
# BUD AND MARY

Poems about my parents and our family life

David Baldwin

## First Date

# 1933

The boy who came
to be my father
kissed her cheek.
What did my face look like
before that happened?

Bud at 17

Mary at 16

# 1939

September 9, 1939. Wedding Day

Bud and Mary with Mary's parents, Ethel and Donald Dondro

# 1940

Baby Donna

Mary and Bud with Donna in March 1941

## Childhood Memories

1945

Memories of my childhood
are hopelessly corrupt.
Facts are elusive.
The core event may stay the same,
protruding like a stone
in a turquoise tidal pool,
but ancillary facts appear,
disappear, reappear,
and shape-shift over time.

Facts are fleeting,
but feelings are forever
and absolutely incorruptible.
Memories are not unlike
the garden-variety dream
where the main takeaway
is not the inscrutable plot,
but the emotion I am feeling
when I awake.

Ensign Baldwin, Navy Supply Corps

Bud's first duty station, Jacksonville, Florida

## Harvard

Dad was a student at Harvard College
for three months.
It isn't what you think.
He was learning how
to be a Supply Corps officer in the Navy.

Most of the students were young,
right out of business school,
but Dad was almost 30
with years of experience
as a CPA.

They called these guys 90-day wonders.
Fortunately, for the American war effort,
they taught him how to salute properly!
But he never mentioned to me
physical fitness or marching
or inspections of cleaning stations.
It was all business.

Dad had deep contempt
for the Navy's accounting principles.
In his words, the Navy way was *stupid*.
There is the right way
and there is the Navy way!

Never mind.
Dad did well.
There were forty-two students
in his class,
and forty-one were assigned to ships,
and some of those died in combat.
Only one got stateside duty—
De Forest "Bud" Baldwin.

## The Word Jap

One of the first words I learned
as a small child
was the word *Jap*.

I heard it ten thousand times
before my fourth birthday,
and when I learned to read
it was in the L.A. Times
every day.

Jap.

The slur remained,
but was seldom heard or printed
after the war.
By then, we were friends with Japan.
The Boomer generation was spared
the J-word.

Officers Club, San Diego. Mary is in the middle, Bud is to her left.

## Images of Navy Housing

1946

*Jacksonville, Florida*

heat and high humidity
paint peeling from the ceiling
falling to the floor
Mother and the neighbors
holding their sides laughing

*Chula Vista, California*

heavy downpour
looking out
a second-story window
at a child playing with a tire
in the mud

## The Purple Cow

The guest bathroom toilet
by the entry
has a purple cow.
There is a soft bellow
when you flush it
and it doesn't stop
until the tank is full.
My neighbor, the plumber, tells me
the water pressure is too high.
He replaced the valve,
but the cow only moved
a few feet farther away.

When I was four, we lived
in a pre-war bungalow
with one toilet
and it sounded just like this.
Dad said it was a purple cow
and we believed him.
And now as I am nearing
the end of life
the cow is back
along with the memory
of Dad's solemn pronouncements.

## First Sounds

From the dawn of memory,
images, smells, and sounds
are all I have.
The earliest memory of sound
I am sure
is Mother reading "The Song of Hiawatha"
from a large old book.

There was the warmth of her body
next to mine
and the joyful richness of her voice
reading Longfellow's lines
with their hypnotic *Kalavala* cadence.
She spoke with all the passion
of a seasoned star of the stage

as I am sure
the same lines were read to her
from the large old book
with loving ardor
by her own mother.

Back row: Bud, Grandfather Dondro, and Mary; front row: David and Donna

## Cloud Formations

On simmering summer afternoons,
Mother and I stretched out
on the backyard grass
at our tiny wartime tract house
on Brighton Street
close to the Lockheed plant
and we tried to identify objects
in the clouds.
Those were the years
before smog commandeered the skies
over the L.A. basin.
Cumulus clouds were commonplace.

Mother was good at this.
She would spot some formation
in the clouds,
point it out to me,
and then tell a story.
I marveled at the stories,
but most of the time
I could not see what she saw
and that was a common theme
of our sixty-two years together:
we often did not agree
on what we were looking at,
but she could tell a story
like no one else.

Mary in 1946

## Family Day at North Island

Dad was a 29-year-old naval officer
reluctantly serving his country
at the end of World War II.
He was stationed at North Island
in the San Diego area.

In the summer of 1946,
he took us to Family Day at the base.
We toured an aircraft carrier
where we walked around the flight deck
and got a close look at the planes,
some with their wings folded up
so each plane looked like a triangle.
Officers and enlisted men described
their combat experiences in the Pacific.
We were 52 feet above the waterline.
The sun was shining.
There was a light breeze.

The best part for me by far
was the elevator between the flight deck
and the hangar deck.
The plane-pusher airmen operated it
all day long, moving the planes
from the hangar deck to topside
and back again to the lower spaces.
I could not get enough of it!

A month before I graduated from Navy OSC
nineteen years later,
I was asked where I wanted to serve.
The career Navy types in my class
requested duty on destroyers and cruisers,
but I wanted no part of the smaller vessels.
I said, "I would love to be stationed
on a big-ass aircraft carrier."

There is a joke in the military:
your first choice for duty is never honored.
But I got mine.

## The Spoils of War

At the end of the war,
my dad was a supply officer
at NAVSTA San Diego.
His sole job was paying off
binge-drinking pilots
about to be mustered out
from the Pacific theater.
Dad himself was mustered out
and we moved to Burbank.
On his way out the door,
he helped himself
to some government property.

One was a laundry hamper,
a 3x4 feet rectangle,
about three feet high,
covered with white canvas
with "U.S. Navy" stenciled
on the side.

This was my favorite toy.
I spent hours playing with it:
hiding under it
alone or with playmates
or turning it on its side
to make it a cave
or swimming in it until
all the water
seeped out the sides.

Another spoil of war
atop my bed
was a vanilla blanket
emblazoned with "U.S. Navy"
in large blue letters.

A year after we moved,
two men in dark suits
from the Treasury Department
came to our door
and asked my dad
what he did with $1300 worth
of office equipment he purchased
as a supply officer.

It was missing from NAVSTA San Diego
and Dad's signature
was on the purchase order.
The Navy had no idea
who stole the equipment,
so they decided to stick it
to the lowly lieutenant junior grade
who signed for it.

It took months for Dad
to sort it out,
but he did.

I wonder.
If the Treasury men had checked
my bedroom or the backyard,
would Dad look so innocent?

Seven years later,
in 1953, Dad showed me
a document from Navy BUPERS
in Washington, D.C.
It was his final release
from the Naval Reserves.
"This," he said,
"was the happiest day of my life."

## Lucky Strike Means Fine Tobacco

1947

We had a large brown radio
in the living room
when we lived on Brighton Street
in Burbank.
Mother and Dad listened
to their shows on Sunday afternoon
while I played with a toy
or worked a puzzle book
on the living room rug.

They laughed at the jokes
on the Jack Benny show
sponsored by Lucky Strike,
and because of their laughter,
I started to pay attention.

I kept hearing the letters
LS/MFT, and I asked Dad
what that meant.
Both Mother and Dad answered together
with a hearty laugh,
"Lord, save me from Truman."

## Time

The longest years in life
are those of youth.
In a child's life,
one year
is a huge fraction
of the whole.

## Mother Reading

1948

It was an everyday visual:
Mother reading a magazine or book
when chores were finished.
She studied business for a year

at L.A. City College
before taking a job
as a typist somewhere.
I give her credit.

She never stopped learning
and discerning different subjects
like history, politics, and the arts.
The better-schooled,

including me at times,
dismissed her as a dilettante,
and often her notions
were half-baked,

but I was taken
by her push for knowledge.
I got the reading bug
at an early age thanks to her.

## Kathy Fiscus

# 1949

It was just after we purchased a 13-inch TV.
My baby sister was one month old.
Six miles away to the east
on the land that would become
the football field and quarter-mile track
of my future high school,
a little girl fell 100 feet down
an abandoned water well.

Starting that Friday night,
*KTLA News at 10* began
non-stop coverage from the scene.
It was a major first in television news.

Someone in the family,
either Mother or Granny,
suggested I pray for Kathy Fiscus.
Following the example of children
in the old movies,
I got down on my knees at bedside
and prayed for her.

KTLA announced on Sunday
that Kathy Fiscus was dead.
She died for lack of air.

I was surprised she was not rescued.
After all, I asked God to help.
God chose not to intervene.
I found that troubling.

From 1957 to 1960, I never missed
a San Marino home football game.
We had good teams and times were exciting,
and it wasn't until many years later
I was reminded all those games
and all my track meets
took place where Kathy Fiscus died.

## Snow Day in L.A.

*January 10, 1949*

The Starbucks-green fronds
of our stout pineapple palm tree
bent toward the ground
under the weight
of two inches of snow.
Opposing choirs
of leafless deciduous trees
on the west and east sides
of La France Avenue
were brown and white
stained-glass windows
one after another
in the slant snow.
The black asphalt street
still empty of tracks
from the Monday morning commute
had a thick white covering.

How did I react
as a sober seven-year old
waking up to snow
for the first time in my life?
I raced out the front door
and ran up and down the street
in my bare feet and pajamas
screaming like a berserker,
and then started to roll
the foundation of a snowman
on our front lawn
until my parents
put me on a leash
and dragged me back to sanity.

Back row: Donna, Granny, and Mary;
front row: David and Susan

Mary was eight months' pregnant with Pamela at the time

## Granny

For three years,
we had three generations under one roof.
Granny was well traveled
before she came to us.
She had a connection to China.
Born on Xiamen Island
(known as Amoy at the time)
to Scottish missionaries,
she lived in L.A. most of her life.
Grandfather Baldwin died in 1943
and Granny moved to Hong Kong
to be with Dad's brother Simeon.
She came to live with us
when the Peoples Liberation Army approached
the Pearl River delta.

Granny was quiet, self-effacing,
and very intelligent—
like her son, our dad.
Now she was part of a household
with four noisy kids
and a domineering mother.
Like water, she sought her own level.

She was short and thin.
Most of her dresses were of dark silk.
Granny was a chain smoker.
Even on her deathbed at the nursing home,
she was sneaking her cigarettes.
She was a news junky,
devouring news magazines like chocolates.

Once I asked her why she wasn't Chinese
since she was born in China.
She laughed at my stupidity.

There was a time I made the mistake
of calling her "Scotch."
In a rare show of anger,
she thundered,
"I am not Scotch! I am Scottish."

Granny dispensed wisdom and consolation
to those who trusted her counsel.
Unwavering in her faith,
she showed our family
a Christ-like concern for those
who suffer at the hands of the powerful.

Helen Douglas (MacLeish) Baldwin

Simeon Baldwin (1883-1943)

Mary in 1949

## Tears Over a Contest

Dad bought into the partnership
at Graves & Cobun in 1948.
His income was impressive on paper
until you deducted a large sum

of money for his partnership buy-in.
The Baldwin family with seven mouths to feed
was barely squeaking by.
For the first time in my life

I witnessed friction between my parents.
There were constant discussions
about money, some louder than others.
The Sunday L.A. Times announced

a puzzle-solving contest for $25,000,
and I tried to come up with an answer
to the question for the first week.
No one in the family knew I was doing this.

I wanted to win the $25,000 secretly
and surprise my grateful family.
I finished the puzzle and mailed it in.
Instead to diving into the sports section,

as usual, on the following Sunday,
I went looking for the contest.
The Sunday Times was thick with lots of ads.
It wasn't easy with all the pages.

When I found it, I was devastated.
I knew immediately I had no chance
to solve the puzzle as this one
was much harder than the previous week.

There would be no $25,000 prize for the family!
That is how my parents found me
on a sunny Sunday morning—
in tears over a contest.

*This running-away-from-home letter is my first effort as a writer. There was a large couch in the TV room. It was large enough for three adults or four children. The best seat had an armrest and was directly in front of the TV, and I considered that to be my special spot.*

*However, my two sisters kept sitting in my "pleace." I complained to Mother. She told me to knock it off. I packed my things and walked a few blocks, then returned home the same day.*

*Here is the actual letter:*

## Your Son, David Baldwin

Dear Mother,

You know when you get mad at me
for siting in a real good
on the couch.
Well it was not my fault.

I got fead up about Donna and Susan
taking my pleace on the couch.

So in a few days
I decided the kids
have bin taking the pleace
where I have bin siting to long.
You have bin getting mad at me to much.

I am leaving because you
and the rest of the family
have bin cheading me
out of where I have bin sitting.

Your son, David Baldwin

## Driving Around L.A.

1950

All of us would pile into the car
and go for a long drive
around Los Angeles.
We took the Pasadena Freeway
to the end of the Hollywood Freeway
and back to South Pasadena
with side excursions
on some of the scenic "surface streets"
(in L.A. lingo).

Dad loved to drive and show off his city
to the rest of us.

Dad, Mother, and our youngest
sat on the bench seat in front,
and we three older kids sat in back.
Seat belts were years away,
but Dad was a careful driver.

The best part was old time radio.
The parents, my older sister, and I
got the jokes on the Jack Benny Program,
Amos 'n' Andy, Fibber McGee and Molly,
and Our Miss Brooks.
The younger sisters also laughed,
but more on cue with us
than anything they understood.
My favorite show was the drama Johnny Dollar
as he went about solving crimes
of insurance fraud.
His expense report at the end
always brought a smile.

Driving around L.A.
was a welcomed three-hour respite
at the end of the week.
Mostly I remember all of us
laughing in sweet unison
at the Sunday shows.

## Pour on the Coals

I don't remember anything
about the transgression
that offended Mother so much.
Whatever it was,
it was so disrespectful,
she decided I needed a whipping,
yes, an old fashioned strapping
with a belt like her dad
gave to her brothers
when they screwed up.

Except whipping a child
was not a job
for the lady of the house.
That job was for a man!

When Dad got home hours later,
he learned he was supposed
to whip his son to a bloody pulp.
He gave my mother
the *Are you serious?* look.
*That's not the way*
*we did things in my family*.

Dad had to make a decision.
He could say, *This is wrong*.
Or he could do what he was told.
He ordered me to drop my pants
and underwear,
and bend over the bed,
exposing my rosy little buttocks.
While Dad removed his belt,
Mother shouted, "Pour on the coals."
Dad gave me three or four
hard licks with the belt,
and I cried like never before.

What did I learn from this?
Dad didn’t have the stomach
to put up a fight that day,
but I’ll say this for him:
it never happened again.

## Bicycle Freedom

I was seven when I got my first bike
as a Christmas gift from Santa.
It was the basic Schwinn bike
with a reflector in back,
but no light in front.
I reached the age when I was wise
to the Santa myth.

I don't remember the original color.
Dad offered to paint it all black
and I said, *Yes!*

The bike was my ticket to freedom.
I saw Mark down the street,
Kathy the tomboy at the end of the block,
and Randy on the next street over.
Eventually, I was all over
the City of South Pasadena,
as far away as Garfield Park to the north
and Poole's Pharmacy to the east
where I would order a root beer
at the counter for a nickel.

As far as Mother knew, I was "out"
until dinner time.
It was a safe neighborhood in a safe city.
We did not have helicopter moms
hovering over their children.

There were two organized sports
starting in the fourth grade:
Little League baseball
and flag football at the Y.
I chose not to play baseball,
my favorite sport,
because I didn't want to be beaned
in the head with a hardball.
But I played pick-up softball
every day of the year with my friends.

Life was delightfully disorganized
by today's standards.
We were free to do what we wanted
until dinner time.
The black Schwinn was my passport to freedom.

## [tanka]

the loveliest things
are incredibly brief
the loveliest things
happen only once
years compress to minutes

## Den Mother

She loved a captive audience
of small children,
especially boys.
Given her authoritarian bent,
serving as a Den Mother
of my Cub Scout unit
was a perfect opportunity
to show off her knowledge
without contradiction
to a clutch of 8-year olds
sitting quietly
in a slack-jawed semicircle.
I was taken aback.
The other boys were smitten
by her presentation,
and if you did not know better
you might be thinking
she was flirting with them.
"I really like your mom,"
was a comment I heard
more than once.

Mary in 1950

## At the Ghost Town

1951

Not an angry word by anyone all day—
that is what I remember.
So remarkable!
Mother seemed blissful and calm
as she carried my baby sister
who was in a rare quiet mood.
Mother was in a bubble.
Dad was free to let out his inner joy
with me and my sisters
as we panned for gold—
real flakes of gold;
we rode the narrow-gauge train,
and visited the gambling saloon,
the old post office,
and, best of all, the jail
where Dad was on the other end
of the phone line
to the mannequin inside the cell
who somehow knew every little detail
about me and my friends
in the neighborhood.
We finished our visit
with the best berry pie in the world.
It is hard to remember
a day without conflict.
This was one of them.

NOTE: Knott's Berry Farm before the roller coasters

## Polio

My youngest sister woke up one morning
and was unable to stand in her crib.
Mother freaked out.

She rarely showed signs of fear,
but this time Mother spoke
with real fear in her voice,

"Your father and I are taking her
to the hospital.
We are worried she may have polio."

I was old enough to know
polio was serious.
The first thing that came to my mind

was a huge contraption
called the iron lung.
Could that happen to my baby sister?

I knew President Roosevelt had polio.
I heard people use the word "cripple,"
usually as a putdown.

L.A. County General gave her a spinal tap.
The results were negative.
It was a blessing!

But it was a real scare in the family.
Four years later, in 1955,
we could not wait to get our shots.

## The East Side Kids

"I love the East Side Kids.
They are so funny!"

He gave me a stern look.
"You may think they are funny,
but they are just a gang
of young criminals.
They are always breaking the law
and stealing from others—
they call it borrowing.
Do you think that is OK?
They are a bad influence on you
and I would rather you not watch."

He was talking about the TV show
the East Side Kids
on one of the L.A. stations.
This discussion came up
the previous summer
when I saw "Ghosts on the Loose"
at the Rialto Theater
as the feature film
following nine cartoons.

This movie was slammed
by the L.A. Times
as "a feeble and cheaply produced
bit of unenticing nothingness,"
but to my nine-year-old mind
it was a movie masterpiece
with lots of slapstick physical comedy
and non-stop stupid malapropisms
by the lead character, Muggs McInnes.

It was more than ethics.
Dad despised the cheap laughter
generated by vaudeville's broad comedy.

I asked about the East Side Kids TV show
when I was in college.
"Didn't you enjoy that kind of humor
when you were a kid?"
"Yes," he said, "but I outgrew it."

## Conversations with Mother

I admired Dad,
but I had no interest in accounting
or in being a businessman.
I was sure of that
long before I got to junior high.

Mother and I shared common interests
in certain subjects
and we had long conversations,
good conversations,
beginning in the first grade.

She could talk to practically anyone
about practically anything
for at least a few minutes.

We had a mutual passion for history,
and we exchanged our views off and on
for days at a time,
and intermittently over a long life.
Because of her, history was my path
on my first go-around in college.

There was a difference between
Mother and Dad.
Dad was competitive with ideas.
He was an idea person; Mother was not.
She listened carefully to what you had to say,
then offered her own views.
It was a conversation,
not a debate
with a zero-sum outcome.

## Perfume

Christmas was coming.
I walked into J.J. Newberry,
the five and dime on Huntington Drive,
and approached the perfume counter.
The saleslady could see
I didn't have a lot to work with.
She tried to fit quality to my budget
by showing me a tiny container
of a popular brand.
I was not impressed.
I pointed to a larger rectangular bottle
with very pale blue glass.
The price was four dollars.
I put my money down
and left the store
feeling good about myself.
On Christmas morning,
Mother opened my gift
of cheap perfume from the five and dime
and made a great show
of thanking me for my kindness.
"It's the thought that counts."

## Norma

Grandfather and his second wife, Norma,
lived in the Hollywood Hills
on Nichols Canyon Road.

Grandfather built his large ranch house
in 1937 with the help
of Mother's brothers John and Charles.

Of my three grandparents,
Norma was the only one
who went out of her way

to be friendly to me.
With Grandfather Dondro,
it was better to be feared than loved.

Granny was never outgoing.
You had to approach her
and I rarely did that.

We called her Grandmother to her face,
but around our house she was Norma.
Norma had a thing for plastics.

Nearly everything in the house
on Nichols Canyon Road
was covered by plastic.

All the items on the kitchen counter
were encased in plastic,
and we were warned not to touch anything.

There were plastic sofa covers
and plastic protectors for the lamp shades.
There were plastic runners

over the white carpet.
Norma had a bubbly personality.
She was fun to be around.

Plastics notwithstanding,
we visited Nichols Canyon frequently.
Even Mother seemed to enjoy our get-togethers,

though she mocked Norma's plastics fetish

behind her back.
Poor people are crazy.

Rich people are eccentric.
Norma was eccentric, for sure.
Near the end of her life

after Grandfather passed away,
Norma strolled down the streets
of Morro Bay calling out,

"I'm the village idiot"
like she was the town crier.
She was committed for a few months

at the Camarillo State Mental Hospital
until Tommy, her dentist son from Iowa,
was able to bring her home.

Norma loved me. She cared for me.
For that, I look past her foibles,
her weirdness, and remember her fondly.

Norma flanked by her son Tommy Stonehard and Grandfather

1827 Nichols Canyon Road, Hollywood, California

## [tanka]

a pinwheeling leaf
strikes the watercourse
and floats around the bend
gone forever
do you ever think of me?

## [tanka]

looking ahead to the past
remembering the future
one datastream
the road from home
is a road leading home

## [tanka]

my run from hill to lake
is noisy, swift and short,
like life itself…
traveler, remember me,
your kinsman

## Grandfather Loses It

1952

From the backseat of Grandfather's car,
I was aroused from my reverie
of peering out the window.
Grandfather and his second wife, Norma,
were having a heated argument
on how to get to their destination.
Norma was a chronic backseat driver
and she kept saying
he needed to turn around
and take a different route.

Grandfather wasn't having any
of her complaint.
After she made the same criticism
using the same words
for the fifth time,
Grandfather turned to her and shouted,
"Goddamit, will you shut up?"
Because he turned to his right
to face her,
he jerked the wheel to the right
and almost ran the car into the ditch.

That was 70 years ago
and memories are dim,
but I wonder had I not been there
if he would have smacked her
across the face
he was so furious.

## Paying Kindness Forward

My older sister was six
when we moved to La France Avenue.
It was a larger home,
two stories high with twice the rooms.
There were times she could not sleep
and she would tap
on our parents' door for consolation.
Mother would say, "Go back to sleep,"
and she would wonder
how you go back to sleep
when you worry about going back to sleep?

At the time, Dad's mother,
our Granny, was living with us,
and she was my sister's consolation.
They would sneak off to the kitchen
where Granny warmed some milk
and read stories
about the heroes in the Bible
like David
and the heroes of Scottish history
like Robert the Bruce.

Years later, Granny moved away,
and my youngest sister was a toddler.
She was a restless child,
frequently crying,
and getting into mischief.
Mother believed in tough love,
though her approach
was far more tough than love.
She locked my sister in her room
and would not let her out
until she stopped crying
and kicking the door.

My sister recalled Granny's kindness
and paid that kindness forward.
She sat on the other side
of the locked door for as long as it took,
and offered her comforting words,
her consolation,
to someone punished for being a child.

## Skinny Dipping

Two of my three sisters
and my parents
squeezed into the sleeping quarters
of a 13-foot trailer,
while I slept
in the open-air rumble seat
propped open in the back.
It was crazy!
Everyone complained
with mock bitterness,
but we made it through
the two-week trip
up the coast to the Bay Area,
over to Yosemite, Kings Canyon,
then back to South Pasadena.
Memorable? Yes, it was.

It was memorable for me
in a special way
as a shy ten-year old.
I woke up before sunrise
and peeked out my rumble seat
to see my parents skinny dipping
in the ice-cold Tuolumne River
whooping and splashing each other
acting like silly fools
having spontaneous fun
in a way I never saw before
and in truth
I would never see again.

## Doing the Laundry

Mother's left thumb was mutilated
in a laundry accident with a wringer
when she was a teenager.
Her thumbnail was imprinted

with ridges deep and ugly.
She held it up to my face
when I complained about my chores.
My sisters and I had it easy,

she said, compared to her.
Her father and her two brothers
needed starched white shirts
and collars every day

and her job as the lone female child
in the family was to clean
and press the shirts for the men.
The work was brutal, and she hated it.

She shook her thumb.
"See that?"
I thought, *OK, I get it*.
I was no longer the focus of her anger

as the humiliation of laundry service
rushed into the present moment.
It was more than the excruciating pain.
It was about her wounded dignity.

She had little to say about her mother,
but to my ear
her father was an unyielding taskmaster,
demanding from her perfect performance.

## Murph, the Butcher

1953

One of the Ms at the M&M Market
on Huntington Drive
in the early 1950s
was Murph, the butcher.
Dad was a meat and potatoes
kind of guy,
and Mother was an excellent cook
of beef, pork and lamb.
It helps to have
the best cuts of meat
and Mother was good
at getting that
by flirting with Murph
on her trips to the M&M.
I saw her in action
many times, and Murph,
bless his heart,
knew he was being played
by a master manipulator.
Mother would give me a wink
as if to say, *See how it's done*?
The result was always the same,
and Dad never complained
about his servings at suppertime.

## The Bruin Bench

Because of me and my love for sports,
he joined the Bruin Bench.
We had season tickets on the 40
for three years
and we got to see
the one-and-only national championship
in UCLA football.

He was most comfortable
in the company of men.
Dad loved the atmosphere.
All the members of the Bench
had UCLA memories to share.
Like him, they all smoked.
Dad was never a cigar smoker
except at the Coliseum.
Some were drinking alcohol
out of fake binoculars.
The air was full of man talk,
as crude as it could be
with children present.

Dad wasn't much of a talker
and he wasn't loud,
but he was a master of the quip,
the clever interjection.
I could tell he was well liked
by the other men and their sons.
"Bud" was one of their favorites
and I was proud of him.

## The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard

*Matthew 20:1-16*

I was an L.A. kid. My favorite sport
was baseball. The weather was always kind
enough for a game. My friends and I
knew the batting averages and the earned run
averages of the players in the PCL,
and all the major league stats. I followed the Angels.
It was always a treat to go to Wrigley Field
with my dad and watch the Angels play ball.
I never went without some friends from school.

One Saturday, my dad took me and two
of my friends to an Angels game. We sat near
the back of the lower section overlooking
first base. There was a section in front of us
right by the visitors' dugout completely empty.
These seats were the most expensive in the park,
but today, those ticket holders did not show up.

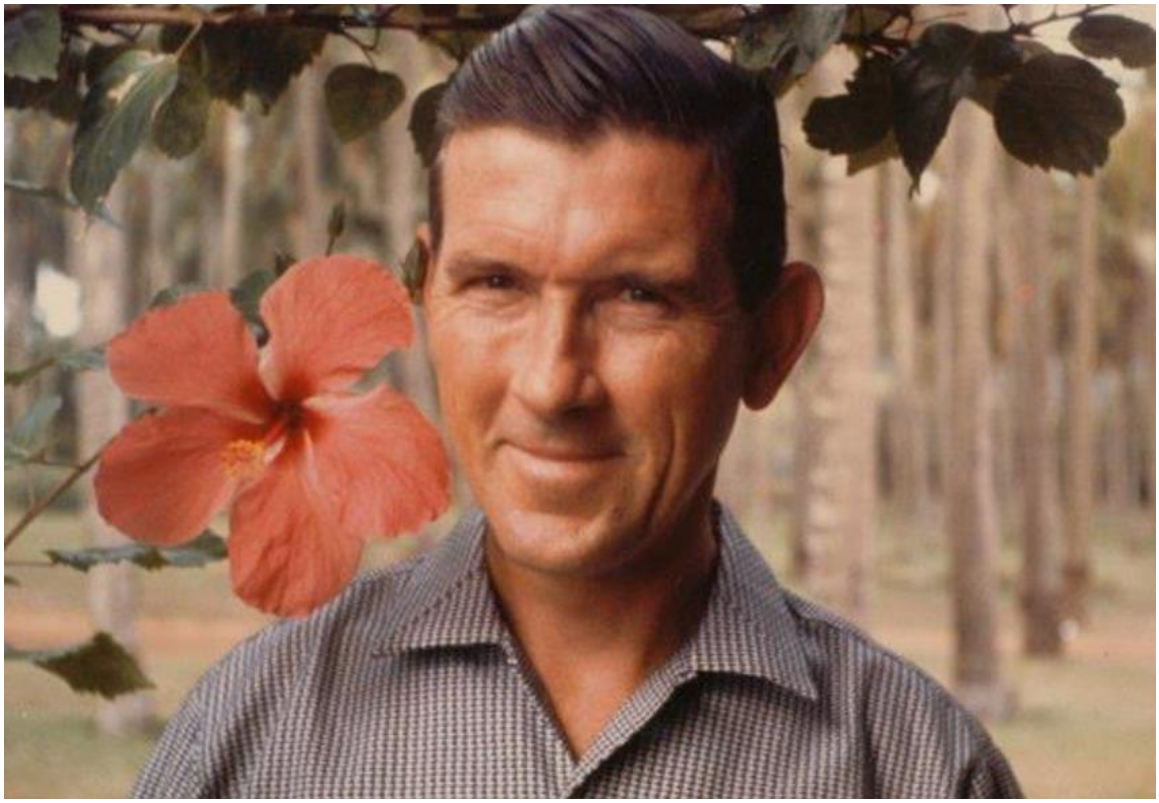
Wrigley had a custom to let the local kids
into the stands after a couple of innings,
just to fill up the ballpark. It was a neighborly policy
with the surrounding community in south L.A.
and it helped to boost the noise for the home team.

When a boisterous group of Black kids commandeered
the seats in the coveted section down below,
a man sitting near us began to grumble
about them in a loud voice. This same man
was telling his companion at the start of the game
how pleased he was with his seats at the ballpark.
He did have great seats, but it made him angry
when poor kids sat closer to the action.

The man complained and muttered racial slurs
for two innings before my father finally
had enough. Dad was sure the commentary
was ruining the experience for me and my friends.
After one racist rant too many, my father turned
to him and said, "Hey, knock it off.
We're trying to watch the game." The man was caught
off guard, "Well, it isn't fair. I paid good money
for these seats, and those kids don't deserve

the luxury box." Dad said, "I heard you bragging
about your seats when you came in. You said
they were perfect. What happened? Relax,"
he said gesturing toward the buoyant fans
in the stands, "enjoy the game with the rest of us."

It worked. We never heard another word.
Later, my dad explained it this way:
"It is a gift just to be there at Wrigley Field
where the sun is shining and the Angels are winning.
Be happy. It doesn't matter where you sit."



Bud in 1953

## Cigars

Cigars evoke the stadium.
Whenever I catch the drift
of a great cigar,
I revisit the Coliseum
where you and I
would cheer the darkest team
In white America.

The tunnels reeked of smoke,
cigars especially;
today I miss the stench.

Cigars evoke for me
our best of times as father and son.
Whatever I meant to you
and you to me
in real life,
together we loved the game.

Bud at the dinner table

## Camping at Lake Havasu

Our scoutmaster, Mr. Sharp,
was a boisterous, alpha male type
with lots of camping experience.
Then there was my Dad,
the assistant scoutmaster—
a quiet office worker
with little knowledge
of the great outdoors.

While Mr. Sharp planned and executed
the camp activities
and ran the variety-show campfires
like a Hollywood pro,
Dad sat hour after hour
through the long weekend
with all the boys in my troop—
to help each one earn
his scouting merit badges.
Because of him,
we made exceptional progress
in our achievements.

Not long after we got home,
I asked him how he knew
all that stuff.
He didn't know anything, he said.
Dad was never a Scout himself
and he had to spend a month
before the trip
pouring over the leadership manual
to prepare himself.

That was my one year in Boy Scouts.
That was Dad's one year, too.
We went on to other things.
Still, on that occasion,
I am grateful he was brave enough
to leave his comfort zone
for something radically different
on my behalf.

## Climbing Parker Mountain

Dad was aloof, taciturn, blunt.
He was good at exposing dumb ideas
using direct language.
But sometimes we learn by doing.

Four weeks before my 11th birthday,
Tenzing and Hillary reached the top
of Mt. Everest
and I announced I was interested
in mountain climbing.
I asked if we could try that.
He gave me *the look*,
but instead of chewing me up
and spitting me out,
he said he would think about it.

We set out for Acton
north of the Angeles National Forest
on a hot day in July
to climb Parker Mountain.
It was not the mountain climbing I imagined,
but a hike up the service road
to a fire lookout
where we chatted with the friendly ranger.

I expected Dad to be exhausted,
but the opposite was true.
He looked no worse at the end
than at the beginning.

As for me,
a thousand feet up;
a thousand feet down;
temperatures in the 90s.
Sometimes we learn by doing.

## Phil Harrison

Phil and her husband Harry,
a police detective,
were frequent guests at our gatherings.

She was a practicing Buddhist
who earned a doctorate in Chinese philosophy.
She was a professor at Claremont College.

Phil was a slender, well-dressed white woman
with her jet-black hair pulled back
into a tight bun.

She spoke confidently on a variety of subjects
and with her wire-rimmed glasses
had the look of a college professor.

Mother and Phil were good friends.
They bonded during the PTA wars
in the South Pasadena School District.

For once, Mother did not feel threatened
by a highly accomplished woman.
I came to Chinese philosophy and Buddhism

late in life when I began to write haiku, tanka,
and other short poems.
I knew Phil when I was young—

in the fourth through the sixth grades.
She was formidable,
but now as I look back

I believe she would have taken the time
to talk to me about her interests.
I regret my shyness held me back.

## Oneonta Hills

Dad was a ham radio hobbyist
earning his first license at 14.
It was a happy time for me

when Dad drove up
the winding dirt road
into the Oneonta Hills

in his ’51 Ford V8
where he did his radio checks
from the setup in the car:

"Calling CQ, calling CQ.
This is W6ECM calling CQ."
Two or three hams, always men,

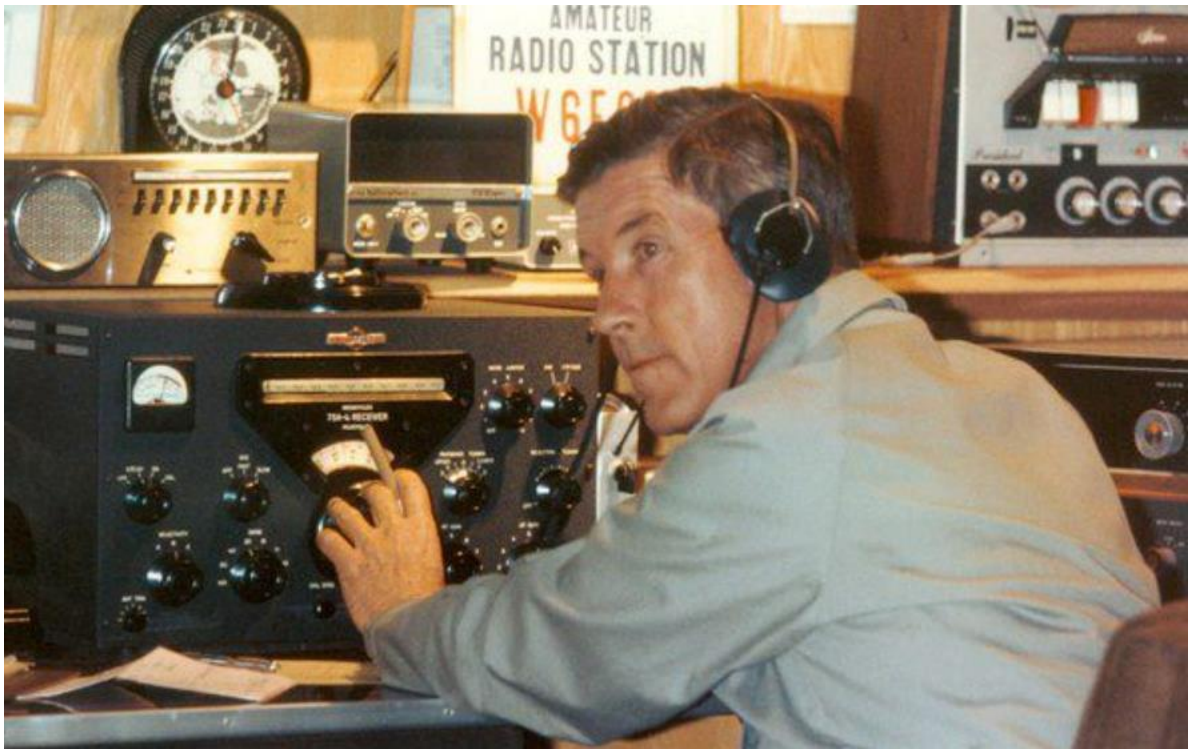
responded each time and Dad
and these voices in the night
compared notes about their gear.

Dad asked where they were calling from,
making notes in his log,
and there would be a sharing

of new technical developments.
All the technical stuff
was over my head,

but I was blown away
by my Dad's radio voice,
so smooth and loud and confident

unlike his voice at home
or in public settings.
This was the love of his life.




Bud with his ham radio setup. His first call sign was W6ECM. Later in life, he acquired a more advanced license, W6CS.

## Dad Critiques the Sermon

1954

Dad did not have much use
for organized religion,
but he took us to church
for the appearance of family unity.
He surrendered one hour
to avoid the grief of not-going.

He was silent before,
during, and after the service
every time except once
when I said something kind
about Dr. Gray's sermon
and Dad, staring straight
at the street ahead,
called B.S. on the pastor
for a sermon Dad considered
logically incoherent
and biblically incorrect.

Dad was an avid fan
of logic problems and, of course,
faith requires some skips in logic.
Until that moment,
I had no idea he knew anything
about the Bible,
but there he was,
the well-schooled village agnostic,
countering by throwing
his proof texts over the wall
at Dr. Gray's assertions
about the Sunday lessons.

It was years before
he opened up to me again
about religion,
but his silence was not
for lack of interest:
he paid attention to everything.

## At the Dinner Table

The dreaded "How was your day?" question
interrupted the shoving of food
into our mouths.
What could I say?
I spent my day looking out the window
wishing I was on the playground,
but I couldn't mention that
so I made something up
that passed inspection.
Then my sisters had to talk about
the girl things they did.
We all pretended to be interested.
Conversation dwindled to nothing.
All we heard was the shoving of food.
Dad never said a word.
He was a CPA and no one
wanted to hear about his day
of entering debits and credits on a ledger.
Mother broke the silence
with her bottomless desire for appreciation,
"Yum, this is delicious,"
drawing attention to her own cooking.
That was our cue.
"Oh, yeah, this is great!"
was the usual throwaway line.
Mother picked up on the synchronicity,
and assumed we were insincere,
but, no, the food was great.
She was a wonderful cook
and yet there was never enough praise
to make her happy.

In the kitchen

## Not 100 Percent

Before we moved from South Pasadena,
the parents bought a set
of World Book Encyclopedias.
The set had nineteen red hardcover volumes
with distinctive black and gold trim.

The reading level was aimed
at children my age.
The arrival of the encyclopedias
was a high point of my childhood.
I was learning about the universe

at my own self-directed pace.
One of my favorite memories
about the books was the smell
of the printer's ink on the open page.
I had an early interest

in human evolution and race.
After I read everything I could
in the World Book and learned
what the science of the 1950s
had to say about ancestry,

I asked Mother about my roots.
She said I was mostly English and Scots
with a little bit of Polish.
I asked, "What's Polish?"
She said, "Poland is a country

behind the Iron Curtain in Eastern Europe.
Most of the people there are white
just like the English and the Scots."
Mother was born with the surname *Drozeski*.
Then she had this to say about my ancestry,

"You don’t have any African, Asian, or Jewish ancestry.
You are a 100 percent white kid."
Even then I wondered if Jewish Americans
came from Europe and they looked white,
why they weren't white like me?

But I let it go.
I majored in European history at Cal
and learned enough about Poland,
with its wars and ethnic mixings
to question Mother's absolute claim.

After Mother died,
I took the ancestry test to clarify
my connection to the Polish-speaking world
and discover new ancestral surprises.
And there it was, the breakdown for Poland:

seven percent Eastern European Jewish
and one percent Gentile.
She died too soon to know the truth.
Had she known,
how would that play?

## Jehovah's Witnesses

Religion encroached on my thinking
in the sixth grade.
I explored topics

in the World Book Encyclopedia
and I read the "Religion" section
of *Time* magazine when it arrived.

Dad refused to talk about it
beyond a few inoffensive sentences
to get rid of me.

Mother's muddled, incoherent thoughts
were not helpful.
One day, two young men

from the Jehovah's Witnesses
came to the door and asked
if they could talk to me about Jesus.

I said, sure, come on in.
I was hungry for a discussion.
Discussions lasted three months.

I remember two things.
First, every time I said the word *God*,
they corrected me.

It was *Jehovah*.
Second, they insisted
on the seven-day creation story,

and I insisted the universe
was thirteen billion years old
and that human evolution

is how we got to where we are today.
Evolution was the deal breaker for me
and for them.

## [tanka]

like a stuttering newsreel
from the 40s,
the same events and the same emotions
of joy and disappointment
roll across my mind

## The Talk

Kathy was the first girl I knew well.
She was a tomboy.
Her family lived on a corner lot

with a long rectangular lawn
perfect for tackle football.
She could mix it up

with the best of the boys.
Her dad was the head librarian
at the L.A. County Library.

Kathy and I talked about many things
other than sports.
It was the best of friendships.

Beginning in the third grade,
I had a crush on a girl named Claudia,
but I was too shy to speak to her.

We never had a conversation.
I had a vague understanding
going into the sixth grade

there was a difference
between a Kathy and a Claudia.
Sixth grade was a time

of emerging awareness.
Some of the girls in our class
were beginning to develop

and boys were talking.
One night, I said something
that gave the parents pause.

One of them said,
"We'll talk about that later."
The thing is, we didn't talk about it later.

Days and weeks passed.
Nothing.
I remembered Dad's peculiar behavior

earlier at Lake Havasu.

He tried to explain the basics
of sex education as part of my effort

to earn a Boy Scout merit badge.
It was the first and only time
I ever saw him blush.

In my final month as a sixth grader,
with my twelfth birthday fast approaching,
Mother abruptly sat me down

and explained the facts of life.
I sat there dumbfounded
as she described the mechanics of sex,

what pregnancy was like,
and how children were born.
It was a torrent of new information

and was hard to process in one sitting,
but at least it was *something*
other than rumor and gossip.

Bud with an awkward 12-year-old kid

## A Falling Out Over Football

On a crystal-clear Saturday morning,
our family of six
squeezed into Dad's car
and set out for Santa Barbara
to visit Uncle Dick and Aunt Judy
one hundred five miles to the north.
It had been a while
since we saw the Brimer kids,
Christy, Denny, and Gail,
and we weren't sure what to expect.
We didn't exactly hit it off
the last time we met.

We came to the front door
just before noon.
Aunt Judy was full of enthusiasm.
Their living room was to the left
of the entrance
and Uncle Dick and Denny were watching
a college football game.
They smiled and said “Hello,”
then turned back to the game.

I took a cross-legged seat in front of the TV.

Christy had a superior attitude
toward the South Pasadena Baldwins,
but she put up with my sisters for a day.
Gail was a one-year-old kid.
It was fun to play with her.

Aunt Judy was falling over herself
being the vivacious hostess.
Mother and Judy had a loud exchange
so they could hear each other
over the roar of football,
but the louder they spoke,
the more it annoyed Uncle Dick.
He retaliated by turning up the TV volume.

Dad wasn't interested in the game
or what the women were talking about.
He just sat there.

After the late-afternoon dinner,

Mother could not wait
to leave for home.
I enjoyed watching football,
but I was mature enough to be mortified
for Aunt Judy,
Saint Judy,
who was the only one with any manners.
In the future,
whenever we spoke of the Brimers,
Mother and Dad always said
it was too far to drive for a visit.

NOTE: Brimer rhymes with *climber*.

The families of siblings Simeon, Judy, and Bud Baldwin in the late 1950s

Back row: Simeon Baldwin, Dick Brimer, Granny, Bud, Laara Baldwin Zimerman, Marjorie Baldwin, Judy Brimer, Denny Brimer, Robert Ross; front row: Mary, Donna, Christy Brimer, Pamela, Gail Brimer, and David.

## State Your Preference

We were summoned to the dining room table.
For once, Dad led the discussion
and Mother let him do the talking.
By itself, that was unusual.

We were used to being told
what to do,
not being asked
what we want to do.

This time we were asked
to state a preference.
We had this choice:
Would you like a house
with a swimming pool
or a nice cabin in the mountains
near Lake Arrowhead?

Before we were allowed to speak,
we all knew what we wanted.
Dad went on to explain more
about the recreation property
in the mountains—
activities like summer water skiing
and playing in the winter snow.
He reminded us of our visits
to the little town of Crestline,
a few miles away from Arrowhead.
It would be like that.

Never mind.
We all said we wanted the pool.
Case closed.

Dad may have mentioned a move
to a house with a pool,
but I don't remember that.
Were we going to dig a hole
in the La France backyard
for a tiny pool?
Dad's lips were sealed on the options.

Photo credit Zillow.com

The pool. See the poem “Back Jackknife” for a description of Bud’s diving prowess.

From left to right: Donna, Mary, Pamela, Susan, Bud, and David. This picture was taken soon after the move to Lorain Road.

## Mutt

Mother was born Mary Drozeski.
Her family moved from Chicago
with its half million Polish Americans

to Los Angeles in 1928.
No one in L.A. could pronounce Drozeski,
she claimed, so her father,

Donald Drozeski, changed the family name
to Dondro in which he combined
the first three letters

of his first and last names.
Her mother was raised by British parents
and Mother's upbringing

was British in every way.
She had little to say
about her roots in eastern Europe

no matter how many times I asked.
She fancied British as a better breed,
but Mother was a mutt like everyone else.

Ethel Reid Dondro was born in Kansas City to English parents. She is shown here with Mary, John, and Charles. The Reid family had a deep connection with Scotland (Clan Donnachaidh).

## The Family Buys a Car

1955

One of Dad's best accounts
was Urich Motors on the corner
of Greenleaf and Whittier.
Instead of paying Dad a fee
for tax services,
Mr. Urich let Dad have
a free car every other year.

It was 1955 and Dad decided
he wanted a Mercury Montclair
so he brought home
a fistful of brochures
for the '56 Mercury
and laid them on the dining room table
for us to view
and we all gathered around
to help him choose a car!

For our large family,
the 4-door was the only option.
Most of the debate
was selecting the two-tone colors.
We all liked the Classic White
above the checkmark chrome strip,
but what would complement it
below the line?
That was the question
we kicked around
for nearly an hour.
Did Dad put his thumb on the scale?
I don't know,
but Persimmon was the final answer.

The new car smell was heavenly.
Even after that was cancelled out
by Dad's smokes,
we never got over
our pride of family ownership

## Disneyland

We missed the opening day,
but we were there two weeks later.
It was the most wonderful day
of our lives to that point.
Nothing we ever saw
came close to Disneyland!

At the end of our long day,
we pulled out of the parking lot
and entered the old Highway 101.
As we drove by the park one more time,
Mother pointed to the Matterhorn and said,
"I wonder how they keep the snow from melting."

## Residents Only

How is this different from the deep south?
There is no "Whites Only" sign
on the front of the Orange Grove Plunge.

That's one difference.
The sign says,
"South Pasadena Residents Only,"

and you need an official
South Pasadena resident ID card
to show at the door.

That gets you into the pool.
How do you get the official ID card?
You have to live in the city.

How do you get to live in the city
when every residential property
in the City of South Pasadena

is restricted to persons
of the Caucasian race?
The admitting person at the front desk

of the Plunge
knows this is an all-white city.
If you are a person of color,

you can't buy a home.
If you can't buy a home,
you can't get an ID card.

If you can't get an ID card,
you won't get into the pool.
Again,

how is this different from the deep south?
There is no "Whites Only" sign
on the front of the Plunge.

## The Levy Failure

Two and a half miles.
It was a 20-minute bike ride
east on Huntington Drive
from the old home to the new.
But it was a move
from regular folks to rich folks
and we weren't that rich.

No one thing prompted the move.
A school levy failure
was the approved justification—
an honest hope for better schools.
The levy might have been the feather
that tipped the scales.
Unspoken but obvious was the desire
for a classy address.

Not by me.
I was happy with my friends
in junior high
and my pals in the neighborhood,
and I saw nothing wrong
with the schools at all.

## Back Jackknife

*for Bud Baldwin*

His rigid arms are pointing down as he walks
the diver's practiced pace toward the edge
and deftly spins around to set his feet.
The crowd grows quiet as he is on his toes,
to seek and find the pulse of limber steel.
With that assured, arms come up, palms flat
and facing down; knuckles nudge his gaze.

Silence snaps—he takes the backward leap,
exploding blind at forty-five degrees
(too high, you flop; too low and over you go),
and belly muscles pull his daggered toes
into a row of waiting fingertips
still reaching out directly from the chest.
He shuts the knife exactly at the apogee;

his body forms a tight, symmetrical V.
And just a blink beyond, he pops the knife.
The head flies back and arms in tandem follow
violently; so head, arms, and back design
a deadly blade to cut the water clean.
He nails the perfect dive. And slicing through
the bottom of the sky, he suns in blithe applause.

## Aunt Ming

Mary Virginia Morton was married
to Uncle Charlie,
Mother's brother.
She hated her birth name,

and insisted we call her *Ming*.
I never knew her
by any other name
until I saw her obituary in 1994.

Charlie and Ming had three daughters—
Joan, Anne, and Phyllis.
Ming wasn't a head-turning beauty,
but she had wholesome good looks

and was a powerhouse of energy.
Doris Day could play the lead
in “The Ming Morton Story."
She had a big personality,

big enough to fill up the room
at family gatherings,
which she did every time
Charlie's family came over

to our house.
She would stride though the front door
full of enthusiasm and good cheer,
giving warm hugs all around.

Ming had a career
as a journalist and writer.
For a decade, she had a by-line
in the “Features” section

of the L.A. Times,
and she authored a children's book.
She was a fierce environmentalist
long before Earth Day.

Aunt Ming loved the planet
and every living creature
with all her heart.
She had strong opinions

and was used to getting her way
in a discussion.
If she disagreed with someone,
like Mother,

for example,
Ming did not hesitate
to push Mother's buttons
just to be provocative.

This was Ming's idea of fun,
but Mother did not appreciate
being made the fool,
especially in her own home.

My sisters and I admired Ming.
We called her “Auntie”
and she did not mind
our familiar tone at all.

Two sisters in law—
one spotlight.
Our times with Ming diminished
as we grew older.


Norman Rockwell Museum

Ming Morton is the girl on the left in the Norman Rockwell painting “Land of Enchantment.” She grew up in Yonkers, New York.

## [haiku]

pan-fried trout
I learn something new
about my father

Our family and Uncle John and Aunt Margie Dondro's family by our new pool. From left to right: Uncle John, Mary, Aunt Margie, David, Granny, Donna, Nancy Dondro, Susan, Bud, Cindy Dondro, Rick Dondro, Pamela, and our dog Buffy.

## Brown Military Academy

I was surly and sullen
over the move to San Marino.
"If you don't shape up,
we're going to ship you out,"
to a military school.
Dad, as usual, had little to say.
Mother, as usual, did not hold back.
She delivered the news
as an explicit threat.

I could tell this was her idea.
She was the authority.
Her brothers were in the Army
and they told her stories.
Dad actually served,
but he kept his counsel.

It worked.
It was hard to imagine
suffering a steady stream
of gratuitous harassment
in the 8th grade
and possibly longer.
My friends and I all knew
what the academies were like—
shine shoes every night,
polish the belt buckle
and other brightwork,
make the perfect bunk,
march from class to class,
salute everything that moved,
and, above all,
show respect to your betters.

## All My Music Was White

All my music was white
growing up in the Baldwin household.
I was playing Beethoven's Sixth Symphony

all by myself at age six—
with its five 78 RPM records
covering the full 45 minutes.

All the music at Oneonta Elementary
was white, too, including "Dixie,"
which I loved to sing

at the top of my soprano voice.
All the anthems in church
were safely mainline Protestant.

Sometimes we sang a Negro spiritual,
but we only sounded like white folks
pretending to be a real gospel choir.

All my music was white
before the move to San Marino.
I joined Huntington School

in the middle of the seventh grade
and fell in with a crowd of boys
who introduced me to Black music.

When school let out,
we wandered over to the record shop
on Huntington Drive

to pick through the records.
The tiny sound booth in the back
let us listen through headphones.

All this time, we are talking about
the best in Black music,
and where you could find it

on the L.A. radio dial.
I still listened to top-40 KPOP,
but was quite taken

with the blues for a while.
Jimmy Reed's "You Don't Have To Go"
opened up a whole new world

far beyond "That Doggie in the Window,"
"Mr. Sandman," and "The Happy Wanderer."
There was nothing lighthearted

about the blues.
There was real pain
articulated by real people,

downtrodden people,
living in a world
where all the music is white.

## Magazines

I thumbed through all the pages
of the *Saturday Evening Post*,
digesting everything.
I admired the Norman Rockwell covers
and the Harry Simmons feature
"So You Think You Know Baseball"
with his *ex cathedra* explications
of the baseball rulebook.

I read *Time* or *Newsweek*
from cover to cover.
(I can't remember which magazine.
Was there any difference?)
I got my fill of politics,
world affairs, and religion.

The *Ladies Home Journal* was different.
I skipped the articles, fashions,
recipes, and short stories,
and searched for the singular feature,
"Can This Marriage Be Saved?"
Already at age 11,
I realized I picked the wrong parents.
The best years of their marriage—
when they pulled together
through war and its aftermath—
morphed into a smoldering standoff,
and I was looking for a foothold,
some purchase, to help me climb
out of choleric darkness into the light.

## Dad Has a Mistress

They got into it every night.
I was thirteen and befuddled about
girlfriend problems of my own.
This was my first careful look
at an unhappy marriage.
They were loud enough
for the whole family to hear,
and Mother,
already in her cups at sundown,
was always the instigator
accusing Dad of having an affair
though not with body and bone.
It was his obsession, she said,
with the *damned ham radio*
where he slipped away
to his radio room whenever he could.

It was safe to sit quietly
with a small tumbler of Jim Beam
in easy reach,
holding a thin Tiparillo cigar
in his left hand
and with his right send and receive
Morse code at 20 words per minute
back and forth
to an impersonal outside world
as far away as Balochistan
and Easter Island.
Such an interesting universe!

He willfully walled off
his own wife and children
for comfort and solace.
Being a ham gave him pleasure
from childhood to his middle years.
He was good at it
and obviously
preferred to spend his time
tapping the code key
than to suffer beyond the minimum
the scorn of a jealous termagant.

## The Smartest Guy in the Room

It took me a while to notice
the chip on his shoulder.
He never made a scene
and yet he silently saw himself
as the smartest guy in every room.
He sized up each man
by noting the factual errors
and rhetorical flaws.
Like a judge in Olympic diving,
he lowered the poor man's score
and Dad always came out on top
even when he didn't.

And women, by definition,
could never measure up.
Nineteenth century gender inequality
was baked into his understanding
of the great chain of being.
My sister and my dad
attended the same college.
Only one graduated Summa Cum Laude
and was accepted into Phi Beta Kappa
and it wasn't him,
but it made no difference.


Phi Beta Kappa

## Pivot

When did we pivot
toward discontent?

When did they start
battering each other,
my father and mother?

Finding faults
in daily assaults.

Her querulous insults
and bitter tears
confronting
his stoic aloofness.

On and on
for thirty years.

They were happy once.

Happiness is the journey.
This we know
when we get to where we want to go.

## Appointment with the Psychiatrist

It was over almost before it began.
I climbed into the back seat of Dad's car,
and the three of us drove

to an office building
on the north side of Huntington Drive
where I was introduced to a psychiatrist.

He was a man in a dark suit
with thinning hair
about the same age as my parents.

As you might expect,
Mother kicked off the meeting
with words to the effect

that I was a truculent teenager
and she was wondering if he could help.
The man turned his impassive eyes to me.

In his most non-judgmental voice,
he asked me a series of questions.
We had a quiet conversation

for about twenty-five minutes.
The parents sat in silence on the couch.
Then he asked me to take a seat

in the lobby.
I flipped magazine pages,
waiting for whatever happens next.

After a half hour,
Mother, Dad, and the psychiatrist
emerged from the office.

They shook hands and said good-bye.
We got back into Dad's car and drove home.
No one said a word in the car.

There was no follow-up
to the counseling session.
That was it.

## Bridge

1956

We played a lot of bridge
when I was in high school.
The parents taught us how to bid

using the Culbertson method first.
Then we switched to Goren.
They did their best to explain

the strategies of the game.
None of us were that good
and no one played for blood.

My sister and I learned the hard way:
Dad was a card counter.
He kept track of every card played,

and as the game neared the end,
he knew exactly which cards
were still out there.

Mother was the bridge enthusiast,
but Dad was the partner
everyone wanted.

Pamela, Mary, Susan, and Donna

## Names That End with the Letter O

Mother's family moved from River Forest
near Chicago to Southern California
when Mother was eleven.
They had a new life in the sunshine
and a new last name, Dondro.

Within a year, the Dondro family
was getting literature
from the local Catholic Church
inviting them to Bingo night
on Wednesday and services on Sunday.

This infuriated Grandfather.
He was fiercely anti-Catholic,
a prejudice Mother also shared
all her life.

Grandfather demanded he be removed
from the mailing list.
The church office told him
the only reason he was on the list
was because his name ended
with the letter O.
Assumption 1: He must be Italian.
Assumption 2: Italians are Catholic.

Grandfather loved to tell that story about
the unintended consequences
of his name change.

## Friday Night Fights Every Night

The Gillette Cavalcade of Sports–Boxing
from Madison Square Garden
with the Look Sharp/Be Sharp theme song
and Jimmy Powers announcing
was a regular Friday night event
for Dad and me.

Dad never boxed himself,
but he loved the manly art,
the sweet science
as it was called.

I was fascinated
by the different styles of boxing:
the peek-a-boo face shield defense,
the flailing perpetual-windmill offense,
the powderpuff jab while backing away,
the lethal left cross,
the unexpected uppercut,
and the thunderous knockout right
when the victim drops his guard.

For entertainment,
the best matchups paired
the buzzsaw free swinger
against the cautious counterpuncher.
It was fun to watch.

But buzzsaw vs. counterpuncher
was no fun at all
when the parents squared off
later in the 1950s.
It was Friday Night Fights
every night of the week.

Mother was a free swinger,
always throwing the first punches,
launching one haymaker after another:
accusations of bad faith
and compromised loyalties.
Dad deflected the blows
with his annoying fact-checking,
his claims of innocence,
and by pointing out she needed help.

There was alcohol, always alcohol,
to juice the aggression.

In the olden days,
boxers used to fight
until only one was standing.
My parents fought and fought and fought
every night
and all they did
was hold each other up.

## [tanka]

I hold the red flannel shirt
I gave him for Christmas,
the one he mocked
and never wore…
feeling the heat in my face


Donna, Bud, Susan, Mary, Pamela, and David.

## Little Rock, 1957

1957

Our school was 100 percent white.
There was little difference
between the white public schools
and the Christian academies
of the deep south
and San Marino High School.
Brown vs. Board of Education
was ineffective nationwide.
Non-compliance was still the rule.
We lived in our own version
of whiteness during the standoff
at Little Rock's Central High.

The Little Rock Nine
was a hot topic at our house.
It was all over the L.A. Times
and the national news on TV.
Dad didn't have much to say,
as usual, but Mother
was quick to condemn
the bigoted white people
screaming hateful words
at the terrified Black children.
Over and over, she said,
"These people are ignorant."
I remember her saying,
"Every child in America
deserves a good education
regardless of race."

The Civil Rights Movement
was suddenly in my face.
It was a vivid awakening for me,
and I was impressed
that Mother was a forceful voice
for racial justice.

## In the Ring

From the seventh grade until I left for Idaho,
I never heard him raise his voice—not once!

She lacked finesse; aggression was all she knew.
When she attacked, he tracked rhetorical flaws.

His counter-punching style would fake retreat,
if not defeat. He set such subtle traps.

She flailed away until her strength was sapped,
until she dropped her guard and showed the chin.

With viper quickness, he decked her with a *mot*
and hid a smirk behind Jim Beam on ice.

Then bouncing back, she poured another drink,
each drink another round, each fight a draw.

# High School Dress Code

Money was tight when we moved to San Marino. The high school had a dress code for the girls, but not the boys at the time (that came later).

For the girls, pants were not allowed except for one Friday a month. Also, one Friday a month was a free-dress Friday where any dress was OK. Every other day of the month, the dress code mandated all girls wear a gray skirt or dress, and "gray" was defined as a spectrum from white to charcoal.

Why the dress code? Our town was an upscale community. The district was determined to keep the girls from showing off over-the-top outfits. The code was a partial success; dullness dampened the envy, but it did not stop the girls from wearing luxurious sweaters.

My sisters learned to sew from Mother and Aunt Judy. While the other girls shopped at the stores, it was cheaper to buy fabric and use Mother's sewing machine to keep up with the Joneses.

The younger sisters saw some rules added for the boys. It wasn't because the boys were dandies. The slovenly look was in at the time. Pants were so low, you could see the crack.

Boys had to wear shirts with a collar and T-shirts had to have a pocket. Every shirt was tucked in.

The high school was deadly serious. Boys and girls were sent home all the time, including my youngest sister for making and wearing culottes. The dress police did not approve.

Mother was hard on the girls for many reasons, but the dress code brought out some goodness as she shared her knowledge and tools to help my sisters cope with the constraining rules.

## Working With His Hands

The man of the house was expected
to be a handyman.
It was a heavy lift for him.
His preference was for tax law and numbers,
but he tried, he really tried,

to fit the stereotype.
When we lived on La France,
he had a mess of tools
scattered on the long workbench
and elsewhere in the detached garage.

When he looked for a tool
and could not find it,
he bought another one
at the hardware store.
Mother came from a family of craftsmen.

Her father was an engineer,
brother John, a carpenter,
brother Charles, an electrician.
Their tools were as important to them
as Dad's calculator.

Funny thing about that long workbench.
There was always a perfectly clean space
to build and repair his ham radio.
He would soil his hands for that!
There was a secret shame

in the unhelpful comparisons
to handymen in-laws.
Dad organized his tools
in the new garage on Lorain Road.
He forced himself to learn

how to do things he did not enjoy
by asking questions at the hardware store,
by reading how-to magazines.
Lawn care in San Marino
was a secular religion

and Dad was inspired
to be the best

once the element of competition
was added to the mix.
He became a pro at lawnmowers,

but repairs did not always go
according to the manual.
When my youngest sister was eight,
she sat by the pool next to my Dad
as he fixed the mower

and when nothing was working right,
he blew his cool, tossed the wrench,
and shouted "Damn it,"
only to return a little later
to finish the job.

Stubborn persistence to conquer
an unpleasant chore
is something I witnessed myself
as he struggled to be the master
of many things.

Mary with Charles (left) and John in 1939

## Money Man

Finance was Dad's superpower.
He earned all the money in the family
and he was the gatekeeper.
All of us had to justify
a withdrawal from Dad's Bank.

Dad was a misogynist.
It was easy for me as a boy to win him over,
but he had little interest in
and less understanding of
girls and their needs.
For my sisters,
every request for money became
a quiet-voice humiliation ritual.
He would say, "The only time you come to me
is when you ask for money."

Mother said it's a man's job
to make all the money decisions in the family
and women and girls were not to question him.
But they had disputes all the time!
Mother was a free spender of Dad's money.
She would spend;
he would complain;
she would question why he was such a cheapskate.

Dad was a money man.
For all his good qualities,
he was greedy in getting money
and stingy in giving it away.

## Last Laugh

1958

Your lips pulled back to bare your crooked teeth
and laughter soared, an honest belly laugh.

I saw you grip your sides from quivering joy
and soon your eyes were tearful happy slits,
and you, my father, were such a mess from laughing!

You let me see this mess when I was fifteen,
but after that you never laughed again.
Never again an honest belly laugh.

## Adults Sitting Around Drinking

Friends and relatives joined us
for barbeque on our patio.
The weather was mild
and some of the kids
were still in the pool.
I was not in a good mood.

It was just after I broke up
with my first serious girlfriend.
I was brooding in the shadows
quietly observing the adults
sitting in their folding chairs
with drinks in hand.

This was not a beer and wine crowd.
The martini was Mother's favorite
and, also, it was the favorite
with a plurality of the gathering,
but there were mixed drinks
with gin, vodka, and bourbon.

Dad was drinking Jim Beam
with ice and a splash of water.
There was a large bottle of Seagram's 7
blended whiskey on the kitchen counter.
There was plenty of alcohol
and my parents made sure

everyone had a full glass
at all times.
I was used to seeing adults
sitting around drinking,
but for the first time in my life
I asked the question:

*What is the point of all this drinking?*
I knew the standard explanation—
when people work hard,
they need to relax
at the end of the week
and alcohol helps them do that.

But in that moment, it occurred to me
my parents and their friends
might be seeking a kind of numbness

to life itself,
and I failed to understand
how that made them feel

better about themselves.
Meanwhile, I kept thinking
about my own failed love life.
Like most fifteen-year-old boys,
I assumed marriage would be wonderful
because you could have sex every night.

But when I looked at Dad and Mother
and the other couples
on our brick patio,
it seemed that train left the station
many years ago
and was no longer a factor at all.

If it wasn't a factor,
why were some of the couples
at the barbeque still happy together
when others, like my parents,
were determined to blur their expectations
in a fog of alcohol?

## Oberlin College

She had her pick
of several top-rated schools.
My sister decided Oberlin College
was the best fit for her.

During the summer,
she received a letter
from Oberlin's Dean of Women
asking her if she would "accept"
a Negro girl as a roommate.
The letter said the parents
would also have to accept
the arrangement.

Well, why not? She was ready
to explore an exciting new world
beyond our white-bread community
in suburban Los Angeles.

She took the Dean's letter
and showed it to the parents.
Mother said, "Absolutely not!"
A week-long battle ensued
that put pro wrestling to shame.

*Sister:*
It's my life.
I should make my own decisions.
Having a Negro roommate
would expose me to another world—
a world of inclusion,
not a world of separation
based on race, class,
the haves and the have-nots.

*Mother:*
No, it is not your life.
As the letter makes clear,
your parents must agree,
and we don't.
Having a Negro roommate
would ruin your life at Oberlin
because no one would want
to associate with you.

I jumped into the conversation
and reminded my mother
how passionate she was about the plight
of the Little Rock Nine
in September of the previous year.
Stunned, she got into my grill
and told me to shut up.
This wasn't my business.
I raised my voice: "You are such a hypocrite."

Mother turned to my sister
and accused her of corrupting me.
We laughed.

Without the parents' permission,
the project failed,
and my sister never knew for sure
which Negro girl
was offered up for acceptance.

## Norman and Virginia

They were drinking companions,
Mary and Bud and the Serigstads.
Norman could hold his liquor.

Virginia was a three-martini drunk.
They both had Hollywood good looks.
Norman was a Douglas engineer

with a quiet, poised demeanor,
always handsome and charming.
Virginia was knock-out beautiful.

She was the life of every party—
not quite *La Dolce Vita*,
but close,

and her best pal Mary
did her best to keep up.
Also like Mother,

Virginia had a horrible temper
when she was drunk.
I saw her go off on Norman once

in front of everyone.
He smiled as if it was nothing.
He was the Norwegian coastline

shrugging off another North Sea storm.
This too will pass;
it always does.

They took a Lurline cruise to Hawaii,
the four of them,
and it was time for us kids

to sit through a slide presentation
about their trip.
Dad loaded up the projector

with 40 slides or more.
It was interesting at first,
but soon enough it was repetitive,

especially seeing the foursome

holding up their drinks
to the camera.

More of the Hawaiian landscape
and less of the partying, please.
It was about this time I learned

the Serigstads were my godparents.
I was baptized when I was five
and they were there,

but that was the last time
the three of us had anything to do
with religion.

I had no idea.
"You're kidding.
Norman and Virginia are my godparents?"

Bud, Mary, Norman, Virginia, and the Lurline's Captain

## French Cuisine

The soup was so divine
I went back for seconds and thirds
and sometimes for fourths.
I didn't have much room
for the main course
at Taix's Restaurant,
in the shadow of the L.A. City Hall.

We sat at long tables
in the company of other customers.
This was the best part—
meeting interesting people
without the burden of commitment.

Mother was at her peak vivaciousness.
Even Dad loosened up a little
to speak politely to strangers.

After I left for college,
the younger sisters dined
at Madame Portier's
in East Los Angeles.
Reviews were most favorable.

Mother considered herself
a cosmopolitan person
determined to break away
from American insularity.
For Dad, French cuisine
was not exotic.
The food was good
and that is what he cared about.

## [tanka]

you are forever 15 for me
and that's the way I like it
please
if I call your name
promise not to come

## The Anthropologist

We broke up in the spring
and could not put it back together again
in the summer.

I did not have a steady girl
for the next four years.
Suddenly, I was an old soul

looking for a love built to last.
I did not know the word at the time,
but I began to play *anthropologist*,

studying my parents
and their married friends
to see what worked

and what did not.
Dad and Mother had their problems
to be sure,

and I was curious to learn
what went wrong
from 1939 to 1958.

One thing I knew for certain:
they were faking it
when they went out in public.

Given my cynicism,
I looked hard at their friends
like Tom and Helen,

Paul and Joan,
Norman and Virginia,
and Uncle John and Aunt Margie.

All these couples hung together
until the end.
But to my anthropologist eye,

only one couple—John and Margie—
was comfortable together
one hundred percent of the time.

## I'll Take the Cracked Egg

No one remembers the circumstances
or even the year,
but we all remember his comment,

"I'll take the cracked egg,"
in which he claimed
the only cracked egg

in a bowl of hard-boiled eggs.
It was so typical of him
to play the self-effacing martyr,

just like his mother,
our Granny, before him.
It became a running joke in the family

whenever we remember him
as the stolid stoic
contra the entitled wife and children.

CPA convention in 1959

## To Get Away for Good

1959

Drama!
My last three years of high school—
a running battle between
my ever-angry self-centered mother
with no tolerance for dissent
and my older sister who "talked back."
My escape was simple: athletics.

I could not wait
for my last class to end.
At 3:15, I am out at the track
running, stretching,
measuring my approach to the bar.
The magnificent smell
of the fresh sawdust
in the high jump pit
gloriously fills the air.
The aluminum black-white crossbar
is battered and bent.
It takes a minute to smooth out
my dirt takeoff spot.
After five or six warmups,
I am straddle-rolling over the bar
at six foot, six foot two,
and, on a good workout,
six foot four.

This is my plan to escape the drama
and get away for good:
land a full-ride scholarship
somewhere, anywhere.

## High Jumper

The changing years extend, but still I shine
above the crossbar straddling six foot three
at the quarter finals in May of ’59.

My father’s grainy photo caught the victory;
I share with him the moment’s immutability.
Time cannot erase the singular joy

of jumping—the illusory release from gravity.
I keep the gold and the aura of a perfect day,
but changing years took the boy away.

July 11, 1959. All-comers meet at Long Beach State College.
Height: 6 ft. 5 in. (1.96 m)

## I Want to be Like that Guy

There were times when I said,
*I want to be like that guy.*
When I was a child,
athletes were in the frame.
I admired Mickey Mantle
and taught myself to be a switch hitter.
I was equally inept
from both sides of the plate.
I admired Frank Gifford,
a two-way star at USC,
but football dreams died
in the ninth grade
when I tipped the scales
at one hundred five pounds.

I admired Mr. Bradford,
my twelfth-grade history teacher.
We called him General Jack
for his stories of World War II
when he personally led the Allies
across the continent of Europe!
Would teaching history
be the Way for me?

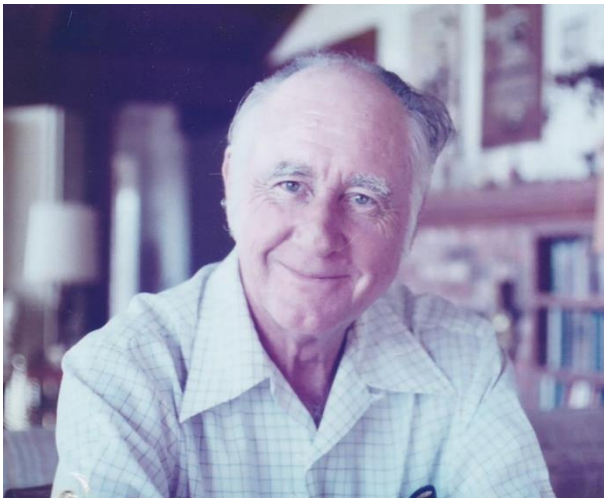
It was different when I looked at Uncle John.
He was in the frame,
but not for his vocation.
John was a construction worker
and I was all thumbs with tools.
He was a practical man.
I was a dreamer,
destined, as it happened, to be a writer.

He helped to build the house
on Nichols Canyon Road
when he was seventeen
and from that apprenticeship
John found his calling—
to spend his life in construction.

And that is what he did
for five years until
Uncle Sam said, “I Want You,”
for service in the Army.
He returned to the construction business

at war's end and never left.

John was happy in his work
and because of that
never went to college.
But to be a contractor in California
required a mastery
of a bewildering array of tests
and recertifications
for home construction,
home remodeling,
construction of professional buildings
and parking structures;
and for brickwork,
concrete,
steel work,
and masonry.
It was like earning
a B.S. degree in construction.



Uncle John in 1983

John seemed to be genuinely content
with his personal life.
That's what caught my eye
more than anything.
No one knows what really goes on
behind the walls of someone's home,
but over a period of many years
I could see
there was nothing fake about it.

I was around him a lot when I was young.
There was never a moment
when he did something
or said something
that made me think, "That's not right."
And, yes, there were moments
when I made a mental note:
*I want to be like that guy.*

## On Mount Wilson

Mother said her father,
my grandfather, had a request.
He wanted to take a drive

up to Mount Wilson for a day
and he asked to take me with him.
Just me.

I thought that was strange,
but I said OK.
It was strange because it was rare

for me to have any alone time
with Grandfather
and to be honest

I was never that close to him
because I feared his temper.
On an overcast Saturday morning,

the two of us took the hour-long drive
from Lorain Road
to the Observatory grounds.

Both of us were familiar
with the telescope
and the public access area

surrounding it,
so we strolled to the edge
of the mountaintop

overlooking the Los Angeles basin.
It occurred to me
this is what he really wanted to do:

look down on the City of Los Angeles.
It was early afternoon
and by now the morning fog

was a layer of unsightly smog
two thousand feet thick
pressing against the San Gabriel Mountains

with only the higher hills of the basin

poking out into the clear air.
There was nothing to see,

but he just stood there
for the longest time,
looking to the south and talking to me.

Somehow, Grandfather found it comforting
to look to the south and talk to me.
Three months later, Grandfather was dead.

Christmas 1958. Grandfather shares a happy moment with his grandchildren.

## Pearl

I drove her to her home in Pasadena
near Muir High School once a week
after I got my license.
I did this for two years
and I got to know her as well
as anyone in the family.
At first, it was a chore—
being her chauffeur—
but it wasn't long
before I enjoyed my time with her.

Pearl was the only Black person I knew
in the first 18 years of my life.
She was middle aged,
medium height,
a little overweight,
and scrupulously respectful of white people,
which was expected behavior
in the 1950s.

Ours was a large house,
but she was a hard worker
with a disciplined routine.

My sisters and I loved Pearl
and we came to see her
almost as a member of the family.
Mother cared for her
and appreciated her years of service.
The Civil Rights Movement
was crowding into the news,
and I think Mother eased her conscience
with the conviction
she was uplifting the life
of one Black person.
For Dad, it was more of a business transaction:
Pearl needed a job, and we gave her one.

Our parents were explicit in their belief
in white supremacy.
Each said as much when asked.
Most of my friends had the same view.
The general idea was Black people did not have
the capacity to learn as much

or as fast as white people,
and they lacked the work ethic
of the white race.

These were abstractions.
At first, she was guarded talking
to this white boy who just got his driver's license,
but I could tell she was no one's fool.
She read books.
She was well informed about the world.
I asked her serious questions;
she gave me serious answers.

Her life project was to help her son
get a fair start in life.
*Fair* is the key word.
White people make glib references
to equal opportunity,
that every person has a fair shot,
but listening to Pearl,
it was clear that was not so
for Black Americans.

I met him once.
He was just entering his teen years.
I remember how uncomfortable I was
because he was so nervous,
so excessively respectful
to an older white teenager.
It wasn't right.

I learned that the definitions
of *capacity* and *work ethic*
often serve at the pleasure of prejudice.
Years later, when I was on the Cal track team,
I noticed all the Black guys
were getting better grades than me.
Like Pearl's son, they found a way
to move from 10 meters back
just to begin at the same starting line
as their white competitors.

## Bonnie

Sunday afternoon was our campfire event.
The whole family gathered
in front of the TV
to watch "Lassie" and "Bonanza."
My baby sister immediately fell in love
with the beautiful Collie dog
on the screen,
and love took a giant leap forward
when, on Christmas Eve
after the move to Lorain Road,
she secretly witnessed Dad and me
replace the old 13-inch TV
with a larger color console.

Our cocker spaniel died in 1959
and Pam begged for a collie,
but the parents said
they did not want a large dog
jumping up and knocking people over.
Well, she countered,
how about a Shetland Sheepdog?
She asked Dad,
the money manager in the family,
to buy her a female sheltie
and she would pay him back
through the sale of the puppies.
Dad assumed, correctly,
he would never get his money back,
but he said OK.

Thus, Bonnie joined the family.
She wasn't much of a show dog.
Her career went sideways
when she bit a dog show judge.
It was always more about love anyway.
Bonnie was the first love
in the succession of ten shelties
in Pam's life.

Pamela with Bonnie in 1961

## San Marino

# 1960

Professional lawns, exquisite flowers, houses
out of *Sunset* illumined quiet wealth.
Money was mostly new, but tastefully displayed.
Professional men sipped cocktails with their wives,
quietly, of course, when business deals were done.
The tone was English. Along with Germanic cousins,
British surnames slept on English streets.
Italians, Greeks, and Jews were borderline.
A fleet of Japanese gardeners broke a sweat
in sunny yards. The trash was quietly hauled
each week by courteous men in coveralls.
After school, perspiring maids in uniforms
white or blue would queue for buses along
the Drive to ride a rumbling ashtray home.

The nights were deathly quiet. We never saw
the underclass at dark. Invisible deeds,
professionally drawn by cordial men, kept
our slumber safe, our world a safe cocoon.
Depression-haunted parents pampered us
into the sixties. The gaunt face of poverty
that fueled their fears was one we never knew.
Our class of 1960 naturally believed
in privileged wealth, believed in dread pursuits
of Dry-As-Dust at top professional schools.
Our dreams were so intense before the dawn,
before the day enhanced our consciousness.
From out of the comfortable night we faced the sun.
At long last we were forced to cope with light.

## Class of 1960

We meet again, halfway to the sea;
we touch again, halfway from the snow.
Our disentangled lives have floated free
through range and farm and city far below,
and far away from home. We floated free
within the groove of the river's quiet flow.
Our lives are channeled—this we clearly see;
our cut of land determines where we go;
but how we go is up to you and me.
Entangled as we are again tonight,
salute the past, then say a last good-bye.
Remember me as I appear tonight
and I'll remember you with an inward eye
until the whispering river meets the sea.

NOTE: This poem was written in 1990 just before the 30th class reunion.

## [haiku]

August moon
children disappear
into their lives

## [haiku]

in my dream,
mother scolds a waitress
the coldest hour of the night

## [tanka]

as I cut and splice
a few salient vignettes,
the rest of my life
spools out
on the cutting room floor

## Storytelling

My mother was verbal;
my father was not.
Dad told his stories
through his impeccably crafted written word.

I loved visiting Dad's office,
first in Whittier
and later in Los Angeles
down the street
from Belmont High School.

In my senior year,
he took me into the L.A. office
where he introduced me
to the secretary,
the junior accountants,
and the senior partners.
I was impressed by how much he was respected,
even loved,
by his staff and associates.

On this occasion,
he showed me a quarterly newsletter
he created all by himself.
It was a brilliant eight-page document
about the firm
and the recent changes in tax law.
It's hard to make accounting interesting,
but he did it!

Dad was a multi-talented Renaissance man
and he had the intellectual gifts
to do anything he wanted.

## The Candidate

He was a fresh political face,
only 32 years old
with a warm, outgoing personality.

John Rousselot was running for office
in the 25th Congressional District,
and he was on our patio by the pool

chatting with my parents
and a crowd of dedicated Republican voters.
This was the first time

I was in the presence of a real politician.
He was short and slender,
and he walked with a limp from boyhood polio.

His attire appealed to L.A. conservatives—
in other words, he looked like money.
Rousselot was a San Marino homeboy

brimming with confidence,
ready to take on the evil Democrats.
He did not say anything

about the John Birch Society
and I don't remember anyone asking.
That did not come out

until after he was elected.
Within a year, Rousselot set up
the Birch Society home office

on Mission Street in San Marino.
Mother was furious when she found out
he was in bed with the far right.

She felt betrayed by his sin of omission.
Mother worked against his reelection
and he was voted out after one term.

## You Make Too Much Money

Dad knew the earnings of his clients
and he had a general idea
of the incomes of the different professions.
His compensation was well above average.
Making good money was important to him,
but there was a time
he really wanted something
only to be told he was too rich to get it.

The coach at Occidental College
recruited me for the track team
and dangled the hope of a scholarship.
Dad and I attended a dinner on campus
with other prospects and their parents.
We were encouraged to speak
to the director of financial aid, Ben Culley.
So we did.

The dean made his pitch for the school,
but unfortunately for us,
Dad was making too much money.
We would have to pay full price
for a private Oxy education.
Dad was taken aback,
though he did his best not to show it.
For once, being too well off was a liability.

## The *Grande Dame*

I never knew my mother's mother
who died of cancer before I was born.
Mother always spoke of her
with a reverent voice.
According to Mother,
her mother made the family circle
and the world beyond
as elegant as herself.
She was the perfect family matriarch
beloved by all for her kindness,
selfless sacrifice,
and sage advice.

My grandmother was the *grande dame*
of Mother's family.
And by her many sledgehammer suggestions,
Mother expected us to treat her
as the *grande dame* of our own family.

Mother's father ruled
as a mercurial autocrat.
Grandfather played the genial patriarch
most of the time,
but his thunderous anger is what
I remember best.
Often without a warning,
he would explode
with furious force
at those of us
including Mother
unlucky enough to be in the way.

Mother tried with all her powers
to align herself
with her saintly *grande dame*,
but it was clear to me,
to my sisters,
and perhaps even to her,
her demeanor aligned splendidly
with dear old dad.

## House Rules for Gender

Fathers raise their sons;
mothers raise their daughters.
Fathers provide for the family;
mothers take care of the home.

Mentoring daughters was not his job.
I don't know how else to say it.
That was women's work.
Compared to me,
my sisters were overlooked
except at family functions.

Sadly, for my sisters,
Mother was a harsh mentor,
even jealous at times.
If one of them
was in the center ring too long,
Mother made a point
to knock her down a peg.

These were the house rules
from when the oldest was born
until the youngest was married.

From four tightly wrapped chrysalises,
butterflies flew away happy to be free.

## Gee Gee

We called her Gee Gee
for Great Grandmother.
She was Granny's stepmother,
although they were close to the same age.
Rita Cobb and Archibald MacLeish were Scots.
In 1930, she wrote a monograph
about the MacLeish family
as they journeyed from Edinburgh
to the China coast
and, finally, to Los Angeles.

Gee Gee wrote the MacLeish family history
long before she came into my life.
She was a careful and entertaining writer,
but when I knew her,
Gee Gee was growing old
and she suffered from episodes of dementia.
Whenever I entered the room
at crowded family gatherings,
she would say,
"Who is that tall young man."

Gee Gee's greatest joy
was to sit with small children
and talk to them about their interests.
She could do this for hours
and because of that
she is the centerpiece
of some of our best memories of childhood.

Mary with Gee Gee in 1954

## Escape to Idaho

# 1961

In the summer after my 19th birthday,
Dad and I drove one thousand miles
to visit Yellowstone Park
and the Grand Tetons,
then returned to Pocatello
so I could register
for my sophomore year of college.
My room, board, and tuition
was paid for by the school.

We were far away
from the distractions of the family
and that was good.
Just the two of us.
We had an amiable running conversation
the entire trip.

On the morning he left for home,
we had breakfast
at Smitty's Pancake House
on Yellowstone Avenue
across from the college.
Dad got into his car
and drove off.
I walked back to Owen Hall.

Dad was completely relaxed
from beginning to end.
His mood was the best part
of our time together.

## Las Vegas

We stopped in Vegas for the night.
It was my first time there
and I was blown away
by the lights of the strip,
by the extraordinary consumption
of electricity.

I asked Dad if he was a gambler.
He said, no, not really.
Gambling is a tax on stupidity
was the way he put it.
The machines and gaming tables
are set up to come out ahead
most of the time.
Gamblers are at a disadvantage
playing the odds against the house.
You may win big once in a while,
but most winners are too stupid
to quit while they are ahead.
And once more, the house cleans up.

Then he told me a story.
A few years back,
he wanted to play blackjack in Vegas.
He calculated how much
he could afford to lose
and he came up with a figure of $3000.
He could walk away from that amount
and call it the cost of a good time.

The next time the parents were in Vegas,
Dad sat down at the blackjack table,
ordered a glass of Jim Beam,
and lit a cigarette.
He knew the rules and odds by heart,
but occasionally he would make a mistake
deliberately
so he would not be kicked out
of the casino for being a card counter.

Every player was watched from above.
The card counters were escorted
to the door.

Dad came home to L.A. with his $3000,

plus a little extra.
He didn't say how much.

He loved a mental challenge,
whether it was completing an audit for a client
or outsmarting the house at blackjack.
Behind his Clark Kent exterior,
there was the beating heart of a competitor.

## Dad Tips the Waitress

For the first time in my life,
I noticed how Dad paid a restaurant bill.
I had been watching him silently
on our long trip.

We ate dinner in Jackson Hole, Wyoming.
The waitress cleared the table
and came back with the bill.
Dad pulled out his credit card
and examined the bill.
I asked him how much he tipped the waitress.
He turned the bill around
and moved it across the table
so I could look at it.
He showed me the individual prices
for the food and drinks,
and the grand total for everything.
He pointed to the grand total and said,
"I tip 15 percent of that amount."

Dad could do math problems in his head.
He already knew the exact amount
of the tip, to the penny.

Also on the bill was a four percent tax
for the state of Wyoming,
and an additional two percent tax
for Teton County. He said,
"I don't tip for state and local taxes.
The government had nothing to do with this meal.
The state and county get nothing."

## Stress

# 1962

Dad is hauled away
to Huntington Hospital
in a blue and white meat wagon.
Everything is up in the air
with the sole breadwinner
out of action.

Daughter's wedding is coming soon.
Things are shaky at the office
for reasons he won't talk about.
There are screaming matches at home.
The younger girls duck and cover.

Dad is forty-five.
The marriage is on the rocks
by all appearances
and the happy family of six
is anything but.
Emphysema waits stage left
thanks to 30 years of smoking.
Dad is drinking early and often.

The official story
is a possible heart attack,
but it isn't.

## Spotlight

The mother of the bride insisted
everything about the wedding
be done a certain way,
but the strong-willed daughter

pushed back
with ideas of her own.
The week before the wedding
was one damned thing after another.

The mother wasn't drunk
as usual.
It was a cold-sober morning.
She flew into a rage,

slapped the face of the bride-to-be,
and ripped her blouse to shreds—
this to make her point
perfectly clear.

To the mother of the bride,
All Saints Church
had never looked better
for a June wedding.

The bride was beautiful and radiant
in this, her special hour
in the spotlight,
and watching,

the mother knew
the spotlight had moved on.
This day belonged to her daughter
and no one else.

Donna and Robert Ross marry

## First Born

My older sister had the misfortune
of being first in the birth order.
So much pressure, so many expectations!

Dad was open minded about the future
of his first child
whether it was a boy or a girl.
He was ready for some give and take.

Mother did not believe in give and take.
She embarked on parenting with traditional views
on the roles of boys and girls.
She insisted her views shall not be questioned.
Most of all, she expected—
no, she demanded—
gratitude for being a wise mentor
to her first-born daughter.

None of these expectations came to pass.

Our family's first-born was praised
as a scholar at every level
until she graduated from college with honors.
Step by step, she pursued the world of ideas
with all her heart, soul, mind, and strength,
and the results were nearly perfect.
She imagined an independent career for herself.

Both mother and daughter were strong-willed.
My sister believed she was smart enough
to figure things out on her own
and, in truth, she was!

Mother's admonitions were brushed aside.
She was doubly thwarted—
there was no appreciation for her advice
and, perversely,
her daughter enjoyed abundant life.
She nursed a grudge until the very end.

## Dad Explains Supply and Demand

The parents were at services
on Christmas Eve where I read
a Bible passage from Luke.

On the afternoon of Christmas day,
Dad asked me why I wanted to go
into the ministry.

Wow, I thought.
He actually wants to talk about it.
"I'm considering it.

Nothing is decided.
I may end up teaching high school history.
I have a long way to go."

This kicked off a gentlemen's debate
about the comparative importance
of different professions.

"Either way, are you prepared
to live a life of poverty?"
There was a hint of a smile.

"I'll be paid enough to get by."
"Yes," he said, "but I assume you will have
a wife and children to support.

What about them?"
I tried to score a debating point.
"I know in some countries

teachers get more respect
and are paid better than in America.
Maybe we should do that here."

"Assuming you go into teaching,
who is going to subsidize your salary?
The government?

That's socialism—we don't do that here.
People are paid what they are worth."
I said, "Teachers do a lot of good

for a lot of people.
You make it sound like being a businessman
is the highest form of service.

You are equating wealth with value."
Instead of taking umbrage,
he chuckled at my naiveté.

"We live in a capitalistic society.
Accountants are important.
Why should people work hard to acquire wealth

only to pay the highest tax rates?
My job is to help my clients keep
as much of their earnings as they can."

He turned the discussion back
to the ministry.
"Speaking as your father,

I don't want to see you spend your life
in a low-wage profession."
"It's not as bad as you say,

but I agree with you.
I could spend four years of college
and three years of grad school

studying something else
and make more money."
He drove his point home.

"It's a matter of supply and demand.
The public is willing pay more
for business services

than for the service
by a Protestant minister.
Each one of us is selling something.

If there was more demand
for preaching and church work,
the public would pay more for it."

## Born With an Inclination

I believe I was born
with an innate inclination
to believe in God.

The Baldwin children had the option
to form their own opinions.
For that, we are grateful.

Dad was studiously noncommittal.
He may have been a member in good standing
in the First Agnostic Community Church.

Mother professed a preference
for the dreamy atmospherics
of Christian piety.

Yes, we attended church,
but there were no devotions
or grace at meals.

We kept a secular house.
No one told me to believe in God.
I figured that out on my own.

## [tanka]

tonight
by the lemon tree
our first kiss
I ride home
on a horse of oxygen

## [tanka]

double-clicking
the Events folder
our first kiss
remembering your touch,
the tilt of your face

## Love at First Sight

# 1963

My parents walked through the front door
of the sprawling rambler on Oxford Road
and my mother immediately saw
myriad ways of spending my Dad's money
on interior decorating,
and the realtor helped her out
by making her own expensive suggestions,
but Dad didn't really mind
because he knew he could afford it
and he enjoyed the pose that money worries
were for the little people.

After a half hour of wasting his time
as the women co-decorated
the insignificant rooms,
they finally came to the opposite end
of the house, the rec room,
and for Dad it was love at first sight.
This was the den of his dreams
with a large corner desk
for his ham radio equipment,
his beloved Morse code key,
and his conversation logs.
There was ample space on the wall
for his large Mercator map of the world
with multicolored, rounded-head push pins
showing where his radio contacts lived.
Now add his own big-boss chair
and the scene was perfect.

Until this moment, Dad was silent,
and the women assumed he was bored.
The realtor was in mid-sentence,
describing all the possibilities
of the room having nothing to do
with an old-fashioned radio shack
when Dad opened his mouth
and announced, "We'll take the house."

## Coping

My older sister and I were raised
in a home and in a world
different from our two younger sisters.
The four-year separation between me
and my younger sister seemed like 20.
Given the different environments and gaps in age,
I was paired with my older sister
and middle sister was paired with baby sister.
Still, each child had a unique set of parents.

The world evolved from the buttoned-down 1950s
to the more permissive 1960s.
Our parents evolved into creatures
less joyful about life in the passing years,
more damaged by toxic incompatibility,
and increasingly impaired by alcohol.

Susan, Bud, Mary, and Pamela

## Dad's Politics

Dad was a Herbert Hoover Republican.
Not the Hoover who rode the wave
of the Coolidge economy for a year and a half,
but the Hoover who spent
the last 30 years of his life
opposed to the New Deal.

For all his intellect,
Dad viewed Big Government
through the prism of accountancy.

He despised the Navy.
Why?
Because government accounting principles
differed from what he learned
as a CPA in California.

He hated the ever-changing tax code.
Why?
Because, he said, tax laws were written
by lawyers who knew nothing about accounting.
And yet he made a good living
decoding the code for his clients.

He preferred the unfettered capitalism
of the distant past, before the New Deal.

Dad was a conservative Republican
on race, gender, social change,
and government oversight.

He was the autocrat of the dinner table
calmly spinning out his harsh political views
for the captive audience.
We listened with half-interest,
even when he tried to be provocative.

As adults, each Baldwin child rejected
his love for the Hooverian hellscape.

## Surfboard

Of my three sisters,
she had the greatest passion for the water.
Our new home had a pool 44 feet long,
and she was in it every day.
When I left for college,
she became the family's pool cleaner.

My younger sister was the tallest,
by far, and the most athletic of the three.
She had long arms and large hands,
perfect for swimming,
and was a key member
of the high school swim team.

In her later teens,
water skiing became a thing,
thanks to a friend with a powerboat.

Like me, she was a beach rat.
My favorite spot for body surfing
was 40th Street in Huntington Beach,
and hers was at Laguna
where our Aunt Marjorie lived.

She met Errol at Laguna Beach
in the summer of 1963,
and the two decided it was time
for her to build her own surfboard.
They set up the work area
on the concrete slab behind the cabaña.

And sure enough,
the surfboard was nearly done
when I got home from Berkeley.
There she was putting the finishing touches
on this beautiful board.
I was so impressed with her can-do spirit!
I had the feeling
she could do anything she wanted in life.
Nothing was going to stop her.

## Feeling Valued

She was not an academic
like my older sister.
She wasn't interested in clubs
or student government.
She was athletic,
but no one cared about sports for girls
except the participants.
This was before Title 9
mandated equal opportunity.

My younger sister had talents
completely overlooked
in the college prep milieu
of San Marino High School
where ninety percent of the students
went on to college
and seventy percent graduated
in four years.

There was little reward
for those at our high school
who had a passion for arts and crafts
like my sister.
One exception was the theater group.

She worked backstage creating the sets
and moving them around on stage.
She helped produce the programs
for the plays.
She loved every minute!
It was one of the few places
she felt valued during high school.

Susan is a set designer for the high school plays

## Expensive Stage Props

As luck would have it,
Bud and Mary were on a trip somewhere
and no one was using

the dining room furniture
so my sister appropriated the chairs
for the school play, *The Miracle Worker*,

without telling them
and that was a great idea
until they came to the scene

where Helen Keller trashed the dining room
during one of her fits of frustration
and, yes, the parents hit the ceiling

when they got back,
but sixty years later
the chairs are still in use.

## She Loves You

The Kennedy assassination stunned the nation
like nothing else since the attack on Pearl Harbor.
We all remember what we were doing
when we heard the news.

What followed was six weeks of sorrow.
The grieving widow and her two small children.
The horse-drawn caisson to the Capitol.
The Requiem Mass at St. Matthew's Cathedral.
Lee Harvey Oswald and Jack Ruby.
The endless documentaries on network TV.

This went on until the end of the year.
Six weeks of sustained sadness.
Six weeks of ruefulness!

I returned to the Berkeley campus in January
to finish my first semester classes.
I passed through Sather Gate
and entered the Student Union Building
where I met a deafening wall of noise.
The Beatles were singing on the sound system,
"She loves you YEAH YEAH YEAH."
Everyone in the building was singing along with them
as outrageously as possible,
especially loud on the YEAH YEAH YEAH.

This was our release—
we were done with the enforced solemnity.

## The Recovering Racist

# 1964

Cocooned wholly in whiteness
from infancy through high school,
racist assertions passed on to me
by my parents
settled in for a lifetime
never to be extinguished.
They cannot be un-remembered
no matter how hard I try,
but they can be heated
in the crucible of reason
so the impurities of prejudice
roll away like slag
and tempered truth remains.
I am a recovering racist,
but sad to say,
I will never be recovered.

## The Surgeon General's Report

I asked Dad if he was ready to quit.
He was 48 and had been smoking
since age 16,
two-thirds of his life.

It wasn't long before Mother gave it up,
but for Dad, it was hard to admit
he was owned by an addiction.

Using his critical thinking skills
and motivated reasoning,
he looked for
and found
inconclusive recommendations.

The report hedged on nicotine addiction.
The writers of the report
(all smokers themselves)
called it habituation—
a habit that can be broken
by strength of will
and that was Dad's fallback plan.
No one had more strength of will
than he
or so he thought.

*Habituation* was corrected
to *addiction* in 1989,
four years after he died of emphysema.

## Checkpoint

Two days earlier,
on August 2, 1964,
torpedo boats fired on the USS Maddox.
There was a single bullet hole
on the ship
and one aircraft was slightly damaged.
All the top commanders were on edge.

It was late at night on August 4th.
The seas were rough.
Radarmen and jumpy commanders
saw images on the radar screen
that may or may not be torpedo boats.
The Maddox reported this
to the brass in Washington:
possibly there was another attack
by North Vietnam in the Gulf of Tonkin.

Captain Herrick of the Maddox
clarified his first cable
three hours later:
never mind—nothing happened.

His second cable was brushed aside.

The president was spoiling for a fight,
and this was going to be the excuse
to get the ball rolling.

From slight damage on the 2nd.
and no damage at all on the 4th.,
the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution
passed Congress on August 7, 1964,
and we were at war
for the next nine years.

The Resolution was a pivotal checkpoint
in the middle of the 60s
separating my older sister and me
and our FDR-born generation
from our two younger sisters.
The war was popular at first,
but soon the nation turned sour.
Americans were fed up

long before we left.

The Boomers weren't convinced
those who fought the Good War
knew what they doing.
Vietnam is half a world away.
Why are we there?
Is this in our national interest?

The younger sisters and their friends
were still in their teens.
If there is a war to fight,
they are the ones to suffer.
Young men will die.
The war will be a widowmaker.

The domino theory—
the last domino to fall, the theory.

Translated from the Latin:
*How sweet it is to die for a theory*.

## The Little Red Schoolhouse

We didn't talk much politics
until my junior year in college.
Cal Berkeley was my school.
That's where brother-in-law Rob
got his doctorate.
My sister spent three semesters there
before finishing at UCLA.

Dad was fond of calling it
the little red schoolhouse.

The Free Speech Movement of '64
was in the news
and Dad and I talked about it
every time I came home on break.
Our conversations were low key
and enlightening for both of us.
It was fun.

He was alarmed by all the lefty students
roaming the campus.
I confessed it bothered me, too.
I was always circumventing the protest rallies
just to get to class.

It took a while, but I convinced him,
using survey facts and figures,
that Cal professors leaned conservative.
The institution itself was ruled
by an old guard determined to keep
an outmoded model of liberal education
in place for as long as possible.

Which is why we had a Free Speech Movement!

Dad could be open minded.
But heaven help you if you came to the debate
without a bulletproof argument.

## The Blackouts

1965

She wasn't a Joe Sixpack drinker
consuming alcohol with gusto
or quietly sipping bourbon or wine
or both at all hours
like my dad.
One martini and she was off balance.

One drink was all it took
to spring the hatch suppressing
every childhood resentment
or marital grievance
or parental dissatisfaction,
and come the morning
claim not to remember anything!

Joe Anonymous remembered enough
of his drunken escapades and abuses
to enliven the AA meetings.
Not Mother.

Because of her rages,
Mother owned all the bandwidth
in the family,
and it was up to us
to brainstorm strategies
for outfoxing peevishness
and sidestepping pyroclastic vitriol.

## Henry Ford

We had one serious disagreement,
Dad and I: Henry Ford.
Not his place in history
as a great industrialist.
We disagreed on Ford's role
as a celebrity industrialist
opining on the Jewish people.

There was little daylight
between Ford's conspiracy theories,
grounded in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*,
and Dad's beliefs.
If the Great Man said it was so,
it must be so.
I tried to humor him.
"Mickey Mantle is my favorite player.
If he says, 'Viceroys are for me,'
does that mean smoking is right for me?"

I was taking one history course
after another at Berkeley.
My professors all said the *Protocols*
were a proven fake.
No matter, he said.
That line of thinking is normal
at the little red schoolhouse.

Dad's antipathy was deep seated.
I pointed out the obvious.
Jews are smart people
with a strong faith in education.
Some of our best Americans are Jewish.

I tried to pin him down.
"I am sure there are good Jewish accountants
out there in the workforce.
Have you ever hired a Jew for your office?"
“No.”
I asked why not.
"Because my clients wouldn't stand for it."

## At the Airport

For the one traveler
who thinks for himself,
there are thousands of baggage handlers
portering ideas
from one generation
to the next.

## Snoopy

Compared to the confinement,
the tedium,
of the classroom,
this was heaven—
nothing but physical activity
in the High Sierras
among the giant Sequoias.

"Snoopy" was my camp handle.
Like a sheepdog,
I herded the children
around the campgrounds,
but I was like a child myself
learning to love large animals
for the first time in my life
and refining my skills
in archery and water skiing.

It was at Montecito Sequoia
I learned I would never be happy
as a suburban housewife
or working in an office.


Susan spent three years at Montecito-Sequoia summer camp. She was a junior counselor in her last year.

## Celebrating Peace

1.

Today we gather in this faraway space
to celebrate what never took place.

Under this cloudless sky
the Unknown Soldier did not die.

No one was wounded on this spot.
Nary a soldier fired a shot.

No soldier sang a battle hymn
or killed or died or lost a limb.

On this our distant grassy field,
no corpse was lifted onto a shield.

The world at war is far away;
let peace begin with us today.

2.

Fog is rising from the thawing ground.
Birds are soaring without a sound.

Cedars shimmer in the morning breeze.
Snowy mountains back the trees.

For a world at war, where do we start?
Peace begins in the human heart.

By changing hearts one by one,
changed hearts lower the gun.

Today we promise to work for peace,
changing hearts in the name of peace.

The world at war is far away;
let peace begin with us today.

## Aunt Margie

My uncles and aunts were good people.
I admired and loved them all.
My favorite was Aunt Margie

who was married to Mother's brother, John.
She had a warm and generous spirit
that reflected her midwestern roots.

As they say, Minnesota nice.
She always had a smile
and a genuine curiosity

about what was important in my life.
Margie had a friendly voice.
It was a joy to listen to her.

I have come to appreciate the importance
of the sound of a voice
in a long-term relationship.

An unpleasant voice can make life tedious.
When my parents were dealing
with their difficulties

during my middle school years,
the thought occurred to me
I could live with a person like Margie.

As it happened, ten years later,
I was engaged to a young woman
with a warm personality,

a deep and soothing voice,
a ready laugh,
and a real love for life.

Mother was curious.
She asked me what my fiancée was like.
I was reluctant to answer

because Mother put women and girls
into two categories:
either she was a rival or a protégé.

I did not want my wife to be either.
After taking a few seconds to come up
with an answer, I said,

"Well, she is a lot like Aunt Margie."
By her look, I knew right away
Aunt Margie was in for rough seas.

Aunt Margie in 1987

## Dorothy

Mother wakes up
disoriented
until she visualizes
the face
of her enemy.

Anger gives her life
intentionality.

Her eldest daughter
is cut adrift.

In the sorting out,
there is a new bond
of mother and daughter,
not one of blood,
but love.

## Not on Speaking Terms

When my sister lost her baby,
I came to the hospital later in the day.

Dorothy in L.A. drove to Berkeley
to console the childless couple.
She stayed for a week.

Mother in L.A. chose not to come
or pick up the phone.

## Glass Half Empty

He loved to be the devil's advocate.
If you pleaded in favor of the notion of progress
or argued for the goodness of faith-based optimism,
he would, in his quiet way,
set out to destroy your thesis point by point.

Dad was a philosophical pessimist.
He was not emotional about it,
but he felt he was doing you a favor
by exposing the flaws in your illusions.

Optimists look at the bright side.
He would gently point out
the human condition was not improving at all.
As he aged and declined in health,
he believed history was not progressing,
but actually was getting worse.

There is something to be said
for being correct about the human condition.
When he was young and full of life,
he took pleasure in setting the record straight.

Dad put himself in a logical box.
By placing himself,
the world, and all its inhabitants
on a metaphorical death row,
what was there to live for?
Where was the happiness in soft nihilism?

## B.A., History, U.C. Berkeley

I entered the fictive Mall of Great Accomplishments,
clutching my youth like a lottery payoff,
ready to spend my years.

## [haiku]

leaving college
just ahead
Gas Food Lodging

## You May Call Me Grandmary

1966

Her first grandchild was born
on April 1, 1966.
Mother said, "Don't call me Grandma."

Left unsaid was her disdain
for the commonplace name.

"How about Grandmother?"
Nope.

She wanted something unique,
something to set her apart
from the others.

"You may call me Grandmary."

David and Nancy Elefson marry

## Sea Duty

I shipped out on the first of June
and did not come home
until the end of August.

Nancy was stuck in a strange city,
forced to learn the streets of Long Beach
and the L.A. freeway system

all by herself.
Mother and Dad gave me
a small portable TV for my birthday.

Except I was overseas—
the TV was for Nancy.
They could see she was lonely.

Our apartment was 30 miles away
from Oxford Road.
Nancy only dared the freeways

driving to and from San Marino.
When she visited,
she slept in a small bedroom

near the back entrance by the garage.
The room had a heavenly smell.
Mother always put a fresh gardenia

in a bowl for her.
I joined the Navy to see the world.
I did not know what to expect

when I learned my new homeport
would be my old hometown,
but the parents were welcoming

all summer long.
It was a relief to me
to hear about their kindnesses.

## Ship to Shore

Coming home from my first cruise
off the coast of Vietnam,
Dad and I managed a phone hookup
from the sailors and Marines
onboard the ship
to their dependents
scattered around the country.

I was the Princeton's radio officer.
Dad and his amateur radio friends
in the L.A. area
set up the connection
as the ship was steaming
from Pearl to NAVSTA Long Beach.

On the afternoon and evening
before we docked next to the Queen Mary,
more than four dozen sailors and Marines
lined up outside Main Comm
hoping for a 10-minute phone conversation.
Each would get on the phone
and tell Dad what number to dial.
If the call went through
to the lucky dependent,
there was an overflow of happiness
in the crypto room.

Hats off to Dad
for bringing brief moments of joy
to so many weary sailors and Marines.

Back from Vietnam

## Thanksgiving

My first cruise to Vietnam was over
and the Princeton was in the yards at Long Beach.
I left Main Comm and became
the Education & Training officer for the ship.
There were five sailors in the E&T office.

Our family had a long tradition
of inviting strangers over for Thanksgiving.
Mother always adored men in uniform,
so I asked her if the sailors in my office
could come for dinner.
She was thrilled!

Three sailors were going home to their families.
The other two said they would come.
One was a PN3 and the other was a Seaman.

We showed up wearing civilian clothes.
(Mother might have been disappointed.)

The Seaman was a good-looking kid
right out of high school.
Normally, he was well behaved,
but on this occasion, he was tipsy with wine.
He was paying too much attention
to my youngest sister who was still in high school.
She wasn't interested and told him to buzz off.

Dad managed a small sliver of a smile.
He was amused.
Mother laughed out loud and moved
the wine bottle to the other end of the table.
Dinner ended well without incident.

For those of us sober enough to know
what was going on, it was a fun memory.

## It Doesn’t Pencil Out

1967

He was a CPA
and his answer was Spock logical:
"It doesn't pencil out,"
an accounting expression
meaning you cannot build wealth
with alimony, child support,
division of property,
and billable hours for the lawyers.

Building wealth was what he did best
for his clients and for himself.
If he was going to live
in a loveless world,
wouldn't it be better
to live in a world
that penciled out?

USS Princeton (LPH-5)

## [tanka]

on the signal bridge,
I caught myself
gawking at the full moon over Hue
for a moment
I forgot men were dying.

## [tanka]

the Marine was lying low,
terrified,
waiting for enemy fire
a wavering moth
perched at the end of his gun

## [tanka]

in the Mekong Delta,
rice farmers stumble
on some bones
wrapped in a uniform…
the boots are gone

## The MCP Tie

1968

Nancy got her degree at the city college
and Dad asked her what she would like to be
after finishing at a 4-year school.
She said she was interested in accounting.
Thinking her father-in-law might be impressed,
she said she would like to be
a CPA someday.
Dad quipped with a mischievous wink,
"Oh, you mean
Cleaning, Pressing, and Alterations?"

At Christmas next, she gave him
a high-quality MCP tie.
It looked like a fancy-school patterned tie,
showing the profile of a white pig
with a white MCP below the pig.
The background was blood red.
Dad was delighted.
He wore the tie proudly to the office
and at many events where ties
were the uniform of the day.

CPA meeting in Kyoto, Japan

Kyoto, Japan

Hong Kong. Bud's older brother Simeon is in the center background.

## Sour

The elder children were gone,
never to return.
The left-behind daughters

searched for meaning
in the blowin'-in-the-wind 60s.
They were open to the siren call:

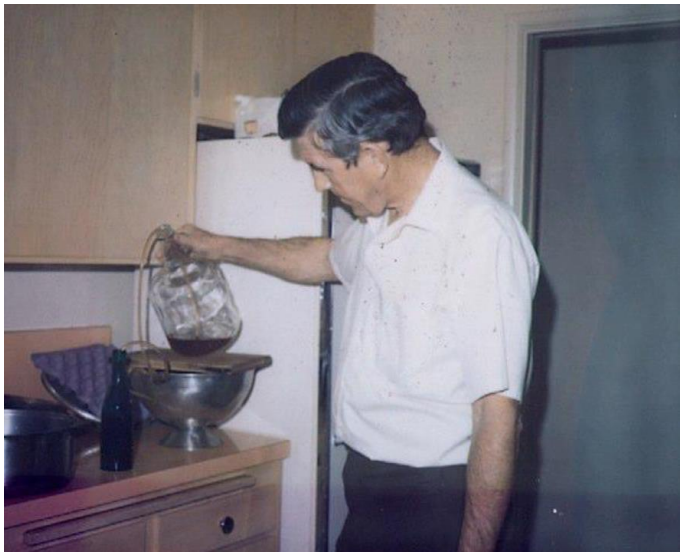
*Turn on, tune in, drop out.*
What does an empty nester do
when he is suddenly blessed

with a kid-free calendar?
He finds a hobby.
No one alive remembers

why Dad took up winemaking.
His Hobbesian career as a vintner
was solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

We gathered in the kitchen
for his first and only tasting.
We tried to be polite,

but even he
could see
it was not his calling.



Bud Baldwin, winemaker

## Moon Walk

1969

Astonishing peace and pride
were what we felt
for all too brief a moment.
An abnormality in a heartsick era.

## International Man of Mystery

He was the international man of mystery
in the Baldwin family.
Simeon was Dad's older brother.
I was born early in the war.
Uncle Sim was in the Asian theater
at the time
and he never left.
He was in the aircraft parts business,
first in Bangkok,
later in Kowloon,
and he found his sweet spot
in Hong Kong business and society.

I rarely saw my uncle.
I can count the times
on the fingers of one hand.

Simeon's greatest love
was his 40-foot sailboat *Morasum*.
He was a competitive sailor
who loved to try his luck
in the local races.
The *Morasum* was always in the mix.

Simeon's wife, our Aunt Marjorie,
returned to the states
in the 1960s
to live in Laguna Beach.
We got to know her well
as Laguna was a favored surfing spot
with the Baldwin kids.


Mary and Bud on the *Morasum* in 1968.
Simeon is second from the right.

In February 1969,
Uncle Sim was captured
off the China coast by the Communists.
As the *Morasum* was towed
to the mainland,
Sim tossed his passport
into the ocean,
and, of course, because of that,
the Chinese accused him
of being a spy.

On the day of Simeon's arrest,
I was a Naval officer

involved in the debriefing
of the sailors of the USS Pueblo,
the spy ship captured by the North Koreans.
The Pueblo crew was released
In December of ’68,
but there was still palpable antipathy
between the United States
and the Communists of the Far East.

Uncle Sim returned to Hong Kong
after ten months of confinement
and the obligatory show-confessions.

Bettmann/Getty Images

USS Pueblo crewmen flip the bird to the North Koreans

## Granny Moves into a Nursing Home

Granny moved out for the last time.
Her mind and memory were as good as ever,
but her body was failing.
Her medical needs exceeded
what Dad and Mother could do for her.

It is difficult to move a parent
into a nursing home.
It is like the beginning of the end.
Dad took it hard.

Mother's feelings were a little different.
It was never clear
how well the two got along.
Granny never lost her temper.
Mother was outspoken, as we know,
but she used Dad to relay her complaints.

Mother had one serious grievance,
more against Dad than Granny.
Granny's room was in the back of the house
next to the garage.
When Dad came home from work,
he said hello to his mother first
and to Mother second.
That was unacceptable.
It may have been a factor
in moving Granny out.

Granny was resilient.
She made the best of her new digs
at the nursing home.
She read news magazines
and her Bible all day long.
She smoked her cigarettes
when she could get away with it.

Mother visited Granny in August,
and Granny asked her
if she could bring her
the hot new best seller,
*Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex*
*(But Were Afraid to Ask)*?
Mother burst out laughing.
"Are you sure they will let you read it here?"

Granny said she would duck under the covers
with a flashlight.

Granny was an information junky.
Here was this 90-pound weakling
on her deathbed,
wasting away from too much tobacco,
continually learning new things
about her world.

She died December 15, 1971.
At her memorial service,
I read the Dylan Thomas poem,
"Do not go gentle into that good night,"
which to me summed up her lust for life.

Granny with Bud

## Wedding in the Park

It was about the time
of the Armstrong-Aldrin moon landing.
My younger sister was married
at Heartwell Park in Long Beach.
At 5-11, she towered over Tony, the groom,
even as he wore a top hat.

There was a slight smell of skunk in the air.

The groom's own rock band was tuning up
at the start of the ceremony,
drowning out the minister at the microphone.
Tony shouted, "Hey! Knock it off!"

The words of the vows were in perfect harmony
with the Peace and Love decade coming to a close.

The wedding cake was a sight to behold.
It was a shapeless pile
of brown and white cake-like substance.
The bride and groom cut it together.

Tony's band amped up the 60's music.
I remember they were loud,
but not very good.

A reporter from the Press-Telegram
shot some pictures and wrote up a story
with a heavy emphasis
on the hippy dippy scene.
She referred to the Baldwin family
as the Brooks Brothers crowd.
Her tongue-in-cheek report played it up
as a clash of civilizations.

HEARTS JOINED IN HEARTWELL PARK
Tony Sanger, in top hat, Susan Baldwin, left, Recite Vows
—Staff Photo

OPEN AIR CEREMONY

Pamela (second from left) is the maid of honor

## Mother Joins the Workforce

# 1971

She was another faceless female
in a corporate typing pool
late in the Great Depression.
Mother bragged she typed
100 words per minute
and she probably could
if you didn't count her many typos.
After marriage in 1939,
she was a stay-at-home housewife.

More than thirty years later,
when the youngest child married
and was out of the house,
she and three other well-to-do ladies
opened a boutique shop in Pasadena.
Each woman bought the stuff she liked
and put it on the shop floor.

Mother was a natural as a decorator.
She had a flair for design.
She was constantly reading books
about American history
and that was a plus when she shopped
for antique furniture.
Her purchases made money for the shop
and that gave her a sense of pride
for a job well done.

The shop closed after a few years.
It never made a profit,
but neither was it a money pit.
For Mother, it was a boon opportunity
to flesh out her latent talents
in design and decorating
she believed were always there
waiting to be tapped.

## Idaho Reunion

The parents came to Idaho
when Matthew was an infant
and I was finishing
my master's thesis.
We were making plans
to move to the Twin Cities
where I was to pursue
doctoral studies in English.

It was a good time for the four of us.
Dad fixed a broken light fixture
that I was too unhandy
to fix myself.
Mother was on a shopping tour
of Idaho and Wyoming.
She said the intermountain area
had a lot to offer.
Young families moved out west
with their furniture.
Their goods never went anywhere
for a half a century or more—
until there was an estate sale.
Oh, the undiscovered treasures!

She showed us the Lady Victorian desk
she bought in Blackfoot
a few miles away.
She was so proud of her purchase!
It went on the shop floor
at the store in Pasadena.
Fortunately for her,
it never sold,
and she got to keep it
when the shop closed down.

## My Moment in Time

Curving through a basalt cut,
the slim-waisted river brings
waters from the Two Oceans Plateau

at Jackson Lake to the faraway waters
out west, all the way to Astoria.
Cache Peak is due south.

Smooth-sanded alluvial fans
are tan with flecks of sagebrush teal.
To the north, the massive Craters of the Moon

lava fields lie between the river
and the distant mountains of central Idaho.
I stand alone in this isolated spot.

Civilization is nowhere in sight.
Little has changed since the Bonneville Flood
scoured the Portneuf River Valley

at the end of the Ice Age or even
when the first people arrived more
than ten thousand years ago.

This moment by the river—my moment
in time—is a one-of-a-kind snapshot
in the millions of years that some version

of the Snake River flowed to the Pacific.
This tiny stretch of river is not
the complete river any more than lives

exists in isolation apart from all the brothers
and sisters of the past, present, and future.
Like the island in the stream parting the waters,

it isn't you who travels forward.
The small measure of time meant for you
travels toward you and beyond you.

When Granny died, we found a dusty old shoebox full of family letters—over two hundred from 1813 to 1854—from David and Mary Higginbotham and their children to the world outside of Morven in Charlottesville, a short distance away from James Monroe and Thomas Jefferson, and a half-day coach ride to James and Dolly Madison.

David and his sons talked business. Their letters show how David transformed Morven from small-scale tenant farming to large-scale plantation slavery. Mary and her daughters reported news of Virginia hams, illnesses among the children and the slaves, the major purchase of a fortepiano, and—always—the weather. Their sentences had intimations of Jane Austin and Sir Walter Scott.

Mary was the child of a Quaker family in Philadelphia, but she seemed quite at ease with the ownership of other human beings. David ran a mercantile business in nearby Milton. The price of wheat, slaves, farm equipment, whatever; it made no difference to him.

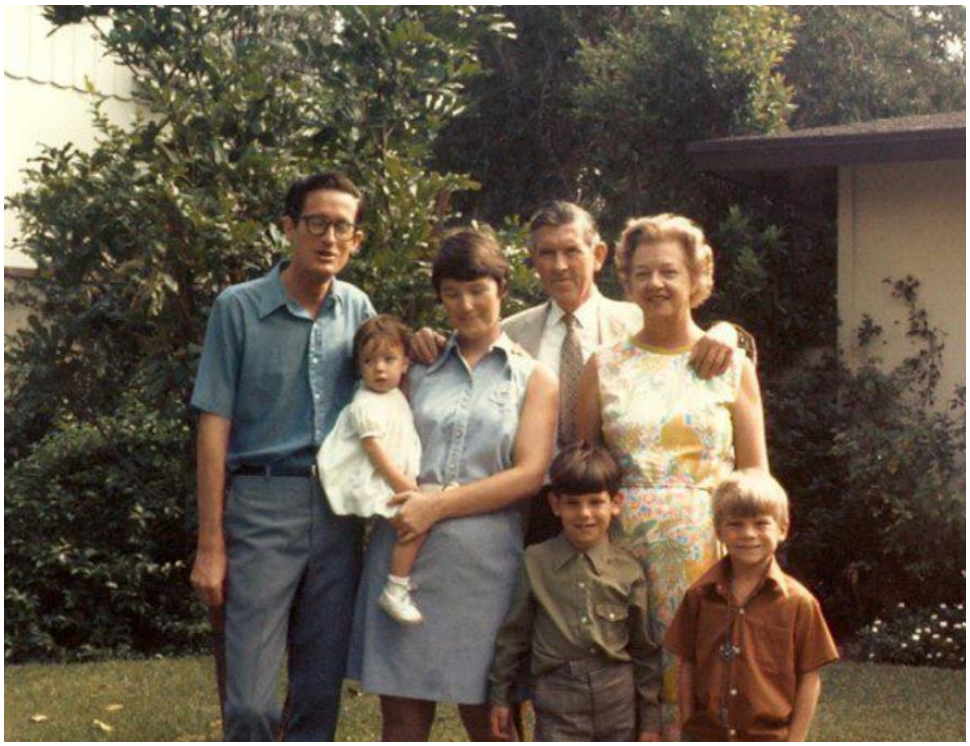
Mother was most excited about the cache of letters! By marriage, she was connected to a grand estate in antebellum Charlottesville. Using our old typewriter, she transcribed three dozen letters. She could not wait to see Morven for herself. Like David Higginbotham, Dad had scant interest in history. He would not be traveling to the East Coast.

Though Morven had dozens of slaves, the letters barely mentioned the Black people held in bondage on the plantation. That bothered me.

I shared my thoughts with Dad. He said the slaves were no more worthy of note on the plantation than the junior accountants at his office. Why should they get special recognition in the letters? Besides that, they were probably living better at Morven than they were in the jungles of Africa. Mother was equally untroubled. That's just the way things were, and we should not be judgmental or feel guilty. It isn't anything we did.

No, it is not anything we did, but can we take vicarious pride in our association with a splendid ancestral estate and, at the same time, airbrush away the misery caused by white people—our white people—on subjugated Blacks?

Donna Baldwin Ross in 1970.



From left to right: Rob Ross, Marian Ross, Donna Ross, Bud, David Ross, Mary, and Andy Ross.

## Leaving the Firm

1974

Dad joined the firm before the war.
To avoid the draft, he switched jobs
to an exempt national-defense business.
When that no longer worked,
he signed up for the Navy Supply Corps.

Dad returned to the firm
and became a partner in 1948.
His partner buy-in was $15,000,
a princely sum.

He did well throughout the 1950s,
but there was a mysterious uneasiness
about his work in the 1960s.
My sisters and I sensed the tension.
Dad did not talk about it.
Mother knew, but she kept her silence.

There were whispers he was drinking too much.
Co-workers and clients alike
may have been offended.

Dad confided to me, even bragged about it,
that he was creating a computer system
for the office.
He taught himself code and database design,
and tried to do it himself.
It turned out to be a project from hell.
Instead of hustling for new business
and maximizing the existing business,
he spent too much time on overhead.

His health began to decline
at a time when he needed peak performance.

Dad stayed with the firm
until the early ‘70s when the partners
eased him out the door into early retirement.
He wasn't even 60 years old.

At the construction site in Escondido of Mary and Bud's new home on 10 acres. Back row from left to right: Bud, Nancy Baldwin, David, Julie Baldwin, and Mary; front row: Matthew Baldwin.

## Rehab and Retirement

# 1975

We four children married
and moved far off.
The closest was 700 miles away.
Nine grandchildren materialized.
Our parents were now confined
on a 10-acre estate
with row upon row
of avocado and grapefruit trees.
Dad knew nothing about agriculture,
but he got a write-off
for being a farmer.

Mother entered rehab
and stayed dry for the next 29 years.
She switched to Schweppes
and everyone was better for it.
Sobriety did not cancel out
her short fuse
and her penchant for cruelty,
but it made her more self-aware.

At the other end of the teeter totter,
Dad was drinking more,
and he was meaner for it
when he was loaded.
He retired from his firm
at a time not of his choosing.
The partners felt it was time
for him to go.
Everyone put on a happy face.

They lived together
with separate unhappinesses
for another ten years
when Dad passed away.
Life was quiet
without the diversions and comfort
of children and grandchildren
except on rare occasions.

## Flummoxed

1976

Dad was flummoxed
when Mother came out of rehab.
For two decades, they had a set pattern.

She was the usual aggressor
because drink loosened her grip
on her bag of grievances.

Dad expected her to go on offence.
That was the routine.
Sobriety gave Mother some control.

She held her grievances in check
during most of the evenings.
Of course, her mean streak never went away,

but she picked her spots.
Meanwhile, Dad was drinking more.
He had his own bag of grievances

that needed expression
and he was losing control of the battlefield.
Dad was not nimble enough

or sober enough
to understand his passive-aggressive posture
no longer worked.

As it happened, post-rehab, it fell to Dad
more and more to pick the fights,
and not always just with Mother.

## The Scolding

1977

Dad picked us up at the airport,
pulled onto the freeway,
and began his tirade that lasted
all the way to West Lilac Road.
I had never seen him so furious.

Nancy and I were in town for a convention
at the Hotel del Coronado.
It was Leaders Conference
and I was honored as one
of the top salesman in the company.
It was a weekend trip
and we decided not to bring the children.

This was the first time we visited Mother
since she began her recovery
as an alcoholic,
and we weren't sure what to expect.
Our concern about her
and the brevity of the trip
were the reasons why
we left the kids in Seattle.

Dad was angry the entire weekend.
Mother was calm and congenial,
but she was always like that
on the first day of any visit.

Leaders Conference – Hotel del Coronado

## Leaders Conference

I glanced at my watch
for no particular reason
when we entered
my parents' favorite restaurant.
Dad ordered a bottle of wine.
Mother ordered her usual Schweppes.

Dad chased down the wine
like it was a soda.
After he finished his third glass,
I check my watch again: 18 minutes.

He was angry about something,
maybe life in general.
He decided to unload on me
because, why?
Because I was a salesman?

As his son, I listened quietly
as he ripped the useless people he knew
in sales—the cheats, the charlatans,
and, worst of all,
the dim-witted who could never
make a respectable living.

Even I could see this was about dominance.
Why me?
What happened to the supportive father
I knew as a child?

I never intended to go into sales.
I made the best of it.
Something else was going on.
Beneath the surface ridicule,
there was an underground river
of rage and disappointment
having nothing to do with me.

[snip]

# 1978

The story got out
when my sisters
and I were in middle life
that Dad wanted two kids
and Mother wanted six.
My third and final sister
was born in '49.
Mother loved the glow of pregnancy
because it anchored her
as the center of attention.
My older sister recalls
Dad was hospitalized in 1950
for abdominal surgery.
No one remembers what it was for,
but I know for sure
I never got a brother
or another sister.

## Never Mind

In the sixties, seventies, and eighties,
nothing said *Punch a hippie*
like law enforcement against
growers, distributors, and users
of marijuana.

People were jailed
and their property confiscated
in our modern Prohibition Era.

Today, marijuana is fully legal
in eighteen states
and Washington, DC,
and medical marijuana is legal
in thirty-eight states, plus DC.

Shouldn't we say, "Sorry,"
to all who were jailed, fined,
and had their property confiscated?
Wouldn't it be nice if we pardoned
their criminal records?

## Remembering Aunt Judy

1979

She was always Judy to us,
but when she died,
I learned her name

was Virginia Sherman Baldwin.
I remember thinking:
*It's just like her to choose*

*her own name.*
Aunt Judy was one of my favorites.
I was a baseball junky

and so was she.
When we got together,
which wasn't that often,

baseball was our conversation.
She was a favorite
of my younger sister, too,

as Judy was a master craftswoman
with the sewing machine.
She could stitch clothes together

in record time.
She took my sister under her wing
and generously paid forward

a rich array of lifetime skills.
Judy and Uncle Dick enjoyed
an easy-going lifestyle

near the beach in Santa Barbara.
It was a refreshing respite
from the striving ways of San Marino.

## Honor

# 1980

Interest rates rose
to thirteen percent.
The real estate boom was over.

One life lesson I learned was this:
hard work is not always the solution
to every problem.

I was one commission a month away
from paying all our bills,
including the loan repayment

to the parents.
I told Dad I was unable to pay
and he said it was OK,

but I could tell
from that day forward
to the end of his life
it was not OK.

Grandson Irion helps Bud with the chores at the ranch

## A Missed Opportunity

On his summer vacation,
eight-year-old Irion visited the grandparents
at West Lilac Road.
He was beginning to write adventure fiction
and draw pictures for his stories.

Even at this early age,
he had a vague idea that symbols
like © or TM indicated
the author's ownership of the manuscript.
Although he wasn't sure what they meant,

he added these symbols to his stories.
He showed the stories to Granddaddy
at the dinner table.
Bud asked him if he knew
what the symbols meant,

and Irion said, "No."
The conversation ended there.
Dinner went on as before.
Granddaddy had a thorough knowledge
of copyrights and trademarks

and could have shared his knowledge,
but he remained silent,
leaving Irion with the feeling
he failed a test.
It was a missed opportunity

for the grandparent to give his grandchild
a gentle nudge in the right direction.
Had he not been indifferent,
Bud might have enjoyed a teaching moment
with a precocious child.

## Distracted Driving

1981

Mother had a compulsion: lecturing people.
It never stopped.
Usually, it was to make a point
of how misguided or disrespectful or evil
the unfortunate listener was,
but sometimes her intentions were good.

There was the time when Matthew and Irion
visited the grandparents in Escondido.
Mother was driving;
the boys were in the backseat,
intimidated and speechless.
Mother saw an opportunity to launch
into a lecture.
She decided,
on the spur of the moment,
to give the boys a lesson in Drivers Ed!
She pointed out the meaning of the street signs,
shared a brief history of the rules of the road,
demonstrated the proper use of turn signals,
and explained how to merge into traffic.

This was all good
until they entered the broad main street of town
and a police siren cut the lecture short.
Mother parked the car.

"Do you know why I pulled you over?"
She had no idea.
"You were rolling through a crosswalk
when people were still crossing the street."
Mother said, "Oh, I did not know that."

Suddenly, she brightened
and flashed her 1000-watt smile.
"It's funny you pulled me over.
I was just teaching my grandsons
the rules of the road,
so they will be responsible drivers
some day."

Nothing was said about the ticket
from that day forward.

## Living in Fear

Irion's four-greats grandparents
owned other human beings.
Grandmary did not sugarcoat
her stories about Morven.

Slavery was brutal and unforgiving.
Fear was everywhere.
Blacks feared the lash
and the integrity of their families.

Most toiled in bondage without hope
from birth to death.
Whites lived in constant fear of the Blacks.
Men were heavily armed should there be

another Nat Turner rebellion,
and women were terrified
when the men traveled on business
and left them alone on the plantation.

## Bank-shot Criticism

Dad believed in the proverb,
"If you can't say something nice,
Don't say anything at all."
This was a problem for him.
He had lots of complaints

about lots of things.
His workaround was this:
he would arrange his complaint
in the formulation
that other people might think

you are doing something wrong
if you do X.
He was just passing along
imagined survey results
for your benefit.

He used this bank-shot criticism
on Irion when the two of them
visited a World War II exhibit
in the San Diego area.
Afterward, as they stood outside,

Irion asked if he could
go back inside and buy a medal
that was on display.
He returned to the exhibit and bought
a cool-looking Nazi war medal.

Irion was too young to appreciate
just how evil the Nazis were.
His idea of evil was Darth Vader,
but the Dark Lord
was totally cool, too.

By his expression, Bud was shocked,
but he did not say,
"I am shocked.
I think you should take it back."
Nope.

He said Irion might not want
to wear it because
some people might disapprove.

Clearly, he was one of the *somepeople*.
It might have helped

if he explained WHY
some people might disapprove
and WHY
he shouldn't wear it.
Granddaddy wasn't ready

to go that far.
It wasn't his style to be explicit.
Survey results notwithstanding,
Irion pinned it on his shirt
and wore it proudly.

## Mentoring

Mother had a soft spot in her heart
for younger friends and family struggling
in challenging circumstances.
A deaf girl came to live with us

when she studied fashion design
at an L.A. trade school.
A classmate of mine
married the wrong son-in-law

and her parents,
best friends of the Baldwins,
shunned her for a while.
That didn't stop Mother

from helping their daughter
whenever she could.
Later in life,
she took a distant niece under her wing

with positive outcomes for both.
My younger sister's son, Irion,
grew up in the eco-friendly redwood country
of south Humboldt County.

Many in the back-to-the-land movement
were young professionals
pursuing a more authentic lifestyle
grounded in peace and freedom,

but it was a contrary environment
for a budding intellectual.
Irion acquired an interest in history.
Mother was more than ready

to vocalize her family stories
when he came to visit
on West Lilac Road.
She was well versed

in the family's participation
in the great American experiment—
the Revolution,
the Constitution,

and the antebellum period.
In her own self-educated way,
she was an expert in American history.
Mentoring an acolyte

who valued her expertise
was a genuine joy,
and, for Irion, having a fellow enthusiast
nurture his passion for history,

there was the reassurance
that a stimulating world of ideas,
beyond the fields and forests,
was out there waiting to be explored.

Mary and Irion Sanger

## Calculator Love

Of course, he didn't need
a new calculator.
Dad retired seven years earlier

and wasn't doing anyone's taxes
beside his own.
He owned a fleet of calculators already

and they all worked just fine.
The calculator nerd in him
compelled him to purchase

the most powerful
and most expensive calculator
whenever something new

hit the marketplace.
The HP-12C came out in 1981
and Dad was first in line

to buy one
for one hundred fifty dollars,
an extraordinary price

he mentioned to me more than once.
Bragging about the cost
was part of the appeal.

When Casio released a calculator watch
in the same year,
he couldn't wait

to throw down his fifty bucks.
I asked him why
he needed a calculator watch.

He gave me the look that said,
"If you have to ask,
there's no point explaining it to you."

I imagined it might be useful sometimes.
He could calculate his net worth
while waiting for a long freight train to pass.

I kept that watch after he died

and I wore it every day.
It was a useful jogger's watch

for the next eight years.
It recorded my overall time,
my mile splits,

and it calculated my average pace.
My net worth?
I have no idea.


The Casio C-80 watch. Father and son wore this watch for a combined 12 years.

## Starting Over

# 1982

All she had were her clothes,
a sewing machine, two girls,
and a tiny Honda hatchback.

The 12-year marriage was over.
They drove from Humboldt County
to the parents' farm in Escondido

where they set up shop in the cottage
down the slope from the big house.
My sister quit everything

to build a new life
for herself, Dulcie, and Celeste.
She raced through Palomar College

in a year and a half
and went from there to Humboldt State.
The parents offered a helping hand,

but it was not always easy.
The eighteen months was unique
among the children of Bud and Mary.

It was the only time
our parents had quality time
with any of the grandchildren.

Bud and Mary with Dulce and Celeste

Bud with Celeste

## Stupid Ideas

1983

Two years before Dad died,
I visited the ranch by myself.
I was training for the Seattle Marathon
coming up in November.
One morning around nine,
I arrived home on West Lilac Road
after a 17-mile training run
through the rolling hills of Escondido.
Dad was sitting in his radio room
with an oxygen caddy close by
in case he struggled for breath.
His cheeks were puffy from steroids.
Emphysema was making deadly progress,
but that didn't stop him
from smoking his Tiparillos.
Mother asked how was my workout
and I said I feel great.
Dad looked at me and said,
"I think running a marathon
is a stupid idea."
Mother jumped in,
"Oh, Bud, leave him alone.
Let him do what he wants."
That was 39 years ago.
Today is my eightieth birthday,
and I still feel great.


Kirkland Half Marathon, 2012

## Anxiety Alert

We're not eating in front of the TV tonight.
Here are the rules for table manners.
You need to set the table

with napkins in their napkin rings on the left.
The fork is between the napkin
and the plate.

The knife is on the right
with the blade pointing in,
and the spoon goes outside the knife.

The glass is above the plate
in the one o'clock position.
Elbows off the table

or you'll get an "elbow pie."
Granddaddy will grab your wrist
and bang your elbow on the table.

Grandmary is the chief enforcer
of table manners,
so keep an eye on her.

If your clothes are dirty,
put on a clean outfit before you sit down.
Children are not to speak

unless addressed first by an adult.
Don't be loud
and don't go on too long.

Don't help yourself to seconds
without asking first.
When you are full,

sit quietly and wait
for the grandparents to finish
before you ask to be excused.

The grandparents are coming.
You need to be on your best behavior.
Any questions?

## Granddaddy's Tractor

Bud and Mary bought the ranch
on West Lilac Road
forty-seven years ago.

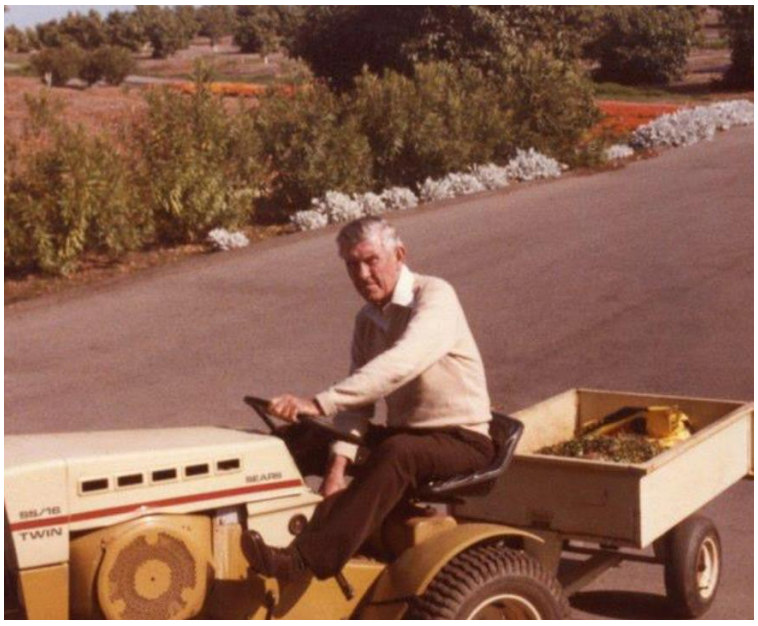
All the grandchildren,
without exception,
have a happy memory of Granddaddy

loading them in the wooden-box trailer
behind his tractor
and powering them at Disney-ride speeds

down the bumpy rows
between the avocado and grapefruit trees,
and finishing on the dirt road

connecting the big house
with the small residence
at the bottom of the property.

Without Mary around
to suck up all the oxygen,
Bud was a lot of fun with the kids.




The grandchildren loved Bud's tractor rides

## Unappreciated

1984

Unappreciated.
If I had to pick one word
describing his mood as he was dying

of a terminal illness,
it would be *unappreciated*.
Dad was too much of a hard realist

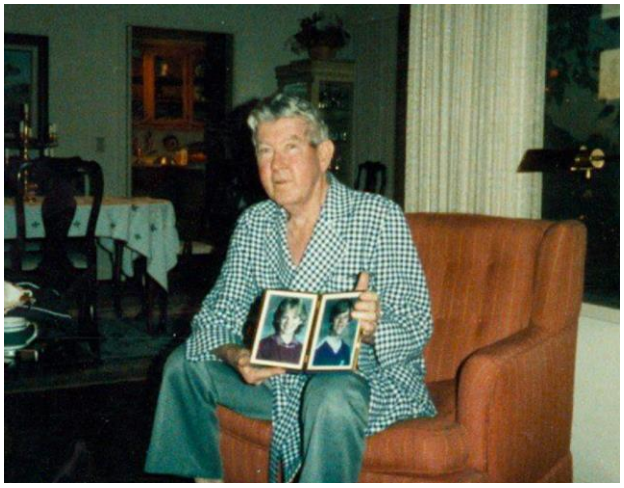
to wallow in self-pity.
As always, he would gather the facts
and use his reason to make a judgment.

Here are the facts.
He was an honest and upright man
who worked hard and played by the rules.

He had an old-fashioned calling:
to provide the best for his children
and his stay-at-home wife.

In many non-verbal ways,
he tried to be kind to others.
Considering these facts,

all of which were true,
how did he end up this way—
feeling unappreciated?



Christmas 1984. Bud holds pictures of his middle school grandchildren Julie and Matthew. This was his last Christmas.

## Morning in America

Bud and Mary were comfortable
with Reagan's Republican rule
emblemized by the commercial
"Morning in America,"

which showed the faces
of happy white people
going to work,
moving into a suburban home,

and getting married.
In the one-minute campaign pitch,
there was just one small instant
showing a non-white person,

a light-skinned Black child,
smiling at a flag raising.
The message is clear:
traditional America is back!

Irion was six years away from voting
for the first time,
but that did not stop him
from speaking his mind forcefully

in the presence of the grandparents.
He made the case for Jesse Jackson
in the Democratic primary.
Deploying his debating skills,

he pulled back the country-club carapace
to show Bud and Mary
the teeming social justice inequities
still in place,

still needing attention.
Jackson may be a long shot,
but at least he was speaking out
on behalf of the less fortunate.

Irion was working a tough room.
Bud and Mary were life-long Republicans.
Neither had any intention
of voting for Jesse Jackson.

Bud had little to say,
but his demeanor was dismissive.
Mary claimed to support
many of the same social justice reforms,

at least in theory.
Politics aside,
Mary prized Irion as someone special,
as an incipient high achiever

who had the stones to emerge
from the milieu of Humboldt County
and, by force of mind, create
a more equitable morning in America.

## Julie

She returned with favorable reports
of her trip to Escondido.
Granddaddy was ill, of course,
and it was hard for him to be
the genial host.

Julie and Grandmary had a fine time together.
Mother was glad to have
an attentive protégé on the scene
and her granddaughter pushed
all the right buttons.

In Julie's eyes,
Mother was a sophisticated lady
who illuminated her wealth and privilege
with understated ease.
Oh, to have that sense of entitlement!

## Acknowledgement

Matthew and Julie attended
a multiracial middle school.
Their main complaint
was the hour-long bus ride

from the Renton Highlands
to South Seattle,
and a second tedious hour going home.
The subject of race never came up.

When visiting West Lilac Road,
Julie witnessed unvarnished racism
by the Greatest Generation
for the first time.

Dad kept his thoughts to himself
unless he was asked.
Mother shared her opinions openly
whether you liked it or not.

Mexican immigrants topped her list
of grievances.
Any mention of immigration or Mexicans
triggered a host of hateful remarks.

And so it happened with Julie.
But after Mother finished her rant,
she got a polite response:
"Why, Grandmary, you are a racist."

If any of her kids had said the same,
Mother would have lost it,
but the 12-year-old child gave her pause,
and she acknowledged, "I guess I am."

## Disgusting and Slutty

1985

Three generations in the car
on the way to the jewelry store
for a promised ear piercing:
scowling grandmother in the backseat
offering her vile opinions
to granddaughter in the passenger seat,
predicting her pristine white neck
would soon be dripping with blood,
and to daughter behind the wheel
for raising such a disgusting and slutty child.

Grandmother stays in the car, fuming.
Relieved to enter the invective-free zone
of the jewelry store,
granddaughter has her ears done,
and daughter decides
defiantly to do the same;
her own daughter is shocked and pleased!

Invective resumes on the ride home.
Grandmother points to the earrings
and announces her granddaughter
is now a disgusting slut,
and any moment blood will flow,
yes, blood will drip down your neck—
you should be ashamed of yourself.

All this high dudgeon focuses
on the passenger seat.
The driver's shiny new pierced ears
escape her notice.
Mother and daughter occasionally share
a knowing side-eye
as grandmother does not get the joke.

## Dog Turd Letter

The letter she wrote
in her unsteady 14-year-old hand
defending her mom's hard work
completing seminary studies
to become a minister of the church
was not well received by the grandparents.
They did not approve
of the woman-of-the-cloth idea at all
and now their late-Victorian view
of women in the professions
was called out by an insolent child.

They treated the letter
like a moist dog turd
on the brand-new white wool carpet.
They scooped it up and placed it
in a padded mail pouch
and put it in a faraway place
where they couldn't smell it,
saving it for the next time
they saw their daughter.

And when that day came,
they handed the dog turd letter
back to the mother
of the offending grandchild
and gave the now-ordained curate
a stern talking-to,
reminding her once again
what a horrible parent she was.

Donna's graduation from theological seminary (CDSP, Berkeley). She was an Episcopal priest for 20 years. Donna was the rector of churches in Oberlin, Ohio, and Cambria, California.

Bud's radio room at the ranch. He was in poor health when this picture was taken.

## Sad Parting

*August 11, 1985*

In his last year,
he saw me as a failure
struggling to support my family
as a mortgage broker
during the Volcker economy.
Salesmen he had known
were not-very-bright charlatans
or outright crooks,
unworthy of his respect.
This was my great sin:
not supporting my family
in the comfortable manner
by which he supported his.
As ever, it was a competition,
and he was the better man.

In his last year,
I saw him as a failure.
He was loathe to leave
a miserable marriage
to an angry alcoholic.
Dad was also an alcoholic,
but was too manly
to get treatment for himself.
The partners at his firm
forced him to retire
for not growing the business.
And now, in his final year,
he was dying of emphysema
because he believed the lies
of Big Tobacco.

You only have one chance
to make a good last impression,
and sadly mine for him
and his for me
were not the best.

## Public and Private Drinking

There was a public side
to Dad's drinking.
The martini was his favorite
when he arrived home from the office.
He had a leather martini travel kit
for the times he was on the road.
Jim Beam on ice
was his after-dinner drink
for his arguments with Mother
or when he retreated
to his ham radio sanctuary.
He had an increased appreciation
for white wine after his retirement.

All that was in public.
But there was another side,
a private side.
After he died and the family
cleaned out his desk and cabinets,
they found liquor squirreled away.
Medicine bottles were resurrected
as containers for vodka and gin.
At work, he drank at lunch.
Who knows? He may have had
a secret stash at the office, too.

He was under stress at home
and at the office
constantly.
Alcohol sanded down
the sharp edges of consciousness.

## Now What?

Now what?
Bud's death brought the family together,
but now I spend my time

with lawyers, accountants, realtors,
and financial advisors.
My own children could not wait

to go home to Ohio, northern California,
and Washington state.
Aren't they supposed to be here with me,

their mother?
Now what?
In a way, it is a relief Bud is gone.

I am an independent woman.
I am free to find a new husband,
one who isn't crabby all the time.

I still have my looks and my health.
I have money.
I don't need a man to support me.

This is an opportunity to go out
and have a little fun.
I feel young again.

## To Have a Man

1987

Divorce—
with nervous hands,
she folds unfolds
folds unfolds
her accordion skirt.

Baby sister, now 33,
shed the alcoholic husband,
packed up her two girls,
moved in with the parents,
and returned to college.

The stress of poverty and abuse
is exchanged
for Mother's unwanted opinions.
In the pre-feminist world,
a woman's worth
rests in the destiny
of an ascendant husband—
though Mother's own marriage
to an ascendant husband
is a contentious, unhappy affair.
Her advice is not without irony.

How can her daughter
capture the perfect husband
on the rebound?
*Mother's advice always hurts*.
She orders the divorcée
to lose the fat,
pressing her fingers hard
into her daughter's belly fat.
Literally, a punch in the gut.

What is the upshot?
This is Mother's story
and she is sticking to it:
you will never amount to anything
unless you have a man.

## Second Marriage

Mother remarried a year and a half
after Dad died.
Chuck was good for her.

He was independently wealthy,
a pillar of the local community,
always cheerful,

and best of all,
he didn't tolerate any nonsense from Mother.
When she acted out against a family member,

he took her aside in private
and told her to knock it off.
Unlike her first marriage,

Mother feared her husband's censure.
Chuck grew up in Green Bay.
He was the ball boy for the Packers as a kid.

His dad was the editor of the Press-Gazette.
Chuck was a member of Patton's army
in the Good War as they pushed

the Nazis across the continent of Europe.
He had shrapnel in his left shoulder
as a testament to his patriotism.

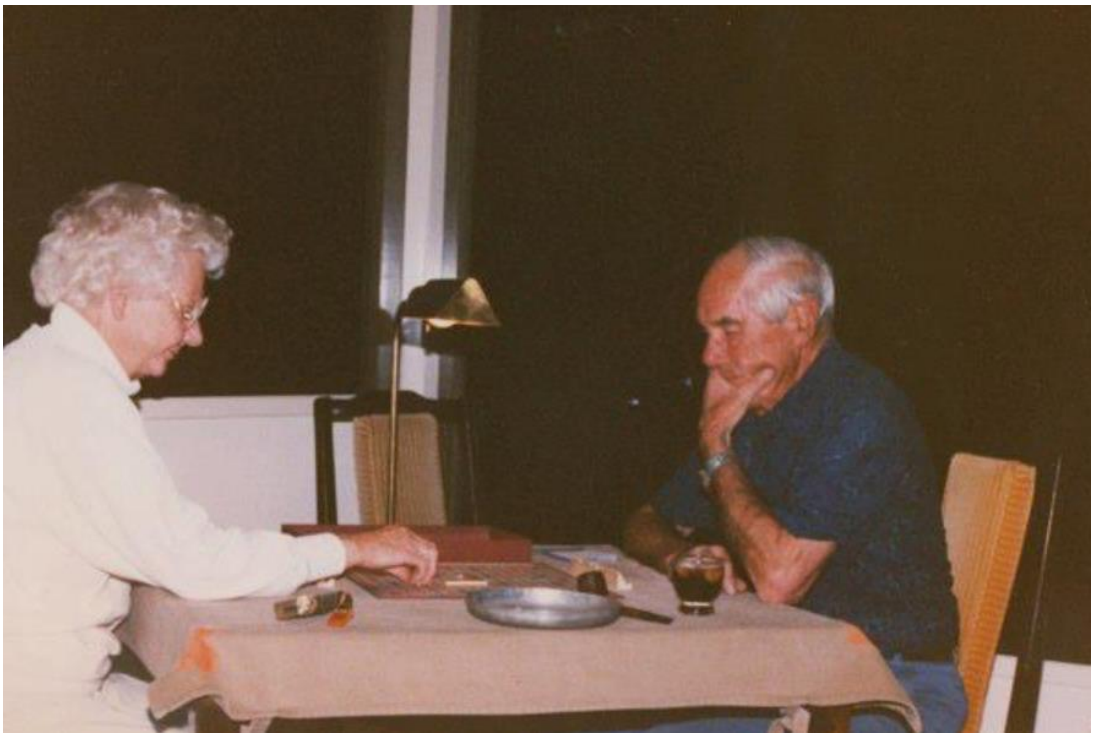
Even though he was retired when I met him,
he was still reading
the Wall Street Journal

from cover to cover every day.
On his eighty-fourth birthday,
I gave him a number 84 Green Bay jersey

with "Snavely" stitched on the back.
It was a joy to see his crooked smile
and hear him thank me with his raspy voice.

Chuck and Mary's wedding day

Mary poses with another cheesehead



High-stakes scrabble

## Nesting Doll of Storytelling

1988

She loved to tell risqué stories.
Every story had a kernel of truth
at the base of the nesting doll.
Invariably, the truth was overlaid
by some form of exaggeration

and overlaid again
by malice or approval
depending on her motivation.
So it was with the story
of her courtship with Chuck.

Mother was nearly 70
and unlikely to get pregnant.
She looked you in the eye
to see if you got the joke
before continuing.

She said to me
and to others in the family
that she checked out the equipment
before saying *Yes*
to a second marriage.

## Christmas at the Benbow Inn

Christmas at the Benbow Inn
was a magical family affair.
Chuck and Mary treated
my youngest sister and her girls
to a leisurely eight-course dinner
where the servers dressed up

in the replicated Tudor costumes
of olde England.
It was ebullient fun from the moment
the party dabbled
with the ever-present jig-saw puzzle
at the entrance of the opulent hotel

until they consumed
the last bite of dessert.
Celeste tasted asparagus served *en croute*
for the first time in her life.
She didn't dare decline
because she was advised

that Grandmary expected her
to clean her plate.
The English Christmas crackers
with their tiny trinkets inside
punctuated the laughter around the table.
It was a heavenly evening

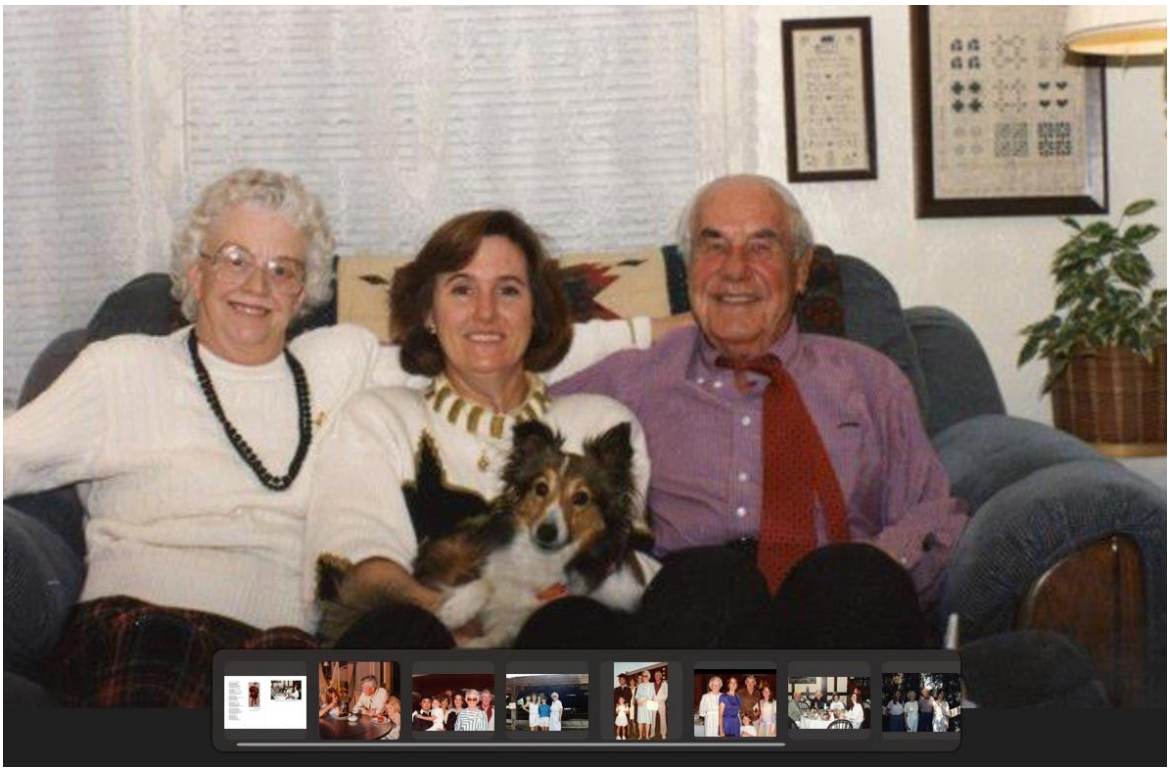
for my sister and the girls—
great memories to last a lifetime—
and it was sweet satisfaction
for the newlyweds, Mary and Chuck,
as their generosity was reciprocated
with heartfelt appreciation.

My sister still treasures
her evening swag—
two Christmas ornaments:
a black enameled stag
and a gold laser-cut image
of the outside of the Benbow Inn.

Courtesy Pinterest

The look of a Benbow server

Fine dining at the Benbow Inn: Chuck, Mary, Celeste, and Dulcie



Mary, Pamela with her Shetland sheepdog Bonnie, and Chuck

## We Get Hate Mail

1989

I warned my kids
to send their thank-you notes
to my mother
for her Christmas gifts.
They said they would, but they didn't.
They forgot.
And sure enough at the end of January
I got a typed hate letter
with lots of typos
consigning me
to Hell for Terrible Parents.
Does that sound like a trivial affair?
Mother and I did not speak
for the next two years.

## Armor

Put on the armor of gentleness.
Defend yourself with gentleness;
stand your ground.
Attack with gentleness;
confound your foe.

## Mother

1990

The things you say and do
to each of us,
your children first
and now our children, too,
are always said and done with good intent.
You never learn how good intentions hurt
or why the hurt is twice as hard on you.

When we were small,
your happiness was full.
A disciplined house fulfilled a need for you.
For us, we could not wait for self-reliance.
How much has really changed in fifty years?

You give advice;
we choose what might be useful
and file the rest away.
Approval will not make or break the child.
Our children rise and shine and come of age
without your help.
If you are pleased or not, our lives go on.

To bring us back, you need to let us go.

## Abandoned

1991

Our matriarchy is like a prairie church.
The pastor died;
the pulpit gathers dust.
White clapboard siding
is shedding paint
and gothic windows
are bleared by prairie rains.
She rings the bell,
but no one comes for prayers.
The city took her once-compliant son
and daughters followed husbands
far from home.
As children,
they only knew the cult
of motherhood.
As adults,
they turned to other gods.
Her faith is long remembered,
but not believed.
When she is gone,
grass will eat the church.

## Don't Breathe on the Baby

1994

When I was six,
Mother carried her fourth child.
I wanted a baby brother;
we welcomed a baby sister instead.
Yes, I was disappointed,
but I don't remember feeling
any anger at all.

Mother told a story
many years later,
and like all the stories she told,
first, was the story true,
and, second,
who was she trying to hurt
by telling it?

This is what she said.
For the first few days,
I refused to go near the crib
because I was afraid
if I breathed on the baby,
the baby would die.
I don't remember saying that.
I may have,
but that is not the point.
Even if I did,
why would she say such a thing?

Mary with baby Pamela, 1949

## Mother's Politics

1995

Mother was interested in the news
and politics was part of it.
She wasn't a political junkie,
but she was well informed.
If she didn't have an opinion,
she deferred to men.

When our world was run
entirely by white people,
Mother was a liberal Republican.
She liked Ike.
She didn't like Joe McCarthy
and she loathed the John Birch Society,
headquartered in San Marino.
She wasn't a Goldwater supporter
like Dad.

Mother talked of fairness and tolerance.
No matter what she said
her actions betrayed a core belief
in white supremacy.

It began with the Civil Rights Bill of 1964;
it ended with Prop 187 in 1994.
She embraced anti-immigration zealotry.
Unwelcomed brown people were changing
the contours of her white world.

To be blunt,
Mother was interested in herself.
Implicit white dominance was key
to how things should be—
for her own self-esteem.
Diversity was fine
as long as her kind of people
remained the ruling class.
America edged toward racial power sharing,
toward multiculturalism,
and Mother argued enough is enough.

## Diabetes

Sunshine and light breezes.
The temperature was warm enough
for Mother and Chuck

as we rode the ferry to Whidbey Island.
We could not have picked a better
picture-postcard day to showcase

the beauty of the Pacific Northwest.
Near the north end of the island,
we pulled over and watched

a pair of sea otters frolicking
in an isolated cove.
That was the best fifteen minutes

of our excursion.
We crossed the high bridge
at Deception Pass

and turned east to Mt. Vernon
to get some lunch
at Mitzel's American Kitchen

where Julie worked
during her time at Western Washington.
Like her father before her,

Mother had diabetes.
She was sure to be cranky
if she went too long without food

and we wanted to head that off.
A young man took our orders.
When he came to Mother,

she ordered a meal
and then asked him
if the restaurant had any prunes.

"No, Ma'am, we don't have prunes.
Can I get you a Dr Pepper?"
"A Dr Pepper? What is that?"

Mother wasn't familiar with Dr Pepper

and we could see
she was getting ready to blow.

The server then recited
the long-debunked urban myth
that Dr Pepper contained prune juice.

Among Chuck, Nancy, and me,
one of us jumped in
to say that wasn't true—

there is no prune juice in Dr Pepper—
and collectively we used
all our powers of persuasion

to get her settled down.
Once she had a full stomach,
Mother was fine,

but she couldn't resist
taking a parting shot at Mitzel's:
"All the best restaurants carry prunes."

## Press 2 for English

1996

There was a difference.
Slave traders kidnapped the Africans
and brought them here in chains.

American Blacks never wanted to be here
in the first place.
Mother had a skosh of sympathy for them.

Not so the Mexicans.
In her fevered telling,
they crossed the border illegally,

snatched jobs from real Americans,
and drained public resources.
Mexicans were undeserving freeloaders.

Mother's worst nightmare:
*Press 1 for Spanish;*
*Press 2 for English.*

## The Three-day Rule

1997

It got to be a family joke—
don't schedule a visit with Mother
for more than two days.

On the first day,
she is glad to see you
and we are one big happy family again.
Will this time be different?

No, it won't be different.

The thin supply of graciousness
is nearly depleted
by the afternoon of the second day.
There are sparks of irritability
foretelling a major cook-off
on day three.

You know it is coming.
The only question is what flashpoint
will set her off.

Mary at Lake San Marcos

I was feeling full of myself for publishing a book in 1996. I turned my attention to the Morven letters. I typed all the letters from scratch on my computer, printed them out, and placed them in a 3-ring binder.

Epistolary novels were out of fashion. No takers for that. What about historical fiction?

Mother and I discussed the letters by phone and mail. Her view of the South before the Civil War matched the tone of "Gone with the Wind." The Higginbothams were good people, she said, fated to live in a retrograde agrarian economy propelled by Black servitude. Nothing could be done. That was the way of the world at the time.

In spring of 1998, Nancy and I traveled to Charlottesville for the annual garden tour in Albemarle County. Morven was on the schedule. We saw the home and grounds, and we visited the Library of Virginia in Richmond for antebellum background.

Back home, I scanned the letters again for signs of conflict in the family over the institution of slavery. Blacks labored long on the plantation, but the letters had little to say on their behalf. Many of the letters were written by mother Mary. She was raised in a Quaker family, but there was nothing, nothing at all, to indicate she had a problem with Black enslavement.

One disavowal of slavery by inference was by the last of the nine children. Ten years after David died and Mary sold the farm, he served as a doctor in the Union Army. That was it. Nothing to build on here.

My intent was to be true to my ancestry without sanitizing slavery. I pinned my hopes on Mary, an Anglican by marriage, to prick David's conscience over the lot of the slaves, but she deferred to the man of the house in every letter.

David and Mary Higginbotham

## [tanka]

clicking **Send**—
she is the last
of my parents' generation…
gone are the trees
I used to climb

Mary and Chuck in the garden at their Lake San Marcos home

## The Disinvited Sister

## 2001

Death in the family.
Mother's second husband, Chuck.
The family gathered

for the memorial service.
Where is my older sister?
I asked my mother in a loud voice

in the privacy of the immediate family
because this had happened before—
the disinvitation

of Mother's oldest child.
If she had her way,
Mother would have disinvited my sister

*from the family* a long time ago.
Why?
Mother cannot share the stage

with any other woman—
a professional woman especially—
who draws more attention than she does.

Narcissism spawns jealousy.
Mother said she wasn't invited
because she worried my sister's schedule

might prevent her from coming.
I leaned into her face
nose to nose,

"That is total horseshit.
You have no business deciding
whether her schedule would keep her away.

She would have come for Chuck.
Admit it.
You didn't want her here."

This went on for fifteen minutes.
A screaming match.
Mother and me.

Mother was the master manipulator,
always arranging the chess pieces
in such a way

that she won every time.
On this day, I called her out,
and the look on her face gave the game away.

## My Son Keeps Getting Fired

2002

Chuck retired after a long career
in sales and marketing.
He understood the world

of contract work,
but Mother never did.
Chuck died in 2001

and Mother moved into the Chateau.
Meanwhile, I drifted
from job to job as a writer,

continuously employed,
and making good money.
Mother did not know

about the good-money part.
She told her new friends
at the Chateau

her son could not hold a job
for more than a year.
She said, "My son keeps getting fired."

I tried to explain
what it's like to be a free-lancer,
but she was stuck in the past

where a man turned himself in
at the local plant.
They put the cuffs on him

and he stayed for the next 30 years.
"That's how your father and Chuck did it.
Why can't you?"

## Candid Conversation

2004

We had a week together
before she died.
She was able to get around.

Her mind was clear.
Mother was in a mood to talk
and I am a good listener.

She talked about the men
in her two marriages
as if she was sketching out

a compare-and-contrast composition.
Now she was alone with no prospects
for a third go-around.

Having a well-regarded husband
was key to Mother's identity.
She disliked living alone.

Mother flirted with other men.
To her, it was innocent fun.
I wondered if any of the men

took the bait.
I went for the kill shot.
"Did you ever have an affair?"

She said, "No,
but there was a pass once."
A roguish smile

lit up her 86-year-old face.
She enjoyed that memory.
"Oh, really, who was that?"

She said his name.
It was someone I knew.
"How about Dad," I asked.

"Did he ever go off the reservation?"
Her answer was instructive.
"Bud did not have the imagination."

## Visiting the Oncologist

Two weeks before Mother died,
I came out from Maryland by myself
for a visit.
We went for a slow walk
around the grounds.
We stopped to look at the flowers
she planted all by herself
when she moved in
three years earlier,
and she said hello
in her friendliest voice
to passing residents,
then made unkind remarks
a few steps beyond.
When we got to her building,
she jammed the square metal opener
hard with her cane
to open the door.
I could not help but laugh!

Of course, I had to listen
to her rants about Mexicans
and family members she disliked,
but it was like
her rants were on autopilot,
lacking the old enthusiasm.

I read two poems I composed
at the Writer's Center in Bethesda
and she pretended to be impressed.
As she aged,
her interest in poetry declined
as mine increased.
We talked politics—
the Bush-Kerry campaign
was underway,
but what could you say?
It was all speculation.

All in all, she seemed to be
in a good place
though there was not much
fire in the belly anymore.

She had an appointment

with her oncologist
and she invited me
to come with her.
Mother was fond of her doctor.
She had a weakness
for handsome young men
and he fit the bill perfectly.
Unfortunately,
he had bad news for her.
Her test results showed
she needed platelet injections
increased to twice a week.
Once a week was not good enough.

I sat across from Mother
in the doctor's office.
Her face visibly sagged.

I flew home the next day.
At the memorial service,
someone told me
Mother went off her meds
two days after I left.
That is how she chose
to end her life.

## [tanka]

in Mother's
retirement village
EMS vehicles
enter and leave
in silence

## Beyond the Narrowing

*for Mother*

The narrowing of life from health and wealth,
from one blessing to another,
from years of privilege and steadfast friends,
to loss and loneliness,
to hourly pills and daily shots,
to weekly transfusions of platelets,
to pain and weariness, and now to this.
Life narrows, narrows to nothing,
and with your death I am forced to see
how the narrowing worked for you.

I thought of you when death came for me.
Confined to bed unable to breathe
surrounded by faceless forms in masks and shields
(strangers who knew I had no chance),
I passed through a wormhole of confinement
to a faraway alabaster beach
where I saw a sun bridge over wine-red waters
spreading to a timeless immeasurable darkness
in the whirling cosmos.

NOTE: The first half of this poem was written after Mary died. The second half was written during the COVID-19 pandemic. The poet's death is imaginary.

## Mother's Worldly Goods

A long conference
about Mother's estate
after the memorial service.

I didn't have an interest
in the furniture,
as nice as it was.
Let others sort it out.

I was indifferent
to her personal belongings
except for the three things
I really cared about.

Everyone was quietly gracious.
There were no disputes
that I remember
and no one spoke ill of the dead.

The distribution of goods
was mostly settled
in the second hour.

No one claimed
the memories I wanted,
so I spoke.

"I'd like the *Mary B*
vanity license plate
and her silver hairbrush and mirror
that once belonged to her mother."

The room nodded OK.

"But most of all,
I would like the carved jade horses.
She told me they were the only things
she ever bought
on impulse
that did not have
a practical purpose.
They were beautiful
and she wanted them
just because."

## Life Begins at 70

2017

She wasn't the special first child,
she wasn't the only boy,
and she wasn't the cute youngest.
Did she get lost in the mix?
We can speculate what hopes
the parents had for Susan,
but it is fair to say
they never expected their daughter
to be a farmer.

While the girls in San Marino
schemed to marry a lawyer
or an engineer
or a boy taking over his Daddy's business
and, in exchange,
be a kept housewife,
Susan grew tall and strong
and just wanted to be outside
where the sky is the ceiling.

And politics?
Where nine out of ten voters
in the City of San Marino
were registered Republicans,
she signed up
for the Peace and Freedom Party of California.
She favored progressive values
and opposed the War in Vietnam
with all her heart.

After many years of hard work
on farms in Humboldt County
and in the Coast Range of Oregon,
she signed up, at age 70, for the Peace Corps
where her knowledge of agriculture
was exactly what they were looking for.
By then, Bud and Mary were gone.
They never knew the full flowering
of her potential.

Susan was assigned to the west African nation of The Gambia. She taught best practices in agriculture for more than two years. She also taught yoga to Gambians who were interested. She is holding Fatima and Omar in this picture.

At the end of her service, Susan wrote this:

> *It was an incredible experience being a PCV in my seventies. I learned a lot about myself, got to live in a culture on the other side of the world, and in a completely different climate. In return, I think I shared some* pearls of wisdom *along the way. After completing my projects, I spent many weeks saying goodbye to some amazing people, and on the last night I enjoyed a sunset on the beach. The Gambia is a unique place and the relationship it has with PC is very positive.*

## Memory

2022

In the beginning, the memory barely fits
a Times Square video screen.
In the end, the image is wallet sized.

In addition, there is an altered state:
the uncarved block becomes a sculpture;
the portrait of a lady becomes a smile.

In the beginning, myriad details cling
to the core event. Incessant winds
of the mind erode the loose periphery

and one by one, over a long life,
the less essential falls away
into forgetfulness. In the end,

the stripped-down core event—
some instance of love, triumph or shame—
remains intact forever.

## Passages

The sacred sea defines
our summed collective soul.

Our infinite designs
are in the sea's control.

We scarcely understand
our fundamental start.

We cannot comprehend
the sum of every part.

As the aeons come and go,
its silent flow and blend
is all we ever know;
but now we feel the wind.

A molecule of water
that skims the sacred sea
and breathes corporeal air
resembles you and me.

As soon as we are tossed
above the nurturing foam,
this flesh, from found to lost,
obscures our natural home
in such a pleasing way
we lose the cosmic sweep
of comely, sun borne spray
rounded by the deep.

## The Children of Bud and Mary

We clattered into the world
like hard-tossed dice
against immovable brick.
Four fierce throws—
one chance apiece.

## [tanka]

the rhythmic flickering
of 8 mm film
blond child
it's me
a thousand lives ago

# Residences

Photo credit Google Maps

909 North Kemp Street, Burbank
1946

Photo credit Google Maps

1418 North Brighton Street, Burbank
1946 – 1948

Photo credit Google Maps

1933 La France Avenue, South Pasadena
1948 - 1955

Photo credit Zillow.com

1716 Lorain Road, San Marino
1955 - 1963


Photo credit Google Maps

1397 Oxford Road, San Marino
1963 - 1975

Photo credit Redfin Realty

10123 West Lilac Road, Escondido (10.3 acres)
1975 – 1986

Photo credit Google Maps

1231 San Julian Place, San Marcos
1987 – 2001

Photo credit Redfin Realty

The Chateau
1502 Circa del Lago, San Marcos
2001 – 2004

# Mary's Short Story

## The Bird

by Mary Baldwin

It was the year 1922. We lived in a pleasant suburb west of Chicago and sometimes Grandfather lived with us and sometimes he didn't. When he didn't, he lived in an apartment house that was red brick and white stone. In the entry, there was a button that you pushed, then you talked through a hole, and that way he knew you were there, and you went in an elevator up to his place. He always wore spats and carried a cane with a fox's head carved on the top. He was tall and thin and had pretty lady friends (my grandmother died before I was born), and he drove a fire-engine red Stutz Bearcat without any top on it.

He was kind of exciting because he did things my father did not approve of. Once I heard my father talking to my mother in their bedroom.

"The old fool drove the Stutz down that rutted river road at twenty miles an hour! He tore the bottom right out of the car."

Sure enough, we didn't see that car around or a while and the next time it was bright green. Maybe it was a new Stutz, I don't know. My parents didn't think much of his lady friends, either. But they certainly were pretty. They wore big hats and flowy scarves around their necks and their lips were pinker than Mother's. One time, one of them had on a flowered dress that was shorter in front than in back and the sides came down pointy at the bottom. I thought she looked like fairy.

But I heard Mother say, "Honestly! You could almost see her knees."

As I said, sometimes Grandfather lived with us and sometimes he didn't. But he was living with us in 1922. He had the biggest bedroom, and you couldn't go in the upstairs bathroom from seven to seven thirty in the morning because that was his turn. It was a larger turn than anyone else's, too. He didn't pay much attention to us children except to correct our table manners and teach us how to use a handkerchief. You never blew in the middle of a clean handkerchief. You started at a corner. When all the corners were used up, you got to use the middle.

But on our birthdays and at Christmas, it was always Grandfather's present you wanted to open first. On your fourth birthday, you were big enough for the "Treat." This was a trip, all by yourself with Grandfather, downtown, to Chicago, on the Elevated, to Marshall Field's. You went to the toy department, and you picked out anything you wanted for your present.

In 1922, I was five. John was four, and our little brother, Charles, was three. So, I had already been on the Elevated to Marshall Field's. Before John's birthday came around, I had told him about all the glories he would see and what and how to choose. A Flying Arrow scooter, maybe? Wouldn't he have fun with that!

The day finally came. It was December and awfully cold. We three children were afraid Grandfather might put off the "Treat" until a warmer day. But, true to his word, he dressed up in his best coat with the beaver collar, put on his brown bowler hat, and, with John all bundled up, they went off.

It was a long day for me. Mentally, I relived my "Treat" of the year before. I remembered how, if you sat next to the window and looked down, there was nothing to show what was holding up the train. If you were scared looking down, you could look straight out the window into people's kitchens and bedrooms as you raced by. The Elevated stopped right at Marshall Field's door. Inside, just around a corner was the toy department. You couldn't see much on the counters because you weren't tall enough, but there was plenty to see on high shelves and toys even hung from the ceiling. There were plenty of things on the floor, too. A Flying Arrow would be in plain sight.

Late in the afternoon, through the living room window where I had been watching, I saw them coming up the block. My brother carried a middle-sized package. My heart sank. No scooter.

Grandfather hung up his coat and turning to Mother he said, "You'll never guess what he picked out." He rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "I'll never understand kids. I showed him this, I pointed out that, but no! Nothing else will do. Wait until you see it."

John didn't hear this. He hadn't bothered to take off is coat or galoshes. His hat and mittens lay on the living room floor, and he was opening his package. Charles and I stood next to him as he carefully lifted out something with a rounded top that had a white cloth cover over it. Very gently, he took off the cover. There was shiny golden bird cage with a beautiful blue bird inside on a perch. There was even a tiny china dish attached to the side of the cage.

"Why John! How lovely," Mother said. And it was, too. Reaching down, she picked up the cage by a ring on its top, turned a key on the bottom, and the bird began to sing. John's mouth opened as if to say something, but no sound came out. He just stared at the little bird as it moved its head up and down and sang. I thought it was like magic. No wonder he had chosen it.

During supper, I asked lots of questions about the Elevated, the toy department, everything he had seen that day. He didn't answer many. I could tell he was tired because he hardly ate any dinner, and when his birthday cake was put in front of him, he couldn't blow all his candles out the first time. It wasn't long before Mother took him to bed saying, "I know a little fellow who is tuckered out."

I could stay up longer than my brothers because I was the oldest. The bird was still on a table in the living room. I went in to look at it again. Grandfather was sitting in his chair with the paper in his lap. He wasn't reading, though, and he had a thinking look on his face.

"Grandfather." I patted his knee to make him look at me. "I wonder why John didn't take his present to bed with him. Can I take it upstairs so he can see it when he wakes up first thing in the morning?"

"All right." He sounded far away. "I'll go up with you. It does beat all why he wanted that."

Mother was at the top of the stairs as we went up together with Grandfather carrying the bird cage.

"He was very quiet getting undressed," she cautioned me.

The bedroom door was partly open and the light from the hall shown in at a slant. We could see where John slept across the room. It looked as if his covers shook. Next, I was surprised to hear him crying. I looked up at Grandfather. Handing me the birdcage, he went in, and I tip-toed behind. Bending over John's bed, he asked what the trouble was.

John whispered in a choked-up voice, "The bird." He stopped. Then, so softly we could barely hear, he said, "I thought it was alive."

NOTES:

Charles F. Drozeski (1861-1925) grew up in a family of Polish immigrants. He became a self-made millionaire in the foundry business. He was married to Harriet Drozeski (1862-1913). Mary's middle name was *Harriet*.

I first heard this story in 1948 when I was six. Mother wrote it down for a creative writing class in 1978.

Grandfather C.F. Drozeski holding baby Mary

## The Alpha and Omega of Gratitude

Giving thanks in your heart is the alpha of gratitude.
Gratitude is the sum of what you sense and say.
Remembering to offer your thanks is the omega of gratitude.

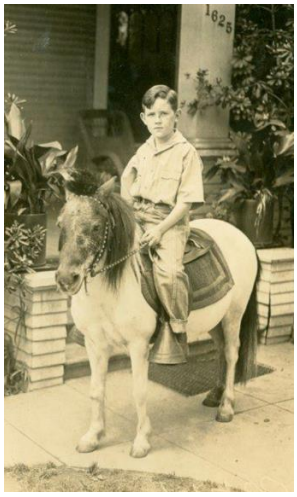
Longing for things you lack is a flawed attitude.
Always be thankful for what you have today.
Feeling grateful in your heart is the alpha of gratitude.

Do not devalue the goods you currently hold.
What you have today was only hoped for yesterday.
Remembering to offer your thanks is the omega of gratitude.

Lust for things puts you in an anxious mood.
You'll find your happiness in the persons you most enjoy.
Giving thanks in your heart is the alpha of gratitude.

The lives of those you love will increase in magnitude
as you count your blessings and walk with them in the Way.
Remembering to offer your thanks is the omega of gratitude.

The ungrateful person is one who journeys in solitude.
Appreciation is the greatest kindness, far and away.
Giving thanks in your heart is the alpha of gratitude.
Remembering to offer your thanks is the omega of gratitude.



Bud at seven

Mary at three

# Afterword

## Acknowledgements

A special thanks to my sisters Donna, Susan, and Pamela (Pam) for their stories. Thank you to my nephew Irion Sanger, Susan's son, for the stories about his grandparents. Thank you to Nancy Dondro, the daughter of John and Margie Dondro, for her many contributions about the Dondro family history. Finally, thanks to my wife Nancy for her fact checking and encouragement. Our journey together of 56 years has been a blessing.

I could not have written these poems without the support of the persons mentioned here.

## About the Stories

My intent is to create character studies of two people: De Forest "Bud" Baldwin and Mary Dondro Baldwin. At the conclusion of this collection of poems, the reader should have a reasonably clear picture of the kind of persons they were.

## About the Poetry

A few of these poems follow traditional forms, but most of them are in free verse. Regardless of the form, I hope all readers of *Bud and Mary* can understand and enjoy each poem in a single reading—even those who hate to read poetry! I want to make this family history as readable as possible.

## About the Poet

David Baldwin retired from Disney Technology Solutions & Services (DTSS) in 2017 after 40+ years as a technical writer and editor. In his career, he has worked for Boeing, Microsoft, Hewlett-Packard, and Amazon. He has been a naval officer, a college teacher of English, a real estate broker, a mortgage loan officer, and a masters track and field athlete. In 2009, he served as the national secretary for the Haiku Society of America. David lives in Lake Stevens, Washington.