

## [The Write Place at the Write Time](#)

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### "Our Stories"

We have decided to devote a portion of our magazine to non-fiction. These are stories of things that have happened serendipitously, being in the right place at the right time or just heartfelt musings, thoughts, and feelings on life. Join us in our non-fiction section. These stories speak to anyone and everyone and are told by anyone and everyone who has a story to tell.



"Water Lilies" by Claire Perkins; <https://claireperkins.com/>

**About this image:** "Every spring and summer my backyard pond explodes in a profusion of white water lilies. This digital mixed media piece blends a painted background with photos of my pond lilies. I love the layering possibilities digital composition affords, and had fun creating this multi-dimensional piece in which some of the blooms are brought forward while others appear to be hiding beneath the surface inviting the viewer to look deeper." —Claire Perkins

## *Our Stories non-fiction*

*With gratitude, we dedicate this page to 2018 WPWT Arts Patron, Michael Tidemann. Michael writes from Estherville, Iowa. His author page is [amazon.com/author/michaeltidemann](http://amazon.com/author/michaeltidemann).*

### Drama Onscreen: Life Ongoing

by Lois Greene Stone

Tears trickle from my eyes during a weekly television show, yet I select that being drawn to not just the characters but similar sad sections of my life. Three seventeen-year-old children have their lives and their mother's forever altered by the sudden death of a caring father/husband. Pixels onscreen poke at my past, stirring up memories of when my forty-five-year-old father died of a heart attack. I had turned twenty the month before, my younger sister became sixteen two months before, my older sister was twenty-two and married with a seven-month-old baby.

The bewildered mother in the script, knowing she is the one to comfort her family and therefore has to push her agony into a separate and silent space, is my mother, as I stare at the wide screen. Why didn't I notice my mother's pain then? I was trapped in my own. I knew I was fatherless when I turned my tassel and got my Bachelor's Degree, began graduate school, walked down a bridal aisle, held my offspring. Why hadn't I understood she was alone but smiled and encouraged and catered to me, and to my sisters? The television show is giving me a glimpse of the courage it must have taken her to continue life and allow her daughters to have happiness. She sensed our suffering.

Death is permanent. The loved one no longer alive, however, is a part of the living. A scent of lavender evokes my dad's aftershave lotion, once the fragrance that came from the master bathroom when he exited it. His sable shaving brush was back in the cup and, eventually, my art brushes for oil painting classes would have the same feel. The senses have no "time."

A granddaughter was taking a college course concerning life and philosophy. She had a poem to read about a person who saw the dead in unexpected places and was clueless to what the poet meant. When I was in grad school, I commuted from the North Shore of Long Island to the Teacher's College, Columbia University and classes were at night. Taking the subway from 116th Street to Penn Station to catch the Long Island Rail

Road, I once saw the shoulders of a man hurrying to get to the lower level where the Long Island Rail Road tracks were. A slight droop of one shoulder, and the way the brim of his felt hat appeared had me actually call out, "Dad! Wait up! It's Lois behind you." As I chased him, reality raised its head—my dad had died when I was a junior in undergrad school. I spoke to my granddaughter of this experience, and what I thought the poet was projecting.

The TV show quickly jumps to twenty years post funeral: the three characters cannot smother grief. Although they move forward through their lives, they are still affected by it. It's "me" again. My grief has influenced my life. Maybe I'm kinder or more sensitive or more caring because I understand a second can forever alter routine. The work to continue the passion, attentiveness, not "sweating the small stuff," realizing that people and not things are important in an enduring marriage, is all because I witnessed that life is fragile.

Why am I watching a program that is emotionally painful? That discomfort has a bit of wonder: how did the scriptwriter know such a loss can never be filled? "Oh, I so know how that feels," I whisper to the air. My husband hears me. We met after my dad died. My mother never even dated again and was alone, protecting her children and grandchildren from her private agony for thirty-two years. Have I made each day count because a heart can stop beating, an accident can maim, disease can take the mind, and so forth? Probably. Sadness can permit strength to grow, and shift priorities to focus on relationships.

Bio: Lois Greene Stone, writer and poet, has been syndicated worldwide. Poetry and personal essays have been included in hard & softcover book anthologies. Collections of her personal items/photos/memorabilia are in major museums, including twelve different divisions of The Smithsonian.

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### Her Chair

by Susan P. Blevins

I walked into the room and could sense immediately that it had been closed for a very long time. It was as I remembered it, the heavy velvet curtains shrouding the windows, with just a faint, late winter afternoon sun striving

to lighten the somber mood. Motes of dust danced in the shaft of weak sunlight. I walked over and ran my hand over the plush fabric, releasing into the air clouds of dust and the stale but persistent smell of my grandfather's cigars. The redolent aroma brought back vivid images of my childhood in this room. I pulled back the curtains a little to better view the rest of the room.

On one wall was the sea chest, purchased by my grandfather in Hobart, Tasmania, from the British Navy, which they transported home for him to England. The chest was made of mahogany, and had two separate chests that came apart for travel and then fitted together after reaching a destination. It was all scratched and worn now, after so many years, the brass corners dull, the carrying-handles loose in their sockets. The large lower drawers contained the well-remembered English hand-embroidered table linens, the Italian damask napkins, and the Indian cushion covers I loved with their vivid colors and little bits of mirror catching the light.

It was the top right drawer that had always fascinated me though, and its contents remained the same: monies from travels all over the globe, sand dollars in a jar, electric travel plugs, and a portable water heater so water could be boiled for tea anywhere in the world, notes and maps, old wallets, folding travel bags, and my trusty bottle-opener that with the flick of a switch turned into a knife for self-defense, given to me by an anxious friend when I set off alone to travel round Asia. I could almost travel the world simply by going through the contents of that drawer.

In the dim light I caught a glimpse of myself in the brass-edged mirror hanging above the chest, and thought I saw myself as a child looking out at me, with ghostly images of my long dead grandparents forming then disappearing. I shivered slightly and turned away.

A black cat appeared from somewhere and came to rub his silky fur against my legs, glad no doubt of some company. Or was he too a ghost of the past?

Against the wall facing the window was my mother's charming bookcase, given to her by my grandparents for her eighteenth birthday. It had diamond glass panels on the front that opened up and slid into the shelf above the books, and still in place were the books I remembered from my childhood: the Sherlock Holmes stories that my grandfather used to read to me, the John Buchan adventure stories that I loved so well, *Beau Geste*,

*Bulldog Drummond, The Count of Monte Cristo*, all still there, waiting for me to pick them up and give them life again.

And there in the corner was my Mother's favorite armchair, where one day many years ago she had sat, with me on the floor at her knees, looking up at her, listening to her while she talked about her cancer which was slowly but surely consuming her. She stroked my hair lovingly, and said to me, "Darling, all the suffering, all the pain of surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation, it's all been worth it just to bring us as close as we are today."

At the memory of that moment, tears streamed down my cheeks and I had to leave the room, and leave behind the ghosts from my past.

Bio: Susan P. Blevins, an ex-pat Brit, lived in Italy for twenty-six years, traveled the world extensively, and has now settled in Houston, Texas, where she is enjoying writing stories based on her travels and adventures. She had a weekly column on food in a European newspaper while living in Rome, and published various articles on gardens and gardening when she lived in northern New Mexico, before moving to Houston. Her passions are classical music, gardening, nature, animals (cats in particular), reading and of course, writing. She has written a journal since she was about nine.

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### French Primer

by Ceri Eagling

Paris, in early 1972, seemed chockablock with lonely men. These men were all sad cases, it seemed to me; many no more Parisian, or even French, than I was myself. They flopped down next to me on chilly benches in the Jardin du Luxembourg, and with their eyes fixed on the toy sailboats on the pond, suggested the two of us might get a coffee somewhere, not too far away, a place they knew. I would pick up my bag and find a more populated spot among the bored mothers and nannies whose young charges poked at their rented vessels with the attendant sticks. The two boys I took care of spent the long French day in class, and so, my duties, falling before and after school, left my daytime hours free except for the weekly scholastic break on Thursdays.

Weekends were free too, and one Sunday afternoon, near the start of my six months' contract as a *jeune fille au pair*, I emerged from the métro station at Place Pigalle, avid for the festive buzz that Toulouse-Lautrec's exuberant

poster art had promised since my teens. Instead, I found drifts of aimless, middle-aged men in drab jackets, one or the other of whom would ask with a gold-toothed invitation each time I scuttled up a side-street to check my map, whether he could help me find my way. Even in the gloomy galleries of the Louvre—which, before the arrival of the glass pyramid and expensive entrance fees and long, long lines, you entered through a nondescript, sooty courtyard—men of varying ages, lurked and pounced.

Nowhere seemed free of them. My teacher at the place where I was taking French lessons, a neat, smooth-faced man in his forties with a balding head, offered to give me extra practice in dictation before the final test. Certain my skills could use a polish, I followed him up the onion-smelling staircase of an old building, and in an almost bare studio apartment, he tried to kiss me.

I said, "Mais non, monsieur, I'm here for the *dictée*." Whereupon he sat primly on the bed and read aloud a passage in French, repeating each phrase in a clear voice as he did in class, while I, on the only chair, held my notebook on my lap, and wrote down everything I heard. When we were done, he corrected my errors, politely offered me a métro ticket, which I as politely refused, and then, consulting a city street plan tacked to the wall, he pointed out where the nearest métro station could be found. The next day I sat the test and moved on to a teacher in her fifties who showed no interest in me beyond the future perfect tense.

I knew it was not my allure that drew them. I took it for granted that their solitary, sex-starved lives drove them to hit on any female they could corner. But I think now, that perhaps they zeroed in on me because I too exuded loneliness.

For all the whirl of nationalities and the knots of English-speaking young adults I passed on street corners making noisy plans to meet up in *Rome! Barcelona! On the twenty-seventh!* I never found a friend. I lived outside the city center with the width of the Seine and the task of putting little boys to bed between me and the evening action. Maybe that was it. Time-rich, cash-poor, I must have looked a likely mark, counting the Stations of the Cross in random churches, where yet another man, seeking consolation of one kind or another, was killing time. Or among the Dutch still lifes in the Louvre, staring at half-peeled lemons and goblets of wine so glisteningly real I could almost lift them to my lips.

Looking back, I see that most of these dispiriting encounters took place in the gray first months of my Paris stay. Spring arrived, the Jardin du Luxembourg began to bloom, and the children guiding the sailboats left their hats and scarves at home. My French became more fluent, and as time passed, some of the paintings in the Louvre took up permanent residence in my mental universe. On rainy afternoons, I grew to love Beethoven's *La Symphonie Pastorale*, played on my employers' turntable. Meanwhile, the boys' mother taught me to mix acceptable vinaigrette.

A friend wrote with an offer to track down the Paris address of a shared acquaintance, and my casual choice to defer a decision made me realize I no longer needed a prop. At some point, I had crossed the threshold that divided loneliness from contentment with my own company, a gift I have cherished ever since. This built-in comrade self, always ready to join me at a theater, or a restaurant, or a meeting with strangers has never left. Soon, I was telling my inner partner that whatever the future brought, we'd "always have Paris."

Some air of hard-won self-reliance finally turned the men away. I had started to emanate a message I only vaguely recognized myself: that I wasn't lonely any longer, just alone.

Bio: Ceri Eagling grew up in Wales, has spent several years in France, and is a long-time resident of the United States.

Her work has appeared in *The Writer*, *LIT*, *The Writing Disorder*, *Antiphon*, and *The Billfold*.

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### Time Sensitive

by Toti O'Brien

What brings back this obsolete memory on the day of your son's funeral? Your young son, aged 55 while you are 91. What prompts you to go back three quarters of a century and revive those minutes, those hours, with such iconic vividness?

As you open your mouth your words aren't uttered but inscribed, rather carved in stone than just aired. Their perfection, adhesion to meaning,

polished economy give them substance, make them tridimensional. Doubtlessly your terse lines belong to the eternal domain, like the recitation of bards, those who didn't have to piece a story together as if sewing a garment. They delivered it whole, alive like a baby.

Why instead of talking of your deceased progeny, of articulating your pain, are you choosing to report a fact buried in the past? How relevant can it be to your present plight?

Slowly I recognize a tale I have heard long ago, perhaps in early childhood. An impression of familiarity surfaces. These sentences of yours have already carved a mark in my soul, left an imprint, created a small niche. I have forgotten them but they have modified me. On the day of my sibling's funeral I'm glad to be reacquainted with them. They soothe me, not sure how.

As you opened the window, that morning, you spotted the plane. Right in front of you and not an unusual sight, yet something struck you as strange. The perception didn't reach your consciousness but it caused you to suspend your breath, senses alerted. The plane was much lower than usual and looked perfectly still. Then you noticed the small rectangular portal. As you stared, it slid open. Then you saw the bomb.

You ran downstairs yelling at your mother, your sisters. They were still in their nightgowns. They threw shawls on their shoulders although it was summer. Just a reflex of decency, an instinct, no time for rational thoughts. And where was your father? Fighting at some remote northern front, you explain. I only gathered his absence.

You describe a panicked crowd rushing toward the countryside, too distressed even to keep count of itself. People stared at the dusty road, trying to leave the urban center as rapidly as possible, seeking abode among hills and forests, lost to the enemy's eye.

You remember the exact location where you hid with your mom, sisters, young brothers. I forget the name as you pronounce it, busy picturing you—thin, dark, seventeen on the twelfth of August of 1943. From your abode you listened to the dense, restless, ominous racket of the bombing.

Later, taking advantage of your mom's distracted exhaustion, you snuck away.

How did you dare? You felt a compulsion, you say, to come back to the house, which was in the very center of town. Your eyes anxiously rose to the window of the room that only contained your bed, and a shelf where half a dozen of books were lined up. Had contained. All was destroyed by now.

The room where, thanks to unjustified favoritism, thanks to your mother's weakness, you had the privilege of sleeping alone, was no more than a walk-in closet. A small cot was pushed against the adobe wall. The shelf was a plank of wood. The books, you said, half a dozen. Yet you immensely cared for that sanctuary, those volumes. They were your entire world, so much you had to return. No risk seemed excessive.

You looked up. Hope always dies last. All had been pulverized.

But you weren't done. Your dad's workshop was next. It was on the main square and you rushed in its direction, your feet moving faster than your brain. As you turned the corner, the light made you stagger. The quasi absence of shadow causing luminosity to solidify, change of status, grow untamed. Guttured out, the square seemed unlimited. Suddenly your knees mollified. You felt you might be unable to cross, as if in front of you weren't a flat expanse of concrete but the open sea, deep and treacherous.

Yet you made it.

By a strange miracle, which at that very moment didn't bring you relief (you registered it in a mechanical way, leaving feelings for later) the boutique was still standing. Inside all was dark, silent, but intact and orderly. Only as you stepped out you realized the door was unlocked. Hadn't you just entered it? Yes, but in a dream, in a trance. In fact it was stuck open and you needed effort closing it—the impulse was mandatory, irresistible. You got hold of a hammer, began hitting the jamb to unhinge whatever had been twisted out of place. Each blow echoed so loud it chilled the blood in your veins, amplified by the uncanny emptiness around you. After each blow you paused, you forearm shaking, your throat tightening. Then you hit once again.

As you stopped your din—having finally shut the door behind you—you noticed the other noise, unmistakable. Still subdued but gaining momentum, the obnoxious buzz of a giant insect. An aircraft was patrolling, ugly bird of death circling, ready to shoot at whatever moved within its reach. Yet you needed to get out of there, of the plaza, the town, back to the hiding place. You had to calculate that vulture's speed and trajectory, then slip between its claws. How long did it take for you to traverse the square? You knew it seemed infinite. You had to identify a cover of sorts amidst such desolation. They were sparse. A residue of marble bench. The carcass of a car. You had to dash, madly running, your body compressed in a fist, an arrow, a vector. Bundle up, wait for the thing to fly by. In the meanwhile you studied your next shelter, ready to leap again.

When, later, you reported the news to your mom (no house but Dad's workshop still up, in good order, and locked against looters) she got absolutely furious. How did you..?

Three quarters of a century later I can tell you don't have a plausible answer. What's the point, today, Father, of recalling that morning, that blinding light? Today's forecast is drizzling. It's a bleak winter day and bells are tolling. They are calling to your son's funeral mass. The crowd flowing through the square is wearing black. They have winter coats, scarves. The square is another one, in another town. I concede it is wide and also looks ominous. It looks huge, impassable, a treacherous stretch of water. And the coffin slowly advancing is a creepy gondola, a thick-skinned cetaceous of sorts, mute and indecipherable.

Do you wonder about death—how it turned above you back then, round and round, blind, inexorable? And it missed you, and you fooled it, but what for since it caught you in the end? It caught you by treason, by ruse, by mistake, in the flesh of your progeny.

I don't know if this is what occupies your mind. Did you come back to your bombed town to un-lid a coffin of sorts, to unbury a secret, unwilling to accept ignorance, needing to confront the truth as scary as it might be? Perhaps.

As you paint the story of that day you sit in a battered armchair, in your studio lined up with myriads of volumes. Walls of volumes, a whole house made of printed pages within which you have cocooned for a lifetime. As if

that half dozen the bomb devoured were a seed that could only germinate, producing a forest, this forest. Today what is this forest worth? I suspect you might be asking yourself this very question.

I suspect you might be pondering survival, and its qualities. Its ambiguous appeal and strange brilliance. Its uncanny noise, unbearable loneliness.

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### My Father's Scream

by Toti O'Brien

“The only time I got worried,” she says, “is when during the wake I heard your father yell. That long animal howl really scared me.”

She is the family friend who is also a physician, who was sure to stick around during the funeral, Diazepam in her purse, alert, ready to deliver instructions, call an ambulance.

The old folks needed watching, of course. An uncle fainted as soon as he arrived to church. He hadn't even made it to the pew. He was hastily shoved inside a taxi, brought home.

Luckily, no further incidents plagued the ceremony.

“I was truly alarmed,” she insists, “when he suddenly bent—hands grasping the rail, knees buckling below him—and let out that wild wail, unstoppable.”

“You should take traditions into account,” I add to mitigate her reaction, dull her shock. “Screaming before the dead is part of our Southern lifestyle.”

I remember Dad's mom at her husband's burials. She, always modest, shy, buttoned-up, made quite a display. Yelling like a slaughtered swine, she attempted to throw herself inside the open hole where the coffin had been lowered, not yet covered with dirt. Of course she was held back, but she managed to engage in a furious struggle with those trying to contain her, in a sudden explosion of rage and despair.

But I don't describe such gruesome scenes to the family doctor. No need.

She dismisses, anyway, my hypothesis of cultural influences over Father's manifestation of grief. Local habits, she affirms, cannot explain it, not so far, in such a different context. Does she mean *in absence of witnesses able to correctly appreciate*? Perhaps.

Perhaps she is right. I don't know because I wasn't present. Didn't hear Father's scream.

I can hear it now, in my imagination. Very distinctly.

I can tell (could tell even the doctor) how it felt, because it echoes mine. The abrupt, ugly sound I uttered when the mournful news reached me on the phone.

I recall the cell phone on my bed, where it slipped from my hand as I slipped somewhere lower, not sure where. On the floor, I guess. I remember banging at the mattress—open palms? closed fists?—my arms groping in search of support or resistance, as my dad's reached for the wooden rail.

I remember an unarticulated lament, awful. A long, indistinct vowel.

"He yelled like an animal," our doctor friend comments. She loves beasts. Her tone is compassionate, sympathetic. Like an animal, though the incomprehensible verse has a rather exact significance. It means *no*. The most useless of words. The most helpless.

It means *no* when we know that such syllable won't change a thing, yet everything should be changed. It means the kind of *no* claiming to subvert the progress of time, to upset natural laws.

I'm not sure if such utterance of sheer revolt can be defined *animal*. Surely it isn't godly. I suspect it to be quintessentially human.

Bio: Toti O'Brien is the Italian accordionist with the Irish last name. She was born in Rome then moved to Los Angeles, where she makes a living as a self-employed artist, performing musician, and professional dancer. Her work has most recently appeared in *Lotus-eater*, *New Reader Magazine*, *GNU*, and *Art of the Times*.

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