

Twenty writers attending The Write Retreat at Stanford Sierra Camp collectively present over forty works of fiction, non-fiction and poetry. From humorous anecdotes of childhood to endearing tales of final days, this anthology speaks boldly of life.

The Fallen Leaf Anthology

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**THE FALLEN LEAF
ANTHOLOGY**

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Imagining the Moon

Roberta L. Riedel

“We should go to the moon,” the small voice says.

I struggle to open my eyes, the wall next to the bed just a blue blur. Did someone say something or was it part of a dream? I am still groggy and my brain does not quite register. Too early, I think.

“Mom. We need to go to the moon,” the voice insists.

I roll over to find my four-year-old daughter sitting cross-legged next to me in bed, head down dark chin-length curls obscuring her profile. Mom? When did she graduate from Mommy to Mom? I somehow missed that transition and I find it unsettling.

She picks up the book and points to the picture, “We need to go to the moon.”

Goodnight Moon, I read. Apparently, the book is a lot more suggestive than I realized. It was one of my favorites as a child, and I wanted to pass along the pleasure to my daughter, but now I am having second thoughts.

“The moon is a pretty hard place to get to, sweetie.”

“You shouldn’t let little things get in the way,” she says.

I recognize the phrase. It is what I say when she makes some excuse about why she has not put away her toys. She has reached the mimicking stage. What other sayings have I taught her that I will come to regret? It reminds me of my younger sister growing up—as a six year old she used to complain, “The girls are bothering me,” when she was unhappy with her older sisters, as if she was not one of the girls.

“You’re right. We shouldn’t let little things get in our way.” Getting to the moon hardly qualifies as little, but that will be lost on a four year old and I let it go. I stretch and yawn and pull myself out of bed. “When were you thinking of going to the moon?”

“I want to go tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” I turn to look at her. “That’s a big trip, honey. It will take a lot of planning, and time to get ready. We’ll need special clothes that stores don’t carry, and special food. I’ll need to request vacation from work, and we’ll have to make reservations on a rocket ship; those things book up really far in advance.” How do you tell your daughter her ambition is beyond reach without destroying the dream?

“Let’s go get some breakfast,” I say. “We can start a to-do list for our trip to the moon.”

We paddle our way out to the kitchen, the cat racing past to beat us there, a thundering herd of elephants in four pint-sized paws, anxious for breakfast too. I watch as Sally surveys the selection of cereal, choosing Cheerios, her favorite. I pull out the Grape Nuts, feed the cat, and start the coffee. What other ideas will Sally come up with before the day is through, I wonder. Maybe I should hide all the books. We start work on our trip-to-the-moon planning list and get as far as research rocket ship flights, purchase space suits, and start discussing meal planning when Sally, bored by the details and having finished her bowl of Cheerios, climbs down from the chair and heads back to her room.

Children start to grow into their bodies at four years old; they develop form. You can see their muscles start to take shape. Sally has the look of a lithe dancer; the same height as others her age, she has these long legs that move with grace and agility. Her cocoa butter skin reveals her African American ancestry, but her Germanic nose comes from my father's side of the family. Her best feature is her eyes—the color of honey, they draw you in with their warmth.

When I look in on her later, I find her playing with her Margaret rag doll from Dennis the Menace. Margaret sports an ever-optimistic T-shirt that reads, "Someday a woman will be President!" We can only hope. Having banned all Barbies from the premises, it gives me great pleasure that Margaret is my daughter's favorite doll and that, as of this morning, Sally harbors aspirations to travel to the moon.

###

Our town library is housed in an exquisite building from the turn of the century with wood siding and a covered porch evocative of leisurely life and Southern hospitality. You walk up three broad steps to get to the front door; the checkout counter in the foyer greets you like the registration desk of a grand hotel. Each room on the ground floor houses its own genre: fiction and its siblings, science fiction and mystery, in the grand ballroom, non-fiction in the solarium and adjoining dining room, reference material in the study. The basement holds the newspaper and microfilm archives of yesteryear. The plebeian public is banned from the two upper floors, an eternal disappointment.

Sally and I make our way to the children's section tucked under the grand staircase, a cozy but surprisingly spacious hideaway complete with undersized chairs and tables and a Noah's ark of stuffed animals of all kinds and sizes. Sally always makes herself at home, talking to her favorite animals as she makes the rounds through the legions of picture books, taking an armful to

one of the tables and engaging in serious study. I wait until she is fully absorbed with her selection before making a quick jaunt to the juvenile and young adult section in the butler's pantry. Like a veteran traveler, I pick up a book on the moon to prepare for our trip. Apparently, travelogues on the moon are in short supply; the book I choose is hardly the caliber of Fodor's but it will do.

The spring weather is in full force when we walk down the steps, arms laden with the day's reward. Kids are playing capture the flag on the lawn amid fruit tree blossoms that flutter down and disappear like melting snow. Jimmy, blonde hair flying and stout legs a constant motion, comes running up the walk, his mother Monica hurrying to keep up.

"What books did you get?" Jimmy asks, and they squat down to look at Sally's haul, the books heaped on the ground, Sally enthusiastically chatting up the merits of her selections.

"And when we're done with these books, we're going to the moon," she says. "Mom got a book to plan the trip."

Monica lifts her eyebrows at me and I nod in agreement. "I have a book on the moon right here." I pat the book under my arm. "Lots to do to prepare for a trip to the moon." I smile.

"How are you getting there?" Monica asks with a laugh, trying to maintain the pretext.

"It might take us a while to figure out," I say with a knowing look. "Any spare space ships in the parking lot?" I add with a sense of false hope.

Jimmy starts pulling his mother's hand as he heads towards the stairs, anxious to find his own prize selection of books. I hear his distant voice as we make our way to the car, "Can we go to the moon, too?"

###

Pete is a long-time colleague, an engineer who works on space shuttle systems. Receding brown hair and just a hint of a paunch, he keeps in shape with myriad sports leagues. I call him my middle-aged jock friend. Full of good humor and wit, he has just walked in from his Sunday afternoon basketball game when I call.

"Pete's liquor and ale. We have liquor for whatever ails ya," Pete jokes as he answers the phone.

I cannot help but laugh. "Pete, it's Marla."

"Hey, Marla. How's my little sweet pea?" He is asking about my daughter, not me. He conjured up the moniker a number of years ago to needle me about some long-forgotten incident, and has reincarnated the nickname since getting to know Sally.

“She’s decided she needs to go to the moon.”

“Whoa Nellie, she wants to be a space cowgirl. What, did you read her a biography of her namesake Sally Ride?”

“I’m saving that for her tenth birthday. She came up with the idea after reading Goodnight Moon.”

“Goodnight Moon? I think my nieces had that book, and they aspired to be princesses. You gotta admit the kid has ambition.”

“I’m not sure it’s ambition, more of a road trip really. We’re supposed to leave tomorrow.”

Pete’s full-bodied laughter resonates over the phone, and I start to chuckle myself. “I think you deserve this kid,” he finally gets out.

“Yeah well, I bought myself some time by telling her that rocket ship reservations are in short supply. I hate to disappoint her, but my rolodex doesn’t include any astronauts.”

“I can probably finagle a tour of the space station exhibit.”

I feel a small sense of relief. “That would be great. Sally would love that.”

#

The moon is 385,000 kilometers from Earth, and littered with craters formed by meteorites, dark basins now filled with smooth lava—our bedtime reading for this night tells us. We are in Sally’s room, gazing through the window at a luminescent full moon and discussing our trip.

“How far away is that?” Sally asks.

“It says the distance is 9-1/2 times the Earth’s circumference.” Sally furrows her forehead trying to understand the advanced math. “It’s like taking 9-1/2 trips around the world.”

“Will it take long to get there?”

“Oh, about 2-1/2 days,” I ad-lib. “They’ll probably have us stop at the Space Station first, and transfer to a lunar module.”

I can tell the details are getting too technical and switch gears. “We should make a list of things we want to do while we’re there. We could spend one day moon rock collecting, what do you think?”

“I want to visit the Man in the Moon,” she says.

“Ooh, I’ve been told he lives in a magnificent moon castle. We definitely want to see that. Did you know the Man in the Moon has a name?”

“My books just call him Man in the Moon,” Sally says, a skeptical look on her young face. It is hard to fool my daughter; sometimes I think she has a built in detector, and I can see it turn on after my last comment.

“I know. But his real name is Neil Armstrong. And his side kick is Buzz.”

“Buzz Lightyear?” Her eyes widen and sparkle, excitement in her voice.

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“I think so,” I lie, deciding that Buzz Aldrin is more my type.

###

We approach the white, one-story building and notice lava-like boulders, gray dust, and small craters landscaping the front entrance. Space Shuttle miniatures and photos of astronauts decorate the lobby. Our trip to the space station exhibit could not have come too soon. Sally finished reading all her library books, the moon travelogue has been part of more than one night’s bedtime ritual, and we formulated as much of a trip planning list as neophytes can conceive. Sally displays the signs of an eager traveler, and that morning I tell her I found a new way to travel to the moon.

“It requires some imagination and a bit of magic,” I say to Sally’s delight. She loves games of pretend.

Pete greets us inside and hands us tickets, calling them boarding passes, and travel kits, which we later discover he has filled with souvenirs.

“Are you coming with us?” Sally exclaims more than asks, thrilled with the idea of having Pete for a traveling companion.

“To the moon? No way, it’s too long of a trip for me,” Pete says with mock unease. “I’m here to see you off. And wish you bon voyage.”

Sally giggles at this last phrase, her first encounter with French.

The light is dim when we enter the station platform disguised as an exhibit hall, small lights twinkling above like stars. The space suit display is our first stop.

“Time to suit up for the trip.” Pete lowers a space helmet over Sally’s head. She squeals with delight, her muffled voice a far-away echo, and starts walking with her arms outstretched—like a mummy on a leash, Pete waddling behind holding the helmet off her shoulders. She nearly bumps into the railing in front of the space station mockup, arriving at our boarding area. We scrutinize the narrow bunk beds, Sally delighted with the idea of her own special hideaway, the efficiency kitchen, and austere lavatory. Control panels full of lights, dials and switches dominate the work areas.

Sally starts to slip under the railing, ready to climb inside, but Pete gently pulls her back. “All passengers must attend orientation first.” And we head over to the auditorium.

We feel the vibration as the film begins—the last 10-second countdown to lift-off. The roar surrounds us and the screen fills with light. I see Sally’s look of awe, and smile. Soon it becomes dark and quiet, a peacefulness settling over us, and the magnificent blue orb of Earth rises, coming out of the picture to envelop us as an ethereal voice begins to narrate. We see stars of the galaxy come into focus as we travel through space, time forgotten. Mesmerized by

James Chandler & Jerry Thrush, MD

the visual experience and aural sensation, we are not ready for our trip to end. The Sea of Tranquility is just a figment of our imagination.

Walking back to the car Sally squeaks with joy when she discovers Buzz Lightyear sitting on the hood. There is a note attached that reads: Welcome Home. That night we get ready for bed; and as I tuck her in and start to close the door, I hear Sally's soft voice. "Mommy, that was a fun trip to the moon. Can we go to Mars?"

Kindergarten Cop II

James Chandler

My substitute teaching had lately yielded to carpentry work. The latter paid twice as much and was half as tiring --- this being a clear commentary on the state of education in California. My wife would laugh at me as I collapsed on the couch after a day in the teaching trenches. Eight hours of construction seldom induced such utter exhaustion.

Still, I missed the kids. The young ones especially were pretty cute --- something akin to a litter of foxes. So when the next call came, I pushed "1" to accept: Kindergarten.

I had just watched "Kindergarten Cop." If Arnold could do it, so could I! I was inspired by his whistle and marching drills. I promptly bought myself a police whistle, harboring some reservations about young ears. In any case, I had taught kindergarten before. I knew the principal and some of the teachers. They would surely offer moral support.

At 8:00 A.M., I found the classroom and proceeded to the teacher's desk, hoping to find notes to help me through the day. Some teachers left only stock information sheets or nothing at all. Others wrote a helpful page of instructions and commentary on the sequestered population. It was useful to know which kids would be trying to blind-side me and which could be enlisted as helpers.

To my surprise, this teacher had three pages of standard information and four on the anticipated course of the coming day. Such optimism is usually in direct contrast to the actual events of a day of teaching. I need flexibility--slack time if you will--to maintain some semblance of control. Halfway through the list of planned activities, I heard the bell ring.

On this cold morning, one of the furry little creatures had entered the room already. I called out to my little helper, "Let's go get the kids!" When we opened the door, a torrent of children poured into the room, parents in tow. Jackets and backpacks scattered in the general direction of cubbies.

There arises in this morning ritual a moment--a handoff if you will--when a parent pauses to check out the teacher. They look him over, as if deciding whether to entrust their child into the care of this stranger for a day. It's a Norman Rockwell moment ... at least it would have been, had I time to savor it; for an orderly procession can digress into chaos within seconds, as I again observed in amazement. "Okay, kids; everyone go to your desks," I called in a vain attempt to quell the rising insurrection.

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One mother explained that her daughter was “Student of the Week.” She had brought materials to share. Others handed me mysterious slips of paper and homework folders. “Just put them in the box over there.” I’d figure it out later.

“Hello, everybody. I’m your Sub today. My name is Mr. Chandler. Chandler.” With older kids, I could depend upon a popular TV show with a character by that name. In the Sesame Street set, this wouldn’t fly. I wrote my name on the board, being rewarded throughout the day by shouts of “Mister” and “Teacher.” Better than “Hey you!” I concluded.

We gathered on the rug. Reading a story usually had a calming effect on the little tykes. I held up the book so they could see the pictures of the little boy and his Uncle, the Plasterer. “All day long Peter carried plaster up the stairs for his Uncle,” I read.

“I can’t see!” yelled kids on the left. I moved the book toward them.

“I can’t see!” yelled kids on the right. I moved the book toward them. The kids in front closed in.

“I can’t see!” yelled kids in the back. Apparently, no one could see. This was starting to sound like a book of its own. Time to shift gears.

“OK kids, now it’s time for us to write a sentence about how we help at home. Let’s all get a piece of lined paper.” It’s funny how kids can move in what can only be described as a “flurry.” I swept them back toward their desks; they swirled around the room.

“Write like this,” I said in demonstration: “I help my mom cook.” I was amazed at the range of abilities. Some were right on. Others didn’t have the attention span to write a whole sentence.

“I’m done!” “I’m done!” Looking on one table, I pieced together words that said, “I Mom my kook” and “I help dad garden.”

“Good!” I encouraged. “Try to put an ‘a’ in there.”

The next child impressed me by saying all the things he had written. However, the strange markings on the page looked like the wanderings of a chicken that had just trampled an inkpad.

“I’m done!” This cry came from several directions now. They started to wander from their desks. One boy showed me his whistle. I was aghast: it was a police whistle just like mine! I found it unconscionable when they sell arms to both sides!

Another wave of children arrived, staggered as they were to allow for smaller reading groups. How many was I supposed to have? Was anybody missing? I started to recount.

"Let's all go over to the rug again. We're going to sing a song!" My instructions referred to an attached page. I began to sing the words. The kids joined in.

They did pretty well at this; the class seemed to be coming together. I looked at my notes, hoping vainly for a moment to scan ahead. As I waivered, the class began to spontaneously combust. I reached in my pocket to grab my whistle; my hand emerged with Chapstick. In those few seconds, all discipline evaporated.

"We want snacks!" chanted two little boys. Soon the whole class was chanting: "We want snacks!" I stood up and walked into the center of this cacophony. In my most indignant tone, I said, "Excuuuuse me!" This always worked; I awaited their acquiescence.

Nothing happened. "We want snacks" rolled on like an unstoppable freight train with 18 little cars. I dove again for my whistle, hands fumbling in my pockets.

"What is going on in here?" We all fell silent. "This is unacceptable," said a young woman. Their teacher had entered the room, summoned from her day's task of proposal writing by the unchecked bellowing of this heathen crowd. Having failed to reign in this gang of five year olds, I marveled at this woman half my age as she transformed barbarians into lambs with a word.

Restoring order, she left Skittles for later and asked me about the Harvest project. I hadn't read that far yet. How much more busted can I get?

Soon it was time for snack. I got helpers to put the Skittles in bowls; others poured water into cups. Skittles spilled all over the table and onto the floor. The water somehow mixed with the Skittles in the bowls, becoming a colored soup. "Okay, snack time is over! Out to recess!" I hollered.

Alone at last, I read about the Harvest project --- something to do with coloring trees and removing fruit according to the roll of dice. Entering the room, the teacher saw the mess and exclaimed, "Oh! Did you use the Skittles for snack? They were the fruit for the Harvest project." Busted again!

She found colored pasta for fruit and copied number strips in lieu of dice before leaving through the front door. The youthful tide returned through the back and flowed onto the rug. "Today we have someone who is the Student of the Week," I announced. She came up with her show and tell.

She went through the standard pages about herself, her family and her favorite things. Then she pulled out her mother's material: a scrapbook of pictures four inches thick! There were pictures of every facet and time of her life. She must be an only child, I thought --- until she showed us pictures of three or four siblings! Kudos to the parents!

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The instructions allocated ten minutes, but it would have taken all week to go through this epic. Shouts of “I can’t see!” came from several directions. She held up the book and continued on, ready to take whatever time necessary to explain the details of her existence to date.

“Okay, we have to get ready for lunch!” I said, drawing this show to a close.

The afternoon went in similar vein as the kids flowed in and spilled themselves on the carpet. Some had their hands in the leftover Skittles. I confiscated the sticky remains. We did the Harvest project. Each pair had a tree and twenty pasta fruit. They turned over numbers to see how many to take away.

“Teacher, we’re done!” cried a cooperative team. “Great!” I encouraged. “Let’s see. You have 8 and you have 9.” What happened to twenty? What should I be teaching here: math, art or project management? I could just see the results with twenty Skittles: “you have 3 and you have 5!”

“I won!” said a rather aggressive young boy paired with a quiet girl. As I watched him play the next few rounds, he picked the highest number card every time. The paper was too translucent. I held my hand over his eyes. He squirmed, ducked his head and picked the highest number again --- a con man in the making.

“Okay, let’s clean up!” I declared. The early arrivals got ready to go. After they left, I rounded up the strays, corralling them onto the rug. We read the morning story about the Plasterer. With half a class, it was quieter. The afternoon was turning out better. Teaching wasn’t so hard; I could do this! Then I heard familiar cry.

“I can’t see.”

“I can’t see!”

James Chandler & Jerry Thrush, MD

Henry David Thoreau for his courage, sensitivity and rawness

Grapevine—it soaks up the beauty of its environment and nourishes those who
toil and those who savor

To figure out my motivation to publish—is it to be heard? Or is it because I
have something to share?

Sierra Camp
Robert Nielsen

Ski dock, floating on the lake
swept by wind, the ridge above
snow in streaks in scars
left by fire a few summers ago

early May, light cold, agitated
behind the silhouettes
of fellow writers,
gnomes on rocks and benches
stumps and steps,
here for a workshop,
pens paper laptops deployed
attending to the exercise,
cataloguing mountain images
and their meaning

none of which come to mind
except of myself, poet now
in this place where years ago
I was a Dad, husband, lover, friend,
alumni family camp
twenty-one years of summers,
week seven,
cusp between July and August

Ski dock, floating on the lake
gentle, smooth August morning light
near the shore reaches down
shows the rocks where crawdads hide

lured out by gummy bears,
bait my four year old son
barefoot, no shirt
kneeling on the dock
orange swimsuit streaked with dirt

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bottom in the air
dangles on a string he holds
waiting for a nibble
and the chance to catch

a creature snared
desire requited
for sweetness
strawberry being the best
at least that's what my son
would say, holding the wiggling
grey green body back
where pincers could not reach

smile for yet another picture
taken by Dad
then toss the crawdad back
to splash, sink to the bottom
hide in the rocks
for future rounds
of grab-the-gummy bear

Ski dock, floating on the lake
swept by wind, the ridge above
snow in streaks in scars
left by fire a few summers ago

early May, in the lee of a rock
a mountain alder warms in the sun
fractal skeleton branches bare
save for swelling scions
where by June leaves will grow
in time for families to return
crawdads to be caught
pictures to be taken

pilgrim cycle continued
including me now, a poet

The Fallen Leaf Anthology

finding myself still welcome
and knowing I never left

Twenty writers attending The Write Retreat at Stanford Sierra Camp collectively present over forty works of fiction, non-fiction and poetry. From humorous anecdotes of childhood to endearing tales of final days, this anthology speaks boldly of life.

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