple spots of cancer in both lungs. I stared at the screen for what seemed like an eternity. No one spoke till Mike asked: "Doc, can you operate on me again and remove the cancer?" My colleague did not reply because he knew the answer. With all my energy and compassion, I told Mike that surgery was not an option. The expression on his face froze. I explained, using the images of the CT scan, why further surgery was impossible. The whole family understood. I could not leave the room, but somehow, after many hugs, I did. I leaned against the wall, trying to catch my breath.

When I retired from surgery, the silence struck me first. No papers. No alarms. No scrub techs calling out the next instrument. No monitors beeping. Just the steady breath of life going on without me. For decades, I lived in a world defined by urgency. My hands worked quickly, precisely, often soaked in blood, guided by both knowledge and instinct. Life was something I fought for, moment by moment, vessel by vessel. Death was always there too – waiting in the wings. I did not have time to talk to it. I had to outpace it, say it aloud, but I believed its power. Each life lost was a tally in the shadow column. But age, and distance have softened that view. I have come to see that death came gently or honestly, not as a failure, but part of the rhythm I served. I most often think of the moments when I sat with a family, held a hand in pre-op before a risky procedure, or after a loss. Those quiet acts of compassion mattered as much as a successful operation or a flawless incision.

When I retired from surgery, the silence struck me first. No papers. No alarms. No scrub techs calling out the next instrument. No monitors beeping. Just the steady breath of life going on without me.

But part of me will always be in that sterile, sacred space where lives hung in the balance. I do not miss the hours. I do not miss the chaos. I do miss the honour of being there – at the edge.

But also, death has come to sit beside me more quietly. It is not the adversary I once imagined. It is memory. It is the names I remember – and the ones I no longer can. It is the child who did not wake up, the heartbroken mother, the loss and the pain. Reflecting on patient death after retiring from surgical practice can be emotionally complex, a profound and emotional exercise. After decades spent at the edge of life and death – making split-second decisions, bearing witness to survival and loss – retirement offers a slower pace, but not necessarily peace. The pace slows – and with this change, the shield that once helped me cope may also soften. This insight may bring both grief and growth. During practice, many surgeons suppress or compartmentalize grief to remain steadfast. Those feelings often resurface. It is normal to recall certain patients, especially those whose deaths were traumatic or unexpected. I may now have the emotional space – and vulnerability – to truly feel what was once pushed aside. These emotions are not a weakness. They are signs of our humanity, and part of the long arc of healing. My surgical career saved and improved countless lives. Patient deaths may stand out – but they do not define my legacy. My presence, skill, care, and courage do. I now carry those experiences not as burdens, but as stories that shaped me. Even the most skilled and dedicated surgeons lose patients. Medicine has limits, and so do humans.

Since I am no longer in the OR, I now spend time with my lovely wife and my sweet mini dachshund, Luna. I can travel and enjoy simple things, like the sound of the wind in trees. But part of me will always be in that sterile, sacred space where lives hung in the balance. I do not miss the hours. I do not miss the chaos. I do miss the honour of being there – at the edge. Where life and death met, and I had a part to play, however small, in saving a patient's life and serving a patient's life.

Jacques LeBlanc retired after being a paediatric and adult cardiovascular and thoracic surgeon at B.C. Children's Hospital in Vancouver. Realizing that he had a lot to give back to his profession in the way of experience as a doctor, a teacher, a student of life, a husband and a human being seeking wellness in this rapidly changing world, he created leblancwellness.com. For the last few years he has been a regular contributor to *The Journal*, sharing a belief in recovering the connections we have lost and engaging the new skills we have gained to mitigate loneliness and create wellness.

ON THE ABSENCE OF PRESENCE

Homage to Gavin Goodall Stairs, 1946-2021

Penn Kemp



Above: "Solstice Thames" by Lynne Helwig. "Even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination" – Hannah Arendt

Below: Gavin Penn 2016 at the Beach by Anne Anglin



In the dark night of the soul rests all potentiality, because the dreadful has already happened; time has collapsed. A life is complete when a person has died, and in that assumption, I can rest, almost content. I can contemplate the life of my beloved in its entirety; I can whole-heartedly celebrate Gavin Stairs, my husband for 24 years. Yes, I miss sinking into his warm bodily presence. But his essence rests here, alongside, no matter where his spirit now resides. On Gavin's *yahrzeit*, commemorating the day he died, I welcome him in. I receive him.

May he become me. May the wide clarity of his intelligence enter me. May his blue-sky vision allow me to see. May his huge heart embrace and expand my own. May his devotion be my heart's. And his humility, his certainty, his solid presence. His accumulated knowledge, his understanding.

"Better write this down," I hear his voice comment as the words scroll by in that hypnogogic state before sleep. "These co-ordinates will never appear in the same way again," he remarks. "Because I never think the same thing twice." So I try to capture the stream of words, even as the scroll unrolls into an abyss where words dissolve and can never be regained, re-read, re-thought.

May Gavin's ability to penetrate thought to its depth, and beyond thought to source, be mine. May his search for *prima causa*, first causes, be mine. His logic mine, his understanding of physics and science from first principles. His ability to understand problems and figure out solutions almost simultaneously. May his mechanical aptitude be mine. His admiration of good design, as in the perfection of a tin can: may I learn to see and appreciate what I would otherwise ignore. May his strength be mine. His ability to speak joul, to drive, to read maps. His sense of direction. May his elegant, capable hands move my hands as cleverly.

May his tenderness rub off on me. His warmth, his joy, his laughter, his delight. His balance. His cellular memory, how he trusted his body. His privileged assurance of place in the world. May the assumption of embodiment so natural to him show my body how to release tension, to let go into deep relaxation. May his ability to rest be mine. May his search for truth, not settling till he found truth's source, be mine. May I assume that trust he had in his mind... and his willingness to give up mind for devotion. May his wisdom live on through me.

Gavin, is this the transmission you would want? To remain a fractal of



Top: Gavin and Penn Xmas 2020 by Jamie Kemp

Above: Gavin Photo by Robert Hogg

memory within me while your spirit soars on through whatever new adventure awaits? In this cloud of unknowing, this negative capability, I'm waiting to hear, to hear back. I am grateful for our time together, however it manifests.

Perhaps we are wrong to think that our dead can no longer act. How can we tell? Perhaps the dead are attuned to great galaxies in the universe, beings of whom we cannot conceive. What do we know, how can we tell for sure until we have joined them? So many mental filters separate us from perceiving our dead's new lives, their new dimensions, their present reality, if present it is.

Perhaps it is we who are limited by life and body to small lives of (at best) 100 or so years. A drop in the bucket of time. The whirling concerns of our egos keep us occupied so that we miss other realities all around us. When mind does not interfere, perception is true, no longer needing to understand. But with self-consciousness, the mind leaps in to control the outcome the only way it knows how. Stop that mental anguish. Stay with the initial perception. Let it broaden around the edges so that the distinction of outline blurs and outline expands into new awareness not perceived till now.

The question remains. What is of value? What remains? To what do we pay attention and preserve? What am I to do with this beloved man's legacy? What do I owe him? What is my duty? I look after my own archive and that is more than I have time and energy for. So be it. But let me remember Gavin through poetry, my way of witnessing, of honouring him with these poems from a manuscript in process, *ACROSS*.

Poet, performer and playwright **Penn Kemp** has been celebrated as a trailblazer since her first publication of poetry by Coach House (1972), a "poetic El Niño", and a "one-woman literary industry". The League of Canadian Poets has honoured her with the Inaugural Lifetime Achievement Award (2025), as Spoken Word Artist of the year (2015), a foremother of Canadian Poetry and Life Member. Penn has long been a keen participant/activist in Canada's cultural life, with more than thirty books of poetry, prose and drama; seven plays and ten CDs produced as well as award-winning videopoems. New collections in 2025 are available on <https://www.silverbowpublishing.com/ordinarymoving> and <https://abovegroundpress.blogspot.com/2025/02/new-from-aboveground-press-lives-of.html>. Updates are on www.pennkemp.weebly.com, <https://www.facebook.com/pennkemp/> and www.pennkemp.wordpress.com.

What consoles, what is solace?

Only the long view, wider than
self. Only your voice alive
at the back of my head. Only
presence, yours, with a tower
of gurus rising above you.

How can I be other than grateful,
when you so generously left (just
before they'd have carted you off
to endure some awful hospice)
in timing that still confounds me?

I'm no longer lonely, with you still
here, surrounded by decades of
memorabilia to keep me company
though how I miss our meditations,
cuddled on the couch by the fire.

"But at my back I always hear
Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near..."
Back of mind, between shoulder blades
where your hands (your sculpted hands!)
would squeeze away pain. If they could.

Because you live inside my head.
Sometimes I hear you speaking.
More often you nod approval or
shake your head to comment, no.

Does my occipital lobe create you?
I don't know the brain's mechanism
well enough to tell. You sing on in
replay, in dream, in glimpsed shade.

In a pottery urn you once built layer
by layer. Clay I cannot fathom until
I too have bit the dust— more a part
of me than ever you could be in flesh.

I scatter you as you would have wished
in the garden, to grow as spring greens.
I spread you on the surface of the pond.
Wind carries random ash onto my face.

I don't wash you away for another day.
Cremains remain. I'll serve myself next
season's sprouts, thinking about cycles'
return. They turn out fine, a bit crunchy.

You knew you'd go first. But where?

Grieving, gift bereft of grit. Leaving
is best left. Well enough.
Alone.

Late Snow in the Estuary of Air

Snow holds Sorrow and Joy in its lap
'Setsunai' implies what has faded from
brightness, what can't quite be recalled,
beyond knowing that everything passes.
Snow dropping on snow-spangled trees.

We share this deep new reality for
which no words suffice... maybe one
in Japanese expressing the loss of
ten thousand things. Something quiet
in the snow, snow the silencing snow.

Solastalgia

Dukkha—
suffering or not
suffering: our choice,
it is said.

This too is said: "What does not
change/ is the will to change"—
global, lobal and localized.

So the I we were is strewn.

What do you say, my love,
living in death?

Inward Bound

Here in deep
winterlude

muffled in snow,
sound slows. True
introvert, I curl

fire-side, tea to hand
writing reminiscence
and reading, what

luxury! Wish you could
pop across to chat and catch

up over cookies
and chai.

But I cannot conjure you.
The distance cross dimensions

allows only for
Memory.

In the Poem's Naked Light

Snow falls, flake by flake. The departed descend
in tiny white shrouds as in *The Dead's* last scene.

They linger alive for another moment of
morning and melt. Left mourning, I scry
between between words and worlds.

Reeled in by whatever realm entices,

Pale sun on snow pulling me from this poem
to the window, lighting a shaft of reeling
possibility. Ice crystals splitting to rainbow in the glint

and dulling again at instant cloud cover.

Indoor plants lean toward the west as I return.
The thermometer hovers at zero,
that zone where elements merge

confused, uncertain, in-between, yearning.

Tears course down the pane.
Beyond outer reaches of thought,
the yard is luminous.

Through The Glass Darkly

Exhalation is exhilaration
in the very cold.

Though our forecast is bleak
mid-winter,

snow squalls are more easily
weathered

than political
disruption and upheaval.

The outer world
encroaches.

The Limit

Marguerite Duras writes that "one
must try to move from dismal despair
to joyful despair"

Politicians address
states of disunion
yet again. Limit the news and blood still
seeps under our door

through the silence,
crying peace,

peace
when there may be no peace.

Remember Arendt's line—

"Even in the darkest of times we have
the right to expect some
illumination"

I try to clinch
such disparity as better than
dismal hope

or an almost impossible
joyous anticipation

*

We who are left
awake in comfort
when those others

don't.

We feast to celebrate
when others can't.

All the while what
else to do but be

kind to one's own
kind and to all yours

out there where

kindness needs
most to spread

contagion.

Kindness matters.
Kindness endures.

TWO YEARS AGO

Amanda Chalmers



This picture is from two months before the last day I would see her. Two years ago. Two of the longest and shortest years I will ever or have ever felt. As Thanksgiving approaches, I've packed my weekend full of events. I'm ok to be by myself. But distractions are good. And normalizing 'real' life again for my boy seems like a good idea. We're moving through this space together. Quietly and somewhat stagnantly, but together.

I started a new grief group this past week. One for bereaved parents who've lost their children. Most of them unexpectedly. Not all members are part of that other inner circle of babies gone to the toxic drug supply epidemic. And not a group for those parents who have literally lost babies and very young children. But a different kind of group – one just for grief.

This new space isn't about how my girl died or the events that led up to it, but simply for my pain and sorrow. Because I miss her so utterly every day. Because I'm so angry and sad and scared all the time.

And because there's this other side to me that's trying to fix my grief. Like I'm searching for the right way to grieve, knowing full well there is no right way. And knowing full well that it will never go away. But my personality is to fix, to mend, to heal. I'm somewhat of a natural healer and problem solver, so when I can't heal myself or solve this problem called grief, I search relentlessly for answers. Answers through books and therapy and friends and nature and groups. All of the above. Constantly searching.

But the thing I'm searching for is my girl, who I lost, and how to put together my broken heart. Tapping on my watch, I say to my new group, "sometimes I'm just biding my time until I see her again."

There are no easy answers. And sometimes none at all. This is what I contend with- every day. And as much as I believe in neuroplasticity, it is impossible for the mind and heart to fathom the loss of a child. This reconciliation is not natural. And the soul is divided from itself. But I get up

every day. I make my boy's lunch and go to work. I walk with my pup. I function. I can live a good life as I mourn and search for a way out and for time to pass smoothly. And I give thanks to the little things.

Two years ago. We were making our way to the island for Thanksgiving. When we were whole. When she was here, 9 October 2023, is just a picture of the backs of my kids. But it's more than that. It's a picture of a brother and sister chatting and walking and genuinely enjoying each other's company.

As the days get shorter and the darkness comes quicker, I am finding myself sadder every day. I am

Me and my girl, one month before she died.





When she was here.

Losing a child is like losing a limb. Really. A part of oneself.

not one to be affected so much by the change in seasons, in fact this change is one of the main reasons I came back from Mexico where I had sought solace. But this year is different. Today marks 22 months since I saw my baby girl, since her brother saw her last. The ebbs and flows of grief hitting me like the winds gathering along the Gulf of Mexico. I still cannot for a minute believe she is not here. This is not denial. This is rage. The tempest that brews in the pit of my belly and at the core of my heart when I say she should still be here, it is from this place that I write. And what propels me through the turbulence of a life without her. I am gutted without her. I am a lost boat in treacherous waters, but writing about my grief helps.

My boy helps me navigate through each day. His activities and comings and goings. Being a mother is all that I ever wanted. I had no aspirations to be anything other than that. No dream job, no career, no real passion. Don't get me wrong, I am a lifelong learner and love many things in this world and have plenty of hobbies and things I like to do. But motherhood was always at the centre of everything. That precious bond between myself and my offspring.

Losing a child is like losing a limb. Really. A part of oneself. A part of your identity. A part of your future and your past. It is an unfathomable pain I wish on no one. Yet children die. Children are dying in wars in other countries. Bombs are flying, but our drug war looks very different. It's an attack on our central nervous system, the heart of our country, our young and our vulnerable. It is a quiet yet terrifying menace that only happens to others. But it's not just happening to others. It's here. And we cannot turn our backs to it or think it couldn't happen to you or it's an over-there problem. I thought that, and look where I am. So I keep up the fight because I don't want others to suffer like me and because she really should still be here.

Amanda Chalmers tragically and suddenly lost her beautiful and talented sixteen-year-old daughter in December of 2023. A teacher and mother to two, Amanda's life has been turned upside down because of her daughter's death due to the unregulated toxic drug supply that has impacted so many in our country.

Amanda has spent the last two years warning other families and providing as much support as she can muster for others in this time of crisis. Meanwhile, she is also learning what it means to grieve a child. How grief impacts every aspect of one's life and how to simultaneously manage the trauma that ensued after the death of her first-born and manage the day-to-day business of moving through it all and functioning in a world which should still hold her child.

One day and one step at a time.

<https://www.longliveula.com>

<https://substack.com/@amanda903278>

A WOMAN'S JOURNEY



Patricia Keeney

I want to share my mother's story with you because it was she who taught me how to find light in darkness. The details of her journey are set out in biographical poems I call *The Book of Joan*. (Oberon, 1994). Through a series of conversations, we tracked memories reaching back to her babyhood.

What were the first ones?

Born in 1920 on the south coast of England (where I was also born) she recalled an early terror. Her carriage careening into the high street on a quiet seaside morning. "Joan and the Beast" tells the tale. Barking dog jumps into the sturdy British pram "with its hot mouth, eyes like angry mud... There is leaping and screaming/ in the sunny square." But Joan is safe. This time.

Her girlhood in England seemed full of such dramatic moments, many of her own making. She was an adventurer, one who dared, often alone. Just because she could. The sea called to her like a siren. At 11 years, she would kayak into the waves. Once she tipped. A poem called "Drinking Brine" details her heroic flip out of "the murky moving syrup," as she throws all her weight into the spin of faith that sets her upright in her life once more to paddle slowly home, "studying balance and the far horizon."

Joan was an only child. Therefore, a bit of a trophy child, trotted out for party tricks at family gatherings. She felt this pressure keenly. I catch a bit of this in 2 poems. "Swan Song" pictures a gathering of cousins in various costumes all waiting expectantly for Joan to perform. Joan floats in wearing soft white feathers. Bit by bit, her costume detaches from her, feathers floating delicately down on sofas and chairs. She feels exposed. The poem ends with her startled family brushing softness over their skins, gently laughing and warbling notes from *Lohengrin*. Here is the last stanza:

When they look up they cannot find
the child.

Joan has gone
on her own dark journey
dragging the sun.

In "The Fates," other aunties take Joan berry picking.

Six old ladies in black
pouring over blackberry hills with baskets.
Ardent fruit pluckers
they snatch all the sweet ripe bodies.
Can't bear to let one weather on the vine.

The Book of Joan



There were times of economic hardship which my mother called “genteel poverty.” No-one was left out on the street. Appearances were preserved.

Joan is their only child.
They keep gathering her up for mashing down
and baking into aromatic pies
for smothering with custard.
Joan’s clear words clog thick in cream
Whisper slightly under flakey crust.

There were times of economic hardship which my mother called “genteel poverty.” No-one was left out on the street. Appearances were preserved. Jess and Jim with little Joan rent 2 small rooms. Again, independent Joan feels smothered and exposed. Sharing a bed with both parents (one double mattress for 3). Sharing bath water (one tub per week). Sharing the landlord’s toilet, his icy wash basin. My Mother said she never felt right. No graphic details. Decorum prevailed. But she never felt right. The poem repeats this line, indicating how deeply she buried her strongest feelings.

There were girlhood revelations. Bourgeoning sexuality. In “Night of the Snake,” Joan waits by the beckoning sea for her beautiful cousin Cora to go eel hunting. On a moonscape of soft sticky rocks the cousins peer into tidepools that trap the eels like pickling jars. They scoop up these lithe wonders, flipping and stiffening in their hands. Run home with their catch, boiling it up to eat for tea. There is retching and gagging. Not seeing the biggest snake slither away, the pubescent girls fall asleep. Dreaming of eels.

There were many times of exuberant joy. Here is the first part of a poem called “Coming Out” that pictures Joan and her young friends tasting freedom on those wonderful south coast piers that rollick out into the ocean.

Joan begins dancing on the edge of the sea.
Soon she’s half a mile over the waves
whirling in a tiny pavilion
to boom of surf and whistle of spray.

Angel, extravagant at play.

Suddenly the sea’s alive with wings.

Two by two the twirling girls weave
through wind and sleet, swaddled
in scarves and shiny macs
crinkled and squeaking like newborns
these embryonic belles
charging into dark.

At fourteen Joan is sent to work typing bills under male surveillance where columns of numbers clamour and flatten the seas and pastures of her mind. She rides buses to job interviews she deliberately misses. Switchboard operator, she connects all the wrong people. Plugging in, tuning out. At last, she finds her happy place. Cosmetician in a clean white coat offering creams, lotions, masks. Using her imagination to ease pain.



Top: Joan's wartime exit visa photo
 Above: Wartime wedding

my mother was not (as I am not) naturally domestic. Her essential nature was an adventuring one and might have been an artistic one

And then she joins the army.

Cold square barrack room with a pot-bellied stove. As the poem puts it, 24 beds stretching like coffins, behind 21 easy girls waiting to be told. Armoured in rough wool, these young WACS are up at 5, crouching on the bitter parade square collecting garbage. They clean latrines, make beds with sheets as tight as bandages. Rasping drill-sargeant marches them miles before food. Believes he's training men.

When my mother meets the love of her life, her dreams soar. My father, Patrick was a signals sergeant with the Canadian forces. Meeting at an army social, they smooch in shop doorways after dances. He whispers of a new and better place with washing machines and refrigerators. No mangled clothes hung on wind-whipped hills, no cooling milk on windowsills in rough sea breezes.

No more sea.

They are married joyfully in khaki under arched daffodils, Lent Lilies and King's Spears gathered by the faithful troops who share their happiness.

My mother gives birth to me in her mother's house under a screened kitchen table during one of countless air raids over England's south coast. Terror follows. Tip and run raids stoke the streets. Bullets whiz by. Heads down. Heads down. When Patrick's on furlough, the lovers meet. Dancing for life over the dark sea. Knowing they must never light 3 on a match.

Joan is consoled by his new world visions. Sock dances and church suppers. Eating turkey and salad on paper-covered tables. Waving western wheatfields where he was raised. Safe community.

Patrick ships back to Canada months before Joan and her baby can leave. Their voyage is harrowing. After weeks of seasickness, they sail the St. Lawrence to Halifax past endless churches, crucified Christs tolling every hour. Joan senses she has sold her salty ceremonies, her steeped English soul for bitter winter.

When Patrick draws the family close in civil service town, his little daughter doesn't know him.

Joan's new home is a gloomy green house with nowhere to walk, except the stairs. Climbing and cleaning and wishing for wind. Instead of the sea she watches the Ottawa canal wind through town, a ribbon of self-regulation tightening around her.

It may already be apparent that my mother was not (as I am not) naturally domestic. Her essential nature was an adventuring one and might have been an artistic one. Yet, she had 4 children with her beloved Patrick, cooked and cleaned for boarders in the same large house for years.

She told me wild tales, a semi-blind tenant, white cane tapping the ceiling, who dried papers on a hotplate in his room, starting a fire. A crippled drunk who'd taxi back each night to Patrick for hugs and kisses before bed. Lady with an excess of gentlemen callers, always dropping dirty panties in the hall.



My mother and I beginning Our Canadian life

She overcame it ... She put her joys and her sorrows into words.

And then the bone numbing fatigue of rising at dawn, flour in her eyes, to bake. Ironing and sock-darning into the night.

It was a busy domestic life shrinking her deepest instincts. She felt she was walking such a small map, afraid of edges. Inland navigation was not her style.

She became the warrior queen at home, getting her children out in all weathers, wheeling through the streets with groceries and babes. Breaking carriage springs. Intrepid in her bladed chariot of war. Wild, possessed, a tribal terror. The force of her nature driving her on.

Meanwhile Patrick sells leather goods. Brings home the leather men to step dance, jig dance, clog dance. Devour Joan's table. Beanpots thick on white cloth. Sting and aroma of pickle and pie.

Then Joan loses him. His new home is his car. Constantly on the road, he sells insurance. Security. Integrity. His own sure sense that life is good and safe.

At the top of Peace Tower Joan and her brood walk slowly around its big silent bell. Mute and stranded she sees the map of all she is. Trembles in her fear of coming fire.

My mother's addiction to alcohol lasted decades. She overcame it. Her family both suffered and supported her all the way. She put her joys and her sorrows into words. As I do. The last poem in the book is hers. A childhood memory at Worthing's chalk pits when she was eight. She and a friend scramble over rough slopes to the top, roll giddily all the way down where Joan lands in a big puddle. And drips happily home.

My mother's story is only one of countless war bride sagas and triumphs. Aching with loss, fierce with courage, it fortifies my life.

Patricia Keeney is a poet and novelist, literary and theatre critic and professor of Literature and Creative Writing at York University. She is a member of the Writers' Union of Canada, the League of Canadian Poets, the Canadian Theatre Critics Association and the International Association of Theatre Critics.

Website: wapitiwords.ca

WITH A STROKE OF MY PEN

June Hawkins



In the winter of 2021, I had a stroke, in possibly one of the most inconvenient places on earth, the middle of the wilderness in the Rocky Mountains of British Columbia. I was sixty-eight years old, living and working 24/7 at Nipika Mountain Resort as the on-site manager. During the day, I taught cross-country skiing and worked in the day lodge; in the evening, I greeted guests as they arrived, showed them to their cabins and took care of any needs that arose during the night. I loved it, I was living the dream working and playing in a mountain winter wonderland!

I awoke February 1st, on the floor beside my bed. It felt like I'd been thrown against the wall. I couldn't get up. My left side was not functioning. I had no idea how long it took, but I finally came to the conclusion that I'd had a stroke and that I needed to get help.

The Resort had Wi-Fi, but no cell service. I needed to call the owners and realized the only way was to get the satellite phone in the office, one floor below. The only access: an exterior flight of stairs.

angels

around midnight:

I'm on the floor beside my bed
feel like I've been hurled against the wall
dazed and confused
get up, must get help
this is serious
just get up, just get help

the maelstrom shouted
the satellite-phone
downstairs
get it

4 am...hello
slurred words, Steve, its June, I'm in trouble, I think I'm having a stroke
we'll be right there
I lean back
knowing then that I will live

Steve and Lyle spoke as they drove
she may not be alive by the time we get there
the ambulance followed, lights flashing
prepared for that possibility

**I awoke February 1st,
on the floor beside my
bed. It felt like I'd been
thrown against the
wall.**

**my trip to the hospital,
lights flashing
illuminate the smiles of
my angels still by my
side**

usually a forty-five-minute drive
seemed they were at my side in minutes

I hear them arrive
rush up the stairs
two worried angels
help stumble my crippled body
down to the ambulance waiting below

Steve and Lyle drove home
how the hell did she make it to the phone asked in disbelief
she needed to live was the reply

my trip to the hospital, lights flashing
illuminate the smiles of my angels still by my side

I was in the hospital for ten days. Once released it was obvious that, even though I was able to use a walker, I was not yet able to care of myself at home. I moved to Comox on Vancouver Island to be with family and continue my recovery. And I started to write.

let go

I approach my recovery in the manner
I approach most obstacles in life
I rise to the challenge
I do more physio, more hand exercises, more balance work, more stretching
more and more and more
thinking that more means faster healing

my brain can no longer command my body
my brain can't think its way out of this
it keeps trying and failing
my thoughts run on a tireless loop of thinking what I don't have
and wanting what I had
a whirlwind of relentless anxiety
calmness is one thing I don't have
fear has taken over

in a dream, my dearly beloved, long deceased sister Joanne came to see me
her face radiant as she spoke
let go, June, let go
give me your fears and anxieties, let me carry them for you, you don't need them anymore
know that a power far greater than you is taking care of you now
just let go

Joanne's wisdom sings to me still
it continues to be the best advice I've ever taken

As I recovered, I kept writing. I just had to get all of the raw emotions out of me and onto a page. The more I wrote the calmer I became. I started to feel in control again when so much of my world was out of my control.

dinner party

it was time to invite some old friends to dinner
we hadn't all been together since I had my stroke
it was long overdue

the first to arrive was Fear
brash and boisterous Fear, still wanting to be the central of attention
Grief arrived next and sat beside Fear
Doubt and Anxiety followed and the party began

I sat listening to them talk and I was shocked
in the past, these four would each pop in for visits
but I don't recall them ever speaking this loudly, it was deafening

finally Hope and Love arrived
so good to see them
they seemed uncomfortable with the noisy conversation,
so sat at the other end of the table
they chatted quietly
Fear shouted, hey Hope, hey Love, how ya doin
well enough Hope replied
ain't this stroke a bitch huh, Fear cackled
I bet the two of you don't know which way to turn
they sat quietly looking down at their laps
me, I'm workin' overtime, thanks to my buddies here,
we keep the old ball rollin', right guys
Grief, Doubt and Anxiety nodded in agreement.

Grief arrived next and sat beside

Fear Doubt and Anxiety followed and the party began

Happiness and Determination soon arrived and heard the commotion coming from Fear's end of the table

Acceptance cloaked us all like a healing blanket

Hope and Love simply smiled and let them continue.
Happiness and Determination soon arrived and
heard the commotion coming from Fear's end of the table
Love looked at the two of them
I'm glad you are both here, we have much to talk about
please sit with us
they began talking about how to help
sensing the negativity may gain strength
oh, how I've been missing them

Acceptance arrived late. just as she always did
entering the room like she owned the place
what have we here, Fear and his boys are up to their old mischief I see
with a calm urgency in her voice, she said
time to get to work ladies

Hope was the first to stand up and speak
I'm moving in she announced, looking directly at me
the strength of her voice forced Grief to leave the room
Love stood next in all her glory, stared down at Anxiety
he slithered out following Grief
Happiness and Determination stood

together, hands on their hips
grabbed Doubt and Fear by the scruff of their necks and dragged them out the door
Acceptance cloaked us all like a healing blanket
when they attend the next get together, she said,
we'll all be right here

Writing stands large in my healing journey; it strengthened my voice when my voice felt so weak. I was creating again.

Writing and sharing stories opens a pathway to human connection, which I believe opens a pathway to hope.

A stroke rips one's life apart. Confidence takes a beating. One's purpose in life is now questionable. These are lonely and scary times.

Writing stands large in my healing journey; it strengthened my voice when my voice felt so weak. I was creating again. I was having FUN creating again. Writing was freeing me. But it was when I began meeting with other stroke survivors in online groups that my recovery soared, these are my people, they cared, they understood the neural fatigue, the memory gaps, the fears for the future. I wanted to share my epiphany of writing with other survivors so I created the *With a Stroke of My Pen*, a virtual writing program. It was a place where others could use their imaginations and feel the excitement of what their own words could do. Maybe they too would feel the power of giving a voice to their new found worlds.

Originally, my vision for the program was to simply create a space for people to gather, do some writing, have a little fun along the way and hopefully become as inspired with writing as I had been. But the outcome yielded something much more precious. After three years of facilitating this program, I see people coming alive in the telling of their stories. People who thought they could not write are finding their stories and their voices. Having a stroke does not take away our stories. They are in there, waiting to be told, they just need a little prompting.

But it's in the listening to these stories, where I believe the magic lies. I've realized that as we deeply listen, we can't help but identify with our commonalities and our differences. Through listening, human connections are made. We are in this writing program because we've all had a stroke. But the telling and the hearing of shared stories taps into the essence of who we are and who we always have been, regardless of having had a stroke. After each person finishes reading what they've written, the others comment on how the piece landed for them. It's truly remarkable to watch them encourage and support each other, not because of their strokes but because of their stories.

Strokes tear away the familiar, and can leave us in chaos. Writing and sharing stories opens a pathway to human connection, which I believe opens a pathway to hope. The telling of the story helps heal the teller; the listening to the story, helps heal us all.

June Hawkins has always felt a strong pull towards living life as an adventurer. She has been a mountain guide, cross-country ski racer, marathon runner, canoeist, writer, home-maker, and mother of two. In February 2021, she had a stroke while working at a cross-country ski resort. It has been one of life's most significant challenges, and her healing journey is ongoing. After forty years in the cross-country ski industry, June is now retired. She continues to work with other stroke survivors.

For more information on *With a Stroke of My Pen* writing program, please visit www.withastrokeofmypen.ca or email June at withastrokeofmypen@gmail.com

MY PUSH FROM THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

Ellen Lewinberg



I think that many of us have difficult times during our lives that make it seem like life may not be dealing us the best cards. It can be devastating to both oneself and to those around us. And, it can be really difficult to recognize it for what it is.

In my case, I had been working in the mental health field for close to 40 years, as a social worker, a child psychoanalyst, and an adult psychoanalyst. I was tired of it. Really Tired. Burned out. And it was no longer giving me satisfaction at the end of the day. I think that it is really hard to get out of a rut when you are really established in it as I was. I did not know what I might do instead. I wanted to work. Maybe just not so much. Maybe do something different. I had no ideas.

Then, a woman who lived in the same building as I did (Linda) said, “I’m thinking of opening a flower store. You like plants and flowers. Do you want to go into partnership?” I said “Yes” without even thinking about it.

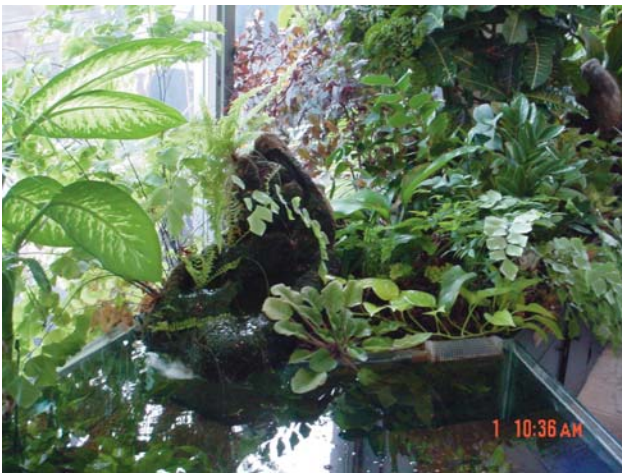
I loved plants and flowers. Prior to opening the flower store, I had been volunteering with a man, Wolfgang, who had been creating Living Walls. He had installed a few of them in big businesses, to clean the air naturally. I

volunteered to go with him to service them. His walls were spectacular. The bottom couple of feet were fish ponds. The water from the fish ponds was cycled through the wall to provide nutrients to the plants. I was fascinated with this idea and enjoyed working with him. However, I knew nothing about running a flower store. Linda and I went ahead anyway. Linda and I took a few classes on flower arranging. I persuaded Wolfgang to sell us his prototype wall to put in the flower store, imagining that we might be able to sell some.

The reality was different. Running a flower store was really hard work. Running a psychoanalytic practice part time, as I continued to do, was really hard work. I was running on empty. To make things worse, I kept feeling a lump in my breast but was too scared to do anything about it. That went on for about a year and a half. In October 2002, I finally went to the doctor. I had decided it was better to know, than to continue to live in fear. A biopsy was performed – indeed – it was cancer. The tumor was

Floral arrangement from store





Top: Prototype of Living Wall
Above: Close up of living wall

After the class, I was energized. I felt that I had options ... I did not feel as stuck.

removed, followed by chemotherapy and radiation. Through it all I was working in my practice and in the flower store. I felt I could not abandon my patients and I had made a commitment to Linda and the flower store. My husband helped out at the flower store whenever he could. I was feeling overwhelmed and so tired. I had no idea what I should do.

It was suggested that I return to therapy. Throughout my psychoanalytic training I had been in analysis. I had studied both child and adult psychoanalysis which involved eight years of coursework and additional time for training cases. This meant I had been training for a long time. It also meant I had been in therapy for a very long time. I did not want to go back.

I began to research alternative approaches. Someone suggested I see a shaman and gave me a name. I had started researching alternative therapies for cancer as I had decided I would never go through the chemo and radiation again. I went to see Jeannette, a shaman. Jeannette did a soul retrieval with me and gave me Essiac to take. (Essiac is an herbal remedy for cancer that a Canadian nurse had created. It is now sold commercially.) I felt a little better. She invited me to her drumming circles on Sunday mornings. There, I met a new group of people who were interested in nature, cleaning water, and a completely different kind of healing. I began to think perhaps I would train as a shaman.

Meeting Jeannette awoke powerful memories and feelings. I had grown up in South Africa. One of my nannies had taken me to her church meetings on Thursday afternoons. It was a church that was held in the open, in a beautiful area of Johannesburg called Linksfield Ridge. My nanny carried me on her back to the meeting. The kids whose nannies had brought them, were seated on the side and the ceremony began. There was beautiful singing and dancing, and people would be so overcome, they would speak in tongues. I had never remembered anything about it until I started working with Jeanette. In one of my sessions with her, it all came back - the singing, the dancing, and the fear and confusion when people were overcome and fell down or spoke in tongues. Soon after that, I saw a program on TV showing a ceremony being held at the seaside. The participants were all wearing a brooch made of fabric that denoted their rank in the organization.

I met Judith at one of the Sunday drumming circles. She re-introduced me to the concept of energy healing. I had started to learn reiki in the late 1980's, but had not pursued it. She suggested I continue with it and also told me about Bill Bengston, who was coming to Toronto to teach energy healing. I decided to sign up for the class. After the class, I was energized. I felt that I had options; energy healing... shamanism.... I did not feel as stuck. I did



Energy Work

I learned a great deal about myself, nature and the unseen world. I use this knowledge today, in my healing practice and in my garden.

other bioenergy trainings and after seeing the amazing results, decided I would close my psychoanalytic practice and concentrate on bioenergy healing. I set a date to close my practice and offered all my patients bioenergy healing. They all, except one, felt much better and felt they no longer needed to see me in a psychoanalytic setting.

It was a great relief, at this point, to finally have the weight of so many difficult years lifted off me. But, that still left the flower shop! My partner Linda had moved back to Moncton in the midst of all this. So, the weight was not fully gone. I still felt stuck doing something I did not really want to do. This time it was easier to fix. After another period of time, my husband, John, took over the management of the flower shop. We hired a second designer and I slowly stopped working there.

I had been going back to South Africa to teach child psychoanalysis once Mandela came out of jail. Now the work that I was doing with Jeannette made me want to return to South Africa to connect with the shamanism there. I met Mbali on one of my visits and did some shamanic training with her over the next few years. I did not complete the training as I could not get myself to complete some of the rituals. However, I learned a great deal about myself, nature and the unseen world. I use this knowledge today, in my healing practice and in my garden.

I was finally able to do what I was really interested in and that turned out to be energy healing. I have been doing it for over twenty years now and still enjoy it. I have also established friendships with like-minded people. I have written two children's books that describe some of the interesting tidbits I have picked up from my reading that are not generally presented to children.

So, what was my lesson? As I said at the beginning, it can be very difficult to make changes in one's life in the face of long-held beliefs and activities. But it is not impossible. It takes a bit of luck and a lot of gumption. Good wishes to you on your journey.

In 2010, **Ellen Lewinberg** closed her psychoanalytic practice to devote herself full time to energy healing. The work Ellen does today is a reflection of her studies and experience. The alternative techniques she uses now are tailored to the needs of each client, based upon her formal learning and her clinical experience.

Ellen has treated such diverse dis-eases as arthritis, liver problems, heart issues, cancer and depression. Ellen has found that her work can lead an individual to transition to better functioning in their lives and improved physical, mental and spiritual health. Another aspect of her work is helping people in palliative care to be comfortable and to transition peacefully. Ellen offers, individual, group and remote Bioenergy therapy for all types of conditions and for the recuperation from chemotherapy and radiation. You can visit with Ellen individually in person or one-on-one for distance healing. She also runs Bioenergy clinics once a month and teaches Bioenergy Therapy at workshops around the world.

WHEN ARE WE MOST CREATIVE?



Antoinette Voûte Roeder

I have been thinking about creativity. Am I unusual in that I don't always find it easy to find my poet's voice when heat and drought and fires are eating up our forests, when on the other side of our fragile globe the relentless extermination of a people is taking place, when skies are filled with missiles and drones over another country and everywhere people are displaced and walk around with a constant level of stress and anxiety? Am I the only one to feel this way while I am actually blessed to live in a country that still tries to adhere to human rights, freedom of choice, and truth over deception?

People in the past have written poetry from the belly of the battle, from the midst of war. Even now I hold in my hand Mosab Abu Toha's 2022 book of poems called *Things You May Find Hidden In My Ear*. He is a Palestinian, whose poems portray the situation on the ground in Gaza: bombs and broken bodies and wailing children. He was able to give voice to the pain and the anguish. That was then. Three years later, is he still able to speak or has he fallen mute from the continual horror that has overtaken Gaza? One cannot read his book and focus on its artistry or on the way the poet expresses himself. These skills pale beside the reality of the conditions he describes.

I have been inspired to write what I call protest poems: words that speak to the injustices of this world, the neglect of governments everywhere to address the suffering of people and the deteriorating condition of our beleaguered earth. These are dark places, not easy to dwell in. The adjacent poem was inspired by the devastation I witnessed following the great fire of July, 2024, in Jasper National Park.

It is evident that not everyone wants to look into these dark places. Among my friends are those who can hold the dark along with the light, the euphoria of joy as well as deep pain. I also count among my friends those people who at one time may have voiced their response to a world gone mad, but have now withdrawn to a small circle peopled by family, friends, and "this moment now."

This moment now is the golden apple we reach for in the practice of meditation: to live and breathe in awareness of this moment which is unique, which will never come again. "Close your eyes and drop down to that inner sanctuary where we simply observe the coming and going of thoughts while not getting hooked by any of them."

When does "this moment now" simply spell avoidance and escape? Perhaps here, too, it is only fair to hold the both/and: this moment holds all the world's agony as well as the possibility of joy, of beauty, of creativity.

How does creativity arise? Does it spring full grown from the cauldron

The Burn

*For five days
I lived at
the edge of
destruction*

*waking each day
in a small green oasis
on the margin
of a great burn.*

*Its colossal
presence
its massive
ruins
have taken up residence
deep in my chest.
We have no choice,
we have no power
over the smack-in-your face
reality
that spells life and death.*

– Antoinette Voûte Roeder, 2025

The Grocery List

*The time came
when some words
had dumped their content.*

*He would come home
with something else
or maybe nothing at all.*

*He still liked
to go to market
so she made it easy,
drew a little picture
next to every item.*

*That's how he shopped
list in hand and still
he'd leave something out.*

*Then she would work
around it, improvise
a meal he'd soon
forget.*

*Think of
the love.*

*Think of
the loss.*

– Antoinette Voûte Roeder, *The Space Between*, 2018

of circumstance, as in the friction caused by the earth's tectonic plates when they meet? Or does it come more quietly, as on little cat's feet (Carl Sandburg), when the artist withdraws to his studio or the poet to her writing desk? Obviously both are possible, even probable. Edward Hirsch's collection *101 Poems To Break Your Heart* contains poems written just before the poet is killed in battle, poems written out of survivor's guilt, written in the midst of abusive situations, divorce, illness.

Lately I struggle with the word "creativity" as well as the word "spirituality." It seems to me they are kindred spirits. For instance, one can express one's creativity as well as spirituality in planting a garden, in designing a ritual, in any number of things. One's creativity comes from one's passion. If your passion is baking bread, that can be both a spiritual practice as well as a creative act. We often confine creativity to the arts but that is surely way too limiting. I was speaking with a friend the other day who told me she does not consider herself artistic, per sé, but she does consider herself creative. When her husband was descending into Alzheimer's she had to think of different ways to "reach" him. Adjacent you'll find a poem that describes one way she was creative in that respect.

I think humans are inherently creative and spiritual. That can be seen even from evidence of the most primitive burials and cave paintings. Are we the only species to be so? Creativity is surely also a part of the animal kingdom. Think of how birds build their nests, even decorate them, how they dance and sing during courtship and mating. Perhaps life, wherever and however it springs up, is creative.

In my bi-annual poetry retreat days I invite people to join me in reading and discussing poetry. I love to support the creativity that arises among those participating. The very planning for those days, the organizing, the building of the structure and researching of the material are creative in themselves. After having been inspired by the poems we read, I invite people to find a quiet place to write. I don't know what people would say is the best thing about these days: the discovery of new poems and poets, the writing we ourselves do, or the sharing of that writing in the circle. I get excited about these occasions and I know people look forward to them.

I started with my own questions about creativity in a time of turmoil. Then I did a bit of wandering of the landscape while briefly examining different contexts and possibilities. I'm sure I've only touched the tip of the iceberg. There's lots more to explore there. In the meantime, thank you for coming along for the ride.

Antoinette Voûte Roeder is a poet and spiritual director in Edmonton, Alberta. Her degrees are in music, her first love. After teaching piano for 27 years, she was drawn to follow the Pacific Jubilee Program in Spiritual Direction. Having listened to others at the piano she was prepared to listen to the inner life of people who now came to her for a different purpose. As she did so she also discerned her own poet's voice which had been there all along but not taken very seriously. Since then she has published six volumes of poetry and offers bi-annual poetry retreat days. Her passions include music, poetry, people, and as a committed environmentalist, our precious earth.

Who Is She?

a women rises
craving coffee yoghurt
bananas chocolate

flicks on her computer
multi-tasks
checks her to-do list

while pursuing some pointed
self examination
till her I am interrupts

points to the Douglas Fir
outside her kitchen window
a tree whose only sentence is sentience

Inanna

deep in subterranean realms
sprawls Inanna

having descended
into dungeons

darkened wounded
smudged smeared

disarmed naked
removes

bracelets charms
beads of lapis lazuli

divests herself
of investments stocks investitures

becoming the tearfulness of things
out of which bloom

lily and rose
white lotus from the muck

yet out of such birthings
beauty flies into the world

as apple grape pomegranate
juice flesh bones

laughter
all out of the holy dark



Mandala, "Contemplating the Sacred"

Sacred that throughout ancient and present time has been named by many faith traditions and cultures, yet in moments of felt experience, sentience, it is left unspoken, "nameless." McCaslin's poems will ask you to think, but with that comes a rewarding contemplation of self and Other.

For Laura David, this brought to mind a mandala that she painted with watercolours titled "Contemplating the Sacred." Although her mandala has no text, she similarly was con-

templating the Sacred as the Spirit, the Light, and the Source eternal.

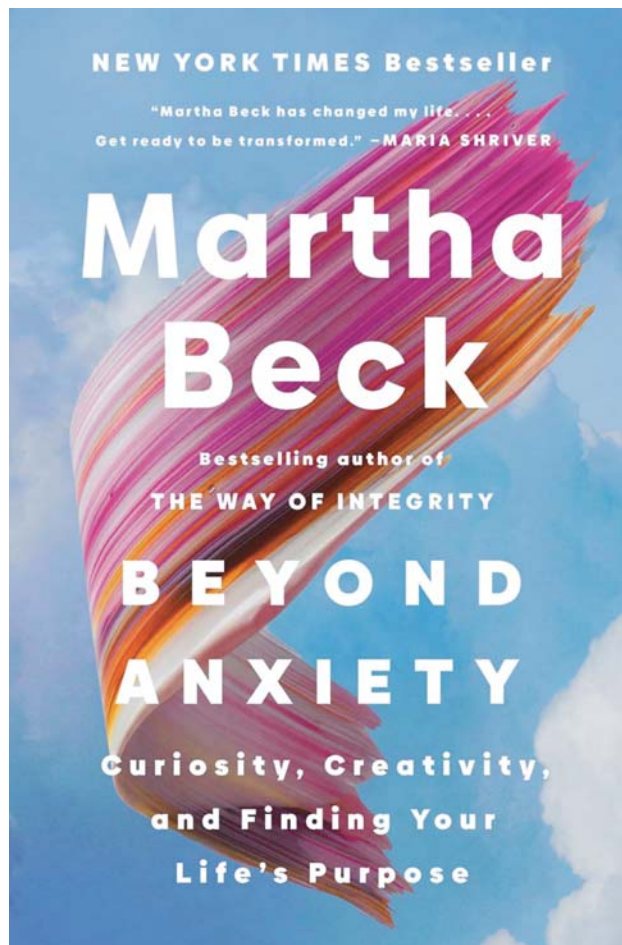
Painting a mandala is a centering and grounding process. It is easy to be present as you choose paint and apply it to the paper within the circle. When Laura created an intention to contemplate as she painted in this nonverbal process, the moments became "sentient." It is only in later reflection that she found the "sentences" to express the experience. She found that the centre of the mandala being white represented a light source, and for her the Light, the Source. Then moving away from the circle the white changed into colours much like a rainbow.

"Painting is silent poetry, and poetry is painting that speaks." – Greek philosopher Plutarch

<https://inanna.ca/product/named-and-nameless/>

BEYOND ANXIETY

Curiosity, Creativity and Finding Your Life's Purpose



As we enter 2026, this is a wonderful book to inspire your thoughts and creative adventures. Confirming the power of creativity, Beck develops a deeper understanding of the left and right brain and why creativity is good for the whole brain.

“Even when confronting a world of chaos, destruction, anger, and threat, you’ll feel a bloom of calm that ripples outward into creativity, connection, and joy. You’ll learn to work with your own mind and heart the way a sculptor works with clay, the way a musician composes songs. Everything you do will contribute to your most important artistic creation: your own life. And as you construct your own best life, you may just change the world.” – Martha Beck

WRITING TOGETHER

Introducing “Braiding Lines: Opening Memory”



Our group from left to right: Sheila Drummond, Jeanette Espie, Victoria Armstrong, Susan Walsh, October 24, 2024, after presenting our collaborative piece, “Braiding Lines: Opening Memory” at the Parkland Poets’ Society monthly in-person session (featured readers), Stony Plain, Alberta.

Victoria Armstrong
Sheila Drummond
Jeanette Espie
Susan Walsh

Our group of four has been writing, learning, and growing together for almost five years. We came together during the Fall of 2020, when Susan taught an online writing course. Over the years, we’ve worked through subsequent courses, learning, for example, how to offer feedback in respectful ways and how to revise.

Before I could write with other people, I had to write alone and get used to the sound of my own voice. Writing, and very gradually sharing what we’d written, went hand in hand. We got to know each other and our writing selves this way. Know and trust.

Susan has extensive experience creating collaboratively in the areas of memory work, collective biography, and *métissage*—a weaving together, for example, of creative non-fiction, poetic writing, artwork and images. In 2023, she asked if we might be interested in working on a collaborative piece rather than focusing on individual projects. We decided we were ready for this new challenge.

We began by reading examples of *métissage*, then brainstorming, mind-webbing, and discussing the words and phrases that would fuel our memory writing. We opened a shared document and began the work that would consume us for several months, each of us adding childhood memories in words and sometimes images.

I began to look forward to checking the shared document to see what others had added. We soon felt free to go wherever another writer’s memory writing led us even if the connection wasn’t obvious, or to begin a new thread.

*

For me, it was like opening the floodgates of childhood memories, and not without some internal resistance.

Ultimately, each writer chose a strand of their own writing to add to our collaborative piece. That left other strands and memories behind for further personal exploration.

Throughout the process, we discussed the slipperiness of memory in relation to context, social location, and the aging process – and what it might mean to re-member/re-vision our childhood experiences through writing.

The decision to make our braided piece a more public document caused us to examine what we were comfortable sharing and what we would decide not to share. For me, it took some self-examination to revise my part of the document.

We intentionally juxtapose all of the foregoing in métissage format to open things up – to make space for questions and creative (re)visioning to arise for ourselves and also, maybe for you, dear readers.

The result of our year-long collaborative writing venture is the piece attached to this issue of Sage-ing that we call “Braiding Lines: Opening Memory” – a weaving together of our original poetry, prose, images, and found poetry drawn from the words of other writers who inspired the process. We intentionally juxtapose all of the foregoing in métissage format to open things up – to make space for questions and creative (re)visioning to arise for ourselves and also, maybe for you, dear readers.

The Journal of Creative Aging

SAGE-ING

WITH CREATIVE SPIRIT,
GRACE & GRATITUDE

A PUBLICATION OF THE
Okanagan Institute

NUMBER 55, WINTER 2026

ISSN 1920-5848

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**BRAIDING LINES: OPENING
MEMORY**

Our Manifesto

This journal (and our associated website) is about you, and the possibility of you creating the next chapter in the book of your life.

You're familiar with how the other chapters worked: early, childhood, teenage, tempest, tragedy, trial, temptation, partnering, breaking, birthing, making, solving, earning, learning, building, growing, mentoring, celebrating, wising up, and ending up here after all that.

The road of life goes on from where you now find yourself, you're still on it, and the vistas that open before you promise more and maybe better rewards, but only if you engage in the possibilities.

You now get to decide if this next chapter will be a rich and fulfilling one for you, or only the last.

Rather than fading into that good night, might we offer an alternative?

Creative aging is a powerful social and cultural movement that has stirred the imaginations of many communities and people. Also referred to as sage-ing, creative aging takes many forms, and elevates people in many ways.

Most importantly, creative aging encourages and facilitates individual and collective creative pursuits, including writing, crafting, painting, dancing, and an almost unlimited number of other ways to express your creative energy.

It encourages you to find your inner artist, to discover the opportunity to celebrate and elevate, to make the most of the wisdom you've accumulated through the lessons of your life. It pleads for you to speak the truths you've learned, to share your wisdom, to be wise, to sage.

Creative aging helps you discover the source of wellness, which is in your spirit, your will to be, to be well, to share your gift, to explore, to create, to be whole.

Creative aging encourages you to engage with your inner life, to experience the grace of knowledge, to express gratitude for your gifts, and to share them with others on the same journey. By doing so, you open the door to the creative person that lives inside you, the insights you possess, the lessons you can learn through your experience, the discoveries you can share with fellow creators, and the wisdom you can gift to future generations.

Sage-ing: The Journal of Creative Aging exists to help you document your creative pursuits with care and integrity, to honour your truth. It's time for you to join us. Tell your story, make your next chapter.

Braiding Lines: Opening Memory

we are four women of European
settler heritage currently living and writing on
land that is the traditional home
of Indigenous communities such as

the Cree, Dene, Stoney, Saulteaux, Blackfoot, and Métis people
an urban area in Treaty Six territory on
the banks of a river originally

called *megwa npepsis cipi*¹ our parents, ancestors
came from Holland, Scotland, Ireland, England,
Germany, Norway, France
some of us are first
generation born
on this land daughters

of immigrants some are first in the family
to finish high school
attend post secondary school
we all had careers in libraries, government,

public schools, universities we are
like-minded women on a creative
journey together women of words who
like to read and talk about
what we read write alone

and together our lines of lead and ink
over four years have helped
us to know each other and
ourselves how to live
well in community

*

¹ Pronounced *meegwa neepsis ceepee* (*Red Willow River*). Many thanks to Ryan Arcand of Saddle Lake for sharing with Susan his knowledge of the Cree language and the traditional name of the waterway now called the Sturgeon River.



Our family was different. Sometimes we seemed to be “normal,” other times, on the verge of bubbling over. I thought that other families lived differently; more orderly, more calm.

Did things get out of control in their bigger houses with more room, more food, more clothes?

We had seven people in two bedrooms. Our bedroom was lined up with beds. I was embarrassed.

What did my friends think?

Yes, I was embarrassed, but I knew better than to voice any of this. My mother was so proud of what we had. She knew what it was like to go without. She had lived through the war in Holland. She reminded us often: we have fresh creamery butter and milk everyday!

I was ashamed to be embarrassed, but I was.

*

five of us a three bedroom bungalow no basement 1968 built-in benches around corner of kitchen wall fuzzy textured wallpaper gray white pattern above wainscotting



Mom paints the kitchen cupboards, walls shades of mint green in between shiftwork at the children’s care home near Northgate Mall

Dad sits in his place at the table facing
the back door smoke rising from his
Old Port cigarillo (tipped) Pilsner on
the go reads Mafia novels after cutting
meat at Safeway writes childhood
memories of Scotland his mother
father uncles aunts his boxing
coach types one finger at a time on
a turquoise typewriter

*

Our kitchen table had seven people around it.
At suppertime, everyone was called and grace was said.

*Bless us oh Lord
and these thy gifts
which we are about to receive
from thy bounty
through Christ our Lord.
Amen*

Food was served and eaten quickly.
We were hungry.
After school snacks not a thing then.

We had oven stew with dumplings, perhaps,
doled out carefully
so that everyone got their fairest possible share.

*

My family moved every year or two when I was a child, but never closer to the support
of our large extended family. We were always starting over again in new cities with new
schools, struggling to find our way making new friends.

Dad's wanderlust was hard on us all.

the uncertainty of life was always with us
never knowing if, this time, we might really feel "home"
each era became just a story, written in the past

If our lives were sometimes stressful during the year, with parents who fought often, and
a dad who struggled with alcohol, then the welcome relief was the trip south to the love
and care of our parents' families in the summer.

We lived for summer.

*

we are children of the
50's, 60's, and 70's
learning to embrace aging becoming

crones our feet on the land by
the river and in our neighbourhoods
hands in the ground, attending to plants,
trees, birds and parents, partners, sisters,
adult children, grandkids, fur babies

*

Where are the story's edges?
Whose story is it?
Why am I writing this?
(Jennifer Bowering Delisle, 2024)

*

My mother was often overwhelmed by her life, too many lively children and a husband that worked long, long hours. Her family was thousands of miles away on another continent.



A small window—very dark outside.
She looks out every five
minutes, hoping to see
headlights approaching. She is ready
to move on to the last segments of the
day—dinner and bed. It has
been a long one. She starts the chant:
“Daddy, come now, come now, Daddy.”
Soon, the girls join in.

*

Mom makes galushkies, German
cabbage rolls with ground beef, not
the Ukrainian kind a break from meat,
potatoes, frozen carrots, corn, peas

(no salad, that's for rabbits, Dad says)

we all sit around the table Mom brings
the big glass bowl, sets it down
I don't remember, but maybe one of us says
she doesn't like cabbage rolls or wants
ketchup to cover up the taste Dad likely says
she doesn't have to eat them with that
Mom strides to the fridge, slams
ketchup bottle over the side
of the bowl glass splinters cabbage
meat rice Mom at the sink looking
out the window

*

What happened when the food was all
or mostly eaten, when we were no
longer (so) hungry? Did we slow down
and venture into conversation? The
span of ages from oldest to youngest
meant our worlds were far apart. What
did my young self see and intuit around
the table? Did I acknowledge what I saw
or did I tuck it out of sight: *don't go
there?*

How is it that I remember nothing of the
conversation?

May I be excused?

*

Each year we'd make the long trek to my mom's hometown
and our grandfather's cabin on Shuswap Lake. Mom had
grown up on a farm in the valley, the middle child of 7. For
her, summer meant going home to her own mom and her
sisters. I knew what a gift it was to be part of such a large
family and often wondered, why did ours have to be the
family that lived away?

My mom's mom was the quintessential version of a
grandma. She was kind, plump and loving, and her memory
was long. Her life had been a hard one, but still she had
room in her heart and at her table for anyone who needed it.
She and Grampa always made us feel loved and welcome.



On their small farm, there were trees to climb, berries to pick, tales to hear, and hugs to be had. I wanted to curl up in her rocking chair and live there forever.

*

the urban area where we live is now called St. Albert
colonized by Father Lacombe and three Grey Nuns
who brought with them Métis children from
a mission at nearby Lac Sainte Anne

St. Albert: the site of two residential schools
Youville Industrial School, spawned by the Catholic church
Edmonton Poundmaker, spawned by the Methodist church

*

I honor the life I was given and the hard work of living
that all of my ancestors took on to bring me the life I live today.
But I feel this gratitude with the very raw and intertwined knowing
that the privilege of my life came at the cost of so many
other human and non human lives.
(Starr, 2020, p. 43)

*

Friends seemed to have more calm and more of everything. They had rooms to themselves, modern clothes, and Sunday dinner everyday of the week. My clothes were always bought or made too large in order to last longer and pass through a few children. Many sweaters, scarves, and mitts created by my mother—warm, but not modern. Our food was basic—bread, butter, milk, apples, and oranges. My mom was proud of always having these on hand—never to go hungry.

How could I ever explain this to my friends?

*

eat what's on your plate or
go hungry (she, the eldest of
six rented house in Regina
'soup bone soup' on the back
of the stove for days nothing else
for dinner nothing more to
add to the pot)

they don't have to eat
anything they don't like they know

what's good for them (he, an only child numerous aunts uncles no children, receives more than his share of ration coupons for sweets during the war)

*

Across the country
around a table in Saskatchewan
(we'd driven four days from Ontario to get there)
the noon meal consisted of
a chicken that had been killed that morning
potatoes and beans from the garden, and
two or three different kinds of pie.

The afternoon work awaited but
no one was in a hurry to get to it:
the adults in happy conversation
the kids content to listen and to eat.



Near the end of the meal
Uncle Reg read the tea
leaves in my cup
I see dishes in your future.

He reminded us not
to use too much water.
It all had to be hauled
in a big silver tank
on the back of the truck.

It was easy to forget that
tap water wasn't limitless.

*

For my brother and I there were countless cousins to have adventures with. We swam, rafted, built tree forts, rode horses, and helped with farm chores while savoring the rural lives of our cousins. Though they envied our lives in the city, we knew they were the lucky ones.

At the lake, all of the adults were relaxed and in good spirits beside this small piece of heaven. With its clear waters and pristine multi-coloured sand, it was the perfect gathering place.

My dad and his dad were best buddies, and they had the whole year to catch up on. They would be up and out on the lake at dawn, bonding and fishing from the pale green rowboat that dad had built, which sported a tiny ½ HP motor.



*The water was crystal calm,
reflecting the mountains and trees on
the far side of the lake.
If we crept out onto the dock
we might catch the whisper of their
voices.*

*

Because my circumstances are white, it's as though
I am a fish taking for granted the water I swim in or
a bird unaware of the surrounding air.
I am always in it, and
it is always there.
(Halfnight, 2020, p. 114)

*

After a decade the little house was paid off; the many and varied basement renters were no longer needed. Each girl had a room to herself. There was more space for everyone and, little by little, more calm.

Privacy and space at last, but how would I ever be able to relax and sleep at night without a foot or an arm touching mine? How could I sleep with only the sound of my own breathing?

*

more than fifty years later Mom and I
sit side by side at the table February
sun on our backs few words except
to praise the lean ground
beef the cabbage we agree
to cut out the hard leaf stems
consider what flavours we might add to
the simmering tomato sauce we slowly
carefully peel tender cabbage leaves
stuff each one with meat rice onion
roll tuck sides roll and listen
to folk music on the radio

*

Later and elsewhere
a small glass table was set for three people.
My father and I arrived home from
our jobs in the city
the late afternoon cold and grey.
(Was the dog still there to greet us?)
The warmth of the house and
the aroma of a meal met us
and drew us in.

On the small glass table there were
woven placemats with plates and cutlery and soon
meatloaf, baked potatoes, a hot veggie,
and a salad graced those plates.

This is perfect, I thought.
There is nothing more or else that I want than
the promise of conversation and a home-cooked meal
and I vowed that if I had a family
I would give them this.

*

“Someday this will all be yours,” our grandfather told us proudly each year. We were
reassured by his promise that we would be sharing this oasis with our own children and
grandchildren, in the same way he had with us.



*But life is nothing if not
uncertain.
Grandparents are lost, debts
need to be paid, and
families are torn apart.*

*And life soon becomes
something other than
the comfort of your childhood
hopes and dreams.*

*

my recollection as far as
I can tell
I remember
I don't remember
I lived for summer
around the table and
out of the house

not for the first or last time
I noticed differences and
wondered about them
sound of the radio
in the distant kitchen

*

All things working together,
listening to what speaks
in the blood
(Hogan, 1995, pp. 158-159)

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Biographies



Victoria Armstrong

I am a passionate nature nut, an aging flower child savouring the transition from a life of painting and storytelling, to embracing the writer within. I am grateful to make this journey in the company of these three wonderful women.



Sheila Drummond

I bought a notebook and picked up a pencil when my retirement began during COVID. I'm a lover of haiku poetry and the outdoor world that gives rise to it. I've been writing with these women since 2020.



Jeanette Espie

I am a Prairie girl, yet my heart is drawn to the allure of oceans, waves, and warm sunshine. My day begins with a piping hot cup of tea. Writing is the thread that weaves the four of us together, fostering deeper connections and shared passions.



Susan Walsh

I am learning to surf, to ride the waves of whatever arises and dissolves—minute by minute. I am with the wind playing yellow elm leaves on the neighbourhood asphalt. I have been writing since I was a child—and I am honoured to share word-and-world-making with my sister-writers.