

A Life of Journeys

Pamela Portwood



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Introduction



Since I'm not a celebrity or a politician eyeing a higher political office, I would never have considered writing a memoir that reviewed my entire life so far had my husband, Mark Taylor, not given me a subscription to a memoir service called Storyworth as a Christmas gift in 2022. The service emails you a question a week for a year to elicit texts about your life and memories. Needless to say, as a writer, I couldn't stick to someone else's paradigm for creating a memoir or stick to the questions posed by the program, or even stay on a weekly schedule. In fact, I was busy with another writing project in 2023, so I didn't spend much time on my memoir until 2024, when I completed my other writing project.

The most interesting aspect of the Storyworth format is that it kept me from writing a linear narrative for my memoir. The disadvantage is that setting up narratives in multiple essays did require some repetition, so please forgive me if you hear certain

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details about my life more than once. While this is a memoir of my life, it also tells my family's stories going back to my great-great grandparents. This book, plus the "Portwood-Stone Family History and Photographs" book that I wrote and edited in 2011, tell most of what I know about the preceding four generations of my family. There may be other stories told by cousins I don't know floating about, but at least my nephew and grandnephews will have the stories I have included here. I hope the text is not too personal to be of general interest. Certainly, some of the vintage photographs are amusing. Even if you read all of the essays in this book, you would not get the whole story of my life. I don't think any memoir will give you that, and this one is no exception.

Having grown up as an ex-pat, travel is in my blood, so in 1993, I wrote a travel memoir entitled, "Exploring the Interior," that featured 15 essays about my foreign journeys. While I published the essay about my trip to Iran in a literary travel journal, I never found a publisher for the entire book. I have adapted six of the essays from "Exploring the Interior" for this book. If some of the chapters that are set in foreign countries seem stylistically somewhat different from the other chapters, it is because they were drafted decades ago.

Thank you to my family members who kindly provided me with some of the contemporary photo portraits for the book. Thank

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you to my aunt Paula Evans and my brother Tom Portwood for answering questions about the past for me. Thanks to my good friend Jan Bowers for reading the manuscript and providing me with invaluable feedback to help me revise the manuscript. Thank you, too, to my longtime friend Paula O'Bryne for generously editing and copying editing my manuscript; there is nothing like a professional to make a real difference in the end product. Many friends have enriched my life and supported me for years, even decades. Others have come into my life and touched me until one or the other of us moved on to another city or another phase in our lives, leaving behind a mark on my life. Some of my friends appear in this book and others do not. Thank you all.

The time for thanking my parents passed decades ago, but they are here at the core of this book and in me. Much of the best of who I have become as a person I owe to them.

Thank you, of course, to my wonderful husband Mark, who is scattered throughout this book, who has filled my life with love and everything that matters.

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Early memories of Venezuela



I was born in Houston, Texas in 1957, but all of my early memories are set in Campo Mata, a Texaco oil camp planted in the middle of nowhere Venezuela. My parents, Alice and Norm Portwood, my older brother, Tom, and I moved there from Houston when I was two. When Campo Mata began in the early 1950s, it had housing, offices, a mess hall, and a clubhouse. Gradually, the company built more amenities: a school, golf course, swimming pool, tennis courts, outdoor movie screen, and bowling alley. There was never a grocery store in Mata, so the wives made regular treks to Anaco (a larger Mobil oil camp) to shop. The nearest airstrip was in Anaco, too, so Mata residents had to drive there to fly out to Caracas, Venezuela's capital, and from there onward to the U.S. In 1962, there were 34 families living in houses in Mata as well as several families living in transitional trailer housing. At first, we lived in a metal, pre-fab house, and later we lived in a permanent house. Looking at a

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1962 camp map, I can still remember half of the families listed on it even though we left Mata when I was eight.



A portrait of me at age three in Campo Mata at Easter, 1960.

Sometimes it can be hard to sort out which stories are my memories and which are drawn from the stories that my parents told me or from old family photos. There are several photos of me at age three in a cute dress with a lacy collar that were taken at Easter. My hair is quite short. My mother told me that one of my friends cut off a handful of my hair when we were playing, so my mother had the rest of my hair cut short to hide my friend's fun with the scissors. I don't actually remember my friend

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cutting my hair, but I do remember wandering around looking for Easter eggs in the grass in front of the camp's clubhouse.



Campo Mata with its clubhouse and movie screen, 1957.

The clubhouse with its bar and big, covered patio was the site of many parties and events. We kids would lie out in the grass to watch movies on the drive-in size movie screen in front of the clubhouse. There were “censura A” (censor rating A) movies for the kids and “censura B” (censor rating B) movies for the adults (on different days of the week). I remember sitting on the hood of someone’s car in the parking lot to watch a “censura B” movie at least once. Obviously, I was older than three by then.

Mata was really a childhood dream, the small-town life that gave kids an incredible amount of freedom. Meanwhile, the adults played golf, tennis, and bridge. They bowled (in the later years),

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sunned themselves by the pool, drank cocktails at the bar, and gave parties – lots of parties. They invented holidays to fill out the year. For Las Vegas Night, they turned the clubhouse into a casino, and the men had to grow beards or be fined.



Alice dancing on the clubhouse bar on Las Vegas Night in Mata.

The camp was surrounded by “el monte,” the wild plains in the state of Anzoategui, and sometimes nature impinged on our American enclave. I remember riding my bike in the camp once and having to pull my feet out of the pedals and up on the bike because domesticated dogs gone wild were nipping at my heels.

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Norm sporting a beard at Mata's annual Las Vegas Night party.

We didn't have a grocery store, but we did have a truck that delivered cases of soft drinks. Whenever I went out on our back porch to get a drink, I knew to take a stick, bang on the bottles and listen for the shaking sound of maracas to be sure that a rattlesnake hadn't laid its eggs in the empty bottles. Once, I remember the men in the camp killing a snake with a big machete. In my memory, the snake's body was as large as a man's thigh, but I expect that its size has grown as the years have passed.

One early memory that I have in clear detail is hearing about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963. I was six years old, and I was playing with some friends after school in "The Circle," an area surrounded by houses, including my

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family's home. I don't remember how long we had been playing when a friend's mother came out of her house and started calling to us. We could tell from the timbre of her voice that she was upset, so we started running across the field toward her. In retrospect, my memory of running is in slow motion until the moment when I understood her words: "The president's been shot!"

It wasn't until I was an adult that I wondered how she knew about the assassination, since Mata had no televisions or radios. I asked my dad who said that she had probably heard the news via short-wave radio. My family was living in another world - an ex-pat microcosm of American society - but I still shared one of the defining memories of American children of my generation.



Our first house in Campo Mata, 1959.

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My older brother Tom in Campo Mata, 1962.

The year I entered the third grade, my family moved to Caracas, which was situated in a valley surrounded by the tail end of the Andes Mountains. We lived in a large, two-story house in an upper-crust neighborhood; there really wasn't a middle class in Venezuela then. I had to get up at 6 a.m. to catch the school bus that meandered all over the city picking up children who attended one of the two private schools where classes were taught in English. One day, in the five minutes between when my school bus passed the corner store and my father drove by, the army colonel who lived down the street from us was assassinated while walking to the store to buy his daily newspaper. My father saw the machine-gunned body in the street.

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Caracas, Venezuela in the mid-1960s.

Once, my mother and I were selling tickets for the English-speaking theater where I starred as the princess in “The Gumdrop Dragon.” The ticket booth was in the shopping center frequented by North Americans, and I wandered off to buy a Mother’s Day present: a foot-high wooden chair, hand carved with a seat made of twine. My mother and I left as the shopping center was closing for the night. Thirty minutes after we left, a bomb exploded in the mall where we had spent the day. I knew the bombing meant “Yankee go home,” but it had nothing to do with me. Venezuela was my home. I wasn’t a “Yanqui.” When people ask me, “Where are you from?” I have never had a good answer to the question.

After the assassination in the neighborhood, my family moved into the penthouse of a five-story apartment building. It had a wonderful patio that wrapped around the building. One summer night in 1967, my brother and I were eating dinner in the dining room. My parents were out on the covered section of the patio having drinks with a business acquaintance. They were getting ready to go out to dinner, when the whole building began shaking. It was so violent that our dinner plates were flung across the room, splattering food on the wall. Tom (or Tommy, as he was known until high school) grabbed my hand and pulled me into the living room. My father, in his usual cool voice, said it seemed to be over, so we could wait and see if anything else happened. My mother said, of course not. As we headed toward the door, another tremor moved like a wave through the floor.

When we reached the stairs, I put my hand on the railing as the lights went out. Screaming voices echoed up the stairwell. My mother held my other hand as we began descending the stairs. The poor businessman who had come to Caracas for a day kept flicking his lighter. It was out of fluid, but the sparks showed us there were a few more stairs ahead. Later, my mother told me that she was meticulously counting the flights to be sure that we didn't end up in the basement parking lot beneath the shaking building.

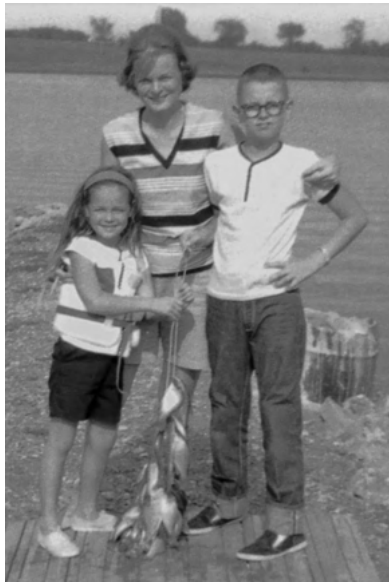
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Outside, the street was packed with people. I could hear our dog barking incessantly at the closed back door even though the front door was wide open. We sat in our car until it began shaking with another aftershock, and we all tumbled out. That night, we ended up in a two-bedroom house with three dogs that couldn't be kept in the same room, and 14 people, friends who couldn't get back into their homes that night. My family stayed for two weeks in our friends' house, playing game after game of Yahtzee, waiting for our apartment building to be inspected for damage and declared safe.

Every 50 years or so, Caracas has had such an earthquake. This time, 236 people were killed, and thousands were left homeless, or without water. Two blocks up the street from our home, a 20-story apartment building crumbled to the ground. The building had the same name as our apartment building, so for hours, our friends in the U.S. were afraid we had been killed. When I went back to school, the principal started emergency drills where we learned how to file calmly out of the classrooms and onto the sports field. Twice, my mother and our maid Carmen panicked and dashed down the apartment stairs, only to discover that the shaking was just the garbage truck driving past. Soon after the earthquake, we moved to a two-story duplex just down the street from two of my best friends.

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When I was 11 years old, my family moved back to the United States. For me “Norte America” had been the land of grandmothers, shots and shopping. Vacations always started in Houston, with a whirlwind week spent visiting clothing stores and doctors’ offices. We would get our immunizations and have our eyes checked, our cavities filled. Then, my mother would take us to buy a year’s worth of clothes, which we packed in the 10 mostly empty suitcases that we always brought from Venezuela. We spent the rest of our summer vacations with my grandmothers - one month with Mama (my maternal grandmother) in Little Rock, and one month with Grandmother Mae (my paternal grandmother) in Vinita, Okla.



Alice, Tom and I fishing at Grand Lake near Vinita.

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One of my jobs was to sit on the motel doorstep in Houston and scuff up the soles of our new shoes, so we wouldn't have to pay the Venezuelan import tax on new items. While I was scuffing, I could watch the wonder of cartoons in English on TV. American cartoons and those miniature boxes of Frosted Flakes and other sugary cereals are some of my fond memories of vacationing in the U.S. In the photo below, my mother is showing me how to scuff up shoes while we are sitting on the sidewalk in front of my Grandmother Mae's house. I'm wearing a headscarf with fake bangs, of all things.



My mother shows me how to scuff up the soles of new shoes.

Living in the U.S. was completely different from visiting it. Knowing the state capitals of Venezuela or the history of Simon

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Bolivar meant nothing in this new place. I had to borrow a jigsaw puzzle of the U.S. states from my neighbor's kid brother to learn geography. I was an outsider in a new world. I began saving my allowance and my babysitting money to buy a plane ticket to go home to Venezuela. I almost had the \$200 for the ticket when my friend Ede and several other children were killed in a massive traffic accident in Caracas. When Ede died, I was 12, but I knew then that one can never go back. The money I had been saving was searing my memory with longing for a home I would never have, so instead, I bought a Smith-Corona typewriter with a power return. Already I was thinking of going away to college, of being someplace that wasn't supposed to feel like home.

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My American childhood



I was halfway through the fifth grade when we moved back to the United States from Venezuela. I hated this new place, “Los Estados Unidos,” and I missed my friends, as any child would. After a short stint of living in an apartment, my parents bought a two-story, four-bedroom house in Metairie, a large suburb outside New Orleans. To placate me in my unhappiness, my mother let me pick out a white, French Provincial bedroom set with gold trim, complete with a canopy bed. The linens were pink with ruffles. The two chests had hutches for books and knickknacks. The overstuffed chair was upholstered in a floral, dusty-rose fabric – everything was girly to the max. I had long dreamed of such a bedroom, but I would have given it up in an instant to be back in Caracas or Campo Mata sleeping in my bedroom of mismatched furniture.

Our house was eleven blocks away from Phoebe Hearst Elementary School, which meant that I had to walk to school.

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The kids who lived two houses away from me on the other side of the cross street caught the school bus because they were a mile away from school. The family across the street from ours had three daughters and a much younger son. The youngest daughter, Paula, was only one year older than I was, so we started walking to school together. I expect she didn't have a choice in the matter, but she didn't seem to mind walking with me, until we got to her friend Kathleen's house. Then they would walk together, while I tagged along behind for the rest of the way.



My first Christmas in Metairie with Rebel, our new puppy, 1968.

One day, Paula fell back to walk beside me. She seemed downcast while Kathleen continued walking ahead, laughing. When I asked

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Paula what was the matter, she said that Kathleen knew a swear word she had never heard before: “Shit.” I knew what it meant, and I told her. Paula ran ahead and gloated with her newfound knowledge. I don’t know if it began then or later, but Paula and I became best friends.

I can’t count or remember the number of times I spent the night over at Paula’s house. On weekend mornings, her father, who had served in Patton’s army in France during World War II, would stand at the foot of the stairs and call out in his deep sergeant’s voice: “BREAK – FAST!” We would tumble out of bed and dash downstairs to his wonderful, weekend omelets. On Christmas morning, I always would go over to Paula’s house and play games. Every year, the family got a new board game, and I would be the fourth player with the three daughters.

If Paula’s parents got sick of me always being at their house, they never said anything or gave a hint that they did to me. In fact, when I wrote Paula a sympathy email after her father died, she told me that I always had held a special place in his heart, which touched me. During my childhood, I probably couldn’t have articulated why I spent so much time at Paula’s house, but in retrospect being in Paula’s house was like stepping into an “Ozzie and Harriet” world while my home was filled with the stresses of my family dealing with moving back from Venezuela.

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For example, Tom dropped out of high school during his last semester, and then he had to figure out what to do with his life. (Ultimately, he earned a GED, went to trade school and established a career repairing computers, moving with the times from repairing corporate mainframes to fixing desktop computers in people's homes.) At the time, my parents had their own issues, but they were especially worried because it was the height of the Vietnam War, and Tom was eligible for the draft. For me, Paula's house was an escape. Full of rambunctious kids, it was structured, too. Her parents always had a Manhattan before dinner, and dinner was served at 6 p.m. sharp. After dinner, I would help Paula deal with the dirty dishes, which was one of her household chores. When we were finished, we would dash up the stairs to her bedroom to do whatever we had dreamed up for that night.

We both went to T.H. Harris Junior High. Paula was outgoing, and she encouraged me to try out to be a cheerleader when she did. She made the cheerleading squad, but leaving Venezuela had made me an introvert, hardly the right personality for cheerleading. On the other hand, I rediscovered theater and ended up in leading roles in both community- and school-theater productions. It's ironic that you don't have to be an extrovert to get up on a stage and perform in front of a roomful of people. I found classes at Harris endlessly boring,

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because the Louisiana public schools were far behind the English-speaking, private school I had attended in Caracas.



Me with my ventriloquist doll at a junior-high talent show, 1971.

Making straight A's without effort and being bilingual in junior high meant that teachers let me out of my Spanish classes to do other things. I spent one year tutoring a Cuban girl and teaching her to speak English. My other year in junior high, I helped the lead in my school's production of "West Side Story" memorize his lines during class time. He also was the school's star quarterback and pitcher. We started dating, and overnight I went from being an introvert in the "out crowd" to being the center of attention in the "in crowd." That didn't last long, and the relationship ending didn't mean anything to me.

Later, I started dating a boy who performed in some of the community-theater productions I was in. Steve was my first love, and he even gave me his bracelet inscribed with his name to wear. I don't remember how long it lasted, but at some point he asked for his bracelet back without explaining why. I was heartbroken. The irony is that decades later when I was in my late 50s, perhaps, Steve got in touch with me on Facebook with a friend request. Unlike one of my high-school acquaintances and a former college boyfriend who had contacted me on Facebook, it was clear from the Facebook portrait of Steve and his newly married wife that he wasn't looking for romance. A few months later, Steve started posting about his forthcoming book. Talk about taking social-media marketing to a new low: contacting your former, junior-high girlfriend - the one that you broke up with - to promote your book.

As we got older, Paula and I read Fitzgerald, Eliot and Frost after we outgrew the posters of Clint Eastwood (mine) and Paul Newman (hers) hanging on our bedroom walls. How many times did Paula call me and say: "Come over now!" Once when I was a freshman in high school, it was because she had bought John Lennon's "Imagine" album. Her father had said that he didn't want any music by that hippie group The Beatles in his house. That day as we huddled in Paula's bedroom with "Imagine" playing on a low volume, I think we gloried in the fact that we

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were doing something verboten. I don't know to what extent we realized that we were listening to lyrics that advocated radical ideas about society, but then many people still don't realize that "Imagine" challenges the existing social order and religion.



Paula's 17th birthday with friends, her little brother and me.

It was hardly surprising that Paula and I played word games like Scrabble and Perquacky obsessively as children since we both became word people. She got her bachelor's and master's degrees in journalism and spent her career working for the "The Times Picayune," New Orleans' morning newspaper, and I got an MFA in creative writing and ended up working as an art critic for a couple of newspapers and other publications. As teenagers, we played gin rummy, and we kept a running score at gin all year long. Paula would win until December, when I invariably would start gaining ground and catching up. We would pop a big bowl

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of popcorn and play gin all night on New Year's Eve, as our parents partied in the neighborhood, and we would stay up to watch the ball drop at Times Square. By midnight, I usually would win our running gin game, and we would pledge to start again in the new year.

While Paula went to a public high school, my mother got me a scholarship to St. Martin's Protestant Episcopal High School because she was appalled that New Orleans (and its suburbs) had dealt with integration by segregating its public high schools by sex. The city's large, mostly Catholic, high-school system also was segregated by sex. My mother thought that this was an unnatural state of affairs and that young people should be exposed to the opposite sex while they were growing up. Even though I wholeheartedly believe in the public school system, I'm grateful that she got me into a private, college-prep high school because the Louisiana public school system was sadly lacking in the 1970s.

To get into the honors program at St. Martin's, I had to take Algebra I in summer school, which turned out to be a disaster, because all the other students were repeating the class that they had failed in the public schools. The class didn't get past quadratic equations, and I ended up struggling through the rest of my high-school math classes, because I was ill-prepared; I even needed a tutor for Algebra II.

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Portrait by my friend Jim from my freshman year in high school.

I devoted more time and attention to my high-school and community theater productions than I did to some of my required classes although I did well enough overall. Fortunately, because St. Martin's was a college-prep school, it offered elective classes that did interest me like "Modern Poetry," "Journalism," "Art History," and "History of Revolutions." I can't imagine high-school students in the South reading about Marx now, but Marxism was at the core of the curriculum of "History of Revolutions" in 1974.

Because St. Martin's was an Episcopalian school, we were required to take two religion classes. Even though I was a practicing Christian at the time, I chose to take "Ethics" and

“Contemporary Religious Issues,” both of which involved discussing issues of the day like capital punishment and abortion, rather than studying the Bible. When I went to a high-school reunion years later, a former classmate of mine who had been in one of those classes and had become a city prosecuting attorney, talked about what a liberal I was then. Yet I didn’t think of myself as having been particularly liberal in high school, and I certainly wasn’t as liberal then as I became later, as I am now.

Of course, in high school Paula and I went out on dates on Friday and Saturday nights. How many awful movies do high-school girls see on dates that boys, of course, paid for? I don’t know why I went out with a boy who wasn’t as smart as I was in the first place. Maybe it was because in my generation, girls were supposed to have dates, especially for events like proms. One friend later told me that boys were intimidated by my intellect. I don’t know whether that was true or not, but the boy I was dating at the time didn’t seem to care about such things. We certainly never had any discussions about poetry or theater. In any case, he became my steady boyfriend near the end of my sophomore year. One thing to be said for him was that he was an entrepreneur even in high school. He and a friend bought a couple of lawnmowers, and with a big truck, they made a lot of money in a city where lawns had to be mowed every week. As for

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Paula, she started dating the boy she eventually married, who was no intellectual slouch, and later earned a master's degree to advance in his career.

I discovered partway through my junior year that I had enough credits to graduate from high school in three years, because I had taken that summer-school algebra class. To do it, I had to squeeze two years of English classes into my junior year, which was fine because I loved literature. I was surprised when I received the school's English Prize as a graduating senior. The best part was that the prize included two books by my favorite poets - "The Complete Poems and Plays" by T.S. Eliot and "The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats" - beloved books that are still on my shelves.



My high-school graduation portrait, 1974.

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I was lucky enough not to work during high school. After my senior year, I spent the entire summer of 1974 watching the Watergate Committee hearings, sitting for hours in my parents' living room, glued to the television. I was upset that I happened to be away doing some errand when Alexander Butterfield testified and revealed the existence of a taping system in the White House, a turning point in the hearings. I still clearly remember watching President Nixon waving both his hands with his famous "V" for victory sign before boarding the Marine One helicopter to leave the White House after his resignation. I was crying, not because I was sorry to see him go, quite the contrary, but because even at 17 I knew that we had lost something as a nation, lost something that we could never get back.

I wanted to major in international studies in college and become a foreign service officer, so I applied to two schools: Georgetown University, the premiere university for international studies, and Southwestern at Memphis, a private, Presbyterian-affiliated college that offered an international-studies major. While I was accepted at both schools, my parents decided that they didn't want to pay the higher tuition at Georgetown, so I went to Southwestern (later Rhodes College). Despite the distractions of high-school theater and dating, my grades and my high verbal SAT scores were enough to get me one of the college's six Southwestern Scholar awards for incoming freshmen. (I was

surprised they didn't care about my pitiful math SAT scores.) Had I been income eligible, the award would have included a tuition waiver; as it was, I received a small honorarium.

My parents drove me, in a caravan, the 400 miles from New Orleans to Memphis to start college. A hurricane was bearing down on the Gulf Coast, and after our frightening experience riding out Hurricane Camille in 1969, my mother had vowed never to stay in New Orleans again when a hurricane was approaching. So I was riding with my father in one car, while my mother was driving in the second car with Mama and our dog Rebel bounding around in the backseat. The rain was pounding and the visibility was near zero as we crossed the 24-mile bridge across Lake Pontchartrain. I spent half of the trip twisted around watching out the rear window to make sure that my mother was still behind us and hadn't gotten into an accident or been waylaid somehow.

By my junior year in college, I was disillusioned with Southwestern's international studies program, and I changed my major to English, my first love. I always suspected that the real reason my parents didn't want me to go to Georgetown was that they didn't want me to move as far away as Washington, D.C. While I might not have changed majors and careers had I attended a first-class, international studies program, in the end, Southwestern turned out to be the right choice: I met my future

husband my senior year, although we didn't start dating until a year after I graduated.

Predictably, my high-school romance didn't last beyond high school. Paula was married to her college sweetheart for a couple of decades. A few years after they divorced, she married one of her newspaper colleagues. After her parents died, and Paula and her new husband had retired, they moved to France and bought a stone cottage in a small village in the rural countryside. Aside from being Facebook friends, Paula and I haven't been in touch much since my father died in 2001 and I stopped visiting New Orleans, but we exchanged some messages recently when one of her sisters died unexpectedly. Paula said she considered me her third sister, and it's true that at a time when I felt out of place seemingly everywhere, the one place where I did belong was when I was with Paula. We traded clothes, went shoe shopping and just had fun together when making garlic toast and popcorn were part of the rituals in our culture of two. During that difficult time in my life, Paula was the sister I never had. Although we rarely speak now, the bond forged between Paula and me during the years when I spent as much time in her house as mine, is unbreakable.

Paula and her husband James are now living a life abroad that I could imagine for myself as the adult who grew up as an ex-pat child, except that I've never envisioned living in a rural

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community. I would want to live in Paris with my husband, or more likely in Barcelona or Madrid, someplace where I could enjoy urban European culture, and where I could resuscitate the second language I still spoke fluently during my American childhood.

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My mother's stories



I was an adult, and years beyond college, before I realized how much the stories my mother had told me about her own life had influenced my decisions about my career and my life. So, too, in the memoir he wrote in his 80s, my grandfather says that my mother's birth changed the direction of his career and life.



Bob and Alice Stone in a wheat field in Maple Hill, Kan., 1923.

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My maternal grandparents, Robert Kenneth Stone and Alice Claudia Smith, were married in 1922. At the time, my grandfather was enrolled in Washburn College in Topeka, Kan. After my mother was born on Nov. 15, 1922, my grandfather (Papa) left college to get a better paying job to support the family, which led him on a completely different career path than he had planned. My grandparents divorced in 1932.



My mother as a little girl.

My grandmother never remarried, and she raised my mother by herself. My mother did visit her father when she was young, although she never shared any details with me about their relationship back then. Even though my grandmother (Mama) only had a high-school diploma, she became a medical

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technician and ultimately a microbiologist with the Veterans Health Administration.



My mother and grandmother.

I wish I knew something about my mother's childhood. I have some wonderful photographs of her as a child and as a young woman, but all the stories of her life that I have start when she was an adult. I don't remember her talking about going to college, and when I went through all of my parents' papers after my father died, I didn't find a college diploma for her. I did find a photograph of her and her father on the University of Kansas campus, and her half-sister, Paula Stone Evans, remembers that

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Alice was attending the university when she (Paula) was born. A society-page newspaper clipping I have mentions that Alice attended the University of Kansas and was a Sigma Kappa sorority member. I suspect she didn't graduate since she never said anything to me about having attended college when we were discussing my college options.

Based on her age, Alice probably would have started college in the fall of 1940 or 1941, just before the U.S. declared war on the Axis Powers. At one time, I assumed that she dropped out of college to get married, but it seems more likely that WWII affected her college plans; she didn't get married until 1945.



My mother and her father at the University of Kansas.

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Presumably, my mother met her first husband, Jay George Diamond, after my grandmother moved to Helena, Mont. to work at the VA Hospital there. Jay worked in the agriculture and cattle industries before he joined the U.S. State Department; according to another newspaper clipping that I have, he had known for 30 years how many bushels of wheat were grown in Montana and how many head of cattle were roaming the state's lands.

Jay and Alice were married in Helena in 1945. After WWII ended, Jay was appointed agricultural attaché to the American Embassy in Berlin, and they moved to Berlin in 1946 where, according to my mother, she was the first American civilian woman living in the city after WWII. As a map that Alice sent to my grandmother shows, Berlin was still separated into four sectors: American, English, French and Russian. In 2011, Mark and I used the map to find the old American Embassy in Berlin, which had been closed for years. We also drove around the neighborhood where my mother had lived. Presumably, the neighborhood didn't cater to Americans anymore, but it was still filled with large, expensive homes.

After Berlin, Jay and Alice moved to Athens in 1948, for his second embassy assignment. My favorite story from that time is when they made a trip to Cairo. At one of the social events, Alice danced with King Farouk of Egypt, who she said was rather

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flirtatious. Another night, my mother toured a pyramid by lantern light. Decades later, Alice gave me her bracelet made of seven, hexagonal, two-piastres Egyptian coins stamped with King Farouk's profile.



Alice with her dog Bodo in Athens.

These were heady tales for a girl of 10 or so. I always thought my desire to major in international studies in college and join the foreign service was tied to my growing up abroad. At some point (long after I had a BA in English and an MFA in creative writing), I realized that my mother's stories of living as an attaché's wife had influenced my original choice for a college major, as well as my choice for which college to attend, as much as my own personal experiences of living abroad. Of course, I didn't want to marry a diplomat, I wanted to be one! Even so, Alice did teach me many of the social niceties required in such circumstances like how to set a table with more silverware than we used in

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suburban New Orleans.

When Jay and Alice married, he was 32 years older than she was. As a consequence, she said that Jay had always been jealous of other men being around her. One day when he became jealous for some ludicrous reason, he threatened her with a gun. Alice, with the help of her maid, left Athens the next day and returned to the United States. Her divorce papers were filed in Helena, but I think the only reason she returned for a short while to the city where she was married was to file for divorce. After that, she went back to Topeka, her hometown, to begin life anew.

It seems crazy, but I actually don't know where or how my parents met. After Norm received his BS in chemical engineering from the University of Oklahoma, he moved back to Vinita, and returned to working for Coca-Cola. He drove around to different Coca-Cola factories with another chemical engineer, and they did quality control testing for the company. I suspect that Norm met Alice on one of his testing trips after she returned to the U.S. for her divorce.

My parents must have had a short romance, because on Christmas Eve of 1949, Alice sent a telegram from Topeka to Norm at his mother's home address in Vinita. I think the telegram was a thank-you note for an engagement ring that he had sent her. Alice wrote: "It is a beautiful ring / Thank you

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honey / Love kisses / Alice.” They were married on March 1, 1950, in Kansas City, Mo.

Soon after my father married my mother, he left Coca-Cola and took a better paying job with Texaco, which took them to Austin, and then to Houston. In 1959, my family moved to Campo Mata, Venezuela, which is where my childhood memories of my mother begin.

In Campo Mata, and later in Caracas, we had a live-in maid who cooked, cleaned, and looked after my brother and me. I spent a lot of time with Carmen, who in the photos I have of her and me, doesn’t look much older than a kid herself. I have memories of my years in Campo Mata when I was age 2-8, but I remember more about the time that Alice and I spent together in Caracas when I was age 9-11.

My mother was an excellent seamstress, and she made many of her clothes and mine, from when I was a child through high school. In retrospect, I’m surprised that I didn’t rebel as a teenager and refuse to wear homemade clothes, but I think it was a sign of how accomplished she was as a seamstress, how her clothes were not so much “homemade” as “handmade.” When I was in high school in Metairie, we used to go to the fabric store and pick out patterns and fabrics for my dresses, so I could get what I wanted, and I didn’t want what my peers wore. It was

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the early 1970s, and they were all wearing jeans, but I wanted to wear dresses and 4” platform heels.



A sketch of Alice from her Venezuela days.

I have a vivid memory of sitting with my mother in Caracas and watching while she finished the trim work on one of her handmade party dresses. I would have been between nine and ten years old. She was hand-stitching a strip of hexagonal rhinestones on the neckline of a sleeveless sheath dress. The blue fabric had the shimmer of satin or sateen. I still have a lot of the clothes that she made for my Barbie dolls: the silver lame sheath, and the coral, off-the-shoulder dress (both made from

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the scraps of her own handmade dresses), the felt Jackie-O style coat, and more.



Alice in costume at a Halloween party in Campo Mata.

When we lived in Campo Mata, she would make costumes for the whole family for Halloween, Las Vegas Night, and any other day the residents could dream up to celebrate with a costume party. I remember her cutting silver air-conditioner filters into “body armor” for her and my dad’s knights’ costumes. The women needed party dresses and evening gowns. Even though they were living in a Venezuelan oil camp rather than an American metropolis, they celebrated holidays like New Year’s Eve in

formal attire, and the men actually wore tuxes.

Years after she died, Alice's friends still remembered her dancing on the clubhouse bar in the bright green can-can outfit that she made for one of Mata's Las Vegas Night parties. Outgoing, talkative, personable, even flamboyant in her youth, that was my mother.

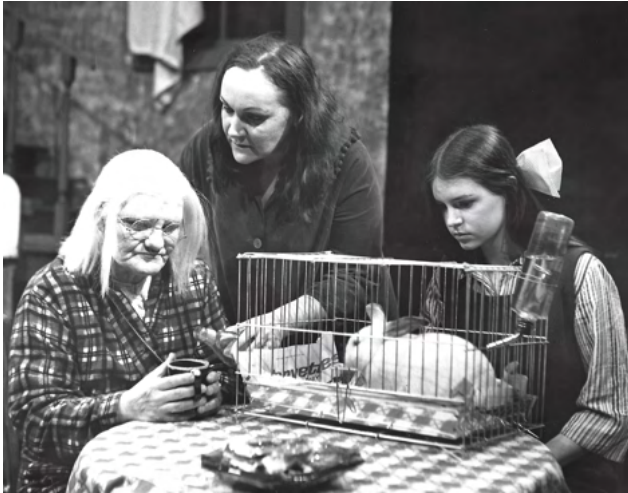
When I was age 10 in Caracas, Alice and I started working in the theater together. That year, I had the starring role as the princess in "The Mystery of the Missing Gumdrops" in a children's production at the Caracas Theater Club. Alice was in charge of ticket sales.

When we moved to Metairie, I was in the fifth grade, and by junior high, Alice and I started working in a children's theater group out in the suburbs. Typically, I was on the stage, and Alice always ran props. I was the witch in "Hansel and Gretel" and the stepmother in "Cinderella." Later, in a high-school production, I was condemned as a witch in Arthur Miller's "The Crucible." (I wonder if I noticed a pattern back then.) I couldn't sing, so for musicals, I would help Alice with the props in community theater shows. I took voice lessons, but it didn't help. I still whisper "Happy Birthday" when I can't get out of singing.

Later, I started acting in plays at St. Martin's Protestant Episcopal High School as an extracurricular activity, but that was

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something I did alone. Eventually, I landed a part as Tillie in “The Effects of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds” at the Gallery Circle Theatre. The theater was located in the French Quarter, and was one of the city’s serious theaters. Suddenly, I was busy rehearsing or performing with professional actors almost every night of the week. This time, my mother wasn’t backstage running the props. She and my dad were out in the audience on opening night watching the play.



“The Effects of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds.”

Like almost all of the wives at Campo Mata and Caracas, Alice worked as a homemaker or housewife, as they were known then. The exceptions were the teachers and the nurse. With full-time, live-in maids, the wives’ main occupations were playing bridge, sports (golf, tennis, swimming), hosting parties, shopping, and

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childcare beyond the maids' daycare. Of course, they did other things that I didn't see. When I was going through our family memorabilia, I found a Texaco newsletter with a story about the employees' wives doing volunteer work in Venezuela, and it was accompanied by a photo of Alice getting off a prop plane.



Alice a year after moving to Campo Mata, 1960.

Moving to suburban New Orleans, where there were no fancy parties and no maids, must have been as much of a culture shock for my mother as it was for me - not that I was aware of that as an 11-year-old girl. I was too wrapped up in my own unhappiness. When we moved to Metairie, Alice continued

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working as a homemaker until I graduated from high school and moved away to go to college. Then she began looking for a job.

Alice tried selling real estate, but it wasn't for her, despite her outgoing personality. One tax season, she tried doing tax returns with H&R Block. She always had loved doing math. In fact, whenever I had problems with my math homework, I would ask Norm to help me, because Alice's enthusiasm about solving math problems and explaining the solution was so time-consuming that it would drive me crazy.



My parents at Tom and Gloria's wedding, 1975.

Ultimately, Alice managed the largest H&R Block office in New Orleans, and she was certified to represent her clients in tax court even though she didn't start with H&R Block and discover her vocation until she was in her early 50s. In the late 1980s,

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Norm took a special retirement offer from Texaco, because the company had bought Getty Oil and was trying to reduce their management staff. In 1989, Alice was still at H&R Block, doing the work she loved, when she died at age 66 of a brain aneurysm. The evening of the visitation before Alice's memorial service, the room was bursting with flowers, as the florist kept bringing in spray after spray of flowers. It seemed that almost every H&R Block office in the New Orleans area had sent flowers in tribute to her.



Alice with our crazy beagle Rebel at home in Metairie.

Norm later told me that he wished he had retired earlier so that he and Alice could have spent more time together. I have to say that I wish I had spent more time with Alice when I was an adult, too. I moved 400 miles away from my parents' home in Metairie

to go to college in Memphis when I was 17. I stayed in Memphis after I graduated from college, and then four years later, I moved 1,400 miles away from the South to go to grad school in Tucson, Ariz. I never returned to the South to live.

I think you get to know your parents differently as you age, so that you can see them as individuals with their own lives and not just as your parents, the people who are responsible for you, who you know largely in relation to yourself and who think of you as their child. Losing Alice too soon made me realize that I needed to get to know Norm as a person better than I did, to discover what it meant to truly be an adult daughter and not just a child who had grown up. Fortunately, I had another dozen years to spend with him.

Fiestaware and photographs



In the mid- to late 19th century, the majority of Americans lived in rural areas. My maternal great-great grandparents, Samuel Sylvanus and Emily A. (Woodruff) Smith, owned a farm in Maple Hill, Kan., but it's clear from the family portraits with all of the men in suits and the women in fancy Victorian dresses that by age 65, if not sooner, Samuel Smith was no longer involved in the daily grind of running a farm. He also sent at least one of his five sons to college, an uncommon sign of wealth and privilege in the 19th century.

Samuel and Emily had six children: Earl, Alice, Thomas, Lakins, Harry and Lloyd. Emily, the family matriarch, died at age 76 in 1926. Samuel died at age 81 in 1927, in a bizarre accident. He was standing outside the Royal Masonic Temple waiting to attend a party when he was struck by a car driven by another Mason who was going to attend the same party. Samuel died several hours

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later of a heart attack brought on by shock from the accident.



Samuel and Emily Smith, my great-great grandparents.

My grandmother's father, Lakins Woodruff Smith, went to Campbell College in Holton, Kan., which had a population of under 3,000 in the late 19th century and a population of only 3,400 in 2020. He then taught school in Holton for two years. Later, Lakins and his younger brother Harry Lee Smith started the Kansas Acetylene Co. The company, which was based in Topeka, Kan., advertised itself as offering: "Modern Lighting System(s) for Country Homes, Office & Sales Rooms." Harry was the president, and Lakins was the vice-president, secretary and treasurer. Lakins must have been doing well financially at some point (probably before his marriage) because I have a photo of him out motoring with friends at a dude ranch in Colorado.

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Lakins and Alta Smith with their daughter Alice Claudia.

Lakins married Alta Riggin on Oct. 22, 1901, and their daughter, Alice Claudia Smith (my grandmother), was born on Sept. 11, 1902. I always thought that my grandmother was an only child, but when I took her body back for burial in the family plot in Topeka, I discovered from the funeral records that she had two brothers (Forest Lakins Smith and Dorace Dean Smith), both of whom died in infancy.

At some point, the Kansas Acetylene Co. closed, and Lakins and his family moved back to the Smith family farm in Maple Hill. Perhaps, the business was unsuccessful, or it may have closed because Lakins' brother and business partner Harry died in his 30s. Ten months later, in 1917, Lakins was crushed under a

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falling building where he had taken shelter during a severe wind storm. His legs were paralyzed, and he lived in pain until his death two years later at the age of 41.



Alta, Dorace and Alice Smith.

My maternal great grandmother Alta Riggin was the daughter of Willard Millard and Martha Claudia (Craig) Riggin. She had two sisters, Edna and Irvyl, and at least one half-sister and two half-brothers. The only detail that I know about the Riggin family is that my grandmother Alice Claudia Smith was named after her grandmother, and she hated her middle name. Also, looking at my collection of vintage photographs, it seems that Alta could easily pass for the identical twin of her sister Edna, but I don't know that they were twins.

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Willard and Martha Riggin, my great-great grandparents.

I don't know anything about my grandmother's childhood or her life as a young woman, except that she graduated from high school but didn't go to college, although she was obviously intelligent and capable. I always suspected that she never had the opportunity to pursue a higher education because college degrees were considered superfluous for women in her generation, yet the more details I found out about her family, the more I realized that my assumption was probably flawed. When her father died, leaving her mother a widow, my grandmother was a month short of turning 17 and still in high school. What followed in her life set her on a track for a traditional woman's role - at least at first.

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Alta Smith with her daughter Alice (my grandmother).

Alice met Bob Stone in 1920, and they fell in love. According to his memoir, Bob graduated from high school in 1921 and then enrolled in Wabash College in Topeka. My grandparents married on Feb. 4, 1922, and they hoped that if they both worked, he would be able to continue in college.

When my mother was born in late 1922, my grandfather left college to find a better-paying job to support his family. He went to work for S.W. Bell State Engineer's Office in Topeka. He soon moved to a job with the State Highway Department, which paid almost twice as much as his other job. In 1932, my grandparents divorced, which my grandfather attributed largely to all the traveling that his job required. My grandmother never told me anything about their relationship or separation.

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Alice Smith at age 19, a year before she married.

After the divorce, my grandmother needed to earn her own living, and somehow she ended up working with the Veterans Health Administration. In her position as a microbiologist, she moved across the country several times to different VA Hospitals (from Topeka to Helena to Little Rock). Mama's last position was in Little Rock, and by the time my family was coming back to visit her on our summer vacations when I was aged 4-10, she was living in Little Rock in an apartment with what I thought of as fancy furniture, which is to say reproduction Chippendale. Unlike at my Grandmother Mae's big house in a small town, there was not a lot for a kid to do at Mama's apartment. I mostly

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remember the year when Mama had surgery and my parents bought me a Johnny Seven O.M.A. multi-purpose, toy weapon to get me out of the apartment and go launch grenades, fire missiles and shoot a tommy gun in the building's parking lot, even though I wasn't a tomboy.



Alice Stone receiving an Incentive Award from the VA Hospital.

Mama retired early from her microbiologist's job at the VA Hospital in Little Rock because of her health problems. When she had to move out of the apartment where she had been living since the early 1950s because it was being remodeled, my mother persuaded her to move to New Orleans and stay with us while she looked for an apartment. I was in high school, and she must have been about 70. She never did move into an apartment. (My father

once told me that he never expected that she would.) Mama lived with my parents until she was about 86 when she moved into a nursing home because of her declining health. She outlived my mother by almost a decade, dying of dementia in 1998 at age 96, a tragic fate for such an intelligent and accomplished woman.

Since Mama was supposed to rent an apartment when she moved to New Orleans, almost all of her furniture and possessions had been in storage for more than 25 years in big wooden crates in a warehouse. After she died, Tom and I opened box after box of dishware, knick-knacks and books. The masking-tape labels on her furniture had become permanently laminated to the wood from the steamy New Orleans heat. I kept some unusual serving dishes, a late 19th-century china bowl that belonged to my great-aunt Alice Smith Ericsson, Mama's collection of vintage Fiestaware that I still use, some 1950s' wood furniture, and a burgundy velvet Bergere chair - all of which had to be shipped across the country to Tucson. (When I came home, I sold all of Mama's red Fiestaware because pre-WWII, red Fiestaware contains radioactive uranium oxide in the dye.)

Back at my father's house, I looked through a box of Mama's vintage photographs of people whose names I didn't recognize. Over a dozen years after Mama died, I would organize her photographs to make sense of four generations of my maternal family's history.

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Personally, I don't know much about my maternal grandfather's family history, because my family didn't come back to visit him every summer while we lived in Venezuela, although my mother did write to him about our lives there, according to my Aunt Paula. I also didn't inherit boxes of his family photographs and memorabilia, since my grandparents were divorced. Unlike everyone else though, Papa was interested in genealogy, and he developed a detailed family tree. Just as importantly is that at the age of 84, he wrote "The Life History of Robert Kenneth Stone," a 15-page, single-spaced memoir full of details about his life. This text is based on his memoir.

Like many people of his generation, Robert Kenneth Stone, the son of Thomas Jefferson and Olive Hester (Allen) Stone, was born at home in King City, Mo., on Feb. 10, 1902. In the first three months after his birth, his father moved the family first to Omaha and then to Topeka in pursuit of agreeable employment. Through the years, his father tried a number of jobs: owning a grocery store, working as a butcher, and building sleeping porches. In 1916, he bought a farm north of Lawrence, Kan., and my grandfather dropped out of high school to work on the farm. He was too young to fight in World War I.

By the fall of 1918, my grandfather said he had had enough of farming and moved back to Topeka to finish high school. A year

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later, his father, who was having health problems, sold the farm, which wasn't profitable anyway. My grandfather (Papa) met my grandmother while they were both in high school. As I mentioned earlier, they married, had my mother in 1922, and then divorced in 1932.



Thomas and Olive Stone, my grandfather's parents.

Not long after that, Papa left his highway department job to start his own accounting firm, and then in 1938, he had the good fortune to begin working for IBM. He started in IBM sales, moved into management and later went back to sales, because he didn't really like management.

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Bob Stone as a young man.

Eventually, he married Pauline Zanichelli, and they had two children, Paula Kay and Robert Kenneth Stone, Jr. They lived in Memphis and Kansas City, Kan. Ultimately, a career spent at IBM, plus some judicious investments, meant that Papa could retire in 1962 as a wealthy man - a millionaire, according to his memoir - at age 60. Papa and Pauline ended up living in a condo in Los Altos, Calif. and traveling extensively in their retirement.

Even though my family didn't spend part of our annual summer vacations from Venezuela with my grandfather, my brother and I flew out to Kansas City when we were children to see my grandfather, but I was too young to remember that. When my

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family moved back to the U.S., I did see my grandfather and his family periodically.



Bob and Pauline Stone with their children Ken and Paula.

When I was in high school in 1972, my grandfather flew me out to Los Altos. Then the two of us drove down to Los Angeles as part of a two-week trip where I met the whole Stone family: Pauline, my Aunt Paula and Uncle Ken and their families. Suddenly, my mother had siblings I had never known, and I had an extended family for the first time.

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Mark, me, my grandfather and mother in Sunnyvale, Calif.

I did see my grandfather several other times in my life when he came out to see my family in Metairie, when I stopped by his home in California on a vacation trip just after college, and when Mark, my mother and I went to California to see him. My Aunt Paula and Uncle George visited Mark and me periodically through the years as part of their trips to see a cousin in the greater Tucson area. We've kept in touch through the years, and Mark and I stopped overnight to visit them in Utah during our national parks tour in 2015. Especially after my mother died, I think that my Aunt Paula has made an effort to become a part of my life so that I would continue to have an extended family as my immediate family has grown thinner. Sadly, my Uncle George died four years ago during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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George and Paula (Stone) Evans.

If I were doing a genealogy now, I know my extended family would be more complex. When I visited them in 1972, Paula and George had two young daughters, Kathryn and Melissa, and my Uncle Ken and his first wife, Sue Constantine Stone, had two boys, Kenny and Bernard. Not surprisingly, my aunts and uncles now have grandchildren and even great-grandchildren. Ken and Sue divorced years ago, and he is now married to Patricia Hudson Andrews.

A stroke in 1981 curtailed Papa's golfing and some activities. He was still able to work on his genealogy and write his memoir. Bob Stone died in 1988 at age 86.

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My father and the American Dream



My father was born Silas Norman Lynn Portwood on April 19, 1922, in Poughkeepsie, Ark., but he didn't know his first name was Silas until he saw a copy of his birth certificate when he enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Forces during World War II. His parents, Mary Mae Paden and Silas Ogden Portwood, divorced when he was eight months old, and apparently, his mother was so angry with his father for leaving her to raise their son alone that she never told Norm he was named after his father. Growing up, my father was known as Norman, although I never heard my Grandmother Mae call him anything but Son. By the time I came along, everyone called him Norm.

When my father was a baby, he and my Grandmother Mae moved to Greenville, Texas. Then, when he was four or five, they moved to Afton, Okla., to live with my grandmother's half-sister Dora and her husband Bill Welch on their farm. When my great-uncle

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Tom (Dora's brother and Mae's half-brother) found a job in Vinita, my grandmother and my father moved to Vinita with him. The three of them lived together in a big, two-story house, and my great-uncle (or Uncle Tom, as my brother and I called him) raised my father like a son. (My parents named my brother "Thomas" after Uncle Tom.)



Grandmother Mae with my dad in the driver's seat of her car.

Money must have been short for Grandmother Mae and Uncle Tom during the Great Depression because my father swept the floors at the local Coca-Cola factory after school when he was eight. I'm sure that they had plenty of food, because Grandmother Mae always had a big garden, and she would can food. At some point, Uncle Tom worked in a grocery, and he would bring home fruits and vegetables that were still edible but getting too old to sell so that Grandmother Mae could cook or can them.

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My father as a boy with his uncle Tom.

My dad developed a long relationship with Coca-Cola. He was a delivery truck driver there while he was still in high school.



Norm at age 14 with the Coca-Cola delivery truck that he drove.

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Norm graduated from high school in 1939. He enrolled at Oklahoma University in Norman for the fall semester, and he would drive home on the weekends, but he had to drop out in the spring when he had an operation on his elbow. He attended Miami (Oklahoma) Junior College for a year or two before he enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Forces during WWII.

Because he had some higher education, Norm entered the Air Forces as a lieutenant. He wanted to be a pilot, but his vision wasn't good enough, so he became a navigator. He spent the war in the U.S., traveling around the country going to different air bases and training new airmen in the skills to become navigators.



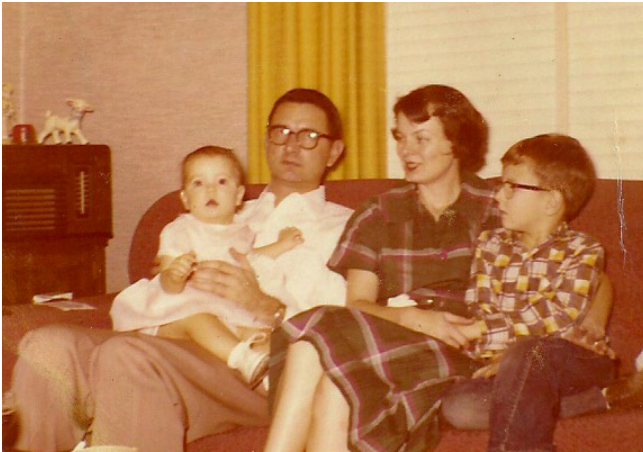
Norm (on left) with some of his fellow airmen during WWII.

When the war ended, Norm left active military service in December 1945 and returned to Oklahoma University in Norman, where he completed his bachelor's degree in chemical engineering in 1948 with funding from the G.I. Bill, a part-time

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job, money from Grandmother Mae for fees and books, as well as cigarettes sent from Uncle Tom. (Norm had started smoking in the military.) Norm continued to serve in the Air Force Reserves for years as an income supplement, and ultimately he retired as a captain.

After he completed his bachelor's degree, Norm returned to work for Coca-Cola in Vinita. As I mentioned earlier, I suspect that my parents met while Norm was traveling around the country doing testing for Coca-Cola. I seem to remember being told that after they got married, for a short time, Alice and the other chemist's wife drove around with their husbands on their testing expeditions.



My parents and brother and me.

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Norm was working for Texaco in 1959 when my parents decided to move to Campo Mata. The reason is that they were in debt from medical expenses; between the births of my brother and me, they had lost a child (Lynn Anne) at 10 days old. Texaco offered large financial incentives to employees who were willing to live and work overseas. We had to stay in Venezuela for two years after we moved there before returning to the U.S. for vacation, and after that, we could return annually to the U.S. for two months each year, usually during the summer. We ended up living in Venezuela for nine years.



Norm out in the oil field near Campo Mata.

Alice and Norm were 37 the year we moved to Venezuela, and they were 46 the year we moved back to the U.S. What a big decision it must have been for them to pull up their roots and move to a foreign country with a two-year-old girl and an eight-year-old boy in tow. I doubt it was as big a deal for my mother, who had lived in Berlin and Athens and traveled to Cairo, as it was for my father, who grew up in a town with a population of about 5,000. I'm sure part of what made it possible for my father was his WWII experiences. He, like so many soldiers, had traveled more than 20 miles beyond his hometown, and so he could envision doing things that his parent's generation might not have considered.

When we lived in Venezuela, I was too young to have a sense of what Norm did during his work life. Like most dads, he was just gone during the day and back at night. By the time we moved to Metairie, I was in the fifth grade, and I knew Norm was part of the corporate world. He became a manager of gas sales, which didn't mean glad-handing customers, but rather negotiating and writing offshore gas leases. Five days a week, he carried a briefcase, and he wore a suit, a tie and a white shirt. He carried a large, white handkerchief that I ironed. Everything else went to the cleaners. The first thing he did when he got home was to change into his casual clothes, which evolved through the years.

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My senior year in college while I was studying photography I photographed Norm in a jumpsuit. Later he wore guayabera shirts, slacks and moccasins. “Beer call” was at 5 p.m. during the week, and 2 p.m. on the weekend.



Norm on the back porch of my parents' house in Metairie, 1978.

My mother may have cooked during the first years of their marriage in the U.S., or she may not have since she had a maid during her first marriage. In any case, nine years of having a maid cook in Venezuela had left her with no inclination to handle kitchen duties. So when we moved back to Metairie, Norm took over the main cooking duties, although Alice would make green

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salads to balance out his proclivities toward meat and potatoes. All sorts of exotica turned up in my diet after we moved back to the U.S.: Pop Tarts, Deviled Ham, Rotel dip (one of my dad's favorites).

Norm always seemed to me a man of his generation, the Greatest Generation. He wasn't given to idle chatter, and he was always cool, calm and collected. I never saw my father lose his temper or his patience - not in my entire life. Yet after my mother died, whenever I came to New Orleans to visit, Norm and I spent a lot of time sitting at his favorite bar talking about all kinds of things, including his life. (It was only after my mother died that I had a chance to talk to and get to know my dad because while my mother was living, whenever I would call, he'd say, "Here's your mother," and pass the phone to her.)



Norm in his 9-5 suit in Caracas, 1966.

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Norm chose his regular bar because it was near Alice's H&R Block office. After he retired, he would go to the bar and have a beer before she got off work. Then she would join him for a scotch and water before they went out to dinner. Later, when it was just the two of us hanging out at the bar, I realized that it was a neighborhood, working-class place and that everyone knew Norm by name, and he knew everyone's names, too: the waitresses, the oyster shuckers, the truck drivers. He was comfortable in their world, certainly as comfortable as he had been in his white-collar, corporate life, because this was the world he grew up in. It wasn't a world Alice knew, but she was comfortable anywhere. Even though she was a former diplomat's wife who had danced with a king, her convivial personality meant that she could chat with anyone. As for me, I was the visiting daughter the regulars were happy to meet.

Norm took his responsibilities, especially his financial responsibilities for his family, seriously. Before I went away to college, he's the one who showed me how to balance my first checkbook and told me never to spend more money than I had. I didn't get credit cards for a long time for that very reason, and I have borrowed money for only one thing: our home. I don't know if he ever told me that I shouldn't cheat, but I understood from him that one's character was defined by being honest, following through on what you said you would do and being

trustworthy. When my brother and I were speaking to the pastor who would do the service and eulogy at my father's funeral, he asked us to talk about my father, and my brother said, "His word was his bond." I don't know how one knows something like that about someone, but my brother was right.

I've always thought of my father as the fulfillment of the American Dream, but it's not really that simple. He did rise from sweeping the floors at the Coca-Cola factory when he was eight years old during the Depression to working in middle management for an international corporation, generating the kind of income and investments that his mother could never have imagined when she urged him to get a college degree. Certainly, his frugal habits and dedication to hard work were a big part of his success. Yet the government support that he received in the form of the G.I. Bill was crucial in launching his career. I don't think Norm ever thought of his life in terms of the American Dream, but he did believe that if you worked hard, you would succeed. Once, when I told him that Mark had gotten a promotion, his reply was underwhelming and predictable: If Mark worked hard, he would do well. Today the American Dream slips further and further out of reach for many people, because hard work often isn't enough.

Norm always wanted me to be competent. When he gave me my first car, my Grandmother Mae's 1964 Dodge with a

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push-button transmission, he taught me how to change a tire and how to change the spark plugs, which is tricky with a slant-six engine. One time when we were sitting at his favorite bar, I asked him what he had expected me to be when I grew up, and he said a professional, maybe an attorney. (There had been a time when I was young when I had considered that career for myself.) For a man who was born in 1922, who was the first person in his family to get a college education, I think that's quite a progressive attitude toward one's daughter. Of course, I ended up with my father's work ethic. How could I avoid it?



Norm and I on one of my parents' visits to Tucson in the 1980s.

Mark and I eloped during our summer break from grad school and were married in Merida, Mexico. When we flew back to New

Orleans, we discovered that my parents had not yet received the postcard we sent announcing our marriage. My mother was very excited by the news. My father asked what we were planning to do next? Then, he said to Mark, “More to the point, what are you planning to do?” The implication was: What are you going to do to support my daughter? Mark told my dad that ours was to be a marriage of equals, that we would both be working and contributing equally to our living expenses. I don’t think my father was particularly impressed by this concept. My mother was disappointed that she would not get to plan a big, white wedding or call me “Mrs. Taylor,” since I was keeping my birth name. I will say though that she was punctilious in introducing me with my birth name. The irony is that my upbringing, the way they had raised me, was a big part of why I had become an independent woman who would live a life outside of their traditional assumptions about a woman’s role in society.



Norm, his high school’s drum major, and its band queen group.

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Chasing fireflies



American family sizes and structures have changed radically in just a couple of generations because American society has changed. My paternal great grandfather, Anderson Polk Paden, had five wives because he was widowed four times and remarried each time, surviving all but his last wife. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, men with large families needed wives to care for their children while they supported their families.



The Paden family with Anderson holding his daughter Mae.

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While divorce wasn't common in the next generation, the divorce rate doubled post-World War I. Both sets of my grandparents, who married in the early 1920s, were divorced.

My paternal grandmother, Mary Mae Paden, was born on April 19, 1902, in King's Mill, Ark., to Emily A. "Emma" Wolfe, the second wife of Anderson Polk Paden. My great-grandfather had a mill and a general store in King's Mill around that time. According to my father, the store went under at some point because Anderson had extended too much credit to his customers. Anderson died in 1926 in Greenville, Texas. I don't know when my great-grandmother Emma died.



My uncle Tom Paden and my father as a boy.

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One thing that my father told me a number of times through the years and included in genealogical notes for me is that his great-grandmother (the mother of Anderson Polk Paden) was Native American. When I was young, he told me a story about his great-grandmother taking a train to register as a member of the Cherokee Nation. Something happened to delay the train - I can't remember what now - and, as a consequence, she missed the registration deadline, which meant that she and her descendants lost the many benefits of being members of a wealthy tribe. The coda to this story is that my brother had a DNA test that showed no trace of Native American ancestry. DNA tests are notoriously inaccurate, but so is human memory, and family stories often are as much about embellishment as accuracy. Make what you will of this bit of family history.



Mae Portwood (second from left) and her sisters, 1968.

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Because Grandmother Mae's father had married five times, she grew up with a brother, a sister, four half-brothers, two half-sisters and other assorted relatives. Tom, Dora, Juna Paden Butts (her sister), Eva Paden Naylor (her half-sister) and Genevieve Welch Harrison (Dora's daughter) were always a part of my dad's life, and they were around when my family came to visit. The photo on the previous page shows the sisters together when Mae was 66 (from left): Eva, Mae, Dora and Juna.



Tom Paden in ad for Boatrights' grocery store contest.

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When Grandmother Mae and Uncle Tom moved to Vinita, Mae started out working at a dry cleaning business. During WWII, she managed a Montgomery Ward catalog shop. Later, she worked in clothing stores, first at Burden Pyeatt, then at Thomason & Son, until she retired, according to my father. Mae had a 10th-grade education, which was as far as her school went.

Uncle Tom worked at Boatrights grocery store in Vinita. I don't think I ever saw him without a cigar dangling out of his mouth, and his manner was as gruff as the photos of him would lead you to believe. Uncle Tom was married in his youth, but his wife, Myrtle, had been committed to an "insane asylum," according to my father, by the time he and Mae joined Uncle Tom in Vinita. Norm didn't know what became of Myrtle, although I have a photograph of her when she was older. In any case, Uncle Tom never re-married.



Tom and Myrtle (Younger) Paden.

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My father said that during his childhood, he and Grandmother Mae used to go to Aunt Dora and Uncle Bill's farm during the summer. It was a great experience for him as a kid although there was no indoor plumbing, so water had to be brought in from a well. Cooking was done on a wood stove. Clothes were washed in a "boiler" of hot, soapy water on the wood stove, then rinsed in clear water on the wood stove, manually wrung dry and hung out to dry. The family made their own soap from cooking fat, stove wood ash and lye.

Grandmother Mae was a kind person and was always in good spirits. She was an active member of her church, and the Pyrex dishes that I inherited from her had her name taped to the bottom, because she was always taking casseroles to gatherings and to friends in need. She, her women friends and her sisters would go on tour bus trips in the area. She even rode a bus to New Orleans once to visit my family.

When my family came back from Venezuela to spend our annual, two-month vacation in the U.S., we would spend a month with Grandmother Mae and Uncle Tom in Vinita. Typically, we would fly into Tulsa, and then take the train to Vinita. My mother tells the story of the first time I rode the train, probably at age four. After getting on the train, I was restless in my seat and kept squirming about. When my mother finally asked me: What is the matter? I answered: Where is the seatbelt? I had only flown on

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planes, and everyone always made a big deal of wearing your seatbelt on planes. According to my brother, one year my father bought a Buick, probably from a friend who had a car lot in Vinita. The Buick had an automatic transmission and air conditioning, which was a big deal back in the 1960s.

Visiting my Grandmother Mae was the best part of our summer vacations for me. Mae and Tom had a big house with a grass yard, a porch and a swing. Mae taught me how to shuck peas, even though cooking with a young child was probably incredibly inefficient. I chased fireflies at night, which was a marvelous novelty for me. I even made a friend in the neighborhood whom I played with for a couple of trips in a row.



Grandmother Mae and Uncle Tom's house on Delaware Street.

As I grew up, went to college and even married, Grandmother Mae and I corresponded through the years. She wrote me lovely

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three- and four-page letters that usually began “Hello darling,” and she asked about my (and later Mark’s) life and commented about the things I’d written to her.

Even though Vinita has a total footprint of less than six square miles, Mae always owned a car. (At some point, she regularly drove her sisters the 30 miles to Miami to visit a friend who had moved into a nursing home.) After we transferred back to the U.S., my father told Mae that whenever she wanted to buy a new car, she should find out what the dealership would give her for her old car in a trade, and he would buy her old car from her. Of course, she maintained her cars well, and the mileage that she put on her cars even in a decade was negligible.



Grandmother Mae playing the organ at home.

My father bought her '49 Plymouth for my brother when we moved back to the States. When she was ready to buy a '79 Dodge, my father bought her '64 Dodge for me for my senior year in college, when I lived off campus. Mark and I drove that Dodge across the country from Memphis to Tucson, and we kept it until it died at around 100,000 miles. We decided not to rebuild the engine since the car didn't have air conditioning. We sold it for \$100 to a friend who wanted to rebuild it, and later Mark used to see the car - its bumper emblazoned with parking-permit stickers from the universities I'd attended - in the parking lot near where he worked. When Grandmother Mae died in 1986, my father gave me her '79 Dodge.

Uncle Tom died in 1968. I don't remember the details because I was only 11, but we had just moved back to the United States and were still living in an apartment while my mother was house hunting. My father went to Uncle Tom's funeral alone.

Grandmother Mae was something of a packrat. Fortunately, she had moved into a smaller house by the time she died. Mark and I went to Vinita to help my parents go through her things. She had eight sets of dishware, not china, and I brought home her salmon-pink "Woodfield Coral" set of dishware from Steubenville. It wasn't particularly expensive, but I liked the unusual, leaf-shaped plates and the "tea sets" that combined a teacup with a saucer large enough to hold the cup and a dessert. I

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couldn't imagine keeping Mae's 1935 Manchester "American Beauty" silverware for myself, but I hoped that someday it would find a home. Probably 15 years later, I gave it to my nephew's wife, Barbara Stewart Portwood. Mark and I also brought home some other unusual kitchen things, including a china hot-chocolate set (something I'd never seen before), a china tea set stamped "Made in Occupied Japan" and three vintage standing lamps. Of course, there were boxes of photographs. We managed to fit it all in her '79 Dodge that we drove back to Tucson.

My paternal grandfather, Silas Ogden Portwood, was the son of Mary Dell Waglay and Fred Lee Portwood. Silas was born in Oklahoma although I don't know the city of his birth or anything about his childhood. I do know that he enlisted as a non-commissioned officer in the U.S. Army on Dec. 19, 1917. On his enlistment papers, he said that he was 18 and had experience as a chauffeur mechanic. He was honorably discharged on Feb. 24, 1919. Although his enlistment paper notes his character as "excellent," he apparently lied about his age so that he would be old enough to qualify for the military (age 18 rather than 16). His gravestone, which was provided by the military, lists his birthdate as Nov. 20, 1899, but his death certificate, which was filed by his mother, lists his birth year as 1901.

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My dad only saw his father once in his life when he was a toddler in Greenville, Texas although they corresponded during WWII. Silas fought in Sicily, Italy and Sardinia. He retired as a corporal from the 437 Army Air Force Bomb Squad. When my grandmother died, I found two photographs of Silas among her belongings.



The grandfather I never knew, Silas Ogden Portwood.

A decade after my father died, I began organizing all of the photographs that I had inherited from my maternal and paternal relatives. Fortunately, through my online research to create a photo book, I met Donald Paden, a paternal fourth cousin who had developed in-depth genealogies for my paternal family lines

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for his website padenfamily.org. He was delighted to hear from me since he had little information about my side of the family, and he immediately set off researching more. Donald discovered that after divorcing my grandmother, Silas had married Imogene Blair, and they had two sons, Fredrick Charles and Dean Kendall Portwood. So my father had two half-brothers he never knew existed. They even lived in New Orleans at one time, although much earlier than my family did. According to his death certificate, Silas was divorced from his second wife by the time he died in 1948, on his birthday in Fort Worth at age 47.

Not politics as usual



Every year when I was working on my bachelor's degree at Southwestern at Memphis, I would come back and spend my summers in New Orleans with my parents. I don't know how I found my first job at Kelly Girls (Kelly Services, as it is now known), but doing temp office work made sense, and that's what I did every summer in New Orleans. I started out as a "clerk" at Kelly, since my typing speed wasn't that great. For my first job, I went out to UPS with about 20 other temps, and we spent eight hours that day flipping through driver's logs looking for some detail; I've forgotten what after 50 years. The next day, another woman and I went out and finished the job. The third day, UPS called Kelly and asked about hiring me from the agency, which would have required a substantial fee for UPS. Apparently, I was much faster at reviewing driver's logs than anyone else. Of course, I was interested in getting a college degree rather than an entry-level job at UPS, so I turned down the offer.

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After that, I was always at the top of the temp list to get available jobs, so I would go out to different office jobs every few days. The first thing that I did at the end of day was to stop off at the restroom and strip off my pantyhose before I stepped out into the sweltering New Orleans heat. In the South in the '70s, the required dress code for women in office jobs called for dresses, heels and hose. As my typing skills improved, I moved up in job titles and pay from "clerk" to "clerk-typist" to "typist," etc. Finally, one company just kept me on for the rest of the summer and told me to come back to them the next summer, and they would pay me a higher salary than Kelly did. So I switched to an administrative position with them for a summer, although I did have to go back to Kelly later. I had friends who worked in the hospitality industry, which was more lucrative, but I tried working in a bar once. After having my paycheck docked when someone knocked a tray of drinks all over me in a disco, and then a table of customers skipped on a bill, I decided that Kelly's pay was enough for me. (When I started working in 1975, I made minimum wage: \$2.65/hour.)

The summer after my junior year, my college roommate Serena came back to New Orleans with me, and instead of living with my parents out in the suburbs as usual, she and I got an apartment that we shared with another roommate in Uptown New Orleans. When we first looked at the apartment, I told Serena that it

wouldn't work because the apartment was cooled with room air conditioners, and the second, tiny bedroom had no A/C. Serena said that she would be fine there, because she was from St. Louis, and she was used to hot, humid summers. I told her that St. Louis was not New Orleans, but she insisted it would be worth it for the location and rent. She slept in her bedroom the first night, and then she spent the rest of the summer sleeping on the floor of my bedroom.

I don't remember why Serena knew how to cook, but she did. Although she had worked in restaurants, she worked in the front of the house as a server, not in the kitchen. Having grown up with a maid and then my father as the primary cook, I didn't know a thing about cooking, but Serena taught me all of the basics and then some that summer. (A few years later, when Mark came to visit me in Greensboro, N.C., I taught him how to cook. At the time, it was fun, and when we started living together, it was a foundation of our commitment to shared household responsibilities.)

On Fridays, Serena and I would go out to a local bar that gave away free oysters in the shell and free beer until the keg ran out. I would get a beer, put quarters on the pool table, and generally hold the table all evening. The reason is that we had a pool table at home, and my mother had given me a specialty cue stick. Plus, I used to play pool regularly at Southwestern's Student Union

with a friend. When I finished playing pool, Serena and I would go and sit on the bar's steps, drink beer and eat raw oysters. Serena also was a pro at oyster shucking. Little did I know at the time, that my summer in New Orleans wasn't just my first chance to live on my own and to have a taste of the girls'-night-out lifestyle that I would never repeat, but it planted the seed for political activism in my life.

Somehow I heard about a meeting for the New Orleans Chapter of the National Organization of Women (NOW) that summer. I don't know what prompted me to go to the meeting nor do I remember how I heard about it. I think Serena went with me once. The small group was in the early stages of planning a rally to protest the wage disparity between American men and women. I was appalled to discover, that in the summer of 1977, on the average, women made only 50% as much money as men did in the United States. The group talked about many feminist issues, but most of the time was taken up with the nitty gritty of planning an event: getting a city permit, setting up speakers, etc. In a move that would set the pattern for my political activism to come, I wrote the press release for the event and worked on the publicity. Years later, I would be an experienced writer with press contacts, but at this point, I was an English major, which meant that I had more facility with writing than anyone else in the room.

The NOW event came off smoothly not long before I had to go back to Memphis for my senior year in college. I don't know what I would have thought back then, when I was 20 years old, if I had known that in 2022 when I was 65 that women would be earning only 84% of what men earned. Almost worse than that is that women would have earned only 80% of what men earned in 2002, so we would gain only 4% in 20 years! Would my 20-year-old self have been able to write that press release if she knew what I know now? Will the wage gap close only another 4% in the next 20 years? The idea that I may not see it close completely in my lifetime is a dismal thought.

In the early 1980s, I became an ovo-lacto vegetarian. There wasn't a specific incident that prompted my decision to quit eating meat. I hadn't read Upton Sinclair's 1905 classic "The Jungle" or any of the exposés of the meat-packing industries that followed it in the next 70+ years. At some point, I simply realized that I wanted to respect all life, not just human life. I realized that I couldn't respect animals and feel compassion for them while still making them a part of my diet. Becoming a vegetarian was a personal, ethical choice, so I've never proselytized for vegetarianism or joined any vegetarian groups. Later I was surprised to discover that two of my friends became vegetarians just from being around me. At the time, I simply bought the "Moosewood Cookbook," and Mark and I started

keeping a vegetarian household. Soon we had an entire library of cookbooks by the Moosewood Restaurant and by Mollie Katzen, the author of the original “Moosewood Cookbook.”

Forty years later, it’s much easier to find vegetarian entrees in restaurants in Tucson, and even in Memphis, than it was in the early 1980s. Now in many restaurants, instead of my having to quiz the waiter about the details of how a dish is cooked, I can just look for the *vegan and *vegetarian codes on the menu. Vegetarianism and especially veganism have become politicized in the last few years when they have been promoted as actions that individuals can take and will need to take to deal with climate change by reducing one’s personal carbon footprint. Other people are talking about the health benefits of completely eliminating or reducing meat in their diets. I have watched vegetarianism go in and out of fashion through the decades, and I hope that this time, its popularity will keep growing for the welfare of the planet and the animals.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, as part of the second generation of feminists, I worked on issues that were more emotionally challenging and politically more radical than the American wage gap. For seven years, I was involved in the anti-rape movement in Tucson, doing readings, giving talks, presenting panels and more. It is a difficult issue, and most volunteers, like many professionals in social work and even law enforcement, don’t

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endure for an extended period.

In the 1990s, I joined Amnesty International USA, and participated in its letter-writing campaigns. AIUSA regularly would mail me case studies of people who had been jailed by authoritarian governments for their political beliefs, and I would write personal letters to those governments requesting the prisoners' release. As political action, it didn't have the rewards of being part of a group of like-minded people working on the same cause, but it was something meaningful that I could do on my own time in the midst of a busy schedule. Periodically, an AI-USA newsletter would report that one of the prisoners of conscience that it had adopted for a letter-writing campaign had been released, after months or even years of incarceration.



Tucson Women's March - Jan. 21, 2017.

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Through the years, I have participated in protests and rallies related to causes and issues that I support. On Jan. 21, 2017, the day after President Donald Trump was inaugurated, Mark and I joined approximately 10,000 Tucsonans and over five million people worldwide in the first Women's March to support gender equality, civil rights and other issues that were under assault at the time (and now). As friends and I discussed while we marched, it seemed unbelievable that we were having to defend again issues like abortion that we thought had been won definitively by the 1970s women's movement.



Protesting ban of people from Muslim nations entering the U.S.

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When I look back through my photos, I realize that 2017 was quite a year for protesting for me, as it was for many liberal and progressive Americans, because it was the first year of the first Trump presidency. On Jan. 31, I joined approximately 1,200 Tucsonans in protesting then-President Trump's executive order banning the entry of people from seven predominantly Muslim countries into the United States as a racist and prejudicial government policy. On April 29, I participated in the Tucson People's Climate March. The event, which was held after the first 100 days of Trump's tenure in the presidency, protested his administration's environmental policies. The national People's Climate March in D.C. drew an estimated 200,000 participants.



Tucson People's Climate March - April 29, 2017.

From the time I became an interior design student in 2002, I was interested in healthy and sustainable interior design. I joined the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC), a nonprofit organization that advocates for sustainable buildings, especially energy-efficient buildings. USGBC developed the now widely accepted Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program that certifies buildings at four different grades based on the building's environmental qualities (energy efficiency, low water use, etc.). While American public policy is directed largely toward making vehicles more energy efficient, 40% of the carbon dioxide that contributes to global warming is generated by building construction. As an interior designer, I became certified as a LEED Accredited Professional with a specialty in Interior Design and Construction (LEED AP ID+C), which gave me the professional credentials to work on LEED-certified buildings. Unfortunately, I never had the chance to do so since my client base was residential rather than commercial, but learning more about sustainable design also helped with my green home designs.

I became involved with the Sonoran Branch of the Arizona Chapter of USGBC and joined its Communications Committee. Predictably, I started writing the press releases for the branch's regular speaker presentations and its tours of LEED-certified buildings that were geared toward getting professionals and the

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public interested and educated in the sustainably built environment. We toured several LEED schools, Tucson's new Sun Link Streetcar Operations and Maintenance Facility, the new San Xavier Administrative Center on the Tohono O'Odham Nation, a housing development designed specifically for low-income seniors raising their grandchildren and more. Of course, our most popular tour featured the new Tucson Police Department Forensic Laboratory because in addition to seeing the building's rainwater harvesting, its low-flow plumbing fixtures and other LEED features, participants got to tour almost all of the labs where scientists dealt with latent fingerprints, toxicology, arson, drugs and all types of forensics. After a few years, I was elected to the branch's Governing Council (aka the board of directors) and served for four years.



USBGC tour of the new Sun Link Streetcar Facility, 2014.

Unfortunately, our local branch had a difference of opinion with the Arizona state chapter about how the branch should be run. Then the Arizona chapter had a difference of opinion with the national office about how the chapter should be run. When it became clear that all of the meetings and paperwork that I and the branch council had worked on had been a waste of time, I decided to leave USGBC. In a final bit of irony, the Arizona chapter awarded me its 2015 Volunteer of the Year Award. At the last minute, I decided not to go up to Phoenix for the annual meeting, so I missed the surprise award presentation and my Governing Council chair's speech about me at the ceremony.

During the time that I was running my interior design firm Greener Lives and volunteering with USGBC, I also volunteered with Habitat for Humanity and helped establish the related Habispaces program to improve the lives of low-income families by furnishing their new homes or by creating customized, furnished bedrooms for their children. (There are more details about the programs in "My second career as an interior designer.") Two of the women heads of household who earned Habitat homes had come through the Emerge! local program for survivors of domestic violence, so this truly was a new beginning for them and their families.

I have kept in touch with one of the Habitat for Humanity mothers on Facebook and watched her two daughters grow up

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and attend college. One has graduated and is doing wonderfully with a job in social services. She even went to Washington, D.C. and was a spokesperson for a political organization where she volunteers. The other daughter is in college and doing well. It seems a small thing to touch the lives of nine people in three families, yet it also feels more quantifiable than writing press releases for an organization tied to climate change.



Habispaces bedroom for a boy who was a UA basketball fan.

It's easy to remember the frustration at the end of my tenure with USGBC and to forget the good things that we did, like the September day when I went out with my photographer friend Georgette Rosberg to cover Borton Elementary Magnet School and Holladay Elementary Magnet School, two local schools that were participating in USGBC's global 2015 Green Apple Day of Service (GADS). The kids, parents and teachers were working on

green projects at their schools. Borton was one of the 18 schools in Arizona that had received \$500 grants from USGBC-Arizona for activities like planting a heritage fruit orchard.

George took some great photos of the kids, their parents and the schools' staff; I wrote a blog entry to accompany the photos for USGBC's website. I trust that a bunch of kids at 18 schools across Arizona had experiences that taught them something meaningful about the environment, not just on Green Apple Day but through longer, extended programs - all thanks to USGBC-Arizona's grants. Of course, I had written a press release about the Green Apple Day of Service before it happened, in hopes of getting the mainstream media to come out and tour the schools like George and I did.



A girl and her dad plant a garden at Holloday School for GADS.

Many of my friends who are environmentalists think that climate change is the most important issue in the arena of political activism, and that it must be addressed first so that, as human beings, we have a future. Others think we should be addressing our world's current problems - sexism, racism, homelessness, poverty, health care and more - to improve the quality of people's lives. Still others are devoted to creating a more livable world and a better future by supporting the arts and education. I think people should follow their passions because all of these things matter, and what we truly need are more people with the motivation to improve our communities, our world and our future.

As for me, I have worked both to improve individual lives and my community, and I have tried to change my nation as part of changing the world. These efforts all have had their satisfactions and their frustrations. It's easy to write a check to the food bank, and to buy toys at Christmas for families in the domestic-violence shelter. I do both, but I know that I need to do more. I have been reading directories of nonprofit organizations that need volunteers, but I haven't been able to find the right place.

For now, I'm doing something that I think truly matters: working to get out the vote in the November presidential election. I've received 200 postcards from the Progressive

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Turnout Project to mail to registered Democratic voters in Arizona, which is considered a swing state, as reminders for them to vote in the election on Nov. 5, 2024. Statistically, receiving handwritten postcards has been shown to be as effective as talking to canvassers at one's front door. Three of my friends took 75 of the postcards; I wrote 75 of them, and I gave a "Postcard Party" to finish them off. I bought most of the stamps at 56 cents a pop. I don't want to think about how many protest marches I might have to attend if former President Trump gets re-elected and pursues some of the policies that he is promoting.

When 2025 rolls around, I will find another place to volunteer, because I believe that changing the world can mean anything and everything from walking a protest line to painting a bedroom mural for a child in a low-income family.

Postscript: Because Donald Trump won the 2024 U.S. presidential election, the U.S. is roiling with protests over his domestic and foreign policies, which are even more extreme than I expected, than anyone expected, I think. To say that his ever-changing tariffs on foreign goods and his searing cuts to domestic programs are creating economic turmoil at home and abroad is an understatement. His immigration policies and the practices they have engendered have worried even legal immigrants, and rightfully so, since people literally are being

disappeared from the streets and, in some cases, sent off to barbaric prisons abroad, as if America were an authoritarian state. The courts are becoming the last refuge of justice in the United States. As a sign I saw at a protest last week said: “Make Orwell fiction again.” Indeed.

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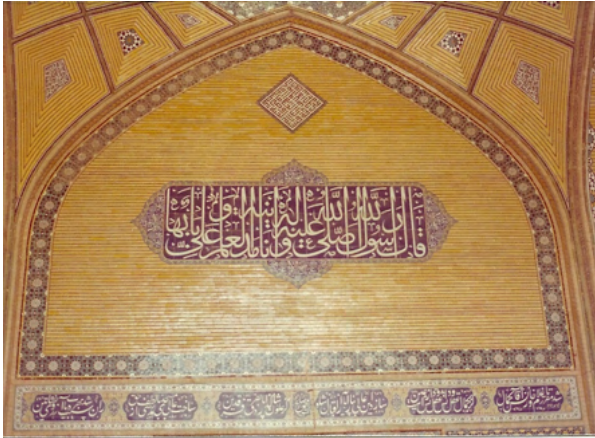
Behind the veil in Iran



After the first time, I could always tell what was coming. Everyone around me would be conversing in Persian, and I would have the benign expression of someone listening politely to words she cannot understand. Suddenly, the room would fall silent, and everyone would begin smiling expectantly at me. Once again, the father of the Iranian family with whom I was staying would explain that his relatives or friends were eager to hear my recitation. And so I would recite the first verse of the Quran in Arabic, beginning “Bismi ‘Llahi ‘r-rahmani ‘r-rahim” (In the name of God, the most merciful, the most compassionate).

Throughout most of the Muslim world, Arabic is the language of divinity to be used for all religious rites, much as Latin once was used worldwide in the Roman Catholic Church. In Islam, the purer one’s accent in reciting holy texts in Arabic, the more grace one is awarded in heaven. I don’t remember how my

Persian-speaking family discovered I had memorized the opening of the Quran while I was studying classical Arabic, but my first recitation was for their grandfather, who was revered as a devout Muslim. He prompted me when my memory faltered, and on that occasion, my recitation was clearly considered an act of reverence and piety. Later, when the neighbors were visiting, I may have been more of a sideshow marvel: a foreigner who knew the Quran and had a good Arabic accent to boot.



Tilework featuring Arabic texts on an Isfahan school or mosque.

Yet the father often asked me to read the Quran aloud at night to his family for inspiration and to improve their pronunciation. Since Arabic is perfectly phonetical, I read many chapters that I could not understand, that they could not understand, but our understanding did not seem to matter. What mattered was the simple enunciation of the words of Allah spoken to the Prophet

Muhammad through the Archangel Gabriel. This was one of the many things that made me wonder about the places where people find meaning in their lives. Why should my two years of college Arabic have any value in heaven in the light of these people's ardent beliefs? And why did I lose my own faith in Iran, a country I found spiritually moving? Why was it always easier for me to find and preserve a sense of meaning in my life when I was away from home, preferably in a foreign country?

It was the fall of 1976, and I was one of 33 students traveling through the Middle, Near and Far East under the auspices of the International School of America's International Honors Program, which that year was being led by Huston Smith, a prominent scholar of comparative religious studies.

I arrived in Iran just over two years before the 1979 Revolution that overthrew the Pahlavi dynasty, and the power of Muhammad Riza Shah Pahlavi was omnipresent. Every public building, every bank, every store, every window that did not front a personal residence bore two posters: one of the Shah, and one of either his wife or his son. The Shah and his heir-apparent were dressed in full military regalia. His wife wore a formal evening gown, a testament to the attempted outlawing of the traditional veil by the Shah's father, the first ruler of the short-lived Pahlavi dynasty. The posters created a sense of the Shah's ever-watchful eye, and I could not persuade anyone to

talk about their ruler or their nation's politics. Three years after I was in Tehran, the American Embassy was seized.

I spent most of my five weeks in Iran living in the holy city of Isfahan where another student and I stayed with an Iranian family in their home. The 35-year-old mechanical engineer, who spoke English, and his 30-year-old wife had two children: a 10-year-old boy and a five-year-old girl. The husband's older brother, sister-in-law and their 14-year-old daughter also were living in the house temporarily while their own house was being built down the street.

In the morning, when the two men left the house, both women shed their veils like butterflies abandoning their cocoons. Beneath the veils, they wore polyester blouses and slacks reminiscent of the casual clothing middle-aged women wore in the 1960s in the United States. Whenever someone entered the front door, the women of the house would cast nervously about to see which man had returned. If only one brother entered, then his sister-in-law would don her veil immediately. His wife remained unveiled, a symbol of their intimate and marriage-sanctioned state. When both men were in the house, both women wore their veils. The girl was in the throes of adolescent modesty and wore her veil most of the time, even around her own father. In a less conventional family or in a more insular home with only the woman's husband, father or brothers

present, this shuffling of veils would not have been necessary. In retrospect, I realized my Iranian foster family was quite conservative.



Women in chudors walking to a pilgrimage site near Isfahan.

The Iranian veil or “chudor” is perhaps the most impractical, cumbersome garment known to womankind. It is quite simply a four-foot by eight-foot rectangle of cloth with seamed edges, and wearing it is rather like clutching a sheet around oneself. The rectangle size may be altered somewhat for very tall or short women. In pre-revolutionary times, the chudor was made of various types of light fabric in everything from solid black to bright, floral patterns. Women placed the center of one of the eight-foot edges across their forehead. One end was then brought across the body and tucked under the opposite arm. The second end was held across either the bridge of the nose or the

chest, depending on a woman's age, modesty and circumstances. No safety pins, clips or other fasteners were used, and the chudor was worn over a full set of clothing. When women had to carry both children and packages, they held the second end of the veil with their teeth.

In 1936, when Riza Shah Pahlavi outlawed the veiling of women, he ordered his soldiers to pull the coverings off women wearing them in the streets. As a consequence, many religious women would not leave their houses for fear of being defiled. The second (and, to date, the last) Pahlavi Shah later compromised and made the wearing of the chudor voluntary. In pre-revolutionary Tehran, the capital city, some Iranian women wore Western clothes on the street rather than chudors, but in the more traditional city of Isfahan, almost all Iranian women wore chudors outside their homes – for protection if for nothing else. Just inside the gate of the University of Isfahan, most women would stop, pull their chudors from their bags, and cover themselves before setting foot outside the campus. These women had abandoned the chudor in their professional and personal lives, bit by bit, going from a full veil to a partial veil to a head covering to Western clothing entirely. Yet on the street, being a woman in Western clothes meant having one's bodily parts groped by anonymous men in crowds on a daily basis.

Iranian men do not stare pointedly at women as they do in other Middle Eastern countries. The keeping of women in their place is both more insidious and more violent. Even teenage and pre-teen boys on bicycles quite commonly grab women's bodies as they ride past. Once a boy grabbed my breast as I stood in front of the family house waiting for the doorbell to be answered. After weeks of being assaulted on the street, I reacted without thinking and swung my arm out, knocking him from his bicycle to my feet. I wanted to kick him again and again, to make him pay – for the humiliation, the violation. Instead, four-letter words poured out of my mouth in a language his eyes interpreted perfectly. Now he was the small, frightened animal, and I was the predator. He scrambled to his feet, jumped on his bicycle and fell off, trying to get away from me.

Another day, I was sitting alone in a park, writing a poem. Two Iranian soldiers talking Persian (or Farsi, as it is known) kept offering me cigarettes and candy. I ignored them, so they finally left. They returned later, at dusk, just as I was finishing my poem. When I walked away, one of the soldiers grabbed my body. I turned and punched the stomach of one – his eyes widened with shock. The other soldier already was running away, like a child fleeing a bad deed. When I saw the empty park, the distant street, fear washed over me. I whispered to myself, "Walk quickly, don't run, walk quickly, don't run," as my eyes swept

the trees, the benches, looking for someone, anyone, and my feet followed the sidewalk as though it were the path to heaven.



Tiling on an Isfahan mosque or school.

Outlawing the chudor was one of Riza Shah's most symbolic and potent acts directed towards modernizing and westernizing Iran. As an emblem of women's roles in Iranian culture, the chudor points to their powerlessness and to their status as essentially the property of men. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's reinstatement of laws requiring all women to wear veils mandated a return to claustrophobic ways and roles for women. If a woman did not wear a chudor on the street when Khomeini first came to power, she risked having acid sprayed in her face. Sexual assault and acid both point to a society struggling to hold women in a very old place.

Once I had to wear a chudor myself at a Sufi prayer meeting. Sufism is the mystical branch of Islam, yet in Sufism, being a mystic does not necessarily mean being a hermit in the desert. In contemporary Iran, Sufism is a codified and respected sect, complete with the equivalent of the Christian monastery – the “khaniqah.” The khaniqah provides the private quarters and gathering place for local Sufis. One evening, through a special dispensation of the Sufi master, our entire student group was able to attend a prayer meeting in the khaniqah. Normally, such gatherings are not open to outsiders or to non-believers. The men in the group were seated in the large meeting room while the women were ushered into a small, triangular room – a corner in a world tailored to men. We women were all wearing chudors. Mine was a bright blue cloth that kept slipping down my hair as I sat cross-legged on a floor covered with many Persian carpets laid one upon the other like a patchwork quilt.

Several Iranian women in black veils entered the room and joined us on the floor. One was a wizened old woman, slumped under the weight of her years. A younger woman had thin, plucked eyebrows, and her eyelashes were heavy with mascara under her black veil. Her gloved hands fingered the Muslim equivalent of rosary beads as her voice murmured the 99 names of Allah. The one-hundredth name is unknowable and unspeakable, a perfection beyond human understanding. Persian

poetry filled the room from a speaker overhead. When the door opened, incense wafted in from the men's meeting room, and the inevitable round of tea and food arrived. We ate and drank as if this were an ordinary social gathering rather than a meeting place for mystics. Over the speaker, I heard the word "Ali" ring out, the name of the martyr whose death led to the founding of the Muslim Shi'ite sect predominant in Iran. Suddenly, all the women sobbed. The young woman put out her cigarette. For an instant, her hands flashed garish red nails before she retreated, softly sniffing, into her cocoon of black cloth.

Later, the lights went out, and above the doorway, a stained-glass cauldron blazed blue: the symbol of this Sufi order. Then the light beyond the stained glass went out. We were in pitch black as the chanting began and voices from the speaker filled the small room. Over and over, the invocation welled up in Arabic, louder and stronger: "La illaha illa 'Llah" (There is no god but God). A male voice would rise to an ecstatic pitch, then fade, only to rise again with a dying fall – "Allah." As the chanting wore down, I heard a woman sobbing, then another, until anguish had been wrenched from every corner of that tiny room. When the lights were turned on, I, like the other women, drew my veil close about my body and across my face as though a sheer cloth could hide my sense of vulnerability. Later, I learned that while the women were wailing, seated and confined within

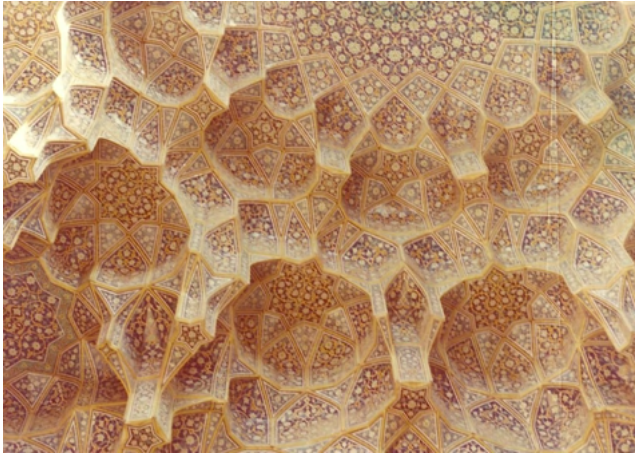
their individual veils, the men were chanting, standing, swooning, going into ecstasy in the larger meeting room. This was the heart of the nation two Pahlavi Shahs had spent half a century trying to secularize.



Isfahan's Luftallah Mosque, which was built in 1603.

On the streets this heart was bared in the centuries of religious art available seemingly everywhere. Isfahan's cityscape was defined by the turquoise and gold domes of 16th-century Safawid mosques. Their tiling is patterned in abstract, floral, geometric and calligraphic designs; icons depicting Allah, Muhammad or any religious event or figure are sacrilegious in Islam. On the entrance portal to the Luftallah Mosque, tiling placed on honeycomb shapes gives the ceiling an amazing three-dimensional quality as though this metaphoric sky might grow fingers, reach down and touch an outstretched human

hand. Inside the mosque, floral designs in concentric patterns wind outward from the domes' central cores like unimaginable ivy, each tiny line connected to another, each overwhelming pattern created as a tribute to Allah's greatness.



Three-dimensional, honeycomb tiling on the Luftallah Mosque.

From within, Iranian mosques are large, airy, open spaces so that many worshippers can place their individual prayer rugs on the floor oriented toward Mecca for praying. Five times a day, from the minarets and the radio towers, muezzins call the faithful to prayer. Five times a day, devout Muslims pull out their prayer rugs, kneel, prostrate themselves, repeat the appropriate religious texts and pray - wherever they find themselves. Men who can pray in a mosque do. Women, for reasons of modesty, rarely pray in public. All men are expected to go to a mosque for the communal, midday prayer on Friday, the Muslim holy day.

Between the five calls to prayer, the mosques are quiet, cool, often empty places, perfect for meditation and reflection. In Iran, unlike Morocco and some other Muslim countries, the mosques historically have been open to outsiders, whether their interests were in the religion or the architecture. I spent many undisturbed hours in Isfahan's mosques peering at the tiling, thinking and writing poetry.

Although I had written a few poems in high school and college, it was in Isfahan that I wrote the first string of poems born from the world I saw around me, rather than from formal exercises or my longing to be a poet. Suddenly, the world was full of poems, of scenes waiting to be written, from an old, heavily jowled woman sitting slumped beneath her veil in a hospital waiting room to conches scattered on the coastline of the Caspian Sea.

Perhaps, I was seeing everything in the light of poetry, but "Chehel Sotoun" (Palace of the 40 Pillars) seemed a tribute to the "Rubáiyát" and the other Persian poetry I had read. Built by Shah Abbas II as a king's party pavilion in the 17th century, the Isfahan palace was being restored in 1976 as a museum of Persian art. Here the reflection of reality and reality itself are one: The 40 columns are the actual 20 wooden columns and their 20 reflections mirrored in a pool in front of the palace.



The honeycombed, mirrored entry to Chehel Sotoun.

Above the palace doorway, inset within an immense archway, is a honeycomb of mirrors and tiles to reflect the reflection. At each corner of the pool are stone statues of four water bearers standing back to back. Each figure's hair is curled like Mary Tyler Moore's hairdo in the "Dick Van Dyke Show." His eyebrows grow out from the top of his stone nose, and his mouth sings a perfect "O," a spigot for water that did not flow that day. The heads of lions rest on the water bearers' shoulders like ferocious jugs.



Restored fresco of a couple at Chehel Sotoun.

Within the palace, the restored wonders of Persian painting on both a grand and an intimate scale peer out from behind a whitewashing administered by the Afghans during their 1722 occupation. Large historic frescoes depicting the life and deeds of the Safawid dynasty fill the upper portion of the walls. Beneath these are small genre paintings concerned with the traditional subjects of Persian poets and miniaturists. Here are the couples sharing Omar Khayyám's "a loaf of bread beneath the bough,/ A flask of wine, a book of verse – and thou." Here the young women shake their tambourines, and the young men bear the bounty of the hunt. The rituals of life are played out slowly beneath spreading trees and mountains whose rocks roil like ocean waves. This trip was my first chance to see serious art and architecture in person, and I admired and photographed painting after painting in the Palace. I cultivated a love of art

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that would lead to my vocation as a writer and art critic.



A photo of me at 19 at the Palace of the 40 Pillars in 1976.

When I look back at my photographs of Iran, I see a 19-year-old woman in an Izod shirt and jeans with a flannel shirt tied around her shoulders and her passport pouch protruding from her pants pocket. These are the first jeans she has owned, but when she returns to college in Memphis, she will abandon her tasteful dresses and wear floor-length, blue-jean skirts and tie colorful scarves around her hair. She will appear as she feels, an exotic returned to a world turned foreign in her absence.

She will remember these same feelings from the time she was 11 and moved back to the United States after a childhood spent in Venezuela. But for now she is posing, hand-on-hip, beside this waterless fountain of singing boys with lions' heads, and her smiling face looks young, incredibly young. Her cheeks seem

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almost pudgy with baby fat, but in reality it is 20 extra pounds accrued from eating delicious Iranian cookies every day as she walked back from classes to her Isfahan home. It will be years before she understands why she put on 20 pounds in two months, how she tried to disappear into her own slender flesh, to become invisible in streets filled with men's hands. She will drop those pounds without effort after she returns to the U.S.



Persepolis' ruins, a testament to grandeur and destruction.

Even now, I cannot imagine what it would mean to feel part of a culture dating back not just centuries but millennia, to be born in a country that is not an immigrant nation, to grow up in a world where people have lived in one place, generation after generation. Looking out over the ancient ruins of Persepolis, I was filled with a sense of wonder that any place whose foundations were laid in 518 B.C. could have survived to the 20th

century (and now to the 21st century).

Begun by Darius (who succeeded the son of Cyrus the Great), Persepolis was to be a celebratory capital of the Persian Empire. In 330 B.C., Alexander the Great invaded and burned the palace before it was completed. From the nearby hills, the panorama seems an ironic juxtaposition of logic and myth. The stone foundations of buildings and pillars form grids filled with perfectly placed circles. At both ends of the city, the Gate of Xerxes is flanked by two sets of enormous animal legs, the remains of monumental winged bulls, the guardians of 36-foot doorways. Their hooves are bigger than several human heads.

Elsewhere, a grouping of doorways and their lintels remain clustered together, and from a distance they look like a Stonehenge maze. Large, excavated sculptures of a two-headed lion and a two-headed horse with a bird's beak are straight out of mythology. From close up, two great staircases leading to the royal audience hall are covered with beautiful bas-reliefs.

A lion with tear-shaped eyes is biting a bull's hind quarters in an animal symbology related to the spring equinox. The stairs and the wall are lined with rows of meticulously carved soldiers and men from over 20 nations bearing tributes of goods and animals. Shields, daggers, spears, bulls, rams, pottery, goblets, miniature horses and more are all carried past exquisitely detailed cypress

trees, complete with cones and spindle-like leaves. Looking out across all of this, I wondered about the nature of human aspirations to grandeur and the matching compulsion to destroy the dreams of others.



The lion and bull, symbols of the spring equinox at Persepolis.

Since the time of Persepolis, one of the ways traditional, religious culture has been maintained within the cities of Iran is through the “zurkhanahs” (the houses of strength). While I had the good fortune to witness the ritualistic calisthenics of the zurkhanah, few Western writers have been able to explain or agree upon the significance of what I saw. Apparently, the zurkhanah dates to the time of Darius and the Zoroastrian religion. When Persia converted to Islam, the zurkhanah and its athletic warriors were entrusted with the protection and propagation of the new faith. Because of their religious context

and insular nature, the zurkhanahs fell from favor during the reign of the first Pahlavi Shah. However, they experienced a revival post-World War II and survived in a more secularized form. In 1976, there were over 100 zurkhanahs scattered throughout Iran. In keeping with the Shah's fears, zurkhanah members were said to have supported Khomeini and the revolution.



Master's booth at the zurkhanah in Isfahan.

The core of the zurkhanah I attended was a room covered with framed photographs of muscular men, past and present. It seemed a world no Iranian woman would ever enter, and I felt very much an outsider observing a cultural phenomenon. The master of the zurkhanah, who was wearing a sleeveless white T-shirt and an ankle-length red cloth wrapped about his loins, stood in a raised booth and pounded an incessant beat on a

drum. I sat with my fellow students and a few Iranian men around a sunken, central arena where the athletes or pahlavans gathered. Attired for the most part in red drapes (with and without white T-shirts), the athletes invoked the name of the martyr Ali upon entering the arena. They performed a series of weight-lifting exercises and calisthenics alone and en masse. Men of various ages raised and turned large, striped clubs above their heads. Watching their calm faces, I would never have guessed a pair of those clubs could weigh up to 90 pounds. Later, the men manipulated archery bows made of iron and strung with metal chains, weighing up to 100 pounds. Since the pahlavans no longer were responsible for the defense of the faith, their weaponry had turned symbolic.



Pahlavans perform with symbolic, iron weaponry.

In an exercise derived from the Sufi whirling dervishes, the pahlavans individually danced, jumped and spun (with their arms extended) in the arena while the other athletes clapped to the drum's beat. What I saw was a daily, practice session. For their public performances, the men bared their chests and wore the heavily embroidered leather breeches hung on the zurkhanah wall when not in service. The calligraphy in the tile work on the master's booth said "Allah," and a sense of religiosity beneath the physical practice permeated the air.

Religion was everywhere in Iran, and at the time, I didn't know why I lost my faith there. I only knew that I had come halfway around the world to study religion, but I no longer believed in any god. I couldn't live without a world view, without belief. So, poetry stepped in and offered me a way to speak when I needed someone to listen, a way to touch something beyond myself. Even though I had rejected a transcendent creator god, I felt the world itself was saturated with meaning like a white cloth dipped in a vat of dye to emerge a deep indigo. Writing poetry helped me to look closely at the world, to embrace my own experiences and to be transformed by them. "Making art in America is about saving one's soul," as Charles Simic writes.

One day as I was wandering through the market in Isfahan, I came upon the shop of a metal engraver and found a poem simply waiting to be written. Using only a hammer and nail, the

engraver created a typical Persian scene on a smooth, metal plate. He began with a quickly penciled outline. Then, as he tapped hammer to nail, a finely engraved silhouette appeared. Suddenly, a branch stretched out to support an elegantly plumed bird. Leaves emerged, without a sketch. From memory, he tapped out one side of a branch's leaves, only to work his way back, completing the leaves and the circle. A curved line or two were drawn, and mountains filled the distance. Buildings appeared, and then without warning, window after window opened and a crisscrossed dome filled the sky. A slender minaret finished the background. Returning to the outlined figures, the engraver found two lovers twined together. Their garments swirled inseparably until he patterned tiny, starred flowers on his robe and petaled flowers on hers.



Metal plate engraver in Shah Square in Isfahan.

The lovers were oblivious of the woman beside them who stroked her harp's new found strings. Beneath the tree crouched an old man. Face worn, mustache drooping, he stared at an earthenware jug, and his eyes cried out, "I came like water and like wind I go." Behind the harpist stood another turbaned man. His outstretched hand pointed toward the distant mosque, and his passionate eyes gazed on the scene before him. Like Khayyám's muezzin from the Tower of Darkness, he cried, "Fools! Your reward is neither here nor there!"

So much began in a photography class



I don't remember why I decided to take a photography class the second trimester of my senior year at Southwestern at Memphis, but it was probably because I had enjoyed using my new 35mm Pentax camera during my junior semester abroad. I photographed a Moussem (a festival of nomadic tribes) in the High Atlas Mountains and a wedding in Fez, Morocco; the beautiful mosques and the ruins of Persepolis in Iran; and the Taj Mahal and other architectural sites in India. I loved the photography class and the chance to learn about photographic techniques and darkroom skills as well as the history of photography. Of course, I didn't realize at the time that the 12-week class was setting the stage for the rest of my life. Six years later when I was in grad school at the University of Arizona, I used a paper that I wrote about a photographer as the writing sample that landed me my first job as an art reviewer for the university newspaper, the "Arizona Daily Wildcat." That

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student job led to my 20-year career as a freelance writer and art critic. Better yet - the photography class is where I met my husband.



My photo of Berber child brides at the Moussem, 1976.

The photography class at Southwestern was small, fewer than 10 students, and it was taught by Murray Riss, a photographer on the faculty at the Memphis Academy of Art. It was a good class, although I can't say that I remember much about the assignments or even my own photographs, with just a couple of exceptions. The curriculum combined practice, theory and history. In one trimester, we not only learned black-and-white photography, but we also made our way through Beaumont Newhall's classic text, "The History of Photography," covering the field from the discovery of photography through the mid-20th century, complete with slide lectures.

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One of my images from my college photography class, 1978.

There was only one darkroom, so at times, several students would be in the darkroom sharing the enlarger. I met a quiet sophomore named Mark Taylor in the class. He had thick, black hair that hung down to the middle of his back. He wore wire-rimmed glasses, blue jeans and no shoes, most of the time. It was 1978, but Mark was a belated child of the '60s who knew every rock 'n' roll song imaginable and was literate about classical music, too. I don't remember how we became friends. I probably started the conversation, because Mark was shy. He had an ironic wit and was fun to talk to because he had so many interests: popular culture, film, television, consciousness, art. At

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one point, I remember going to his mother's house to help him with an 8 mm film he was working on. When we first met at the beginning of the trimester, Mark was 18 and I was 20. I was dating someone else at the time, so Mark and I became friends because we enjoyed spending time together, talking about photography, art and literature.

I graduated that spring, spent the summer in Europe, came back and started working as a technical editor at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center, which turned out to be incredibly boring. By then, Mark and I had started dating.



One of Mark's nighttime Memphis photos, ca. 1978-1982.

Initially, Mark and I would photograph together, but I soon found that I could not both photograph and write poetry, because

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my poetry was so visual. If I saw something evocative in the world, I could either translate it into words or into a photographic image. So I stopped photographing and kept writing poetry since I had a longer history writing poetry and studying literature compared to my experience photographing and studying photography.



One of Mark's early portraits of me, Memphis, ca. 1979-1982.

Often, we would walk around the city at night, and Mark would take photographs while I would collect material for poems; sometimes I actually would write poems while we were walking. At the time, Mark and I had a similar sensibility about imagery, and we later talked about combining some of his photography and my poetry into a collection. Of course, photography became

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an important part of my life again when I became an art critic, and Mark and I have seen and discussed innumerable photography exhibitions over the past 46 years.

An intimate exchange of VOWS



Every afternoon, the monsoon rains would pour for about 30 minutes, but no one in Merida, Mexico seemed to pay much attention to the downpours. When the thunder struck and the water began falling, people simply dashed into the nearest open doorway and waited it out. One day Mark and I ducked into a neighborhood church where Mary, dressed in bridal clothes, stood behind the altar. Above her, Jesus was caught in the moment before the resurrection. He sat on a stone with his head in his bleeding hands. The stations of the cross circled the room above the walls' flaking paint. Angels hovered in the stained-glass dome overhead, and the air beneath was tinged the color of angels. I wanted to inhale the colored air, to breathe in belief like incense from the altar.

What I felt was the banality of daily life, even in this holy place. I watched the man carrying out empty flower vases and sweeping

the altar, the old woman in black kneeling, praying, rising, crossing herself, leaving. When the rain stopped and I rose to leave, I wanted to kneel, to acknowledge the sanctity of this place, but it felt somehow false to me. I simply left. Outside, I turned, blinking in the bright air, to talk to Mark, but he was not there. Then he walked out, his Cupid's bow lips smiling, his hazel eyes soft with compassion and love. He reached out and touched holy water to my forehead. In that moment, I felt blessed. I believed in the continuity of the human soul and its capacity for understanding. I believed in the essential goodness of the universe. I was glad Mark and I had come to Mexico to be married.

Although he was born in Memphis and had grown up in a conservative Southern world, racism and sexism were completely alien to him. He didn't even have a Southern accent although he had always lived in the South. Mark and I read Mircea Eliade and talked about mythos and meaning. Later, as I wound my way through faith and doubt and intellectual contemplation, Mark always seemed to have a foundation that never slipped, that had nothing to do with institutional doctrine or faith. When I gave up on gods, Mark's photography and mixed-media art became a sardonic critique of the hypocrisies of televangelism. While I speculated, Mark simply knew we had purpose. When I felt doubt, he understood that the questions

that dogged me for years ultimately didn't matter because we were here, living our lives together. (By that point, we had been together for two years.)

After several days in Merida, a comfortable city most tourists abandoned the day after they flew in, Mark and I decided to seek out the ocean in Progreso. We packed a change of clothes, swimsuits, toiletries and Mark's camera into a day pack and headed for the bus station. The first-class bus, which cost only a few more pesos than its poorer, second-class relative, looked brand new – a luxurious transport with large, comfortable seats and air conditioning. We arrived around noon, the siesta hour, so the town center was almost deserted. We didn't see any other foreigners around, and the few locals who were outdoors stared at us. There were a few Europeans on the beach but no North Americans. Normally, I liked being in places that are not overrun with tourists, but there was something disconcerting about Progreso.

After dinner, Mark and I walked along the beach. This was why we had come here, not so much to swim and cool off during the sweltering June days, but to walk on the beach. I had always been drawn to the ocean. I loved to walk beside it in the darkness, listening to it pound the shore. The ceaseless rhythm assured me; my personal frustrations seemed minuscule in the face of such relentless magnitude. Watching the tidal patterns sweeping

in and out, again and again, I felt at one with nature. I rarely had doubts about my place in the universe after spending even a couple of hours walking and sitting on the beach at night.

Usually, walking beside the ocean, I felt my self submerged in something greater than “me,” but I didn’t on that night in Progreso. Teenage boys were cruising in their cars and mopeds up and down the nearby road, honking and talking. Once again, Mark and I felt paranoid and distinctly unwelcome in this place. We left the beach to check into a motel and ended up in a room with pink walls turning green with fungus. It looked repulsively as soft as velvet. The outside bathroom was lit with a bare bulb and festooned with insects, including giant roaches. We stuck a chair under our room’s doorknob because of the pitiful lock, and we vowed to take the first bus out of town in the morning. Years later, when a Mexican friend from Merida told me her family always vacationed in Progreso, I gathered that Mexicans resented North Americans turning up at what they considered a vacation spot for locals.

We crossed the eastern end of the Yucatan Peninsula by bus and then by ferry to discover the perfect ocean experience on the Isla de Mujeres, the Island of Women. The charming town was only seven blocks long and four blocks wide. The brick streets gave it a European flavor. In fact, most of the tourists were Europeans because the Americans were staying across the bay in the

expensive, tour-group haven of Cancun. The Isla de Mujeres was more expensive than Merida. Of course, it was 1981, and for two graduate students, \$10 a night for a hotel room seemed expensive compared to \$7.50.

One day, we rented a moped to drive the five miles to the other end of the island in hopes of seeing the giant statues of women that we thought were the island's namesake. All we found was a crumbling temple to Ixchel, the Mayan fertility goddess. The temple was oriented toward the cardinal directions for astronomical observations. Later, I read that the giant statues were simply a rumor and the small figurines of deformed women that once filled the temple had long since been stolen. In 1988, Hurricane Gilbert almost leveled the temple remains.

At night we walked beyond the city to the north end of the island. What we found was the intersection of bay and ocean. To one side, the bay was a clear, calm pool where the edges of rocks were well defined, and we could see the fish swimming. Behind us, the ocean waves crashed in a white foam against the rocky shoreline. As the sun set and the stars came out, lightning illumined the entire sky like a light bulb hidden beneath the horizon, being flicked on and off, on and off.

Mark and I lay in each other's arms on the fine sand, kissing and staring at the sky. We recognized Hydra, but the other

constellations were from a cosmos we had never seen. Even the plane lights looked like stars keeping temporal time. This seemed a sacred place, not a church, but an axis for the universe that spun around us while paying us no heed. We thought we could lie there forever, but soon we were hungry and thirsty and sleepy, and we went back to the world we knew.

The Isla de Mujeres seemed the perfect, romantic place to get married, so we checked with the local registrar's office. The friendly woman there said yes, they could marry us; they married many foreigners. However, we would have to have a blood test and wait several days for the results. This didn't fit into our travel schedule, so we decided we would return early enough to Merida to allow time for blood tests and the license.

First, we visited the impressive ruins at Chichen Itza. We stayed at a small hotel in the nearby town of Pisté, and for several days, we rose early every morning to walk the mile to the site, which dated from the 5th to the 15th century. The Castillo, a perfect pyramid, rises in the center, a tribute to Mayan astronomy. The 91 steps up the temple's four sides are not even as deep as my feet are long. To climb to the top, I clasped a thick iron chain and scrambled up precariously. The number of stairs on the sides and top equal the 365 days in the Mayan calendar, while other architectural aspects total the number of months in a year and the number of years in a calendar round.



The Temple of the Warriors in Chichen Itza, 1981.

At the base of the stairs stands a sculpture of Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent god. During the March equinox, the shadows of the terraces fall on the staircase, and the serpent shadow slides down the stairs toward the sacred well. At the September equinox, the body of Quetzalcoatl rises upward. Scattered throughout the site are other serpents, their stone bodies separated into parts like beaded necklaces dropped and broken on the jungle ground. It seemed they could reunite and come to life. I watched Mark warily stroke one serpent's split, stone tongue as if it could at any moment sink its fangs into his wrist.

The Temple of the Warriors was built by the Toltecs. This tribe from central Mexico conquered the Maya at the end of the 10th century and made Chichen Itza their capital. In front of the

pyramid and off to one side are square columns topped with stylized faces. At the top of the staircase is a “chacmool” sculpture. A stone man lies on his lower back with his bent knees and shoulders pulled into a V shape. His head is twisted toward the front, so his staunch face could watch as the Toltec placed the heart of a sacrificed victim in the indented bowl in his stomach. Touching the inside of the bowl bleached clean by centuries of sun made my skin crawl. Elsewhere, reliefs of jaguars and eagles clutch human hearts in their hands, and rows of human skulls speak in scrolls. I wondered what they were saying. How would these dead instruct the living? The largest ball court in Mesoamerica is here, but no one is certain whether it was the game’s winners or the losers who became the next sacrificial victims.

Tour buses arrived at Chichen Itza daily. The tourists would pile out and roam about the site for an hour. The voices of guides in French, German, Spanish and English drifted across the open air. Mark and I sat atop one of the pyramids and stared out at the columns made soldiers, the edifice made calendar, the snakes whose bodies and tails pointed like compasses at the sky. Later, we walked to the sacred “cenote” (well of sacrifice). This circular well is almost 200 feet wide and opens in front of a rocky cliff inhabited by birds. Human sacrifices were fed to the rain god Chac here. At one time, 50 skeletons were exhumed from the

murky water. As I stood there, thinking of a god who required human blood, everything appeared to move in slow motion, except the birds. They flew in and out of their cliff nests, streaks of iridescent aqua sweeping through the sky, screaming like the voices of dead.

By the time we walked back from Chichen Itza to our hotel, the afternoon sun was blistering, the jungle humidity a cloak of dampness. After the first day, we had the good sense to bring an umbrella. By mid-afternoon, the thunder began. It actually shook the ground like an earthquake, and I understood why Chac, the rain god, reigned supreme. Mark and I would go back to our room and plop down on the bed to recover our energy while the small ceiling fan spun and shook like a helicopter preparing for take-off. The rain would torrent for about an hour, and then the jungle around this small enclave grew even more verdant.

Chichen has since acquired a sound and light show. Even in 1981, the site at Uxmal had a nighttime performance. Melodramatic music played, and colored lights flashed across the Great Pyramid and the House of the Magician while a loud, amplified voice told the site's history. It transformed Uxmal into a Disneyland show, a cartoon version of a mythical place. I wonder if it is possible to touch the wonder of Chichen Itza today. Are the ruins still ready to come alive beneath one's fingertips, or has

the place become another carnival ride?

While we had easily caught a first-class bus to Piste, leaving was not so simple. We had to stand out on the road and wait for a second-class bus with room for two passengers burdened with backpacks. Then, we stood for miles in a sweltering bus packed with people carrying chickens to market. In Merida, we walked back to the small hotel that served Mexican business people and vacationing families. The friendly management remembered us.

The first morning back in Merida we made our way across town, a 45-minute walk, to the Office of Civil Registry. Inside was a room with a long counter and desks identified by large signs in Spanish: BIRTHS, DEATHS, DIVORCES, MARRIAGES. We thought we had come to the right place, but the man beneath the MARRIAGES sign was not so sure. He didn't know if he could marry two U.S. citizens. We'd better come back tomorrow and talk to the woman who worked there, he told us.

On the walk back across town, we stopped in a jewelry store and found wedding rings, which made the delay seem auspicious. A silver band with two clasped hands was Mark's ring: an "anillo de palabra" (ring of word), the traditional Mexican wedding ring for men. There was no equivalent ring for women since contemporary Mexican women prefer diamond rings or wedding bands. For me, the "anillo de amistad" (friendship ring) was the

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perfect choice: Two abstracted hands (mounted on thin bands of silver) opened to reveal a heart hidden within. I was the woman who was learning, bit by bit, year by year, how to let someone inside to touch her shivering heart.



The postcard we sent my parents announcing our elopement.

The next day, we again made the walking trek across the city and presented ourselves to the woman seated beneath the MARRIAGES sign. She looked at us and our tourist cards and our

U.S. birth certificates. Finally, she asked in Spanish if the man had told us yesterday that she could marry us? I took a deep breath and said “Si” (yes). She shrugged her shoulders, pulled out a ledger-sized book, and began copying information from our papers onto one of the pages. There was no mention of blood tests or waiting periods.

She asked if we wanted the property each of us brought into the marriage to be community property or not, and she recorded our answer, “Si,” in black ink on our “Marriage Act.” She recorded our names, addresses, places of birth, nationalities, marriage statuses and ages. (I was 24 and Mark was 22.) Along the way, she asked her colleagues who walked by whether they would be witnesses. Some shook their heads, no, nervously. Two women and a man smiled indulgently at us, signed the form and recited their addresses for the woman to enter on our license. At one point, she asked me: “Do you of free and spontaneous will wish to be united in marriage?” I answered, “Si.” She repeated the question to Mark. I began to translate it into English for him, but Mark understood this was the moment and said “Si.” We signed the forms. The woman shook our hands and handed us a sheet with the number of the book in which our marriage was recorded. We paid the license fee, and we were married. (The next day it occurred to us that we should come back and get a certified copy of our 11” x 14” marriage certificate before we left

the country, which Mark did with his rudimentary Spanish; unfortunately, I had come down with the classic Mexican intestinal bug.)



Mark and I on our wedding night, June 30, 1981.

We emerged from the office building into the Yucatan sun, jubilant. We walked under a blooming bush, and Mark picked up a tiny, perfect flower and gave it to me. Along the way, we found a church and went inside. Sitting in the pews, we exchanged our rings and kissed. As we walked through the streets to our hotel, I translated and read aloud sections from the “Matrimonial Message” pamphlet published by the Office of Civil Registry. We laughed happily at the traditional messages about the marriage contract implying a man was obliged to provide materially for

the woman and children. This was not the kind of relationship or future that we envisioned for ourselves.

That night Mark set his camera up with a timer and took our wedding photograph. We are standing in each other's arms in front of the floral curtain in our hotel room. I am looking up into Mark's eyes with the tentativeness and expectancy of a child. He is smiling down at me with the quiet certainty that I am the woman he will love forever.

Halflife – writing poetry and more



I remember the exact moment when I first understood what poetry could be, what it could mean. My tenth-grade English class was being taught by the department head, Virginia Woods, who was filling in for a teacher who was having surgery. We were on page 12 of Laurence Perrine’s “Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry.” (Yes, I do still own “Sound and Sense” as well as all of my high-school and college literature textbooks.) As Mrs. Woods explicated Philip Booth’s “Was A Man,” this 18-line poem blossomed to suggest the entire world. It amazed me that bleeding blue blood connoted aristocracy and a cracked mirror suggested a double image and hence hypocrisy or a confused self-image. The notion of a poet saying one thing literally while suggesting several other intentions through image, metaphor and word choice felt revolutionary to me at age 15. I became a devoted student of serious literature rather than a reader of bestselling novels, romances and trite poetry.

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While I had written a poem here and there, I didn't start seriously writing poetry until I was 19 and traveling on my junior-year abroad program in college. Unlikely beginning though it was, my first poem was about riding a bus in the darkness to the Tehran airport. Of course, it was about much more than that, and I went on to write poems about the many amazing things that I saw and experienced in Iran: a traditional engraver, women at a hospital, the ruins of Persepolis, the Caspian Sea and more.

I set off on the International School of America's International Honors Program in my junior year because I was an international-studies major, but when I returned to Southwestern at Memphis, I set about taking enough literature courses in a year and a half to graduate with a major in English: Victorian Poetry and Prose, Chaucer, English Romantic Writers, Shakespeare, American Literature. It was a mad dash, but I loved reading and writing about literature. In fact, the only reason I could complete my degree with a new major so quickly is that during my freshman and sophomore years I had taken half a dozen literature classes as electives. My senior year I devoted my last electives to my new (second) love: photography.

The year was 1978. I graduated and embarked on my version of the grand European tour with only \$800, a backpack and my

former college roommate as a traveling companion. The trip started out fine, with time in London and a visit to my roommate's boyfriend who was studying in Cambridge. I was on my own in Paris while my roommate and her boyfriend met up with his parents in the city. We were set to reconnect in Pamplona for the running of the bulls. I arrived in the middle of rioting by the Basques. There were no available hotel rooms, the banks and restaurants were closed, and I was out of local currency. My friend turned up with her boyfriend on a motorcycle and promptly abandoned me because the running of the bulls had been cancelled after a death during the riots. She said she'd meet me in Athens, and to write to her in care of American Express.

I still have the rubber bullet that rolled under the park bench where I was sitting when a stream of rioters came running past me to get away from the police smoke grenades. One of them sat down beside me and said, "Let's talk English." It was clear that he did not want to be identified as one of the rioters. My roommate never did understand why leaving me alone in the middle of riots in a foreign country was a problem. Fortunately, a kind Spanish couple offered to share their tent with me and with another lost American. He and I ended up hitchhiking around Spain for a month - something I wouldn't do now. I never did make it to Athens, but my three-country, European tour was a

great experience, riots and all.

After I had changed my college major to English, I expected to follow the career path that many humanities majors do: Get a doctorate and become a university professor. Through a snafu with the recommendation forms that I needed to give to my college professors to apply to graduate school, I had to take a year off between college and graduate school. I worked long enough at a boring job as a technical editor to save some money and start writing my concept of the Great American Novel while doing some work as a freelance darkroom assistant on the side. (Twenty-five years ago, I dumped my draft of half of that novel in the recycle bin. Some juvenilia isn't worth saving.)

When I applied to graduate school the subsequent year, the only university that would give me financial aid without considering my father's income was the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. So that's where I went, even though it was at the bottom of my list of universities to attend. While I was there, I changed from their MA program in literature to their MFA program in creative writing, but I was dissatisfied with the creative writing program and left after the first semester. During the end of the semester crunch, I still found the time to fold 100 origami cranes as a Christmas present for Mark.

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I moved back to Memphis and rented an apartment in the winter of 1979. It was during that semester in Greensboro, where I initially knew no one, that I was able to stop using my childhood name, Pam, and switch to my given name, Pamela, which I felt suited me better.

I took the spring semester off from academia, and with the recommendation of a college friend, I got a job as an assistant manager at a regional chain bookstore. Because Mark graduated from high school at 17 as I did, he still had another year of Social Security support for his higher education if he went straight into graduate school. When he went to interview at the Communications Arts Department at Memphis State University (later the University of Memphis), I went to chat with the English Department there to see what they offered. Even though I hadn't applied to the department, they were eager for me to attend their master's program in literature and offered me a teaching assistantship. Mark enrolled in the Communication Arts' program and accepted a teaching assistantship, too. We rented a duplex together when the academic year began.

Teaching Modern European Literature and atheistic authors like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus in the Bible Belt definitely had its interest, but teaching Freshman Composition was an incredible grind. I used to wake up early on weekend mornings, get out of bed, brush my teeth, then get back in bed and grade

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papers until Mark woke up and we could have breakfast together. I gave up the assistantship after the first year and took on a variety of part-time jobs for my second year at MSU. I joined a women's writers group outside of my grad classes, and I soon discovered that I could design my own graduate degree.

I ended up graduating with an MA in individual studies with a specialty in creative writing. For my MA thesis, I wrote a manuscript of poems called "The Purple Air." Although I published half of the manuscript's poems in literary journals, I did not find a book publisher for the entire manuscript. One of my few regrets in my writing career is that I did not submit the manuscript to very many book competitions or publishers. The reason is that I soon became engrossed in writing a new series of poems with a completely different content and style.

In many ways, the manuscript's title poem captures what fascinated me most as a poet at that point in my life, which was how divorced we were from the world in our urban, 20th-century lives. Most poets who feel that sense of isolation go out into nature and seek a sense of union with it, but my poems tended to snatch bits of nature as I found them in the world around me. In this poem, as in a number of other poems in "The Purple Air," there is quite a bit of description of that other world and a desire to be subsumed by it.

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The Purple Air

Lightning flashes in the mirror.
Outside the air and the asphalt
are purple for an instant.
The screen patterns itself into water silk.
Seeing the screen, there is no world outside,
looking through to the world, no water silk.
I see the leaves on the ginkgo split,
part black, part green, each leaf shadows the next.
The leaves hardly move, their designs flicker.
Rain blows across the street towards me,
then streaks down the street's side in a creek.
Cars fly by driven by shadows.
The street flashes red and gold in their wake.
I step out on the porch.
I turn and see the water silk.
Then I breathe the purple air.

When I completed my MA in individual studies at MSU, Mark also completed his MA in communication arts. He wanted to pursue an MFA in photography. Georgia State University's program in Atlanta was very much in line with the kind of black-and-white landscape photography that he was doing, but we both wanted to leave the South, so he also applied to the University of Arizona's MFA program in photography. Since the

UA had one of the top MFA programs in creative writing in the nation, I decided to apply there, too. As it turned out, I was accepted to the program and offered a teaching assistantship that I didn't apply for and didn't really want, before Mark heard about his application. We decided that since we really wanted to move to the West, I accepted both the position in the creative writing program and the assistantship so that we would have an income when we arrived in this new place before we heard that Mark had not been accepted. We later discovered that the UA's photography department was staffed with faculty who specialized in postmodernist work and would have had no interest in photographers doing landscape work.

Fortunately, I was able to transfer enough credits from my MA at Memphis State to the University of Arizona so that I could go part-time and pay in-state tuition. I had the credits to graduate in two years, but to complete my MFA thesis (a poetry manuscript) I stayed on for a third year, which was tuition free, thanks to a fellowship that the creative writing program head secured for me. It took me three years to complete my degree, because I was writing a series of feminist poems for my thesis manuscript, and another set of poems that I submitted to my UA workshop classes for the standard scathing critiques.

When I read a selection of my feminist poems at the graduate student reading, only the women from my off-campus women's

writing group had heard them before. None of the MFA faculty said anything to me at the reading, although a visiting Irish poet came up to me and told me that he thought they were powerful poems. In the end, I felt lucky that my thesis committee of three male poetry faculty accepted my thesis and approved my graduation. Later, my MFA manuscript was accepted for publication by two publishers, both of which ultimately cancelled its publication. One small press closed down when one of the two principals became ill. The other nonprofit press didn't receive the expected grant to underwrite the publication. As a consequence, the book never saw print.

When I received my MFA in the spring of 1985, I was already a year into my career as a freelance writer and art critic. I gave up my teaching assistantship in freshman composition at the UA after the first semester because the schedule was lunatic. I was teaching two composition classes with 25 students each, and I had to grade 10 papers by each student, so I was grading 500 student papers per semester. I hardly had time to write the papers for my own graduate-level courses, let alone do any creative work like writing poetry.

I started working a variety of part-time student jobs, until in the spring of 1984, I became the art critic for the "Arizona Daily Wildcat," the UA student newspaper. I was writing two art exhibition reviews a week for the "Wildcat" when the "Tucson

Weekly,” the city’s new independent newspaper, opened. Based on my writing in the “Wildcat,” the editor solicited me to be the “Weekly’s” first art critic. I waited until the semester’s end to finish my commitment to the “Wildcat,” and then I started working at the “Weekly,” writing one art column per week, typically an exhibition review, and occasionally a feature story.

I fell in love with art in a high-school class that surveyed Western art, and I kept taking art-history classes as electives throughout my academic life, from an undergraduate class in Asian art and literature to a graduate-level class on postmodern linguistic theory and photography. I hadn’t known what I was going to do when I graduated with my MFA in creative writing, but working as the “Tucson Weekly’s” art critic was a chance to do two things that I loved – look at art (a lot of art, thoughtfully and critically) and write – so it set me off on my 20-year career as a freelance writer and art critic.

Throughout my writing career, with only a couple of exceptions, I always had two strands of work going on. I was doing the freelance work that generated income, preferably a steady stream of income: freelance art columns for the “Tucson Weekly,” the “Arizona Daily Star” and/or “Artspace” as well as feature stories about the visual arts and artists in magazines. For seven years, I wrote and produced quarterly, tabloid newsletters and annual reports for Access Tucson, the public access

television station where Mark worked for 14 years. I even took on a half-time job for about 18 months as the Information Specialist at the University of Arizona Museum of Art, although there is a reason why I've been self-employed for most of my career, which is that I have a low tolerance for micromanagers.

While I was writing exhibition reviews or nonprofit newsletters, I always had another project going, a book that would only generate revenue in the long term if it was published, or a book that wouldn't generate much income at all (aka a poetry book). Over the course of my writing career, I wrote another three books of poetry (in addition to my MA and MFA collections), two mystery novels, a travel memoir and a collection of art essays. I published over 70 of my poems in journals and anthologies. I received a Fellowship in Art Criticism from the National Gallery of Art in 1991, a Literary Arts Fellowship in poetry from the Tucson/Pima Arts Council in 1993, and a Project Award from the Arizona Commission on the Arts in 1996.

The TPAC award was based on poems I'd written in the early 1990s, poems which in a sense were about how one can live in a world filled with grief and loss at one moment, and magic, art and love in the next. One of my favorite poems from that period is the title poem of my manuscript "Halflife." I wrote it in 1990, a year after my mother died at age 66.

Halflife

If I live my mother's lifetime, this year
would be my halflife. Imagine
as of now, this moment, half of everything
done. In my mother's life, I was not even
born yet, but that was right, half
her children had breathed air and lived.
Already I see the disintegration
of the body beginning, the first lines
mark the skin, the muscle turns flesh,
the passing of youth begins
with the certainty one will not live forever.

And I think of all the things
I would do, places I would go,
but I cannot live
by the navigator's watch which loses
no more than five seconds each day.
We live in the time lost, the moments
spent chopping vegetables for dinner,
walking to the mailbox, talking about the day
just passed, waking up in the night
and turning to press our bodies against
another, to create one sweating self
until we roll unthinkingly away

in the half-awake darkness of sleep.

I'm not a superstitious person, but when I turned 65, I kept thinking about "Half-life," and the fact that the next year I would turn 66, the age Alice had been when she died of a brain aneurysm. Going on Medicare and becoming a "senior citizen" at 65 simply passed me by because of my pre-occupation with turning 66. I wrote a poem that included "Half-life" as section one, and I imagined what the next 20 years of my life would be like for section two. When Jan. 1, 2023, arrived and nothing happened, my unease disappeared even before my birthday in March or the anniversary of Alice's death in July, and life went on as usual. It seemed ridiculous that a poem could set a marker in my life 33 years in the future, but it had.

I always thought of myself as the proverbial optimist. Even before I went through therapy in grad school when depression was a regular part of my life, I always knew I would get through to the other side. I knew life would go on, that I would make something out of this. I could listen to the evening news and still believe in the essential goodness of the human soul or spirit, whatever one calls our core.

I don't remember exactly when that changed, but I think it was after the car accident in 1991 that left me with years of debilitating whiplash. In the first few months, I made

remarkable progress. Every week I was better; I could do more, and I felt less pain. I exercised every day without fail, even on our trip to Italy. Yet one day, I remember talking to my physical therapist who was being her usual cheerful self, and I knew a shadow had seeped inside, that some part of me had faded, grown darker, found the partial eclipse that never yields to full light or total darkness. I had no certainty I would ever heal completely, that my life and I would leave this behind. When I watched the news or read the newspaper, I thought about the horrors of which human beings were capable. Most of the stories I told friends had a skeptical or sardonic edge.

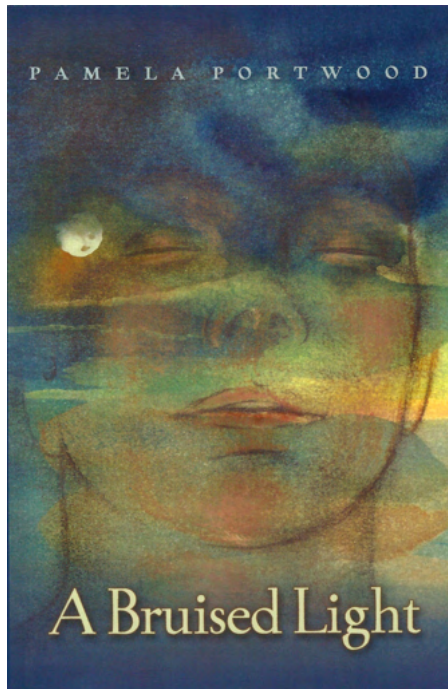
I didn't know exactly what had brought me to this place. I was in my mid-30s, and I had several chronic health conditions. Although I was making my living as a freelance writer, I had been trying to change the focus of my work. I had spent a couple of years of my life writing a mystery novel no one would publish. I was interested in returning to art criticism, but there were no jobs to be had. Writing poetry, my first love, was no longer something that just happened. I was having great success publishing poems in little magazines, but the shadowed part of me questioned whether anyone read such journals, whether this success meant anything more than a longer résumé.

Then, at the beginning of the new year, I won the TPAC poetry fellowship, which made me truly happy for months as an

emotional boost in the face of my continuing back issues and publishing problems. In the spring, I read Patricia Hampl's memoir, "Virgin Time: In Search of the Contemplative Life," and I knew such a memoir about travel, belief and meaning would be my next project. That June, I started the manuscript that provided the source material for several of the chapters in this book. I wrote incessantly at an incredible pace, completing the 50,000-word, first draft in two months. The other part of me shook her head at the woman who was writing another book in a genre where she had few publishing credentials, who might be investing a year or two of her life in words no one would read. The poetry fellowship, plus income from some technical writing, was enough to cover a trip to England, Scotland and Ireland, and to provide the material for what I expected to be the last chapters of my travel memoir. Then, on the last day of the trip, in New York City I had my first generalized seizure.

I embarked on a three-year journey to find the combination of medications that would and ultimately did control my seizures completely without debilitating side effects. At the time, I wrote a few mediocre poems about my experiences, but by 1996, I had a good concept for a poetry book about epilepsy, and I received a \$5,000 Project Award from the Arizona Commission on the Arts to write "A Bruised Light."

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My poetry collection about epilepsy from Star Cloud Press.

The award meant that I could concentrate on just writing poetry for awhile. Mark was on the staff at Access Tucson at the time, but he also did some consulting work for the public access station in Honolulu. I went with him on one of his consulting trips, and we stayed in the former Bishop of Hawaii's residence, which by then was a house shared by multiple renters. Mark and the other residents would go off to work in the morning, and to do research for my poetry book, I would sit on the lanai reading biographies and texts about historical figures who had or were reputed to have had epilepsy: Vincent Van Gogh, Gustave

Flaubert, Peter the Great. The majority of the poems in my book were about the historical figures, combined with 11 poems about my own experiences with epilepsy, and another half a dozen poems about historical views of epilepsy and vintage seizure treatments.

This poem, which is the first poem in my book, is inspired by my experiences in the moments before having a generalized seizure.

The Falling Sickness

Some nights my dreams cross the border
like immigrants desperate to escape
a hungry life. I lick my lips
with words that cannot escape.

My fingers knead my pants
as if they were the finest cashmere,
but I feel only a bleached stillness,
a stiffly woven waiting.

The air is vibrating in a cicada's buzz,
and I cannot hear, I cannot speak
the terror of falling into death -
and then waking
without remembering those last moments,
this hunger for life.

This second poem is about the 19th-century, Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky, who used his experiences with epilepsy in his novels. My poem draws on some of his journal writings.

Dostoyevsky: Morbus Divinus

“I felt that heaven had descended to earth and swallowed me.”

-Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky

While I was sleeping, the moon split into shards,
its crescents repeated three times, three months
passing in single flash of light.

My nervous tongue spoke a foreign language,
my eyes read the calligraphy of crescents,
a Biblical verse proclaiming, “Da. Da.”

Yes, yes, the glow spread from east to west.

Now there shall be no more time.

No time to be cast out of the blue sky.

No time for disbelief in devils.

No time for mourning the dead.

For this moment, this ecstasy before the darkness,

I would give up my very life.

“Morbus divinus” (death divine in Latin) refers to the ancient concept of epilepsy as a transcendent, religious experience.

It took five years, but “A Bruised Light” finally was published by Star Cloud Press in 2006. My one other regret in terms of my

writing career is that I didn't promote "A Bruised Light" the way I should have. It came out a year after I had started my new career as an interior designer, so poetry was not the top priority in my life at the time. I did set up a reading at Tucson's feminist bookstore, and I did get a book review as well as a feature article in local newspapers. My attempts to get national epilepsy organizations interested in the book came to naught. The publisher did little to publicize the book, although he did have a trade-show booth at the Associated Writing Programs' conference, and I went to Austin to sign book copies there. Almost 20 years have passed since then, but according to poets I know, these days even poets whose books are published by major publishers have to set up their own book tours.

During the 11 years of my interior design career, I wrote just a smattering of poems. When I retired, I did a large, pro-bono, interior-design project for the Southern Arizona AIDS Foundation, and then I thought: I'm going to write some poetry! I started researching and planning a series of poems about climate change. I had written about three poems for the series when Daniel Martin Diaz, a Tucson-based artist I know, contacted me. He wanted me to write 10 essays about a series of his artworks that were inspired by John Milton's 17th-century, epic poem "Paradise Lost." A chance to write about poetry and art by an artist whose work I had always admired - how could I

say no, even though I hadn't written a word about art for over 15 years. Climate change was not going anywhere, so I said, "Yes." Daniel is a savvy businessman in addition to being a good artist, and I was confident that he would either find a publisher for the book of his artwork and my writings, or publish it himself.

Getting back to writing about art was wonderful, and the book that we expected to be about 11,000 words grew to 30,000 words as I expanded the book concept to include longer essays, a visual lexicon and a short series of my own poetry. I wrote the book in seven months. Daniel's Los Angeles gallery agreed to publish the book in conjunction with the upcoming exhibition of a different series of Daniel's artworks in November of 2020. Then Covid-19 struck. Daniel's exhibition was converted into a virtual exhibition with no reception, and the gallery cancelled publication of our book, "Paradise Lost: Darkness into Light." For three years, Daniel went back and forth about whether he could self-publish the book. At one point, I designed the book, and Mark did the layout, so that we had a book manuscript that was close to print ready, but it all fell apart, one more victim of Covid and hardly one of the most significant ones, although a painful one for me.

Despite the unsatisfactory resolution of "Paradise Lost," I had so enjoyed writing about art that I decided to undertake another book project. This time I chose to write about my first love in the

art world: photography. After much research, I came up with a concept for a unique book based on content unlike anything else on the market. “21st Century Women Photographers” would feature essays about 20 accomplished, mid-career, international photographers accompanied by a small portrait or self-portrait of each photographer and a three-page portfolio of their photographs.

On the sage advice of my good friend, the poet Cynthia Hogue, I wrote half the book (10 essays) and developed a book proposal rather than completing the entire manuscript. I emailed proposals to American independent and university presses and to European art book publishers. I was right that editors would be interested in my unique concept. One third of the 30+ editors I solicited were interested. A quarter of the editors took my proposal to their publishers who almost all turned the book down, mostly because they thought it would be too expensive to produce to make a profit. One editor at a German art book publisher accepted my book for publication, but then withdrew the offer when the press got a new CEO who wanted to assess the press’ publication offerings. The CEO had all of the editors withdraw existing publication offers, unless they had signed contracts.

The whole experience of looking for and losing publishers was an unhappy reminder of why I had changed careers more than 20

years before. Of course, this time I was writing as a sideline to my retirement. The fact that I had invested so much time in writing projects that would not generate income didn't matter in the way that it had when writing was my fulltime career. I actually had been paid to write the 10 essays and the introduction to "Paradise Lost" because I had done it as a work-for-hire project, although I had put in a great deal more work on the writing than the payment covered, and, part of the payment included copies of a book that was never published. I also hadn't been paid for the book design since the book was never published.

Of course, climate change is still around as a topic for poetry, although the number of poets who have started writing about it in the last five years has exploded. There is much to be said for writing a book like this memoir that does not require endless proposals and rejection letters because it is self-published and not even marketed in pursuit of a large audience. As a young writer, there comes a point where one wants to get one's work out into the world. As an older writer, one may realize at some point that the price exacted to succeed in the publishing world may not be worth it. That's what I decided at age 46, when I went back to college to earn my fourth degree and change not just my career, but my lifelong vocation and identity as a writer by becoming an interior designer.

When I retired and went back to writing art criticism, it was so easy to pick up my old identity as a writer, since several of my writer friends had decided to retire to Tucson, and once again I became part of a community of writers. After the German book editor withdrew the offer to publish my photography essay book and I couldn't find another publisher, I told myself: I am done with writing art criticism, with writing anything that involves dealing with publishers. Maybe I'll write some poetry for myself, but that's it. I'll figure out something else to do with my life when I've finished this memoir.

Last week, the daughter of an artist friend called to tell me that she is organizing a retrospective of her mother's artwork, and she wants me to write an essay for a book that will be published in conjunction with the exhibition. One of my first art reviews back in 1984 was about this artist's work. Mark and I even produced a documentary in 1986 about her and her artwork. I wrote her obituary two years ago. Of course, I'm going to write the essay. The exhibition is scheduled for January 2026, so I'm going to put off any decision about my future writing life for the present.

A Life of Journeys Pamela Portwood

A generic Protestant



I've always said that I was raised a generic Protestant. With just 200 residents, Campo Mata could only afford to have one church service on Sundays - a Protestant one. To go to Mass, the Catholics had to drive 30 miles to the larger town of Anaco, which had a Catholic church. I don't know if there was a Jewish synagogue there or or a mosque. In any case, my brother and I would walk to the Mata clubhouse every Sunday for Sunday school.

I still have the little pins that I got for my first two years of attendance at Sunday school. The first-year, circular pin has fluted edges and is enameled in red. It bears a blue cross, gold crown and a white banner that proclaims "Christian." The second-year pin is a wreath of laurel leaves that fits around the first-year pin. Looking at the little pin's cross and crown symbol, I wondered about my memories since the symbol is associated with Catholics, the Knights Templar, Jehovah's

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Witnesses and the Church of Christ, Scientist. To discover more, I went looking for these vintage pins online, and I discovered a plethora of near-identical Sunday school pins that bore the names of practically every major Protestant denomination: Baptist, Methodist, Episcopal, Lutheran and Presbyterian.



Tom and I in our Sunday best at Easter at Campo Mata.

My family moved to Caracas when I was in the third grade, and I didn't go to Sunday school during the three years that we lived there. I gather that there were not many English-speaking, Protestant churches in Caracas, and none of them were near where we lived. My parents believed in the Christian God. My Grandmother Mae was a practicing and active member of her

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church in Vinita, but neither of my parents ever showed an interest in going to church. They definitely were not interested enough to drive across the city to take my brother and me to an English-language Sunday School in Caracas.



My Baptist confirmation class (I'm the girl with the long hair).

When we moved to Metairie, my mother took Tom and me to a Presbyterian church. She said that the Presbyterian church was a good church, and if we wanted to go there, she would take us, which is to say, drop us off after the first visit. I remember Tom, who was 17, just stood in the back of the church with his arms crossed the whole time during that first service. He never went back although I think I did go to Sunday school there a few times. Mostly, I just went to Sunday school with my friends from school. In elementary school, I went to a Baptist church with my

friend Pam. I went with her long enough to get confirmed there. (The fact that I hadn't been baptized didn't come up.) I went to Lutheran services a time or two with another school friend.

Early in high school, I started dating a boy who was Catholic. I went to Thursday evening services with him. In the 1970s, evangelicalism was taking hold in the Catholic Church, and those mid-week services included guitar playing. People would speak in tongues. It began as just scattered voices here and there, but soon the voices would move like a murmuration of swallows swirling through the room. The voices swept me up into a belief in God and Christ that I had never had before. I read the New Testament for the first time in my life. Sometimes, I would go to the chapel at my Episcopal high school and pray. I never heard God's voice, and I never started speaking in tongues myself, but my newfound faith didn't require either of those things. I started wearing a sterling-silver cross that featured an abstracted form of the crucified Christ.

I don't remember having a great crisis of faith in college, but my belief in the Christian God had slipped away by my sophomore year at Southwestern at Memphis, and I would spend the next 20 years finding and losing my faith. When a college administrator offered me the opportunity to spend my junior year abroad as Southwestern's representative in the International School of America's International Honors Program, I jumped at the

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chance. Students from different colleges across the country would spend a year abroad traveling to six countries to study religion, anthropology and philosophy.

We would study Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, staying in two different countries for each religion so that we could experience and study two major movements in each religion. We started by spending a month living in Fez, Morocco, studying Sunni Islam, followed by a month in Isfahan, Iran, studying Shiite Islam. From there, we were going on to India to study Hinduism in Varanasi and Madras, which was of personal interest to me. Finally, we would study Theraveda Buddhism in Sri Lanka, and Mahayana Buddhism in Kyoto, Japan, with a side trip to study Shitoism in Ise, Japan.



Old fort in India, 1976.

In Varanasi (the contemporary name for Benares), another student and I lived in the house where our classes were held and where the faculty and their families were staying. I had a small room with many windows on a terraced roof full of potted plants. Several days after my student group arrived, we all went to see a concert by Ravi Shankar at the Central Hindu Girls' School. By the time Ravi Shankar came on stage to play, it was past midnight. I stayed until about 2 a.m. The music of sitars and other Indian instruments was going strong when I left, but I was falling asleep in my chair. I walked back with another student. As we stood on the roof of our house, I looked up into the night sky and realized I could see the stars for the first time in a week. The pollution had cleared, and the sky was full of constellations I couldn't identify.

In the daytime when I walked outside, children would gather about me, holding out their hands for change, but they left me alone as I approached the Ganges River. All of life was being conducted on its shores. People were bathing and washing their clothes in the water. One man was getting a haircut while paper-thin holy men meditated nearby. Everyone simply ignored the screaming monkeys that dashed in and out of the windows and onto the roof of one of the temples on the shore. Hundreds of thousands of widows came to Varanasi to live on the streets. Because widows could not remarry in the Hindu tradition, they

lived with their in-laws, who wanted to preserve their good name at all costs. The easiest method was to lock a widow up in the house for the rest of her life, and a widow could be a girl of five or 10 or 15 who was betrothed or married to a boy or an older man who had died. It was only in 1955 that child marriage (under the age of 15 for girls) was outlawed in India. In rural India, child marriage continued long after that. Living on the streets of the holy city on the Ganges, a haven of safety and freedom, was a better alternative to many widows.

Everyone seemed obsessed with money in Varanasi, from the beggars on the streets to the well-to-do man next door. He invited me over for tea one day. We sat outside in his lovely garden, and the man quizzed me with questions I later understood were characteristically Indian, questions no American would ever ask: What was my father's income? How much did he pay in taxes? How much did my trip cost? Then we went on to politics: Watergate, President Carter's election, Jackie Onassis. All the while, his wife, who had a PhD and a JD, served tea and sat quietly off to the side, listening like a well-behaved child observing the adults at a party.

Other American students came back from the Ganges glowing, talking about the spirituality of the place. When I looked out at the water of the Ganges, I felt nothing. It was simply polluted, brown water without a trace of sanctity. This was why I had

come on this trip: to stand here and feel belief in its home, to know the truth of Hinduism from something besides books. I had come to accept Hinduism in college because for me reincarnation offered the only true justice.

In the mid-1970s, reincarnation did not exist as an independent belief in the southern U.S. I don't remember ever calculating justice in explicit terms. I don't remember ever considering that in Christianity, murderers and rapists could simply repent and go to heaven just like innocent children, and where was the justice in that? No, back then, my longing for justice was a more unconscious urge. (Now when I read mystery novels, I only pick out books where justice triumphs in the end. What would be the point of reading about murder as recreation if it didn't reassure us that, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, justice can prevail in this unjust world?)

As I stood on the shores of the Ganges, I felt deluged by the sea of people living in a poverty that surpassed even what I had seen as a child in Venezuela. The periphery of Caracas as it rose into the mountains was filled with "barrios," the cardboard and tin shacks where sewage ran in the streets and children's bellies bloated with hunger like perverse birthday-party balloons. In India, the malnourished children and adults were skeletons strung together with wrinkled skin. Looking at them, I saw the children in the barrios of Caracas in front of me. I felt again a

sense of misery that consumed me.

When I first came back from Venezuela at age 11, I wanted to sponsor a poverty-stricken child through one of the organizations that advertised on TV and in my father's "Time" magazine. I tried to save enough money, but then the monthly sponsorship rates went up. I wanted to save just one girl from a childhood of misery. I wanted to save myself. When I looked at the children in the barrios, I could pity them. I could think about the injustice of their lives. I could see their dirty faces and bare feet, and I always knew they were not to blame for any of this. It took me years to feel the same emotions for the unhappy child I had been.

I was 30 when I finally sponsored a girl in Sri Lanka through Save the Children. It cost me \$192 a year, plus the airmail postage on the letters and postcards I sent her. What I received in return were charming letters from a 10-year-old with an inordinately serious face. Eighteen months later when civil war forced Save the Children out of Sri Lanka, I switched to sponsoring a younger girl in Indonesia. I grieved for the loss of Malani Kukulage, who shared bits of her life with me and once wrote, "I am sorry to hear that you are working in a desert with the temperature rising to about 49 degrees C." Knowing that one percent of our income could change a child's life by improving her family's circumstances and her community was amazing.

In 1976 in Varanasi, all I could think of were the children in the barrios of Caracas. I didn't realize then that seeing those children had pulled up all of the grief I had felt at losing the only home I had ever known as a child when my family left Venezuela. I only knew I was depressed beyond belief. India was why I had come, and the India I found had nothing to offer me. I had lost my belief before I even reached India. As perennial traveler and seeker Andre Gregory says in the movie, "My Dinner with Andre": "I'd been to India and I felt like a tourist. I'd found nothing." At one point, I thought that if I just stayed in the house in Varanasi, studying downstairs and sleeping upstairs, I could get through this, but for what I asked myself. We had a religious festival to attend and another month to spend in southern India. The program continued on to Sri Lanka and Japan to study Theraveda and Mahayana Buddhism, but I couldn't face the idea of another month in India. I left the International Honors Program and India on Christmas Eve. When I crossed the international dateline, I had Christmas, my mother's favorite holiday, twice.

When I got back to Metairie, the Christmas tree was up, and there were the ornaments of my childhood: snow angels, silver bells, beautiful horns and the blue velvet ball, which held a statuette of the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus, that my mother had tentatively given me the year I had embraced

Catholicism. I added a new ornament to the collection: a carved wooden donkey and camel linked by a chain. They were part of a nativity scene I saw on my one day in Jerusalem. Rather than cut the price, the shopkeeper broke off two of the three animals and sold them to me for the cash I had in my pocket.

Suddenly, back in the United States, I was in the midst of reverse culture shock. The woman, who had moaned repeatedly in her letters about not being able to shave her legs in the cold Moroccan water, quit shaving. The woman who had longed to return to her short dresses and heels and stockings converted her new-found jeans into floor-length skirts. She tied colorful Iranian and Indian scarves around her short hair. She wore flat shoes and old button-down shirts. She found herself contemplating all the issues of meaning she had expected to contemplate abroad. After India, she was appalled by American shopping centers. Even grocery stores had a multiplicity of goods that felt ludicrous. Who needed a dozen brands of laundry detergent or two dozen types of shampoo?

As Philip Slater says in "The Pursuit of Loneliness": "A traveler returning to his own country after spending some time abroad obtains a fresh vision of it. He still wears his traveler's antennae – a sensitivity to nuances and customs and attitude that helps him to adapt and make his way in strange settings.... One goes abroad forewarned against exploitation by grasping foreigners,

but nothing is done to prepare the returning traveler for the fanatical acquisitiveness of his compatriots.... The traveler's antennae disappear after a time.... America once again seems familiar, comfortable, ordinary."

I first became interested in Buddhism when I graduated from college. It was ironic that had I been able to endure another month in India during my junior year abroad, I would have gone on to study Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Japan. Yet at the time, I wanted nothing to do with religion because I had lost my faith in God. I never imagined there could be a religion without a god. Later, I discovered that the Buddha's First Noble Truth described a world that I had seen: All life is suffering. The other Noble Truths provide the answer to this basic tenet: The origin of suffering is craving; the end of suffering can be achieved through detachment from craving; the Noble Eightfold Path leads to the extinction of craving and hence of suffering. The path establishes a way of life, wisdom and morality, and its core is practicing meditation to end attachment to the world.

For a number of years after I had lost my faith in God, I meditated sporadically. Shunryu Suzuki's book "Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind" inspired me to think that I could let go of the past, that I could be free by learning to meditate and to live in the moment. Years later, I remember discussing Buddhism with Mark. Even though he, too, had been interested in meditation at

one point, he had never heard the Buddha's First Noble Truth that life is suffering. His immediate response was "Life is not about suffering." I knew immediately that he was right. Yes, life often involved suffering, and for many living in extreme poverty and violence it offered little more. But suffering did not belong at the core of my life as the basis for meaning. In that moment, Buddhism slipped away from me.

For many years, I considered myself an agnostic rather than an atheist simply because I was not prepared to think that I was right while the roughly 90% of Americans and the 75% of people around the world who believed in a god (although not necessarily the same god) were wrong. Then, things changed in 1994 when I was transitioning to my third anti-seizure medication to try to control the generalized seizures I started having the year before. The process involved gradually lowering the dose of my current medication while raising the dose of my new medication. While these two medications were in my system at high levels, I was having a couple of hours of side effects a day when my balance was so bad that I couldn't walk and my vision was blurry. I was spending that time sitting out on my back patio enjoying the weather and watching the blossoms of the cat's claw vine change from lovely flowers into a blur of yellow as though an artist had decided that the world did not deserve this beauty and had wiped their hand across the canvas to transform what had been life into

nothing but color.

One day I could only think: If there is an all-powerful, benevolent God, why am I sitting here watching these beautiful blooms dissolve into nothing? Why am I struggling through medication after medication in pursuit of good health? Why are children starving in Venezuela, in India, throughout the developing world? Why do good people die young? Why? That was the day that I became an atheist instead of an agnostic.

Later it occurred to me that until Copernicus developed his theory about the Earth revolving around the sun, almost everyone in the Western world had believed in the Ptolemaic theory that the sun revolved around the Earth because they believed that man was the center of the universe. All of which is to say that sometimes one person can be right and everyone else can be wrong. It's been just over 30 years since that day on my back patio, and I'm still an atheist. I've never looked back, and I don't expect I ever will.

Visits to Venice



The sleek, black bodies of the Venetian gondolas were carrying couples along the watery road to romance. The gondolier stood, plunging his pole into the water, pushing the boat ahead while heading nowhere. Sometimes whole tour groups would fill several gondolas and sweep down the Grand Canal three, four, six abreast to the accompaniment of a singer and an accordion player on board. Those who wanted the pace of another world rode the speed-boat taxis, darting in and out of the waterways. Barges bussed the rest of the populace down the Grand Canal for just over a dollar a trip.

Mark and I sat beside the Grand Canal at a sidewalk cafe table cloaked in a red-and-white-checked tablecloth. We raised glasses of red wine in a toast, drank, leaned back and were suddenly completely content. Thoughts of pickpockets in Milan just days ago and publication deadlines at home were simply gone. It took me a few minutes to register what I was happily not

missing: the terrible Italian traffic, the honking cars, the polluting Vespa motorcycles. Here transportation was blissfully silent. In the late afternoon, the locals came out to walk their dogs down the sidewalk beside the Grand Canal.



Gondoliers on the Venice canals.

Some streets were simply water, and the doors of some houses opened onto the canals without so much as a porch. It seemed that Venetians could walk out their doors onto the water like Christ. Other streets, constructed of cement blocks, wound among continuous walls like a maze. Occasionally, they opened to a canal or a small bridge curved just high enough to clear a standing gondolier's head. It was like the medina, the old city in Fez, Morocco. Only here the streets were wider, about eight feet on average, so it was not claustrophobic, although I could imagine that walking down these streets as a woman alone at night would be disconcerting. Walking the day away with Mark

was an adventure as we pursued a particular gallery or a new neighborhood.



View of the Campanile di San Marco (St. Mark's bell tower).

In the evening, we wandered the streets, reading the menus posted on windows and on easels in front of restaurants. It was a culinary quest, a pursuit of perfect places to suit our changing moods and palates. One night, we settled on the Ferichitta Toscano, where I had a marvelous meal. A waiter who spoke reasonable English ushered us onto the empty patio; it was early for dinner in Italy. When I asked about several dishes to see if they were vegetarian, the impatient waiter asked me what I ate, and then he suggested something not on the menu: fresh truffles grated on pasta and tossed with a little butter. I had never had truffles before, and they had such a wonderfully idiosyncratic flavor that I cannot recreate the taste, only the great pleasure of consuming them.

My main course was giant, fresh porcini mushrooms, sliced and grilled with a piece of fried polenta on the side. The wild mushrooms (which were available fresh in Italy only in September) had a rich, woody taste unlike anything I had ever tasted. (It was 1992, and wild mushrooms had not arrived in American grocery stores.) Mark had a traditional Venetian dish: cuttlefish with porcini in black squid ink. The wine was a 1988 Barbera D'Alba, a dry, medium-bodied red with a lovely bouquet, reminiscent of Spanish Riojas. We finished with a few little cookies for a touch of sweetness and a piece of cheese. It was an expensive and wonderful treat for us.

In Venice, as in much of Italy, there was art everywhere. Even the peeling paint on the buildings and the fading bricks on the streets looked artful. In the museums and churches, I was fascinated to see the history and sacraments of Christianity born anew in each century, in each artist's vision. Tintoretto's "Paradise," reputed to be the largest painting on canvas in the world, fills the entire end wall of the Grand Council Chamber in the Doges Palace. Here Christ reigns in heaven standing on a cloud of cherub heads and wings. He is like a star radiating light in the upper center of the painting. Mary is nearby and angels are flying toward them. The entire wall is packed with people, who are being pulled toward Jesus as though he were a spiritual magnet. Almost everyone is simply looking, gleaming and

leaning toward Christ. The exceptions are a few bishops who hold Bibles in their hands as intellectual testaments of their faith. Incredible crowding and overpopulation are the hallmarks of this monumental Mannerist vision, yet no one appears aware of this or of anything except an overwhelming longing to be united with God incarnate.



Veronese's "The Feast in the House of Levi."

So, too, Veronese's painting "The Feast in the House of Levi" impressively covers the whole wall of an upstairs gallery at the Gallerie dell' Academia. It is as though the painting opens the inside wall to reveal an impossible vista of buildings, clouds and sky. Originally, the piece was named "The Last Supper," but the Council of Trent made Veronese change the title because they found the presence of dwarfs, jesters, dogs and Germanic peoples inappropriate for the original Christian sacrament. Even though Christ is sitting in the center of the painting, he is hardly the center of attention. No, our eyes are drawn first to the two

immense pillars and the three archways topped with angels, then to the view through the archways. The dinner scene below fills only the bottom quarter of the painting.



Detail from Veronese's "The Feast in the House of Levi."

In the foreground, a man seems to measure the air with a large gesture of his spreading hands. A Black boy prepares to hit a dwarf on the head with a metal plate. The entire scene, from table end to table end, encompasses almost 50 people, most of whom are embroiled in their own conversations and distractions while paying little heed to Jesus. Only the tiniest halo distinguishes Christ from the crowd around him. The charm of Veronese's Last Supper is that the core sacrament of the Christian church happens at a dinner party, and the religious life of even God's son is vested in the ordinary world where the fishers of men are wearing fancy, 16th-century dress.

Although it sits in a plaza full of tourists, pigeons and souvenir stands, Venice's Basilica di San Marco is a beautiful church on a

scale with Notre Dame in Paris or St. Paul's Cathedral in London. The ornate Middle Byzantine domes and arches suggest Russian religious architecture. The dome's crosses resemble children's jacks, as Mary McCarthy writes. Above the central portal is the winged lion, symbol of Venice's patron, St. Mark. Inside, the basilica is a golden wonder that narrates the history of Christianity in 12th-century mosaics, from the creation to the building of Noah's ark (complete with workers using saws) to Christ's life to Joseph's life (three cupolas' worth) to the transportation of St. Mark's relics to Venice.



Crowds at the San Marco Piazza and Basilica, 2022.

In the central dome, Christ sits on an arc of light in a blue sky filled with stars shaped like flowers. A second, smaller arc of light supports his feet, and he holds his hand up in the traditional two-fingered gesture. The sky is a wide circle with a white border held aloft by four angels. In earlier visions, such as

the fine, 5th-century mosaics in Ravenna, Jesus is shown as a shepherd sitting regally among the sheep. It was amazing to realize that these scenes were created of tile, the medium we have relegated to bathrooms and swimming pools.

I had long wanted to go back to Venice, because we spent only a couple of days there in 1992. Yet for years, I read about how the city had been overrun with tourists, largely because of a deluge of cruise-ship stops, and I had assumed that we probably would never return. After the drastic drop in tourism during Covid-19 and the city's new policies prohibiting cruise ships from docking in Venice proper, Mark and I decided to return to Venice in 2022 as part of a trip that included Vienna, Salzburg and Zurich.

When we discovered that the Venice Biennale would be in progress while we were there, it seemed like a particularly auspicious time to go. I don't have a bucket list of places to go and things to do during my lifetime, but if I did, attending the Venice Biennale would be on my list. The 2022 Biennale's main exhibition was entitled "The Milk of Dreams" and featured 20th-century, surrealist painters whose work Mark and I love, like Remedios Varo and Leonora Carrington, as well as work by contemporary artists. More than 80 countries had pavilions that displayed work by contemporary artists chosen to represent their nations.



Leonora Carrington's "The Pleasures of Dagobert," 1945.

We spent six hours a day for two days walking from one nation's pavilion to the next, viewing artwork by international artists whose work we had never seen before. It was exhilarating and exhausting. Some people complained that the overwhelming majority of the artworks in the Biennale's main exhibition were by women artists, but by the second decade of the 21st century, that seemed long overdue to me. The Peggy Guggenheim Collection's special exhibition, "Surrealism and Magic: Enchanted Modernity," featured 60 works, including Carrington's and Varo's paintings, that showed the development of the surrealist movement in the early 20th century, an excellent background for the Biennale's main exhibition.



Korean artist Yunchul Kim's sculpture "Gyre" at the Biennale.

The one place that was thoroughly overcrowded on our second trip to Venice was the Piazza San Marco. The only time we needed to go through that section of the city, we just scooted past the square, shoulder to shoulder with strangers in the crowd on the bridge. I could see that there were long lines to get into the Basilica and the Doges Palace. Since they are must-see sites, I was glad that we had visited them 30 years earlier when the lines were short and the rooms weren't packed with people.

We were staying on the second floor in an Airbnb apartment that was located on a small square over a trattoria in the Castello district. There was a canal with a bridge on one side of the apartment, and a small alley under the bedroom on the other

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side. The living room opened onto a terrace where we often enjoyed happy-hour cocktails. The apartment actually was quite noisy, but we have taken to traveling with a bluetooth mini-speaker controlled by a phone app. So I slept to the sound of falling rain and didn't hear the early morning deliveries to the restaurant downstairs.

At day's end, locals gathered in the cafes to chat and drink Aperol spritzes, as they do in Vienna and throughout much of Europe. Looking back at Mark's journal of our trip, much of his record is devoted to the restaurants we visited and the amazing meals we had. Wandering through the city's maze of alleyways, sitting in cafes like the locals, savoring wonderful food, drinking great wine and enjoying the art were the great joys of returning to Venice.



View of Venice's Grand Canal from a Doges Palace window, 1992.

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A gift of Christmas ornaments



Giving and collecting Christmas tree ornaments is a tradition in my family that dates back to my maternal grandmother. From childhood, I cannot remember a Christmas tree without the glittery snow angels, silver bells, beautifully painted horns or wooden angels who read books while perched on crescent moons. One of my beautiful ornaments was a gift from my grandmother. This antique red ball adorned with pearls, rhinestones and gold trim is shaped like two teardrops melded together with elongated points top and bottom.

When my family moved from Campo Mata to Caracas, our new home's foyer was almost two stories high beside the staircase. That's where my mother put up an incredibly tall Christmas tree. I remember her shopping relentlessly to find ornaments to fill out our collection for such a large tree. She came home with a dozen each of medium-sized, pink and blue balls, a few of which

now are scattered on my tree.



Tom pointing at the ice skater ornament on our tree, 1962.

After I graduated from college, my mother divided her collection of ornaments into thirds, splitting the balls, the beads and the multiple pieces (the silver bells, snow angels, etc.) among my brother, herself and me. Of course, I also received all of the ornaments that had been given to me specifically through the years: the blue feathery peacock, the toy soldiers, the old red ball stenciled with a sleeping child dreaming of Santa and more. By then, I already had begun my own collection, starting with a tiny green angel made in Spain that was a gift from my first college roommate.

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In 1981, which was our second Christmas together in the year that we were married, Mark and I picked out two brass ornaments that seemed exquisite and incredibly expensive, since we were in graduate school: a large star for the treetop and a half-moon face with a turquoise eye. (Our first year together we put up a tree without a top ornament.) Mark brought several ornaments with him, gifts from his godmother, who he has called Aunt Jeanne all his life. For decades, she sent each of us wooden ornaments painted with our names and cut in the outlines of geese, hearts, rabbits, Scottish terriers and more, which she had bought as part of an annual fundraiser at her church.



A bowl with some of my oldest ornaments: my grandmother's ribbon-trimmed, red ball and a silver horn painted black.

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My mother-in-law, Betty, has given us many ornaments through the years, most recently a photograph of the two of us at an impossibly young age framed in a Christmas-tree shaped ornament. My sister-in-law, Kristy, has given us some charming ornaments, too. One year it was a collection of tiny animals, including a silver elephant, a fat blue bird, a gold monkey, and a brown hedgehog that sadly was broken in 2019. (Yes, I started keeping track of our ornaments in a notebook once I realized that over the course of decades I could never remember who gave us which ornament.) My brother and sister-in-law, Gloria, who now live in Nashville near their son's family, have given us many ornaments through the years, including an aspen leaf preserved in gold and a ball made of upcycled plastic wrappers from Nepal. My Aunt Paula and Uncle George sent us a tin heart bearing the words "Peace on Earth."

Through the years, our friends have shared our ornament giving tradition. Mark's college roommate Robin visited one Christmas and gave us a delicate straw goose with a six-inch wingspread. When we took a vacation in Maine with Robin and his partner, we bought a ball striated into layers and bubbles of purple and lavender. After they broke up, his partner disappeared from our lives, and sadly, we lost Robin to brain cancer just over a decade ago. We have had to repair the goose's fragile wings since then, but we will care for the ornament and treasure it through the

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years as we think of Robin at Christmas when we hang his ornament.



Ornaments on our 2023 Christmas tree: gifts from friends (the goose, saguaro and pickle), a painted eggshell we bought in Prague and a vintage angel perched on a crescent moon.

In 1987, the year we bought our first home on North Desert Avenue in Tucson, we held a house-warming party in December, so a number of people brought us Christmas ornaments as house-warming gifts: a red bicycle, a Mexican flamingo in a clear, acrylic, flame-shape, and a clothespin reindeer. Later, we began holding Christmas-tree decorating parties every year, unless we were traveling. (By then, we had a lot of ornaments to hang!) We never asked people to bring ornaments as party gifts, but a few people often did.



The cobalt-blue, Dr. Who police call box from our friend Tim.

Our next-door neighbors on Desert Avenue gave us a lovely metal verdigris reindeer, and our oldest friends in Tucson gave us a wooden cat with a plaid bowtie. By the time we moved to our current home on Holmes Street, it was charming and wonderful to see how our friends were thinking of our Christmas tree party tradition even when they were on vacation. Mike brought us a ceramic depiction of the Pentagon from his trip to Washington, D.C., and Tim brought us a large pickle (a Scandinavian Christmas tradition) from a German market in Chicago. He also gave us a beautiful, cobalt-blue Dr. Who police call box ornament, a reference to a TV show we all loved. Our good friend Hoge gave us an olive, metal, saguaro cactus wrapped in barbed

wire, which seemed very appropriate for his artistic sensibility. We have given ornaments to our friends' Mike and Mika's daughter Hana, and one year she gave us a charming ornament designed with her handprint. Our friend Leondra turned up at our door with a gift of three marvelous Black Santa ornaments after Mark admired her collection of Black Santa ornaments on Facebook and asked where he could find one.

Yet for the first 32 years of my life, our Christmas tree was very much a record of my mother Alice's love for me, her only daughter, and later for Mark. She bought the two Greek dolls in traditional garb a decade or so before I was born when she lived in Greece after WWII. The ornament that she gave me of an angel clad in tutu and toe shoes, playing a harp, and seated atop a glittery ball, epitomized all of my ballerina dreams in the fourth grade. She made the Wizard of Oz ornaments from felt and sequins: Dorothy, the lion, the scarecrow and the tin man with a prominent red heart. Through the years, she gave Mark ornaments that reflected his interests. The plastic gilt camera came complete with elf, Christmas tree and reindeer. A wooden computer ornament bears the message "Season's Greetings" on its monitor screen.

The first year that we put up a Christmas tree after my mother died, when Mark and I and our friends finished hanging the ornaments, I felt a sadness growing inside me. I remembered my

mother and me sitting in the dark with only the Christmas tree lights blinking in our living room in our house on Judith Street in Metairie. My mother would point out a particular ornament. At another moment, she would almost hug herself and pull her shoulders up close to her face in a shiver of joy. She was always smiling as she admired the tree and recalled the years symbolized by each of the ornaments. After that first night of sadness, that Christmas tree, like every year's Christmas tree, has made me smile every time I look at it. What I think of is not losing her, but that shiver of joy that our family's Christmas tree and its ornaments brought her.



The ice skater with the taped leg dates to my childhood. The glass cat was a gift from my mother, and she bought the Greek doll in the 1940s when she lived in post-WWII Athens.

It seemed appropriate to pass on my family's Christmas tradition, so decades ago, Mark and I started giving my nephew

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David, my brother's son, a Christmas ornament every year. When David's son Anderson was born, we started giving Anderson, instead of David, an ornament. Now Tom and Gloria have given their ornament collection to David and his wife, Barbara, since they all spend their Christmases together. So half of my family's snow angels, painted horns and silver bells have made their way to the next generation of Portwoods.



A glass reindeer, one of Mark's gift ornaments to me.

There have been many ornaments received and given in my home in the 35 years since my mother died. Just over half my life has passed since then. I'm not sure when, but sometime in the 1980s, Mark and I started buying each other ornaments as Christmas gifts, probably after we got out of grad school and

actually had some money. (I didn't start my list until 1999, although I have dated entries that go back to 1990.) Around 2014, we started buying ornaments together, typically as mementos when we were traveling, because by then, we had far too many ornaments to hang on one tree.

We have given each other so many beautiful, funny and amazing ornaments through the years, and we have collected so many as remembrances of places and occasions. I love my metal plate that ran away with the spoon, the Holstein cow with wings, and the heavy teal diamond-shaped glass ornament. We bought the brass oval with the camel in the center on our trip to Sedona, Ariz. to celebrate our 20th anniversary. The blue Delft reindeer is from our 2011 trip to Amsterdam when we were celebrating our 30th anniversary. We bought the demon head ornament in 2016 at one of the Seven Hells of Beppu in Japan on our 35th anniversary trip in which we were plagued by earthquakes.

These are only a few of the ornaments that we hang every year now, and some of our ornaments are packed away. I love remembering the stories and the people behind them, both those who are still part of our lives and those we've lost. Even though the size of our annual tree decorating party has shrunk since Covid, I still enjoy getting together with family and friends, being able to share some of our ornament stories, and remembering that our Christmas tree ornaments are not just a

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collection of beautiful objects, but the symbols of an entire lifetime of relationships.



The Christmas tree at our Holmes Street home, 2020.

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My second career as an interior designer



Around the turn of the 21st century, after almost 20 years of working as a freelance writer and art critic, I decided that I wanted to get out of writing articles for periodicals and start writing books, so I drafted my second mystery novel. (I had written my first mystery novel about a decade earlier, and while many editors read the manuscript, no publisher picked it up.) When I couldn't find an agent for my second mystery novel, which meant that my chance of finding a publisher was incredibly unlikely, I decided it was time to change careers.

I went back to college in 2002 and completed my fourth degree in 2005, an AA in interior design from the Art Center Design College (later the Southwest University of the Visual Arts). While my background in art history and my knowledge of form and color served me well, as I had hoped they would, learning new skills in drawing, drafting and rendering was a challenge for me.

I took several classes at Pima Community College and transferred all of the humanities classes that I needed from my BA at Southwestern at Memphis, so that after three years I was only a semester short of a BA in interior design, but after 10 years in the academic world, I was ready to get to work. As I suspected, no one was worried about the fact that I only had an AA rather than a BA in interior design, since I also had a master's degree in another subject.

Ironically, "A Bruised Light," a book of poetry that I had been trying to publish for five years, was accepted for publication shortly before I graduated from the Art Center. The book was published in 2006, a year after I had started working as an interior designer. Would I have changed careers if "A Bruised Light" had been accepted for publication right after I started sending it out? Possibly not, but re-reading my journals from the last years of my career as a freelance writer made me realize that changing careers was one of the smartest things I ever did. The grind of searching for publishers, dealing with rejections and being underpaid for the writing I did publish had been wearing me down emotionally. I love to write, but I loved doing interior design, too.

I began my design career in 2005 working for American Home as a residential interior designer for the store's furniture clients. Much to my surprise, I didn't mind working a 40-hour week for

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the first time since I graduated from college. Of course, I never started work before 10 a.m., which helped for a night owl like me, and my shifts changed weekly. In 2008, when American Home declared Chapter 11 bankruptcy and prepared to close its Arizona stores, I quit and started Greener Lives, LLC, my own interior design firm that specialized in healthy, sustainable homes.



An interior design from my three-year stint at American Home.

I was already in the process of developing a business plan to start my own design firm, so American Home's bankruptcy simply sped up my timeline. Unfortunately, it meant that I launched my business at the start of a housing crisis and the Great Recession. My design firm Greener Lives, LLC was the only residential firm that specialized in sustainable design in Tucson, which should have been a tremendous advantage, but it turned out that Tucsonans who could afford interior designers were not quite ready for sustainable interior design in 2008.

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In 2012, I received ASID's first-place, specialty-design award.

I devised entire marketing campaigns for my company, doing everything from paid ads to writing a blog to writing a column on green interior design for the "Tucson Green Times." I went to networking events, appeared on panels, taught classes and more. Ultimately, I found clients who were interested in healthy and/or sustainable designs, and I designed some award-winning spaces, including one home that was featured in the book "LEEDing the Way - Domestic Architecture for the Future: LEED Certified, Green, Passive & Natural."

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For about a year and half, while I was still building up my client base, I took a half-time job at DIRECT: Center for Independence. I was working in DIRECT's housing department with an interior designer I had met through my membership in the American Society for Interior Designers (ASID).



The living room from my design featured in “LEEDing the Way.”

DIRECT provided all kinds of services for people with disabilities, and the housing department where I worked remodeled homes for low-income people with disabilities and the elderly. We built a lot of wheelchair ramps and converted many bathtubs to walk-in and roll-in showers for recently disabled people.

I would go to people's houses to check out, measure and photograph the spaces, and then I would design appropriate remodels. First, I had to review everything from wage stubs to bank statements to tax forms, to make sure that they qualified

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financially for the services based on city and county low-income guidelines. The whole process was eye-opening. One man had \$5 in the bank. There were living spaces with holes in the floor and boards on the windows. Some places were spotless. I heard so many heartbreaking stories of people struggling to get by when they no longer had the physical fortitude they once had. I wished that every millionaire Congressional representative and senator could have spent a day with me driving from houses to rundown mobile home parks, meeting some truly amazing people who were receiving essential services funded by federal grants.



A girl's bedroom Lisa Reeves and I designed for Habispaces.

I did a number of pro bono design projects while I was still running Greener Lives. During the Great Recession, I led one of four teams of ASID interior designers assisted by interior design students that designed and furnished (with donated goods and

funds) a whole house for a new Habitat for Humanity homeowner. Later, Lisa Reeves, a designer I met through ASID, and I started a volunteer program called Habispaces, where the two of us designed and furnished the bedrooms of kids moving into Habitat homes, using a small budget of contributions that we raised and donated goods that we sought out.

I also volunteered as the interior designer on a team of volunteers who built and furnished a home for the young, pregnant widow of a firefighter who had died in a forest fire in northern Arizona. It was an amazing project in that the widow received the three-bedroom, furnished home free of charge. I think all of the labor, except for the general contractor's work, was donated, including the architect's plans. Most of the product was donated, too. I asked my regular vendors for donations, and they provided the paint, the light fixtures, a fireplace and the decorative window coverings free of charge. A non-profit organization raised the funds to cover the rest of the expenses.

Ironically, I did the largest interior design job of my career pro bono for the Southern Arizona AIDS Foundation (SAAF) in 2017, the year after I retired. For the SAAF project, we remodeled a 5,000-square-foot building in Tucson to create a community center for LGBTQ youth: the Thornhill Lopez Center on 4th. As my first, public design job, it was fun, exciting and challenging. I was the only interior designer on the project, and I donated over

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500 professional hours to the project. The Center on 4th and my other volunteer designs were some of the most rewarding projects of my 11-year career as an interior designer.



Community room at the Thornhill Lopez Center on 4th.

Family ties



I'm not sure why it happened, perhaps because I'm a writer, but as my elderly relatives began dying, I became the repository for their family photographs. It began when my Grandmother Mae died, and Mark and I met my parents in Vinita to help them sort through and dispose of her things. Grandmother Mae had been a bit of a packrat, so we filtered through every sheet of her stationery to be sure nothing was hidden away there. Many of her boxes and boxes of photos were unlabeled. It was heartbreaking to look at so many wonderful images and wonder who these people were and what part they had played in my grandmother's life. Might I even be related to them, I wondered?

While we were in Vinita, my father and I went out for coffee one day with his cousin Genevieve Harrison to look at a pile of Mae's unlabeled photographs. Happily, Genevieve did recognize a few of the people in the photos, and she turned out to be the lovely young woman in one image, so we gave her that photograph.

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Soon after Mark and I got back to Tucson, I pulled out the photos from our last couple of trips and labeled all of them. I didn't want to leave that kind of a photographic jumble to whomever inherits our photographs.



My grandmother Mae Paden Portwood.

When my maternal grandmother died in 1998, I took her body back to Topeka for burial in the family plot, as she had requested. My brother doesn't like to fly, my father was too sick to travel, and my mother had died almost a decade earlier, so I went by myself. I transferred planes twice, until I was down to a plane that only seated 12 and had no flight attendant, just a pilot and

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co-pilot. The weather was bad, and I clung to a seat arm with one hand and pressed the broken overhead light to the ceiling with my other hand to keep it from swinging in the air above my head. We made a safe, if bumpy, landing although my suitcase didn't make the two transfers with me. I thought I was going to have to wear jeans when I buried Mama, but my suitcase arrived at the last minute. The only airport counter attendant closed the airport so that she could deliver the suitcase to my hotel, which tells you how small and quiet the Topeka airport was at the end of the 20th century.

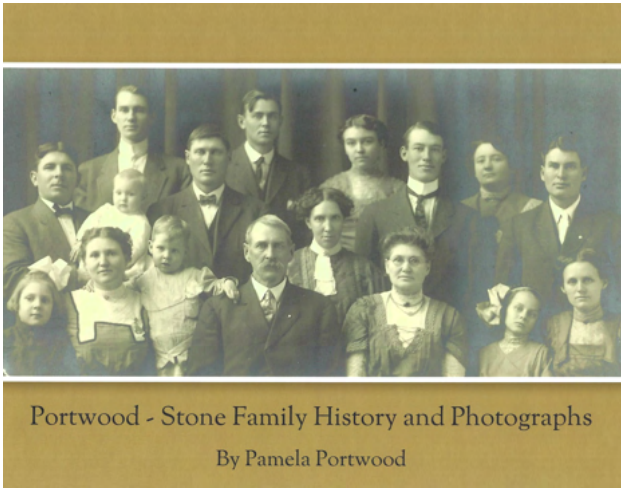


My grandmother Alice Smith Stone working at the VA Hospital.

Taking Mama's body back for burial may have seemed like an inconvenience initially, but visiting the town and state where my mother grew up turned out to be fascinating. When I drove outside of town in a rental car, there were fields of corn as far as I could see, and the land was so flat, flatter than any landscape I had ever known. When I went to the funeral home to fill out the paperwork for the burial, I discovered that they had burial records for the Smith family going back to my great-great-grandfather. I came away with copies of all of the records. I discovered that one address recurred as a home address on many of the burial records, so I drove by it and found a well-kept home in the midst of a scruffy neighborhood. When I went back to New Orleans and was going through Mama's photographs, I found a photograph of the same house, which turned out to be the house where my grandmother had lived when her family wasn't living on the farm at Maple Hill.

When my father died three years later, again there were piles of family photos among his many papers and possessions. I pulled out most of the childhood photos of my brother for him to keep, and I brought the rest of my parents' photos home with me to Tucson. I ended up with five boxes of photographs from my maternal and paternal families. It took me a decade to finally get around to sorting through the photos and making sense of four generations of family members.

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My maternal line, the Smith family, at Christmas, 1911.

My book “Portwood–Stone Family History and Photographs” organized my family photographs all the way out to my great aunts, great uncles, and their families. (In the book cover photo above, my maternal grandmother, Alice Smith, is the nine-year-old child on the first row, second from the right.) Using my maternal grandfather Bob Stone’s genealogy, the Smith burial records I’d found, My Ancestry’s online resources and the genealogy developed by Donald Paden, my paternal fourth cousin, I developed genealogies for all of my family lines to use in the book and to figure out who was who.

When I self-published “Portwood–Stone Family History and Photographs” in 2011, neither of my parents was still living.

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Tom and Gloria Portwood in Alaska, 2019.

The book ended with photographs of my then-single nephew, David Zebulon Portwood, the son of my brother Tom and sister-in-law Gloria (Parks) Portwood. One Christmas when David and I were chatting on the phone about the book, he alluded jokingly and somewhat uncomfortably to the fact that the photos of him were the last in the book. The unspoken words were that if he didn't have children, the Portwood family line would end with him. I hadn't intended to create that message, but I could see how he read it in the book.

A year or two years later, David left New Orleans and moved to Nashville, in what became a turning point in his life. His work in information technology led to a partnership in a Nashville IT company, and he met Barbara Stewart, his future wife and the mother of his son.



David and Barbara (Stewart) Portwood at their wedding, 2015.

The greatest virtue of my photo book was that it organized my family's history verbally and visually so that we discovered things we had never known about our collective past. As a consequence of reading the photo book, when David and Barbara had their son, they named him Anderson Law Portwood after his paternal great-great-great grandfather, Anderson Polk Paden. (Anderson also is named after his maternal grandfather, Sam Law Higdon.) Anderson has grown up with his older, half-brother Brian Stewart. Barbara's nephew Jordan Calvert also lived with the family for several years, but tragically he was

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murdered at age 18.



Anderson Portwood and Brian Stewart (his 2023 graduation).

A wonderful way that my family has grown is through marriage. While conflict with one's in-laws is the subject of everything from Biblical stories to the Sunday comics, all of Mark's family accepted me from the very beginning, when Mark and I were just friends, to when we were dating, living together and then married. There was always a welcome place for me at Mark's grandmother's dining table to eat his grandfather's homegrown vegetables. I never felt like I was putting anyone out when I became a vegetarian for ethical reasons because there were always enough vegetable courses served to make a meal without the meat main course.

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C.W. and Annie Vanlandingham in their youth, 1931 or 1932.

Mark's grandmother, Annie (McKibben) Vanlandingham, insisted that everyone, including his college friends who stopped by for dinner, call her Grandmother. While she had worked at Goldsmith's, Memphis' high-end department store, for decades, she was finishing her career by the time I met her. Mark's grandfather, Clyde Wilson Vanlandingham, worked for the railroad when he retired, but he had been an entrepreneur all his life, doing everything from owning a convenience store to reselling food to other workers at the railyard. He started out as a farmer in Mississippi, and that was still clear from his backyard, which was planted from edge to edge with vegetables. One year, we sent him some tomatillo seeds to plant along with his usual Big Boy tomatoes, and the tomatillos must have thought they had gone to vegetable heaven with all the Southern rain. They grew up a trellis, then back down it.



My sister-in-law Kristy Taylor.

When I met Mark's sister, Kristy Diane Taylor, she was 12, which seems hard to believe now, 46 years later. It wasn't until she and my mother-in-law, Betty (Vanlandingham) Taylor, moved to Tucson in 2016 that Mark and I both really got to know Kristy as an adult. Spending four days together for Christmas annually is not the same as living in the same city for two years, where you gather for weekly family dinners, meet for impromptu happy hours, and just spend time together. Kristy would never fit the stereotype of someone with a degree in accounting who manages 401K plans for businesses, although that is what she does for a living. With her wry sense of humor, enthusiasm for travel, and

willingness to try just about anything, Kristy has been a great travel companion on some of Mark's and my vacations. In Iceland, we all enjoyed Reykjavik and drove to many of the country's natural wonders: Vestmannaeyjar Islands with their puffin colony, Gullfoss Waterfall, Skogafoss Waterfall, and more. Unlike Mark and Kristy, I did not partake of the "hakarl" (fermented shark) that one of our B&B hosts kindly served us along with Brennivin, Iceland's traditional beverage that is distilled from potato mash and flavored with caraway. Unfortunately, I never had the chance to get to know Mark's younger brother Scott very well since he committed suicide at age 21, a year after Mark and I were married. I wish I had.

Perhaps the worst of all the in-law horror stories are saved for daughter-in-law and mother-in-law relationships. I have been very lucky in this, too, because Betty and I always have had the best of relationships. Mark and I left Memphis and moved to Tucson a year after we were married, so the eight years that Betty has lived here in Tucson (and cooked us Southern dinners every Sunday) have given me a chance to get to know her as a person in a way I didn't decades ago, and in a way I probably couldn't have known her when I was in my 20s rather than in my 60s.

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Betty Taylor with her great-great nephew Oliver Pope.

Mark's father, Billy Holloman Taylor, died of lymphoma when Mark was 11. While Betty worked in an office before her marriage, she became a homemaker and raised her three children after that. When Billy died, she said her main thought was how she was going to educate her children. She went to trade school and got certified as a hairdresser, a career she pursued until she was 70, which allowed her to put both Mark and Kristy through college with support from Social Security and government grants. It amazes me how well she did and how successful she was at juggling career and family when she had to start over in her 30s in the midst of grief and loss. I think that people without children don't truly understand the emotional

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drive that having children can give parents to do whatever they need to do to take care of their children. Betty thinks of me as her adopted daughter, and I don't think anyone, certainly not a daughter-in-law, could ask for more than that.

While Mark grew up around his paternal family and has fond memories of playing with his cousins in his paternal grandfather's coal yard, they all had moved away from Memphis by the time I met Mark. Because we have never lived in the same city, I haven't spent the kind of day-to-day time with Mark's father's family as I have with his mother's family, but we have spent holidays and vacations together. Although such times can be rife with stress and conflict, ours never have been.



Mark's aunt Ann (Taylor) Pope and his cousin Keith Pope, 2002.

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In the beginning, I was a little worried about spending several days in a house in Asheville, N.C., with Mark and four of his relatives. (I probably would have been worried about spending several days in a small house with any five people.) It was the first time I had ever booked a house through Airbnb, and it turned out to be the first time this host had rented out his second house. It hadn't occurred to him that he needed dishware for six rather than the standard, boxed four pack, but he remedied that situation and the lack of cookware pretty quickly, since he lived next door.



Mark's cousins Steve and Shelley Pope.

We did some sightseeing and eating out, but Betty and Mark's aunt Ann (Taylor) Pope Wagster enjoyed cooking their Southern meals in the kitchen while Mark and his cousin Keith Pope grilled meat on the back porch barbeque grill. Kristy and I stayed out of the way. We have met for a number of shared vacations through the years, and we all had a fun time, because the Taylors, like the Vanlandingham, are great people. We've spent enjoyable Christmases with Mark's cousins Steve and Shelley Pope in rural Tennessee at the Taylor family farm, which Steve now owns and where they live.

Through the years, I have seen Mark's family members marry and divorce, have children and grandchildren, age and die. I have attended weddings, helped plan funerals and deciphered financial statements, which is to say that I have shared in his family's joys and sorrows for over four decades. They have found a place for me, not just on a genealogical chart, but in their hearts.

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The poet's affliction



Two hours of my life disappeared, so I can only tell the story secondhand. After our trip to England, Ireland and Scotland in 1993, Mark and I stopped in New York City to visit our friends Carol and Jeff. Even though the transatlantic flight had been exhausting, Mark and I spent our first day in New York City walking miles all over Manhattan looking at contemporary art galleries. That night we went out to dinner with our friends. Afterwards, I fell asleep on their couch while everyone else stayed up talking.

The next morning, I woke up early. As I was sitting on the couch, waiting for Jeff to get ready to leave, I had a generalized seizure (specifically a tonic seizure). I lost consciousness. My body stiffened and curled forward into itself as if to become a shell. Mark, who was sitting beside me, kept my body from falling to the floor and lowered me onto the couch. It was over in a few minutes.

Jeff said he would never forget my face when he came into the room after the seizure. It was a childlike face of complete innocence, the face of an angel, he said. He called 911 and said that Hastings-on-Hudson's entire police and paramedic force of six turned up at the door. When a police officer asked me if I knew where I was, my reply was, "I'll have to contemplate that." When he asked again, I said, "I don't know." My friends laugh at this – never a thoughtless "no" for me.

I have only one flash of memory between the moment when life was what I expected it to be and the moment when I found myself in a Yonkers hospital. All I remember was seeing Mark climb in the ambulance to be with me. In the emergency room, Mark cried and I kept saying, "Don't worry. Everything will be all right," but I don't remember that. I don't even remember the doctor's examination so precisely reported in my medical records. When I finally could hold on to the memory of my life from minute to minute, I was lying on a gurney in the holding area for hospital admissions, although at the time I only knew I was in a hospital somewhere.

At one point, a woman in the space next to me cried, "No, no, no" and began wailing hysterically. The nurse pulled the curtain all the way around her, but the woman's relentless sobbing was only a few feet away. My heart started beating faster, and I could feel my own fear about what was happening to me rising up from

my stomach into my throat. I looked at Mark, and I could see in his eyes the dread, the helplessness I felt. He stroked my arm as if I were an animal with a lush coat. I blinked the tears out of my eyes and told myself to breathe deeply, again, again. Surely the woman would stop sobbing in a minute, or the nurses would take her somewhere private, away from the half-dozen of us who never expected to be in a hospital that day. Eventually the woman's sobs became tears, and finally someone came and wheeled me out into the hall.

I spent four days in the hospital, having all the appropriate tests. The EKG, EEG, MRI and CAT Scan – it seemed a perverse spelling bee. The doctors put me on Dilantin, an anticonvulsant medication. When I first heard the word “anticonvulsant,” I thought of the Middle Ages, the time when convulsions were considered a sign of possession by God, or was it the devil? I couldn't remember. The neurologist speculated that what my therapist had identified eight years before as anxiety attacks might have been small seizures all along. Mark said I had an anxiety attack before I had the generalized seizure.

I read, ate, slept and talked to Mark, who was incensed that the hospital allowed visitors only from 2-8 p.m. and only two at a time. Often I think it was harder for Mark than it was for me because he had been there, he had seen the seizure. Even though it was my body, it also was just a story other people told me.

There was an air of unreality about much of it. I checked out of the hospital on the fourth day because the airline would cancel our tickets if we didn't use them on this, the last day of a sale. The doctor came in to release me with the last test results. They were all negative. I was glad not to have a tumor or vascular problems, but having no answer was hardly a comfort. The trip home was exactly what we wanted: uneventful.

I saw a local neurologist two weeks later. While she explained a good deal more to me, she had no answers to the question "Why?" She mentioned that the anxiety attacks could have been complex partial seizures (now called focal impaired awareness seizures). She noted that a combination of factors might have lowered my threshold for seizure: I had taken antihistamines for a cold; I had drunk wine the night before; I had been tired from traveling. At the time, it did not seem that probable to me. Traveling, antihistamines and wine were nothing extraordinary for me. I asked what epilepsy was and how it related to my seizure. She smiled and said epilepsy was having two or more seizures, and I had only had one. She said the probability of recurrence was about twenty percent for me. She confirmed that I definitely should not drink alcohol on the Dilantin, because both substances had sedative effects on the brain. I had been holding out hope for a different opinion, but I had begun drinking two cups of coffee a day to combat the chronic fatigue I

was experiencing from the Dilantin alone. She also informed me that under Arizona law, I could not drive for a year after having a seizure. (Arizona has since reduced its legal waiting period for driving after a seizure to three months, although there are a number of exceptions to this rule, such as when the seizure is presumed to be a one-time event caused by something like a medication interaction.)

At home, I read the section on complex partial seizures in a library book I had checked out. The description of complex partial seizures sounded just like my presumed anxiety attacks, which had begun eight years earlier during a stressful time in my life when I was in graduate school. While I was in the hospital in Yonkers, it had occurred to me for the first time to ask Mark how he knew when I was having an attack. I assumed it was the look I gave him when I needed him to pick up the conversation until I had recovered. He said I licked my lips repeatedly, and my fingers kneaded my clothing, things I was never aware of. The library book identified lip smacking and picking at one's clothing as "automatisms," signs of complex partial seizures. Such seizures often began with a sensation of fear or a flashback, a memory, a sense of *deja vu*. This was followed by impaired or altered states of consciousness. The seizures primarily affected the brain's temporal lobe, which controls speech and verbal skills. (They had once been called "temporal lobe seizures.")

As Mark and I talked about what we had done the two days before the seizure, I remembered more details than I had told the neurologist. It suddenly made more sense that I had been having complex partial seizures, and that the physical stresses of travel had lowered my seizure threshold so that a complex partial seizure became a generalized seizure. I called the doctor's office in the morning, but her first available appointment was in a month. So, I had four weeks to consider the likely proposition that I had been having 5-15 seizures a month for the previous eight years. That would mean I had epilepsy.

Epilepsy: Why did the word frighten me as if it were an abomination? Epilepsy meant people had seizures, no more, no less. Why was there a social stigma? Why did Mark feel he should ask whether I wanted him to tell our co-workers I had had a seizure? Why did I have to consider the matter closely, decide whether the experience was too embarrassing to share with the people I had worked with for six years? Logically, I knew there was no reason for me to feel guilty and humiliated by a medical condition I could not control. To be emotionally repulsed by an illness or disability was antithetical to all my values and beliefs, so I told Mark to tell our co-workers, tell our friends, tell anyone who asked about me that I had had a seizure.

Epilepsy: "The very word seems to activate the most human of terrors, the fear of losing control, of losing the self, the shame of

making a degrading public spectacle of yourself, the fear of death.” It wasn’t until I read these words written by Adrienne Rich that I understood my feelings. I didn’t have to know the history of epilepsy or to have ever seen someone seizing to feel the shame and the fear somehow programmed into our Western minds, yet this was not what seizures had meant in all times or places.

The ancient Greeks coined the word “epilepsy,” which means to be taken or seized from the outside by either a god or a demon. The oracle at Delphi was often chosen from women with epilepsy. The Romans also honored and feared seizures, which in some cases resembled the throes of death in the foaming at the mouth, the unconsciousness and the thrashing, yet they were followed by the return to consciousness and life. By the 5th century, Hippocrates asserted that “the sacred disease” was merely a physical phenomenon, rather than divine or demonic possession.

In the Christian era, epilepsy became solely the sign of demonic possession. In Mark 9:14 of the Bible, Jesus heals a boy with epilepsy who was said to be possessed by an “unclean spirit.” In the Middle Ages, epilepsy was known as “the falling sickness,” and it was considered a sign of possession by evil spirits. In 1692, the Salem witch trials began with the seizure-like “fits” of a 10-year-old girl. From its founding in 1540, the Order of Jesus

(the Jesuits) had denied admission to anyone with epilepsy. Yet in many societies, seizures were considered a blessing by the spirits, a sign of a potential shaman. Where Puerto Rican espiritismo merged with Cuban santería, people faked seizures to be considered for the esteemed position of healer.

Finally, the four weeks passed, and I went in for my second appointment with the neurologist. I told her all of the things I had remembered. She took extensive notes. When I came to the last two – the licking of lips and kneading of clothes – her face lit up with the “Aha!” expression at these two automatisms that accompany complex partial seizures. I asked another question or two, and then she was getting up to leave. She hadn’t said the words, so I asked: “Have I been having complex partial seizures for the past eight years?” “Oh, yes,” was her reply. Anxiety also could be involved with the seizures, she said. There were a million things I wanted to know, but I couldn’t articulate the jumble of questions in my mind. “What does it mean that I’ve been having complex partial seizures?” I asked. She sat down and again explained about chains of neurons firing excessively in my brain. What I wanted to know was what this would mean for my life. I’d been preparing myself for a month to hear her say “Yes,” so why was this so hard? Some little part of me had hoped an MD, a specialist, would tell me something I couldn’t find out for myself by reading.

I wrote my first poem about the seizures not long after I came home from the hospital. I wrote another one a few months later. They were not very good poems. Almost two years passed before the real poems began. They came, not all at once, but they came uninvited one by one, the way my poems once did. They began with an image, a metaphor, and the words simply followed. In some poems, the literal descriptions of seizures were transformed. Others were about the bizarre cognitive side effects of the seizure medications I was taking, but they were all tight poems. I felt they were the best poems I had ever written, and it had been a long time since I had felt that way, because I had been having difficulties with my poetry for several years. In the midst of my problems with epilepsy, poetry returned to my life. When the seizure medications impaired my analytical skills and made writing prose a struggle, I could still write poetry, because it was intuitive process. That was part of what I had always loved about poetry, that it could take me out of my meticulous, everyday mind. It helped me let go of my frustrations and obsessive thoughts. Putting my fear down on paper, crafting it into something beyond myself, meant that for those moments and the days that followed, the fear was no longer mine. It belonged to the paper, the pen.

Epilepsy has been called “the poet’s affliction,” because it has been associated with creativity. Muhammad, Moses, St. Paul, St.

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Teresa of Avila, Tennyson, Flaubert, Van Gogh, Doestoevsky, Petrarch, Tolstoy, Dickens, Lewis Carroll, Handel, Paganini, Buddha, Socrates, Pascal, Swedenborg, Julius Caesar, Richelieu, Napoleon, Alexander the Great, Moliere, Peter the Great, Rasputin and Strindberg. Poets, prophets and tyrants. It would be hard to imagine a more influential crowd: three major religious traditions; a few empires; some of the greatest art, literature and philosophy ever created. (There is, of course, a great deal of contention about who does and who does not belong on such lists.)

Many seizures begin with what is called an “aura.” It’s different for everyone. For some people, it’s a tingling in the limbs, an odd smell, or a strange visual perception. When I had an aura, my sense of depth perception changed due to a phenomenon called “teleopsia.” Sometimes things in the foreground simply stood out a bit more from the background, as if a photographer was looking through a camera and had shifted the lens to the next f-stop. Other times, when a seizure would inevitably follow, it was as though the whole world had taken a step backwards. Suddenly, everything looked farther away than it had only a moment before. I felt more distant from the world although neither of us had literally moved. When I held my left hand in front of me, it had all the right characteristics to be mine – the wedding ring, the long fingers, the white tips of the fingernails –

but it didn't feel like my hand. At times, the quality of the light changed so that even if I was indoors, the light had the ephemeral quality of the light at sunset. Yet auras are not just the warning signs for an oncoming seizure, they are actually partial seizures.

I ended up playing what I thought of as "modern alchemy," searching for a medication to control my seizures without debilitating side effects. Higher doses of Dilantin gave me chronic fatigue and memory loss, while Tegretol evoked a spectrum of memory and cognition problems. For several months, I felt my intelligence slipping like sand through my fingers, and I lost my ability to think and speak with clarity. I couldn't find the words for the simplest household items. My short-term memory was so bad, that halfway through a complex sentence, I would have to stop and replay the words in my head like a tape recorder to be able to finish the thought. I often misunderstood what people were saying to me, but typically I didn't understand I was missing the point, so I kept repeating myself or even arguing. Once I stood on the wrong side of the street to catch a bus, but I simply could not understand when other passengers tried to explain why I was on the wrong side. A battery of neuropsychological tests confirmed what I knew: I probably did not have Alzheimer's or dementia. The seizure medication was causing the problems, and when we decreased

the dose, I felt a wind moving through my brain, the ability to think with greater speed returning to me. I had not known how impaired my skills had been.

I had more seizures on Depakote, the third drug, but I was lucky to have them with Mark or friends, and there were no more ambulances in my life. Still, the wrong words kept spewing out of my mouth. I said “artichoke” when I meant “asparagus,” “lemon” instead of “lime,” “black” instead of “white.” I became dyslexic and could not do math in my head. I lost half of my hair. I confused east with west. I walked into a room and forgot why I had come. Instead, I picked up something else, left, remembered the original errand, returned, got distracted, left, returned, perhaps, remembered. I went to a concert without the tickets. My friends laughed and said, “I do that stuff all the time,” but I never had. Even if many people did not notice, I knew I was not the person I used to be.

Ultimately, what was hardest for me was becoming a writer who had lost her sense of narrative, who had drug-induced writer’s block. I no longer knew how to tell a story well, how to write a good lead or how to create a powerful conclusion. Filtering through facts and interviews to organize information was a struggle. I found myself rewriting and rewriting and rewriting too many articles. The most basic grammar mistakes flowed out of my word processor. I couldn’t take notes fast enough at

interviews or think of follow-up questions on the spot. Whenever I became nervous about my professionalism slipping away from me, my hand tremors (from my essential tremors, a separate condition) would spread, so my whole body shook.

After a year of redoing jobs and spending three times as long on simple writing projects, I gave up the contract that had sustained me financially for seven years. I quit working as a freelance writer and editor. Part of me felt guilty that I had failed, that I had allowed myself to accept disability without enough of a battle. The other part of me knew that struggling to perform at the same level with impaired skills was taking a stressful toll on my life and health. I hoped I could make my decision into a good moment, a chance to bring poetry more fully into my life, both for the pleasure of such intuitive, non-analytical writing and for what it could teach me about how my brain now worked.

Dealing with chronic illness reminded me of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's stages of dying. I spent a year moving through the denial, the anger, the depression, the bargaining. Coming to acceptance was hard. I discovered how important my mind was to my life. I would look at the results of my new IQ test and console myself that they were still above average. Carrying an inflatable back cushion with me everywhere and having daily back pain as a consequence of a car accident I was in 18 months before the first generalized seizure meant little to me in the face

of my diminished intellect. I had to learn to let go of my mistakes and not to harp on every misspoken word. I had to learn not to expect perfection of myself.

Shortly after I turned 40, while I was still trying to get my seizures under control, I was diagnosed with a melanoma on my left arm. I thought a simple surgical excision had solved the problem until an oncologist recommended I do chemotherapy as well. I was torn, because one of the potential side effects of the chemotherapy was seizures. Fortunately, I got a second opinion from a skin cancer specialist who advised against chemotherapy. I heeded his advice, and here I am 28 years later cancer-free.

Three years or so after my first generalized seizure, after I had tried six anti-seizure medications, my new neurologist found a high-level, combination dose of two medications that completely controlled my seizures with an acceptable level of side effects. I received that \$5,000 project grant from the Arizona Commission on the Arts to write a book of poetry about epilepsy, which made me happier than I could remember being in a long time. After four years, I got my driver's license back. When I finished my poetry book, I decided to write my second mystery novel. I knew I couldn't write at remotely the breakneck speed I could write when I drafted my travel memoir in the months before I went on anti-seizure medications (2,000 words per day), but I decided that I would be satisfied if I could write at

Graham Greene's pace: 500 words per day. The difference being that I wouldn't quit writing and go for a drink when I hit 500 words – whatever the time of day – like Greene did.

Five years after I went on the seizure combo regime, I went back to working as an art critic for the "Tucson Weekly," although I had to tape record my interviews for the first time because I still couldn't take notes fast enough to keep up with an interview conversation. Seven years after I had quit drinking when I went on my first anti-seizure medication, my new neurologist said I could try drinking a few glasses of wine on our trip to France as long as I didn't have a seizure. (I had asked him because it seemed such a pity not to drink wine in France.) Fortunately, I didn't have a seizure, and I was able to enjoy wine in France and in my life since.

When it comes to the epilepsy, I've been very lucky. Only 50% of Americans with epilepsy have complete seizure control. Over the course of the last 32 years, I've had a few complex partial seizures off and on. Mostly the seizures have been side effects from new medications prescribed for different health conditions, although at one point I lost control of my complex partial seizures and had to add a third anti-seizure medication to my regime. My memory isn't what it once was. The medications I am taking do have cognitive side effects, and the eight years of seizures I had before being diagnosed took a permanent toll on

my memory. As a doctor friend of mine explained, having a seizure is like running an audiotape past a magnet. Sometimes nothing happens, but eventually parts of the music begin disappearing. I will have to take medication religiously and be careful all of my life. I will always have epilepsy, but it no longer controls my life. It's been over a quarter of a century since my last generalized seizure, since I got my life back from the first medications I took. I can't imagine going back to that time and losing such important parts of myself again. I know that things could change as I age, but I will never accept such losses again. Never – even if I have to try six new medications when I'm 80.

Cultivating good fortune in Thailand



Spirit houses stood on posts in front of the houses, shops, restaurants, hotels and banks of Thailand. Usually they were miniature temples made of cement, adorned with paint and gilt details. Along the canals of Bangkok, spirit houses looked like the homes they protected, their tin roofs and wood walls decaying in the humid air. An expert determines where to place the home of the site's guardian spirit. To placate the spirits and promote harmony where they live and work, Thais make daily offerings at the miniature houses: vases and garlands of flowers, lit candles, plates of oranges, glasses of water, sticks of incense burning in bowls filled with sand, even bottles of soft drinks. Although the belief in "phi," the invisible spirits, comes from ancient animistic traditions, statues of Buddha often sit within the open archways of spirit houses.

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Statues of Buddha are mounted on taxi dashboards. Small posters of Buddha and of Thailand's king are tacked inside taxi roofs. Ticket collectors in cross-country buses light incense and place flowers on altars beside the driver to avoid accidents. People embarking on long drives hang garlands of jasmine and miniature orchids from their cars' rearview mirrors to ensure safe journeys. The Thais are great believers in cultivating good fortune through ritual.



Offerings at the base of the Tarin Hotel's spirit house in Surin.

Mark and I visited temple after temple where I made offerings and wished for good health. We had set out on our three-week journey in Thailand and Hong Kong in 1995, two years after my first generalized seizure. I worried that insomnia on transoceanic flights, fatigue, illness and other travel stresses would lower my threshold for seizure. Yet when frequent-flier

miles offered us the chance to visit Southeast Asia for the first time, my love of travel won out over my fear of foreign hospitals.

To try to reduce the cognitive and memory impairments caused by my anti-seizure medications, I had just changed to my fourth anti-seizure medication in two years. It would be weeks or months before I knew whether my mental acuity would return and if the new side effects – especially the daily headaches – would dissipate on this new medication. Twice when I came down with an Asian intestinal bug, I had repeated auras for seizures, so I had increased my medication dosage (as my neurologist said I could), and I had no seizures on the trip. I was glad I had decided not to let epilepsy rule my life. I was glad we had come to Thailand.

People were so friendly in Bangkok that if we paused even for a moment and looked confused, someone would stop and ask in English if they could help. They not only pointed us in the right direction, but they offered information and happily practiced their English. On our first day, a man who worked at the Grand Palace, which was closed when we arrived, told us that the government had a special promotion to encourage tourism that day. For a dollar, we could take a “tuk-tuk” around the city to see the sites. So we set off for a hair-raising ride on what looked like a three-wheeled golf cart. In Bangkok, as in Rome, the number of lanes in a road was determined not by the painted

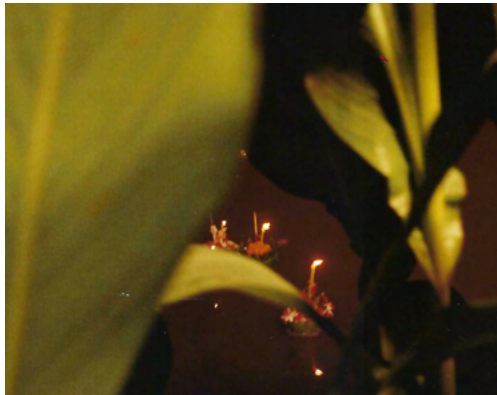
lines but by how many cars, motorcycles and tuk-tuks will fit in the street at any given moment. It was an authentic experience in a city of six million where crossing town at rush hour could take three or four hours.

Like many of the Thais we met, our tuk-tuk driver was amazed when Mark spoke the Thai phrases he had learned. Our driver had taken a class in English and spoke reasonably well. He was astounded that Mark had learned some Thai just for a vacation. Learning Thai was quite an undertaking because it is a pentatonic language, which means that a single word can have different meanings if it is spoken in a mid-tone, a low tone, a high tone, a rising tone or a falling tone. Depending on the tone used, the same word can mean a spice or a leg, to dangle, to trade or to kill. This may sound hazardous, but people seemed to understand Mark from the context of the words. We chatted amiably in English and Thai with our tuk-tuk driver as he took us to three temples and waited while we viewed the sites.

We had come to Thailand in November to see Loy Krathong, the festival that is celebrated on the night of the full moon in the eleventh lunar month. A “krathong” is a small boat made of banana leaves folded into layers of triangles in the shape of an open lotus blossom. To honor the water spirits, people set krathongs on every body of water in cities throughout Thailand. (Our hotel even had a celebration for guests at the swimming

pool.) Most krathongs are about eight inches wide, although some are immense. Each handmade boat is different, but all are adorned with incense sticks, candles and flowers. While the offerings are made to the water spirits, their adornments are symbols of Buddhist beliefs: the fragrance of life, the ephemeral nature of reality and the impermanence of beauty.

Although the festival honors the end of the rainy season, the Chao Phraya River that winds through Bangkok was still high that day. Bangkok was once known as the Venice of the East because the city was laced with canals, but most of them have been filled to allow further development. Some of the canals were still lined with wooden houses built on stilts in the water – a design rather like the houses in the Louisiana swamps. Because of the flooding, many people were living in houses with several inches of water on the first floor.



Krathongs float in a Bangkok canal during Loy Krathong, 1995.

Because the pier near our hotel was flooded, we couldn't get to the river for the festival. Instead, Mark and I walked to a nearby canal where a ten-foot-high krathong floated like a festive, transitory sculpture. All along the canal, women sat at tables plaiting leaves into the symbolic flower. Mark and I each bought a krathong. Mark's had the traditional design of banana leaves with three large purple flowers in the center. Mine used the newer technique of mounting folded paper on a Styrofoam base. Its matte color was so soft that the krathong seemed to be made of white leaves. I added a coin to my boat, lit the incense and candle, walked down the steps to the water and set it afloat. My year of misfortunes burned sweet as incense and disappeared into the night air. Mark and I stood on the bridge and watched the scattered krathongs drawing their flickering reflections across the water. The slow tide gradually pulled ours across the canal where they collected with another 100 boats and kept burning. A boy climbed down the embankment, pulled the coins from the boats, and pushed them out again into the water. Gradually they drifted back, and we ended our first day in Thailand.

The second day, we went to see Wat Phra Kaew, a temple that houses one of the Thais' most venerated icons: the Emerald Buddha. The statue was discovered in the early 15th century when a bolt of lightning struck an ancient stupa in northern

Thailand. Through the years, legends have endowed the sacred image with supernatural powers to protect the king and his Grand Palace. The sitting Emerald Buddha or Phra Kaew (“wat” means temple) is carved of a single piece of semiprecious jade that is 26 inches high and 19 inches wide at the lap span. The sacred statue seems small sitting atop its high throne of gilded wood. The king ritually changes the Buddha’s gold and diamond-studded robes three times a year, for the winter, summer and rainy seasons.

The Wat Phra Kaew is set within the mile-square grounds of the Grand Palace, and its buildings seemed an incredible vision of jewels and gold glimmering beneath the sun. Every surface is intricately decorated with multicolored porcelain, gilded stucco, gold leaf and bits of colored glass. Some ceramic designs resemble flowers of whipped cream imprinted on a bridal cake. The inner temple walls are covered with painted murals, and statues of mythical animals are scattered throughout the compound. It was some of the most magnificent architecture I had ever seen.

To ward off evil spirits, the gates to the temple courtyard are guarded by immense demons that are as tall as the temple roofs. They are painted in bright colors, and their clothes are patterned with intricate glass and gilt mosaics. The demons snarl, and tiny, curved horns grow out of their lips. The temples that they guard

are splendid creations of Thai Rattanakosin architecture originally built in 1782 when Bangkok was established as the country's capital. (King Rama I gave the new city what is still the longest place name in the world, which in translation means: "The city of angels, the great city, the residence of the Emerald Buddha, the impregnable city (of Ayutthaya) of God Indra, the grand capital of the world endowed with nine precious gems, the happy city, abounding in enormous palaces which resemble the heavenly abode where reigns the reincarnated God, a city given by Indra and built by Vishnukarm.") Thais have shortened this official name to "City of Angels.") Through the years, Thai kings have built and remodeled buildings on the palace grounds.



Demon guardians at the gate to the temple's courtyard.

The breathtaking “chedi” that once housed a Buddhist holy text is covered in brilliant gold leaf. A few simple curves form the base of a smooth bell shape surmounted by a spire that rises more than two stories high. Behind the chedi on the Royal Pantheon’s marble terrace stand the fabulous “kinnon” and “kinari,” gilded male and female bird-humans. The top half of their lithe bodies are human, but their hips blossom into wings, and their feet and tail are those of a rooster. These creatures, like many other fantastic animals around the temples, inhabited the Himaphan, an imaginary Hindu forest in the Himalayas.



Kinnon, male bird-human figure, at Wat Phra Kaew, 1995.

Elsewhere, statues of Fu dogs and Chinese heavenly guardians as well as murals of the Thai version of the “Ramayana” (the central epic of Hinduism) point to the many religious traditions that Buddhism has absorbed since its inception in the 6th century. Chief among these influences in Thailand is animism, the source of spirit houses and statues of elephants whose smooth heads shine from the millions of hands that have rubbed them seeking strength and good fortune.

When I came home, I wondered why I had participated in so many rituals if I did not believe in either Buddhism or good luck. I have always opened umbrellas inside the house. I walk under ladders without qualms, and I hold no grudges against cats of any color. Yet the Thai have a marvelous aesthetic sense, and their rituals appealed to the poet in me. Placing a boat of flowers, a burning candle and a stick of lit incense afloat in a river and then watching the lights flicker on the dark water was lovely. Setting a caged bird free was a wonderful metaphor for liberating life. The tinkling of coins dropping into bronze bowls created a magical music. The rituals became an affirmation of life for me, a confirmation of that tremulous sense that my life could change. Yes, I had to do my part – light candles, drop coins, learn memory tricks, overcome my frustration – but I had discovered that good health also was in large measure out of my control. Perhaps, that should be self-evident. Perhaps, the young

always think they can do anything. Perhaps, I had simply been naïve and had discovered that willpower could not change my physiology. Performing rituals was a way of accepting that in many ways, my life was in the hands of chance if not the whims of fickle gods.

And so we continued on to the oldest temple in Thailand. While the buildings of Wat Po resemble those of Wat Phra Kaew in their multi-tiered, tiled and pointed roofs, their chedi are of an older, square design. The beautiful bases are cut into levels that progressively narrow into a spire. They are adorned with tile and delicately colored, porcelain flowers rather than gold leaf. Huge Chinese statues guard the temple's 16 gates. The oddest statues are the Europeans wearing top hats and carrying canes. They are said to be Marco Polo and a friend. These figures and statues of real and mythological animals scattered throughout the 20-acre compound were brought as ballast on ships returning from selling rice to China in the early 19th century.

Line drawings on the ceilings and walls of a nearby pavilion show the techniques of Thai massage. The outlines of a man's body, front and back, illustrate the human skeletal structure with each vertebra clearly drawn and each acupuncture point identified. These are only a few of the displays that made Wat Po Thailand's first public university in the 19th century. Its murals and displays illustrated geology, astronomy, botany,

archaeology, literature, history, morality, warfare and other topics. When King Rama I opened these exhibits to the public, he offered knowledge and education to those outside the aristocracy for the first time.



Diagrams for Thai massage techniques at Wat Po.

In one of the courtyards, a woman sat beside a stack of bamboo bird cages. She beckoned to us. For a donation, she handed us one of the smaller cages. I held the cage as Mark opened the door. The bird flew away, carrying our wishes into the sky. Of course, after we left, the trained bird returned and waited for someone else to send their hopes fluttering into the air. We wondered if this was simply a tourist ploy, but a Thai waitress told us that she often went to the temple to set birds free.

The marvel of Wat Po is the Temple of the Reclining Buddha. When I first stepped inside the temple, all I could see between

two large pillars was a half-closed eye of the Buddha. Only when I stepped beyond the ornately painted pillars, did I realize what I was seeing: a Buddha whose reclining body is the length of the entire temple, a Buddha who is 160 feet long and 40 feet high and covered in pristine gold leaf. His toenails are the size of a human head.



Gilt, reclining Buddha statue at Wat Po, 1995.

The statue is so immense that is impossible to stand back and see it all from the front. The dozen pillars that support the roof obscure the view. Seeing the statue from the head or feet distorts the proportions, so the Buddha's legs seem preternaturally long. His head is supported by his hand and bent elbow. His hair is a meticulous pattern of perfect conical spirals. The soles of his feet are inlaid with designs in mother-of-pearl that depict the 108 auspicious signs. The kinnon and kinari, elephant, lion, water

buffalo, flower, snake and other figures symbolically show how a true Buddha can be recognized. As we walked beside the back of the Buddha, we dropped one satang coin (about five cents) in each of the 108 bronze bowls – again for good fortune. The blackened bowls rested on metal stands in the shadows against the wall. Sunlight from the windows striped the floor with light.

The Reclining Buddha shows the Buddha at the moment he was freed from the cycle of reincarnation and entered Nirvana. The Buddha is an example of how to achieve enlightenment, how to reach this moment and escape the suffering of the world. Any Thai monk will tell you that this is one of the founding principles of their religion: There is no god. Yet standing in front of this awesome statue after having seen the tiny Emerald Buddha atop his ornate altar, having circled the courtyard of Sitting Buddhas, it was hard to believe the Thai Buddha was not a god. Believers prayed and lit incense and brought flowers to their temples, to their Buddhas.

How could the intellectual concept of Buddha as a human example survive all of these rituals and icons? After all, Jesus began as a teacher, a shepherd depicted in the early tiled murals of Ravenna, Italy, yet he ultimately became an aspect of the Trinity, a part of the Christian God. Islam has escaped this deification of their prophet in part by prohibiting any depictions of Muhammad or Allah. The main tenet of their religion asserts:

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“There is no god but God (Allah), and Muhammad is the messenger of God.” In some ultra-conservative, Muslim nations depicting Muhammad or Allah in any way, even in a positive light in art is a crime and grounds for arrest and conviction. In any case, Buddhism does not have a creator God, and Buddha did not seek to become a god in his own time even if he has been saddled with some of the trappings of a god since his death.



Visiting the Aw Boon Haw Garden in Hong Kong, 1995.

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Two-thirds of my life



Mark and I were friends for a year, dated for a year, lived together for a year, and then got married, which is to say that by the time we got married, we knew each other as people. Even though we were quite young when we met in college in 1978, and still young when we married in 1981, our eyes hadn't been clouded with romance from the beginning.

When they hear how long Mark and I have been married, many of our contemporaries have asked me: What is the secret to a successful marriage? I would say that we always have had shared values, interests and beliefs, yet we've also been willing to give each other the time and space to pursue our separate interests and activities, to have our own friends. As the decades have passed, respecting each other's independence has become as important as the things we share. One thing I typically don't say, but I probably should say, is that you both should be madly in love and thoroughly committed to your relationship when you

become spouses or partners, because love and commitment are what will get you through a lifetime of challenges together, through the struggles of paying your bills when you're young and unemployed, to the emotional demands of supporting your partner if they become seriously ill or develop a disability. Another thing that I usually don't say is that you should find a companion as wonderful as Mark.

Growing up in Venezuela and then living in suburban New Orleans, I didn't have any role models for women who were wives and mothers and who also had the kind of professional career that I envisioned for myself. By the time I went to college, I surely had seen women who were juggling traditional women's roles and professional careers, but I already had made up my mind about my future. At some point, when Mark and I started dating seriously, I told him that I didn't want to have children, that I never would want to have children, so if having children mattered to him, he needed to find someone else for a long-term relationship. He was a little taken aback by this forthright statement, but he said that having children wasn't that important to him. So we kept dating.

I left Memphis to go to graduate school the year that Mark and I had started dating. When Mark came to visit me in Greensboro, I realized that I had fallen in love with him. I also realized that the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's creative writing

program left much to be desired, so I moved back to Memphis at the end of the semester in December of 1979.

Mark and I decided that we would move in together when we both started grad school at Memphis State in the fall of 1980. Little did we know how difficult it would be for an unmarried couple to find an apartment in the Bible Belt in 1980. At first, we would read the ads for available apartments in the newspaper, and I would call about promising places. The owners, typically women, invariably would start by asking me if I lived alone, and then was I married, and finally did I have a roommate who was a girlfriend. When I answered “no” to the last option, the women inevitably would sigh, and say: “I’m sorry, but I can’t rent to anyone like that. I’m a good Christian.” (I called the city’s housing department and discovered that discrimination on the basis of marital status was not illegal.)

Eventually, Mark started calling about the apartment ads, because owners rarely asked men about their living arrangements. We moved into a place, cleaned it, and then had to move out, because the bank lost \$400 of our money over the Labor Day weekend and bounced our deposit check. The owner, a good Christian woman, evicted us even though the bank called to tell her it was their fault the check had bounced. She assumed we weren’t married, because we had different last names on our check. She said that she tried to love us like a brother and sister,

but she could not condone “fornication.” She also kept \$50 of our money for her trouble, although we’d cleaned the place for her.

Finally, we found a duplex on North McLean Boulevard and paid the deposit from a second set of checks that we had printed with just Mark’s name on them to use for one purpose: to pay the rent. We didn’t want the owner to get suspicious because my last name was different from Mark’s last name. (Of course, I didn’t change my last name even when we got married.) The utilities, which we shared with the woman on the other side of the duplex, were in my name, because I had rented an apartment before, and Mark had only lived in a cooperative household. We hoped the house owner and the woman next door would never use our last names around each other, but I didn’t think the owner would care. Every time one of the daffodils in our yard would bloom, the plant would mysteriously disappear. Eventually, we discovered that he was digging them up, one by one, and replanting them in his own yard down the street!

Our 1920s house on McLean was designed like a New Orleans shotgun house, with no hallway. When you walked through the front door, you came into the living room, continued through sliding wood doors into the bedroom, which led into the dining area and then to the back door. The tiny kitchen was off to the left side, followed by a tiny bath with a second bedroom at the

end, which Mark used as a darkroom. That room was a badly built add-on, and you could see light through the corners of the room. The kitchen was so tiny, that when you opened the door of the old O'Keefe Merritt range, there were only a few inches between the edge of the oven door and the front of the opposite cabinet. The refrigerator wouldn't fit in the kitchen, so it sat in the dining area - hardly the ideal triangular design for cooking.

We may have shared the heating bill with the woman on the other side of the wall, but she got all of the heat, so we covered the windows with plastic sheeting on wood frames that Mark built so that we could take the plastic out when the weather changed. There was no air conditioning. All we had was a box fan during Memphis' hot, humid summers, but it was Mark's and my first home together, so how could we not love it despite its shortcomings and idiosyncrasies? We had a rattan throne chair, a cocktail table and four rattan dining chairs from my parents' Caracas apartments; a wooden rocker that belonged to my college roommate's aunt; and peach crates for bookcases. We started out with Mark's twin mattress on the floor until we could buy a full-size one (still on the floor). How we fit on a twin mattress, I can hardly imagine now, but we were young, in love, and happy to sleep with our limbs entwined like a puzzle.

A year later in 1981, Mark and I flew to the Yucatan Peninsula for three weeks, and without telling anyone in advance, we were

married in Merida, Mexico. All of our friends gave us wine glasses for wedding gifts; we had been serving wine to them in coffee mugs. For years, we wondered whether our ledger-size marriage license was legal in the United States, and then an attorney friend who works with Mexican immigrants told us that it was legal, because it has a purple stamp on it. So now we've been officially married for 43 years - unbelievable.

These days when high-school students apply to colleges, many of them fly or drive to multiple potential colleges all over the country to check out the schools and their locations. In 1982, after we both completed our master's degrees at Memphis State, we decided to move to Tucson, having never seen the city or the desert landscape, so that I could get my MFA in creative writing from the University of Arizona.

We held a yard sale, and we got rid of everything, except our new double mattress, our furniture, the TV my in-laws had given us as a wedding gift, Mark's stereo equipment, our clothing and the essential linens and kitchenware necessary to set up a household. Everything had to fit in a 4' x 4' U-Haul. Our friends Joe and Bob had agreed to come visit us in the fall and bring our boxes of books and our peach crates full of Mark's collection of 500+ records so that they wouldn't warp in the summer heat as we drove west. (We're still using those peach crates for storage in our garage 43 years later.)

We set off at night in late July driving my Grandmother Mae's 1964 Dodge pulling the U-Haul. Mark's grandfather had sold his Pinto, which was the model that had been recalled and modified to avoid the possibility of exploding. Our trip went fine until the third day, when the Dodge started overheating on the inclines. We ended up driving from sunset to sunrise and often being passed by semis because we were speeding along at 20 mph on I-10. Fortunately, the Dodge had a temperature gauge, so we knew when to pull off the road when the gauge jumped up.

One morning at 2 a.m., when Mark was napping and I was driving full speed on a straightaway at last, I realized there were headlights approaching straight in front of me. Someone was going the wrong way on the interstate! I blasted the horn, hoping they would pull onto the shoulder or into the other lane. When they didn't change lanes, I pulled into the left lane and passed them at the last minute. My heart was pounding. It was 1982; we didn't have a cell phone to call the Highway Patrol.

Ultimately, we turned up two days later than expected, at 4 a.m. at the front door of the house of the sister of a college friend. I had corresponded with Barbara Kingsolver during the summer, and she and her partner Joe Hoffmann had agreed to put us up while we looked for an apartment. Little did Mark and I know as we were unloading all the houseplants that we had brought 1,400

miles across the country with us, that Barbara and Joe would become our best friends in no time.

At that point, Barbara was working as a scientific writer while writing short stories and publishing some freelance journalism pieces on the side. (She soon began researching what would become her second book, “Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983.”) Barbara, her friend Janice Bowers (a botanist who was writing natural-history essays) and I started a women writers’ group modeled on a group I belonged to in Memphis. The number of writers in the group waxed and waned through the years, although the three of us were the core, and we read Barbara’s first successful and well-received novel, “The Bean Trees,” in manuscript as well “Holding the Line” and many of the short stories included in “Homeland and Other Stories.” Jan’s essays became part of her collections, “The Mountains Next Door” and “A Full Life in a Small Place: and other essays from a desert garden” while I received constructive feedback on the poems that would fill my MFA collection “Learning to Speak” as well as on subsequent poetry.

For several years, Mark and I would go over to Barbara and Joe’s house every Friday night for a potluck dinner and a bottle of wine, such a treat in the early years. Then, we all would go to the free movie at the UA Modern Languages Building. One couldn’t expect such a ritual to go on forever, but I did assume our close

friendship would go on forever. Perhaps, one always expects such things when you're young, but people's lives change. We saw less of Barbara and Joe when they moved to a house on the other side of town, and still less of them when they had a smart, charming baby girl and their circle of friends expanded to include friends with children. Somewhere along the way Barbara, Jan and I left the writing group, one by one, but I was happy that the group continued on without its founding members. Barbara, of course, became a much-beloved bestselling author and then a Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist.

When Barbara and Joe divorced, Mark and I saw still less of both of them, but when they each remarried, we were able to pick up our relationships with them, although the dynamics changed somewhat with two new spouses – both interesting people – in the mix. Barbara and her second husband, Steven Hopp, had a daughter, and then the family moved across the country to Virginia. Joe, who was one of the smartest people I've ever known, directed the Bioresources Research Facility and held academic appointments in two departments at the university, died tragically young at age 52. We still see Barbara periodically when she comes through Tucson on book tours, which is always a pleasure, because despite her fame and fortune, Barbara is still the warm and generous person who opened her home to two strangers at 4 a.m. that July in 1982. Of course, none of us knew

what our futures held when we were making up the sofa bed in Barbara and Joe's living room over 40 years ago.

With the driving delays, we were on a tight schedule to find housing. There were "For Rent" signs everywhere, but rents reflected Tucson's cost of living, which was higher than that in Memphis, and some places had things like orange carpeting on the walls or purple paint. We chose the University Apartments, the first buildings constructed as apartments in Tucson.

Located at the corner of University Boulevard and Sixth Avenue, the apartments were only seven blocks from the university's main gate, so I could walk to the university, and Mark could have the car for work. The first-floor apartment's rent was more than we had hoped to pay, but we loved its wood floors, vintage light fixtures and 11 windows (counting the two in the doors). It had an alcove for my desk, and a second bedroom with a linoleum floor for Mark's darkroom, as well as a pool for me to cool off in after my hot walks back from the university. Mark and I had been married for a year by then, so our "living in sin" would not have come up, but it wouldn't have mattered in Tucson, which even in 1982 had laws regarding joint tenancy. As we explored Tucson, we were happy to discover that we had moved to the liberal bastion in the midst of a conservative state with a beautiful landscape.

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As soon as my '64 Dodge crossed into the Sonoran Desert, Mark fell in love with the spare, sere landscape and its amazing saguaro cacti. He started photographing it almost immediately. It took me a little longer to catch my breath in the dry air, to not grow thirsty in the parched land. Eventually, I wrote poems about the desert as well.

We lived in the University Apartments for a couple of years. We weren't in a position to buy a house, but we decided that we wanted the privacy of living in a house after two years of living below an apartment with a couple who argued regularly when the woman wasn't doing calisthenics overhead.



Mark in front of our 1920s house at Fifth and Fifth.

We found a small (800 square feet), 1920s brick house at the corner of Fifth Street and Fifth Avenue, not far from our apartment. Mark used the second bedroom for a darkroom, and I put my desk, a small bookcase and a four-drawer, Hon filing cabinet in the corner of the living room for my office. The only heat was from a small radiator in the fireplace, which was useless, so we bought an oil heater that was shaped like a radiator. During the day, I would roll it beside my desk to heat up the corner of the living room (aka my office space), and at night we would close off our bedroom and use the heater to create a toasty sleeping space. Aside from the owner, who lived next door and would never fix anything on a timely basis, our little house was a great home, and we lived there for three years until we could buy our first house in 1987.

In Tucson, it took Mark two years to find a professional job in his field. Initially, he volunteered as a cablecaster at Tucson Community Cable Corporation (later Access Tucson), the provider for the city's public access television stations, and when they created their first staff Cablecast Coordinator position, they hired Mark for the job, initially part-time and then full-time. Of course, he was working more than 20 hours/week from the beginning, so when it came to house hunting, I was the one who was riding around with the real estate agent looking at potential houses. Unfortunately, we had agreed to work with a novice

agent because she was an artist who was starting a new career, and we wanted to support her – a big mistake.

The real estate agent had not previewed any of the houses that she and I went to view, so we looked at every available three-bedroom house in our price range within five miles of downtown, including houses in good and bad neighborhoods, even a house with a 2' x 3' hole in the floor. By the time Mark had a day off to come and look at houses with us, I had previewed 80 houses and was fed up. When we got to the eighth house of the day, I didn't even want to go in because it looked boring on the outside. Mark persuaded me to look at it, and I was disappointed that it didn't have a dining room, which I wanted, just a breakfast area in the kitchen. I can't remember my third issue with the house, so obviously it wasn't a big problem. The most important thing was that it wasn't a fixer-upper, even though it was built in 1948.

We made an offer on the house, and based on the advice of our agent and some mortgage officials, we decided not to lock in the interest rate, which was high. On Friday, Oct. 16, 1987, we started getting frantic calls from our real estate agent and the title company saying that we needed to come in immediately and lock in our interest rate because the stock market was falling precipitously. The interest rate had risen one percent to over 10%, so we had to come up with another \$1,000 for our down

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payment to be able to afford the monthly payments. We signed the paperwork before close of business on Friday, when the stock market fell over 100 points. On Black Monday, the Dow Jones fell 508 points, the largest percentage one-day drop (22.8%) in its history. There was talk of another Great Depression, which did not happen thanks to the Federal Reserve's actions. After we moved into our home, we took out our first life insurance policies, because it took both of our incomes to cover the mortgage payments, and we didn't want to have to sell the house if one of us died. We bought two sets of do-it-yourself wills, living wills and powers-of-attorney forms. I was 30, and Mark was 28. We definitely had grown up.



Our Desert Avenue home in the era's gray and mauve palette.

Our house on North Desert Avenue was 1,150 square feet, and the rooms were small, but for the first time, I had an entire room for

my office. (We painted the living room walls gray, and the mauves were accent colors in the furniture. The other rooms were painted different colors.) Mark's darkroom was a converted back porch. Because the previous owner was a painter, the darkroom was already vented. The backyard was mostly dirt with one large tree, but we planted a lime tree to shield my office window from the western sun. For many years, I grew vegetables more and less successfully along a strip of the backyard. A 250-square-foot workshop provided great storage, although its construction by "Bud" (signed in the concrete pad) was definitely not up to code; some of the electrical wiring had been done with telephone wire. The previous owner, who was an acquaintance and a new co-worker at the University of Arizona Museum of Art where I had just started working part-time as an Information Specialist, had not mentioned that Desert Avenue was in a flood plain that ended halfway up our front yard, so the street ran curb to curb with water during the monsoon rains.

All the time that we lived on Desert Avenue, our good friend Hoge Day helped us with many projects, since he had carpentry and construction experience. He and Mark built a carport, and then a back porch roof to deal with a flooding issue we had at the back door. The three of us spent many evenings eating home-cooked meals, drinking wine, and laughing over TV episodes of "Mystery Science Theater" after some home project.

Mark and Hoge were both members of the Dinnerware Artists' Cooperative Gallery in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Hoge and Mark started playing and writing rock music together, too, although they didn't form a band and play out back then. While Hoge spent a decade living in New York City to promote his artwork, Mark's first band, The Stellas, performed some of Mark's and Hoge's songs and other original music at local bars. (The drummer Kini Wade isn't included in the photo below.) Our friend Tim and I would go and hang out waiting for the band to start and the crowds to filter in. The Stellas also played some songs composed of Mark's original music and lyrics created from my poems. They self-produced and recorded two CDs.



Mark Taylor, Erin Youra and Geoff Towne of The Stellas.

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When Hoge moved back to Tucson, he and Mark formed The Introverts, recorded a CD, and began playing out in local bars with drummer Daniel Behrend and bassist Blair Forward. One of the effects of Covid in our lives is that The Introverts stopped playing gigs, although Mark and Hoge have continued writing and recording music. Mark has since started writing and recording his own experimental, ambient, electronic music under the name Whale of Noise.



Mark Taylor, Daniel Behrend and Hoge Day of The Introverts.

I never thought about our home on Desert Avenue as a career training ground, but in a way it was. Years before I considered becoming an interior designer, I designed and oversaw a remodel for our bathroom. When Mark's job at TCCC started expanding into computer support, he began teaching himself computer programming. He set up a computer network in our house,

running cabling from his combination office and darkroom to the house's exterior, above the back door and then back indoors into my office. The knowledge he gained at home, plus his work at TCCC, led to his second career in information technology, and his job as the City of Tucson's first Webmaster and then as a Project Manager in the City's IT department.

In 2001, we decided that we could afford to buy a larger home with the dining room that I had wanted all along so that we could host dinners and have more room to entertain our friends. We still wanted to live in midtown Tucson, but we hadn't intended to buy a house 0.6 miles from our house on Desert Avenue. Although the houses are just over half a mile apart and were built three years apart, they are in completely different neighborhoods. The Desert Avenue neighborhood is a post-WWII subdivision, while our house on East Holmes Street is in Poets' Corner, a neighborhood of custom-built 1950s houses. The reason for the neighborhood's name is that the streets are named for poets: Holmes, Kilmer, Poe, Whitman, Burns.

We told our new real estate agent that we wanted a house with some architectural interest. From the outside, our Holmes Street house looks like a brick, ranch house more suited to the suburbs than the city. Inside is a different story. Step through the front door, and you realize the house is not rectangular. The living room is canted off the entry hall so that the coat closet is

triangular. Although the ceilings are only eight feet high, most of them are coved on the exterior edge. The house had been fully remodeled, except for the bathrooms, which had been partially remodeled when we bought it. After we bought the house on Holmes Street, we found a full set of the house plans and a folder of receipts for some of the original owners' early purchases, including two palm trees (\$8 each) that are still standing tall on the property.

I have to say that we didn't work on our house or travel a great deal during the first decade of the 21st century; I was preoccupied with changing careers. By 2011, I had been working as an interior designer for six years, and we were ready to "remodel" our backyard and get rid of the patch of ugly Bermuda grass that we had inherited but stopped watering.



Our new Holmes Street backyard design reused on-site bricks.

We hired a landscape designer to design a back porch with a ceiling high enough for a fan and a second patio with a fire bowl so that we could extend our season for outdoor living. The landscape designer created the sustainable design that we wanted for the whole backyard using regional plants, creating swales, capturing the water off the roof, upcycling an old propane tank into a fire bowl, and even designing an art feature that suggested water but didn't use water. I specified many of the sustainable products, and I found old bricks at a salvage yard to match the 1950s bricks we were reusing from the backyard. Instead of grass, we had pebbles.

Mark happily retired from the City of Tucson at age 56 in January of 2015. That spring, we set off on a five-week driving tour of Western national (plus some state) parks. Zion, Bryce, Arches, Canyonlands, Grand Teton, Yellowstone, Glacier and Waterstone (in Canada) were some of the parks we visited. Yellowstone is so big that it was 100 miles from our cabin to the other side of the park. We saw some fabulous landscapes and logged over 5,000 miles on our Prius during the trip. I didn't retire and close my interior design firm until the summer of 2016, when it became clear that I couldn't run a one-person business and do the kind of traveling Mark was now free to do.

That same year, a crack in the water filter in our refrigerator managed to flood enough of our house in two hours while we

were away that we needed to replace the wood flooring in the whole house. It turned out that there was asbestos under part of our wood flooring, so we ended up spending December in an extended-stay hotel near our house during the asbestos abatement and floor replacement. We had to pack up everything in our house, except our kitchen things, and leave it sitting in storage units in our driveway. There is something to be said for purging your belongings every 14-15 years. On our current schedule, we'll be due for a purge in 2030, but I'd rather do it voluntarily than as a result of a crisis.



Our remodeled primary bathroom at our Holmes Street home.

We remodeled our bathrooms in 2015 as part of the floor replacement since we wanted to incorporate a dressing room with wood flooring into the small primary bathroom, which had tile flooring. We decided to remodel our kitchen in early 2020, which was 20 years after its last remodel. Things went pretty smoothly, and I was grateful that we finished the remodel in February of 2020, a few weeks before Tucson's Covid-19 lockdown, when we began eating in and cooking together more than we had in the previous two decades. Now, we have essentially remodeled our entire home, and we are only replacing a few things and doing maintenance on our "forever home."

Around year seven in Tucson, I started to get antsy. We had bought our first house on Desert Avenue two years before, but I had never lived in one city for longer than seven years. Emotionally, some part of me was thinking: Surely, it was time to move. We had never intended to stay in Tucson beyond my years in graduate school, and Mark had even applied for some jobs in Los Angeles, but they had not paid enough for us to live a comparable lifestyle in L.A. compared to Tucson because of California's high cost of living. We would have to rent again and give up our Desert Avenue house. We loved having a backyard. Even though it was just two trees, a trellis of cat's claw vine, a concrete slab for a patio and a set of patio furniture, it was ours (and the bank's). We've always been drawn to the cultural hubs

of big cities, but Tucson is an easy place to live with its casual lifestyle and just enough restaurants and cultural amenities to be acceptable for an urban life. We now have spent 43 years living in midtown Tucson.

Thirty-six years ago, when I let go of the restless sense that I should move on and leave this place behind, I didn't realize I was laying the groundwork for an answer to the question that people are always asking me: Where are you from? My answer now is that after living here for 43 years, I'm from Tucson. It's my home. The answer doesn't satisfy everyone, because some people assume that knowing someone's place of birth will reveal something essential about their identity and cultural heritage. (Knowing that I was born in Houston would tell you nothing about me, because my family moved away when I was two.) My identity is tied to place; it's just tied to many places, in the plural. It's tied to being an ex-pat child (aka a third-culture kid), to growing up in a country where I wasn't born; to traveling happily to places where I don't belong; to making a home with Mark in a place unlike any other place I had ever known. Importantly, so importantly, I have had a fellow traveler on my journeys through two-thirds of my life. If I had been traveling alone or with someone other than Mark, my stories would be different and I would have become a different person. I cannot even imagine that, nor would I want to contemplate it.

There is so much more that I could write about Mark's and my life together, from the funny stories to the poignant ones. Writing about the places we've lived is simply one path through the 47 years we've known each other. The "Chronology" features an illustrated list of the over 50 trips that we have taken together through those years, but only the essays on Mexico, Venice and Thailand say anything about how amazing those trips have been and what they have meant in our lives. Ideally, travel is about more than sightseeing. Among other things, it is about the creation of shared memories, the moments that neither of us will forget, the stories that will come up again and again through the years.

I haven't shared the essay that I wrote for "Exploring the Interior" about our 1993 trip to England, Scotland, and Ireland, with our experiences of chatting with the locals at a Dublin pub, searching for the Dogden Stone in a mucky farm field, happening upon Druids at Stonehenge, and more. I have just shared the journey's end in New York in "The Poet's Affliction," where I had the generalized seizure that upended my life and sent me on a journey through illness and loss. There, at the beginning, when I didn't even know where I was, I found a certainty that had eluded me through much of my life. It was the look in Mark's eyes when I was lying on a gurney in a New York hospital: his fear of losing me, my knowledge that in that moment I was the

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most important thing in the universe for him. Now when Mark comes home and holds me close, when I see his dark eyes glistening with tenderness and joy that I am here in his arms, I know it, too: He is what matters to me, more than poetry, more than religion, more than anything I ever imagined would make me happy.

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A chronology of life and travel



1957-I was born in Houston, Texas.



My mother and me in Campo Mata.

1959-My family moved to Campo Mata, Venezuela.

1965-My family moved to Caracas, Venezuela.

1968-My family moved to Metairie, La.

1974-I graduated from St. Martin's Protestant Episcopal High School and moved to Memphis, Tenn., to attend Southwestern at

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Memphis (later Rhodes College).



My high-school graduation photo, 1974.

1976-I spent one semester traveling in England (Bath), Morocco (Fez), Israel (Jerusalem and Eilat), Iran (Tehran and Isfahan), and India (New Delhi, Agra and Varanasi) as part of the International School of America's International Honors Program.



Moroccan bride before a traditional wedding ritual, 1976.

1978-I graduated from Southwestern and spent the summer traveling in England, Paris and Spain (mostly southern Spain).

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1979-I spent one semester at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in its MFA in Creative Writing program.

1980-Mark and I began MA programs at Memphis State University (later the University of Memphis).

1981-Mark and I spent three weeks traveling in Mexico's Yucatan peninsula (Chichen Itza, Uxmal and the Isla de Mujeres) and were married in Merida, Mexico.

1982-Mark and I graduated from Memphis State University and moved to Tucson, Ariz. for me to attend graduate school at the University of Arizona.

1984-I began my 20-year career as a freelance writer when I started working at the "Tucson Weekly" as its first art critic.

1985-I graduated from the UA with an MFA in creative writing. We traveled to New York City, Washington, D.C., and Acadia National Park in Maine for Robin Burks' and Dee Foss' commitment ceremony and celebration.

1986-We spent three weeks on Oahu and the island of Hawai'i.

1987-We bought our house on North Desert Avenue in Tucson.

1988-We spent Christmas week in San Carlos, Mexico.

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1989-We spent three weeks on Oahu, Kauai, and Hawai'i and witnessed the Kilauea volcanic eruptions.

1991-We spent a week in Mazatlán, Mexico hoping to see the full solar eclipse to no avail, because of last minute cloud coverage.



The Grand Canal in Venice, 1992.

1992-We spent a month traveling in Italy (Milan, Florence, Venice, Ravenna, Cavalese, Rome and Sienna).

1993-We spent a month traveling in England (London, Salisbury and Oxford), Ireland (Dublin), and Scotland (Edinburgh) with a short stopover in New York City on the way home.



Buildings on the Wat Po temple grounds in Bangkok, 1995.

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1995-We spent three weeks traveling in Thailand (Bangkok and Surin) and Hong Kong.

1996-We traveled to Vancouver and Victoria for our 15th anniversary.



Abbey of Mont St. Michel, France (at night), 2000.

2000-We spent a month driving around France (Paris, Versailles, Chartres, Mont St. Michel, Anger, Tours, Cognac, Bordeaux, St. Emilion, Agen, Toulouse, Montpellier, Nime, Arles, Aix-en-Provence, Avignon, Cassis, and Fontainebleu).

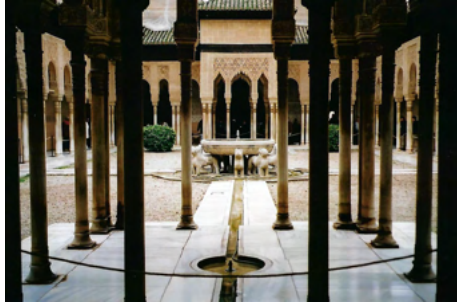
-I met my father in New Orleans, and we flew to Montgomery, Texas for the Fuller's and Crawford's 50th wedding anniversary party, which was an unofficial Campo Mata reunion, too.

2001-We spent a week in Sedona, Ariz. for our 20th wedding anniversary.

-We bought our home on East Holmes Street.

2002-We spent a week in New York City.

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The Alhambra in Grenada, Spain, 2003.

2003-We spent a month in Spain (Madrid, Cordoba, Barcelona, Alicante, and Granada for New Year's Eve).

2005-I graduated from the Art Center Design College (later the Southwest University of the Visual Arts) with an AA in interior design.

-I started my first full-time job as an interior designer at American Home.



Mark and I on our 25th anniversary in Nikko, Japan, 2006.

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2006-We spent two weeks in Japan for our 25th anniversary (Osaka, Tokyo, Kyoto, Nara, and Nikko).

2007-We spent a week each in Prague and Budapest.



Hungarian Parliament on the Danube River in Budapest, 2007.

2008-We went to Pasadena, Calif., to see our friends Robin Burks and Debra Hori.

-We went to Memphis and to New Orleans, three years after Hurricane Katrina.

-We went to San Francisco and San Jose for a few days for the Associated Writing Programs conference, where I was promoting my poetry book, "A Bruised Light."

-I opened Greener Lives LLC, my own interior design firm that specialized in healthy, sustainable homes.

2009-We spent two weeks traveling in France (Vacqueyeres, Orange, Rousillon, and Carcassone) and in Spain (Barcelona and Girona) with our friends Jeff Hall and Carol Goodwin.

A Life of Journeys Pamela Portwood



Mark and I during our 30th anniversary in Europe, 2011.

2011-We spent three weeks traveling in northern Europe for our 30th anniversary (Berlin, Hamburg, Brussels, Bruges, Weesp, Amsterdam, and Edam).

2013-We spent several days in Asheville, N.C., with the Taylors and visited our friend Guri Andermann.

2014-We spent a week in Chicago.



Visiting the Chicago Museum of Natural History, 2014.

A Life of Journeys Pamela Portwood



Mark playing a piano that was sitting in a Chicago park, 2014.

2015-We spent a week in San Diego to celebrate Mark's retirement from the City of Tucson.

-We spent five weeks driving through numerous national and state parks from Arizona to Glacier National Park and Waterton Park in Canada.

-We drove up to Lafayette, Colo. to visit Mark's cousin Keith Pope and to attend a blue grass festival in Lyons, Colo.



Geothermal feature at Yellowstone National Park, 2015.

A Life of Journeys Pamela Portwood

2016–We spent three weeks in Japan during cherry blossom (“sakura” in Japanese) season for an early celebration of our 35th anniversary. After experiencing earthquakes in Beppu, we changed our itinerary and ended up visiting Tokyo, Ise, Kyoto, and Kobe.

–We celebrated our anniversary proper with a few days in Las Vegas.

–I closed my interior design firm Greener Lives, LLC, and retired as an interior designer.



“Rainy Night, Tokyo” from Mark’s 2016 “Sakura” series.



Celebrating our 35th anniversary in Las Vegas, 2016.

A Life of Journeys Pamela Portwood



Palacio da Pena in Sintra, Portugal, 2017.

2017-We spent one week each in Portland and Seattle.

-We spent three weeks in Portugal (Lisbon, Belem, Coimbra, Nazare, Sintra, Aveiro, Oporto, Alijo, Amares, and Braga).

-We spent a week in Charleston, S.C.

-We drove up to Boise, Idaho to see the full solar eclipse.

-We met the Taylors and spent a few days in Sedona.



Fjallsarlón glacier lagoon in Iceland, 2018.

A Life of Journeys Pamela Portwood

2018–We spent three weeks in Iceland (Reykjavik, Hella, Westman Island, Keflavik, Vik, Stykkisholmer, Akureyri, and Hofn), including the first week with my sister-in-law Kristy Taylor.

–We spent a week in Mexico City.



Outsider art from Mexico City's Museo de Arte Popular, 2018.

2019–We spent a week in New York City.

–We spent a week in Philadelphia and Lancaster, Penn.

2020–We spent a week in San Diego for our 39th anniversary and a small respite from over three months of the Covid-19 stay-at-home order in Tucson.



Mark and I at the Henry Miller Memorial Library in California.

A Life of Journeys Pamela Portwood

2021-We spent three weeks in California to celebrate our 40th anniversary, starting with a week in San Francisco and then driving down the coast to Monterey, Carmel, Paso Robles, and San Luis Obispo.

-We spent two weeks in NYC visiting galleries and museums while I researched my “21st Century Women Photographers” manuscript, as well as a week in Toronto and a week in Ottawa.



View from Karlskirche Cathedral, Vienna, 2022.

2022-We spent a week in San Diego for my birthday.

-We spent a week in Vienna with Kristy Taylor. Then we flew to Venice for five days and saw the Venice Biennale. We took a train to Salzburg and then Zurich. We ended up extending our stay in Zurich because we both caught Covid-19. At that time, a negative Covid test was required to board a U.S.-bound plane.

-We spent a week in Chicago for our anniversary.

-We visited Kristy Taylor and several friends in Memphis and then drove to Murphreesboro, Tenn., to visit my brother's family

and my friend Jane Marcellus.



Antelope Canyon, Ariz., 2023.

2023-We spent a week in Miami.

-A two-week driving trip through the Southwest took us to the Trinity Test Site in Alamogordo, N.M.; Santa Fe, N.M. (to see Meow Wolf); Taos, N.M. (to visit a friend); Page, Ariz. (to see Antelope Canyon); and Flagstaff, Ariz. to end the journey.

-We spent a week in Boston, and then we drove up the coast to Kennebunk and Portland, Maine, with a daytrip to Salem, Mass.

-We spent a week in Chicago with Kristy Taylor, which included a weekend in Schaumburg, Ill., for Mark's Knobcon conference. Then Mark and I went on to Milwaukee, where our rental Kia was stolen. When we got to Madison, Wis., Mark came down with Covid-19.

A Life of Journeys Pamela Portwood

-We took a spur-of-the-moment, 11-day trip to London to see Brian Eno's first solo show, although we did many other things.



Mark and I outside the Fukuoka Art Museum, Japan, 2024.

2024-We spent 10 days in Memphis visiting Kristy Taylor, Jan Schoemaker, Mari Trevelyan, and other friends.

-We traveled to Austin hoping to see a total solar eclipse but ended up seeing only a near-total eclipse because of cloud cover. We visited our friend Carol Goodwin.

-We spent a week in Minneapolis celebrating our 43th wedding anniversary.

-We spent three weeks in Japan (Tokyo, Kamakura, Nagasaki, and Fukuoka).

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Jan Schoemaker.

-In remembrance of my good friend Jan Schoemaker who died in 2024.

Credits



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Cover

-Detail of a portrait of Pamela Portwood by Mark Taylor, ca. 1979-1982.

My American childhood

-High-school graduation portrait of Pamela Portwood by David Nelson Studio.

My mother's stories

-Publicity photograph for "The Effects of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds" by Arthur W. Tong.

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Fiestaware and photographs

-Stone, Robert Kenneth. "The Life History of Robert Kenneth Stone." Los Altos, Calif.: privately printed, n.d.

My father and the American Dream

-Photograph of Norm Portwood sitting on his back porch by Pamela Portwood.

-Color photograph of Pamela and Norm Portwood on his visit to Tucson by Alice Portwood.

Behind the veil in Iran

-This text was originally published as an independent essay under the title "Behind the Veil: A Woman's Travels in Pre-Revolutionary Iran" in "The Cool Traveler," late summer 1991.

-All photographs by Pamela Portwood (except the portrait of Pamela Portwood).

Not politics as usual

-Photographs of Women's March, protest of executive order ban, People's Climate March and Streetcar Facility tour by Pamela Portwood.

-Photograph of girl and her dad planting a garden at Holloway School by Georgette Rosberg.

So much began in a photography class

A Life of Journeys Pamela Portwood

-All photographs by Pamela Portwood or Mark Taylor, as indicated in the photo captions.

An intimate exchange of vows

-Both photographs by Mark Taylor.

Halflife - writing poetry and more

-Portwood, Pamela. "The Purple Air." In "Memphis State Review," fall 1981.

-Portwood, Pamela. "Halflife." In "Sistersong," fall 1993.

-Portwood, Pamela. "The Falling Sickness" and "Doestoyevsky: Morbus Divinus." In "A Bruised Light." Scottsdale, Ariz.: Star Cloud Press, 2006.

- "A Bruised Light" book cover illustration by Hoge Day.

Visits to Venice

-Four photographs of Venice by Mark Taylor. Color photos shot in 2022.

-Photographs of Leonora Carrington and Yunchul Kim artworks by Pamela Portwood.

A generic Protestant

-Photograph of old fort in India by Pamela Portwood.

-Suzuki, Shunryu. "Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind." New York: John Weatherhill, Inc., 1970.

-Slater, Phillip. "The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point." Boston: Beacon Press, 1970.

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A lifetime of Christmas ornaments

- All photographs of Christmas ornaments by Pamela Portwood.
- Photograph of our 2020 Christmas tree in our Holmes Street house by Mark Taylor.

My second career as an interior designer

- Rooney, E. Ashley, ed. "Bungalow Transformation." In "LEEDing the Way: Domestic Architecture for the Future: LEED Certified, Green Passive & Natural," 134-135. Atglen, Penn.: Schiffer Publishing, 2015. (Text with photos about Pamela Portwood's award-winning design.)
- Photographs of my American Home interior design and my "LEEDing the Way" interior design by Robin Stancliff.
- Photograph of Pamela Portwood at the ASID awards gala by Mark Taylor.

Family ties

- Portwood, Pamela. "Portwood-Stone Family History and Photographs." Mixbook, 2011.
- Wedding photograph of David and Barbara Portwood by Brittney LaRee' Photography.

The poet's affliction

- LaPlante, Eve. "Seized: Temporal Lobe Epilepsy as a Medical, Historical, and Artistic Phenomenon." New York: Harper Collins, 1993.

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-Temkin, Owsei. "The Falling Sickness: A History of Epilepsy from the Greeks to the Beginnings of Modern Neurology." 2nd ed. London: John Hopkins University Press, 1971.

Cultivating good fortune in Thailand

-All photographs by Mark Taylor.

Two-thirds of my life

-Photograph of The Introverts at Monterey Court by Pamela Portwood.

-Photograph of our Holmes Street backyard by Mark Taylor.

-Photograph of our Holmes Street bathroom by Pamela Portwood.

A chronology of life and travel

-Photographs by Pamela Portwood:

Moroccan bride (1976), Mark playing piano at a Chicago park (2014), Yellowstone Park geothermal feature (2015), Sintra palace (2017), Iceland glaciers (2018), Mexican outsider art (2018), Karlskirche Cathedral (2022), WNDR Museum (2023), Antelope Canyon (2023) and Westminster Abbey (2023).

-Photographs by Mark Taylor:

Venice Grand Canal (1992), Kinari figure in Bangkok (1995), Mont St. Michel, France (2000), Alhambra, Spain (2003), our 25th anniversary portrait (2006), Hungarian Parliament, Budapest (2007), Pamela at Chicago Museum of Natural History

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(2014), “Rainy Night, Tokyo” (2016) and Mark and Pamela at the Henry Miller Memorial Library (2021).

-Detail of a photograph of Jan Schoemaker by Karen Sobel.

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