

Nine women writers from the fields of education, journalism, law, science, community organizing and art share their experiences creating families and careers in Twentieth Century America. They faced institutionalized misogynistic attitudes, but persevered in spite of uneven playing fields to create new opportunities for themselves and others.

Stories from the Left Coast: Nevertheless They Persisted

by The West County Writers' Circle

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STORIES
FROM THE
LEFT COAST

NEVERTHELESS,
THEY PERSISTED

WEST COUNTY WRITERS' CIRCLE
OCCIDENTAL, CALIFORNIA

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NEVERTHELESS, THEY PERSISTED



THE WEST COUNTY WRITERS' CIRCLE
OCCIDENTAL, CALIFORNIA

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Learning to Swim

Janet Louise Langton

Most of the memories of my father are set in the town of Occidental. When I was very young, my family had a second home there where we spent weekends and holidays and summers. We had a tiny two-bedroom house, old, but still only partially finished, heated by a wood burning stove, on thirty acres of green grassy hills covered with redwoods, oak, and bay. In winter on cold nights we would roast chestnuts on the wood stove and eat them when they were gooey and hot. I can still smell them even now. We called our place “The Lone Star” because there was a large white star hanging above its gate at the end of the long driveway. Our other home, my less favorite, was a large beautiful old house in Berkeley, near the university.

The memories of my father I could count on the fingers of one hand, possibly needing the use of only one or two more digits from the other hand. There are so few memories that I can’t really say which would be the earliest, or where they would fall in any particular order. When I was seven, my parents divorced, and we were not allowed to talk about him or see him anymore.

I remember one summer day in Occidental; my father was on the far end of our small, man-made lake. We called the lake “Lake Ig.” Ig was the nickname my mother sometimes called my father during their happy years. My father was shoveling, digging and scraping into the blue-gray clay on the bank, probably trying to encourage flow from the spring that fed into the lake. I was with him and I asked, “Dad, how do you swim?” I was probably about five at the time. He plunged the shovel into the hard, wet clay and leaned on it so he could free his hands, and he said, “Well, you move your arms like this, and kick your feet,” as he demonstrated with his arms and legs.

I carefully picked my way along the water’s edge to the other end of the lake. Then I waded into the cool muddy water and swam the

length of the lake to where my father stood on the bank watching me.
That is how I learned to swim.

I've loved water ever since.

Prison

Blythe Klein

Na, na, na, ni, na, na! Na, na, na, ni, na, na! Your Dad went to pri-son;
Your Dad went to pri-son! Na, ni, na, ni, na, na!

My cousin Karen, who was eight, just like me, chanted as we jumped wildly on my bed. My happy smile turned to a frown of disbelief and my legs got shaky and my jumping turned to a slow small bounce. My cousin had just turned my beautiful world into a world of pain and embarrassment. I was sinking by the second into a scared, mistrusting girl.

How could my hero, my Daddy, be a criminal? No, it can't be! But it was.

Later that day when the relatives had gone their way, I confronted my Mother about this horrifying story. I'll never forget the look on her face; it was one of great sadness and regret. She knew she had to tell me the truth. She was the most perfect and honest person I knew, but she would have to deliver the sad truth to me. "Yes, Blythe, he was in prison, but your father is a good man and he would never hurt anyone. He drove the get-away car in a bank robbery."

From that day forward I tried to piece together the whole story of this dark secret. Much later in my life, my Dad handed me his memoirs of his thirty years in San Quentin Prison, where he had been since he was eighteen years old!

Oh, what a ride his young life was! I cried when I read what he wrote about the big clanking door closing behind him. The title of his memoir was *Less than the Dust*. Now I'm hoping to get it published one day and that it could sit on one of the shelves in the San Quentin library. It is a ray of hope for troubled souls. It proves there is life after prison and that it can be a good one.

Babushka

Diane Masura

I first noticed her, the little bent figure, going into the apartment building next door.

My apartment in downtown Detroit was one of six apartments in an elegant three-story brick house built around 1813 by General Lewis Cass for his daughter Isabella. Rumor had it he made a deal with her that she could live in it only if she never married. His photo on Wikipedia shows a disappointed and angry man, then governor of Michigan Territory, later the 22nd U.S. Secretary of State.

The apartment carved out for me was on the first floor in the back. Two others occupied the first floor on either side of a staircase going up to the second floor. On the second floor, there were three more apartments in the same layout. The top floor had a grand ballroom with window seats, stained glass, and a hardwood floor. Since Lewis was away most of the time with duties of state, he couldn't have monitored how well the deal was working. My guess is that the ballroom served her in meeting her future husband, the then Ambassador from Holland. Maybe then she had had to move out.

Lewis died in 1866, and about 100 years later I moved into Isabella's house. By then there were three story brick apartment buildings on either side sandwiching her home between them. Taking study breaks from undergrad homework, I liked to daydream about the history these walls had seen. The apartment's living-room had two windows which looked at the brick wall next door. But if I stood up very close to the glass and looked out, I could just view about ten feet of the cobblestone alley out back. This I did often to stretch and to keep in touch with life in the outside world.

First, I noticed, then looked for, the sheeny man pushing his cart down the alley to collect newspaper and other reusables from the incinerators and cans there. His schedule didn't seem to be regular

enough to predict the timing of his daily appearance, but I looked for him anyway.

However, I learned that every day in the afternoon my little bent lady, my little babushka, appeared. She was intent on spreading what looked like bread crumbs or seeds on to the cobblestones. Her headscarf was drawn up to extend over her forehead, so I didn't get a really good look at her facial expression and assumed she was just a sweet little old lady feeding the pigeons.

I found it touching to observe her nurturing the meager wildlife of the city streets. With diligence, she appeared each day from the building next door and slowly tossed her bounty from the bowl of her raised apron. Day after day at the appointed hour, pigeons landed knowing it must be time to eat. Day after day I observed that the flock was growing.

One day, as the sky was growing gray and windy, she appeared. As usual she cast her bounty as the pigeons flocked to her. They ate, eyes focused on cobblestone, secure in her presence. Then, with one quick thrust, she reached for a bird, snatched it into her apron, and disappeared from view next door. My shock made me question my senses. Had I just seen what I thought I'd seen? Gradually, it occurred to me she had just snatched her dinner. Perhaps that had been the plan all along.

Blouses

Noël Bouck

I counted yesterday. I have exactly 50 blouses. Not tops but real blouses with a row of buttons all the way down the front. About a third of them moved with me from Illinois to California so were bought at least 15 years ago. I have acquired them over many years but they are not a collection.

I **collect** Victorian trade cards, colorful lithographed advertisements for all sorts of goods from stove polish to medicinal syrups that date from about 1865 to 1900. My trade cards are catalogued, prices kept, specialties engaged in, oddities searched out at fairs. They form a genuine collection. Blouses are not curated. They are the detritus of vice. Whenever I feel unusually powerless, I try to re-establish control by decisively deciding on a blouse to buy. Curiously, it works splendidly. Blouses are reasonably priced. Even a fleeting sense of mastery over life is priceless.

The first such blouse I bought was in 1958, during my last semester of college in southern California. It was a lonely time. Most of my fellow graduates were planning their weddings. I was to go off to New York for graduate school—no wedding, no medical school, mine was clearly a default position. My final paper in Contemporary Literature was a lackluster riff on Kafka. When I went to plop it on the pile of others on a chair outside the professor's office door, I saw the top one was by Kris Kristofferson (later a Rhodes scholar, still later famous for poetic country songs). I stood there and read his paper. It was delightful, brilliant, perfect. If this was an example of what others could produce, then how, I wondered, could I ever compete in the adult world I was about to enter. I wandered off campus into the sleepy leafy college town where next to the laundromat there was a small store that sold clothes. I bought myself a short-sleeved yellow cotton blouse. Walking home to my dorm, I felt

better. Not actually competitive of course, but definitely restored and ready again to move on, maybe even inch forward.

It was a white blouse from Lord & Taylor in New York City that next set me comfortably back on course. During my second year of graduate school, I was assigned a laboratory on the tenth floor of old Schermerhorn Hall atop Columbia's Morningside Heights campus in Manhattan. My little lab smelled cleanly of the 70% alcohol I used to keep the benches sterile, although the drawers defeated me—they always had to be shaken to scatter the cockroaches before reaching in. There I assisted Dr. Ray Appelyard, a sand-colored, angular, toothy British fellow who had trained at Cal Tech with Nobelist Max Delbruck. but now represented the British Commonwealth as an assistant secretary at the United Nations. He came to the lab each Monday to do an experiment with bacterial viruses. I counted the results and prepped reagents for the next week. One Wednesday he called to ask me to bring the binder with our data down to him at the UN. It was intoxicating on that breezy spring day to walk through flapping flags of all the member states and right on into that iconic building where I proudly announced to the guard that I was there 'on business'.

Dr. Appleyard sat behind a wide clean desk in his glass walled office. It was blindingly bright from sunny reflections off the East River. He checked a few things in our notebook that seemed to please him. Then he asked me to please use this data to write a paper demonstrating that the current idea of the existence of messenger RNA was wrong. Although this was totally beyond my ability as lab helper, I couldn't seem to bring myself to do anything but nod. Exiting the building, I stalked angrily through those noisy flags and on across town to Fifth Avenue. I went directly to Lord & Taylor and carefully and deliberately chose a blouse with a peter pan collar. While I was debating among blouses, the rest of my brain had been working. By the time I caught the grimy subway back uptown I felt actually decisive. If I couldn't do the paper, I couldn't do it, that was that. Just have to say so. And I said so the following Monday.

For 25 years, I worked in downtown Chicago, a block off Michigan Avenue's Magnificent Mile where blouse buying was particularly delightful. The time I most needed one was the day of my third annual review as an Assistant Professor at Northwestern University's Medical School. I arrived at my chairman's office on time for my 1:30, checked in with his secretary and sat down in her large office to wait. Soon Dr. Patterson stuck his head through his office door, called me in and sat me down. Without a word, he turned to the sink that was installed in a counter behind the desks in many offices in this medical building, and began to brush his teeth. Vigorously. The uppers, the lowers, the way back, then the front, spitting as he went. With a quick gargle, he spat a final time, wiped his mouth on a towel, turned, sat down at his desk and began my assessment.

This performance recast me from university colleague to youngster watching her dad at home in their bathroom. Uncomfortable as this made me, it worked. I dutifully sat through my review like the perfect daughter. He droned on: grants essential, I had one; papers necessary, I had several; salaries tight, he'd do what he could. Then I fled, not back to my lab but straight to Niemen Marcus to spend an hour perusing their sale racks seeking, of course, the perfect blouse.

Throughout my adult life, blouses have been quiet saviors. Their purchase provides a distraction for my conscious mind while my unconscious deals with a problem. It restores the illusion that I have choices, can make decisions, control my destiny. Blouse in hand, I have always been able to get on with life, to reboot my impetuous curiosity about what is going to happen next. And the following day, if I still need a little lift, I can always wear my new blouse.

Down Under Blues and Other Poems

Meryl Krause

Down Under Blues

I love the land down under
Stark, lush, raucous with wildlife
Cockatoos squawk, stropo old women
Give you “what for” on buses.
We killed a white tail spider in the bathtub the other night.
To think it could have been in my bed –
My bed’s been empty for a while here
The ocean fills me up
Yesterday the rock pool was
A washing machine.
Swim in the middle as hard as you can
To keep from scraping the rocky edges.
“Christmas tides” they’re called –
Powerful tidings of surge and rip
Surprise drenchings to loungers on rocks,
Nature giving us “what for.”
But no worries, mate, she’ll be right.
My heart’s grown roots like the
Blue Gum tree, scorched by fire
In the Blue Mountains’ dry spell of summer,
Hanging on to survive.

Hunger

Jana Lane

Don't get a sheep if you have acorn trees. Or a goat. Or anything not approved for acorns.

I looked into Buffy's strange eyes. And she looked back in mine. Two creatures with little in common except that neither is fit for the consumption of acorns.

The vet came and gave her medications. I was told to squeeze the fluids into the sheep's mouth every day, twice a day, for a week. It was a daunting task; I had never been close to a sheep before. I didn't do this for long anyway, because the old girl let me know how she hated it – being force fed.

The native people knew about acorns, leached out the poisons to make bread. What happened to us? We've forgotten so much. We have stepped too far from the shelf of the earth. Walking on concrete, rolling on rubber, sleeping on platforms in tightly enclosed edifices, we no longer gaze upward to the stars. We gaze instead, at glowing screens.

We have forgotten about the old sheep in the pasture – meddled into existence by human intervention – now dependent on our constant intercession.

The placid girl with wide hips and gentle mouth lay dying in the field. Acorns poison the liver, the kidneys, the spleen. Slow poison.

When I found her that last morning, she had been shitting herself where she lay. She was trying to shoo the chickens off. They insisted on pecking the maggots from her behind. So I spent that day sitting in the field fending the little buggers off myself. It was my last homage to Buffy, a penance for my kind, the ones who allowed her to eat the acorns. I covered her with hay to keep the flies from her. She hated those flies as much as she did the chickens.

Everything dies; I know.

Near the end, she craved water, so I brought a shallow pan and placed it near her head. That way she didn't have to get up, didn't have to struggle.

She hung her chin in it, blew bubbles in it, whatever. I didn't care, since I couldn't give her life, I would help her die as she wished.

As I looked into her eyes, we shared an intimacy that only the dying share.

See, the truth is I'm dying too. Not from acorns or kidney failure, or neglect, but from a terminal condition called "life". At sixty-one, I feel the winter in my bones, a cold wind blowing through me.

When our eyes met in that moment I realized clearly, that my day will come.

My day, too, will come.

—

The carcass man came to take her body. In the back of his big truck, a huge beast of indiscernible biology lay swelling in the heat of an Indian Summer day. I looked away.

The carcass man, himself a large hairy beast, albeit a live and jovial one, busied himself over morbid rituals involving chains and winches and the like. I watched as Buffy's old body was zip-lined across the pasture in brutal jerks, then hoisted unceremoniously onto the flatbed of the charnel truck.

Work complete, the carcass man ran a thick hand through greasy black hair and scanned the premises.

"Them acorns'll kill livestock," he said motioning toward the paddock with his head. "If they eat 'em, anyways."

I looked away. There was some time without words. I sensed him waiting – wanting more.

“It’s not mine,” I said. “I’m just the sitter... the farm sitter.”

He snorted, perhaps at the idea that a sheep and a few chickens could, in any way, constitute a farm. He had obviously been a farmer – a real farmer – in his day. Or maybe it was the words “farm sitter” that stuck in his craw. Real farmers probably didn’t take vacations.

“Well, you might want to tell about them the trees in case they plan on getting more livestock.”

I didn’t tell him that they already knew about the acorns, that five other sheep had died and been buried in the same pasture. He turned for his truck.

“Pygmy goats.” The words fell from my mouth.

“Excuse me?” he said turning back.

“They’re thinking of getting pygmy goats after... after this.”

He shook his head. “Them critters ain’t going to last here a week.”

“I’ll mention it.”

“Good.” He pulled a notepad and pen from his pocket. “Good. And while you’re at it don’t forget to tell ‘em they owe Joe Mack 150 bucks. For the dead sheep. Have ‘em send it to this address.” He scribbled, tore the page off and handed it to me.

“Well, better be off. Got me a big load today.”

As I watched him heave himself into the truck cab an unwholesome image popped into my mind: the carcass man roasting on a spit, all fat and succulent, turning, turning, marinating in his own juices and going golden brown. I had eaten nothing all day, and suddenly, the thought made me voracious. I tried to shake the image from my mind and headed for the hen-house to get cob for the chickens.

I wondered about people like Joe Mack, who did such jobs. Like the men in the black hearse that came to take my father’s body. One tall, one squat, both wearing ill-fitting black suits, hair slicked back in a

seedy show of reverence. The zipping of the body bag. My mother and I running from the house into the woods so as not to hold that image as our last.

But I could not stop seeing the carcass man roasting on a spit, nor could I stop my stomach from its incessant growling, even when the chickens came clucking about me like ladies in a bingo parlor.

Against all advice, I had named every one of them: Big Red, Skitter, Fly By, etc. I named my favorite one Little Bit. She was friendly and bold for being so small, a little Bantam with a top-knot of feathers on her head. Not long after the naming, I came upon her remains – a pile of fluff and feather and nothing more. Little Bit. At least it had been quick.

As I finished tossing the cob a brilliant light scattered through the oaks and across the hen yard. Something came over me as I stood there, boots rooted to the earth, the trees above me undulating. Even the sky was whirled by the breezes, small clouds scattering in arcs. Squirrels came to gather acorns in their mouths and took them up to the canopy. I marveled that they could eat the things without harm. Woodpeckers went about business stuffing the poisonous nuts into the nooks of the hen house – to be eaten later.

The sunset bloomed and faded. And, despite all that was dying, the world around me hummed – sang – with life. Then the light and sounds merged with this thing that I call me, until I was no longer “me” but a part of a thing much greater than I could ever be. A thing, which I cannot, in my finite expression, explain or understand.

When I came back to myself, the chickens were gone. I panicked. Then I found them in the hen house squabbling on their roosts. All accounted for, I locked them in for the night.

As I navigated the thicket of dusk toward the light of the big house, I noticed again how famished I was, and forgave the chickens for pestering the dying sheep. They had meant no harm. They were only hungry, after all.

I forgave the acorns for being poisoned. And the world for its ignorance.

And then I began to forgive myself. For being unable to save the old sheep in the field, or the chicken, or the dogs in my life. For being helpless to save my mother, or my father before that. And for letting those men take them away in bags – forever.

Once inside the house, I closed out the darkness, fed the cat, pulled a sandwich from my pack and sat down at the kitchen table to eat – at last. The tuna sandwich, though slightly soggy, was simply the most delicious thing I had ever tasted.

And in my safety and solitude I forgave myself once more, this time for wanting to eat the carcass man.

For hunger in the face of death.

Oranges

Alexis Lorenz

Glad I wasn't there.

Yes, me too.

If you were there,

You would have seen me soaked from the drizzling rain,

Plucking the orange from the inside branch,

Scratching its bumpy skin,

Savoring its rich oiliness gathering underneath my
fingernails,

Firm at first, then yielding, chuck by chunk, peel on
soggy earth.

Orange blood through my fingers, separating pith,

Catching each drop upon my tongue.

Liquid sunshine wetting my hair to the roots.

Orange rain, wet sunshine.

Time and Time Again – for Chris Caswell

Beverly Riverwood

In the dusty courtyard, he sits, head bowed, his white hair
Shining in the gathering woodland dusk.

He is surrounded by groups of chattering people,
Waiting impatiently to be called to the camp dinner.

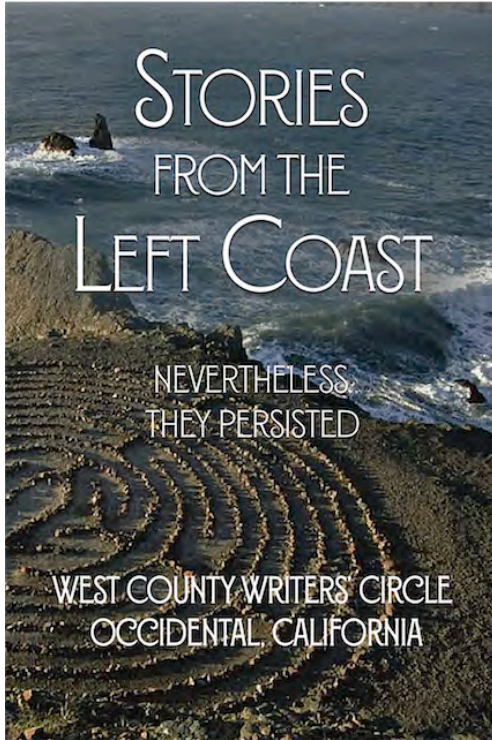
He is soothing the hungry mood of the ruffled crowd
As he moves his graceful hands over the harp strings.

The notes are blending with the swirls of voices, high and deep
They float together in the evening light.

Momentarily history telescopes, and I see him in great stone halls
Playing for Kings and Queens in the ancient castles of many
countries.

“Tell me, Bard, what is that ancient song you play?”

“Oh yes. This music was composed this morning in class
By a fourteen-year-old lad. His first tune did move us all to tears.”



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