1999

The voice of the turtle

Robin Montgomery Kennedy

Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd

Part of the Creative Writing Commons, and the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd/16233

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa State University Capstones, Theses and Dissertations at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Retrospective Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
"The Voice of the Turtle" is a nonfiction, narrative memoir which relates the evolution of an individual female consciousness. Within this memoir, Robin Montgomery Kennedy relates her struggle to find, express, and retain a voice, a self-identity and awareness of human limitations, and the choices available within the artificial constraints of society. This memoir is the recounting of this individual's journey on the voyage to becoming an open, expressive, direct being, within societal constructs as a twentieth century, female Iowan. Each narrative essay relates a turning point in this woman's life which brings her to a greater awareness of who she is, beyond knowing how she is viewed by others, which allows her to develop into an individual shaped not only by outer influences, the voices she hears, but to tune in with her own inner voice, her own innate intuitive directives.
This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Robin Montgomery Kennedy

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A BLACK PEARL</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GET READY AND WAIT</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHAT THE DICKENS ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE VOICE OF THE TURTLE</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HERE</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIPS</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I heard the electronic front doors click, then swing open, and turned to see a blurred barrage of people: nurses, orderlies, residents, swarming around a gurney. "Let's move!" someone yelled.

"Watch the I.V.!" one of the residents ordered. My hands began to tremble as I tore the wrapper from a scrub brush. Its soft plastic bristles prickled against my fingertips. The noisy throng pushed closer. I swallowed hard, feeling as if the ship was already sinking as we prepared for the storm. The surgeon, Dr. Tollari, ran past me into room 10. I wanted to scream, WE ARE NOT READY, DOCTOR! but I didn't dare. The cart with its chaotic entourage followed Tollari through the door. Glass bottles filled with intravenous fluids clinked against their metal poles as the wild crew propelled the rig forward.

They were barely through the door when Tollari started screaming, "Goddamn IT! Give ME A KNIFE!" I could hear him as I trembled at the sink just outside the door. I marched into the room and crossed to the gown table, grabbed a sterile towel, and with forced, precise movements dried my hands and arms, moving quickly from fingertips to elbows. I tried desperately to steady my hands and appear calm.

"JESUS C-H-R-I-S-T I GIVE ME THE GODDAMN KNIFE!" he demanded. With my back to the patient, I was completely absorbed in putting on my sterile gown and gloves. Tollari had not gowned. He had apparently grabbed a pair of
gloves and put them on himself.

*Oh my God, I've got to concentrate, I've got to stay calm,* I kept telling myself, and remembered my instructor's gentle voice reassuring, *“Even though the surgeon is considered to be the captain of the ship, you can make the surgeon wait for you. Wait to put the knife up; place the knife onto the Mayo stand after everything else that you need is up on the table. They can’t start until you are ready. Don’t let the surgeon begin the operation before you are organized.”*

*“GIVE ME THE GODDAMN KNIFE!”*

I took a jagged breath. The entire crew, including Tollari, waited impatiently for me to act. I grabbed a few hemostats, a couple of sponges, a scissor, tossing them up onto the Mayo stand. Tollari grabbed the knife from the back table, *“Give me the GODDAMN BLADE! Jesus this kid’s gonna bleed-out! SHIT!”* He rummaged around on the back table where the instruments were piled, found the blade himself, and slipped it onto the metal handle.

We sailed on at rapid speed into the surgery. Our seemingly mad captain jumped to the patient’s side, smoothly, quickly and forcefully pushing the knife down through flesh, from the base of the sternum following the curve between the ribs to bed-level. There was a huge, arched, gaping hole in the patient’s side, the virgin, white flesh violated in the worst way, slit open like a butchered hog.

*“Oh my God!”* I let myself look at the patient’s face for the first time. He was just a boy, a teenager. Later I learned that he was 16 years old, three years younger than myself.
Earlier it had been a slow-paced, ordinary evening in the operating room. The department was in order. We had eaten, stocked supplies, and put away instruments. The three of us, who were free, had readied everything for the next day’s scheduled cases. The two nurses, Millie and Vanda, were sitting at the front desk. Millie was rechecking the following day’s schedule; Vanda was talking on the phone; I was checking through the procedure cards.

From behind the glass window that separated the inner corridor from the desk area, I eavesdropped on Vanda’s phone conversation. She hung up the receiver as I walked around the metal file cabinets toward the back of her chair. I asked what she had just scheduled for the next day, and who the surgeon was going to be, when the phone rang. By her tone, I knew it was the emergency room.

As she slammed down the receiver, Vanda spun around with a panicked look on her face and lunged toward me. “Scrub, NOW!” she ordered. Before I could ask any questions she grabbed Millie by the wrists. “We’ve got to set up and open right away!” she told her, then released her grip, and scrambled down the hall to gather supplies and instruments.

Vanda’s rotund figure disappeared around the corner. Millie’s eyes rolled toward the ceiling. She shook her head and sauntered toward room 10. We both assumed Vanda was over-reacting as she usually did when there was a case to do.

I had worked in the operating room of another hospital for about a year and
in this operating room for a few months. I felt comfortable scrubbing for most routine cases and was agitated by Vanda insisting that I scrub immediately. I wouldn't even have the chance to look at a procedure card to familiarize myself with what I would need for the operation.

   Shari, the other more experienced surgical tech, was at home with the flu. I was the only scrub person available and I began to get a little nervous. Vanda was running around, positioning packs on the tables in room 10. I could see through the window over the sink into room 10. Millie was actually attempting to hurry as she opened the packs. The phone rang again. Vanda maneuvered around the corner, breathless and tense. "They're on their way over with the patient!"

   Waves of panic began to wash over me. "What are we doing, Vanda? Who's the surgeon?" I asked. "I've got to have some kind of clue about what we're doing if you want me to scrub! What type of case are we going to do?"

   "The patient was crushed by a piece of heavy machinery. I think they said it was a forklift," Vanda strained for a breath, forcing the crucial information out through pinched nostrils. "Tollari is the surgeon. He is on his way! Scrub, NOW!" she panted for breath, waddling down the hallway toward the refrigerator after the anesthesia drugs.

   I had never scrubbed for a chest case. I knew that Dr. Tollari was a chest cracker and a vascular man. There was no time for questions.

   Neither Millie nor Vanda would, or could, scrub. The registered nurses take care of paper work, attend to the patient's needs, and assist the person giving
anesthesia. Vanda had no experience with scrubbing. Millie would never be able to keep up the pace Tollari would likely demand. There was no time to debate. I had no choice; I had to scrub.

Ordinarily we had at least a half an hour, or longer, to ready the room for a surgery, more than enough time to get organized. Routinely we would be ready and waiting for the surgeon. That night there was no time to breathe.

"GIVE ME THE GODDAMN RIB SPREADER!" Tollari shouted. We hadn’t thought of it. The rib spreader wasn’t in the room. No one said a word as Vanda ran out the door to find the instrument. Tollari broke the silence with, "Jesus Christ, people! How can I do anything to help this kid when I can’t see a Goddamn thing!" His face twisted behind the mask. "Paul, get your hands in here and hold back the chest wall," he ordered. The resident slid his hands and bare arms into the boy’s chest exposing the heart.

I gasped into my mask. It was the first time I had seen a human heart. There it was, the powerful, mysterious organ itself. Our desperately determined captain reached into the chest cavity, grabbed the shiny muscle, and grasped it between his fingers. He began to squeeze in a rhythmic pattern, struggling to keep the slippery gem in his hands, pushing the chest wall back with his forearm. "Ram, does he have a pressure?"

Dr. Bashi, the anesthesiologist, muttered something nearly inaudible. The rhythm of his native Indian tongue made it difficult to comprehend the meaning of
his words, "50, barely palpable, Joe."

"What can I do to help you, doctor?" I asked stupidly.

"I can't do a Goddamn thing without the spreader! Get me the spreader!"

Torlari didn't give up; he kept squeezing and pumping until his hand cramped.

"Damn it, Paul, we'll have to trade places," he told the resident. They repositioned quickly, and the resident began to massage the boy's heart while Tollari held back the chest wall.

Across the room Vanda slammed against the metal plating on the door, and paddled across the room out of breath. Unwinding the sterile wrappers from a small rectangular package, and clasping the corner of the tray with the wrapper without touching the contents, she thrust the metal tray containing the rib spreader into my hands. The spreader was in FIVE SEPARATE PIECES!

"Oh, dear God," I choked under my breath. With a panicked whisper I caught Millie's attention, "Millie—Millie, I don't know how to put this thing together! Show me how to put the blades on. How do they fasten?" She tried to tell me how to put the blades on. I could not process what she was saying. My hands were shaking so badly that I couldn't hold the blades still long enough to put them onto the body of the spreader. "Millie, please put some gloves on and help me," I pleaded.

If anyone knew how to assemble and take apart instruments, it should have been Millie. At least that is what she always led me to believe.

At that moment I came to realize Millie moved in one speed only, SLOW. I held my breath and prayed that she could get the blades on. Millie trembled so
badly that she couldn't get sterile gloves on; when she finally did, she couldn't
steady the blades to get them on the spreader either!

“Oh, for the love of Christ!” Tollari cried out. As he squeezed the boy’s heart
in his right hand, he struggled with his left hand to put a clamp on a severed artery
to control the bleeding. Once again the resident fought to pull back the chest wall
to expose the vital organs and vessels of the boy’s chest.

“Joe, he’s gone,” the anesthesiologist’s words cut through the tension and
filled the room with silence. “Joe,” a bit louder this time. Tollari kept working and
pumping. “Joe, let him go. You’ve done everything you could possibly do.” But
Tollari couldn’t abandon ship, not with the boy trapped in the wreckage of his own
body.

Had the boy come to us in that body? Or had he been freed from his shell
before I heard the electronic doors give way? The anesthesiologist said that he
had lost so much blood it would have been impossible to save him under any
circumstances.

I believed Dr. Bashi; I had to believe him. If there had been a slim chance for
the boy to survive, if they had brought the spreader into the room, had it on the
table, if I had known how to put it together, if I had remained completely calm and
capable of snapping the blades into place, and had put the instrument into Tollari’s
hands the instant he needed it, it would have meant that he just might have been
able to save the boy. No. It was not possible. The boy was dead before he came
through the door.
Bashi’s words were gentle and soothing, “Joe, there is no carotid pulse; he’s bled out. It is out of our hands now. There is a power greater than all of us at work here.” With his melodic Indian accent, he coaxed the captain into releasing his hold on the boy’s heart. Dr. Tollari reluctantly relinquished his position, taking a couple of steps backward away from the table, his head drooped, his shoulders hunched forward.

He turned to approach Millie and me, eyes brimming with tears. We stood lifeless at the back table, in a state of shock. He groaned, “Why does this hospital always do this to me? They only call me when they can’t get anyone else to come! They only call me into Goddamn tragic messes like this!”

Millie and I stood speechless and motionless. Dr. Tollari’s eyes scanned the floor as if he would find a reason for the tragedy within one of the gray spots that decorated the cold, white tiles. “I have to go out into the waiting room now and tell this boy’s parents that their son is dead.” His eyes were glazed with tears and I could detect a slight quiver as he spoke. “What am I going to tell this kid’s parents?” he asked. I could not move. I could not speak. Our captain, talking to us, but questioning himself, trying desperately to justify what had happened, didn’t expect us to respond to the question.

As though dragging himself back onto the shore, Dr. Tollari trudged out through the back hall doorway. The chaos of hurricane proportions had hit and dissipated into the silence of death.

The resident asked for a heavy suture on a large retention needle. I assisted
as he lashed the boy's gaping side with loose, bulky, running stitches. The layers of tissue came together in crude fashion, he finished the task of sewing, then walked out quietly through the back hall.

Dr. Bashi had turned off the respirator and silently exited.

I never blamed myself for the boy's death, but after that night, I gradually learned to take apart and re-assemble every instrument and every piece of equipment we used. The boy's death altered my behavior. The change evolved slowly and subtly over a period of months and years.

A professor once told me that people do not search for information, do not seek to learn about something specific, until they need to know that information. Humans make mistakes. Hopefully we learn from those mistakes, push to improve ourselves, and let go of those overriding feelings of inadequacy which result from our inability to calmly master the waters we sail.

All who remained in the room were Millie, Vanda, and I, and the shell of the boy. I dreaded what we had to do next. Half dazed, shaking and exhausted, I began the gruesome task of cleaning his body, wanting to hurry the nasty business of wiping the dried blood from around the boy's lips. I swallowed hard under my mask and tried not to inhale the coppery aroma of his mouth. I could taste its dry lifelessness. I wanted to throw up.

"The endo tube has got to come out--his I.V.s have to come out too," Vanda ordered in her pinched nasal pitch. "The family may want to view the body in the
recovery room before they take him to the morgue.” Normally anesthesia removed the tubes and lines after a procedure, but Dr. Bashi had left the details of death for us.

With scissors Vanda snipped the cord that held air pressure in the cuff on the lower end of the endotracheal tube. “You’ve got gloves on, why don’t you pull the tube out?” Vanda ordered. I grabbed the tube firmly and slid it out over his tongue between his teeth. I wanted to gag—I wanted to run.

I tossed the tube into the trash and began to clean his body with a soft lap sponge. Repeatedly, I dipped the sponge into cold saline, and wiped the blood from his chest and arm.

Vanda busied herself with paper work. Millie came to the table and began to help me. She rolled the body and balanced his lifeless flesh while I wiped his back and bottom. Tollari’s hunched figure reappeared in the back doorway, “I’m sorry—it’s just that they only call me in to these Goddamn tragic messes.” He was shaking his head. “They didn’t even have a line in the kid by the time I got to the emergency room! I’m sorry—I’m sorry,” he muttered. As the door swung closed, Tollari vanished into the hallway.
Billy is a nappy headed girl with soulful, brown eyes, eyes that are always filled with tears. It’s hard to say exactly how old she is because of the disease that has worn away most signs of approaching womanhood, leaving only a thin feminine remnant, a bony frame of a body covered with papery, friable skin. Billy’s kidneys have shut down. She’s been sick for years.

Here in room 10, there is always a discourse which turns into a serious debate between the surgeon and the renal specialist. Dr. Tolari, the surgeon, argues with Dr. Flynn on the other end of the line, “By God,--we’ve got her here in the O.R.--yes--yes. She’s on the table. Jesus Christ--what do you want me to do, Scott?” Tolari slams the receiver back on the wall and stomps out the door.

Billy lies on the table and sobs, “Please take me back to my room.

“There, there,” the anesthesiologist pats her bumpy face with a gauze, turns to the circulating nurse, and whispers, “I’ll be in the lounge. If he comes back, let me know.” I can hear him from where I stand in the corner of the room. I’ve been scrubbed in long enough to have the back table and the Mayo stand set up, hemostats snapped and lined in a neat row on the Mayo, knife blades snapped onto their handles, vascular catheter tested and in place, sponges and needles counted, towels folded, drapes stacked and ready. I have nothing to do but watch her sob.

“Could I please have a stool to sit on?” I ask the nurse. Since I am scrubbed
in, I can't leave the room. I can't touch anything but the sterile-draped back table and the Mayo tray where the instruments and supplies are ready and waiting. We wait.

When I try to talk to Billy, I get a lump in my throat. "It won't be much longer now, Billy," I lie. I squint to squeeze off the tears. It is hell to cry beneath a mask. My nose runs. I can't wipe it. The mask gets soggy. I don't know what else to say to her. I sit there and pray Dr. Tolari will send her back to her room.

Sometimes Flynn wins and Billy gets to go back to her room. Sometimes Tolari wins and we operate. Tolari stomps back into the room and picks up the phone again. "No! I told you, Scott---she's down here on the table." Then to the nurse, "Where the hell is anesthesia? What are her vitals?"

Billy cries to the nurse, "I don't want him to cut me again."

Tolari is always in a huff over Billy. Because of their faith, as Jehovah's Witnesses, Billy's parents won't allow their daughter to have blood transfusions or particular intravenous fluids and medications. Even though her death is imminent, because she is a minor, no one ever listens to Billy.

"Billy, you know we have to do this so you can have dialysis," Tolari tells her.

"I don't care. I don't want another surgery. Let me go back to my room," she begs.

"You need dialysis soon, Billy. You know the fistula has clotted again. It won't take long, Honey," Tolari promises. We'll open up the artery, get the blood to flow through it again, so you can have dialysis tomorrow."
I place sterile sheets under her arm. We circle-wrap her upper arm with sterile towels. Billy is too sick to have general anesthesia; they always keep her awake during surgery. The touch of Tolari’s gloved fingertip makes her yowl. She knows the routine. First comes the, “I’m sorry, Honey,” the needle pricks follow. “Hold still, Billy,” Tolari orders. She’s strapped to the table, wriggling. “You’ve got to hold still for me, Honey.”

Her left arm is extended on an arm support. The old incision is exposed. I hold her arm firmly, upper arm with one hand, her wrist with the other, while he injects the Xylocaine into her forearm.

“Leave me alone,” she sobs.

“Scalpel,” Tolari whispers to me.
Dr. Silperman had squinty eyes, orange greasy hair, and freckles to match. Wire frame glasses perched on his narrow pointed nose. He wore this brown tweed jacket a couple of sizes too tight even for his skinny frame, and wide ties when narrow were the style. I always cringed at first sight of the man as he'd race through the front doors of the surgical department, and wished God would send him back to the East coast where he came from, him and his hissy fits.

"Learning to do a procedure smoothly and gracefully takes time, just like good sex," he said. I pitied his wife. Yuk, I cringed at the thought of him in the act, the mousy little man. I pitied his daughter, a four year old whom he said he awoke every morning at five a.m. to practice the cello.

He'd burst through the doors, wide tie flying as he ran toward the front desk to deposit his bag of tricks for manipulating eyeballs, the tools of his trade: a metal instrument case filled with tiny little torture devices, Castroveiho needle holders, calipers, and forceps. To me they were the initial symbols of the tedious hours which were to follow, hours I would have to spend with Dr. Silperman, working cheek to cheek in the operating room.

Being a scrub tech on the evening shift meant that I was required to scrub for and assist with whatever case came through the door, whenever it happened to come through the door. We did primarily emergency procedures, whether it was a shattered bone which needed to be pinned and plated, an inflamed appendix that
needed to come out, an abscess that needed draining, a kinked bowel to untwist, a ruptured spleen to remove, a baby to deliver by cesarean section, we did it. Since there were usually only two crews on duty, enough people to staff two operating rooms, we did what we had to do, whatever came though the door. We only occasionally did scheduled procedures, rarely did eye cases. I'd never heard of scleral buckling before I'd heard of Dale Silberman.

Buckling retinal detachments was his specialty. I only vaguely remembered what a retina was from anatomy class. *The lining on the inside of the eyeball which has something to do with reflecting light?* Dr. Silberman liked to do surgery in the afternoon, after office hours. He was establishing a practice, said he needed to work in the office all day and do surgery in the evening. Lucky for his family that he wasn't home torturing them. Instead, he was making money and torturing me. Why in the world a retina would have to be reattached, I didn't know. But I would soon learn the hard way.

Each retinal procedure took three, sometimes four or five hours. I dreaded working with Silberman more than I dreaded having teeth pulled, more than taking the dog to the vet to be neutered, just as much as giving birth. Seeing his name on the schedule for the following afternoon was like walking onto the obstetrics wing nine months pregnant with your fourth child, smelling amniotic fluid, anticipating the excruciating pain to come without any way to escape. Nothing I did pleased the man. Rarely, anything anyone did, suited him.

One night, after the patient had been anesthetized and draped, we were
ready to go. I'd even given him the sheets and towels for draping in the precise order he expected. Actually, for five whole minutes things had gone smoothly. Then the circulating nurse, Cindy, decided the best tactic would be to face the music before the tirade. "Dr. Silperman," she began politely and directly, "I'll be honest with you up front."

There was no way to worm out of it. She had to tell him, even if she was bucking for a pay raise and a promotion to head nurse, "There are no full tanks."

At the beginning of a retinal case, Silperman would cold cauterize the exterior surface of the back of the eye, using a pencil-like device which channeled nitrous from a tank to freeze spots of tissue. It was the circulating nurse's job to select a tank that was full, and have it ready before the start of the case. The tank was never full enough for Silperman. There was never enough pressure in the line, something always went wrong. "How many times have I told you people, I can't work under these conditions. What in the hell is it gonna take to get what I need to do these procedures! If you can't get the equipment I need, if this happens to me one more time," he'd threaten, "I'll take my business to one of the other hospitals." I would be thrilled to hear that he was taking his business elsewhere; I knew it would never happen. The hospital had invested hundreds-of-thousands of dollars in equipment just for him to do these retinal procedures. No other hospital in the city would buy the expensive machines he demanded. No other surgeon would ever use this specialized equipment.

Ordinarily, after he applied the cryo pen once or twice, then he'd start to
prance and nearly hyperventilate while the circulator would bust her butt dragging in tank after tank from the storage room, reconnecting the hoses, twisting open the valves, until miraculously somehow the cryo unit would freeze to his standards.

That night, before he started, Cindy had directly admitted there were no full tanks to be found anywhere in the department. "Get Roger in here right now, God damn it!" Silperman screamed. Roger had just taken on the head-nurse position. It was his job to order a fresh, full tank for each case. I could see the blood as it flushed up the back of Silperman's neck into his hair line where his red hair was shaved short at the base of his cap, changing his normally pink skin to bright red. The arteries at his temple bulged and pulsed. I stood silent at the back table, resting my sterile gloved hands on the draped surface. Fran, the other scrub tech, wrapped her hands in a sterile towel and sat on the only stool available, acting disinterested in his tantrum. Silperman paced from one end of the room to the other, waiting for Roger, panting louder with each step.

Roger dashed into the room out of breath, fidgeting with the metal bridge of his mask, flipping the strings of it over the top of his head, and started cranking the valves on the tank before he tied his mask. He had to hold his mask with one hand and manipulate the tank with the other. Typically, Cindy loved to blame me for everything she possibly could. At that point, I realized she had deliberately set Roger up for a fall. Cindy wanted the head nurse position. She knew he'd forget to order a fresh tank, and she had not bothered to remind him the night before. I knew Roger wouldn't be head nurse much longer.
“Roger, how much longer do I have to put up with incompetence like this?” Silberman demanded. “What in the hell is wrong with you people around here? This patient is anesthetized—we’re wasting precious time. Why the hell don’t we have a full tank?”

Roger spit back, “Dr. Silberman, I just don’t know, but we don’t have one! What do you want me to do? If I could shit one for you I would.” I thought, What a great line. That should smooth him over for the rest of the case.

Silberman always demanded that two people scrub with him, one to pass instruments, one to assist. No one ever wanted to assist him. The person who assisted had to work looking through the microscope with him. I must have lost the toss that night. Peering through the scope, I had to hold, and manipulate retention sutures that served to expose the rear surface of the eyeball, keeping it in a position that provided easy access for Silberman to sew a silastic band onto the back of the sphere of the eye. The ultimate goal of the surgery was to position the band and secure it in place on the exterior surface of the eye so it would buckle and bring the unattached retina back into place against the inner surface of the eyeball. The most important job of the assistant is to hold the knots in the stay sutures he’d place around the silastic band. The band creates the buckle.

Ready to tie the silastic band into place, Silberman started to hyperventilate again as he ordered me to hold a knot. He got so tense he reminded me of a pressure cooker that had built up too much steam, vibrating, rocking with heat,
ready to blow. Holding his breath he ordered, “Pinch, and hold.”

I hated working through the scope. It was new to me and made me feel clumsy and nervous because my hand holding the forceps appeared to be six inches from my face when it was actually an arm’s length. I awkwardly grasped the knot, my hand shook, and the knot slipped out of the forceps. He started to scream, “Damn it, I didn’t say release, shit! This is ridiculous. This is so simple. Any seven year old could do what I’m asking you to do. It’s just like tying up a Christmas package. It’s just like holding your finger on the knot of a bow before you tie it.”

“Again! Hold the damn knot! You’ve got to... Pinch, hold...” Silberman tightened the suture. I grasped the knot, my hand still shaking just enough that the tips of the forceps slid off again before he could loop a second knot to secure the suture in position. He spun around and slammed his forceps on the Mayo stand. I thought the whole tray of instruments would fly onto the floor. I winced and swallowed hard, trying to steady my hands. “Again,” he demanded and we started over.

A series of sutures are needed to hold the band in place. Each time I had to hold a knot, I held my breath and concentrated all my attention and energy on steadying the tip of my thumb and forefinger to steady my forceps, praying that my hand wouldn’t cramp. Each time the suture held, I breathed a sigh of relief; each time the forceps slipped off his knot, he yelled louder; each time he yelled, my hand shook harder.

Hours after we’d started, he released the retention sutures, slipped the
retractors from the eye, then tossed them onto the Mayo. Thank God...we were finally finished. As Silperman ripped his gloves off over his fingers, latex snapping, he flipped them into the garbage near the door. He looked at me and Fran, the other tech who had been passing instruments. “Thanks to your expert assistance, this patient will likely lose his sight.” Fran glared at him. He turned his back to us and stomped out the door. No one said a word. My whole body began to shake. Without thinking I darted out the back door after him. I followed him through the door into the recovery room and found him scribbling a note behind the nurses’ station. When he looked up he seemed surprised to see me.

I was standing directly in front of him. “Dr. Silperman,” I began, “I’m not going to be blamed for that patient losing his eye sight. You are the surgeon. You are ultimately responsible for what goes on in that operating room, not me. You are the one with the years of training and expertise, not me. It is extremely difficult for me to concentrate on what I’m doing, on the delicate movements you expect me to make, when you’re screaming profanities in my face and throwing a fit. It is impossible to perform calmly and precisely in that environment.” I stopped to inhale.

“You people are all trained professionals. I shouldn’t have to say anything to you. I expect you to know what you’re doing,” he blurted.

“You expect too much. I’ve never even heard of a retinal detachment before you came to work here a few months ago.”

“That’s ridiculous! You’ve all had years of education and special training!”
“What do you mean? Do you think we’ve had detailed step by step training for each type of procedure?”

“You’re all supposed to be intelligent people...You’ve all read Dickens, for Christ sake! You should be able to hold a simple knot!”

I was too upset to even wonder or question how the hell Charles Dickens was relevant to the discussion. All I understood from what he said was that I was stupid and inept. I was on the verge of sobbing.

“I’ve never read Dickens!” I screamed, spun around on my heels and ran for the door. I didn’t want him to see me cry. I choked back the sobs until I was safely on the other side of the door.

Cindy’s head popped out the door of the operating room. “What do you think you’re doing?” She sneered. The tech is never supposed to leave the room before the patient is taken out to the recovery room. I didn’t care if she reported me. I tried to sop up my tears on the sleeves of my water repellent, paper gown and blew my nose into my mask.

“That bastard’s not blaming me for the patient losing his eye sight!”

Then I heard Silberman open the recovery room door, “Hey, wait up!” I was sobbing. I turned and walked away from him as fast as I could without running. He was following me down the back corridor.

“Please just leave me alone,” I sobbed. I didn’t want to hear anything else he could possibly have to say. Taking deep breaths to stifle my sobs, I walked toward the safety of the decontamination room where we washed instruments. I’d
never seen a surgeon enter that room before. I didn't think he would follow me there. After I entered the room, I turned to face the door. He was right behind me, blocking the only door into and out of the room, hanging onto the rim of the hopper. I wanted to dunk his head into the basin and flush.

"Look," he said, "You're right,...I'm sorry. You people don't realize...Yes, I am ultimately responsible. That's why it's my job to push everyone to do the best job possible, a person's eye sight is always in jeopardy when I'm working. That's why I get tense. I'm sorry."

"You don't need to feel sorry for me," I sobbed, and mopped my dripping nose with my sleeve. "It's the patient who'll lose his sight." Silperman stood there, crinkling his nose, raising his glasses up on the bridge. He wouldn't leave.

"Okay... fine," I said reluctantly just to get rid of him.

Then he volunteered, "He may still be able to see... I don't know at this point."

What a schmuck, I thought. A few minutes ago I was responsible for the patient's permanent blindness.

Then he asked, "Are you all right?"

I couldn't believe it. He was possibly, actually, concerned about me.

He looked at me calmly with a half smirk on his face, his eyebrows raised in question.

"I'm fine," I lied.
I can’t say that I ever learned to enjoy working with Dr. Silperman. Each time we worked together, he always fussed and griped. Occasionally, he still cussed under his breath. But, after the night I followed him into the recovery room and screamed at him, and he followed me down the back hallway and apologized, he never yelled at me again. The next time I assisted him, he actually took the time to calmly show me the steps of the buckling procedure and explained what he was doing as he worked. I learned his routine, how to hold his knots with a steady hand and release them at his command.

When my husband finished college, he took a job in a small town 70 miles from the city and the hospital where I worked. We decided to move. I wanted to continue to work part-time so I decided to commute the distance to continue working in the operating room. With two small children and a baby at home, this was no easy feat. After laundry, housework, and chasing the kids during the day, I fed the kids and took them to a sitter before I drove to work. I was always exhausted. Even working part-time was too much. I had to quit.

The last time I worked with Dr. Silperman, the case went smoothly. He didn’t whine or swear once. He knew it was my last night. As he slipped the retractors out at the end of the procedure, he asked quietly, “Robin, would you like to work for me as my private scrub nurse?” I didn’t know what to say. He was offering me a job, an opportunity to work with him on a daily basis.

“Thank you, Dr. Silperman,” I mumbled dumbfounded. “I appreciate your
offer... I can't.... I uh... have to stay home. I need to stay home with my kids. I'm exhausted."

It was years before I read Dickens.
The tormented look on the face of Susan Smith has haunted me since I learned of how she drowned her two young sons a few summers ago. I do not condone what Susan Smith did, but, I do believe I understand her torment. Pregnancy, child bearing, and parenting young children, is physically and emotionally exhausting under the best circumstances. In this exhausted, fragile state, I believe, many young mothers, at times, experience a complete sense of frustration, and may become consumed by overwhelming feelings of hopelessness, which can lead to severe depression.

On the highway coming home from Des Moines one Sunday night, I had a strong urge to drive my family into the ditch. I wanted to floor the accelerator, plunge myself, husband, and kids, to our deaths. I felt the pull of fatigue and despair take hold of my hands on the steering wheel. The station wagon began to veer toward the shoulder of the road, headed for destruction.

At first, Marty had been driving, oblivious to the kids fighting in the back seat, unconcerned about the baby screaming on my lap, and completely unaware of my pounding head. I demanded he stop the car and trade places with me. I must have shoved the baby at him before climbing behind the steering wheel. There was no escaping the constant noisy chaos of my life, no way to disconnect, to shut the kids out. I was trapped in the shell of my existence, desperately needing a release, a time bomb ticking, ready to explode into a million tiny fragments.
Taking over as driver didn’t help. The kids continued to scream and fight on the back seat; the baby kept crying in the front. I begged Marty to do something, anything, to quiet them, “I just can’t stand this constant roar, Marty!”

The years leading up to this incident had spun by. It had been a whirlwind of work, having babies, getting Marty into a graduate program, scraping together enough money to keep us fed and get him through school.

Marty and I met at the hospital in Des Moines, where we worked evenings together in the operating room. He was an orderly in surgery and a college student. We became good friends, confidants, then fell in love. Briefly time stood still as our romance progressed. We were often late for work. Then, before I knew it, I was pregnant; we were going to be parents.

My husband was born into an Irish-Catholic family, the second of five kids. I was lured into the large family life which I’d never had, being an only child. I had joked about wanting 16 kids.

I was curious about, and attracted to, the Catholic church. Catholic churches are filled with alluring sights, symbols and smells. I was enraptured by the colored glass candle holders, with flames flickering; by the sacred symbols, the stations of the cross, the statues of Mother Mary, the figures of Jesus; by the smell of incense and candle wax. I was pulled toward the sense of inner peace my husband possessed after growing up in the church, and drawn into the sense of belonging to a church family which I’d never experienced before. It provided me with more of an
extended family. I took classes with a kind, middle-aged priest who brought me into the church formally.

For health reasons, I could not take birth control pills, and the only type of birth control the church condones is, Natural Family Planning. Trying to be good Catholics, before we knew it, we had a natural family of our own, three babies in four years. Throughout my pregnancies I continued to work as a surgical tech at the hospital.

Marty began graduate school after our first, our daughter, was born. I worked to support us. Money was tight until Marty finished school and got a good job as a physician's assistant, in a small town, 60 miles south of Des Moines. We had two small kids then. The doctor he worked for, provided us with a nice home to live in as part of Marty's salary, a three bedroom ranch style house. Our third child was born while we lived there. After his birth, I tried to stay on at the hospital part-time, driving back and forth to the city three days a week, dropping the two older kids at a sitter's house on the way out of town, taking the baby to my mom in Des Moines.

That Sunday, during dinner at Marty's parents, his dad had remarked to me, "Now that Marty has a good job, if you keep working too, the two of you could really get ahead."

I knew I needed to quit working, but I didn't know how I could. Even though Marty was earning a decent salary and we were living rent free, we had no money saved and lived from paycheck to paycheck. I couldn't forget that the previous
Spring, at Easter time, we didn't have enough money to buy candy for the kid’s to have an egg hunt. I became almost obsessed with money and began to try to figure out ways to spend less by cutting the grocery budget and by using reusable cloth diapers instead of disposable. I used the whole stalk of broccoli instead of just the flowers, chopping the stalk and stems into small chunks as Marty’s mom had taught me, to make it go further.

Whether I worked the night before or not, after a few hours of interrupted sleep, the baby always woke up to be breast fed around 3:00 a.m., I was up by 7 a.m. with the kids. Marty got up, showered and left for work.

One morning, after Marty had left, I found our four year-old daughter, Tressa, on the front step sobbing onto her plastic Punky Brewster backpack. She watched the older neighbor kids leave for school. “Why can’t I go to school? I want to go to school too, Mommy, like the other big kids.”

I tried to cheer her up. “You’re not old enough now, Tressa. Next year you can go to school too. Before you know it, you’ll be in school too.” She continued to whimper while tears ran down her pudgy cheeks onto her protruding lower lip. I went inside stepping between the Cabbage Patch dolls, Fisher-Price farm animals, Ninja Turtles, their weapons, and the various other stuffed animals and toys that covered every inch of the living room and front hallway floor. I remembered what Marty’s younger, single sister had announced when she’d dropped in once unexpectedly, “It looks like a tornado moved through this place,” she’d said with her eyes bugging out of her head.
Embarrassed and frustrated by her remark and by my inability to keep the toys picked up at all times, I’d told her, “The tornadoes are named Tressa and Sean,” as I bent over to slide a pink plastic Big Wheel from her path.

I tried to shake off the memory and irritation of her comment, and looked up the number for the preschool. During our phone conversation, the preschool teacher, at the one preschool in town, apologized sympathetically because they could not accept any more children that year. She’d be happy to put Tressa’s name on a list for the following year. When I told Tressa, who wandered into the living room as I hung up the phone, she started to sob again quietly. Just then, the baby began to scream from his crib. “But, Mommy, I’m big enough to go to school now!” Tressa insisted. Then I remembered I hadn’t seen Sean, who was sixteen months old, for a few minutes, not since I’d lifted him out of the highchair where he’d dumped his bowl of Cheerios and apple juice onto the tray and was splashing his palms into the mixture before patty-caking to amuse himself.

Between the baby’s hunger cries, as I navigated the hall, I heard water splashing in the bathroom. I plucked the baby from his crib and rounded the corner with him on my hip, his diaper soaking the side of my nightgown. I found Sean smiling and gurgling while dipping into, and licking the toilet water from his fingers. The smell from the training pants Sean wore overpowered both the urine in the baby’s diaper and the stale ammonia scent from the diaper pail which sat in the tub.

I lay the baby on the bathroom floor. He began to scream again. I grabbed
clean diapers and clothes from a basket in the hall, plucked Sean from the toilet, stripped off his clothes, threw his poopy training pants into the toilet, lifted the diaper pail out of the tub, ran bath water, plopped Sean into the tub, stripped the baby and placed him into the tub with his brother. The warm water quieted him temporarily. I washed, dried, and dressed the baby quickly, then placed him on his back in the center of my bed. His crib sheets were soaked and smelly. Quickly, I built a nest of pillows around him and dashed back into the bathroom where Sean played contentedly in the tub. I began to dip and rinse the training pants in the toilet water, flushing the solid chunks and the smell. I dumped the dirty water from the diaper pail into the toilet, and gagged from the stench as I flushed it and began to rinse and wring each dirty diaper.

The baby started to scream again. I washed Sean, dried and dressed him, and shut the bathroom door behind us. Tressa was watching cartoons, munching on dry Cherios in the living room. She'd temporarily forgotten the burden and tragedy of not being allowed to go to school. I sat down beside her on the couch and began to nurse the baby. I knew it had to be after eleven o'clock. I hadn't even bathed or dressed myself yet. “What's for lunch, Mommy?” Tressa asked cheerfully. I had to make lunch and dinner yet, and have the kids ready to leave by 1 o'clock in order to get them to the sitter’s and the baby to my Mom’s in Des Moines, to make it to work on time at 3 p.m.

When the baby was full, burped and satisfied, he drifted off. I couldn't put him in his bed because I still hadn't had a chance to put a dry sheet and blankets on it,
so I gently placed him back onto my bed. Sean was playing with an Oscar The Grouch hand puppet, awkwardly trying to make Oscar bite Tressa's nose. I returned to the bathroom and found the diaper pail still half full. On my knees, over the toilet, I began to dip, rinse and wring the remaining diapers and I started to cry. There was no end to this in sight.

I managed to shower and dress, throw the dirty diapers, pants and bedding into the washing machine, open a can of chicken noodle soup, a package of saltines, and a can of fruit cocktail for our lunch. Before noon, the kids were fed, faces and hands washed with a rag. I changed Sean and the baby, filled bottles with formula for the night, packed the diaper bag for the baby, and a bag for Tressa and Sean. I peeled potatoes and carrots and tossed them in the oven with a beef roast for their evening meal with Marty. I'd hung the clean diapers and crib sheets on the line to dry and brought them in before we left.

There was no air conditioning in my old Chevy. It was hot. The baby fussed in his car seat for the first thirty miles on the highway. I dropped him at my mom's and managed to get to work by 3:00. During report, I was told that Dr. Silberman had a scleral buckle scheduled for 5:00. I was assigned to scrub and assist him. When I stooped over to lift the sterile packs for the case onto a gown table, my low back ached from the weight of my full breasts and my eyes burned from crying.

The stress and strain of the job, the driving, and trying to be super mom, were wearing me out. I hated the job, but I hated to give it up too, now that we had
two paychecks coming in. I had worked at the hospital for eight years and my job was part of who I was. I didn't know how to stay home, was afraid to "just" stay home and be a mom. What would happen to me? I'd drown in a mess of scattered toys, clabbered bottles, apple juice and urine soaked diapers.

That Sunday night, on the way home from a visit with our parents in Des Moines, the noisy chaos faded as I snapped into a different level of consciousness. The car veered to the right. I was immersed in, and focused only, on my thoughts of oblivion. The front tires jolted over the edge of the pavement and spun through the gravel which bordered the highway. The jolt, and the flitting gravel under the tires, pulled me back into a conscious realization of my hands on the steering wheel, and my foot on the accelerator. I controlled not only my own destiny, but the fates of my husband and children.

It took every molecule of warmth my body could generate, every ounce of energy I possessed, to raise my foot off the gas and force the wheel back to center, keeping the car between the lines on the right side of the highway.

I could have easily destroyed myself, and could have probably killed my husband at that point. I could not kill my kids. Directing the car back onto the road, with tears streaming down my cheeks, limp resignation pulled me toward our destination. I wondered where in the world I could find the energy to survive another half-an-hour until we arrived home.

When we got home, I immediately collapsed onto the bed, my aching lower
back against the rigid oak headboard, with the baby sucking at my breast. I shut my eyes and was instantly in the midst of a dense, foggy, illuminated grayness, in another realm, weightless, free of my aching back, and heavy sore breasts. With no visible connection to the bedroom, no sensation or knowledge of the baby on my chest, I was communing with a higher power. It was informing me without words, that if I let go, completely surrendered, I would know all of the answers of the universe and be released from all stress and pain, free from every nagging detail of life.

During this experience I relived my life, every profound relationship, every unresolved conflict, every sight, every sound every taste, every touch, every emotion. Instantaneously, I was every age. I smelled the Noxema scent of my high school boyfriend’s Clearasel, tasted its bitter chalkiness when we kissed, felt the sadness of knowing that despite his kind nature we were not meant to be soul mates or lovers. I smelled fish and felt the cool salt spray of the Pacific as I walked a rocky shore line on the Kona Coast when I was eighteen. I smelled blood as I mopped a pool of bloody saline from the floor in room 10, and saw the pale face and the exposed, empty shell of the body of the boy who had been crushed by the forklift as he lay on the operating table.

Time did not exist. Every frustration, all confusion, any anger I’d harbored, was instantly dissolved. I knew exactly what I needed to do to make amends with everyone, including myself. Blame did not exist. I could let go, follow into the light. Complete surrender was an option.
It took all of the concentration and energy I possessed to re-enter into the physical realm. I wanted to see Marty, to talk with him, to beg him to give me reason to continue living. I was afraid to let go, but felt I had no reason to live.

Like a capsized turtle, shell-side down, I fought against the cresting waves of life, tried desperately to regain command over my body. Struggling for control, I forced open the weighted folds of my eye-lids, and found myself on the bed, calling and crying out for my husband. It seemed as if it took hours before he appeared beside me. I frantically pleaded with him, “Marty, you have to tell me that you need me, that you want me! There’s no reason for me to stay here!”

He looked at me with shock, and worry, and weariness on his face, with that olive tint beneath the surface of his complexion which shows when he’s tired. Marty swallowed dryly, blinking ever so slowly and muttered, “Of course I need you, Robin.”

I flayed at his chest with my fists. He grabbed my weak wrists and held them tightly within one of his hands. My physical attempts to strike offensively failed to do anything but capture the confused young man’s attention. I buried my face in the pillow and sobbed into it, “Why do I always have to ask for a response from you, Marty? Why don’t you ever tell me you need me? Why do I always have to ask first?”

I wanted him to turn me over, propel me onto solid ground, push me back onto the shore of life, to a place where I could rest. Having no energy to push myself, I begged, “Why don’t you ever offer to help me, or just sit with me and talk?”
There's always something else more important! There's no reason for me to exist!"

“Robin, I need you and the kids need you,” Marty spoke to me calmly, not convincingly.

I closed my eyes again, and there I was, in the gray fog, weightless and free of all restraints, my essence moving toward the peaceful warmth of the light beyond it, deeply attracted to the tranquillity that beckoned in the blissful, increasingly bright illumination.

My kids, what about my kids? For the first time since I sat down on the bed, I became conscious of my three children, and relived a scene where I screamed at my mother when I was 12 years old, "I had no choice, Mom! Don't tell me to appreciate what I have, or where I live. I never asked for any of it. I didn't ask to be born!"

My children had not asked to be born either. Knowing that I was responsible for bringing them into the world, responsible for keeping them safe and warm, pondering their fates if I left them at such a young age, I realized I couldn't bear to leave them without a mother.

I was enraptured by the light, lured by the peace, and serenity it offered, but I had to stay with my kids.

The metallic tinkling of wind chimes beyond the bedroom window brought me back, terrifying me, and accompanying me, through the cold darkness of that night. Their tinny clinking was a sign of impending departure. An ambulance raced by, its silent red light whirling through the window panes. Who would go?
Not me. Not now.

I pulled back into life, exhausted, frightened, and wired. I could not sleep; ideas reeled through my mind. Feeling a mixture of intense excitement and fear, I could barely stand to let my husband sleep. I wanted to tell him everything about the experience of being drawn into the light.

The next morning I told him I had nearly died. He didn’t believe me, but listened. Deep lines folded into place on his forehead. I begged him not to go to work. He insisted that he had to go, and offered to take the kids to a sitter.

“No, I don’t want to be alone.” I cried, “Why can’t you stay? I’m sick.” He went to work.

After mentally reeling and speeding through the following two or three days, with very little sleep, I found myself drained, softened, and moving at tortoise pace, in what seemed to me, slow motion. I was transformed. Every movement and moment possessed its own continuum. In this state, for a long time after the experience, every thought and notion that came to me was respectively spoken aloud and acted upon.

I brought in the little neighbor girl who was on her own during the day while her mom worked, feeding her, watching over her, caring for her along with my own kids. When I spotted a spider, building a web in the corner of the kitchen ceiling above the refrigerator, I climbed a chair, softly wrapped it in a tissue, then set it free on the back step.

“Everything, every creature has a right to its place in the universe,” I said. I
believed I had to be charitable; I knew I had to be kind. Although he may have agreed with my philosophy, my husband thought I was completely loony, tres dans la lune. I believe I was craving attention, searching for a purpose, suffering from dreams deferred.

We all have dreams that get put on the back burner--or flushed down the toilet, but women especially, it seems, put their own lives on hold for their family responsibilities. We are still the primary child raisers, home caretakers, and grocery gatherers, doing the household tasks, performing dutifully, usually quietly, swallowing our voices at home. Even with full time jobs, we women ordinarily carry the emotional, and the majority of the physical, labors at home.

We have been socially conditioned to take care of everyone else to the point of completely submerging ourselves, nearly suffocating our creative voices in the depths of pure exhausted frustration. The artistic instinct which connects us with our soul and moves us toward our dreams, is often forced to hibernate under water, in an extended state of dormancy during long cold periods.

I felt I was flushing a bit of myself down the toilet each time I rinsed out a poopy diaper. I was greeted in our new community as “Marty’s wife,” and isolated from the world outside of our house, having few connections with other adults. The interactions I did have, served as regulators of my attitude and actions.

My movements were controlled by the surrounding climate. Marty worked day and night, while I felt I desperately needed him with me, to motivate and push me. I quit my job in Des Moines and spent most of my time inside the house with
the kids, poking my head out into the world occasionally, hoping for a push of encouragement or some guidance.

It took the mixture of extreme emotional exhaustion, the physical drain of three babies, combined with the warmth and illumination of the white light experience, for me to push myself to become a freer, more vocal, expressive being, initially crying out for attention; then actively searching for an autonomous identity; acutely craving a purpose other than existing to be someone’s daughter, someone’s mother, someone’s wife.

“There is no way out,” I remember telling my mother. I had given up my job of eight years. I had three small children to take care of. We were living in an unfamiliar town filled with strangers. Though Mom loved my kids and loved to pamper them, she was physically too far away to help me take care of them on a daily basis. I was her only child. Though I was 28 years old, Mom kept telling me I’d waited too long to have kids, that she was too old now to help take care of them. We only got to see her once every few weeks. She hated the fact that we lived 60 miles from her. I felt completely alone.

Mom tried to console me and advised me to do something I liked, or wanted to do.

My mom’s encouragement was diluted by her inability to pursue her own dreams, by her inability to take steps on her own, using the excuse of never having a husband, or anyone, that would push and support her. Dad ridiculed and made fun of her interest in drawing. Before I was born, Mom actually sent away for books
on drawing and commercial art. I found those books a few weeks ago when I emptied out her house, abandoned along with her drawings, in the musty basement, a damp chamber where her deferred dreams mildewed in the dark.

It is crucial to my well being, to know that I am living my own life, that I will continue pushing myself, rather than expecting and waiting for my husband, or anyone else, to push me. Pursuing my own dreams, as my children grow and move out into the world on their own, is essential. I have always feared becoming like my Mom and my aunts who tried to live through their children, with apron strings so tightly wrapped around their kid’s throats that a separate identity was undefinable; while we, their children, were constantly fighting to breathe on our own, pulling Mamma’s weight when we tried to emerge as individuals and young adults.

I stayed at home with the kids for several months after my near-death experience. Then for a year or so, I worked part-time in the local hospital which got me out of the house a few days a week. The capsized turtle began to push herself and rock with the momentum of her daily existence, enabling her to defy the gravitational forces which kept her stationary, tipping back over onto a stable platform, onto solid ground once again. Her head and legs emerged from their protective environment. I began to acknowledge and move in the direction of my dreams.

How could my husband, or anyone else, have known what I needed, when I had not known myself? I gradually began to take responsibility for my own actions,
realizing that if I waited for validation from some one else before acting, before
taking care of my own needs, that I'd be waiting forever.

I enrolled in a literature class at the nearest college, forty miles from the town
where we live. School gave me a focus and a direction of sorts. I guess it saved my
life, reconnecting me to a goal, to something for me, even though it was an
incredible balancing act with three kids, driving the forty miles to and from classes,
a part-time job, and then another baby born while I was taking classes.

I refused to have a tubal ligation, not because of Catholic conviction, but
because of my years in the operating room. I knew it would be much easier for
Marty to have a vasectomy. After our forth baby was born, without any prompting
from me, Marty scheduled an appointment for the procedure.

Maybe it was unfair to my children, leaving them with a sitter while I drove off
to college, but it was thrilling to finally graduate, and receive that degree. I finally
read and analyzed Dickens and many other classic authors I'd always wanted to
read and study.

In college, I was introduced to the poetry of Langston Hughes for the first
time. He's become one of my favorite writers. “Hold fast to dreams/ for if dreams
die/ Life is a broken winged bird that cannot fly.” I now know, it is important to let the
dream pull you forward, important to grasp the momentum, clinging to the pull, not
waiting for the push.
Our artist child, our creative side, the dreamer and visionary, is the young
turtle propelled, pulled by her front limbs. She has not yet found her back legs to
push. Her eyes are tiny black dots, they see little but sand. The fledgling wants to
stop and rest, she cannot, because she knows intuitively the gulls will come to feed
upon her if she remains stationary. The small turtle is not afraid of the gulls. She is
propelled forward by the thought of their existence, passionate about emerging into
the water.

Now I am a fledgling turtle, pulling myself across the delicious hot sands. I
strive to be in rhythm with my inner voice and must keep moving toward the sea.
How do I know this? It is instinctive. I know that I must find the sea.

I get glimpses of the sea when I am privileged to gaze upon confident
women who are not afraid to be individuals, females who are open-spirited, honest
and direct, especially female writers who speak freely and poignantly. I get
glimpses of the sea when I read Alice Walker's words, or hear her calm articulate
voice, a voice of the daughter of sharecroppers, a voice without pretense or self-
consciousness, an educated voice able to express the truth as she sees it, artfully
with conviction; I get glimpses of the ocean in the words and wisdom and presence
of women who give me new found passion and courage to speak, to use my voice; I
get glimpses in the eyes of all women who, by example, teach me to dive in head
first and live without fear of the unknown.

I get glimpses of the waves slashing and crashing, feel the cool spray on the
craggy shore-line, in the lyrics and melody of the song "Green-Eyed Lady." "Green
eyed lady, ocean lad-a/Wind-swept lad-ee/Dressed in love/She lives for life to be-
e.

I get glimpses of the watery “depth and height and breadth my soul can reach,” when I’m drawn into the moist surface of the green eyes reflected from my mirror. In my reflection I see a calm, relaxed woman whose eyes are clear and wide. Fortunately for me, when the flood gates opened, the dam gave way but no one drowned. It is likely that Susan Smith will never be able to look herself in the eye without a vision of anguish. She will live in perpetual torment with a view of her sons’ death, knowing that she drowned them.

The torrent of exhaustion and despair I experienced, softened my inner being, and eventually allowed me to open myself up to new opportunities. At the same time, I learned that I carry my own protection. I’m ready to let the waters rush over me. I now know I’ll resurface ready to surf the next wave, emerge from any storm as long as I don’t panic, as long as I submerge only for as long as it’s necessary to nourish myself in solitude, to nurture myself in quiet contemplation, to protect myself from predators or to take shelter from a cold harsh season.

The woman in the mirror is not worrying about the future or regretting the past. For an instant, she’s absorbed in the miracle of infinite life, in the depths of the sea green shafts and flecks of light found within the golden-brown perimeter of her own right iris.
Across the water, I can distinguish the heart-shaped leaves of the redbud trees along the shore of Red Haw Lake. I recall this landscape in April before the green appeared. Tiny blossoms budded from the bare slender branches. The blooms are so small, they blur into blotches of color, without distinct shape. When the water's smooth and silky they reflect the illusion of pink cumulus clouds floating. In a good year, when the redbuds climax, it is as if Monet has mixed the hues of pink and lavender himself, and dabbed the water's edge from his palette.

The day we buried Mom was bright and warm like today. I held her memorial service here in Red Haw park.

The sun radiates onto my bare legs and arms, glistens off the ripples of the water, scintillates across the surface of the lake. I feed on light. I am a sun worshipper. Despite the hole in the ozone and the danger of skin cancer, to me, it is a sacrilege to spend the daylight indoor submerged in work, hiding from the sun, locked in windowless buildings and cubicles like thousands of people do in contemporary society each and every day. Sunlight and God are intrinsically connected in my mind.

The Indo-Europeans, who lived before the fifth millennium B. C. in Eurasia, used the word _deiwos_ for "god." _Deiwos_ was derived from the root, _deiw-_, meaning "to shine." Therefore, it is understood that the notion of deity was melded together in the minds of the Indo-European with the concept of the bright sky. The
present day English word, "deity," and many other contemporary English and European words, were formed from this Indo-European base word. The root deiw- is the obvious base for the word "god" in several contemporary languages in the Indo-European family. For example, the French use Dieu, the Spanish use Dios, the Italian, Dio for "god." Since the beginnings of humankind, it is likely that the sun and the divine have been adhesed together in the minds of human beings as one concept.

It's seventy degrees, not a cloud anywhere. The distant hum of wheels on the highway can't dilute the constant rubbing of forewing, the sensual rhythmic song of crickets in the grass. A continuous gentle breeze caresses the lake, cooled by the water as it crosses from the south.

Despite my usual ambivalence about living in this small town, poetry surrounds me here. Surprisingly, I feel a natural part of this southern Iowa landscape, finally free to explore and contemplate my complex feelings about this place. When I'm outside in the warmth of the sunshine, especially on a gorgeous day like today, I soften, extend my limbs into the sunshine, and join in life. I begin to anticipate new possibilities right in front of me that I never knew existed. The simplicity of the ordinary becomes extraordinary.

I have often longed to move from here, from small town Iowa, felt isolated and trapped in this rural setting, silenced and stifled by the same painfully familiar faces, the same homogeneous, unintriguing places, felt ready to spring from the trap with one foot securely caught in place. I've lived in Iowa all of my life and often
wondered why. But now I'm taking to heart H. D. Thoreau's order to, "Think of the consummate folly of attempting to go away from here! When the constant endeavor should be to get nearer and nearer here." Thoreau's words and this sumptuous day, make me question how much I miss every other day, how much movement, life and wonder I fail to see in the everyday places I inhabit. Instead of struggling to pull out of the trap, I've decided I should stop resisting, and examine my surroundings more intimately.

Thoreau recommends, "You need sit still long enough in some attractive spot in the woods that all its inhabitants may exhibit themselves to you by turns." He believes you have to be looking for the scarlet oaks in the woods of brown November, the partridges camouflaged by their color among the leaves, playing dead; or the otters which grow to be four feet long, before you are able to see them. Settled here on this slope of grass, overlooking the lake, following Thoreau's advice, I'm free to play with his thoughts, and absorb the day and the sunshine.

* 

I'm trying to open up to the here and now, attempting to train my mind and eye to begin to examine, appreciate and visualize the beauty and possibilities that surround me. My ten-year-old son asked me the other day if I'd noticed the dead turtle in the drive way. Half-listening, "What, what are you talking about?" I asked, as my mind wandered and I stacked dishes in the dishwasher. "What do you mean a turtle?"
"It's shell is this big," he said and spread his hands to form a twelve-inch circle.

"You're kidding, a turtle in the drive way?"

"Come and see it, Mom. Its shell is cracked." I dried my hands and followed him outside. It lay in a depression of gravel next to the front lawn. A twelve-inch carapace, cracked but intact, compressed on the lifeless body. A brilliant red patch on each side of the head identified it as a red-eared slider. "What was this turtle doin' in our drive way, Mom? Who ran over him?"

"I don't know, Tad." I wondered if I was the one. Maybe I was. Oblivious to its existence, as Thoreau says, I could have taken its life, run over it with the Aerostar, pressurized the life out of it. I remembered I had caught a glimpse of the turtle and thought one of the little neighbor kids had left one of their plastic toys in the drive way again. I had noticed the turtle before Tad brought it to my attention, but hadn't really seen it. "I don't know what it was doin' here, Tad--I've never seen a turtle in town before. They're usually in, or around water, and live in the country."

Thoreau makes me wonder how many turtles have passed through our yard over the years, crawled through our town unnoticed. What specific message did this turtle have for me? Its shell did not protect it this time. What was this slider doing so far from water and its natural habitat? Red eared sliders were very popular pets in the 50's and 60's, but banned because they didn't survive well in
captivity deprived of sunlight. All young water turtles need enormous amounts of calcium and vitamin D, which is produced by exposure to sunlight, in order to grow well and produce a hard shell. Like me, they need direct, prolonged exposure to the sun. I crave sunlight, usually become depressed in the winter when we don’t see the sun here in Iowa, sometimes for weeks at a time.

*

One Native American Creation Story involves the turtle, humans, and the development of the earth. One version of this story translated from the Cherokee language relates:

Long ago, this world was a place of peace and happiness. Man was content. There was no crime, war or sorrow. Then evil came slipping in under the cover of darkness from the land of shadows. It entered the minds of the people. Soon the wicked people outnumbered the good people. Life continued like this for a while.

At last, a great flood came and destroyed the world and all those who had become wicked. Only those who had remained good were left. They were saved from drowning by a giant turtle who let them climb on his back. The turtle was so old his back was covered with moss.

Once on the turtle’s back, the people saw a swimming bird. The bird came to them and seeing they were in trouble, asked what he could do for them. The people asked him to dive beneath the water to find a little bit of land. The bird did this. He was gone a long time and the people began to worry and give up. But just as it seemed all hope was gone, the bird came out of the water with a bit of earth on his bill.

The people gratefully thanked the swimming bird and took the soil from his bill and mixed it with the moss on the turtle’s back. They tended the soil very carefully, and it grew larger and larger until there was new earth inhabited by the children of the good people and the children’s children.
It is said the earth still rests upon the back of the giant turtle and when he moves, there are earthquakes and floods.

As I looked at the lifeless turtle, I recalled what my writing instructor, Fern, had remarked the day before, “It’s hard going--entering this life, and even tougher exiting out of it.” I carried her words from the classroom, and tucked them in the back of my mind. Fern’s mom is living in her home; she is dying. The family is preparing for her death, taking care of Grandma. This dying process and the preparing to part with her mother is taking a toll on Fern, yet she is doin’ her damnedest to appear bubbly and talkative in the classroom. Her Bronx accent is still noticeable after twenty-six years in Iowa. Fern is very unlike the tight-lipped Midwesterners I’m more accustomed to hearing speak, not a typical Iowa professor in many respects. It’s her nature to be bubbly and talkative, but she’s tired. She’s paler now than she was when I first met her at the beginning of the semester a few weeks ago, her face more ashen. The sparkle from her eyes is gone. Fern says she has trouble believing in a God who would make coming in, and going out of this life, especially going out, so rough.

To the writer, Edward Abbey, death, rot, and decay, make up a part of the whole of Paradise, of God. God and Paradise are one in the same to Abbey, exist in the here and now, comprised of the Earth, our mother, the natural world. This
summer I was struggling with the God thing myself, with faith in anything positive. It seems to get harder every year to believe that the good outweighs the bad. Maybe Abbey would say the good, and the bad, ie... the so-called ugly, have to struggle for their own place in this world, strive to balance each other. Death can be ugly.

* 

I buried my own mom four years ago in the Spring. It was the beginning of Memorial Day week-end when she died, late May, the climax of Spring. Ellis' Greenhouse was loaded with tons of bedding plants, bursting with blossoms, and gorgeous hanging baskets and pots of all colors. The solarium was filled with geraniums, petunias and pansies, fatuous, marigolds, coleus, inpatients, snapdragons, moss rose and mums, dahlias and delphiniums. I bought a planter of purple petunias, and salmon colored geraniums, bordered with white sweet smelling alyssum, propped it outside on the window ledge, next to Mom's bed. She grinned and shook her head, an act which said, "They're so pretty--Is it Springtime? You shouldn't have spent money on flowers for me--I'm too worn out--completely tuckered in." That's what she would have said, if she could speak.

Most of the time, I was thankful that she couldn't talk any more. I knew what she wanted to say when I looked at her. She could still verbally produce a "Goddamn it!" or "Shit!" with no effort. Sounds which demanded a conscious effort usually took more ability and energy than she could muster. She cried, shaking her head frantically, stomping her one good foot on the linoleum, with a look of
terror and fury in those brown eyes the day I first took her to the nursing home.

Fern and her family took care of her mother at home. Her mom died in their home. I tried to figure a way to keep Mom at home. She’d always been horrified at the mention of living in a nursing home. It was impossible to find a feasible solution. We live in a turn-of-the-century, two story house with no bedrooms or bathrooms on the first floor. There was no way I could take care of her in our house. At that point, she was in a wheel chair and incontinent. I could lift her, but I couldn’t carry her up the stairs. I kept her with us for a few days, giving her sponge baths in the kitchen, and lifting her on and off a portable commode in the foyer. I looked at a little house a couple of doors up the street, with thoughts of buying it for Mom, even interviewed the one woman who had applied for the job of live-in caretaker. The woman was well past middle-age and not in great health herself. I had to face the reality that Mom had to go to the nursing home. People always say, “Once they go into the nursing home they don’t last long.” She may have lived longer at home.

Superstitiously I wondered if the dead turtle in the drive was a bad omen. I’d murdered a turtle, right in my own front yard.
Mom’s flower beds behind the house were always at their prettiest on Memorial weekend, loaded with perennials. The peony bushes in the bed circling the garage opened into jumbo grapefruit-sized, fragrant pink balls of petals. The red peonies were her favorite. Only one precious bush grew next to the back fence. Their scarlet heads of petals never grew quite as big as the pink’s. The egg yolks transplanted from Great-Gramma Johnson’s yard in Murray, bordered the pink peonies, with big button-sized, sunny colored blossoms. There were deep purple irises, yellow irises, white-brown-lavender irises that oozed a sweetly fragrant, sticky, syrup from the base of their petals. Mom called the paler colored, smaller irises, “old flags.” She thought they were ugly because they were wild, grew back every year without any care or effort from her.

Mom seemed more alive in the Springtime. She looked forward to the warm weather and working in the yard, planting tomatoes, and green beans, and pulling weeds. She’d start to fret early in April, “I don’t know who I’ll get to till the garden this year,” and in the same breath predict that the weather wasn’t going to cooperate. The eternal pessimist in her always knew it would be too dry to till, or too wet for planting. By mid-May she’d worry if the buds on the peonies were too big, or if there were ants working the buds open too early, or if there weren’t any ants at all. Miraculously hundreds of peonies would nearly always burst into bloom at just the right time. If they weren’t in full blossom by the big day, she soaked their stems in warm water to trick them into opening.

On Memorial Day she’d be up at dawn snipping stems with Dad’s old black
barber scissors. The peonies would be soaked with dew and humidity, their pompon heads bent over, heavy with moisture, their rich green leaves covered with droplets, the air saturated with their perfume. For hours, Mom would stoop over the bushes, cut flowers, fill twenty gallon white plastic buckets with water and peonies, then wrap coffee cans and fruit jars with aluminum foil for vases. We’d load them into the trunk of the car. I was glad to get out of Des Moines into the countryside.

*

I am very intrigued by Thoreau’s theme that “the greater part of the phenomena of nature are . . . concealed to us all our lives.” He proposes that we humans fail to revel in the beauty and wonder of the natural world around us, because we are not “prepared to appreciate” and not expecting or conscious of its existence. In his words we do not visualize or realize the beauty all around us, “because there is no intention of the mind and eye toward them.” The poet, Joy Harjo adds to Thoreau’s philosophy when she writes:

It is possible to understand the world from studying a leaf. You can comprehend the laws of aerodynamics, mathematics, poetry and biology through the complex beauty of such a perfect structure.

It’s also possible to travel the whole globe and learn nothing.

*

When I was five years old, Mom bought a cherry red Nova Super Sport. I remember I couldn’t wait to ride in the new convertible with the top down. By noon,
with the sun directly over our heads, and the wind whipping my long blond hair, we were zipping along the interstate, heading south toward Winterset. Once we'd slow down at the Bevington truck stop, to make the turn west onto highway 92, the countryside seemed warmer, more welcoming. New calves frolicked in familiar pastures, patterned rows of corn seedlings sprouted from the hills of black earth between furrows, scattered patches of wild iris blossomed in the grassy ditches of old farmsteads. The smell of ripe manure and sour silage made me hold my breath as we passed muddy barn lots of fat sows spread on their sides with rows of piglets sucking at their bellies.

In Winterset we'd stop for Gramma and Aunt Bobby, then Aunt Lois. We'd twist through the limestone hillsides of Madison County. Mom always said that there were rattlesnakes in those rocky bluffs south of town. Snakes, "scared her shitless," she said. If a tiny gardener snake slipped around her bare foot while she was in the yard inspecting her flowers or working in the garden, she'd hack the poor thing into chunks of skin and pulp with a hoe. Once she hacked a nest of babies and their mom all to pieces. It made me sick when I saw their bloody remnants lying on the grass, their mutilated fragments beside the rock wall surrounding the peonies. On my hikes through those southern Iowa hills, I've never seen a rattlesnake, but I'm always looking underfoot, listening for its rattle, and hearing Mom warning me, "God, Robin, be careful, honey!"

*
I am drawn to turtles as a symbol. I wear turtle shaped earrings and a T-shirt decorated with turtles, and collect turtle figures and pictures.

* 

After Gramma died, Mom always bought a greenhouse planter for her parents’ grave, for her mom and dad to share, because Gramma Tressie and Grandpa Weaver deserved better than cut flowers from the yard. If she couldn’t afford to buy planters, Mom’d buy a flat of pansies and petunias, scavenge a pot from the garage or the basement, and create one. Her brother’s graves, baby Marvin, and Uncle Keith, always got cut flowers, and Aunt Lorraine’s too. Sometimes Dad got a planter, sometimes cut flowers. His mom, Gramma Francis, and her mom, Gramma Johnson always got cut flowers, a jar with three peonies, an iris or two, and a sprig of her eggyolks.

I buried Mom in the Lorimor cemetery, in the plot between Gramma and Grandpa, and Uncle Keith. As they lowered her into the ground, I took one long last look at the pink peonies sprayed over her silver casket. My daughter, Tressa, played *Nearer to God* on the flute.

They are all there now. They’ve made the big trip, all gone home. I remember to walk between the graves, not on them, like Gramma Tressie taught me. “Why shouldn’t we walk on the graves, Gramma? Will we sink in?”

“It’s just not respectful, honey,” she’d say. As a child, the thought of walking over human bones and rotting flesh gave me the willies. How can disease and
death, and the rotting of the flesh help to comprise paradise?

The turtle was one of the most powerful creatures in Plains Indians culture. Because of its hard shell, the turtle was associated with protection. It also represented the power of women. Both a symbol of the earth and water, the turtle was believed to protect women in childbirth and prevent female diseases. I have on occasion seen big turtles next to the highway at a distance, but never in town, never on our property, never so close to my home, up close.

I'd lost memory of the positive effects of the sun, of a Springtime paradise in the soul until today. My spirit was cold, lifeless. I couldn't even enjoy the sun and the summer this year. Normally I feel most alive, happy and healthy in the heat and sunshine of June, July and August. I've spent most of this summer trapped in my own shell, primarily disconnected from the outside world, without joy, cut off from sensation, clinically depressed. It has been a painful summer. I'm intrigued, and somehow vaguely reassured by the philosophy of Edward Abbey. According to Abbey, paradise isn't always neat and tidy, or painless, and death is a natural part of paradise. The following passage from his book, Desert Solitaire relates his beliefs:

Now when I write of paradise I mean Paradise, not the banal Heaven
of the saints. When I write "paradise" I mean not only apple trees and golden women but also scorpions and tarantulas and flies, rattlesnakes and Gila monsters, sandstorms, volcanoes and earthquakes, bacteria and bear, cactus, yucca, bladderweed, ocotillo and mesquite, flash floods and quicksand, and yes--disease and death and the rotting of the flesh.

Abbey echoes the philosophy and advice of Thoreau when he writes, "the only paradise we ever need--if we only had the eyes to see" is "the earth which bore us and sustains us, the only home we shall ever know." Here is another naturalist telling me to look, to just simply open my eyes and be quiet and absorb, revel in the natural world for my salvation in the here and now. This man even promotes the acceptance of death, not only as a natural part of existence which I try to accept, but to embrace it as part of the only paradise I will ever need. That is a much tougher order to follow.

Paradise is with me today, all around me on this breezy bank of grass. God radiates down onto my bare skin and glistens off the surface of Red Haw. But where is God, where is Paradise lurking, when Mom wets the bed? When she reeks of her own pee and is completely helpless to get out of bed because her right side is paralyzed? Where is God when she can't even ask for help because the stroke which severely limits her mobility, also robbed her of speech. Where is Paradise hiding then? Is it mired in the overwhelming inadequacy which pervades my spirit as I watch, helpless to reverse the ticking of the clock--the natural progression from birth to death? Helpless to lessen the pain, unable to enlighten
Mom instilled a sense of fear in me. I'm not afraid of snakes anymore, at least not as fearful as I used to be. Since I witnessed Mom's exit--I am afraid of dying. How can Paradise include rot and decay, and pain, like Abbey says? How can Paradise exist in the here and now when you're watching some one you love gasp for breath?

* 

Had someone who knew I had an affinity for turtles placed its cracked body there in the drive as a mean prank to haunt me? No. Who would do that? I talked myself out of the thought, brushing off the turtle as a fluke.

* 

It is the fear which robs the spirit and envelopes the Paradise of the here and now in a vampire's cloak. It is Dracula's dark cape swooshing over his victim, blackening her vision as he sucks the life force from her neck.

I let him cut on Mom's neck, her fragile, friable neck. I didn't even try to stop him. "It's like holdin' a gun to your head, Ruth," he'd told her--told me too. Big Dr. Bob talked her into the surgery before I'd had the chance to talk with her, before I made the sixty mile drive from Chariton to Des Moines. He'd been a MASH surgeon in Viet Nam. I'd worked closely with him for years. I knew he'd bullied her into letting him cut on her. If it hadn't been for the fear--her fear of never seeing the
sunrise again—Mom wouldn't have consented. If it hadn't been for my fear to stand up to him and speak out, to use my voice, make myself heard for Mom, when Mom was paralyzed by fear, before she became paralyzed from the clot that was dislodged during the surgery.

I went into the operating room with Mom, stood next to her as Josee, a friendly Philippine nurse, belted her legs to the table, strapped her arthritic body into a “T,” arms extended crucifix style on the side boards, and placed a rolled sheet behind her neck. I stood at Mom’s side, looked into her eyes. She searched my eyes, the only part of my face exposed above the paper mask. “You’re tired,” she said. The anesthesiologist injected medication into her Intravenous line, and Mom went to sleep. He held the nitrous mask over her mouth and nose. I knew the endotracheal tube came next, so I bolted for the door.

“It was her choice,” my husband tells me. “You had no other options.” I'm not sure I believe him. If it weren't for my naive faith that she’d come out of the operating room in better shape than she’d gone in, maybe I would have stood up to Dr. Bob.

*

In the poem, What Are Years, Marianne Moore writes: What is our innocence,/ what is our guilt?...

In the year that followed her surgery, Mom lived in the nursing facility near our home. When the phone would ring at 2:00 a.m., I'd jump straight up, into a
sitting position on the bed. Marty would answer and tell the night nurse to “get an ambulance, get her over to the hospital. We’ll be there in a few minutes.”

Moore continues: *All are/ naked, none is safe.*

By the time we’d arrive in the emergency room, they’d have her stripped naked and strapped to an exam table. Marty would order an intravenous line and a urinary catheter, stat. Mom would be in heart failure, shivering, quaking from head to foot, sobbing like a baby, gasping for breath. I’d ask for a blanket. The paramedic would bring a blanket after the I. V. was in and running. Sometimes they couldn’t find a vein, so they would stick her arm repeatedly. First the nurse would try, then Marty. The blanket still wouldn’t arrive until the nurse inserted the catheter.

*And whence/ is courage: the unanswered question,/ the resolute doubt--
dumbly calling, deafly listening--that / is misfortune, even death,/ encourages others/ and in its defeat, stirs/ the soul to be strong?*

Mom continued to fight. I had to be strong. We kept her alive as long as possible. She wanted to live.

*He sees deep and is glad, who/ accedes to mortality/ and in his imprisonment rises/ upon himself as/ the sea in a chasm, struggling to be/ free and unable to be...*

Ma was struggling, the wave churning. After they’d move her into a hospital room, no longer strapped, she at least had the freedom to pull herself upright in bed with her one good hand, so she could breath easier.
The sea, ...in its surrendering/ finds its continuing.... Says Moore.

Mom didn’t surrender.

So he who strongly feels,/ behaves....

I planned Mom’s memorial service. It was a bright, sunny warm Spring day, very like today, right here in Red Haw park. We gathered in the big stone shelter house, overlooking the lake. The casket was open in one corner of the shelter, The Red Haw Campers played, picked and sang some old time bluegrass tunes for Mom. When I was searching for thoughts that might help me to choose the right words for that day, I came across a quote by Robert Louis Stevenson that I believed captured one of Mom’s main philosophies in life. He said, To know what you prefer instead of humbly saying Amen to what the world tells you you ought to prefer, is to have kept your soul alive. I slowly repeated Stevenson’s words to the crowd of family and friends there in the shelter house. I asked my cousin, Phyllis, aloud for the mourners, “Do you remember her standard breakfast order when we were traveling with Harry and the carnival that summer?”

I answered, “Two Eggs over easy, bacon crisp, coffee--black,” was the request. And continued: “When I asked her why she always had to be so picky and embarrass us each morning, she defensively snapped, ‘Damn it! I know what I want, if I pay good money for it I should get it, I reckon!’ Mom almost always knew what she preferred. She always voiced her opinion. Mom never had trouble expressing herself, even after she could no longer talk. “Mom has secured everlasting life for her soul by never humbly saying amen to anything.”-------That is
what I said to the family that day, but I didn't believe the "everlasting life" part.

I know now, by stubbornly holding fast to her convictions, by clinging to that bed rail with her one good hand, and straining to pull her body upright in order to breathe, she was exhibiting in her own way, the only way possible, a tenacious courage of spirit up to the moment of the death of her body.

* 

Because of their rigid shells, turtles are unable to expand their chests to breathe. Inflation of the lungs is made possible only by altering the volume of space within the shell.

* 

_The cost of a thing—is the amount of what I call life—which is required to be exchanged for it immediately or in the long run_, wrote Thoreau. _I read this quote to the crowd gathered there at her memorial. We are all God filled, full of potential. Through our creative actions we are capable of evoking the image of God. In coming together here today we are exhibiting divinity—God is moving through us. God is love. Love and compassion brought us here today, Ruth brought us here today; our love for each other brought us here today._”

* 

God is light.
Moore closes “What Are Years” with,

So he who strongly feels,  
behaves. The very bird,  
grown taller as he sings, steels  
his form straight up. Though he is captive,  
his mighty singing  
says, satisfaction is a lowly  
thing, how pure a thing is joy.  
This is mortality,  
this is eternity.

Mom was a caged bird, trapped between the metal bed rails, locked in her paralysis. Did she grow taller as she stole her form straight up? Yes. Yes, without words, she sang, “satisfaction is a lowly thing.” Did she realize the purity of joy? Yes. Even though Mom was often depressed and struggled with her failing health for many years, she knew joy.

I doubt if she was ever an optimist. Mom did have faith, not faith in organized religion, or the God they preach about, but faith in the intrinsic beauty of her grandkids’ freckles, faith in the tangy taste of the fat, red tomatoes she grew. Was she singing more sweetly as she stole forth--upward in that bed? She was bein’ Mom--killing the object of her fear, fighting death, voicing her triumph with that stare, exerting her will from within the cage, within the shell of her body.

Will I go quietly into that good night? Or will I rage as Mom did against the dying of the light? Or walk toward the light? Dylan Thomas tried to provoke his
own father at his deathbed to, "Rage against the dying of the light"--while I’ve wondered for years why Mom raged. It is the pain of life which scares me. Why did she fight so hard, for so long?

I never understood why Mom was so afraid to die. I’d gone into the light and come back transformed. Maybe she was never granted the opportunity I was. She was afraid of darkness, could not sleep at night for several years before she died. I remember the story she told about her experience at her own dad’s deathbed. My dad, who died a year before Grandpa, came to her. He appeared on a stump near a pond in a ray of light, sat fishing outside the hospital window, waiting for Grandpa. I should have reminded her of that visit as I sat next to her and kissed her forehead before she died.

* 

As a pathway to God, Jesus professed, *I am the way, the truth and the light.*

* 

Why was Mom so afraid of snakes? Now I realize that snakes were able to surprise her in the midst of her protective sanctuary, steal the safety and security of her own backyard. They threatened her on home territory. Death posed the same threat to her.

Why am I attracted to turtles? Sea turtles struggle, fight, beat incredible odds, overcome immense challenges to reach the ocean after they hatch, in order
to submerge into its protective life-sheltering water. They are not afraid to live.

For sea turtles, the ocean is their home--their natural, needed environment.

I’m still searching for my natural home. For the past several years I’ve felt the need to leave Iowa, felt trapped here. I have been caged in the empty shell of my existence on this mound of earth between the Mississippi and the Missouri rivers, caught in this land of silence.

“Fern was back in the classroom, teaching the day after her mother’s death. Surprisingly, she looked slightly more relaxed than she had for some time. When one of my classmates asked her why she returned to work so soon, she responded nonplussed, “Where else would I be?” Fern, it seems, is never at a loss for words. All of the Easterners I’ve come to know have always been more outspoken and direct than any typical Iowan or midwesterner. I’ve often kicked myself in retrospect for not speaking out when I should have. But I am an Iowan, an Iowa woman, born and raised to keep my mouth shut in an effort to be respectful of others, in an effort to be, what I was taught and conditioned to believe, is feminine.

In this place of tight-lipped midwesterners, I’ve been unable to express my voice, accept and love myself, find a place that is my own. If I cry onto the page, maybe I won’t have to crawl out of Iowa. I might be able to push my head out into the world, propel myself forward within the boundaries of this place, and explore the here and now intimately, even in dark cloudy November. Maybe I will
leave Iowa, but Iowa will never leave me. This place is my turtle, my foundation, my mother-earth.

* 

The next morning when I walked out to the drive to study the turtle cadaver.

It was gone.
It is mid-October. I walk this trail by the lake routinely, see something new each day, when I'm looking. I'm here to unwind, to let go of some stress, loosen my muscles and shed some of last night's tension. Here on the trail, the wild rose hips, bright red in the sunlight, catch my attention today. The bush is loaded with pomegranate colored, pea-sized balls, capsules naturally packed with vitamin C. I stop and pick a few, stand and bite into one for the first time, afraid of its bitterness, waiting for its taste to sour my tongue. It's not bitter. The juice from the pulp is slightly astringent, mildly sweet.

I'm trying to release some of the anxiety I absorbed last night into the fresh air and sunshine. Marty ran the kids to catechism class. I'd expected him to be gone for five minutes. Twenty minutes later, the phone rang. "Where are you?" I blurted impatiently.

He hesitated briefly. I knew that something was wrong. It had been a long, hectic day for both of us, and we'd been looking forward to a few minutes alone together, relaxing over a quiet dinner. "Robin, I'm at Ethel's. I spotted her on the ground beside her house when I was coming around the corner. She fell. I think she's broken her back."

"Oh, God!" Do you need my help? Do you want me to come over?" I volunteered quickly, but reluctantly.

Marty hesitated to ask me for help, because he knew I was exhausted. He
also knew our neighbor, Ethel. “Would you please? She won’t let me call an ambulance.”

“Marty, for God’s sake, just call for help! We can’t move her alone.” I knew how pig-headed Ethel could be.

“I can’t. She gets hysterical at the mention of an ambulance. I’m trying to calm her down. She’s worried about her animals, her birds, and her dogs. I’ve called this woman, a friend of hers, Ethel insisted that I had to call her and get her here before I call an ambulance. She doesn’t trust us to take care of her pets.”

“I’ll be right over.” I slipped on my tennis shoes and jogged up the street to Ethel’s. There she was on her hands and knees on a patch of grass outside of her kitchen door. The sun was going down and it was beginning to get chilly. I ran inside and grabbed an afghan off of her bed, darted out the door again and draped it over her, to help prevent her from going into shock.

“No-oo-oo-oo-oo!” She shrieked, “That’s ma good throw! Take it inside before it gets dirty!” she ordered.

“Okay, Ethel, Okay! Calm down. Let us help you. Let us call an ambulance.”

“No-noooooooooooooo!” She began to shriek again, tried to raise herself up, then cried out in pain. It took over an hour to convince her to let us call an ambulance. We waited for her friend to arrive and tried to placate her. I followed her orders to take the squash out of the oven, turn the oven off, take a towel off the clothesline, fold it and place it on the kitchen counter, and put the clothespins in their place in a bag hanging in the stairwell. Once she calmed down, she didn’t
make a sound, not even when Marty palpated her hip. Who knows how long she’d been there on her hands and knees on the cold ground, with what we later learned was a broken hip, before Marty’d spotted her.

A rose hip joins the delicate flower to its stem. Human hips are joints that connect the upper body to the legs, the joint formed by each thighbone and the pelvis which Ethel fractured when she fell. Generally, the part of the anatomy we think of when we use the term hip, in relation to a human, is the part of the body surrounding and including the joint, especially the fleshy part of the upper thigh, the haunch.

It is the orange-red rose hips that caught my eye today as I walked the trail. The little cherry-like baubles are illuminated by the sunlight reflecting off the lake. Why are they named hips? Webster’s defines hip as the small fleshy ripened fruit of a rosebush or, on a human the fleshy part of the upper thigh or haunch. The Indo-European word for hip, in both contexts, human and rose, is keub, which has evolved through centuries from heope in Old English, hiopo in Old Saxon, to hepe in Middle English, into the Modern English form, hip. Keub meant to bend as at a joint, to bend over.

The word hip connotes and conjures images of soft, supple, adipose, and muscle, usually the curves of a feminine derriere which join the pelvic flower to its stem legs. Human hips are generally thought of as female. When we are young our hips serve to attract a partner which ultimately makes reproduction possible.

“These hips—-can take a man—-and spin him like a top!” writes Lucille Clifton. The
red fleshy fruit of the rose hip attracts hungry birds and animals the way it enticed me. We carry the seeds off and spread them. Both woman’s hips and rose hips house possibilities for new life, seeds.

As I taste of the rose hip, a seed slips between my front teeth, and I push it onto a finger with my tongue. Surprised by the seed, I split another hip in half with my thumbnail and forefinger to examine it. There are ten seeds nested in the tiny red ball, sesame sized, almond colored, all uniform, perfect, snuggled in their shell, this ovary home. When I flip it over the half shell rests on the tip of my little finger, looks like a ladybug with one spot.

The fleshy shell of both rose and human hips pad and protect their precious inner contents. A woman’s ovaries lie inside her pelvis protected by her fleshy hips. When a female is born, her ovaries hold a multitude of ovum, more egg cells than will be released in her lifetime. A single rose-hip, the ovary, contains enough seeds to reproduce up to a dozen new shrubs or plants, thousands of blossoms and hips, millions of seeds. The young fruits of this rosebush attract me to examine their flesh in detail.

Human flesh used to be more intriguing to me until I’d examined it in detail in the operating room on a routine basis. Working as a surgical assistant, I’ve seen flesh dissected, bisected, bifurcated, and excised. I’ve literally helped to turn flesh inside out and upside down. I can’t help but think of Ethel today. She is in a Des Moines hospital having her fractured hip pinned and plated. I know the procedure in intimate detail. Over the years I must have assisted with hundreds of hip
I remember one ninety year-old woman, stripped naked, suspended in mid-air on the fracture table in room nine, her flaccid hip flesh sagging to the floor. She was wide awake, having been given a spinal anesthetic. She couldn't move because she was tied to the table. The surgical workers ignored her cries for help. They hadn't started to prep her because they were waiting for us, the evening shift, to take over for them. They were angry because we were a few minutes late and they had planned to go out for pizza and beer. The woman was completely helpless and vulnerable, stripped of her clothes and her voice, forced to wait to be prepped with antiseptic solution so we could cut into her flesh to repair her broken hip.

A lot of people constantly asked me how I could work in surgery, “Doesn't all that blood and guts and gore gross you out?”

When I first began working in the operating room I’d reply, “No. I’m fascinated by the human anatomy and physiology.” I personally could never forget the feelings, the soul, of each individual body who found himself or herself strapped to a table. But, as I became more and more used to being exposed intimately to the flesh of strangers, I lost sight of the wonder and the mystery of life encapsulated in the shell of a human body. I believe this is possible because the operating room is an unnatural environment. There are no windows, no sunlight. Richard Seltzer, a surgeon and author, believes, “To work in windowless rooms is to live in a jungle where you cannot see the sky. Because there is no sky to see,
there is no grand vision of God." In the operating room, it is easy to become blind and muted to the miracle of life, to forget the wonder, the infinite possibilities housed in human flesh.

Here in the sunshine, on a cloudless October day, surrounded by God's cathedral of gold and orange leaves and endless sky, I stop to examine the flesh of a wild rose hip in detail. In June these hips were delicate blossoms of primrose, decorating this pathway in full bush glory. An uncultivated giant bouquet, a wild shrub, blushing with pink flowers, surrounded by a background of dark green leaves. Their blooms and fragrance attracted honey bees hungry for nectar and pollen. It is their pink color and smooth petals that catch my eye too. I'm always touched by their simple, yet provocative beauty.

The blossoms attract bees and insects which brush sunny yellow pollen from a central circle of male stamens into the very center of the flower, the female pistil. The mixture begins to grow downward into the ovary of the pistil, the hip. Within the female hip, ovules await fertilization. Pollen enters the surface tissue of the ovule. Sperm is discharged into the embryonic sac, fertilizes the egg and becomes the embryo of the seed which matures inside the fruit, which we call hips.

The flower is literally both male and female. The rose, though technically comprised of both male and female parts, symbolizes what is feminine at its finest. Feminine, not strictly female or male. A rose offers its individuality and mystery to anyone who takes the time to stop and ponder its sublimity, inhale its sweetness, and caress its petals. Its feminine buds unfold to the world, attractively vulnerable,
open, despite the protective thorns on its stem.

Rose blossoms like their hips, peak in perfection as they open and soften with age. Symbolically the rose is identified as female, the epitome of feminine beauty and grace in our culture. It is a tough yet tender flower. The rose has been celebrated in the art, music, literature, and religions of numerous civilizations of ancient times.

Roses may be traced back over 5000 years when they were grown by Egyptians, Chinese, Greeks and Romans. Confucius wrote about roses around 500 B.C. Since then, roses have been cherished by kings and queens, described by poets and philosophers, and loved by commoners. Nero lounged on cushions filled with rose petals. Cleopatra supposedly had rose petals piled knee-deep in the room where she first entertained Mark Antony. The Egyptians grew large numbers of roses in the Nile delta which were used in religious ceremonies.

A legend from early European mythology tells of the Greeks being defeated by Xerxes. The Greek warriors retreated to a rose bower to discuss retaliation. Subsequently, the talks “under the rose” connected the idea of confidentiality to the rose. Many meeting places and council chambers have by convention roses embossed or carved on their ceilings.

The development and expansion of the Roman Empire was a tremendous boost to the cultivation of the rose. A banquet (or a debauchery) was not complete without decorations of rose blooms and petals. There is evidence to suggest that the Egyptians created a very lucrative market exporting rose blooms to Rome.
The expanding Christian church adopted the rose in many forms as a symbol in architecture, heraldry, and nationalism. The Transept Rose Window at Notre Dame in Paris is one example of an intricate rose design created in the thirteenth century. The windows in ecclesiastical buildings were but one part of an expanding art form and the establishment of rosarian collections became fashionable.

During the Renaissance the expansion of culture and the association with the rose is so pervasive that it is difficult to find spheres of influence where it did not appear. By the sixteenth century the Dutch flower painters had discovered the rose, and it was depicted in many forms by a series of artists. Roses also have a long history as medicinal and perfume plants. Rose oils were used to treat everything from eye problems to wrinkled skin and hangovers. As far back as the thirteenth century, the apothecary's rose was widely used to make perfume and medicine in the French town of Provins. Eventually, it became a symbol for modern pharmacology.

Women's hips, like the symbolic rose blossom and its hip, peak in perfection as they open and soften with age. No matter what their age a woman's hips are a symbol of femininity at its finest. A young rose-hip is tight, round, and firm. I pluck another riper hip and pop it onto my tongue. It is softer in texture, more mellow and sweeter in taste like fresh applesauce. The mellow pulp is more appealing to the palette, more attractive to the creatures that feed on it. The rose hip softens to release its fertilized seeds. Girl's hips naturally soften and expand as they mature
into a woman at puberty. During pregnancy, in preparation for giving birth, a woman’s hips must expand and soften to ease delivery of a baby. And women’s hips soften as they age with gravity. It is only natural.

The wild rose which proliferates along this trail in an uncultivated state is a delightful gift of natural grace. It is hardier than its cultivated offspring hybrids. The hybrids which decorate many lawns and parks are showier with their concentric whorls of double flowers. But their petals are not real petals, only stamens that become petal-like, giving the blossom its fullness. The hybrid offspring have to be purposefully crossbred to create their full blossoms. These artificially bred roses are prized by many gardeners. I prefer the simple classics.

Most roses are descended from a handful of basic types. Even in this uncultivated state, in this simple five-petaled, single aureole that marks a wild rose, the blossom holds a mesmerizing, aesthetic appeal. This is one of the mother roses, the wild rose, the state flower of Iowa. It is a “perfect” flower by scientific definition, which means both stamens and pistil are present, both male and female parts, therefore, it is “complete” flower in the reproductive sense. This simple wild beauty is more appealing to me than a cultivated showier blossom. The wild rose’s needs are fewer. It doesn’t demand but still attracts attention. When and where conditions are right, this wild beauty propagates in untamed fashion.

The hybrids’ needs are many. It must be planted in special nutrient-rich soil and pampered, pruned, and protected from cold temperatures. The wild beauties spring to life and flourish on their own. They must be allowed to grow in a perfectly
natural manner or they will lose their individuality and charm. If the young growth of a wild rose is pruned, it looks ugly, stunted. If a wild species appears to be getting too big or out of hand in a garden, the correct approach is to thin selectively by cutting out some of the older stems close to the base of the plant. As a ground cover, a wild rose bush is trouble-free and makes few demands for maintenance. Deadheading new growth on a wild rose bush is a mistake, because it will produce fine autumn foliage and hips.

Through the ages, the physical products of the rose bush have been the seeds and the fruit, the hip. Both rose hips and human hips attract attention because of their naturally sensual appeal. My own hips have incited cheers from a boy who watched me walk down the sidewalk on the way home from school when I was twelve years old: *I ain’t seen a shake like that since my parakeet died*. I’ve never forgotten that one, not sure I completely understood it, only knew it was directed toward my loose hips. They jiggle, always have. In the hallway of my Des Moines high school I heard from another male, *Shake it but don’t break it honey--It took your mama nine months to make it*. I never forgot that one either. It was the seventies. After that, my mom bought me a panty girdle. She didn’t want my young hips to attract too much attention from the opposite sex. As a result, I became more self conscious and ashamed of my hips. That girdle was intended to mute the sexual message they proclaimed.

Twiggy was a top fashion model in the sixties and early seventies. Her name proudly proclaimed a description of her curveless physique. Twiggy’s hips
were not visible beneath her straight-cut mini dresses, a board-like figure perched above miles of leg. In our culture today, thin women are still regarded as beautiful by other women, the epitome of gorgeousness by many. Teenage girls still strive to emulate anorexic fashion models. Big breasts are sought after today, the bigger the better, while we are taught to loathe our fleshy hips, to try to hide them, or exercise them off.

Big hipped, fleshy women have been, and are still, seen as the most attractive in other cultures. Many African cultures view a protruding full derriere as sexy. Big hips have been revered in other cultures and civilizations for hundreds, even thousands of years. I'd like to be able to open into full blossom in mid-life, celebrate my hips as a natural, needed part of my female anatomy, feel free to let them jiggle in my jeans, feel at home in my own body without being self-conscious or ashamed.

The Venus of Willendorf is a Paleolithic statuette which represents one of the earliest forms of statuary art. Her rounded, exaggerated hips and form emphasize her power of fertility. This limestone lady was discovered in Austria in 1908. She dates to c. 35,000-25,000 B.C.E. The Venus of Laussel (c. 21,000 B.C.E.), another full-hipped goddess in bas relief, carved in limestone at the Paleolithic sanctuary in Laussel, France, was probably used in fertility rituals. In the European Renaissance women, depicted by the greatest artists and painters, Raphael, da Vinci, Botticelli, and numerous others, are full figured, round hipped and were considered lovely sexual beings.
These images of full figured, sexual, fertile women stand in stark contrast to the typical statue or picture of the Virgin Mary found in nearly every Catholic church today. Revered for her chastity, proposed to have remained a virgin for her entire life by some Catholics and other Christians, Mary is commonly cloaked in layers of white robes that hide her figure, especially her hips. The Catholic church does not condone so-called, unnatural, methods of birth control and at the same time promotes an unnatural asexuality. Rather than letting their natural, individual beauty unfold, women are supposed to stifle their sensual feminine nature, cover their bodies, and reign in their hips.

It is proper in the Catholic church and most other Christian faiths to wear makeup on your face and curl your hair. Even Ethel, before the paramedics came to take her to the hospital, fretted about not having fixed her hair that day. My mom made me promise to make sure she would have eyebrows penciled on in her casket before anyone could view her body. It is quite acceptable and common in American popular culture for women to add to, or alter, their appearance with cosmetics, or even plastic surgery; it is not proper in most social circles to reveal your natural self, especially to be sensual or to show your hips.

The recent trend among young people is to dye your hair, spike it with gel, pierce and tattoo various body parts to attract attention. Young women wear Wonder bras to push up their breasts and make them appear larger; or surgically enlarge their breasts and expose their cleavage. Hips are surgically liposuctioned to reduce their size and firm their shape.
Even though, recent medical studies have revealed that women with fatty hips, rather than bulging waistlines, are less likely to suffer from heart disease and different types of cancer, a pear-shape is healthy but not sought after. Many women starve themselves or work out to the point of exhaustion to tighten and firm their hips. I used to do aerobic exercises, frustrate and exhaust myself as I tried to keep up with Jane Fonda and other female exercise fanatics. Now I usually just walk this trail or one of the other local routes a couple of miles every other day, more often if I have the time and the weather is nice.

At forty, I've given up on firm hips. They're not important to me anymore. I don't recall ever having firm hips. After years of social and religious conditioning, I'm still self-conscious about my hips but no longer completely ashamed of them. I'm walking slowly now, relaxing my muscles, soaking in the sunshine. I clasp a few rose hips in my palm, bite into another one as I step along the trail, and spit the seeds into my free hand and scatter them on the grassy earth beside the gravel trail. This is my religious ceremony. It seems sacrilegious now to sit in church on a sunny Sunday morning when I can be outside under the open sky.

I've never examined the flesh of a wild rose hip in close detail before. There have been days when I've walked this trail, blind to the multitude of possibilities and the infinite wonder that surrounds me, thinking I needed to walk quickly for the aerobic benefit, and to keep my own hips from expanding. There have been times when I felt the need to hurry to get back to whatever task needed completing or to drive one of my kids to soccer practice or piano lessons.
It’s October again. I can hear Ethel shrieking at her dog. I hope I’m never quite as thorny and cranky as Ethel. But I do hope I’ll always be able to express myself openly and honestly like she does. A fractured hip would be the end of many women Ethel’s age. She’s screaming, “Shut up! Cindy--you little bitch!” as she walks one of her dogs, her full hips lumbering behind it, up the street, leash in hand.

Now that I’ve mellowed a bit with age, I try to find time to ramble, walk the trail slowly, watch carefully for signs of life to explore. When I slow down, it is possible to notice and revel in the detail of the feather pattern on the underwing of a hawk as it circles over head, absorb the graceful wonder of a blue heron, as it flaps and glides above the surface of the lake, spot a morel mushroom camouflaged among dry oak leaves, pick the morel and savor its warm, earthy aroma, pull a strand of bittersweet vine from a burr oak branch to decorate the mantel, or bisect a rose hip with my fingernail and taste its sweet pulpy flesh, rub its seeds between my thumb and forefingers.