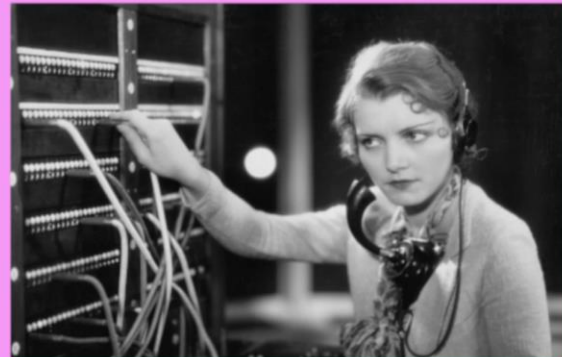


On Mishearing

Miseries, Mysteries and Misbehaviors



A Writing It Real Anthology

Edited by Sheila Bender

On Mishearing
Miseries, Mysteries, and Misbehaviors

This anthology's contributors share their experiences mishearing words and intentions and the impact of those mistakes. As you read their writings, you are bound to remember times you found yourself in similar situations. I dedicate the anthology to all Writing It Real members, whose writing has inspired our community over the years and kept us in touch with our memories and lives.

Sheila Bender, Editor

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Barbara Simmons—Mishearing Aunt Louise

I can't say now that I thought back then my standing outside Aunt Louise's bedroom door, listening to her phone conversations, was actually eavesdropping. That summer in the 1960's, when my brother and I moved into our Aunt Louise's home, the only story we'd been told was that *your mother is ill and has to go to the hospital*. Our family was only my brother, myself, and my mother, and I, only 15, wasn't old enough to become head of house (nor would it have been possible to truly be the boss of my 14-year-old brother.) So, there I was at Aunt Louise's house, at her bedroom door, listening, maybe eavesdropping, for something that would clarify what had happened.

What would I have called the pieces of conversations I'd heard? Scraps, breadcrumbs, snippets, morsels, smidgens, and, possibly, shreds of whispered exchanges that I, hungry for information about my mom, was eager to scoop up as they squeezed out from under the door in that tiny space between carpet and sill.

My brother and I had heard, earlier that summer, mom's crying on the phone to a friend about a lump. After that, we knew there'd been visits to doctors; there had been more crying on the phone; and there'd been the hurried gathering up of clothes for my brother and me when we knew we were moving out of our home, without mom.

Still: nothing articulated by anyone to us. No word as to what was the matter. How long would we be at Aunt Louise's? And when could we see our mom? In many ways, mom simply had vanished. Our new living quarters were definitely not child-friendly, and we were often told to stay off the white rugs, to keep our hands away from paintings that made walls seem an annex to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. *Keep yourselves busy. Stay away from the formal living and dining rooms; don't make a lot of noise*. I heard Aunt Louise tell her housekeeper to clean the lettuce, but later realized that she had actually said *clean the letters*, referring to silver Norge letters on the refrigerator door, the one that seemed untouched.

I knew what I had to do – and that was listen closely enough to figure out what was going on, trying not to mistake what I thought I heard for what actually was happening.

Perhaps Nancy Drew, able to solve just about any mystery (at least all of the 30 or so books I'd read had her success rate at 100%), along with other strong heroines –Jo, Anne, Jane, Tess, Dorothy, Lucy, Hester, and Beatrice, acting as protectresses – helped me sidle closer to my aunt's bedroom door, trying to glean those scraps, breadcrumbs, snippets, morsels, smidgens, and shreds of conversations that would help me to understand what was going on with my mom, with us.

Eavesdroppers were literally persons who listened from under the eaves of a home to overhear conversations inside. They became my alter ego. I listened for words, but only heard mumbled 'm's' and 'omy' and 'radical' and 'ivy' – so my creative self began formulating that my mom was ill, that something that began with an 'm' and included her being surrounded by plants in a radical treatment, had been her undetermined illness. Those 'drops from the eaves' were not clear. I had, unknowingly, created a fable that soothed me.

The ‘m’ and ‘omy’, I would learn, were my mother’s mastectomy, the ‘radical’ the surgery that she underwent, and the ‘ivy’ not a plant therapy, but rather, the IV that she would be connected to for weeks after the surgery.

My eavesdropping had given me some hope, but it had also shared with me the unkind words that my aunt would also say about my mother – *she won’t be able to flaunt her figure now* – and for me, just now seeing my own shape forming the curves of adolescence and the beginning of womanhood – my first bras, my first period – I wasn’t sure what my aunt could mean. The eavesdropping became, instead of rain falling from the eaves, my tears dropping as I began to figure out what had actually happened.

Later, when we returned home, and before my mom’s new mastectomy bra was ready, she would stuff Kotex napkins into one of her old bras to, as she said, *keep herself balanced and her sense of style at the ready*. I heard that loud and clear. Mom was not going to withdraw from the world, and, like Jo and Dorothy and Lucy and Anne, she and I were learning to be proud of who we were, no matter what changes had to be assimilated into our lives, both of us growing into new beings.

The snippets and smidgens of those conversations I’d gathered up at Aunt Louise’s? I realized that I had heard only what I was capable of hearing. I wasn’t supposed to ‘know’ everything from the adult world, and that separation of adult knowledge from children had kept me in the dark. Now, though, when I am fed knowledge in scraps and morsels, I take my time to feast more fully on everything I need to know. I no longer desire eavesdropping, no longer need to catch ‘drops’ of truth. Rather, I head to the front door that opens to all that is vibrant, all that pronounces what is wise, what is known, and walk in, both listener and participant in every conversation. ❧❧

Dorothy Ross—Family Secrets

In the spring of 1949 when I was twelve years old and in the sixth grade, I noticed that my normally slim mother was suddenly gaining weight. It occurred to me that she might be pregnant, but I felt sure she would have told me if we were going to have a baby in the family.

Weeks passed and my mother just kept getting bigger and bigger. Instead of her own clothes, she started wearing Grandma's somber Eleanor Roosevelt-style dresses. Like Mrs. Roosevelt, my grandmother was a big woman. Her summer dresses looked like tents. One day I asked Grandma, "Is Mama going to have a baby?"

"Shame on you." Grandma exclaimed. You shouldn't say such things!" That shut me up.

Then, early on Mother's Day, May 8, 1949, Grandma told me I had a new baby brother! "Oh, but you're the sly one," Grandma said, wagging her finger at me. "You knew it all the time. Didn't you?" She made it sound like I had done something wrong.

Twelve years later, Chris was preparing to receive the sacrament of Confirmation. It is customary, in the Catholic Church, to adopt a saint's name during the Confirmation ceremony and keep it as your middle name. Chris said he was considering Francis. "No." my mother protested. "You can't use Francis. You once had a brother named Francis."

Chris and I were both wide-eyed with surprise. We started questioning Mom. "It was a long time ago," she said. "He died very young, and I don't want to talk about it."

The next time I was alone with my father, I asked him. "Dad, can you tell me about the baby you and Mom lost?"

Dad thought for a moment before he replied. "That was a very sad time. The baby was born in 1940, so he would have been three years younger than you. The poor little guy was terribly deformed. The doctors couldn't tell us for sure whether it was a boy or a girl. The child lived just a few days. When the parish priest came to the hospital to baptize the little thing, he suggested the name Francis because it could be either a boy's name or a girl's name. Your mother was still in the hospital when we buried him."

Another thought struck me. "Was there any connection between Francis and your not telling us when Mom was expecting Chris?"

Dad replied. "We were so afraid it might happen again that we kept the pregnancy as quiet as possible. No one knew your mother was in a family way except Grandma and your aunts. And, when we lost the baby, no one was told it was a hermaphrodite."

When I think about the mystery surrounding Chris's birth, I continue to marvel. I can't imagine trying to keep such a secret from a twelve-year-old girl today. ❧❧

Pat Detmer—Why Not Me?

When I was seven, I prayed that God would send me a baby. My sister was born a year later. Proof of the power of prayer? Nope. That wasn't what I was looking for. My mother was the one who had that baby, and I wanted one of my own. If Mary, Mother of God could be blessed like that, then so could I.

I was an eldest child and quintessential good Catholic girl. My mother had been raised Roman Catholic, and my father converted from a loose maybe-a-Baptist-maybe-something-else Protestant childhood to please her, and as we moved throughout the Midwest, my sisters and I were dutifully enrolled in Catholic grade schools that cost money we did not have. That deep dousing in religion proved the perfect training ground for a life of Type A over-achievement. I was well-versed in Latin phrases and Catholic iconography: Steeples, statues, confession, communion, *pater noster*, *angus dei*, the mass, the host, the bells, the choir, the incense; it lifted and enveloped me, ran through my veins, and pooled in my knees since I spent a lot of time on them. My dog-eared copy of *The Revised Edition of the Baltimore Catechism No. 2* was my guide. I was on a sure march to sainthood.

I knew about The Immaculate Conception. We even had Holy Day for it, and we didn't lack for those. And Holy Days didn't even include Days of Special Dispensation when the Bishop would allow us to do things normally punishable by an eternity in hell, like eat meat on Friday. The Feast of the Immaculate Conception (no food involved in this feast, by the way) was a celebration of the fact that Mary had been born free of Original Sin, thus making her a worthy womb for the Lord. I'd been born with that sin, of course, as had all of us since time began. But was that my fault? I'd been baptized a mere week or two after my birth, and my Original Sin disappeared as magically as all the other sins I would later whisper in the confessional. It was magic! And I doubted I'd committed a mortal sin between my birth and baptism, or even a venial one, which was a lesser transgression that didn't involve eternal damnation and was generally no worse than doing something like leaving the refrigerator door open or pushing your little sister into the mud. Given the facts, I believed that I would make a pretty good host for a god made flesh, too.


Combine my brain, well-steeped in romantic New Testament notions, with the fact that we had no sex education – I was only seven, and it was 1957 – it's no wonder that I thought I could miraculously give birth. I was at a Catholic school where nuns outnumbered lay teachers ten to one, and the nuns were not generally eager to describe reproductive systems, preferring instead to identify leaves and explain photosynthesis. So how was I to know that I couldn't have an Angel of the Lord appear to me and declare me Pat, Parent of God?

So I prayed. I prayed through third grade, then the fourth, when we received the sacrament of Holy Confirmation earlier than most children because the Bishop, who confirmed the pre-teens of his diocese, likely wanted to come North, have some Italian food, and visit family. I was ready. My confirmation name was Helen. When I took that name, St. Helen became my Patron Saint. She was a devotee of simple, plain clothes, and that appealed to me. Of course, what did I know of clothes? I wore a plaid jumper and white blouse every day of my school life. She was also the mother of Caesar. Yes. That Caesar. Even then, power had its appeal. One of my classmates picked St. Fabian as his Patron. The nuns tried mightily to talk him out of it, but to no avail. He had them on a technicality: There *was* a St. Fabian, not to be confused with the first-name-only Fabian, who was a pop singer with hits like “Cuddle Up a Little Closer” and “Doncha' Think It's Time?” Ah, how the gasps and titters rolled toward the altar when the Bishop announced his Confirmation name aloud.

But to my quest, still no baby, and I began to weary of my plan. It took a lot of time to pray for a baby, and my mind would wander to other things that needed doing: books to read, stories to write, sisters to

torment, plays to direct in the back yard using conscripted and intimidated neighborhood children. How long could I wait for this? I was becoming a little less enamored with the tea I was steeping in.

My father's next promotion saved me. He would be managing an office in Kankakee, Illinois, so we moved near a small farming community outside of town. We had left the heart of Illinois Italian/Polish Catholicism. Previously, we'd always walked to school because there were parochial grade schools and churches every fifty feet, but there were none on our country lane or in the little town up the road. The nearest was in Kankakee, outside of our range of ability to attend. So it was public school for us, a relief in a way, and I soon learned that a desire to become spontaneously pregnant was probably not in my future.

More's the pity. It would have made a great story. 

Cassandra Hamilton—Who are YOU? What. Do You. Want?

– I’m Mark Sheffield, Senior, he says as if he’s puffed his chest and grew a foot.

Well, la-dee-dah.

–I am calling to order a log cabin.

– AH. I say and my body unwinds, for when we moved here, the phone company assigned us the number of a former log cabin company. *You’ve* got the wrong number.

– This *is* 2036570444.

– Yes, I say because that is our phone number.

– Good. I want to order a log cabin.

– There are no log cabins at this number.

– I saw your special offer.

– The company went out of business.


– Listen here. I have your card in my hand!

– Congratulations, you have *a* card. However, you still can’t buy a log cabin at *this* number.

– I know you’re still in business! Yesterday, I saw your cabin models clear across the highway. You’re going to take my order!

– *I* can’t take your order.

– Don’t you give me any Malarkey, young lady. I will not stand for it. I will report your behavior to your boss unless you take my order.

I consider hanging up. Then I’ve a better idea. – What size cabin? 

Morgan Baker—Hold the Head

My husband was a young reporter in Pittsburgh, when a grisly murder took place. Body parts started showing up all around Allegheny County and it looked like they belonged to the same person – someone who was then called a transvestite – a man decked out in women’s clothing, probably provocative, street clothing. Law enforcement assumed that a John, as they’re called, tried to arrange a dalliance with this person and when said John discovered he wasn’t having a tryst with a woman, lost it.

Did he do his hatchet job right there on the spot or did he plan it for later? Did he kill the poor guy some other way and then cut him up into pieces and distribute them all around Pittsburgh? I don’t know.

I do know my husband loved telling this story. The first time I heard it, I gagged.

Then I started telling the story. It was fun to see others retch.

His editor told him to go to the morgue and see “the body” or what there was of it pieced together. Matt had given his notice and we, newlyweds, were moving to Boston and a new job for Matt. His editor was torturing him.

Matt knew what he was doing. He was a great journalist for over a decade.

The coroner pulled out the stainless-steel tray from the refrigerated bank of chambers and there on the slab lay the dead guy pieced together like a Jenga game. If you moved one part, the whole body would collapse. But he was headless.

The coroner then yelled to his helper. “Show him the head.”

The schlep wheeled out a gurney with a hat box on it. Matt was thinking, “Oh no, please, no.” As they lifted the top of the round box, Matt tells his listeners, he focused on the wheel of the gurney so he wouldn’t puke.

But eventually he had to look, and there was the head, with no jaw.

I pause when I tell the story. Listeners lean in.

“Hold the head,” said the coroner. And the schlep handed the head to Matt’s outstretched hands; he nearly passed out.

Matt heard me tell this one day, whipped his head around and said, “What!”

“What?” I looked at him.

“I never held the head!”

I’m not sure about that. 

David D. Horowitz—WHAT DID YOU SAY?

Did I ever mishear or misunderstand what someone was saying? Heck, yes! Think “university”: Oh, you said March 1st, not March 21st, so I’ve got three days to write a fifteen-page paper. Why didn’t I double check that?! Why aren’t I more careful?! But just now, given that I’ve focused for weeks on our nation’s torments and protests, I want a little humor. And over the years I’ve laughed at some statements and terms I or someone else misheard. For example, when I was six (I was born in 1955), the starting quarterback for the Cleveland Browns, and later the Detroit Lions, was Milt Plum. For several years, though, I believed television announcers referred to him as “Milk Plum.” I wondered: was he named for a special kind of plum that yielded milk rather than juice? Finally, I read an article in the sports pages which referred to “Milt Plum.” Ah, I see. I must listen more carefully.

And perhaps, too, I should enunciate more clearly. I recall a journey from Seattle to Bellingham. I had recently edited and published a poetry anthology (one of three I’ve published), and I’d arranged for me and two of the anthology poets to read at Village Books in Bellingham. During our drive, we conversed about poetry. In passing I referred to Garrett Hongo, a well-known poet who teaches creative writing at the University of Oregon. I noted Garrett had belonged to a troupe of Asian-American poets called “The Buddha Bandits.” One of the poets in the car looked at me oddly. She remained silent. A few minutes later I again referred to The Buddha Bandits. “Oh,” she interjected. “‘The Buddha Bandits.’ I thought you’d said, ‘The Gouda Bandits.’” All three of us laughed. No, I don’t think they would drive into town to steal wheels of gouda cheese—at least I don’t think so.

But my favorite “misheard it” story occurred in my eleventh-grade driver’s education class at Seattle’s Lincoln High School. Our teacher was Mr. Stickles. With his thin dark tie, short-sleeved white shirt, glasses, perfectly combed dark brown hair, and pleasant smile, he epitomized respectability leavened with affability. One day a student asked Mr. Stickles a question about someone she’d seen driving in Seattle. She referred to the driver as “the chick in the Camaro.” Mr. Stickles didn’t seem to understand the student’s question and asked her to repeat it. She did so. Mr. Stickles responded, “Oh. ‘The chick in the Camaro.’ I thought you’d said ‘a chicken in a barrel.’” The entire class roared with laughter for several minutes at the image of a chicken driving a barrel around Seattle!

So, I hope this gives someone a laugh, and let me know if next March 1st you see a chicken in a barrel steal a wheel of gouda cheese for someone named Milk Plum. ☺☺

Carol J. Wechsler Blatter—Mis-Speaking

I was the most talented tell-it-all messenger mis-speaker when I was a child. I was smart, I had a good vocabulary at an early age, but I wasn't smart enough to know when and where to speak and what to speak about to others. I often repeated things I shouldn't have which I typically heard at home. I was too young to have attended and graduated from diplomacy school. I blurted things out without imagining the repercussions. In my then child's world there were no repercussions. I didn't even know how to spell r-e-p-e-r-c-u-s-s-i-o-n-s or knew what it meant.

There was a neighbor, Mrs. Dansky, who lived downstairs from us in our four-apartment brick building. She lived in the back apartment at 1826 E. 2nd Street in Brooklyn, NY. We lived on the upper floor in the front apartment. She had a sister named Mrs. Rosenbloom who lived nearby. I must have overheard my mom say that she didn't like Mrs. Rosenbloom.

One day I was playing near Mrs. Dansky's apartment and she came out. I imagine this was the conversation:

She saw me and said "Hello.

"Hello, Mrs. Dansky."

"I see you're playing with your dolls. They're very pretty. And you look very pretty, too. I like your jodhpurs. Are they new?"

"Yes, they are." (A pause). "My mom said that she doesn't like your sister."

"What? How could she not like my sister? How mean of her to say that! I'm going to tell my sister what your mom said. And I know she'll be very mad. I'm mad, too."

I have no idea why my mom didn't like Mrs. Dansky's sister. I suspect it was for a petty reason. When Mrs. Dansky told her sister about my mom's dislike for her, sparks started to fly. Mrs. Dansky was determined to side with her sister against my mom whom I imagine they saw as a nasty, unreasonable, gossipy, neighbor lady full of *chutzpah* (nerve). The perfect storm was about to occur. Maybe it was more like a war.

The next thing I remember was seeing my mom, a short woman less than five feet, on a bottom stoop step and the much taller woman, Mrs. Rosenbloom, was on a higher step. I don't know who started the fight. My mom reached up and hit the other woman with her purse. I don't remember if the other woman hit Mom back. She probably did. I think that ended the fight. And thinking back, I don't know where Mrs. Dansky was during the fight. I'm assuming she was there cheering her sister on. I think my mom was the winner but if she was, what could she have possibly won? It isn't like a boxing fight where the winner is clear. The one standing wins. Mom and Mrs. Rosenbloom both stood up. I don't think anyone was physically hurt. Mentally? I'm not sure. As a child observer, I'm sure I was frightened and confused as I tried to figure out what was going on. ❧❧

Penne Wilson—Playing with Fire

I meet my man
on the starlit mesa
of silent sage and volcanic storms
where the wind embraces
and the darkness serenades.

He waits for me
in the sunlit plaza,
The Old Town Plaza of conquerors and natives
where the tourists gather
and the radiance conceals.

I encounter him
in the stale storeroom,
a steeple of school supplies and tools
where the mice watch
and the crowds of boxes converge.

He beckons me
to his private office
full of family pictures and professional plaques
where the secretary listens
and the phone waits on hold.

Eyes smolder with each shared glance
lips tingle with heat that tongues cannot lessen
fingertips massage nerves aglow under my skin
my body radiates at contact with his.

I taste him musky and pungent in the mall parking lot
as the rain beats in rhythm on car windows.

I caress him on the river's edge
and the current, a torrent of spring mud, surges.

I fill myself with him
yet still hunger for him.

The therapist asks,
Do you know you're playing with fire?

Of course I know. . .

Fire means blue skies aglow with the sun
Fire means warmth after the ski slopes
Fire means bread fresh from the oven
Fire means the phoenix rising in the dawn

Fire means a pot burst in the kiln
Fire means a bayonet hardened for war
Fire means a home burnt to the ground
Fire means ashes... ❧❧

Penne Wilson—Egg Magic

The magic
of a single egg
Turns mother's
white cake mix
Yellow.

In grandma's backyard
two sisters stir
mud-cake batter
and look for Yellow.

On the back porch
cartons of country fresh eggs,
(Grandma's spending money)
wait for city customers
hungry for rich, thick yolks.

Sisters

Crack,

Stir,

Watch,


Crack,

Splat,

Mix,

Mud-cake batter

Slick like the excuses we begin to make,
Smooth like the voice that pulls us away,
Shiny like the anger in grandma's hazel eyes,
but not

Yellow. 

Pat LaPointe—When It Rains

Olivia wakes up feeling more rested than usual and smiles as she remembers her dream. She was sitting on a beach, hearing the waves crash against the shore and the muted beeps from the boats as they leave the pier.

She yawns, sighs, and stretches her body, hands reaching the headboard, curled toes gently smoothing the creases of her cozy comforter. As she rolls over, she catches sight of her alarm clock: 9:00AM

“Holy crap! The meeting started at 8:30.”

Tripping clumsily out of bed, she again hears the beeping sounds.

Hoping that she’s still dreaming, she notices the beeps get louder as she reaches the nightstand to retrieve a half-empty wine glass.

The glass tips spilling the remaining wine on to the book she’d been reading before falling asleep.

“It’s the damn alarm.”

Trying to decide what to wear, she lifts the blinds to check the weather.

A heavy rain sloshes against her window.

“Well, there’s the crashing waves.”

With no time to shower or choose an outfit, she piles her not quite clean hair in a knot atop her head and decides what she wore yesterday will have to do.

It’s not too wrinkled.

Rushing to the kitchen she pops the coffee pod into the Keurig and places her commuter mug under its spout. When the last drip has fallen, she grabs the mug and coffee sprays a fine mist onto her light blue blouse.

Maybe no one will notice

Commuter cup in hand, she grabs her linen blazer from the hook on the door, her tote bag and umbrella from the foyer, and rushes out to the bus stop on the corner.

Oh, crap! The bus is already there.

As she runs to catch it, a van speeds down the street, splashing water on to the sidewalk and her new shoes.

She sees the bus pull away.

There won’t be another one for twenty-minutes. I can’t just stand here getting soaked.

With rain squirting out of her shoes, she runs under the canopy over her apartment building entrance and closes her umbrella just in time for a gust of wind to blow under it. The canopy flaps invert and release a gush of rainwater, unwinding her hair knot, and soaking her linen blazer.

She watches as her blazer begins to shrivel and creep up from its place on her hips to just above her waist.

There's not enough time to change. I can't miss another bus. I'm sure the meeting is already over.

Arriving back at the corner, she's surprised to see only a few people waiting.

Duh, everyone else is probably at work already.

The rain slows to a fine mist and she closes her umbrella.

The bells chiming 10 o'clock from the church across the street shift her attention to the beautiful, grand building.

Never knew they did that during the week.

As she takes in its magnificence, she catches sight of the rainbow of colors that merge to form the stained-glass windows.

That's odd. It looks like the lights are on in the church. Must be a ceremony this morning.

Her thoughts are disrupted by the sounds and sights of people crossing the street, many climbing the steps to the church. She hears a man calling out "Get your papers here."

That's only done on.... Oh, crap. It's Sunday! ☹☹

Marlene B. Samuels—Salama Who?

Everyone in my family had some kind of crazy foreign accent, as did just about everyone in our immigrant Montreal neighborhood. Jake, my brother, and I had a saying between us: “If you have an accent and we can’t understand you, you’ve got a serious problem!”

My Polish-Russian father spoke English quite well but most of the time, especially when he was all riled up, had a tendency to sound like Boris Badanoff from the Rocky and Bullwinkle hour. My Romanian mother was a dead ringer for either Zsa Zsa or Eva Gabor. For anyone old enough to remember the T.V. show *Green Acres*, my mom could have been an audio stand-in if ever Eva had developed laryngitis.

Then there was our Aunt Esther’s husband, Uncle Sigmund —Ziggy for short, a German Jew incapable of pronouncing the letter “W” and so “V” and “W” were indistinguishable. Occasionally, they resembled “B” to the uninitiated listener. Should Uncle Ziggy ask for more “vater” during one of our family dinners, he often was served more butter or vice-versa. Whenever Jake and I moved out of Ziggy’s earshot, we’d impersonate Nazi guards, muttering to each other, “Achh, vee half vays of making you Chews talk!” all followed by hysterical laughter. Aunt Esther’s primary problem, aside from also sounding like one of the Gabor sisters, was that to her “kitchen” and “chicken” were interchangeable.

Jake and I were especially amused when our father, with great seriousness, attempted to correct our mother’s pronunciation of English words. During summer holidays in the country, our father always cautioned us, “Be careful! You should look inside from the flowers if you’re picking them. Beans are hiding in many of them.” Jake and I couldn’t fathom why our dad thought beans were inside flowers. Hey, maybe such things were common in his Polish homeland?

The greatest mystery to us, however, was the one expression our father invoked during a wide range of events — his catchall phrase applicable to a multitude of emotions: anger, frustration, disappointment, and on very rare occasions, surprise or delight. He modulated his voice when he invoked the expression to suit the situation. We’d heard the expression during all our young lives yet remained baffled about what it meant, especially given that Dad applied it to a multitude of situations.

“Salama witch!” He’d shout when he dropped his sewing-needle into the rug. “Salama witch, amazing!” He’d announce after hearing good news. “Salaaama Witch!” He’d scream after spilling hot coffee on his crotch.

At last, that special day Jake and I, unwittingly, learned the meaning of salama witch arrived. Uncle Ziggy and our dad had just come out of the house for a quick run to the store. The two of us sat on the front steps playing “Fish” with our cousins. As the two of them approached our father’s massive green Ford, we heard Dad screaming at the top of his lungs, over and over, “Salama witch, salama witch! You bastard, you *goniff* (thief)! Salama witch! What the hell is going on here?”

He and Uncle Ziggy had come upon our neighbor syphoning gas out of my father’s car. Where upon Ziggy chimed in, also at full volume, “Son of a bitch is damned right!” ❧❧

Joni Sensel—Hearing Loss

After the unexpected death of my beloved partner three years ago, I had a call of condolence from someone I'd worked with. When I heard his voice on the phone, I imagined him in the cherry orchard he tended as a retirement project. The image stung—my sweetheart had just retired, and this colleague was at least a dozen years older.

The grapevine had told him of Tony's death. After letting me know he was sorry, he said, "Yeah, my wife lost her cat not long ago, too. That was hard."

Silent, I listened while he chattered on. Tears had atrophied my eye-rolling muscles and I appreciated the compassion he was trying, ineptly, to express. Still, I wanted to rent a billboard proclaiming that losing a partner is not like losing your cat. I've grieved many beloved dogs; please take my word for it. Your cat does not greatly alter your meals or pastimes, your ability to perform household or car maintenance, your vacation plans, your financial situation, your parenting if you had children together, your relationships with mutual friends and family members, your sex life—at least I hope not—or even whether you can continue to live in your home.

My colleague didn't realize he was on the curriculum for my crash course in American incompetence with death and grieving. The opening lecture insists death is fake news except when it applies to other species. Animal lovers bemoan the short lifespan of pets without acknowledging the millions of parents who lose children or babies each year. People who avoid fraught spiritual topics don't hesitate to refer to a pet's journey over the Rainbow Bridge. If, by some fluke, death accosts a beloved human, we're discouraged from grieving for more than three weeks. Death is not a shared and inevitable burden; it's an unexpected bump we need to "get over."

As a result, the bereaved endure comments that poke the wound by belittling it. Although most adults have lost a grandparent, if not other loved ones, well-wishers like my colleague reference dead pets more often. Animal death breaks fewer taboos. When a friend confides she's had surgery, nobody says, "Yeah, my puppy was spayed last week, too." The pet parallel applies only to mortality.

My most traumatic encounter with this cultural failing came from a professional, the veterinarian who cared for the two old dogs who, with my alpha male, had completed my pack. Her staff might deal in canine cocaine, because my dogs were strangely eager to visit, but after 20 years as a client, I counted her team as neighbors, not service providers. That made a wounding there more unexpected.

A month after Tony left my world, I took one of those dogs, Jazz, for his rabies shot booster. The vet's postcard reminder had surfaced on my desk, and the task beckoned as a relic of the normal life I'd lost.

The familiar scent of animals and antiseptic comforted me as I waited. My fingers combed hair from my dog's shedding coat. The routine soothed me, offering the illusion nothing had changed.

After giving Jazz his injection, the vet looked at his chart.

"Oh," she said. "We've already done this. We gave him this booster two months ago."

My hands froze on my dog. "We did?" My last memory of being here with either of my dogs arose—in a different exam room, with another vet in the practice, and at least six months back.

"Are you sure?"

“This is Jazz, right? It’s right here in his file.” She recited the date. Some grieving zombie had simply brought him in twice, the first time apparently days before Tony died. I must have neglected to toss out the reminder. Not that I had anything else on my mind.

“I’m sorry.” Feeling stupid, I thought I ought to explain. “I must be kind of scattered. My partner died a few weeks ago.”

She gave me the Vet Face of Sympathy®. “They just don’t live long enough, do they?”

I blinked. *Lovers didn’t? Plenty of other men did!* The injustice of Tony’s early death welled in me. Looking away, I fought tears. By the time I realized she must’ve misheard me and thought I was talking about losing a pet, she’d opened the exam room door to step out.

“We won’t charge you for this one,” she added. “I should’ve checked. And don’t worry, it shouldn’t hurt him.” No, not like the confusion had bludgeoned me. I resisted an urge to chase her to set her straight, to have my pain seen and ranked higher. Pointless. Still, it bites inside each time I see her.

Since then I’ve had to usher both my dogs to Dog Heaven. Each time, while cuddling their failing bodies, I told them to find Tony. My last murmurs to them were softer than what I told my vet, but my dogs weren’t handicapped by human denial or the mistaken idea that death only takes pets. Neither dog seemed to linger in spirit, so I trust they heard my commands and obeyed.

Left behind, I can only apply what I’ve learned when friends suffer their own inevitable losses. For starters, I might not comment at all. Questions are better. (Hint: “That’s awful, isn’t it?” doesn’t count.) “What have you loved most about them?” is a good one. “Will you share a favorite memory with me?” is another. Sweet memories give comfort, and no statement can help more than encouraging mourners to share them with somebody tuned to hear the love through the tears.

It’s true that beloved pets don’t live long enough. Neither do beloved humans. Our cultural refusal to allow grief to be heard can’t hide our vulnerability; it only compounds the pain. I expected nothing from my vet but a little grace for my error, but her error in response taught a useful lesson: Listening well is the best—and least—we can do. ❧❧

Virginia Amis—Mailbox

I'm over it, really. I barely remember what happened.

The day's air stung my ten-year-old cheeks, although I'd bundled up with hat and scarf. I stood on the sidewalk, facing the front door of our apartment, watching my mother mouth words without sound, giving me a message she wanted me to understand. Babies were napping and she did not want to open the door to the cold just to give me her instructions. She must have thought they were simple enough.

Twenty minutes earlier she'd sent me on a mission, handing me several small envelopes she told me were thank you notes. On them were written names in her lovely script. No addresses needed. I was the stamp.

"Take these to all the people whose names are on the front," she'd said. I knew them all. It was a small neighborhood. "Knock on their doors and hand them in."

My mother was proper, always writing thank-you notes for any gift. She made us write them, too. None of my friends had to write them.

I set out on that gray morning on my delivery route. I saw the milk man and a neighbor, Mrs. Thomas. She liked flowered sheets. They hung on her clothesline in the summer. I don't know how she dried them on cold days. At each house, I went to the door and waited for someone to take my delivery. It was simple.

But, at three of the addresses, no one answered the door. I went home to tell my mother. She understood me through the door as I waived the envelopes and shrugged.

I thought I understood her words, mouthed through the window on the front door. "Put them in the mailbox." I can still see her mouth exaggerating the words. She even pantomimed how that would look so I was sure to receive the message.

I walked to the end of the street and dropped the remaining envelopes into the large blue box, then returned to the warmth of my mother's kitchen.

"How'd it go?" she asked me.

Unwrapping my warm scarf, I nudged each snow boot off with the toe of my other foot. "I did what you said," I told her. "I dropped the last three in the mailbox." The hot chocolate on the stove smelled good and I hoped I could have some.

"You what?"

I froze in place. "It's what you told me to do."

She placed her hands on each side of her face in anguish. "I told you to put them in the mail slot, not the mailbox. The mail SLOT in each front door. I can't believe you mailed them! They don't have stamps or even addresses! They are just going to lay in there, never be delivered. How could you be so stupid? I said mail SLOT!"

She turned away from me in disgust. Close to tears, my shoulders slumped. I no longer wanted any hot chocolate. My only concern was how long it would take for my mother to tell everyone at home how I

could not do anything right. I could already hear my brother in the living room, laughing at my stupidity.

That was many decades ago. I'm sure by now the Post Office has worked out what to do with the envelopes a little girl mailed by mistake. I've moved beyond it. I barely remember what happened. ❧❧

Virginia Amis—Snake Flowers

“Hurry up! We’ll be late.”

Margaret followed her big sister down the steep path that cut the hillside in two. In the distance, they heard first bells.

“Huuuuurrrryyy!”

Taking the goats’ path had been Dana’s idea, since they truly were running behind. It had taken a while that morning for Margaret to find her other shoe and clean socks, and that had cost them precious time. She made her best effort in her sister’s wake, knowing Dana did not want to bear the stares the other parishioners would surely give if they took their seats after the first hymn. The steep path, originating in a neighbor’s yard (they did not have permission to trespass) cut at least ten minutes off their walk. But shorter though it might have been, the ground was rocky and uneven, tough on Margaret’s small feet, especially since she’d been told not to soil her shoes.

If she had looked up at her surroundings instead of studying each step before taking it, Margaret would have noticed the late spring blooms in the scrub on either side of the path much earlier. She liked flowers, especially the little yellow ones that grew on tall stalks and tickled her ankles when she brushed by, leaving pollen behind. Finally, she stole a precious moment to take a look.

“Can we come back this way?” she asked Dana, who had warned her to keep her voice down, so she didn’t alert the neighbors of their crime of convenience. She wanted to pick a bouquet to take home to their mother.

Dana did not hear her. They trudged on toward the bottom of the hill, Dana’s eyes searching for the end of the path that led to the road they sought.

Margaret, at seven years old, did not like to leave her questions unanswered. She tried again. “Can we come back this way!” saying it a bit too loud.

Dana turned and glared at her, eyes warning. “What?”

Margaret pointed to the flowers she wanted, now noticing the blue daisy-like blooms growing beside the yellow ones. “I want to pick flowers,” she said.

Dana showed all of her big-sister frustration in one look, making Margaret stop walking. “Do you see those blue flowers? Never pick those flowers. You will be arrested. They are “snake” flowers.”

Margaret’s view of nature changed at that moment. She looked at the blooms with new eyes, imagining the pretty petals covered with tiny writing snakes, the most gruesome picture she could envision. In a flash, she ran past Dana, beating her to the bottom of the hill and keeping her pace strong until they reached the church, finding their seats five minutes before final bells, Margaret’s heart pounding in her chest.

It was years later that Margaret learned what Dana had really told her, but not until after she had repeated the story many times to her childhood friends, most of whom looked at her as though she had a pigtail growing out of her forehead.

They were State flowers, and no one cared if a little girl picked an armload. ❄️

Contributor Notes

Virginia Amis is a lawyer and a writer, who spends her days in a courtroom and her nights and weekends in her writing room. A transplant from Pittsburgh to the Pacific Northwest, she writes in that setting, bringing nature and characters to life through her stories. She has written two novels and has a third in progress. Her short stories have been published in: *Reminisce*, *Reminisce Extra*, *Perspectives Magazine*, *Scribes Valley 2019*, *Beyond the Norm*, *Scribes Valley 2020*, *Where Tales Grip*, *Linden Avenue Literary Journal* and 101words.com.

Morgan Baker teaches at Emerson College and is the Managing Editor for thebucket.com. Her work has been published in *The Boston Globe Magazine*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Brevity Blog*, *Cognoscenti*, *Talking Writing*, *Motherwell*, *Under the Gum Tree* and the anthology *Done Darkness*, among other publications. She recently lived in Hawaii, and now lives in Cambridge with her husband and Portuguese Water dog. She has two grown daughters and is working on a memoir about her empty nest. She tries to listen more carefully when people tell her stories.

Carol J. Wechsler Blatter, LCSW, DCSW has published a personal essay in *Chaleur Press*, a story in *Story Circle Network Journal*, and a poem in the anthology *Real Women Write, Growing/ Older*. She received honorable mention for creative non-fiction writings in *New Millennium Writings*. Ms. Blatter is a psychotherapist in private practice. A wife, mother, and grandmother, she especially enjoys time with her precious, clever granddaughter.

Pat Detmer's humor pieces have appeared in *The Seattle Times* and the long-gone *Eastside Journal*. She published for years in Whidbey Island's *The Marketplace* newspaper and the *Newcastle News*, a past subsidiary of the *Seattle Times*. She was a staff blogger for BoomerGirl.com for the length of its existence. Her work also appeared in *Newsweek's* "My Turn." Currently she writes a monthly blog about business management and sales for her business's website, our company website www.thequincygrou.net as well copy for other businesses.

Cassandra Hamilton is a disabled artist/writer with traumatic brain injury and central vision loss in one eye who creates from dreams, shamanic journeys and life. She recently had six images accepted into the German publican *Beyond Words*. Her first international image ran in *Beyond Queer Words*, July 2020 edition. This former theater director's art has shown at The Mystic Museum of Art, Marlborough Arts Center and Cromwell Creative District and was published by *Prometheus Dreaming*, *The Door Opener Magazine*, and *MUSED, a BellaOnline Literary Review*. Her writing has appeared in *101 Words*, *The Door Opener Magazine*, *Rivereast News Bulletin*, *The Glastonbury Citizen* and *How and Why We Write: Writing It Real Members on the Vocation, A Writing It Real Anthology* edited by Sheila Bender. She teaches Active Dreaming (a synthesis of dreamwork and shamanism) and is writing a memoir. You can see/read more of her work and contact her at www.BearDogDreaming.com.

David D. Horowitz founded and manages Rose Alley Press, which publishes books featuring Northwest formal poetry. These include the latest Rose Alley Press anthology, *Footbridge Above the Falls*, and David's most recent collection, *Cathedral and Highrise*. His poems have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, such as *The Raven Chronicles*; *Terrain.org*; *The Lyric*; *The Asses of Parnassus*; *The Literary Nest*; and *Coffee Poems*. His essays regularly appear in *Exterminating Angel*. David often organizes and hosts literary readings in and around Seattle, where he lives. His website is www.rosealleypress.com.

Pat LaPointe enjoyed careers in Business Management and as a psychotherapist before she found her true passion to be writing. She has had personal essays, flash and short fiction as well as a nonfiction

published as well as an anthology of women's stories of surviving toxic relationships. She is a writing workshop addict who enjoys enriching her writing skills and sharing work with other writers.

Dorothy Ross worked at the University of California-Davis as an editor and program manager. Since her retirement twenty years ago, she has written more than 200 short pieces, many of which had their genesis in Sheila Bender's classes. Her work has been published by: the Story Circle Network, the *Fourth & Sycamore* literary journal, True Stories Well Told, Writing It Real, and the *Oasis Journal* for 2017 and 2018. Ross recently published a memoir, *Not Just a Secretary*. She says it's hard to decide which is the biggest thrill, visiting her book on the library shelf or welcoming her first great-grandchild.

Marlene Samuels is an independent research sociologist, writer, and instructor with PhD and MA degrees in sociology from University of Chicago, where she serves on the Graduate School Advisory Council — Division of the Social Sciences. She teaches research methodology and data collection workshops for writers at Ghost Ranch among other venues. She researched, edited, and published her mother's World War II memoir, *The Seamstress: A Memoir of Survival* from Penguin-Berkley Press. It was chosen as a top ten best books of the year from the American Librarians Association and won first place in the biography-memoir category at the annual American Audio Book Awards. Last year, Marlene was Research Director for the documentary film, *A Voice Among the Silent* for Eshel Productions. Her most recent book, *When Digital Isn't Real: Fact Finding Offline for Serious Writers* is available on Amazon. She has partnered with Writing It Real member Pat LaPointe for their forthcoming book about female to female relational aggression, known as bullying.

Joni Sensel is the author of more than a dozen non-fiction titles for adults and five novels for young readers from Macmillan imprints. Her books include a Junior Library Guild selection, a Center for Children's Books "Best Book," and a Henry Bergh Honor title. She holds an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts, teaches frequently, and has served as a co-regional advisor for one of the nation's largest chapters of the Society of Children's Books Writers & Illustrators (SCBWI). Joni's current project is *Feeling Fate: A Memoir of an Intuitive Heart*, which she works on from her home near the knees of Mt. Rainier.

Barbara Simmons grew up in Boston, now resides in California – the two coasts inform her poetry. A graduate of Wellesley College, she received an MA in The Writing Seminars from Johns Hopkins. As a secondary school English teacher, she revisited texts with students who inspired her thinking about communication's diversity. Retired, she savors smaller parts of life and language, exploring the communion of words, ways to remember and envision. Publications have included *The Quince*, *Santa Clara Review*, *Hartskill Review*, *Boston Accent*, *NewVerse News*, *Writing it Real*, *Soul-Lit* and *Capsule Stories: Isolation Edition*. Her work has appeared in *Oasis* anthology and on the air for KQED's "Perspectives."

Penne Wilson lives on Anderson Island, WA and teaches English for Great Lakes Learning Academy, a totally online school located in Lansing, MI. A published poet, she also paints, takes photographs, sews, gardens, and lives every day to the fullest, enjoying the many blessings of her life, which include two wonderful daughters, two adopted sons, a granddaughter, and four grandsons. She lives with her menagerie, Mack the cat, Layla a senior citizen cocker spaniel, and Riley, a miniature poodle.