mama who bore me

Lillianna Righter
# Mama Who Bore Me

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I do not exist in a vacuum.

I was not born full-formed, the result of some spontaneous, miraculous conception.

I am the result of thousands of years of women breaking barriers, dreaming, searching, creating—and most importantly, caring for each other. They sowed the seeds of their legacy, and I am living the harvest of their labors. I was born from the actions of the backward spanning generations: my millions of mothers, both literal and figurative. I learned to be curious, resilient, stubborn, and hardworking from their lives and the chain of women spilling down the mountainside of their posterity.

A mother does her job not only by caring and protecting, but by inspiring, fighting, inventing, and leading by example. This is my opportunity to show how grateful I am.

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Maternal figures were essential to my formation as a person. When I was very little, my father traveled for work, so my daily interests and interactions were centered around my mother. I remember daily painting and playing dress-up, wanting to be like my artist and vintage clothing collector mother. It was her that supervised my sister and I in our pink playhouse, her voice that lulled me to sleep with the words from my favorite books, sitting up next to me until I fell into the distant world where Harry Potter and the Berenstain Bears let me tag along to their adventures. She gifted me my love of the library, encouraged me to dress to express, and taught me not to fear embarrassing myself too much. She let me march to the beat of my own drum when I came home playing the largest instrument a four-foot fourth grader could find. She didn’t tease me when I found friends in more boys than girls and let me run wild in the woods with my best friend. As I got older, she assisted me in every school project, supplying materials and quietly encouraging me to put in just a little extra.

She never pushed, but expected me to follow the rules or exceed them when I could, and I never had any reason not to. Sometimes we fought, and sometimes we would shop and joke and talk, and I would get lost in camaraderie with her and my sister like I used to get lost in her mountains of fluffy pastel sweaters. She drove me to every lesson, performance, practice, competition, and activity with few complaints. While she did all this, she showed me the dedication and independence it took to run her own business. When I was in high school, her love for clothing and costuming aligned with my love for theatre. She found herself in charge of dressing more than fifty thespians in the dozens of plays in which I was involved. Our relationship evolved from mother and daughter to friends and collaborators. We would go home after each rehearsal and discuss details long into the night. Our partnership translated into other parts of life: with my sister away at college and my dad away on business, we lived alone more often than not. I came to her for advice, and she told me to take a deep breath but always to make my decisions for myself alone.
My maternal grandmother, my Grammy, taught me independence. She taught me how to drop vanity and never take myself too seriously. She taught me to be free thinking, spiritual, and to laugh, and to remember. At ninety-two years old, she has lived by herself on a mountain for more than twenty-five years, more a mythological figure of the forest than a mortal in my mind. She is also the most open-minded person I have ever met—she has opened her arms and often her home to people from all walks of life. She is willing to consider many viewpoints and usually responds with an intrigued “Ohh!” or “Huh!” She’s fearless to the point of obstinacy. When I was younger, she would discuss the prospect of her own death so frankly that it would leave me in tears and her flabbergasted at what upset me. She would tell me how she believes death is not an end; she’s not sure what comes next, but perhaps a soul achieves greater consciousness, or perhaps it’s the next great adventure. Once, she was discussing the rumor that the world would end in 2012 and pondering that perhaps it would be a spiritual awakening—and when I became upset, she tried to console me by saying, “Oh, it won’t be that different—I don’t think we’re going to wake up with horns and tails!” She introduced me to yoga and meditation but never claimed it as a necessary path, simply enveloping me in her own practice when I wished. I followed her on walks; she would point out familiar flora and fauna. She brought me the funny papers every time she came to visit, and dried mango because she knew it was my favorite. She taught me to play rummy and war on a deck of cards. Grammy also taught me that it is just as important to reflect on life as to live it. She regaled me with cheeky tales from her childhood, stories of my late grandfather Ned, and anecdotes about my mom and uncle as children (nearly the same set of stories every time). But telling the stories revives her; she lives each retelling as if it’s a new revelation.
My paternal grandmother taught me to be generous and to hold on to those you care about. I call her Mom Mom (she’s twice the mom!). I am the youngest of her six grandchildren. She is the classic grandmother: the one who bakes something for every occasion, who took me to the park and the beach, who makes too much food when I come to dinner, and who tells her neighbors more about me than I would have ever cared to share. She and my late grandfather proudly came to every concert and play throughout my grade school years, no matter how scandalous the role I played or how awful the elementary school musicians. Over the eighty years of her life, she’s had kids running through her house and her embrace—her children, neighbors, students, nieces and nephews, grandkids, and most recently, great-grandkids—and she loves them all almost as much as she loves the dozens of birds and dogs she has raised. I always loved going to her house for the weekend and hearing multiple clocks ring every quarter-hour, drawing as many pictures as I wanted, taking a bubble bath in her tub with jets, and having her braid my hair before she tucked me into bed wearing a big t-shirt. Though I grumbled and groaned when I was brought along as a little kid, I admire her vitality and generosity volunteering at a nursing home weekly to play bingo—sometimes with patients years younger than her. She has been a member of the Optimist Club and works hard to recognize and support hardworking young students. She is truly a matriarch, the central gravity of our family. She keeps in contact with even the most extended members of her family and maintains a healthy circle of friends. Sometimes I think she must spend more time on the phone than not—and when she’s not talking to her loved ones, she’s sitting by her pond, enjoying the summer evening and talking to the frogs. Lately, due to some health problems and grieving my grandfather, I think she’s finally learning to accept others taking care of her after a lifetime of being the ultimate caretaker.
Given all these fantastic maternal influences, it’s natural I would want to be a mother myself as soon as possible (though I don’t mean biological offspring!). In high school, amongst my friends, the status of “mom” was a holy one. We made it a point to know everyone’s mom’s name and to refer to them (never to their face, of course!) on a first name basis, as if we were old pals. Later on, the complimentary terms “babe,” “queen,” and “goddess” were trumped by the highest superlative, “mom,” a name we took to our idols and our friends. Being the “mom friend” in a social group also became a point of honor. We celebrated being prepared (bags filled with snacks, medicine, and emergency essentials), giving each other advice, and sternly reminding each other to take care of ourselves mentally and physically. In college, I found a new group of friends with the same values: after being cast as the maternal figures in *Romeo and Juliet* our freshman year, two of my best friends and I were dubbed the “Mom Squad” and have kept the title more than a year later.

The peak of my motherly pride, however, occurred in my senior year of high school. That spring, I directed a show for the first time for our theatre department. Because so many people in the club already called their mother and because the title had a friendly ring of authority, my cast started universally calling me “Mama.” Incidentally, however, the young man for whom I felt the fiercest protective instinct was not one of the people I had known for years: he was someone I met and intensely bonded with in a short amount of time. Not enough boys had auditioned to fill the male roles of the one-act I was directing, so my theatre teacher, Bobbi Vinson (another mother to me), told me she had coerced someone from her home room into trying out who had never been involved in theatre before whatsoever. She helped me set up an audition appointment with him and informed me he was very nervous. Bobbi is famous for seeing potential in people that is overlooked by others, and this occasion was no exception. To be honest, his script read was rather lack-luster, but what struck me were his mannerisms when he wasn’t acting. He had such a gentility underneath his anxiety, and what really cemented my impression: this fifteen-year-old boy with an emo haircut (who had never met me before the minute he made himself vulnerable by auditioning for me) opened all the doors for me and helped me carry my books, not from any expectations of chivalry, but simply because he saw I needed help.
I cast him as the sweet boy-next-door character with an understanding that I would have to work closely with him as a novice thespian. Over the next few weeks of our rehearsal period, this boy continually surprised me with his work ethic and kind heart. He readily took all his notes and constructive criticism—in fact, he often stayed after rehearsal asking for more advice. We also became more emotionally close because I would drive him home after rehearsals and we had many a heart-to-heart on those trips. He didn’t have the most stable home life, but he astounded me with the patience with which he cared for his younger siblings. Leading up to opening night, the natural ease and friendliness he’d developed (on stage and off) were nearly unrecognizable from the boy who stuttered, shaking through a paragraph at his first read. My, you should have heard all the admiring squeals from the other club members when he performed his monologue during dress rehearsal. But it broke my heart to see his self-esteem: he was terrified before the performances and I wished I could instill more confidence so he could have as much faith in himself as I had in him. He was an undeniable asset to our program, a reminder of earnest, hard work and camaraderie with cast mates.

My show was certainly a tearjerker in itself, but I was sobbing at the end of the last performance more from overwhelming gratitude and pride in him and the entire crew. Though many people called me “mom” during that time, it meant the most and humbled me most to be trusted so much by him and to witness so much growth over a month’s time.

A year and a half later, he is one of the most committed members of the high school’s drama club, both onstage and on the design crew. He is going into his senior year and pursuing film studies. He told me joining theatre changed his life and led him to his passion; before he joined, he hadn’t even considered higher education or a career. He and I are still close; it makes me incredibly proud to go to his performances and see how his confidence and ease have grown exponentially. Supporting him was the first time I truly understood what it meant to be the mom I had been joking about being for so long: to live your life first and then hand down what little knowledge you can as seeds, and finally watching someone grow and succeed and feeling the glow of happiness simply because you care about them. And to this day, though he is nearly an adult himself, my “son” still calls me “mama.”

In the following pages, you will find the stories of 15 women who changed the world and changed me, either in opening doors or learning about them. In response to each, because motherhood by definition necessitates a child, I have placed a piece of myself that descends from her legacy. Interwoven there are stories from my mother and grandmothers, bearing important memories or lessons I have gleaned from each of them. Through these pages, you will find hundreds of stories, a book, a girl, and the women who collectively raised her.

*Mama Who Bore Me* is part memoir, part biopic, part diary, part chapbook, part history lesson. The sections are intended to model a woman’s lifetime, and in a way, this book embodies me: my reflections, feelings, and creations all culminate in a product that sends homage to my maternal ancestors. It, like me, could not exist without the inspiration from my forebears.
Cindy Louise Righter, nee. Horne

Born May 3rd, 1963 in Washington County, Hagerstown/Boonsboro, Maryland

Mother: Barbara Elizabeth Froelich Horne

Father: Ned Victor Horne

My father worked for the most part (during my lifetime) in the heating/air-conditioning metalwork/duct work part of the heating and air conditioning company- he did the metal shop, that is. Both of them worked when they were younger at Fairchild, which was the airplane manufacturing plant in Hagerstown. It was a really big business. I guess dad probably worked in the manufacturing part but mom was mainly secretarial, receptionist kind of thing. And then she was a homemaker when we were growing up. Although she did go back to school when we were older. Yeah she took—was it accounting? She took some classes at Hagerstown Junior College when were in middle/high school. Yeah I don’t think she got a degree or anything, she just took classes.

Fine relationship with my parents. They were supportive. Mom was probably a little more... pushy, but she made sure we got education, that we had financial aid so we could go to college, stuff like that. My dad was the little bit more lenient one. So in high school if I was late getting home from a curfew, it was dad waiting up because mom said she knew she’d be so angry that she let him take care of it. So my dad was the funny parent and my mom was the business parent. But you know, it made a good combination I guess. We had our differences of course but nothing major.

I had one brother, Michael, who was 5 years older than me. Well now that he’s moved away we’re not as close as we probably could be, but it was good. There was enough age difference between us that we didn’t conflict, like sharing friends that would make us jealous or anything like that—he could do his thing without me bothering him too much. And of course when I was a baby, he was old enough to take care of me and look after me. Which he did, like when we would have to walk to the bus stop, it was a quarter of a mile down, there’s always the story that Grammy likes to tell, which I don’t remember happening but. Down at the bus stop there was somebody picking on us both, because of last name being Horne, doing dumb horny toad comments, and I don’t know if he was looking after me or what, but the one guy said he was going to chase somebody or something. Uncle Mike was running, the guy was chasing him, and Mike just dropped to the ground so the other guy tripped over him. So he was thinking, he didn’t necessarily fight, but it was to take up for both of us. And when I was a baby one time when they were working on the house and living in what’s now the garage, they tell the story that I started crying so Mike got me out of the crib and put me in the stroller and strolled me over to where they were working, so he protected me.

There was enough age difference that he was off at college when I was at college, so he was more supportive really. Older brother that was going to college, being smart, it was cool man! I mean I’m sure I bugged him when he had friends over and stuff. We’re definitely both, at this point in our lives, taking care of mom, but we’ve pretty much agreed on anything, there hasn’t been any conflict of interests. You know and back to younger kids, I mean he was smart engineering kind of smart and stuff, but he was also artistic. I would sometimes copy his art project kind of things when I had an art project. Like have we ever showed you the nose people? I thought they were cool so I drew them when I was in art class. And over the summer we took art classes together at camp from a guy who was famous or well known in the area, he taught art classes for kids. She did a pretty good job realizing what our likes and dislikes and strengths were and encouraging us.

[Knowing what I wanted to do] was always sort of a gradual process—just all the life experiences so to speak that we had just kind of developed into doing the vintage clothes. Because 1) we shopped second hand so of course I was from early on coming in contact with old stuff. So we shopped second hand for clothes and stuff, and we also went to auctions pretty regularly. So you know I was acquainted with that sort thing, older thing. That combined with every Friday—especially in the summertime—we went to the library. So I was just always drawn to fashion books and art books. So I was basically able to teach myself about vintage fashion. So it sort of came naturally in a sense. But I always liked fashion—Mom said I drew clothes on my stick people before other people would.
I was embarrassed because we didn’t have a lot of money and by the time I was in middle and high school my dad was having health problems and was in and out of the hospital, so with medical bills and what not. It was a little embarrassing because I could get free lunch at school. Which I didn’t all the time, I generally packed my lunch so I didn’t have to get the free lunch, it was less embarrassing. And you know, I guess just having friends to the house because the house was never finished, which looking back on it, I don’t think anybody cared. But we never had birthday parties or slumber parties because it wasn’t my mom’s kind of thing to do and I was embarrassed by it but looking back it was a non-issue. But I probably didn’t have anything to be embarrassed about because they were my friends.

As a younger kid, course we lived out in the middle of nowhere so it’s not like you had a lot of childhood friends, but there was a family down the road that had four kids and so they kind of fit in the age range of us. They were the Hargels, so there was a guy around Mike’s age and Penny, the girl a year younger than me. Their neighbor had a son, Steve, who was the same age as Penny so they were pretty good friends, and then we’d hang out, like at the bus stop and stuff, so sometimes we’d do stuff with them. So that was pretty much the extent of the neighborhood. Like, we only went trick or treating once or twice because we had to go so far. So we probably went with that family, but we pretty much gave up on that. And it was going around the loop (the roads made a circle) but that was a mile or two down the road. We never got any trick or treaters up our way. Maybe when we were real little once or twice Mom would get candy, but then there was no reason.

So then I had friends at school, of course. I guess most of my social as a child was through 4H. We were all in 4H—Mike started out and then I joined the club. So it was a local 4H club and then you had your countywide activities and such. The local club was just in Beaver Creek which wasn’t too far away and it was a very nice couple who ran both the clubs and of course at that time there was a boys’ club and a girls’ club. And then they had 3 sons that were very involved, and one of those sons was a good friend of Mike’s. I got to know people from school who were in 4H at the same time so there were a couple families I knew from both places. Dairy farmers. It was country, so one of the ones we knew that had ids our age were dairy farmers. And you know I was pretty good friends with Tracy who was my friend at school. So then I also had lots of different age friends because I was in 4H. Our clubs were famous for having prizewinning fair booths—that they’d win grand champions at the counties, so we could go to the state fair. So that was like every summer, we got to go to the state fair with our fair groups. When Mike was in, their booths had moving parts and everything. I’d like to say because of our artistic contributions we always had prizewinning fair booths. So that was fun, you know that was a way of doing the art part that we both liked, we were both artistic—it was an outlet for it. And you know the clubs were very active—sometimes we were officers and we had Halloween parties every year in someone’s barn, so that was always fun setting up for those. We’d always do flashlights, and grapes for eyeballs, and that sort of thing, so we were always big in that. We had Christmas parties, and Easter sunrise services, and Christmas plays, so there was a lot of stuff we did in 4H social-wise.

ACTUALLY we did have a rabbit once. We didn’t show it in the fair, but we did have a rabbit. I don’t remember if I did a project or what. But mostly you had to do a project and a record book for the end of the year, and mine were always like sewing, and art, things like that. My record books weren’t the greatest because that wasn’t my favorite part, and because there weren’t really projects that totally related to what I wanted to do, like fine art, or fashion. And I usually never finished my sewing projects either. I mean I could have, I just guess I wasn’t into it that much. But I did learn how to sew that way. And so I entered in the 4H fair— as an individual I’d enter my artwork. I might have done some photography, I don’t remember. And I guess I did enter maybe once with a sewing project. But then because I was in 4H for like 10 years, when I was living here and somehow got contacted as an alumni, when I was first married I got to judge the state fashion show at the state fair. I’m not really sure how that happened, I think it might have been a mistake, but it was cool! I guess because whatever I filled out for the alumni part mentioned that by then I was selling vintage clothes and had taken sewing stuff as a 4Her.

Oh, and the best part about 4H was going to camp in the summer. Go to the 4H camp in the cabins and stay for a week. We had different classes during the day, so we learned arts and crafts, and archery, and swimming, and canoeing, and riflery, which I never took. And then as I got older, I was a counselor and taught some of the classes. I think I did a makeup or stage makeup, or you know, bruises. This were always easy and I could do them well enough to do a workshop. So 4H was actually a pretty good part of my young life—not to say I didn’t do things in school too.
In school, I was always in chorus. And middle school you didn’t have like “drama” but the chorus would put on little play kind of things. So I did that some. And then in high school I was in the drama club, and chorus, and art club, if there was such a thing, and the morning announcement TV show, as far like extracurriculars. And I started running track when I was a junior, so that was the extent of my athleticism. But I was good enough that when I went to junior college, you could get credit for being on the track team, so that was cool—I got credit for running track. I think I got an academic award for being on the track team and still getting a good grade my freshman year of college—well, junior college. So you know, I was pretty well- rounded. But when I was in drama club, I didn’t do like I do now with you guys—I was very much behind the scenes, I never tried out for anything. And I didn’t really do costumes I don’t think I guess we all kind of did our own thing. But I did makeup a little bit. I was behind the scenes in drama club, but pretty much everyone went to drama club. It was the thing. But it was also fun, they put on talent shows and stuff. I never actually tried out for anything, I just sort of fell into things. I think that’s how I fell into doing makeup that one time. I don’t remember actually signing up for it or anything.

I had a lot of acquaintance friends, but as far like staying overnight, hanging out all the time friends, I pretty much had one, one good friend I guess. We like started in middle school as friends, cause she was kind of awkward and I was kind of quiet, so we sort of fell together, helped each other through the beginnings, when nobody knew each other, so then we became fast friends throughout high school. That was Marie, who you met but maybe you don’t remember, or maybe it was before you were born. When you were very little, she came here once. She lives in Washington state. So before that- well, I had a couple friends that weren’t in 4H. So in middle school, there was a little gang of us, I remember we’d be out on the playground doing back bends and gymnastics. But then again, in school, I was having a hard time, because you know my dad was in and out of the hospital, so sometimes I’d be at school and just be upset, and go to the counselors. So there were friends that lived nearby, it’s not like we went to parties and stuff all the time. But there were a good number of girl friends that I was invited to their parties and stuff. But like I said then, in high school it was kind of like the outcasts, the weird people. And then when I got to junior college is when I met Ruth, who’s like my best buddy. And we can always start up where we left off, even though we only see each other once every couple years. Oh and I was a cheerleader in middle school for like the rec basketball team. And then I tried out for cheerleading in high school and I didn’t make it. But I was friends with people that did make it who were cheerleaders before. It wasn’t kind of that exclusive kind of thing.

So by the time I got to high school I was taking art classes and that’s kind of what I wanted to do. So I guess you asked that before, if I knew early on, so I guess that’s true. I did know I wanted to do something with art. And it was something I was good at. At Goucher College, when I was in high school, there was a gifted and talented summer program and I went for art. I guess you had to apply to get in, like send in some pictures of your artwork and stuff. So I got in, and that was a week-long thing. That was where I made that marionette. I used some of the artwork that’s hanging around here as my portfolio. Like the storm picture, storm clouds. The only problem with that one is I copied that of a magazine cover. But I guess I did a good job of it. But that one, and the one that’s hanging in your room, I think were part of it. Oh, and late middle school early high school, my dad was making doll house furniture. They were trying to find ways to make him have income when he couldn’t go to work-work, so he was always crafty and artistic, I guess that’s where I got my talent from. So I did some miniature paintings and sent those in too. And then somewhere along in there, probably high school I guess—I don’t remember what it was—if it was like an internship, but it was like only a day or two days. But there was a program that I got to go work in a retail store for a day. Doing this, mostly [steaming clothes]. But it was a cool store. If I remember correctly they had like an art deco painting of people outside the store. It was retail, fashion at the time. I got to work in there so that gave me a taste of the retail part of it, I like that. And Mom says I just gasped when I first went in the store, that I was impressed. You know, we didn’t go shopping a lot so this was a big deal! A new store! It was later on when I knew [your] Dad and he gave me like a gift certificate or whatever to go shopping in a mall I was like WOWHAHA! That’s cool! I mean, I thought it was cool, I had no problem with shopping second hand by that time, I was like ooh! I’m hip and artsy [laughs] but at the same time it was nice to go to a new store.
Oh, yeah I was a good student. [what were your favorite subjects?] Um, art. English. I was always pretty good at writing, enough that when I was going to HJC my English teacher suggested or somebody along the way suggested that I take this advanced English class. Unfortunately I got there and he was a real pill. Anyway I wasn’t successful. He was kind of like “oh well you guys aren’t as good as I am.” But that’s where I met Roz, I worked in the art department. And of course I said I worked in the art department as part of my financial aid at junior college, and you know I apparently did a really good job of organizing the art room, and that was pretty much my job there. And like I said I always had good grades. I didn’t do real well in high school chemistry, but nobody did, he was really tough. But I pulled it together and did okay. So I’m not dumb, it’s just not my favorite subject. So then of course when I did go to junior college and then college, I could do more of the things I wanted so I was picking art classes. I majored in art with a concentration? Minor? I don’t know what it would have been called—at Maryland—I took sewing and fashion classes. I think I took a history of fashion or children’s fashion and then the sewing classes. But my major was fine arts. I took painting, printmaking, sculpture, and I worked in the art department there. Mostly like paperwork and answering the phones.

And I also worked in the dining hall, which is where I met your dad. I worked the breakfast shift, get up early. Run to get there, I was always late. He always made me get him milk or something. Just because he’s like that. He’s a challenge. Everything has to be a challenge!

As a junior my first roommate was a bust, I think I met her the first move in day, and I think she might have stayed in the room once? And then moved in with her football boyfriend. And then I got a new roommate. So the second roommate turned out to be a good friend. And she actually is the one that coordinated that I got to meet Len Bias, the basketball player. And then when I moved upstairs into a single, the girl across the hall was a good friend. Jenna. So she lived in Baltimore but I think she moved out to Washington too, somewhere along the line. Lost track of her which I was kind of disappointed about. I think she would have been fun to know. But she was kinda like me you know, more behind the scenes kind of stuff. We weren’t real outgoing. At least she was somebody to go to the dining hall with.

I lived in Anne Arundel Hall, which was the same hall that my mother lived in when she went to the University of Maryland! And the same one you live in now!

And I know the single was the fourth floor, but I’m not so sure about the other. I thought the first room was on the first floor but I’m not so sure because I think, at the time, you know the first floor is all like offices and stuff now. It’s been renovated since then and I think there were rooms there, but I don’t think they were ours. I think we were second or third. And the floors were boy-girl, so if the fourth was girl, I guess it was the second floor. When I had a crush on a boy in the building and I’d you know, walk down the hall, I’m pretty sure I went downstairs to see if their doors were open. [laughs].

And it would have been coming in the road side. There was a laundry room on the first floor. Maybe we were on the first floor … or the basement? I don’t remember going down that much. I don’t know, I didn’t wander around too much.

They were threatening to cut down trees outside of Anne Arundel and we didn’t want that to happen so we were going to go sit in the tree so they couldn’t cut them down. And we did go out, but I don’t think we ever sat in the tree—I don’t think anything ever came of it. So we just got all excited, we were going to do something big! But we didn’t have to. Well, and I would go to the friends’ that I knew from JC, Tammy, she went to UMD. So I’d go visit her sometimes, and I don’t know, I think her roommates bought drugs and stuff. I was kind of clueless about stuff like that, but I think they did drugs. Wouldn’t be surprised if she tried something. And the same, I hung out with her at JC and we went to basketball games and stuff, that’s how we got to know each other. I guess that was my favorite sport, watching basketball. So we followed the basketball team in JC, so it was Tammy, Ruth, and also Margie, and we all went to like the tournaments and stuff. Sometimes visited the basketball players. That wasn’t much fun actually. So those were probably the wildest things.

I guess it was on my birthday or around my birthday that she got Len Bias to come to my dorm. So that would have been my junior year. It was pretty weird, cause you know I had this crush on this basketball player. It’s like a celebrity, it’s not like you actually—that they’re real people. So he actually came to the dorm and wished me a happy birthday, but probably not much else. I was probably agghast. I don’t even know if anyone took pictures. I guess your dad also came by at the same time. I don’t know if he was in on it, or if it was all Terry, who was the roommate. And of course I know I had stuck up on the wall all my basketball game tickets and probably articles and stuff. I’m not he if he would have actually realized that or not. And then he went and overdosed before he even got to play professional… Because I think he was actually sort of an innocent, that he wasn’t really aware of what could happen, but it was all in the excitement of getting selected for the NBA, and they went out celebrating and took too much.
I wasn’t aware of much violent crime. But I guess that one family I was talking about earlier, their older sister was murdered up the street. That was a major thing, you know it was somebody she knew—I think it was a boyfriend or something. It was a personal thing. I was probably 6th grade or something, so you know it was kind of surreal. I felt disconnected. And you know, 6th grade then was different than 6th grade now. We weren’t as sophisticated, or worldly, or something. We were pretty much still little kids.

Wasn’t right away [that your dad and I got romantic]. Truthfully, I thought he was kind of dorky at first, but he was nice. But I guess other people knew more than I did that he liked me. And I guess we didn’t really socialize outside the dining hall at first, so it was just a friend at the dining hall kind of thing, and he was my boss. But he was persistent. I guess he invited me to a party or something, and then he started visiting me in my room, so it got more personal, cause he was so persistent. I guess our first date was when he asked me to go to the circus and I didn’t wanna go. But we did go eventually, I just don’t remember if it was that one, or if I totally said no. And he cooked me dinner in his apartment for my birthday, and we went down into Baltimore once or twice. I guess once was for the circus, it was probably at the convention center. And like to the inner harbor and stuff like that. It all runs together, I don’t know if that was when we were in college, or later, it was all sort of a gradual. Then of course he graduated and I was still in school, so he came back to campus to visit me, so it was serious by then. So that’s probably more when we went out on dates so to speak, he picked me up, go to concerts or a bar or something where a band was playing and we met his friends there. Jeff and Jason, Ken.

[what’d you like about him] [silence while she makes a face]

I don’t know, we were friends, and he was friendly and outgoing. Just that he was persistent, and he liked me! I guess I liked the idea that he liked me! [how did you decide to get married/how did he propose?]

I actually asked him that the other day when we were out at yard sales, and it’s like he didn’t want to admit it at first, but he doesn’t remember either. [laughter] I guess it was again like a gradual thing. I do remember he asked my parents’ permission though. He was at our house visiting, and he was like, “I have a question.” I was there when he asked. I’m tryna think, I think I might not have known, so that was sort of the proposal I think. That he asked my parents permission, very old-fashioned. They liked it. I’m not sure if I knew, but I think I knew he was going to do that. But I guess he figured he had to ask their permission before he asked me, trying to do it in the right order. It’s not like he bought an engagement ring and then said “Here, marry me!” because we actually picked out my engagement ring, which is an antique garnet ring, at an antique show that we went to, I don’t remember if it was because Nan and Pop Pop were set up there, or if we just went because we discovered that we both liked that kind of stuff. And I decided that I wanted an antique ring. So we found one. It was an antique show in a mall, it wasn’t even like a hoity-toity jewelry store or something. Which, our wedding ring was actually just a ring, the original, not this one [I’m wearing]. That was in a box of jewelry that we had at home at Mom’s in the stuff we were buying. That’s another thing, as a kid, we went to rummage sales and I would bring home clothes, jewelry, you know, bags and boxes, it was so cheap. Nobody wanted it and I thought it was cool because it was antique stuff. So was this ring was in that, and I just liked it cause was simple. So this is isn’t the original, this is a gold one, the original was just like plated. But then I guess on our first anniversary? He had it copied in gold. It just has the swirl. I like never wore my engagement ring, and it’s too small now. It’s up in a box.

That was another thing that we did: when he discovered that we liked doing antique shows and flea markets, he’d already been helping, you know, Nan and Pop Pop [his grandparents], doing their shows, so I guess he took me along to help on some of those. Then one time, he was already graduated but I was still in college, we set up at one of the flea markets. I remember going home and packing and pricing stuff I’d had at home. So it’s kind of odd to come back to the dorm after doing an antique show. I don’t know, I think they thought it was pretty neat. Meanwhile they’re all watching the Super Bowl or something, which I had zero interest in. We went to flea markets on the weekend even in school! So that’s how I got started, through Nan and Pop Pop. We got to be pretty close, because he was always close to them. I’m setting up at the flea market right beside them, even before we were married. So I guess that was okay with them, they approved. So it wasn’t all romantic. I guess one thing that was a little more romantic, he was out of school and working, so the first Christmas dinner at AAI, he asked me to go, and of course I was still in school, so I had to find a pretty dress. So that was kinda neat, he brought flowers and picked me up. And of course he had visited the house, and there are pictures of this one time we were all trying on stuff there. Mike was there too. By then, I’d already had stuff hanging in the back room there, I’d had collected a lot.
I guess Mom had found Cannon Hill Place [the location of my current shop] sometime during my senior year in college. So then she’d already started doing stuff and I was doing it while I was in school and took right over out of school. I mean not at all like I’m doing now, but I had a booth, and another one over in Boonsboro. Dad visited that one too because we bought the gold chair that’s down in the living room [pictured on cover]. We bought that at Boonsboro flea market together, and it was in his apartment. He lived in Ellicott City. So senior year I’d visit his apartment, and he’d visit me at school, and we go to flea markets, and he visited my house, and I visited his house.

I was a little intimidated by Grandpop at first. Of course he wasn’t Grandpop then. He teased, so it took a while to get used to that. But like Mom Mom likes to tell, I’d just save up and get him with a good zinger. I guess that was a good thing, that I didn’t always react or answer back when I’d get teased but then I’d come up with a good one. And of course they lived on Oak Way in Timonium at the time. I don’t think I visited too often, to their house. I don’t know, I can’t remember if that was before or after we were married, all the times I’m thinking of. I only knew him two years of college, so we were only on campus one year together. So during that year, you know, he was still—there were other girlfriends in the picture and whatnot. It wasn’t exclusive until later on.

Well, my wedding was fun. And of course doing the things we do, flea markets and stuff, and me doing vintage clothes, I wanted to have a vintage wedding. I started looking for wedding dresses at different second-hand venues, and actually bought my wedding dress at a yard sale in Timonium that we had gone to. I think Mom was along too—I don’t quite remember how that all came together. Maybe she was down visiting. But you know, it was a forty dollar wedding dress. So a couple contacts of people we’d seen at flea markets, like the one lady was supposed to be finding me, matching, or similar era, satin for the bridesmaids. So I found them at various places and his mom made one from a vintage pattern. I think the rest were bought. So Aunt Kate was one, and my friend Ruth was one, and my cousin Tracy was one. And the guys all had, I had tuxes that fit everybody in my collection so nobody had to buy anything because I bought it all and didn’t spend much at all. I guess I still have all of it somewhere. Grammy wore (of course she wasn’t Grammy yet) a vintage dress that we found and then made a little lace cover thing for it. Hers was maroon and Mom Mom’s was pinky-peach, like the bridesmaids. And my dad, I guess I had a tuxedo for him too. We fitted everybody. Jeff and Jason. And your dad was able to find somebody that we could rent an old car, so out of the church we threw the flowers and drove away in this old car. So it was appropriate, 1939 something. So anyhow it was fun, doing a theme. I hope I wasn’t a bridezilla. And we paid, your dad paid for almost everything. I think Mom and Dad paid for flowers, Mom Mom made the cake. So it was shared. I think your dad paid for the reception hall cause it was just the hall of the apartment complex, so it wasn’t any place fancy. We got married at his church in Timonium that Mom Mom still goes to (of course it was totally different then). It was the apartments that we were going to live in, that he was already living in, it was their common hall. So then we rented a different apartment in the complex for a year.

I worked at the library in Timonium. When I was still at home, I guess I was still working at the used bookstore. Well, I did that when I was in junior college for sure, I don’t remember if I did that like the summer after graduation... I must have, because I really didn’t have any other job until I got the job in Cockeysville after we were married. Interesting, books. I’ve always liked to read. The job in the used bookstore wasn’t really a job, it was part time couple hours a week, and I only got paid half in books, half in credit—it was under the table, it wasn’t like I filled out any forms or paid taxes or anything. It was kind of like babysitting. But I think, I’m pretty sure I had a key, so it wasn’t totally under the table.

[Do you have any significant coworkers?] No, it was pretty much just me. There was an older lady that lived downtown that was the other one that worked. The owners didn’t actually work, I think they might have had another store somewhere. So we pretty much did this one, it might have been only a part-time open kind of thing. It was a secondhand bookstore, thirty, forty years ago. So it was probably just open whenever we could be there. She was funny. That was my first probably experience with somebody other than like a relative or a teacher. She was just this kind of goofy older lady that lived downtown that I guess came to the bookstore all the time so they hired her, too. I guess she was working the same way I was, some cash and some credit. Totally different kind of people than I was used to, but she was very nice. And I guess there was like one guy that was a regular customer, the dorky heavyset guy that came by sometimes. But pretty much, that’s probably the only people I ever saw. I don’t remember making sales, particularly. But then the library in Cockeysville, that was a totally different story, that was a real job. That was learning computers, and shelving books! I moved up in the world. Checking books in and out, on the computer! (woo!) Back in 1986! I don’t remember how long I worked there, couple years. Two years maybe, two or three. And of course I was at Cannon Hill, and I think I had a day [to work the cash register weekly] there. I would go down to Mom’s even then, and stay over. I guess cause I had so much stuff that was still there that I would keep at her house and bring to Cannon Hill. I would go home to do that kind of stuff and stay over... it was kind of weird, but oh well.
I definitely become more worldly [after getting married], because I actually lived somewhere else besides at home. We did things, we had parties, went to other people’s parties, went to bars once in a while, see a band once in a while. Went to family dinners at his house I guess. Yeah, I got along with his siblings. Of course Jim was already off wherever, because when we got married he was in Hawaii, so that’s where we went for our honeymoon. I guess. And they moved around different places, so we’d see them at Christmas, sort of like we do now. And of course Aunt Kate had little kids. We babysat them once, when they were little. I thought it was fun, but I guess I wasn’t really ready to have kids. I wasn’t in any hurry. I didn’t know anything about kids, it was like yeah I wanna have kids, I mean everybody says that, but I mean I’m trying to start a store! Doing this! I don’t know what to do with kids. I think your dad was like, but, if we wait too long, you’re gonna be too old when they’re older...

Right away, we had animals. We had a dog. I mean they were all rescues or adopted from somebody that couldn’t keep them or something. So Ayla was the dog, a white furry dog. I mean we didn’t have any pets in the apartment, although the neighbor cat came to visit quite often, a black cat. I don’t even really remember who it belonged to. Then we adopted a cat from somebody at work, well I guess Ayla came from somebody at work too. The cat had kittens, and then we adopted another cat, and I don’t even know if I remember after that. And then the outdoor animals, you know your dad: we had a pheasant once we had a turkey once, we had ducks because we had a mushy yard, and then your dad, I don’t remember if the ducks came first or if the pond came first, he just started to dig a little pond, we had chickens—I guess the chickens were first. We had iguanas in there somewhere, yeah. So we always had pets. The first dog it was like, you know, we never had dogs! I grew up with cats and I was like, “is it going to be in the house?” and he was like “yeah but only downstairs.” Yeah, like the first week maybe, and then she was like under the bed. She didn’t get in the bed, but she slept under the bed. Cause you know, I didn’t know what to do with a dog in the house, but I learned. We got Elvis as a puppy, he had a dog crate and he would cry. So I guess it was good practice for parenting. So he’d be comfortable at night in the crate, he would cry, so I came and sat—I left him in the crate, but I came and sat with him tile he fell asleep. Of course the cats would have freedom of the house and one of them had kittens in your dad’s closet. And of course we were fixing the house, pets, it just exploded from there. Couldn’t even give you a timeline of all the pets.

So we do have that photo album we started.

Cat was born in 1995 when I was… 32 I guess. So when you came along I wa going to be turning 35, and that was like the cut off date when you’re getting too old to have kids. They were like “you’re going to turn 35? Do you wanna have all of these tests?” Like no… it’s not going to change my mind, we’re going to have whatever we have. Just because I turn 35, it doesn’t mean you’re going to suddenly develop down syndrome when you’re already in the womb, which is what the tests were for. It’s like I had my birthday while I was pregnant with you, like it’s going to change on the day. So I never had any of those tests, we were going to take whatever we got. I mean I was hoping you weren’t ugly or something [laughs].

It’s not like [getting pregnant] was a surprise or something. We were pleased, and she turned out to be healthy, just like you turned out to be healthy, even though I turned 35. EVERYTHIIING [changed]. Yeah, it does. You have a different outlook on things. Your dad had to change the first diaper though, I was scared to death and didn’t know what to do. I didn’t have any practice. I mean I had read the books and stuff, but I don’t know. It still doesn’t prepare you for the reality. Of course with her, it was new, and I knew that nursing would be healthier for everybody, and we were having trouble with that. So that’s why I finally joined La Leche League. I know, it sounds stupid, but it’s a group of mothers. Baby meetings is what we called. So I learned to nurse properly, so by the time you came along it wasn’t a problem. But that’s how I met the Van Ripers. It was social, at the time, too. And of course with her, it was new, and I knew that nursing would be healthier for everybody, and we were having trouble with that. So that’s why I finally joined La Leche League. I know, it sounds stupid, but it’s a group of mothers. Baby meetings is what we called. So I learned to nurse properly, so by the time you came along it wasn’t a problem. But that’s how I met the Van Ripers. It was social, at the time, too. You had to start going to the doctor’s every couple weeks and having baby’s checks and that was all new. And of course they were like “It’s okay to give her a bottle if it’s not working!! Just so she’s not dehydrated!” It’s not that she wasn’t getting enough, it just wasn’t going as smoothly as I wanted, so she was fine, really. We figured it out.

Much more relaxed with the second one. It was routine by then, just kind of like, “oh, another one.” You had another one that you’d experimented on already. Plus then, you know, you had two that were doing the same stuff, instead of just one demanded your attention all the time.

I don’t know if there was only one best part. Just the interaction, getting love from a little being! I must have been doing something right! They love me! And I love them! Aren’t they so cute? It sounds silly but it’s true. That wow, you’re successful at taking care of another living being. You know, even more than a pet, because pets are independent in a sense. But you’re totally dependent. But I did okay, you turned out okay!
What was the worst nightmare of motherhood that you can remember? Am I gonna get roasted?

No, you were a happy baby. You were pretty easy going. She had some crying spells. Since I stayed with you guys at night it wasn’t like cry and go to sleep kind of stuff. I don’t know if it was colic exactly, but she just, probably just too much going in, just [raaaaah]. So you know, if you’re in a public place it’s awkward. Or if you can’t seem to settle a crying baby, it’s very stressful. But it didn’t last forever. I guess I didn’t let that stuff, after a while, you know as far as being in public and having you act up. We didn’t have that problem, cause we either didn’t try to take you places where you were gonna be uncomfortable, or that we couldn’t leave if we had to. So like occasionally in a restaurant, we might have to walk outside with one of you, but very rarely. And we were going to OC, so we were going on vacation and eating out, going places, so it’s not like we were staying home all the time. I don’t remember any terrible, terrible things. Besides at the very beginning making sure that nursing was going okay. And it wouldn’t have been the end of the world if I had given you a bottle. But we made it work. Once or twice, to leave you somewhere with a babysitter like Aunt Kate or whatever, early. Cause you know, I didn’t want to give bottles cause you guys weren’t used to it, so I had to pump milk and it wasn’t very successful. So it’s not like you were going to starve in two hours. Of course I know that now, but at the time it was stressful that you weren’t eating. Really the stressful part was getting started as babies. Beyond that, you just kind of evolved and you went with the flow and it was fine.

Let’s see, there’s the one time you guys were outside playing, and she had a baseball bat, and she was just swinging it around and she got REALLY close to hitting you in the head. And you must have turned away or ducked, or, you guys were out in the field and I was up here. And it might not have been as bad as it seemed, but I was like [gasping horrified face] [I don’t remember that at all!] Yeah, you guys wouldn’t, you were just doing your thing and it was nothing! Playing around, doing whatever. Just luckily, she didn’t hit you, because she wasn’t looking where she was swinging and I guess you were doing something you just luckily got out of the way. But for a parent that was awful. And then one time she got lost in the bookstore, of course she wasn’t really lost, she had just found something to go look at. I was just standing. I can still picture, kind of like she does now, just standing up, looking at a book. I couldn’t find her, I had gone up and down the aisles. I went as far as having the clerk make an announcement, call her by name. She never reacted, we just randomly found her. And when she was older and ran into the other car, cause you know that was kind of our first “oh my gosh an accident we have to deal with.” And it was money but it wasn’t terrible and nobody got hurt. Just like you had yours. You learn from it.

You were pretty happy go lucky as a baby-baby, you just sat there and smiled. You wanted me to carry you a lot. You both did the uppy-uppy thing. I guess she started it but you liked being carried more. I guess it’s stuff like being late or not calling or something. I always had to be careful with you guys out there, making “potions” stuff, like don’t you be eating plants, and drinking “tea.” You don’t know what they are! You always took your little figures outside and took them on adventures. Then you lost their shoes or whatever and I would have to go find them. We also did lots of art projects. I guess I did it more with Cat than with the two of you, but I would just let her have paper and finger paint or watercolor paint, kid friendly. It was like every day. I don’t know, you might have done it too. Cuase you know, you did that kind of stuff in pre-school and you’d come home and be like “let’s paint something! Get out the clay!”

I don’t know, just go with the flow, trust your instincts. Mother nature’s that way. Women have been having babies and raising kids for a long time. And for the most part they’re successful You’ve gotta set boundaries, but allow freedoms within. Cause you know, we still are the more experienced and in charge. And I’m kinda like, wow, I don’t have to think about saying no or trying to think of why you shouldn’t. I’m like, yeah, ok!

I’m proud you didn’t turn out to be ugly! [laughs] It is kind of funny that when you’re young and talking about kids, that was what worried me. I guess because the ugly part, you can’t help it. But mean and ignorant and murderers, that has to do with once you’re here. How you’re brought up and your environment. I don’t think genetics makes you a murderer.

My proudest achievement in my life? I guess you guys. I mean I’m happy to be doing what I do, I enjoy buying and selling old stuff. I’m kind of sad that I don’t do more creative stuff, just because the nature of how I’ve evolved, I’ve gotten so much stuff that I’m just dealing with stuff instead of taking time to make things. So I like what I do, and you know I enjoy doing the drama, because that’s a creative process that I’ve been successful and appreciated for.
My sense of humor, my sarcastic sense of humor [pffft]. Well that is true, it’s important to have a sense of humor. I keep things so that I am able to see the humor in life. Honesty, I guess, truthfulness is important.

I guess my passions and interests or whatever, I guess I enjoy the vintage stuff. Don’t ask me why or what part of it, or how. It’s just aesthetically pleasing to me, old things. I mean it’s not even necessarily knowing the age of it or the history of it. It’s just visually pleasing. I guess you can consider that a passion. But I’m getting kind of jaded. I guess I don’t have passions at the moment. I’m kind of between passions. [laughs] Goals, yeah they’re all pretty fuddy-duddy goals, like, get a handle on all the stuff! Is one goal. So that could go many different directions.

Well, one thing I’d like to be thought of as intelligent. I don’t like the feeling that somebody doesn’t think I’m smart at all, I get the sense. Not that I wanna be known as a know it all or that I’m smarter than you, but I don’t like thinking that some people think I’m kind of dumb or don’t know what I’m talking about. So that’s kind of a general thing. I wanna be known as an intelligent, functional, compassionate, reasonable human being. I guess the compassionate part too, because I don’t like to think that someone wouldn’t like me for whatever reason, because I like to think I’m a nice person! And whatever I do is because I’m trying to be nice. And I guess I liked being appreciated for the fact that I have an artistic eye that allows me to do the things I do, like with the drama club, at the shop with displays, or knowing about the history of something, or if I put my mind to it being able to make something. You know I surprised myself when you guys were younger and you’d ask for help with a project, and I’d start to draw something and it’s like “oh wow, that’s actually kind of good.” I’ve kind of gotten away from that, but it’s good to remember I do have some talent in that area, some visual talent. Whatever direction it may take. And that I have a sense of humor! I like to be appreciated that I’m funny! Don’t make that face! I mean it’s not that I have a goal to make a million dollars or anything.

Oh god, that’s the hardest kind of question, I don’t know! Because I made it up as I went anyway! I guess it kind of goes along with what I said before: If you believe that you are a good person, or that you’re a whatever kind of person it is you want to be, that you believe in that, then you will be it. OR you will have the confidence to believe that you are it, because you are it. Like I think I am funny, I think I am compassionate, I think I am smart, I think I have artistic talent. I’m not trying to be cocky about, it’s not like I’m better than somebody else because of it, it’s just that that’s who I believe I am. And if you believe you are that, you probably will be able to be it. Be able to take compliments from people! That’s something that I have a hard time doing. Because if someone is complimenting, then they are reinforcing hopefully what you already feel about yourself. So if you can accept a compliment, it’s a good thing. And go to the dentist’s regularly!
say my name

“This is the most extraordinary thing about motherhood - finding a piece of yourself separate and apart that all the same you could not live without.”
— Jodi Picoult
Lilian Bland’s legacy defied her last name: nicknamed the “Flying Feminist,” she was Ireland’s first female pilot, and the world’s first female flight engineer. She was born September 28, 1878, in Kent. She had a rough and tumble childhood: her mother died when she was very small, so she was raised by her father and her aunt in rural Carnmoney. She was never ladylike, wearing jeans, riding horses astride rather than side-saddle, hunting, fishing, and shooting (a skill at which she was very talented). She smoked cigarettes and worked with her hands, especially car engines and farm equipment. She also showed an early interest in photography: as a child, she would wander around the lands near her home and snap pictures of the wildlife. Birds were a particular favorite subject of hers, perhaps a pre-indicator of her knack for flight.

She used this interest in photography to pursue a career in photojournalism, especially focused on sporting events, since she herself was an accomplished sportswoman. She writes, “When taking photographs of racing, polo, etc. the best plan is to use your camera like a gun, sight the object at a distance, and follow it along, when you can ‘pull the trigger’ at the right moment.” Bland was well-established in this pursuit by the time she turned 30 in 1908. Her aeronautical career was launched in 1910, inspired by a postcard from her uncle depicting Louis Blériot’s flight across the English Channel.

At this time, very few women had ever flown an airplane, and they most certainly did not build them themselves. This didn’t stop Bland. After lots of observation of aviators at a meetup in Blackpool, as well as research from Flight magazine, she set to work crafting a glider which later evolved into a biplane, nicknamed the Mayfly—as in, “may fly or may not fly.” The frame was made of lightweight spruce and bamboo, with fabric and wire to hold it together. Gelatin and formalin waterproofed the outside, and it was steered using bicycle handlebars. All of these clever substitutions were evidence of Lilian Bland’s mechanical genius. For a test flight, she enlisted the help of five tall men and a young boy to act as her aviator. She determined from this first hop that her frame could support the weight of an engine, and she ordered one all the way from Manchester, from A.V. Roe Aircraft company. Her first engine fell apart before she could even take it home, but the replacement was successfully put to arduous tests before taking the Mayfly airborne. One final snag: the fuel tank hadn’t arrived. Her solution? To rig up an empty whiskey bottle, with her aunt’s ear trumpet as a feeding hose.

After much re-working, the biplane was ready to be tested. One Lord O’Neill had taken a keen interest in her pursuit of flight and offered the use of his land and its sprawling open fields for flight tests. The tests were not without problems; more than a month of bad weather and a crotchety old bull that lived in the fields caused the takeoff to be delayed. Finally, on August 31\textsuperscript{st}, the day arrived. The Mayfly could fly! Though it only went short, quarter mile or so distances, Bland herself was able to pilot the biplane, and had successfully constructed an aircraft by her own devices. She may have been the first woman in the world to do either of these things.

Lilian Bland then attempted to start her own aircraft manufacturing business. It was not very successful, and her father began to worry about her safety if she were to continue flying. He offered to buy her a car if she would forgo her airborne endeavors. This did little to tame her adventurous spirit, as she heartily took up motorcar driving, and was soon running a car dealership as the first Ford dealer in Northern Ireland. Her flighty nature showed itself once more when she married her cousin Charles Loftus Bland and together they moved to Canada to farm. They had a daughter who died at the age of 16. Bland moved back to Kent in 1935, took up gambling, and later retired to Cornwall. She died there in 1971 at the age of 92.
Jacqueline Cochran was the first. The first of what? Well, her nickname as “The First Lady of Aviation” is appropriate—but it doesn’t mean she was married to a prominent aeronautical figure; rather, that she herself was the first woman (or the first person) to achieve dozens of aerial feats. To choose any of her accomplishments to list here would do her a disservice; her titles, records, and awards are too numerous to list. At the time of her death in 1980, she held most aviation records of any pilot ever. Her story is the ideal American rags-to-riches, as she overcame the circumstances of her youth to become a millionaire, a ceiling-breaker for female aviators, and the most accomplished pilot in history.

She was born in 1906 (or thereabouts—as an orphan, the exact date is unclear) Bessie Lee Pittman in Muscogee, Florida, United States, the youngest of five children of her foster parents, Ira and Mary Pittman. Cochran’s childhood was rather destitute: love and nurturing were as hard to come by as extra money. She barely learned to read or write, and when she was eight years old, she was put to work at a cotton mill making six cents an hour. After starting this job, she bought the first pair of shoes she ever owned. Reputedly, they were high heels. When she was fourteen, she left her adoptive parents and changed her name by picking the first one out of a phone book that struck her fancy. She started working at a hair salon sweeping and shampooing, but being ever-apt at picking up new skills, she soon started cutting hair on commission and got popular. After saving for several months, she bought a Model T Ford and discovered that she had an affinity for engines and mechanical tinkering. During her young adulthood, she was a driven, clever individual and began to rapidly accrue a number of skills: sewing, crochet, nursing (she worked in a hospital and assisted a local doctor, and according to legend, delivered a baby when she was only eight) and more about beauty. Dreaming high, Jackie did the logical thing for an ambitious young woman: she moved to New York City and talked her way into high-paying beautician job in Antoine’s, an elite Saks Fifth Avenue salon and had a loyal customer base within no time.

“I might have been born in a hovel but I am determined to travel with the wind and the stars.”

In New York, Cochran learned how to save and how to socialize, and soon found herself to be making a tidy fortune. She started looking into other ventures and new skills, and was entertaining the idea of starting her own cosmetics company when she met the millionaire Floyd Odlum at a society event. Floyd was the founder of Atlas Corp and the CEO of RKO, an American hero of the self-made man. The chemistry between the two was immediate, but they started off as business consultants: Floyd encouraged her new cosmetics company, but gave her the idea to become a pilot: he joked that she’d need wings to meet the range and supply that the competition demanded, and then suggested flying as a way to differentiate herself from competing brands. It was 1932, and she went for flying lessons at Long Island’s Roosevelt Field right away. Her quick learning style shone through; she was flying solo within three days of starting lessons, and had her pilot’s license in less than two weeks. Not only was she unusually talented at flying, she loved it. It became her passion and life’s work.

Cochran did end up starting her cosmetics business, and was wildly successful. Jacqueline Cochran Cosmetics and its namesake founder made millions. She was named Woman of the Year in Business by the Associated Press in 1953 and 1954, but in March 1961 she relinquished the business’ management to someone else. Jackie kept up her relationship with Floyd Odlum, and in 1936, they were married. Flying (and more so, pushing the limits) thrilled her, and she was entering into races and competitions within months. In 1935, she became the first woman to ever enter the Bendix air race, even after she was forced to obtain permission from all the male pilots to allow her to fly, as a woman. She placed third in the race in 1937 (also becoming the first woman to make a blind landing), competing along with her friend and famous aviator Amelia Earhart. Finally, in 1938, she became the first woman to win the Bendix Transcontinental Air Race.

These first victories gave her a taste for breaking barriers. Flight, however, proved to be more than a hobby for Jacqueline Cochran: when World War II tore through the fabric of the world, she saw problems and used her talents to fix them. When the war hit the United States, nearly every male with a pilot’s license was occupied with the war effort, yet more pilots were desperately needed. Jackie Cochran saw no reason female aviators couldn’t help out. With Eleanor Roosevelt’s endorsement, she approached General Henry Arnold and proposed that she and other women could perform some ferrying, supply, and other non-combat flights. After some pushback, her idea was granted, and she and 25 other women pilots of her choice headed to England to ferry for the ATA. “Wings for Britain” was an organization that flew American built aircraft to England, and the women continued to fly for them until 1942, when the war struck closer to home.
Two organizations of female pilots were being formed for American benefit, and combined to form a single force: the Women’s Air Force Service Pilots (WASPs). Cochran was asked to be their director, and in this role she trained more than a thousand young female flyers. These pilots performed a number of risky flights, freeing up their male counterparts for direct combat. Many WASPs also died in the war, from flying target practice to piloting technologically faulty planes, to surprise attacks. And yet, the women could not be recognized as military pilots on account of their gender. They were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal post-haste by President Barack Obama in 2009. After World War II ended, Jackie Cochran set to change women’s military status: she helped write the bill that established the Air Force Reserve, and as such she was the first female member, and was the first civilian female to ever be commissioned a lieutenant colonel. Over the following years, her military recognitions included the Army Distinguished Service Medal, a Legion of Merit, and two Distinguished Flying Crosses.

Following the war, she took on even greater air pursuits, breaking even more records in altitude, speed in distance. She also became a field reporter for Liberty magazine and provided the American people insight on the unfolding post-war drama. This role afforded her a great deal of excitement: she witnessed General Tomoyuki Yamashita’s surrender in the Philippines, became the first non-Japanese woman to enter Japan after the war, and attended the Nuremberg Trials in Germany. She interviewed and met important leaders like Madame Chiang Kai-shek of China, Chinese Communist leader Mao Tse-tung, the Shah of Iran and President Francisco Franco of Spain. She also reported the Japanese surrender aboard the battleship USS Missouri on September 2, 1945 and toured Russia. In the air, she became the first woman to break the sound barrier in 1953, and tested and endorsed various models of the latest aircrafts. She published a book called The Stars at Noon. She was asked to step into the role as the first-ever female president of the Federation Aeronautique International.

Soon her sights changed from air to space. She helped fund Mercury 13, a privately funded space project that was begun in response to NASA’s call only for male astronauts. The project aimed to prove women were just as fit for space travel, and dozens of women signed up to try out. Thirteen out of the 25 accepted women passed the rigorous tests that the male astronauts underwent, but none of them were accepted: astronauts were required to have experience as combat test pilots for military jets and to have engineering degrees, which were impossible for women to do at the time. The project was later cancelled, and even Cochran herself encouraged this decision in interest of rushing the space race. In 1971, she officially retired, but continued to be a consultant to NASA. Later that year, she became the Chair of the National Aeronautic Commission and was the first ever living woman to enter the Aviation Hall of Fame. She pursued all of these records with such drive because improving the limits of aviation not only broke down barriers for women, but it also pushed the limits of possibilities in engineering and improved technology. Some of her other achievements include (but are definitely not limited to):

- Fourteen time winner of the Harmon Trophy for Outstanding Female Pilot
- the General William E. Mitchell Award
- Federation Aeronautique Gold Medal
- 1950 Aviatrix of the Decade
- inducted in the International Aerospace Hall of Fame in 1965
- the first woman to land and take off from an aircraft carrier

She was very involved in matters on the ground, as well. Cochran was an ardent supporter of Dwight D. Eisenhower, and invested in many of his campaigns, including some rallies that led to his announcement of candidacy for the 1952 presidential election. Jackie herself entered politics, running against Democrat Dalip S. Saund, the first Asian American congressman, for the 29th District congressional seat in California in 1956. She was defeated by only 3,000 votes, a fact that would leave her bitter for the rest of her days. She also made many charitable donations over the course of her life to causes of the poor and underprivileged that reminded her of her morose childhood.

Jacqueline Cochran had a strong personality. Most people respected her, but many also disliked her. Her flamboyantly feminine tendencies, despite her typically male-dominated profession, tended to ruffle some feathers. Many anecdotes report on her vanity, and may be exacerbated through the lens of the contention she was already causing by proving herself. For example, reporters say the first thing she did after becoming the first female to win the Bendix was to reapply lipstick in her cockpit. Others tell of the time she became the first woman to fly a fighter jet over the Atlantic Ocean, after which she insisted photographers wait for her to change from her flying trousers back into a skirt, or of the time she pulled up to a British military base with a chauffeur and a decadent fur coat. Still others attest to her narcissism, even claiming she prevented her own students from usurping her as the predominant aviatrix. In any case, she used these traits to carve out a remarkable legacy. She died at her home in Indio, California, near her home-base airport, which was later renamed the Jacqueline Cochran Airport. This quote from her autobiography neatly sums up her life:

"Earth-bound souls know only that underside of the atmosphere in which they live. But go up higher, and the sky turns dark. High up enough, and one can see the stars at noon. I have."
Lili Elbe

Lili Elbe was born Einar Magnus Andreas Wegener on December 12, 1882, in the small Danish town of Vejle. She was the second transgender woman to ever undergo sex reassignment surgery (the first was Dora Richter—a another brave woman with whom I share a last name!) in an era when such procedures were highly dangerous and very experimental. Often obscured by scandal, marked by glamorized and speculative portrayals in novels and films, Elbe’s life is emblematic of a bravery and authenticity that is often unnoticed or commodified.

Lili displayed enormous artistic talent, and her parents sent her to attend the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. She specialized as a landscape painter. At the academy, she met Gerda Gottlieb, and the pair fell in love and married in 1904. Gottlieb was also a painter, focusing on portraits and fashion illustrations. After their graduation, both worked as illustrators for magazines in addition to working on their finer pieces on the side.

Lili’s work was exhibited in such prestigious institutions as the Artists’ Fall Exhibition, the Vejle Art Museum, The Saloon, and the Salon d’Automne. In 1907 she receive the Neuhausen’s Prize. She discovered her female identity when posing for her wife’s fashion poses. She identified with their femininity and alluring nature. Many of Gerda’s paintings contained erotic lesbian themes, and it has been speculated that she was interested in women in some form. Herwork seta model for the iconic style of art deco fashion illustration after she was regularly featured in Vogue.

Lili began presenting as female in public under the assumed identity of Einar’s sister. Few knew that Einar did not, in fact, have a sister, and that the person they as Einar was actually Lili. Her real siblings may have known and were likely supportive of her identity. Some speculate that Lili was born intersex, and may have had malformed ovaries or Klinefelter’s syndrome. Even when she was presenting as male, however, Lili was somewhat feminine—she was often derided, harassed and attacked for appearing “homosexual.” Eventually, this atmosphere pushed her and Gerda out of Copenhagen and the two moved to Paris, where she began presenting as Lili ever more frequently.

In 1930, she embarked on her biological transition. In February, she had her first of four operations with a Berlin doctor named Magnus Hirschfeld. It was around this time that she began to struggle with mental illness. Initially, due to her female identity, she was diagnosed with Schizophrenia. She did, at times, differentiate Lili and Einar as two separate individuals, Lili trapped inside Einar. She struggled with guilt, fearing that she had somehow “murdered” Einar. She planned to kill herself in May 1930, but Gerda and her doctors intervened. In spite of this, she was determined to live truly, as Lili. Many friends reaffirmed her and cheered her on. Her family friend Anna Larssen said, “You were certainly a girl in a former existence or else nature has made a mistake with you this time.”

Her next three operations were performed by Kurt Warnekros, who may have been a Nazi sympathizer—and as such, his intentions were less pure towards helping Lili and more experimental. The surgery was an experiment and dangerous enough as it is. In October 1930, Lili legally transitioned, changing her name and sex on all legal identification. This forced the annulment of her marriage to Gerda (as it was illegal for two women to be married), but the pair remained friends. Gerda says she feels somewhat responsible for “enticing [Lili] out of [Einar]” but she was nonetheless supportive of her friend and former spouse. She later remarried to a man. Lili left her painting career behind: it was something she associated with Einar. She developed a romantic relationship with Claude Lejeune. Lili showed exceptional bravery in outing herself to the press—her story was sensational. Her new full legal name, Lili Else Elvenes was actually given to her by her friend and journalist Louise Lassen.

“It is not with my brain, not with my eyes, not with my hands that I want to be creative, but with my heart and with my blood.”

In June 1931, Lili entered her final surgery to construct a uterus and vagina. She wanted this most desperately as she yearned to be a mother. She wrote in a letter, “it is not with my brain, not with my eyes, not with my hands that I want to be creative, but with my heart and with my blood.” She wrote in her recovery period, eerily prophetic, that death was near. She confessed to her sister that in a cathartic dream, she found familial comfort and security: “last night I dreamt about mother. She took me in her arms and called me Lili.” Following this last surgery, her body rejected the implanted uterus and she died of cardiac arrest caused by an infection on September 13, 1931.

There are some gaps in Lili’s story. Little is known about her surgery or emotional therapy because of surrounding political crisis. Nazi students initiated book burnings to eliminate what they considered disgraceful information all over Germany, including a book burning at the Institute for Sex Research, where Lili was treated, in May 1933. Similarly, the Dresden Women’s Clinic was destroyed by Ally bomb raids in February of 1945, destroying Lili’s records with it.

Lili did not lack a legacy, however. An LGBT film festival called MIX Copenhagen give Lili an award posthumously and named the prize after her. Shortly after her death in 1933, a faux-biographical novel based on her story, called Man Into Woman, was written by Niels Hayer (a pseudonym for writer Ernst Jakobsen). The book flew off the shelves due to its scandalous nature, although the details often grossly misrepresented Lili’s reality. Much later, the novel The Danish Girl by David Ebershoff enticed more modern readers, inspiring a 2015 film by the same name, starring Eddie Redmayne as Lili.
Lilith

Lilith is a controversial figure in many mythologies. Called Serpent, Woman of Harlotry, End of All Flesh, End of Days, among other nicknames, much of her story comes from Jewish history (and often, she is hailed as a symbol by modern Jewish feminists). She is (literally) demonized by many of these canons specifically because she subverts traditional female roles and rules. For this rejection of her limitations, feminists take her to be a symbol of love only with mutual respect and ultimate female independence. The original myth of Lilith was told as a way of explain women’s role as secondary citizens at a time that men feared any sort of female sexuality or autonomy as it threatened their own status. Lilith and Eve are seen as archetypical foils to one another: the dual essence of femininity, both submissive and maternal and trickster seductresses.

Lilith was the first wife of Adam. Her most famous reference is in the Alphabet of Ben Sirah, here translated by Barbara Borts:

“When the Holy One, Blessed be He, created the first man Adam as a solitary creature, God said, ‘It is not good for Adam to be alone.’ God created woman from the earth like him and called her Lilith. Suddenly they began competing with each other. Said she, ‘I will not lie underneath,’ and he said ‘I will not lie underneath, but rather on top, for you were designated to be on the bottom and I on the top.’ She said to him, ‘The two of us are equal as we were both created from the earth.’

Unwilling to be subjugated to this inferior position, Lilith runs away from the Garden of Eden. This upsets Adam, who reports her transgression to God. He sends three angels out to look for her, under the threat the she will witness the death of 100 of her children as punishment. She gets caught and gives these violent threats many equal returns, declaring herself the ultimate bringer of sickness for children. However, she promised not to harm any child where she can read their name on an amulet (this became the folkloric method of protection against Lilith’s sicknesses). She is expelled from the Garden.

In some counts, Lilith utters God’s secret name and is banished to live alone in the Red Sea She also is credited as the wife consort to Samael, an archangel of death, representative of evil and demons. She bears his children and earns the title of the Mother of All Demons. There is also a legend that she comforts God as his consort when the Shekinah, the feminine incarnation of the Divine Spirit and Holy consort to God, is banished to Earth. This posits even more strength to the idea of Lilith as a temptress, seducing even God himself.

In other counts, she sneaks back to the Garden of Eden and is spotted by Eve. Before this, Adam had been growing arrogant with his subordinate consort, and had begun likening himself to God. When Eve sees Lilith, she sees another woman, strong, beautiful, and brave. She begins to consider her own treatment in the Garden. She swings of the Garden wall to meet Lilith as a friend. Together, they make a plan to rebuild the Garden with themselves treated as equals. This frightens God and Adam, much like men were frightened by any woman seeking to overcome her low status and threaten the superiority of patriarchal structures.

The story of Lilith is used in many teachings as a cautionary tale. Her name is similar to the Hebrew “lailah,” which means “night,” and as such she became associated with darkness and superstition. She was supposedly the evil force who made children sick and came to claim their lives if they didn’t wear protective amulets. She was seen as the original succubus, who would come to men and night and seduce them, causing them to “spill their seed” and produce illegitimate children. This was devastating to men, as their legacy depended upon the existence of legitimate children. Lilith also purportedly exacted vengeance upon these very children, targeting them with illness and seizures. A rule came about to avoid her: no one must sleep alone in a house, or else Lilith will come to them, and either seduce or kill them.

In other faiths, Lilith could have been the right hand of the Sumerian Goddess Inanna, or the goddess Ninlil, “Lady of the Wind.” Ninlil was the wife of god Enlil. By him, she mothered a number of deities—many times, as the result of rape by Enlil. She is also associated with the Akkadian demon called Lil-kitu.

Lilith only appears once in the Christian Bible, and her presence is sometimes only translated as “night hag”- or “screech owl” from the Hebrew word Lilith. She is discussed in Isaiah 34:8-15, inhabiting a devastated, post-wrath Earth. According to the translations of Isaiah 34:14 where she is explicitly mentioned, “there too Lilith shall repose.
and find a rest.”

For the LORD has a day of vengeance,
   a year of retribution, to uphold Zion’s cause.
Edom’s streams will be turned into pitch,
   her dust into burning sulfur;
   her land will become blazing pitch! It will not be quenched night or day;
   its smoke will rise forever.
From generation to generation it will lie desolate;
   no one will ever pass through it again.
The desert owl and screech owl will possess it;
   the great owl and the raven will nest there.

Lilith is thus a great foil for motherhood. Ruling over a desolate land, she births demons, contrasted against the traditional feminine roles that she rejected of docile maternity. She is a death-bringer rather than a creator of life. She also, however, is a paragon of self-respect. She may have been exiled and villainized, but she refused to designated to an inferior role, preferring instead to be an outsider, feared and respected.

My sister and some of my friends used to call me Lilith as a play on Lilli to make fun of me. I was offended because all I knew about Lilith was that she was a demon—until I really started to look into the mythology of her downfall. Now, I am nothing but flattered that people imply I have her power and independence. I would say the first woman and the mother of all demons is a pretty great namesake to live up to.
speaking the language

“And then I realized what the first word must have been: ma, the sound of a baby smacking its lips in search of her mother’s breast. For a long time, that was the only word the baby needed. Ma, ma, ma. Then the mother decided that was her name and she began to speak, too. She taught the baby to be careful: sky, fire, tiger. A mother is always the beginning. She is how things begin.”

— Amy Tan
Dr. Ivy Kellerman Reed was a notable linguist, lawyer, author, and one of the pioneers of Esperanto, “the International Language.” She was born on July 8, 1877 in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Her father was the head of the Botany department at Ohio State University, where she would later attend and receive her undergraduate degree and serve as one of the first members of the Delta Delta Delta chapter there.

Her further educational credits include a Master’s degree from Cornell University, study abroad at the Royal University of Berlin, a PhD with honors from the University of Chicago, and law certification from what was previously Washington College of Law and is now American University. She is also a member of the prestigious Phi Beta Kappa honors society. Kellerman Reed’s involvement with education did not end there: through her life, she taught at various high schools, colleges, and law schools, including Iowa College (now Iowa State University).

She married Edwin C. Reed, a fellow linguist and lawyer, in 1909, and in 1914 gave birth to Erik Kellerman Reed, who would prove himself to be somewhat of a prodigy, enrolling in college at twelve years old, and would become a doctor in the study of archaeology.

Dr. Kellerman Reed’s specialized in the study of Sanskrit, Latin, Greek, and Persian. One of her most cited linguistic texts is her article “On the syntax of some prepositions in the Greek dialects”; for one reason or another, this is one of her academic works that survived most thoroughly, second only to her book, A Complete Grammar of Esperanto. She also studied modern languages, but her main pursuit, of course, was Esperanto.

Esperanto is hailed as an International Language because it was consciously created by linguists to be perfectly predictable in all of its forms, unlike natural languages which have all kinds of rules and exceptions and imperfect forms. It is also supposed to be easy to learn by a wide range of speakers: it takes roots from Latin, Greek, and Germanic roots. Its spelling is supposed to be conducive to pronunciation (unlike English!), though its hotly-debated orthography is biased for users of the western alphabet. As she explains in her paper, “Esperanto as a Prerequisite Study,” Kellerman Reed and her colleagues believed this language would serve as a stepping stone or leg up for acquiring other second languages because they would recognize some roots and see the language through the “lens” of Esperanto. Some of her notable Esperanto translations are of Winnie the Pooh and Shakespeare’s As You Like It. She was also a great proponent of the classics.

When she wasn’t accomplishing all of these incredible things, she was partaking in the Esperanto community. For a time she held the chairman position of the Esperanto Association of North America and also edited Amerika Esperantistio magazine. She was admitted to the Washington Bar in 1935 and practiced law while she lived in the District of Columbia. According to the Woman’s Who’s Who of America from 1914-1915, she also enjoyed dancing and tennis, and rebelliously “favors woman suffrage.” She took part in marches and protests to support this cause.

Dr. Ivy Kellerman Reed would continue to impact women beyond this cause; few know her name, but she was unapologetically intellectual and independent, pursuing advanced education, publishing her own papers, achieving professorship, and practicing law in a time when many colleges prohibited women from even enrolling, and society encouraged women’s complacency. She also pioneered a field that was just emerging; though Esperanto is low on modern linguists’ interest lists, this is a field that seems to be rather equally dominated between the sexes.

Esperanto was the result of an era that was still very much prescriptionist toward language; that is to say, some languages were upheld as more “perfect” or superior to others, leading some to impose more “proper” grammars to others, based on the rules of those considered more perfect. These preferences often held up Latinate and other western languages and disparaged indigenous languages and variational dialects as barbaric or less sophisticated, which also reflected the social attitudes of the turn of the century. There is a strong imperialist flavor to Esperanto—the idea of an international language may seem to encourage increased communication, but it also upholds ideals of conformity and the imposition of a standard of “civilization.” Modern linguists are also somewhat critical of man-made languages; though it caused quite a popular stir, there have never been communities of native speakers. Further, it was largely a combination of other languages, more intuitive for reading and writing than speaking. With modern cognitive linguistics, it is believed that there are universal structures and patterns within the brain that produce human language. At the time, it wasn’t known that language
could not be artificially constructed—the brain may learn it, but it will probably employ structures other than its language tools. Though Esperanto is more of a code than a language, per se, there is still a small community of enthusiasts who study its grammar and history—there is even an Esperanto version of Wikipedia. Nonetheless, it was an intriguing academic and social experiment and Dr. Ivy Kellerman Reed was at its core. Her influence encourages me as a young woman studying linguistics. Learning about Kellerman Reed and Esperanto, I was reminded of a time in elementary or middle school when I, too, thought I could make up my own language (don’t get the wrong idea—it wasn’t nearly as sophisticated). Essentially, I re-imagined the English writing system as characters. Each word consists of one vertical line as a base structure, and then for each letter, a symbol is added to the base in a specific position. To decipher them, one must remember what letters are represented by the symbols, and then unscramble them a la anagrams.

Julia de Burgos was a Puerto Rican poet who transcended her profession posthumously to become a cultural icon. Many define her memory by her poverty, her heartbreak, or her death, but this does a disservice to a woman who was also a teacher, an essayist, an activist, a loyal family member, and a brave immigrant in New York.

She was born in the town of Carolina in 1914, first child to a family whose economic class can only be described as peasant. Of her twelve younger siblings, only half survived—the rest fell victim to the ever-present evils of disease and starvation. The difficulty of her circumstances, however, did not blind her to the natural beauty of the countryside that surrounded her. Her work is rife with images of the flowers and fields of her youth, and most notably, the river nearby: the Río Grande de Loíza is so significant in her corpus of poetry that it maintains a Muse-like presence. One of her most well-known poems is dedicated to this body. Water is a recurrent motif in her work, representing youth, memory, cleansing, motion, and social change. One translated stanza from “Río Grande de Loíza:”

Río Grande de Loíza!... Elongate yourself in my spirit
and let my soul lose itself in your rivulets,
finding the fountain that robbed you as a child
and in a crazed impulse returned you to the path.

Another muse is her mother, memorialized in “Mi madre y el río”. She died of cancer in 1939 when Julia was a young woman, leaving a melancholy that can be tasted in her poetry. Burgos wrote that her mother would enchant her and her siblings with tales of water spirits and other folklore on their excursions to the river. Her father also was a story-teller, telling plots that he gleaned from his favorite books. His passion for reading and education is evident in his daughter. However, alcoholism also seems to have a genetic vulnerability, and this was her other paternal inheritance.

Despite her family’s poverty, she did not want of an education. After attending the local elementary school, her family moved to Piedras for high school and soon the University of Puerto Rico, where she studied to be an elementary school teacher. During the depression that crippled most of the world in the 1930s, she worked for a New Deal agency distributing meals to children, and soon moved to a teaching position in Naranjito. Later she would further her studies with courses from the high school and college, re-enrolling after her move to Cuba in the University of Havana.

Her writing career did not consist only of poetry: she worked on a curriculum subsidized the Puerto Rican government to encourage literacy and provide low class citizens information about social and economic issues. During this time period, she also became involved with the Daughters of Freedom and the Nationalist Party under the leadership of Pedro Albizu Campos. She fought and wrote for this group, speaking out about the oppression of women and the need for economic advancement of the destitute farmers in the Puerto Rican countryside. Battles between the party and the presiding government resulted in the Río Piedras massacre of 1935 and the Ponce massacre of 1937, leaving protestors dead, wounded, and incarcerated. Later that year, Burgos published her first collection of poetry, Poemas exactos a mí misma, additionally publishing several in newspapers and journals. She wrote on the heels of the Romantic movement in Puerto Rico, and this influence is evident in much of her poetry: it places emphasis on the lush beauty of nature as well as the importance of the emotions and individualism. In the next year, joining a group of writers and intellectuals at the restaurant El Chévere, she published her next collection, Poema en veinte surcos.

In that same year of 1939, she encountered Juan Isidro Jimenes Grullón, who is credited with her famous heartbreak. He was a politically-involved medical doctor and soon moved to New York, where Burgos followed him. She was slowly gaining fame at this time and was interviewed and published in New York Hispanic magazines. Grullón moved to Cuba not long after she arrived, but she stayed in New York and tried to sell her books, only moving to Havana months later. Here, the family of Grullón, the man she loved, did not accept her, and in a move of familial loyalty, Grullón also rejected her. Dizzy with heartbreak, she began to write perhaps her most famous collection of poetry, El mar y tú. This collection is where her reputation for being a lovesick romantic comes from, but the poems show remarkable self-recognition and reflection in addition to pain, pining,
romance, and sexuality.

Over the next few years of her life, Burgos did not return to Puerto Rico—in fact, she never returned to her home patria before her death in 1953. This was a self-inflicted exile, perhaps due to many factors. In spite of literary awards she had received, she was known for being politically militant and many in the Puerto Rican government disapproved of her radical ideas. Further, the fear of return was attached to emotional pain: she couldn’t bear to go back to a place she had not been since falling in love with Grullón, since shortly after her mother died, where so many like her had faced injustice. She maintained contact with her sister Consuelo for much of her life.

Though her exile was not forced, that of many others was, and even more Puerto Rican farmers fled the country during the same time period of their own accord to escape such poverty. This has become known as the Puerto Rican (or Boricua) Diaspora, with many landing in New York and forming thriving Puerto Rican communities. This community is why Burgos described New York as her second home—a home where she would experience violence, emotional crisis, and worsening alcoholism that led to many hospitalizations.

She returned to New York from Cuba in 1942, where she found a job as a reporter, interviewer, and director of the cultural section in Pueblos hispanos, a Hispanic periodical. She also published many of her own works in the same paper, along with her award-winning essay, “Ser o no ser es la divisa” in Semanario hispánico. She was briefly married to and living with a musician and accountant named Armando Marín in Washington, D.C., but returned to New York in 1946. Despite her increasing alcoholism and worsening health, she served in many arts positions, including director of the Album Literario Puertorriqueño. Before her death, she wrote many poems reflecting on this very topic, including the chilling “Poema para mi muerte:”

What will I be called when all that remains of me
Is my own memory, on the rock of a deserted island?
A carnation caught between the wind and my shadow,
Child of death and mine, I will be called poet.

In 1953, this nearly prophetic verse came true. Julia de Burgos, aged 39, collapsed of cirrhosis of the liver on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 105th street, alone in the city, and died before she could be admitted to the hospital. Because she had no identification or kin in the city to identify her, she was buried in an unmarked grave. Only later was she identified, exhumed, and returned to Puerto Rico for her final rest.

Do not belittle her based on her death. Do not call her undone by her lost love. Do not paint her life as dramatic gossip. Alone. Unrest. Labor. Love, lust. The earth as her muse. Remember her fierce efforts to fight for women’s and workers’ rights in her country. Remember her as a sister, daughter, and educator—highly educated. Remember the river of time she creates in her works, and the raw appreciation for culture, the natural world, and her fellow human that she cultivated in her essays and endeavors. Do not pity her any more than she pitied herself: remember her clarity and respect for self-identity. Promote her adoration, dedication, and intuition. Fight the fight with your own, strongest weapon.

Hers were her words.
Charm City, March 22, 2017

Local businesses give Baltimore its flavor
And make it a unique area to live and work:
It’s Charm City.

Librarian to be named
Baltimore Woman of the Year
In Charm City.

In Funky Fells Point,
Girding for fancy new hotel
For Charm City.

Video goes Viral!
Middle River woman charged with child abuse
From Charm City.

School for the Arts’ African Fest offer students
Yearlong Contact with African Arts Culture
In Charm City.

Struggling School For the Arts
Hopes famous Alumni can offer hope for program
In Charm City.

Nothing but love for city’s
Lost football star
Love from Charm City.

Oprah’s makeup artist comes back to Baltimore
To transform senior faces.
Old Charm City.

Members of Baltimore County
Alerted of wiretap.
In Charm City.

Baltimore City Council poised to pass
$15 minimum wage law.
New Charm City.

Major drug bust spanned
Baltimore County and Baltimore City.
High Charm City.

11-Year old boy
Sets fire to MD Walmart.
In Charm City.

Police investigating shooting death
Of transgender woman
In Charm City.

Form school principal
Charged with stealing school funds
From Charm City.

Baltimore City Public Schools:
The budget deficit.
Help Charm City.

He vivido casi por todo el continente americano
Y nunca he visto la pobreza como la de Baltimore.
¿Se llama Charm City?

Members of Baltimore Synagogue
Speak out after finding swastika
In Charm City.

Man charged in hate crime
Says he is ‘coming for the blacks’
Of Charm City.

Homicide count mounts
Again
In Baltimore after violent week
In Charm City

Closed tainted shot found officer indictments dead
poor.
The sublime psychology of Baltimore!
This is Charm City.
I.
Do not take for granted
The sun that oozes down your shoulders
And spreads its honey thick across the greenery
And fractured, sugary grass.

Nor the frosty breath that you can’t help but swear
Is the effect of the flinty, far stars
That wink and glare back out of the
Very deep sky.

Sometimes you can smell how deep a valley is
Or pick out separate species of spiraling branches
Like the notes of expensive perfume,
Worn by the chirping ladies on wing.

The hills serve you a taste of hazy Midwestern barns,
Or the Welsh stone mill with a bridge
And walls that taste like sunshine and moss,
Or a winding creek splitting grassy Irish fields.

II.
How many battles can you fight
When you can’t even defeat the guard that bars
the escape of your own head?
When you can’t spit sharp and clever words like vicious blows
at those who bar justice?

I don’t have revolutionary blood on my hands
My wrists
Or my lips

Instead it courses through my veins
fueling my thoughts
watering buds of frenzied musings

III.
Night birds sing and stutter
In spring and all its pleasures
They signal a warmth
You can’t sense in the dark;

On the first night, heard in the breaking sunlight
Of a half-sleeping dream,
On the second, to parallel
The nocturn energy lingering in waking limbs,

On the third, ever more voices
Join the diversified choir—perhaps armada.

Birds that steal the voices of the morning draw upon the sun
The sun that won’t come—for it is not dawn.
Sunrise birds in sundown Invert the gift of the golden morning,
signal something ruinously wrong.

IV.
Who knew I had such power over you?
To enchant you with a profile picture
And a few lines of text?

Who knew I could be the perfect match
Cinderella to rid your break up loneliness
After meeting just once?
Silly of me not to know that ignored elicitations
masked messages and leaving a room on the breeze of your entry
were the newest form of romance

How lovely that passion can overcome
Purposefully constructed walls and the pricking sweat of panic
And stutters that bleed through my cotton veil.

Who knew, too that I had such power over you,
That you don’t accept rejection
Until delivered on the tongue of someone else?

That I had such power over you,
That you and she know my mind better
And the very threat of ‘no’ turns you cold, leaves you sullen, to hide?

V.
I can walk through the rivers
Curl my hair in the rain
That slides around my umbrella’s broken wing
Shed flowers from my skirts like a signature

But never do my tears pelt like hail
Until night, a variable era
With no obligation to be a person.
When I have free time to fall apart.
a lifetime of learning

“Well, knowledge is a fine thing, and mother Eve thought so; but she smarted so severely for hers, that most of her daughters have been afraid of it since.”
— Abigail Adams
The Women of UMD

Elizabeth Hook and Charlotte Vaux were the first female undergraduate students to enroll in the University of Maryland, joining the college in 1916.

Elizabeth Gambrill Hook entered the Maryland State College of Agriculture when she was 20 years old. She had a drive to learn and a dream of doing research, and within four years, she graduated with a degree in entomology, the study of insects, in 1920. She was the first woman to receive a four-year degree from the school.

Charlotte Ann Vaux was raised in West Virginia, where she attended preparatory school, and then lived in Washington D.C. She wished to pursue farming and entered the Maryland State College of Agriculture in 1916. She took a two-year program and graduated in 1918, making her the first ever female graduate of the institution.

Notable also are Grace B. Holmes, who was the first female to receive a four-year degree from Maryland, although she didn’t take all of her courses at Maryland, and Flora Iris Darling, who may have been the first woman to ever attend a class at the school. She took a floriculture course at the college in 1907.

Women were still treated differently than male students during this time: their focus was still pushed to Home Economics courses, and the idea that their degrees were in any way related to a career was repellant to the college. Women students were banned from smoking and flirting, and had a 7:30 pm curfew with a strict lights-out at 10:30 pm (a curfew that lasted well through the 1940’s, when my grandmother attended the University). Male students were not held to any of these codes of behavior. Vivian Simpson, who started her studies in 1921, vehemently rebelled against these double standards and was dismissed from the college. She transferred to George Washington University, and apropos to her strong will, became the first female president of the Montgomery County Bar Association and the first female Secretary of State for Maryland.

In 1919, the women’s athletic association was formed, and within 5 years, the school boasted a national championship-level women’s rifling team. Adele H. Stamp, for whom the student union is named, became the first Dean of Women in the college in 1922. Evelyn Barstow Harrison became the first woman to graduate with an engineering degree in 1932. M. Lucia James was the first African American to become a full professor at the University, starting in 1970. Jacky Brophy became the first female editor-in-chief of the diamondback in 1944.

Marie Mount Hall, dedicated in 1969, is named after the Dean of Home Economics, a traditionally feminine discipline. The Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center takes its namesake from a prominent art collector and patron in the Maryland and D.C. area. Of all the buildings on campus, only four are named for women, the last being Preinkert Field House.

Without the fighting spirit and contributions of these women and the countless others, my Maryland education would not be possible. I would not be able to enjoy the number of opportunities, academic and extracurricular, that I have, nor would I be able to roam freely, or entertain the idea of graduate degrees or professorship. I spend upwards of 25 hours a week studying in Marie Mount Hall, where the linguistics department is located. I come in on the tails of all of these women, in addition to my own family: I am a third generation UMD student. Both of my parents (they met while working in the South Campus Dining Hall) and my maternal grandmother attended the college. Coincidentally, all three female students—my grandmother, my mother, and I—have lived in Anne Arundel Hall over a span of 70 years. My mom actually lived in a room that my grandmother had lived in, 35 years earlier.
All three generations of women to attend UMD and live in Anne Arundel Hall
Angel DeCora, Native American artist and educator, was born on May 3, 1871, on the Winnebago reservation in Nebraska. She was born in a wigwam, as her autobiography famously begins. Her grandfather was chief of the Winnebago tribe and she also had French Canadian blood on her mother’s side. She was a member of the Thunderbird clan, and her Winnebago name was Hinook-Mahiwi-Kalinaka, literally translating to Fleecy Cloud Floating in Space or Woman Coming On the Clouds in Glory, thus earning her English-translated name of Angel.

She lived on the reservation learning native crafts and ceremonies until 1883, when, as a twelve year old, she and her sister were kidnapped to travel to the Hampton Institute in Virginia. The Institute was founded on inherently racist principles: originally intended to “civilize negroes,” it was expanded to include native children. Its purpose in education ascribed to a common salvation narrative of the time: Kill the Indian in him, and save the man. Nonetheless, DeCora performed well at the Institute because she was a bright and curious student, and described herself as well-mannered. Though shy, she quickly showed talent and interest in art and music. The boarding school erased much of her Indian identity and education for the time being. She did not return to her family at home for three years, after which she discovered her father and grandfather had died, and then DeCora returned to the institute until her graduation in 1891.

DeCora did something that was unusual for Indian women in her era: she attended college. She first attended Burnham Classical School for Girls, but transferred to Smith College in 1892 to study in the art department. Here, she received guidance from Dwight W. Tryon, widely recognized for painting Tonalist landscapes. She paid her tuition by working as a custodian in the Art Gallery. After receiving many awards and gaining recognition at Smith College over her four years, she went to Drexel Institute in Philadelphia to study with Howard Pyle, a respected teacher and illustrator. Illustration was a popular genre in this time: photoengraving, a new technique allowing greater freedom and detail to an illustrator, had just been invented and incorporated into use for mass produced magazines and publications. Pyle tutored dozens of very famous illustrators from that time period. It was Pyle who kickstarted DeCora’s career: he encouraged her, a native woman herself, to travel to North Dakota and the Great Plains to do studies of Indian life and culture. He also helped her get two stories about a native girl that she wrote and illustrated published in Harper’s New Monthly Magazine in 1899. These stories were entitled “Grey Wolf’s Daughter” and “The Sick Child.”

Torn in the debate over commercial art versus “art for art’s sake,” DeCora decided to keep learning about art. She continued her studies at Cowles Art School under Joseph DeCamp and later at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston with Frank Benson and Edmund C. Tarbell. It was in this city that she opened her first studio and her career began to take off. She was commissioned more than once by Ginn & Company and Small & Maynard, two publishing companies in Boston. Her native identity began to re-emerge: the books she illustrated for them were called Old Indian Legends and an autobiography by the name The Middle Five: Indian Boys at School. The cover of the latter depicted two Native boys, one in a school uniform comforting the weeping boy in Native dress. It speaks of the sadness of being removed from his family and the forced assimilation of going to a boarding school. DeCora drew on her own childhood experiences and her studies from North Dakota for inspiration. She then moved to New York city where she moved from illustration to work as a designer, portraitist, and landscape painter. She found this work more lucrative, if uninspiring. She speaks of design in her autobiography: “Perhaps it was well that I had not over studied the prescribed methods of European decoration, for then my aboriginal qualities could never have asserted themselves.”

And assert themselves they did. DeCora became interested in studying the culture, traditions, and crafts and designs of many Native American designs. She visited Native women to learn, as they were masters of their crafts: “I have visited Indian tribes with the view of getting an insight into the Indian woman’s life and her natural tendencies in domestic life; not with the purpose of giving her instruction in the improved methods of domestic science, but to find out the kind of work she does in which she employs her native designs.” She used them as inspiration in her own work, but made sure to give due deference to their meaning and to promote Native culture as valid. This was difficult in a time period that saw her culture as uncivilized, so she used her art as a medium for change. She took part in illustrating for The Indians’ Book (Harper and Brothers Publishers in 1907) alongside many other Native artists and designers from around the country. She also worked on the Indian exhibit at the St. Louis World’s Fair in 1904. She joined the Society of American Indians and spoke at the Meeting of the Lake Mohonk Conference of Friends of the Indian and other Dependent Peoples in 1907 in support of art as a vehicle for Indian advancement.
In 1906, she was asked to be an art teacher at the Carlisle Indian School. From her own tumultuous experiences with state sponsored Native reform schools, she was not immediately thrilled. She took the job under one condition: “I shall not be expected to teach in the white man’s way, but shall be given complete liberty to develop the art of my own race and to apply this, as far as possible, to various forms of art, industries and crafts.”

DeCora found a new purpose: though she was barely producing any personal work, she was dedicated to teaching young Native students about their heritage and promoting their artistic skills. Collectively, students from art and printmaking departments published The Indian Craftsman (later renamed The Red Man), a magazine displaying Native students’ work. DeCora also met her husband at Carlisle: she married her assistant, William Lone Star Dietz, who was also a football player at the school. They collaborated on The Indian Craftsman as well as designing for Yellow Star: A Story of East and West, by Elaine Goodale Eastman. Their relationship did not last very long; in 1918, the couple divorced, not long after a scandal had closed the doors of Carlisle Indian School. She took work from the New York State Museum and began working as an independent artist once more.

Angel DeCora had strong artistic aspirations and a deep-rooted connection to her Native American heritage. In 1919, however, her potential was extinguished when she took ill of pneumonia and influenza and passed away at the age of 48. Her will granted most of her estate (worth about $40,000 in today’s currency) to American Indian magazine. They expressed gratitude and a commitment to her example following her death, writing, “This gift is a sacred trust! Such faith in her own race inspires us to our uttermost effort. Angel DeCora Dietz, living and dying, has left us a noble example of devotion to our people. Let us take heed. Let us prove our worth even as she has done.”

Angel DeCora’s work and legacy were largely forgotten, however. Perhaps this is due to her early death, or perhaps it is a parallel to the way she was buried: single and childless, she was visiting friends when she fell sick and died. She was buried in their family plot, but not being a relative, she was not permitted a headstone, and her grave remains unmarked today.

I cannot pretend to understand DeCora’s struggles as a Native American woman, kidnapped from her family and forced to assimilate into white culture, only relearning her heritage much later in life. I can, however, admire that she was the first Native woman to graduate from Smith College (one of the first Native women to go to college in general), and one of very few professional female artists at the turn of the century. Through a white, Euro-centric lens, she is unique in that she was classically trained and yet still portrayed American Indian images in her work—other Native artists were often belittled for their “simple” and “uneducated” forms of craftsmanship. DeCora was passionate, artistic, and focused, and she channeled her energy into fervently preserving and restoring American Indian culture into her young Indian students—she did not waste her effort trying to diminish Native culture into something acceptable by white standards, but rather pressed its importance as an art style all on its own, of equal value.

I do not come from a culture that is so repressed, destroyed, and appropriated as DeCora, and it would be irresponsible of me to pretend I could explore my own heritage in the same meaningful way. However, I used photography to explore my own childhood—I photographed my friends in places around my yard, replicating dark and dreamy memories. I feel something spiritual in connection to these photos, though it is hard to divine exactly what.
Dolores June Rosina Nickel Righter

Born March 21, 1937
Lancaster, PA

My father worked at Bethlehem Steel and my mother was an at home mother.

Very caring parents. I’m the oldest of five, so my mother had her hands full. She was a stay at home mother because 5 of us were born within 8 years. And of course my father worked a lot, he quite often worked double shifts at Bethlehem Steel because it was the time of World War II.

I had three brothers and a sister. Of course being the oldest, I was supposed to know better and be an example all the time. I had a brother a year and 12 days younger than I am and then my sister came along another year and a half later, and then a brother and another brother. I did act as a partial caretaker to the littler ones. You know my relationship has always been really very good—my sister preferred to be with my brothers; she was not a girly girl. That’s the truth. She disappeared with my brothers when they were off and gone. They would get in trouble because they allowed her to go along with them! No, [it didn’t get me in trouble] because I didn’t do that! I didn’t go over to the brickyard with them. There was a brick company not too far from us that they could walk to. And there were hills and all to climb because [the company] got clay out of those hills. That’s—Jeannie would go with them.

[I spent] a lot of time with siblings, but I had a girl who lived next door to me and we did girly things, since my sister wouldn’t—you know, played dolls and things. Then two doors down there was a family with four girls and one boy and I spent a lot of time playing with them too. I made friends in school. The school I went to was just around the block and I just had to walk right around the corner to block. There was one right across the street from me too, but that was a Catholic school and we did not go to the Catholic school. We went to number 230—public school number 230.

[My hobby was] rock collecting. I always collected stones. I like stones. We—we played outdoors a lot. There were those games, you know—Red rover, red rover, I dare you to come over, and kick the can. Out at night, until it got dark and then we had to get home. But we did a lot of outdoor stuff.

I always enjoyed school. I did pretty good in school—except for second grade: I talked too much. And if the teacher wrote a note home that I had disturbed the classroom or talked I couldn’t go see movies on Saturday mornings. I couldn’t go see Roy Rogers or Gene Autry. That’s the honest truth. But that was a good friend I had too. And of course I talked to her, but she didn’t seem to get in trouble. The teacher just wrote notes home to my parents. But academically I did okay. I went to middle school (or junior high as it was called) right in the same building as the elementary school. And then it was only after that for ninth grade that I went to Patterson high school. That was several blocks away but still in walking distance. I walked to school. And then went to Towson University—State Teachers’ College! That’s what it was called then.

I didn’t like my second-grade teacher ‘cause she snitched on me all the time. Third grade teacher was totally different—her name was Mrs. Marshall, we got along fine. Elementary was pretty good. I can’t say anything in particular about middle school that I remember. When I got to high school though, there were teachers. In particular, the math teacher because she introduced Grandpop and me. I liked the chemistry teacher, Mr. Wilkins. When I went to high school there were three different things you went into: academic, commercial, or vocational. It was divided into three groups. I was in the academic group, so there weren’t that many girls in that group because of the math classes you took. I did take algebra, calculus, trig, geometry... and I did well, and that was also why that math teacher liked me. I was very active in high school. I worked in the library—even in middle school I worked in the library, volunteer and then in high school I did. I got all the first science fiction books that came into the library (I liked reading science fiction). I also got very involved with Student Government and my senior year I was vice president of the student council. So I helped with a lot of dances—I did a lot of decoration. I belonged to—well, there was a Key Club which was what the boys belonged to, and there was no such thing for girls, which I know now is not true—but it was a social
club for girls that one of the assistant principals formed and I was invited to be in that. Her name was Mrs. Schwatka. She really encouraged us and kept an eye on us. I went to her farm one time. I was told absolutely not to go into the woods because I am very perceptible to poison ivy. So I stayed back, didn’t go on the hiking trails and helped prepare food. And I petted the dog—a big fuzzy dog—and I got one of the worst cases of poison ivy that I’ve ever had. I had it all over my face and neck and my hands—my hands were so swollen that—I was taking a typing class at the time and I really couldn’t type because my fingers were so bad. And the typing teacher did not like that because I couldn’t do the timed tests. And that gave me the worst mark I ever had in school. And I chose it as personal typing—in other words it wasn’t for commercial typing, to go and work as a secretary somewhere—it was just so I could type papers and stuff like that so. I’m still not very good at typing.

Math was [my favorite subject]. And history, and chemistry—I really liked chemistry, even at college when I went there. Biology, geology, of course geology you were learning about formations. I could probably still tell you what a lot of rocks’ names are. Like right out her by the rock pile? I could tell you.

I don’t know that there was anything that I disliked—even for sports. I used to play basketball but I was short so I couldn’t be a forward so I had to be a guard. There were forwards and guards too, they didn’t play five to a field like they do now. If you were a guard, you had certain places to be and only the forwards could shoot. But I was pretty fast too, so I could guard pretty well. But then at Towson too I took up archery and field hockey. And archery—we really did carry on afterwards, both Grandpop and I—we both still had our bows, which are still down at (the family beach house in) Betterton, as a matter of fact. And we would go to other ranges and shoot just for the competition of it. I haven’t shot a bow in a long time. My neighbors do—if you’re here and you can hear a thud, thud, they have a big target on the side here. We used to shoot and aim them towards the woods in the back. Hopefully you didn’t miss because otherwise you had to go hunt for the arrows.

Growing up, when we were little, almost every weekend or every other weekend, we travelled to Lancaster to visit grandparents. And in the summertime, my grandmother—my mother’s mother—would take my sister and I for several weeks and we would spend time with her. She didn’t take the boys—boys were too much trouble. But she’d take us. And I only had one boy cousin in Lancaster, the rest were boys. They were in walking distance too so we could walk back and forth to their houses to play. There was a playground nearby, and there was a playground right in back of my grandmother Nickel’s house that I could go play on as well. You didn’t have any problem with bullying like you do today—you didn’t. I just don’t remember any.

I kind of always said I wanted to be a teacher and also this math teacher from high school definitely encouraged it. Again, when I went to high school, you graduated at two different time a year: you graduated in February or June. When your birthday was kinda when you enrolled in school and graduated. I graduated in February—February of ’55. I lived at home the first semester, and I had to get a bus, and then a streetcar to get to college. But then after that first half of a year there was a space and I lived in a dorm. There were four of us in a room—two bunk beds. And that was—I guess for me, that wasn’t a bad experience, because of course with having all my siblings I was used to having people around. I of course, being shorter or smaller, had a top bunk. And the next year, we moved to a suite and I guess we had that same bumping order or pecking order that you do now—there’s freshman housing and then you move up. Junior year, there was a brand new dorm built and I got to move into the brand new dorm. But of course I had dated Grandpop from high school on, and then we became engaged, so I got married after three and a half years. I left the college dorm of course, and my roommate was not happy with me [laughter]. No, we shared a birthday, we had born on the same day, and I had become very close with Caroline, and she was not happy when I moved out because she had to find another roommate. Or I guess they put another person in there. And even there, I wasn’t as active—I became involved with a social student center, where badminton was played, and cards were played or whatever, and I became president of that group. Until I got married and left the school of course, so then I wasn’t active there anymore—I was too busy at home.

Oh yes, [my degree helped me]. Well of course I had [my daughter] Kate 11 months after we were married. I actually skipped a semester because she was born in October. I skipped the September to January semester while she was born; in January I went back to school to finish my last credits that I needed. She got taken to my parents’ house every morning, and I went to school for the courses I needed and graduated that June, of ’59. And I of course did NOT teach because Jimmy was already on the way. So it was almost ten years that I spent at home just taking care of kids. So then it was when Mark, your daddy was in first grade—of course I had been very involved at school, being
room mothers and helping at craft fairs and whatever—but it was then that I said I could substitute. So I substituted that first year, while he was a first grader (’cause none of my kids went to kindergarten—it wasn’t part of the school curriculum then. So anyway I substituted that whole year, and then the next year I taught second grade for the whole year. They had a second grade teacher who couldn’t start the beginning of the year because of illness and then couldn’t return so I taught the whole year. They did ask if I wanted a position, but Grandpop said no, that I had four kids at home to take care of and that he would rather that I not teach full time. So I just told the principal I couldn’t teach full time. But come December that next year, he called again and asked if I could teach fourth grade and I finished out that school year. And I kinda continued like that. I taught kindergarten, I first grade, I taught second grade—for long terms, all at least six weeks. I taught fifth grade at least three times, all at the elementary school where the kids went to. And I also volunteered at the middle school in the reading lab, I helped over there. And in the meantime I also did cub scouts, girl scouts, and I ended up for thirteen years teaching and arts and crafts after school program. I also taught Sunday school. So my teaching experience came in handy all the way along, with all of those things. And finally, when I was fifty years old, I had been long-terming it so often and I told Grandpop the kids were grown up and gone and I really wanted my own class. So I went back to Towson and got the two courses I needed to get certified, and then was actively looking for a full time job. I was teaching a third grade down in the Middlesex Elementary. I did it from October to January. I was going to try to get a job in the Baltimore county area schools when I got a call that there was a maternity leave in the St. Joseph’s school, which was very close to where we lived. I called up there and got hired, and started teaching there, and spent the last twelve years teaching first grade up there.

So yeah, my education came in very handy. My degree is in elementary education, so it was the elementary grades I taught. I actually taught kindergarten twice—a whole year, and then I was a half a year, when a superintendent said I wasn’t qualified—my teaching degree was not in Early Childhood education, and he put someone else in the kindergarten room after I was there—somebody who had never taught kindergarten before. And that was my second go-around teaching kindergarten.

All children learn at different times—their time schedules are not always the same. And some of them, it takes a little longer for things to really get in, and settle—you have to find the way to reach the child. And definitely there’s verbal learners and visual learners. And that’s what makes a big, big difference. You know, whether you show them things, tactile things that they can do rather than just give them directions. You know with some kids it’s just in one ear, out the other. I guess that’s the main thing about teaching.

I loved teaching reading, particularly in the lower grades. There’s nothing more satisfying than when you get a child to “hey, I can really read something.” And I also did very much enjoy teaching math. Again, a lot of hands on math—setting up stores, and when you’re doing fluids, having different size containers and letting them play with water and you know, what fills up another container—to visually show them the difference. And teaching multiplication tables, I rapped songs. I had my own Writer’s corner—Mrs. Righter’s Writer’s Corner. And that had this very large #2 pencil—foot long, hanging from the eggshell lights over a desk that had a different picture every day, and writing paper. It would be story paper because there would be a place for a picture on top, and then they could write a sentence. As they progressed, definitely in the second grade, they could certainly write more stories and that.

There was an assistant principal particularly at the elementary school where my children went to and where I did most of my subbing, who made a really big effort to know as many of the children’s names as she possibly could. She was out in the halls walking, you know, she was not in an office, and visited classrooms often. And I of course met a lot of principals along the way because in subbing I went to a lot of schools in the area. One time I actually taught art for two maternity leaves. One I did at Timonium Elementary, but that was a year that the student population had dropped down, and that teacher did one day a week at another school out in the western part of the county, and when I subbed for her I did one day a week at this other school. They had told me I didn’t have to, but that was her schedule and I decided to do it. I had to you know, travel out to that school. And the thing out there with that principal—traffic was always bad out there, and she told me I could leave as soon as my last class finished so I could get on the road and travel on the beltway and get back to Timonium instead of being in the western part of Baltimore County. And yes, I had some co-teachers. Particularly at St. Joseph’s too, my one co-teacher for first grade, I still have lunch with her occasionally, and we commiserate about the parents who gave us trouble (I shouldn’t have put that on there) [laughter]. Particularly parents who thought their children were little angels, and they weren’t.
There are some students I still wonder about how they turned out. There was one little boy in first grade who just picked on everybody, and his parents did not think he ever did anything wrong. They complained enough that the principal took him out of my class and put him in the other first-grade classroom. Each year, as he moved on in school, I would have the teachers come and say, “well what about so-and-so?” And I would tell them. And every once in a while, there was a teacher who had him in middle school. And she would always say the same, thing, I wonder what happened to him. ‘Cause his parents constantly took up for him and he was not a nice person. So he’s probably not a nice person these days either.

I also at St. Joseph’s quite often got given boys who were somewhat undisciplined. I guess because of my age and because of that fact I had raised three sons. And yet I would much rather teach an ornery little boy than a whiny little girl, so I guess that’s why I got them.

[There’s] not in particular any one [student who I keep in contact with]. I do have one that I taught years ago who’s a facebook friend—I taught her just as a substitute, but she also came to me for arts and crafts. She has two children of her own. She became a teacher too—she’s on sabbatical now, I think trying for her master’s—or you know, she took a year off of teaching. But along the way you run into students and it’s always fun to find out where they are, what they’re doing. Even at the nursing home one time, when I was volunteering there—you know this young woman was there and she called me by name and I didn’t recognize her. It turns out she was a speech therapist who I had taught first grade, years and years ago.

There’s another one who I know I had taught in second grade when I had encouraged writing. Her mother was a professor at Towson and we happen to go to church. At one time she told me she appreciated how much I had encouraged her daughter because she was now working for the Sun papers as a reporter. Another time I ran into a parent and she was telling me that I had her son. She was telling me how much he was into music, that he always enjoyed it, and that it was because in the morning when they come in I always had records going. I had music on, which to me was a calming thing, because they would hear the music and rather than being really talkative they would go about doing what they were supposed to do. And that too, you know, it was something you wouldn’t even think about, to me it was just a calming thing, but it influenced that young man too, that he went into music. Of course he had to have an inking, or something was there.

I met Grandpop in high school. He was a half a year ahead of me, since we had two different graduation times. But he was in an all boys' homeroom, in this math teacher’s homeroom, and she decided that we should get to know one another. So one day I went to math—and I had been very active in school productions and stuff like that too—she called me to the back of the room and I thought it was because she had something else she wanted me to do. She had him standing in the hallway and she introduced us. He was too shy to talk to me. And the boys—his friends—Grandpop was active in all kinds of sports, he played football, baseball, basketball, he pole vaulted and ran, but you know, he didn’t have too much to do with girls.

We started dating. He started to come to the church, CYO it was called, the Catholic Youth Organization, which of course was in the church right across the street from where I lived. And every Saturday night there were dances, and he started to come to those, but he didn’t know how to dance. The only dance he knew how to do was the polka, and they didn’t play many polkas. So he finally learned to dance anyway, at least enough to come be brave and ask—of course, he always came with friends. He never came alone. He had a brother older than him, Charles. No sisters, he didn’t have any sisters. He had lots of cousins that lived walking distance. There was particularly one family, I think there was seven of them.

He lived several blocks away, but of course he walked because he didn’t have a car to drive until after we had four kids! But I would sometimes go to the library over in his neighborhood instead of going to the one closest to me. Just in case I saw him. Because his mother made him wash the windows and do housework—since she didn’t have any girls, the boys helped. But mostly we went to the dances, and then of course occasionally a movie. We also went to proms together—junior proms and senior proms. He wasn’t the only one I went to proms with—well, my picture book has other pictures in. I dated another person from high school who was older than I was and went to his proms. And then there was a young man who came to the CYO’s who went to Loyola High School. I went to his senior prom too. And even at college, there was some people who would have asked me out, but I didn’t go out because by then I was going pretty steady with him. I didn’t date anybody else in college.
[What attracted me to him was] mostly that he was very kind, very caring, you know, with his friends. And he was, as I say, not the person who knew it all, he was very subdued. Not performing in plays, not doing magic, and all that [things my grandfather did later in life]. He evolved over the years, is one way to put it. I guess, first of all, a lot of our values were the same. We like the same things.

I guess it was going into my third year of school. Well first of all, my parents really wanted me to go to college, they wanted me to finish school. In their time, both of them only went through middle school. My father because his father had died when he was only thirteen, and he had three sisters. And when his father died unexpectedly from surgery, he had to work. They wanted me to finish school. I anyway got through three years. I was going steady at that time, that was the term you used, you didn’t get engaged, going steady so I didn’t date anybody else. I don’t know that there was any particular time, it was just assumed we were going to get married. And then at Christmas, I did receive an engagement ring and then it was the next November that we got married.

Just having the first child, she arrived 11 months after we were married, and then Jimmy was born 15 months later, after Kate, so I was yes, very busy with children. And then Matthew came 18 months after Jimmy, and 13 months after that I had my fourth child! Katie was not five when I had four children. I was a very busy mother. I was a little surprised [when I found out I was having my first child], probably a little sooner than I expected, but I was happy about it. And another thing was never wanting to know what I was going to have, versus these days everyone’s got to know whether they’re having a little boy or a little girl, but it was a surprise!

And I sometimes thought Jim would probably like a boy, but he got a girl first. Just being in sports and all I thought he might like a son but I don’t think so, I mean she was definitely a daddy’s girl, just like you’re a daddy’s girl.

I was very comfortable with the children, and I was always glad that they’re so close together. Growing up, there was always somebody there to play with. They keep each other company, and not only that, where we lived for 35 years in Timonium, there were what I called “onlies” on our street. And they were always at my house. One—you can’t say he was an only, he had a brother and sister much older than him and then he came along later in life, so it was like he was growing up by himself, and he was a really good friend of [my son] Matthew’s. And it was like he would tap on the door, but he knew he could come in, that kind of stuff. Two doors from us too there was another boy that had an older brother and sister—he was from a second marriage, so when this little guy came along he was only two doors down so he came to play all the time too. And three doors down the street, he was an only child, so he was up at my house all the time too. So I just had extra kids in the house all the time. We had our own playground. There was a playhouse in our backyard. Somebody that Grandpop worked with had this playhouse and wanted to get rid of it, so he brought it home one day. Well that playhouse was a playhouse for dolls and making house, but it was also an army fort, and a lookout tower, and it got painted many colors—that was a big painting party too. We’d say “Okay, the house is going to get painted, if your child can paint, we have paintbrushes but make sure they wear paint clothes” (it was latex paint.) That house was pink, and brown, and purple, and white, it got painted often. And I don’t think any parent ever refused that their child could come and paint. It got painted inside and outside. It had a door and two windows—not a closing door, it was just open, but it had windows on two sides. You could at least see what kids were doing all the time.

They played together all the time so they got along pretty well. The last one with your daddy being home alone by himself for the first time and three of them going to school, it was the hardest on me and him to keep him occupied because he had siblings to play with all the time. And they played in the yard a lot. One of the easy things, give them a bucket of water and a paintbrush and they’d go outside. Our yard was in two levels—there was an upper level with a wall and there was some steps and a lower level. Well, with just plain water, they would paint that wall in the summertime, you know paint pictures on it. It didn’t cost anything, and they got wet so they got cool! They did have chalk too, not on the driveway because it was stone but they drew on that wall.

I never had any broken bones. None of the kids every had any broken bones. Lots of stitches—Jimmy had lots of stitches. At about a year old, he fell right in the house and had stitches. Right before second grade, he was on his bike and went down the hill and wiped out at the bottom. A neighbor brought him up, his Batman shirt was covered with blood, his chin was ripped wide open. The man just said, “I’ll take you wherever you wanna go.” There was a doctor just right over on York road. Grandpop worked construction work and there was no such thing as cell phones, so there was no way to tell him where we were going up, so the man just took us to the doctor’s office and he got
stitched up. But he also had brush burn all over his whole arm, and he couldn’t start second grade because infection had set in on his arm. So he like missed a week of second grade. And then in fourth grade, there was snow. A really snowy night, enough like a blizzard. Living on a hill we used as a sledding hill. There was no school for the next day so the kids were out later at night, sledding and that. The kids come in and say, “Jimmy’s cut his chin open.” He had stepped on the rope for the sled and had landed on the blade I guess. So we had to make our way to GBMC in a blizzard, and he had 40-some stitches put in his chin that night. So yeah, he had stitches. They always said he wasn’t going to be able to grow a beard, but as we now know he has a beard.

[As teenagers], they were very responsible kids. First of all, they were involved in sports. The boys played soccer, baseball, Mark played football—at first I wasn’t so sure if he should play football but he wanted to play football so he played football. Kate played softball, but then she didn’t really like that so much, so instead she became an umpire. She was one of the first girl umpires for the Lutherville-Timonium rec council. She took all the classes, and then she passed the exam, so she umpired boys’ baseball games. So being in sports really did keep them busy, so they didn’t get into too much trouble. Matthew more than anything. And then when he got to learn to drive there were a few car incidents. But other than that, no. Never had to get anybody out of jail, so I guess that’s a big plus.

Again, I think it’s important to recognize that each child is individual. I sometimes, with having four of them so close together, was surprised at their different personalities. And you kinda have to let them do what they want to do ad they’re good at. And even today, I think it’s important to encourage something in a child if they seem to enjoy and excel at it. In the classroom too, along the way there was at least one boy I couldn’t believe what he did in first grade, and I kept encouraging him and his mother too, to get him into an arts and crafts program. The institute of art, she finally did involve him along the way. He just showed such a talent, and I definitely believed you should encourage that. And would I do it again? Yeah I would. I’m very pleased with what my kids have done.

Of course that they did do well in school, and if there were obstacles they did get through them. Matthew of course had difficulties. It took him like the first two years to speak, and being the third child we couldn’t understand what he was saying, it was a lot of gibberish. At first we thought it was because he had a brother and sister older than him that did the talking for him. But he did talk and used all the gestures, like he knew what he was saying, but we did not know what he was saying. And then found out that he had fluid in his ears, and it ended up that I don’t know how many times we got tubes surgically put into his ears to drain the fluids. And we were told that was probably why, he was hearing all these garbled sounds, and that’s why he was kind of repeating what he heard. Even for first grade, there was a smaller class that he was put in because of the hearing difficulties. Second grade too. And along the way in school even he had more learning problems than the other ones did, so when he got to high school, he went to a different high school. He went Eastern VoTech it was called at the time. You had to take certain tests to get in, you didn’t just say “that’s where I wanted to go to school.” So that meant me taking him every morning to meet a bus until he got to junior year until there was someone in the neighborhood that did the talking for him. But he did talk and used all the gestures, like he knew what he was saying, but we did not know what he was saying. And then found out that he had fluid in his ears, and it ended up that I don’t know how many times we got tubes surgically put into his ears to drain the fluids. And we were told that was probably why, he was hearing all these garbled sounds, and that’s why he was kind of repeating what he heard. Even for first grade, there was a smaller class that he was put in because of the hearing difficulties. Second grade too. And along the way in school even he had more learning problems than the other ones did, so when he got to high school, he went to a different high school. He went Eastern VoTech it was called at the time. You had to take certain tests to get in, you didn’t just say “that’s where I wanted to go to school.” So that meant me taking him every morning to meet a bus until he got to junior year until there was someone in the neighborhood who had a car and he went with him. But otherwise I had to take him to a bus stop and pick him up every day. But he needed, again, he needed a different type of education, instead of just going to the high school which was pretty much known for its academics.

Why did I retire, first of all. I had spent 22 years substituting, and then 12 years teaching first grade. Really why I retired, I was not quite 65 years old, which is retirement age, but Matthew dies suddenly. And Grandpop and I got to thinking at that time that we still had my father living into his late 80s. It was difficult to get a day off of school; Matthew died suddenly because he died of a stroke and that was the end of February. Just a couple of months before, [Grandpop’s brother] Charles had died, and his mother was in a nursing home. We got to thinking, and decided it would be best if I stopped teaching in order to take more care of Pop Pop, first of all, so he had someone to go with him to doctor’s appointments and that. So he died in February, and around Easter time, in April, I told the principal that I was going to leave school. She told me I couldn’t because I had already signed an intent to return for the next year. And I just told her that I was leaving and that’s why I was telling her then; it was April and she had plenty of time to hire another teacher. So I retired. And I’m glad I did. Because then I was, quote unquote, “Pop Pop’s cleaning lady.” That’s what he called me! [laughter] I retired and I was able to go one day a week and do cleaning, do his laundry, and then of course I was free to be able to take him to doctor’s appointments. And having a second person along to listen to what the doctors told him—even now I’m thinking maybe I need someone to go along to my doctor’s appointments! And I’m glad I retired—I retired a year before Grandpop did, so I had a year to do what I wanted to sometimes. And I still like to do crafts, I still like to make things. And of course I volunteer all the time as well. And
it’s over 40 years of working with the Optimist group too, you know doing all those activities with the children. And then of course when Grandmom was in the nursing home, when she fell and broke her hip, then we went over there for at least two afternoons a week to engage in activities there. And then when she died in 2002, we continued—Grandpop and I to go every Tuesday for Bingo, and with the Optimist every third Saturday, and all the Optimist things, like the Shop with the Cops. We even manned the poles for football games! I did that, I didn’t know the football rules that much but boy I could get down the end of that stick and measure the down lines. And we also did concession stand for the football. Optimist oratoricals, essay contests, and now the student of the month program. Been doing that for 16 years now, going down to a different school every month and getting the kid and ordering the plaque and gift certificate—it’s just, it’s fun being able to work with children. Here I am, 80 years old, and I’m still going. And of course I like to garden too, as you know, to be outside doing stuff. I’d rather be outside working than inside doing housework!

[How has having grandchildren and great-grandchildren impacted you?] It’s been fun. It’s that old saying: you can have them, and spoil them, and do things with them and then give them back! You don’t have all the daily doing with them. I used to love having you all come and spend the night or the weekend if your mom and dad wanted to go somewhere. My mom and dad would do that too; occasionally watched our children so that we could go have a weekend somewhere. And now to have three great-grandchildren is... I just wish they weren’t so far away! Course watched Ben and grow up because they only lived the next block down for the longest time, and of course you and Catalina have lived close enough to do with you too. Brenda and Steven not; because of the Navy they lived in Hawaii, Nebraska, Virginia, Texas, and Florida where they finally ended up, so I didn’t spend as much time with them. But Facebook has played a big part, too—Facebook keeps me connected with everybody. And I hope to watch the great-grandchildren grow up, too. For a while, at least.

I know Pop Pop wanted to be 100. E did say that, more than once, “I’m gonna head for 100.” Didn’t quite make it at 96, but still. That was one of the things about going to the doctor’s with him too: he would say “I’ve got two boys worse off than I am.” You know, with Albert and Walter. Albert with his stroke that left him unable to talk for five years, and then Walter with the form of Parkinson’s that left him totally disabled too. And I’m just so glad—Pop Pop died July 9 of 2011, and Walter died in December, so he didn’t have to experience his death. And then of course Albert’s just going on 2 years in July that he died. It was bad enough that he experienced Jeannie dying. She was only 51. Quite young. And even then, Nan was pretty sick at times, and I think even she hung on for quite a while after Jeannie died so she could be with him. She died not quite a year after. Never did find out exactly what Jeannie died of, except that her lungs didn’t breathe anymore. They became fibrous tissues that didn’t allow her to breathe. That was hard to watch too. She was on oxygen. Just breathing at first, and then they did a trach on her—she didn’t get enough air through her nose, so they put it through her throat. Particularly with Matthew’s death, I mean it was sudden. But that he’d died in his sleep and he hadn’t had an accident, that he hadn’t injured somebody else along the way or that it was not a criminal act in some way, I guess Grandpop and I both felt very relieved, in a way. That he didn’t suffer—they told us he didn’t suffer. But you don’t expect a child to die. And he was 39 years old, so that’s just...

[If you could choose how you were to be remembered, what would you choose?]

I guess, that I devoted a lot of my life to children, one way or another. My family, teaching, scouting, teaching arts and crafts—for thirteen years I taught an after school arts and crafts class, and during the summer. And working with the Optimist, you know, just working and encouraging children, that’s the main thing.

I just really wanna see what you all do yet. You know, you and the other grandchildren and great grandchildren, you have a ways to go yet. And then you’ll make your decisions, and eventually we’ll have another generation coming along. Hopefully God’s gonna give me some time yet, that I can watch my family grow.

My religion has had a lot to do, has gotten me through so many things. You know I go to church, I believe you should go to church... You would not recognize the church we used to take you to... It’s not the traditional church that I grew up in, it’s much more open, and the music is different. To follow certain man-made rules are not followed—they don’t expect it, and if you don’t do it you’re going to go to hell, that kind of thing [laughs]. It’s much more open. I am a firm believer in Mary. I say the rosary a lot when I’m in trouble. I really do believe that sometimes God is overwhelmed, and Jesus is overwhelmed—go to your Mother. Go to Mother Mary. She will listen to you.
Just go for your dream—you gotta head, and sometimes it might get off track a little bit! You know with going to teacher’s college, I thought I was going to teach. But instead I feel like, probably God meant that I was to have children first. And you learn a lot from having children to be able to teach later in life. But definitely, you have a dream now and you might change it along the way, but keep working for it. And stay out of trouble [laughs]. And also—hopefully that you go a little bit longer before—I was twenty-one when I had my first child. By the time I was 25 I had 4 children! I was 25 when your daddy was born. But really, I know Brenda is definitely going further, and Cat is going further, and Steven too, and even Dan, with having his in his thirties, so he lived some life before too. So I kind of like the trend of waiting until you’re a little older before deciding to settle down and have a family. I’m not sure you should wait until your 40’s and 50’s like some women are doing—that’s usually a health risk for babies too. I hope you do something first! Be a little independent and maybe be on your own first. But I wouldn’t deter anyone from having a family—one of my nephews and nieces decided from the very beginning that they weren’t having children, and I find that decision hard sometimes. I have an Optimist couple who were both only children, and they decided that they did not want kids. I think—that’s a little bit selfish. Honestly, that’s how I feel about it.
“That’s what makes a god—or a mother. There’s nothing more intoxicating than creating something from nothing. Creating something from yourself.”
— Rainbow Rowell
Frida Kahlo experienced an unbidden amount of loss in her lifetime. She showed incredible resilience, however—and it appears she used art to process and handle her grief. Following her lead, I created portraits of a number of people I have recently lost. I can’t help but believe there’s a little magic in the method: on the very day I was drawing one of the anonymous portraits, the person reached out to me, and we reconciled. It was as if they felt the care and pain and flood of memories at the same time I did. No miraculous results for all of them, but I do have a suspicious that preserving them on the page has kept them in my life a little longer.
My Eden

A Dillard-esque Appreciation

It’s easy to hate my hometown. Like much of small town America, almost all of the population is white, thinks college is pointless, and thinks camouflage is the height of fashion. There are limited opportunities for fun, education, or self-expansion, and I’ve been dying to get out. I left for college. I did not go far, by any means, but my voyage took me to an entirely different environment. Suddenly, I was relived by the diverse population all together in one city and was hearing sirens at all hours of the night. The uniform concrete and brick campus dotted with strategic trees and shrubs gave me a new appreciation for the place I came from; I saw its golden views and silent serenity with new clarity. Less-than-pleasant residents aside, there exists in my very own backyard a beautiful, autonomous environment rife with self-possessed splendor. Going out into the big, wide world made the view of my own little world larger and more complex.

Some people grow up without seeing sun breaking over rolling hills as they drive to school, or without hearing crickets shimmer over purple sunset-stained creeks. They don’t see the golden hour kiss the frosty, snow-covered woods, or chase birds and squirrels through wildflower bushes, or smell skunk cabbage under their muddy feet every April, or pick pumpkins and ride through the smoky October air in the back of a truck. They don’t know the viscosity of pine sap or watch cows in their fields as low-hanging fog wraps around their ankles, or drink the smell of hay in an old stone barn. They don’t know what it is to gape at the night sky and see so many stars that wrap around you like a sequined cape, glimmering more brightly than any city lights you’ve ever seen. Tadpoles and hummingbirds, possums, walnuts, and big black snakes; dusks that range from blood orange to nylon fuchsia, onion grass, praying mantis that pop up where you’d least expect; wild raspberries, box turtles, and snowy scenes so quiet you’d swear you’d gone to heaven.

I have no philosophical or scientific way to explain the self-sustaining cycle of life. I can only describe its beauty; I can only appreciate the way the air is scented differently for every combination of season and weather phenomenon. When I come home from school, I breathe it all in more deeply. I appreciate the tradition of going for a drive just for fun. I sleep more easily, albeit unaccustomed to the unbroken quiet outside my bedroom windows. I feel inexplicably energized by each budding leaf. My mother asks how I can walk aimlessly around the woods behind my house for hours: the answer is that this place, overshadowed by the reputation of the population, is my own little garden of Eden — one that somehow resists the sins of its residents.
singing from the heart

“Because I feel that, in the Heavens above / The angels, whispering to one another, / Can find, among their burning terms of love / None so devotional as that of ‘Mother’”

– Edgar Allen Poe
Born in New Hampshire in 1867 to farmer parents, Helen May Butler went on to become one of the most prominent female musicians of her time, perhaps the most important female bandleader in American history. Doubtless, she earned her monikers of “the Female Sousa” and “The Queen of the March” with her unbeatable spirit and incredible musical talent.

During her youth, Butler’s parents, Lucius (a former railroad engineer) and Esther moved the family to Providence, Rhode Island. There, Butler began her musical education, starting with the violin. She studied under Adele Shepherdson and then Bernard Listerman, the concertmaster of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. From him she purchased her first quality violin, from the same era as Stradivarius violins. She must have showed exceptional musical talent for such a prominent performer to take on a young woman as an apprentice.

Through her involvement with the Talma Ladies Club, she began to encourage her friends and other women to take up musical study. She started a small chamber group, originally with both men and women, that would perform at friends’ homes and other small, local venues. Soon, however, Butler’s focus shifted to the talented women in the group, which expanded to become the Talma Ladies’ Orchestra. With Butler as their director, unheard of for women at the time, they began selling tickets to their performances and soon purchased their own theater.

Around 1896, Butler became interested in another side of the music world: band. She saw the barrier between women and brass instruments and decided it must be breached; she aimed to expand her ensemble into the Talma Ladies Military Band. Finding male teachers who were willing to give brass lessons was a behemoth task: she was not successful for a number of months until she came across famed cornetist and conductor D.W. Reeves, who led the American Band based out of Providence. He took Butler on as a student and she soon mastered cornet in addition to violin. She then began to teach brass to other female musicians.

Gender restrictions were a consistent hindrance to Butler’s musical aspirations. For example, many of her female musicians were hard-pressed to find an instrument that they could buy or rent as women. Other venue owners or performance coordinators were uncomfortable speaking to women about work or with the very idea of a women’s ensemble. Butler’s father and brother often stepped in early on, to book performances or purchase instruments under their own names. Later this role was taken on by John Leslie Spahn, the manager to the re-named Helen May Butler and her Ladies’ Military Band, and briefly husband to Ms. Butler. Spahn could adapt to expectation by referring to himself as John, when a male liaison was needed, or J. Leslie Spahn, to be cohesive with the all-female reputation of the band. In his own words, it was an “Adam-less Garden of Musical Eves.” The word “military” was included in the band’s title because it gave credibility to the ensemble and prevented their dismissal as a silly vaudeville act; it placed the band among the ranks of respected male regimental and military-style bands.

By 1898, the band had about 25 core members, but could be augmented by as many 60 young women for larger performances. They were traveling the country and performing coast to coast, in cities like Washington, D.C., Boston, and New York, and at events like expositions, vaudevilles, chautauquas, and fairs. Spahn kept the performers busy: allegedly, the group performed about twice a week for 50 or so weeks a year, their record being 54 weeks in a row. It wasn’t novelty or pity that spurred their popularity, however; not only was the group unusual, being all-female, but Butler ran a tight ship. She encouraged her performers and expected the utmost musical quality, so they were the premier female band in the country, as well as one of the best bands, period. The band was known for its clean, military-esque uniforms. Also unusual for a military band was the inclusion of a woodwind section, which gave more opportunity to a range of female performers. The group became so popular that hundreds of women musicians began to write her and to try out for the band. The ensemble’s motto was prideful and patriotic: “Music for the American people, by American composers, played by American girls.”

Butler took pride in the quality of her performers, and was known for her iron spirit. She was quoted in the New York World saying, “I am ready to play my twenty brass girls against the Bostonian’s forty strings and let the public decide on its merits. But I will not combine with the orchestra—put my players in the background. Mine is the only woman’s military band in the world, and I won’t play second fiddle.”

Butler gained national and global attention. During a 1902 tour, Helen May Butler and her Ladies’ Military Band played for Theodore Roosevelt at the White House. He was so...
enthralled with the group’s talent that in 1904, he made Butler’s original composition, the “Cosmopolitan America” march, his official campaign march for the Republican Party in that year’s election. The Ladies’ Military Band played at the Republican National Convention that year. In 1903, she was granted the honor of being named music director for the International Women’s Exposition. Her band performed at the event held in Madison Square Garden, shocking audience members with striking red bloomers and pants. They also stunned with their technical skill and musicality. Though a female band caused a stir and a scandal wherever it went, the performers were cared for and not salacious or improper. Most were unmarried, but Butler enforced hard and fast rules against flirtation and provided adequate chaperones to meet the social expectations of the time. The following year, the band played at the St. Louis World’s Fair, and here Butler established her credibility as a director and an equal to the world’s leading bandleaders, like Sousa. C.G. Conn, the nation’s leading maker of brass instruments, was so impressed that the company endowed every member with a new silver horn after their performance.

When she was not touring with the band, such as during the winter months, Butler taught lessons in Beatrice, Nebraska, where she established her home base. She married Spahn in 1902 and had two children with him, a son Leslie and a daughter Helen May. The marriage dissolved in 1908, however, and Butler continued to tour with the band. She married her second husband, James Herbert Young, in 1911, and within a year or two, she broke from the band and retired to Cincinnati. There she focused on raising her young family and managing the Burlington Hotel alongside her husband. She did not leave behind her musical livelihood, however; she continued to play at church and social functions, and may have taught lessons at the Cincinnati Conservatory. She was also pulled out of her retirement multiple times, including guest performances with Barnum and Bailey’s Circus, Giuseppe Creatore, Patrick Conway, and one occasion was invited by Sousa himself to conduct his “Semper Fidelis” at his own concert.

Later in life, Butler ran a women’s boarding house until the 1950’s and also participated in charity work throughout her life. In 1936, when she was 69 years old, she ran for a position in the U.S. Senate. She was not elected, but it shows her commitment to breaking down gender-constructed barriers and demonstrating that women’s aptitudes are equal to men’s. She undertook her political endeavor “not because she feels certain she can win the Republican nomination and eventually a seat in the Senate, but because she may open the way for some other woman.” Butler began to see opportunities arise for women in the music world and other areas as an older woman, when women were accepted as adequate musicians and could interact with men. She died in 1957 in Covington, Kentucky, at the wizened age of 90. She was posthumously inducted into the Women Band Directors Hall of Fame in 1995.

Helen May Butler is admirable for her talent, her unstoppable spirit, and her strict personal values. She broke barriers in the 1900s, but she continued to inspire me, 100 years later. As a young musician, I started off playing the baritone horn and the euphonium, unusual instruments in general, but even more so for a little girl. These are low brass instruments, large and deep in tone. I was frequently the only girl in my section of music classes through school. The comments I received were unoriginal and, frankly, grating: “That thing is as big as you!” “You should have chosen the flute!” “You don’t see many young ladies on that horn...” I resolved to stick to my guns, almost out of spite as much as for the love of the instrument. I joined every ensemble I could and took up private lessons, and soon I was being accepted into county and state honor bands. In middle school, I wanted to be as authentic as possible, so I learned to play the trombone, an instrument that is conducive to more power than the dark and melodic euphonium (I also made it further into the “boys’ club” of the trombone world, many “boner” jokes included). I assumed a more obnoxious persona to hold my own.

In high school, I joined marching band, leading me to work on my physical strength in addition to my strength of will. I eventually also learned tuba and sousaphone, mostly because my teacher told me I could only do play them in orchestra if I could prove I could hold them. By my senior year, I was section leader and first chair in nearly every ensemble. As much as Butler worked down the gender ratio for brass bands in her time, it’s still a heavily male-based world today. All of my private lessons teachers and audition judges have been male. The majority of county band and guest conductors were men. In one notable incident of sexism, I was playing first chair euphonium in the county honor band. One of the pieces had a huge euphonium solo, and in those situations, they always went to the first chair. When it was time to rehearse that section, however, the guest conductor addressed the second euph. He stood up for me and corrected the conductor, to which he replied, “Oh! It didn’t occur to me, I don’t usually see talented young women playing euphs.” I’m sure the comment was not in spite, but it was obviously misguided. I continued in Butler’s spirit by teaching music lessons. I contacted the elementary and middle school directors and had about five young students learning low brass from me. I don’t play in a formal ensemble currently, but low brass has been essential to my identity and to my creative formation.
Music is something I’ve been doing my whole life, and I hope to continue to share it with others: through teaching lessons, through performing in an ensemble, or through casual jam sessions.
Maria Tallchief was born in 1926 in Oklahoma to a white mother, Ruth Porter, and a Native American father, Alexander Tall Chief. Her father was wealthy, his fortune made from oil found on the Osage reservation. She had a sister, Marjorie, who she danced with until it became clear that Maria outstripped her sister’s talents. Both girls grew up with incredible discipline, instilled in them by their mother. Every day, she would follow a strict schedule of piano practice, school, more piano, and dance lessons, starting at 6:30. This focus, says, Tallchief, is what allowed her to become a great dancer—eventually, she would become the protégé of Balanchine, tour as a principal dancer in New York, and found the Chicago ballet. She spoke unflinchingly about the control a dancer must have: the ability to withstand starvation, injury, and fatigue in pursuit of an ephemeral craft whose beauty could never last longer than a moment. A true dancer, she says, commits herself wholly to the art without a second thought to the struggle.

The family moved from Oklahoma to Los Angeles to seek more quality arts education opportunities for the girls. Perhaps Ruth did not intend to create a career dancer out of her daughter, per se, but her value on self-control combined with Maria’s passion for the ballet did just that. The girls studied first with Ernest Belcher, and then, when Maria was twelve, with Madame Nijinska, a famous Russian dancer who had trained with the Maryinsky Theatre. This teacher was her first encourager: not through enthusiastic praise, but simply by giving the young dancer attention and important roles. Indeed, Nijinska cast Maria as the lead in Chopin Concerto, her new ballet. Maria would later replace the injured lead in the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo company production of the same work as it premiered in New York, a role which would be a breakout for Maria. Critics labeled her a young ballerina to watch for. During high school, while her skill as a dancer was blooming, she faced personal struggle, including discrimination and bullying at school that ultimately led her to condense her last name into one word.

At 18, Tallchief joined the New York City Ballet, then led by the American ballet icon George Balanchine. Balanchine took a keen interest in her beauty and talent—an interest that extended beyond the professional: the two married when Maria was 20 and stayed married for five years. Being Mrs. Balanchine as well as the prima ballerina of the company placed too much pressure on Maria. After their divorce—also caused by a more than twenty-year age difference—the two remained colleagues, Balanchine still invested in Maria’s development as a dancer. Late into her life, she regarded Balanchine as a genius and an inspiration. His trust motivated her: often she pushed herself and found new heights of skill, simply because Balanchine wanted her to. She stayed with the company for many years, giving awe-inspiring performances in roles like the Snow Queen, the Sugarplum Fairy, the Swan Queen, the Fairy Gypsy, and others, as well as the role that would become almost synonymous with her name: the Firebird. Then, in 1954, she received an offer to travel with the Ballet Russe for a year, in exchange for a wildly large salary for a dancer of the time. She recounts this as her greatest mistake: in interrupting her education with Balanchine, she lost a critical continuity and disrupted her teacher’s plans.

In 1956, Maria married her second husband, Henry (Buzzy) Paschen, Jr.—a businessman, but outside the business of Ballet. Four years later, their only daughter, Elise, was born. At first, Buzzy and Elise traveled with Maria while she toured with the ballet. Maria would care for and tutor Elise in her spare time. Eventually, however, Elise got too old and had to go to school, and thus Maria began to travel alone. This was her plight: she could not be both a dancer and a mother. Finally, after a dazzling, twenty-year career, she retired from dancing professionally in 1966 and returned home to be with her family.

She didn’t give up the ballet world completely in her retirement. She dedicated her life to teaching and in 1981 opened the Chicago City Ballet, a combined school and dance company, modelled after Balanchine’s New York City Ballet. Students are taught using Balanchine’s very own methods and then funneled into the company to dance professionally. She continued the work of promoting ballet and the arts until her death in 2013.

Honored as America’s first prima ballerina, she amassed a number of honors over her life, including a National Medal of Arts, a lifetime achievement Kennedy Center Honor, and was inducted into the National Women’s Hall of Fame. Described by colleagues as unflinchingly professional, dazzling, athletic, disciplined, and passionate, it is apt to summarize her with her most famous role: The Firebird.
leading fearlessly

“To describe my mother would be to write about a hurricane in its perfect power. Or the climbing, falling colors of a rainbow.”

-Maya Angelou
Catalina de Erauso

Catalina de Erauso, or the Lieutenant Nun, as she is better known, was born in San Sebastian, Spain (in Basque country) in 1585, middle child and third daughter of wealthy Basque family. Hers is a story of scandal: she spent her life dressed as a man, womanizing, fighting, killing, and “relieving” many people of their wealth along her path through the Americas and Europe. Her story was preserved through her astounding memoirs, “The Lieutenant Nun,” (La Monja Alférez). The credibility of such memoirs has been up to debate for hundreds of years, but she is nonetheless remembered as an icon. It is unclear whether Catalina fully identified as male, and thus is a transgender man, or if she was simply a disguised woman. For this discussion, I will refer to Erauso as a woman. Many academics are also wont to doubt the truth of Catalina’s many lesbian sexual encounters, insisting that they were only an act to reinforce her credibility as a male.

Catalina’s father, Captain Miguel de Erauso, had served in the Spanish military in the Americas, as had her older brothers. She and all her sisters were placed in a convent when she was young, as was proper for protecting a family’s honor: one married and the rest lived as nuns. This did not satisfy Catalina, and one night, she stole material and keys from the convent, chopped off her hair, sewed a set of men’s garments, and walked away from the convent. She weaseled her way into a job as page to the king’s secretary. While serving one day, she received a visit from her father, who had come to tell her master about his woes with his missing daughter. He did not recognize Catalina, but hearing this tale, she decided to seek other employment. On the road, she experienced her first jail sentence for throwing a stone at a boy, but upon her release, she went to San Sebastian where she had another poignant familial encounter: she saw her mother in mass, who also did not recognize her. Her mind was made up: she stowed away as a ships boy to someone she would discover as her uncle. The year was 1603, and the New World was attractive for its reputation as a haven of opportunity.

Erauso’s first stop was Panama. She survived a shipwreck to be employed by a merchant, who kept her on and commended her as a very careful bookkeeper. She quarreled with a nobleman at a play, and he came to her shop to elicit revenge. Erauso’s master recommended that she marry his own mistress, who was family of the nobleman, to assuage the situation, but Erauso refused. She ended up slashing the noble’s face and lived her second jail sentence. She traveled to a new shop in another town, Trujillo, but her foe followed her there and two engaged in a duel—and Catalina committed her first murder. She was arrested, but the sheriff recognized her as a fellow Basquero, and helped her flee for Lima. There, Catalina worked for a wealthy man named don Solarte, but in her womanizing nature, she became overly friendly with the women of the house. Don Solarte caught her in a compromising act with one of his daughters, so he fired her. Erauso was not downtrodden. She joined the army to see the world.

The military took her to Concepción to fight in the Chilean conquest. The governor’s secretary in the city was Miguel de Erauso, her brother! She had not seen him since he left Spain when she was two years old. He took a liking to her (under her assumed identity) as she was a fellow Basquero, and he pulled a favor with the governor to allow her to stay as his personal soldier for three years. He never suspected a thing. The two siblings ended up in a brawl because she seduced his mistress, a brawl that attracted the attention of the governor. Although they reconciled, she was banished to Paicabí.

Paicabí was a battle zone against Indian tribes. Erauso describes this as a miserable time, where the soldiers were always on guard. Catalina proved herself a hero to the Spanish in the battle of Valdivia when she killed the enemy chief and rescued the Spanish flag. She was greatly wounded and later rejoined her brother for a period of healing. This accomplishment earned her a promotion as lieutenant under Captain Rodríguez. In a later battle, this very captain fell, and Catalina was left in charge of the regiment for a few months. After many more battles and a few more mistakes on Erauso’s part, she went back to Concepción, the town of her first deadly gambling brawl, in which both a lieutenant and a judge died. She hid in church for months, surrounded by hostile guards of the local government, until the demands for her detainment slowed down. She finally emerged from hiding on one fateful night: her good friend Juan de Silva asked her to be his second in a duel, imploring that she was the only man he trusted to do so. The dark and fog were apparently too thick to discern their enemies’ identities; both main duelers went down, and thus the seconds began to fight. Erauso killed the other man—only to discover it was her own brother Miguel.

She was charged with rebellion, but another nobleman assisted her flee to Tucumán. The journey was harrowing: both of her companions starved and froze to death after de-

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pleteing all their supplies and even killing their horses for meat. She barely made it alive, only being rescued by two servants of a ranch-owning widow who tried to arrange Erauso’s marriage with her daughter. She grudgingly agreed, but ran off with a mule after postponing this wedding for some months.

From there she journeyed to Potosi. There she helped suppress an uprising and was subsequently appointed to a higher military position, encountering many Indian tribes along the way, which she and her regiment viciously slaughtered. They also found the Dorado River, but were ordered to leave it and its riches behind.

Catalina moved on to La Plata, where she was framed as a hitman in a quarrel between two rich women. She was jailed and tortured along with a barber with whom she was supposedly in cahoots. She was sentenced to ten years in Chile but appealed this sentence, and almost miraculously, was pardoned by the Royal Court. In Charcas, and then Piscobamba, she found herself in a number of gambling quarrels, many of which ended in her killing of opponents. In one case, she was sentenced to the death, and after stubbornly refusing her last confession to dozens of priests, was dragged to the gallows. There, another miracle of her pardoning: two witnesses who had testified against her in a previous trial and confessed upon the threshold of their own execution that they had been bribed into condemning her, and this gave the court reason to stay her execution. The decision came just in time to save Catalina’s neck.

On her way out of Cochabamba a few months later, the wife of one of her acquaintances intercepted her quite literally, by jumping out her window and yelling that Catalina must save her from her husband, who was trying to kill her. Our heroine acted without thinking, and pair fled the town on horseback, making it to La Plata where Erauso deposited the lady at a convent with her mother. Then, the husband met up with her again, and after a duel, she bloodied her dagger yet again and escaped into the protection of a monastery. She was ruled innocent, as she had been acting to protect the noble lady. She was given a job to litigate some crimes in Mizque, and then continued on her way to La Paz and yet another murder. This time, she escaped her death sentence by cleverly announcing her lack of faith, which delayed her last confession and one of the priests helped her escape. She was accused of stealing a royal horse: she got out of this situation by playing a trick on the guards and asking which of its eyes was blind—when in reality, neither were. When it seemed the guards were lying, to Catalina’s luck, the mayor had them punished instead.

In Cuzco again, and yet another gambling brawl, she killed a famously menacing man called the Cid. She was greatly wounded in this fight, however, and upon taking what she thought was her last confession, she revealed the truth about her gender and history. Shockingly, she recovered, and in an attempt to outrun this confession and the Cid’s vengeful friends, she fled to Guancevelica. Stopped a number of times, she narrowly escaped on each occasion—except when her cheeky wit got the best of her: she answered the sheriff, “the devil” when asked to identify herself. She was saved from this scuffle only by the lucky kindness of another fellow Basquero—the bishop. In his care, she confessed all of her secret past to him. He helped her make a confession before God and absolved her of all her sins—indeed he rather admired her. When she was inspected and proved a woman, but beyond that, an intact virgin, he helped her enter a convent and became a great friend to her. This confession saw a shift in Erauso’s outlook: she felt validated, and saw life with new eyes, attempting to live the holy life of a good Christian. Her story also spread through the Spanish colonies, gaining her many admirers.

When the bishop died in 1620, she was called to Lima by the archbishop. He allowed her choose the convent in which she would spend the rest of her days, and she selected that of The Most Holy Trinity, but word arrived from Spain that she was never, in fact, a true, sworn nun, and so she gave up this particular lie and set sail for Spain. On this ship, however, back to her old ways, she killed a man in a quarrel and was transferred to another ship, where she befriended a general who commanded two of her brothers, and out of a favor, promoted them. Upon arriving in Spain, she resumed her dress as a man, and tried to lay low to avoid her sensational renown as a cross-dressing “Lieutenant Nun.” Catalina tried to travel to Rome, but on her route through France, she was arrested and tried as a Spanish spy, but was found innocent and sent back to Spain. She appealed to the King in Madrid: he granted her a military pension. A while later in her travels, she finally made it to Rome, where she met Pope Urban VIII, whom she regaled with her secrets an tales, who was in turn amazed and granted her permission to live out the rest of her days dressed as a man. This brought her great favor and popularity and Europe, but in 1630, she returned to the Americas, where all records of her have been lost...
Shirley Chisholm

Shirley Chisholm was born in 1924 as Shirley Anita St. Hill in Brooklyn, daughter to two hardworking immigrants from Guyana and Barbados. She would grow from her low status in an impoverished immigrant family to become the first black U.S. Congresswoman.

She was the oldest of three daughters. Her parents, although having missed educational opportunities themselves, were very concerned with the quality of education available in the ghettos of the city. For that reason, and for the concern of living expenses in Brooklyn, her parents sent her to live with her grandmother on her farm in Barbados. Here she found a loving, peaceful environment, complete with good quality British Commonwealth schools. Her grandmother was particularly apt at raising children, according to Chisholm’s recollection; she was strict but warm hearted, and she and 10 of her relatives spent their days studying and contributing collectively to the farm chores. Chisholm proved to be quite precocious under her grandmother’s guidance, and she started to read when she was only four years old. Meanwhile in New York, the Great Depression was hitting her parents hard. Nonetheless, they decided it was time to bring Shirley back to the USA in 1934, when she was nine years old.

Her precocity persisted in her late schooling. She went to an all-girls school and passed brilliantly, being admitted to an academic honors society and winning a French department award. Outside of school, her father inspired her greatly with his alertness and intelligence: although he lacked formal education, he kept up on current events by reading the papers and was always willing to engage in thoughtful conversation. Her social life, on the other hand, was rather restricted: Brooklyn was rife with racial tension while she was growing up, and her parents were rather protective of her. Shirley faced her fair share of discrimination as a young woman in a poor neighborhood.

Chisholm was accepted into prestigious colleges like Vassar and Oberlin, but because of her family’s financial situation, she turned these down and went to Brooklyn College to major in sociology. She graduated cum laude, a celebrated debater, and spent a great deal of time serving her community by doing volunteer social work. She aspired to be a teacher, both because she believed strongly in education providing a better future for disadvantaged children, but also because it was one of the only professions available to black women in the 1940s. She applied for many jobs and did some substitute teaching, but due to her diminutive size, she was rejected: supervisors were concerned that older students wouldn’t take her seriously. She began to work at a childcare center in the city and started to take night classes at Columbia University to work toward her master’s degree. It was during this time that she met a man, fell in love quickly, and got married—only to find out within a few months that he was a fraud. He was convicted and deported back to Jamaica—and his real wife.

During this period of her life, however, she also met Conrad Chisholm, to whom she would remain married to until 1977. He was a private detective who fell in love with Shirley’s intelligence, and the pair married in 1949. They tried to have children, but the Chisholms experienced two miscarriages. Instead, Shirley threw herself and her passion for children into teaching the children of others. She received a promotion to become the director of a large child care center in Manhattan, and in 1959, she was appointed as the consultant to the city division of daycare. Through her career, Chisholm reflects that she was inspired by her grandmother’s style of child-rearing.

Shirley Chisholm was always politically active in addition to working with children. She was part of the Unity Democratic Club, which was a black organization dedicated to ending so-called “plantation politics,” a type of institutionalized racism in which well-meaning but misguided whites and educated blacks patronize poor, uneducated racial minorities, as if they do not have the autonomy to have a say in their government—derogatorily, as if they were “back on the plantation.” Chisholm also worked with the Bedford-Stuyvesant Political League and the League of Women Voters, as well as the National Association of College Women.

In 1964 she was elected to the New York State Assembly’s committee on education. She served in the Assembly until 1968. Some of her accomplishments with the legislature include arguing against an English-only literacy test, increasing quality of schools in districts that were overwhelmingly populated by black families and providing scholarships for disadvantaged students, and extending unemployment insurance to domestic workers.

In 1968, Chisholm was elected the first black Congresswoman of the United States as a Representative from New York’s 12th District. She was supported by newly-redistricted areas that encompassed much of Brooklyn and her home in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Her victory was a surprise and an upset: she was running against three other black
candidates with more political experience, and she was a woman no less. Her favorite headline indicates Chisholm’s drive and the exhilaration of her election: “Black Woman Will Sock It To Congress.” After all, she had been running on a punchy and empowered campaign slogan: “Unbought and Unbossed.” This description truly fit her no-nonsense spirit. The slogan would later be inscribed on her gravestone, ensuring that her fiery honest will live on in her memory. Later that year, she also served as a delegate at the Democratic National Convention.

Right away, she was appointed to the House Agricultural Committee. She did not feel that she was serving her experience, nor her highly urban district’s interests well. She did something unorthodox, but honest and upfront, protesting her appointment directly during the legislative session. In the meantime before she could be re-assigned, however, she used her voice on the agriculture committee to help assign surplus food products to feed the hungry residents in her district; she became one of the minds behind SNAP and WIC.

In response to her protests, she was placed on the Veterans’ Affairs Committee, in response to which she quipped that there are at least “more veterans in my district than trees.” Finally, in 1970, she settled in the Education and Labor Committee, where she would be the third-highest ranking member when she retired twelve years later. Her strong voice and strong motivation continued to make an impact, both nationally and in her own district. She also overcame personal struggle, dealing with removal of a large pelvic tumor and continuing to work through her recovery period. She hired only women to work in her office, half of them black women, saying that she faced more discrimination in her political career because of her gender than of her race.

In 1972, she broke her most famous barrier: she was the first black woman to announce her bid for the Presidency. According to her, it was an experiment—she wanted to see what would happen. Unfortunately, she lost. From then until 1982, Republicans had control of the White House, leaving Chisholm feeling that, as a Democrat, she couldn’t make an effective difference through legislation any longer. Thus, she resigned, ending her political career.

She continued working on one of her callings, education, by teaching at Mount Holyoke College, among others. She continued to be a leader, community organizer, and to conduct seminars, but she ceased to be involved with the Democratic party. She continued lecturing until she died at age 80, in 2005.

She leaves an incredible legacy behind her. She has been awarded many Honorary Doctorates; she was inducted into the National Women’s Hall of Fame in 1993; she has a Forever Stamp; and in 2015, she was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. By and large, she paved the way for other female politicians of color.
It wasn’t until recently that I realized my dad went by nicknames because he was named after his father, but they didn’t get along too well and he didn’t want his father’s name. So he went by Roy, or he signed his signature as H.R. Mom was a homemaker, I don’t think she ever worked at a job. Daddy was into education, and that’s why I went to college, because he told us all three girls to go. In the 30s and 40s and 50s, before women’s rights or whatever the thing was, women just would cook and clean and have babies and take care of them.

As I look back, my relationship with my parents, I think it was pretty good. I can’t think of a yes it was or a no it wasn’t, but Daddy was looking out for us. I can’t speak for my two sisters, they were younger than me. And mom didn’t make me look after the other two just because I was the oldest. I didn’t realize that until after I was older and saw how other mothers did to their kids.

I don’t think I thought much about it at the time, but when I look back I’d say they were pretty good parents. They weren’t hard-nosed, and the only—I don’ know what I did for Daddy to be so upset but Daddy got his razor strap and he cracked me one and I had a big red welt. But that wasn’t what he was normally, so I must have done something really stupid or he was just having a bad day. And Mom, just, she didn’t make me do things that some mothers make the firstborn do. But I realize now that Daddy wanted us to have an education that most girls weren’t getting at that time but he saw to it that we did.

My first sister is Phyllis Virginia—she was married but I can’t remember her married name. She was good to her kids. She had four or five, and she was good to them... the last time I saw them was one day, and your mom just missed them! She came in... I don’t know, that’s where my brain gets foggy the further back I go. The later I go too. Like I might forget something that happened in here with you all. It’s very difficult.

The other one was Patricia... I can’t think of her middle name. She was married, Kathy is her daughter, and Tracy was her daughter. They lived in Baltimore out on York Road in an area and we didn’t go down that much. Mom didn’t drive, and I got married on my 21st birthday, and I didn’t like to drive (Daddy taught me)...

Well with Phyllis, she actually stood up in public once in the library or something and said, “this is my sister and she’s my best friend!” Or something like that. But with Pat, it was something else again—she’s the one that on the back of the couch/sofa or what you will, there was a piece of wood that was un-upholstered and she wrote on that, “Barbara is a skunk!” And she’d come around when I was trying to play the piano, and she wasn’t playing at that time, and she’d come up and go [mimics plunking keys]. And she’d keep on going until I’d get fed up and try to hit her. But I usually missed. I hit her and it wasn’t you know, it wasn’t a hard one. [It’s a younger sister’s job to be annoying] Very! And she was conniving. Mother had made me the... what to do you call it—takes care of things—look if you think of the word, put it in there [laughs] [executor of the will]. But she finally convinced Mother that because I lived in Hagerstown and she was down there, that she was the logical person. And finally when mom died I figured out that I wasn’t the executor.

And the only time Mother said basically I had to watch for them was—I don’t know where we went into Baltimore to see something, and Mother put me in charge. But by then, I was up in my teens. And let’s face it, Baltimore and Towson and Parkville were not like they are today. Towson—there was a question about whether Towson was gonna be a town on its own or part of whatever’s down there. And it’s changed.
We lived on the corner of the block. We were living in a row house or a house that had another house right next door. We had a lot of ground around us. I collected stamps, Daddy would get after me to help him with the garden. And he was kind of picky about this house inside, and I wanted to have a party. And he wasn’t going to have any part of that, so I said: “Can I clean out the garage and have it in there?” And I did. It was a double car garage, though we only ever had one car. But it was a nice big space, and I had a phonograph or something that could play music, and I had a party. A birthday party I guess—I don’t remember what it was but I remember all the shenanigans I had to go through to get it. I had to finagle, and I was good at that. I didn’t do anything nasty, but I knew what I could do and what I couldn’t.

I learned to play the piano and I sang in all the church choirs and in school. I enjoyed that, I was an alto. And I took lessons for a while to learn to play the organ. The organ, you have to be [using] both your hands and feet. And I apparently didn’t have the proper coordination or something to do it. So that kind of fell by the wayside. I came to Hagerstown in the summer. Like I said Aunt Edna was my aunt—well of course.

Daddy was one of ten, and he was the second oldest, so he had a lot of younger brothers. Even after he got married, they were YOUNGER. And they must have babysat me because one of them—and I’m not sure which one it was—was trying to— I don’t know what the back and forth between us was, but I crawled under the bed because I knew he couldn’t catch me. And I had a picture of that. I liked all my uncles—well, I liked all my aunts and uncles on Daddy’s side. And Mother didn’t have many—she had a sister and I was close to her, she was almost like a second mother. But they didn’t have any children.

Well considering we lived in Baltimore County, and my dad’s people were in Florida, we saw them once a year. My mother’s side, was her sister. And we visited them more often because coming from Baltimore to Hagerstown was no big deal. It’s been more family group stuff once your mom got married and had you kids. And we’re—the two sets of grandparents don’t usually get along too good. At least I’ve seen a lot of, whatever. And we get along great. I like them, even your other grandfather, Jim—I could take him or leave him, he had his good days and his bad days, I mean on a few rare occasions he could be really obnoxious, but most of the time he was fine. And I remember the last time we were together and it was a good one. I was giving him as much as he was giving me and I swear that I asked Dolores, “Did I see you make a hand gesture that”—she was on my side?! And she said yes she did [laughs]. You can love somebody deeply but they can be so [hnnngngg] sometimes too. You know, you have a family so you know what I mean. You maybe know more about that than I do.

I had one girlfriend called Susanne Zaire. I must have gotten acquainted with her in grade school, because she was a good friend all the way even to high school. But it fell off a little bit, because she was from Towson and I was from Parkville and we both went to the same high school, but the Parkville people, we always had the feeling that were not quite as good as those Towson people [laughs]. I don’t know if anybody else had that feeling or not.

When I went to high school it was Towson High. There was no middle school then. So I only got 11 years of schooling. You all got 12—were you stupider that it took longer?! [laughs] I don’t know why that changed, but it did. I think I’m not sure whether Phil—it was the year after Phil that they changed it so I think all three of us went to the 11th grade.

Well I remember the one teacher, but I don’t remember what grade she was teaching, it wasn’t too young. In fact, I think it was high school. Yes, it was a math class. Our classes were usually the desks in rows going up, and then the teacher had a big desk, kinda like mine upstairs, up in the front. And this teacher, I never saw her on her feet! She was a big heavy woman, and she sat up front at her desk. I had another teacher that I really liked, and strangely enough, that’s what I remember, that she was good. She taught us well. Another teacher—I had a male teacher in the 7th grade I guess, and he was a good teacher. I remember more his relations with some of the boys. Because he didn’t take any nonsense from them. It’s funny—I remember these teachers, and I probably could pick them out of a picture, but I can’t—oh I remember another, she was also the vice principal. And she didn’t take any finagling from anybody, boy or girl. Hoo! She was after ya. But at the same time, she wasn’t a mean, nasty person. She just went after the bad ones. And I can’t remember anybody else. But I do remember—this has nothing to do with teachers—there was this one kid, and he could be obnoxious—he was a nice kid, but he—he went after me with a damp cloth, I don’t know if it was something used to clean the boards. Mother
had allowed me to wear one of my *good* dresses to school that day, and he went after me and you know, he’d get hold of the one corner and he’d snap it at me. And I was screaming at him [laughs], I don’t know where any teachers were, or anybody else was. Because I only have the two of us in my mind. Oh, well that was in high school. I was thinking we were younger. But the teacher that I said was vice principal, that was the high school. She didn’t take much from the kids. The good kids she was fine, it was just the bad ones. Well, there weren’t any kids that were really bad, because for one thing the kids—Towson was a pretty—“high class” came to mind, but I didn’t mean that they were all rich high class in that sense. We were a pretty mixed bunch of kids I would guess, from income. I can’t remember any other teachers in high school except that English teacher I talked about. It’s weird! Oh I know—biology. Botany or biology, I’m not sure if I saw a picture that I could pick her out. But she was nice. I can’t say anything special about her but she was a nice person. I mean in high school, you were moving around. You didn’t just sit in one class. It’s weird, I just don’t remember much about high school. It wasn’t bad. [My parents] found a lady who was taking her son over to Towson, and in the same class I guess. Hmm, you’re making me think about things I hadn’t given much thought to! So that’s how I was able to finish Towson grade school, was because she took her son. And she must have not taken us right up to the school, sometimes, or maybe never. Because we’d go down to the corner of Burke Avenue and wait there. Her son wasn’t the most lovable. Oh and he’d bring home a boyfriend to visit, and I’d—two boys against one girl! And girls were not like the girls are now—you stand up for yourself—I think I must have stood up pretty good for myself [laughs]. I don’t remember anything special, but they weren’t doing anything to me, and if they wanted to go climb a tree, I mean, there were plenty of trees around!

I had the feeling you were like me—you drove because that’s what you had to do! I managed to get out of it until I was working at Fairchild and I think I told you that. Well I was good at math, and I guess you could say they were my favorites. When you’re good at something, you sorta learn to like it. In grade school I don’t think I had a special… I guess music class was the one I liked the best. And as I said I was in the chorus, and that was an important part. I just have pictures of us being on the stage. I guess the other classes just depended on the teacher, if he or she was a good person. I got along better and liked that class better of course. I didn’t have any classes that the teachers were just terrible.

Living in Parkville, Mom couldn’t drive, there were some things I couldn’t do because of after-school practice and all that kind of stuff. Any musical thing that I could get to and find a way, I was probably involved in that. You know I said I was in the choir and things. In high school, I didn’t have any extracurricular that I can remember that I was involved with. Although I can remember the playing field! The school was on this side of the road, and on the other side of the road was where you did all your playing, and baseball, and of course I didn’t do that. Oh, and in grade school, the school was up here and then there was a big hill, and at the bottom was where the railroads came in and stopped and there was, I don’t know whether that was a station you could get on? But it ended there. Nothing must have ever been brought in on it, because we’d go down there and walk on the rails. I was pretty good at that. That’s the only other thing I remember doing. I don’t know what happened, but I remember, I must have been late or I didn’t come in with the rest of the kids, and I had to come up that hill, and it was cold, and there might have been snow on the ground—in other words, I don’t know if I dreamed this up or if it really happened.

No, I’ve never held many negative memories. I guess I’m always that way—why hold on to something that’s not nice to remember? Or you know, wasn’t very pleasant or something.

But one thing, at the time, there was, at the time, Jonathan Street. And that’s where the black people had to live. And so they were segregated.

You know I weighed 150 pounds after Ned died. And I was buying stuff at the grocery store, and I realized when I went shopping there were these little dinners and I thought, “that was enough for me, that’s fine.” And I discovered after somebody said to me—a friend, and a male friend at that (there were differences then, when I say a friend, your relationship with other kids was a lot different than it is today. And there weren’t any kids sleeping together! Or if they were, they were very close-
mouthed about it.)

Daddy was determined that all of us were going to be educated. And I don’t know why, but it had to do I guess with that he quit grade school at seventh grade. And when he was in World War I, he came back, and I don’t know if WWI soldiers—whoever was fighting, soldiers, sailors, whatever—were given some kind of a reward that they could go back to school, like they are these days and after WWII? Well he went back to school, I know that. And I’ve got his school photo and diploma upstairs. You know I’d have to go up there and look. I know it’s up there, and he’s in it, but I wasn’t aware that—maybe it was a high school one. Maybe he went back to high school when he got out of the service. He was born in ’93 and the first World War was in the late teens. And he went back to school—answering your questions, I’m realizing there were questions I never asked. I guess I knew that he was not a young man, but he got his education, and I think that’s the reason he was determined for us girls to get it. Because he moved up, he was an electrical engineer. That just popped in my head. And he really moved up with that. It may be that back right after WWI, things may have been much more—freer? He was in the Coast Guard, during the War. And whether he learned just simply by being with other people. Because he came from Lonaconing, further west than this! It was a backwater town! You’re asking questions and they’re making me think of other things... I’m thinking of people that I haven’t thought about.

I went to Maryland and lived in Anne Arundel! You’re in it right now aren’t you? And your mom later got my room! And your dad! He came in one day and sat down, and said, “I’m Mark Righter,” and he wanted to make himself known to us!

Well, I didn’t know what to study! Daddy wasn’t worried about that, he didn’t say you have to study this or that. This didn’t happen because I actually went to school on the train—but it’s like he drove me up in front of the administration building, handed me a check—he’d have never given me a blank check—handed me a check and said “You’re on your own!” But that didn’t happen. We had to walk all the way up from the train station. I don’t know how far that is. And then to get all the way up to Anne Arundel—that was the end of the campus when I was there! But he wasn’t going to give me an allowance, so I had to get out and find a job, which was probably better for me in the long run. But I ended up in the government department. But I wouldn’t mind going down to Maryland, especially since you’re there.

[talking about when I didn’t want a big deal made over my birthday] Listen, sometimes it’s important, especially to a child, what you call something. And even to grown-ups! So it was just a family get together, and you got what you wanted, and we got what we wanted. What else could you ask for? [laughs]

At that time, the first two years were pretty much “this is what you’re gonna take!” And when I walked in—it was a psychology class—I didn’t know anything about it, didn’t mean anything to me—I walked in and the teacher was this—I don’t know if I could recognize him or not, but walked and talked and looked kind of—not with it. But I guess he was an okay teacher. And within a week or two, I knew that was what I was gonna major in. It was just that quick. So that’s what I decided to take, and everything else was pretty much what was required. Oh, and if you took psychology you minored in sociology. That was standard procedure, so I did that. I was very lucky in some of the teachers I got. When I went to do the sociology I had one assignment that I had to do that had to do with where I lived, and I don’t know what it was, whether it was the school or the principal of the grade school in Parkville, was an absolute hnngh! He had to be part of my project, had to be helpful and he was anything but! I went back to my teacher in college and explained everything, and he says, alright, I was to write it up the way it was, with the problems I had, and he just turned it over. That’s why I say I was very lucky to have teachers that could do that, help me make the best of a bad situation.

Well, I didn’t meet my husband in college. No, he [my grandfather Ned] didn’t enlist because he was working at Fairchild, and I think everyone there had that. Those planes were so important—women—I mean, World War II released a lot of women to do things because women could work at Fairchild and things like that, and they’d never done it before! He was already working there when he met me. And he made friends with my family—he was a nice guy! I got friendly with him, but it wasn’t anything else—and he made friends with my family [laughs]. See, well I was babysitting for our neighbors, where he was boarding. I think I’ve told you—he
and Les came down, I heard these footsteps coming down the steps, and I looked up and said “Hello!” And they went out the door. Your [grandfather] must have eaten his dinner real quick! They were out for a little and came right back. I didn’t think much about it at the time, but he definitely decided to be friends. He was friends with my family, they fell in love with him, and he fell in love before I did. And your grandfather, Ned, and I were by that time friendly, he’d come over and we’d sit in the car down the driveway—and Phil would sit with a flashlight at the top! Well, I was what—I had just started college, so I was probably 18, so she’s seven years younger than I am. And she was the kind that would do that! Pat wouldn’t even think of doing anything like that. She wasn’t a tease, but Phil could be. But I could put up with the tease more than I could put up with some of the things Pat did.

Anyway, I realized he went into the service because I wanted to finish school before getting married. I knew I couldn’t handle my school work and also the life of a Newly married person. My gosh, I was a teenager before I knew anything about sex! I mean, what’s that? [laughs] Seriously! You were just boys and girls. And I never even questioned, how did I get here? The most Mother ever gave me was the book called “Martha May’s 12th Birthday” and it was a little pamphlet about when you menstruate. She did give me that ‘cause she knew I was gonna be doing it soon [laugh]. But sex, how you make babies—never! And in fact I don’t know when I finally learned. You’d think it would have been a [gasp sound!] I never gave it a thought about how babies were made or how babies got here or anything like that. Like I said, we didn’t have television. We had radio, we didn’t have computers. So we didn’t see anything. And it still makes me nauseous some of the things they put on TV to look at. I don’t wanna see somebody else having sex! They could leave that off. I don’t think it’s bad, I just don’t want to see it. You can have all the fun you want, stand on your head and have it if that’s what you want to do! [laughter]. Actually if you try to visualize that, you’d have to be acrobats to do that.

I just grew into love. This guy was nice, I liked him, I enjoyed his company I just gradually did. He took care of what he couldn’t have in a way that didn’t do something to me bad. I’m convinced he joined the service so he could get away from me—not in a bad way. And he couldn’t force it, and he wasn’t going to try to do something that I didn’t like, so that’s how he got in the service. And that worked out for him because when he got out of the service he could go back to school. It wasn’t until World War II that they did that. But they had so many young boys that had joined up when they were just right out of high school, and they figure it was probably a good idea.

Oh I enjoyed living at college. I’d only been away to visit my aunt before. I had a home kind of feeling. I really liked my roommate too. Except she broke the frame that was around your grandfather’s picture and I was reaaaaally pissed off! It was a beautiful blue glass frame, and it was his picture. She didn’t do it on purpose, and I guess I realized it after I screamed and hollered at her. I had good friends. I have a bunch of pictures upstairs, and all I can put on the back is that they were taken in college, which was between ’42 and ’46. And I got married in ’46, right after I graduated.

And I was determined that Ned was gonna have a college degree. And we were married by then, and he wanted to go to Penn State. And I didn’t care where he went, I just wanted him to have a college degree. But you know where Penn State is, in the middle of nowhere. There’s no big cities, like in Maryland you can commute from Baltimore and from Washington, so they can take on an infinite number of people. So I said well, try Maryland and see if you can get in there, and I think it was no problem getting in. But of course but the time that all happened, he tried to get into Penn State but it was pretty much, things were closed up and there were no places to live. And we did find a couple, we were living with them in a house with an extra bedroom—course we weren’t teenagers by then (that probably had something to do with it), and he was a veteran, and all the good things spoke for us at the time. So that’s why they could take a couple into their home—I guess it was their guest bedroom. She wanted me to do some cooking, and I said no! And I guess my “no” was so positive that she said ok. And then she wanted me to do some house cleaning a while and that, I agreed to. But it annoyed me, the one thing I remember, I was doing it, there was no problem, she didn’t complain about how I was doing a bad job, so I must have done a satisfactory one. And the next thing, one day there was something sitting on her coffee table, and I was curious, so I picked it up to look at it. And she bawled me out something fierce! You’re supposed to be doing a job, I don’t know what you’re doing, you know, on and on. And I said to Ned, I can’t put up with
this anymore. By then we had been there a while and we sort of knew the area. So we were looking around for someplace to move to. And if Ned wanted to work for this guy, he could. And I don’t remember whether he did or not. But we found somebody who had a basement apartment [laughs]. The people we rented from, I don’t think I would know them if I saw them. Well, they wouldn’t be around I’m sure. They were nice, we paid our rent. I went back to where I had worked before—the government thing, I got a job there.

I don’t remember it as much as my childhood house. Your dad took us down to Towson and pulled up in front of a row of houses and said “do you recognize anything?” I admit for a minute I just sat there wondering what I was supposed to be recognizing, but then it dawned on me that it was my old house. It was a different color—I think they changed the shingles or something. The windows and everything were in the same place, and they hadn’t added anything. Another thing that threw me off was all the playground equipment for the kids. Well we didn’t have anything like that. We had a log cabin to play in! [laughter] I wish I had a picture of that. Daddy took railroad ties I guess and built em up. So there was one door, and I think there was one window in it. So I guess we had a pretty good playhouse. But you got a role of film with 12 pictures in it, and I guess it was too pricey, I don’t remember, so you were pretty careful, you couldn’t just go around snapping anything.

Ned decided to follow in his father’s and big brother’ footsteps. And I would have preferred him to get an engineering degree, and I think he was considering it. But I didn’t say one thing or another—it was enough that he was going to college—I actually stood in front of him when he wanted to quit—because the teacher didn’t come in on a Saturday night when he was supposed to, and the kids were all down there. The teacher wasn’t coming and Ned came out and said, “I’m quitting school!” and I stood in front of him and said “No you’re not!” [laughs]. He got the message and stuck it out. You had to look back at things that you thought were the worst thing in the world: when he was working the ag, I mean he wanted a job so he got a job working for one of the ag professors, who used his engineering ability—he helped design some equipment or something, and I later realized it wasn’t a bad move. So that’s where he worked. And I think he worked full time down there. And I was still working over in the government office that I had gotten hooked up with when I was there in the first place. There were different people there, some were the same. I guess I worked there the whole time that Ned was in school, and I think he worked in the ag department because that teacher—anyhow they got along good. And the rest of the time is kind of fuzzy. I remember somebody telling me that it had been torn down—and I imagine it has—it was just a road, it didn’t have any lines or anything. But it was wide enough that they could have easily made a two lane road. And there was enough property on this side to build houses. I don’t know if this is what is in my head when somebody says it or what, I haven’t been down there. After Cindy graduated, there’s a big space [of time] until you go.

But I do remembering your Daddy coming in there and introducing himself. I think he did the same thing that Ned did to me. He fell in love with your mom but your mom had to get to know him before she fell in love with him. You’ll have to ask her that!

We weren’t supposed to have any kids! Well, I was so sick [when I was pregnant] I didn’t care! I remember going in to the doctor and saying “Oh, I feel terrible!” Having pains and all that—and he said—I don’t remember whether he took a test or if he just knew, but he said, “well, you’re going to have a baby, you’re pregnant.” And I said “I don’t care, I wanna feel better!” [laughs]. The only thing about Cindy was, that the lady that was—my memory is that we were sitting out in a room, but there were also trees—it’s very strange, so I don’t know. But anyhow, the lady that was there waiting the same time I was, all she could do was complain! And by that time I was feeling okay, because I was having her. Or was it Mike? No because when we had Cindy we came home—you didn’t have to hook them up like you do now—and I was holding her and I opened the door and I said, “Do you want to see your baby sister?” and he looked down and I think he just went “I gotta take care of this little thing!” because they’re 5 years apart. So we must have had Mike before we moved here. But if we did, where in the world were we? We must have been in Ringtown because Burton had the property up there. You’ve never been to Ringtown but it’s—you blink and you miss it! I don’t think it’s grown any. Because all the ones that like to live there did and all the ones that didn’t were born and left. Oh golly you’re making me think, which is good. But I don’t know where we were when he was born. I’d have been pregnant and had this big tummy—you know. While we were in Ringtown, I don’t know where we lived. No visualization. So he mustn’t have been conceived while we were living—I don’t think we even lived.
in Ringtown. And I have such an urge, “ask Ned, he’ll tell you”—[laughs]. Oh, and if we were living in Hagerstown—that’s right, he got out of the service. We got married, by then I’d gotten my degree. He was home for a couple of months before we got married. And we got married in June. Oh this is weird. I can’t even put own life back together.

Well my life changed before we had them. Because we were told we couldn’t have any. And to be honest with you, I wonder if the doctor told us that so we wouldn’t be constantly trying and thinking and worrying about it. Just, okay, we couldn’t have any. I don’t know I never asked him. So when they came, I think I told you—it so bad, I didn’t care, I just wanted to feel better! So it didn’t matter. Once I got feeling better, then I was just elated. When Cindy came, I don’t remember having all that problem. And Michael, when he came, it was like he looked out and said “Eh, it’s better in here.” And that’s what happened, he started to come out and stopped. And the doctor said to the nurse, “you watch, and when things start to move, give me a call. And they talk about—I know it was a while back, but I don’t remember some of the things they talk about and it’s supposed to be for real—about how much it hurt. The pain that went with it. Well, what I call pain I never had. It’s not comfortable—you got this little teeny hole and you’re pushing a baby through it—but your body’s designed for it to happen, so unless there’s a miscarriage or something’s going bad it should be okay. And like I said, I was sicker just pregnant than I was when I had the baby. I don’t remember Cindy whether she just came out, I don’t remember anything about hers. But Mike’s took so long.

It’s funny, I watch the mothers carrying the baby’s and dressing them—in the first place, the diapers they have now, oh, I would have loved to have them! You know, that you just bring them up and stretch them and put them on. I think I was using—it was like I was using something ancient. I can’t remember what it was. We were just so glad to get them, it was all—you had your ups and downs, you know, life is not all sweetness and light [laughs]. But things worked out fine.

When the kids were younger, we went to Florida—we got permission to take the last two weeks of this year and the first two of the next year and we went to Florida. We were gonna go pretty much straight down. We stopped in Goldsboro, North Carolina. My aunt was down there. And we stopped another time, we wanted to stop at a campground and we went in and the guy says, “well we’re closed,” and then he says “but you can park in here if you want to, we won’t rent any of the cabins. And there’s a bathroom over there you can use.” So we got free, and I thought that was nice. We went on down, where’s Orlando? I had an uncle that was around there someplace. We didn’t go to his house, but he came and met us on the trail. And we had a chat. Then we went on down the coast. We went across the Everglades and then decided coming back to West Palm Beach which was where my family was. There we stayed with my Uncle Jack and his wife. We visited all our relatives that were down there, and did some swimming, and you know all that. Even though it was December we could still swim. And we came back home. That was the one big thing that happened. Other than that, the kids were put through school, and what I could do as a parent, go in and help or whatever.

I don’t know how I got started in antiques. I know how your mom did. She walked in that door and her eyes—I knew that she had found—I think she said “I want one like this sometime.” Or words to that effect. When college came we didn’t have the money for them to go away to a big college, and the local junior college was here and had a good reputation so they were very willing to do that. And then they both made their choice for the last two years. Mike bought a car that was sitting down on the corner here—it was a red one I think, you’ll have to ask him, and it just sat there for a long time. And finally Mike decided to find out who it belonged to and he went to the guy and said, “do you want it? Do you wanna sell it?” and he made a deal. I don’t know what the deal was, it was between them. But it was something that he could work out. So he had a car. And then he went up and down the east coast looking at colleges. I said “I guess you’ll go to the University of Maryland, it’s the one college you can go to because you’re in Maryland.” And I don’t remember him saying yes no or maybe—he’s good at that. He traveled all the way up to MIT and I think that’s where he really wanted to go. But the price up there was hoo. I don’t remember what it was but it was much, much higher than anything else. And he figured that we couldn’t do it. And I’m not sure that I couldn’t have found a way to get some scholarships. I mean, he’s not exactly stupid. But anyhow, he came back and he went all the way down to Virginia and he finally stopped in Blacksburg and he met the guy and they made a deal, and he finally came home and said [Virginia Tech]’s where I’m gonna go. So at least we made him independent. But your mom’s been independent all the time! [laughs] I remember one time, somebody—we had a truck and it was one that the kids could all drive, and Cindy was driving by that time, and she had it and she got stuck up here—you know how this goes up and dead ends right not too far down the road where you come up. And she
ran out of gas. I saw her walking up that road and you could tell she was maaaad. We worked things out. And then another time, she and I butt heads on something, I don’t know what it was. And I went upstairs and I got to thinking, I was just as much at fault as I said she was. And I went up to apologize and try to work things out, and she wasn’t in her room. And I thought, “oh my god she’s run away.” So I waited, I couldn’t do anything but wait and see what happened—she hadn’t taken anything with her. So she came back and I remember telling her “If you find things so bad that you can’t stand to live here, don’t run away—tell us, and we’ll help you find a new place.” And I asked her once about that, and I forget what she said. I don’t think it was a very good answer, either she didn’t want to tell me or what, but anyhow. She said she wasn’t running away. She was just mad. We made peace then over the original reason that all started.

Then she got married, she picked a good husband. I don’t know how good the wife was, but he made his choice [laughs, my mom sticks out her tongue].

As far as I’m concerned, they were good kids, we got along reasonably well, though we had some—well, I just told you. And the one I was concerned about Mike he didn’t tell us that was where he really wanted to go, but the rest was just, get up, eat breakfast, go to school, come home! She might be able to tell you better than I can! But as far as I’m concerned they were good kids and I didn’t have any serious problems with them. Let’s face it, you’re gonna be able to live four in a house and never have any.

No I’m proud of both! I’d never thought about it until you asked that question, “are you proud!” I know Mike got hurt emotionally and never married, but that was none of my business. It was the love of his life, apparently. He never found anybody else. Or else she turned him off all women [laughs].

I just never thought about proud—to me, it’s when you go around boasting about your kids! I was glad they did what they did. I—that’s weird. I guess I was proud, in a sense, but I’m not the kind of proud that goes around, “Oh, don’t you think my daughter is the most beautiful thing in the world!” or whatever. [to mom] What’s that face for? Mom: You didn’t think I was the most beautiful thing in the world?! :{ [laughter] Well you were good looking. (‘were’). It was mainly that I didn’t go bragging on you.

I can’t hardly remember, but it was not a terrible thing, because Mike was working the kind of work he wanted. He was in Virginia getting his master’s. It must have been a long distance kind of thing. I was proud of him. Cindy and I—Ned couldn’t go because he wasn’t functioning very well, and he never learned to walk on a walker. After seeing the young men now, they’re not pretty, they’re pieces of iron posts and things—but they work! They allow those fellows that are wearing them to do all kinds of things, like win races, and you know. And when I realized—really got to watching—I don’t know what came first, we cleaned up Ned’s old legs, I had them in the bedroom, and I was looking at them, and they had these big pieces of plastic to make it look like a real leg. It was worthless. Especially for men because men can wear pants! I mean at that time, women were only beginning to. Because when I could wear trousers, I forgot to wear skirts.

Ned kept on working until he couldn’t anymore, and I think he worked a little longer than he should have. But he wasn’t complaining. And he asked to be let go and his boss—he was working down the road at Johnson’s—I think his boss said “you better retire.” And I don’t know honestly if his leg, if he’d gone back to work.

I started in genealogy because a lady apparently found out I was interested in family stuff, and asked me if I would mind joining a bunch of old ladies! I’m trying to think if the kids were born yet. Yes, but I was very young. And I said sure. Just because you’re ten, twenty years older than me doesn’t mean you’re not good. By heaven, if I had that theory I’d only have 90 year old people to hang around with. And that wouldn’t be very fun. When Ned died, after my grieving period—when somebody said “what do you do when you grieve?” Well I don’t know! I was still a part of all the groups I was in. My life went on. But one day, about the middle of summer, I decided, I’m finished. I actually decided, it was either a year or two years. And I started looking around. But all the men I saw, all they wanted was some fem—someone to take care of them! So that soon died real quick.

Well, I learned where we came from. The Froelichs are German... we’re mostly German. Seems to me there’s somebody in there that’s English. But I haven’t done any genealogy in a while. I don’t know my maternal grandfather because he was killed when my mother was 4 years old. So my mother and Aunt Jo, her sister who never married, were raised by a son, there was a son left... they were all Needy’s, which was originally Gnaedig, and that’s German. And then somewhere along the line, apparently most people thought that sounded like Kneedys, so then it was k-needy. And there was something closer to my generation or my mother’s, that our line—something about the Kneedys,
and mother’s line, and our line finally decided to throw away the K. I don’t know if there are any Kn’s left or not but I imagine there still are. And daddy’s was Froelichs, Myers. I knew my Grandfather Froelich. And I knew my uncle Felt and he was a Myers—and I didn’t connect the two. All the years and I didn’t realize because my grandmother was in Florida and then she came north but he lived down Harford road and we went down to visit then quite a bit but I didn’t know how they were connected to us!

I think of some families where they live so close together that the kids could sort of run back and forth. And I sort of envied them that I didn’t get to be around you guys that way. But let’s face it you live that far away. So I don’t get to see you as much. But when I see you I’m glad to see you. We get together and do things and I enjoy it. So it’s a positive thing.

[what is your current goal?] Laughs, I’m 92! Well a couple of years ago, my goal was to die. Seriously. I was in and out of the hospital for that one period and I just wanted to go. And I’d have gotten a doctor or somebody to get me a pill, I’d have taken it, no trouble. I don’t think I’d have taken it unless I told the rest of the family, but I nevertheless—nobody would have talked me out of it. So my goal is to take care of myself, as well as I can. Hopefully I don’t go to a home. Cindy suggested that and I squashed that real quick. When I was living in rehab they put me in a nursing home. No way. And I’m sure some people are delighted to be there. It depends on your religion and what you’ve been taught about that. They’ve built a hospital not far from here—if you only had 6 months to live, and it’s for those kind of people. And I can’t help thinking but why. If you’re gonna die, can’t the doctors—you’d have to make sure the diagnosis was correct, that they can’t be brought back to better life—let them go. If they’re willing, I mean there’s some people that wouldn’t take that. I have no control over it. I’m still here. I wouldn’t have been. And I’ve enjoyed—this is an enjoyed relationship. I don’t know if I’d have missed it because you don’t know what you miss.

I don’t necessarily believe the Bible. Because it can say something in the same book, and then a couple pages later say something that seems to contradict it. And let’s face it, it was not repeated in a—piece of equipment that kept throwing out the same thing. It was monks that were copying it. And who are we to say that they didn’t—if they saw something they didn’t like, would they have changed it? Also, would they have misunderstood something? Question it. That’s a big thing, if people question things. It’s only when that happens that things improve. I don’t know exactly how to explain what I believe at this point, and it hasn’t always been that. The more I read, take into account who’s telling me what I’m supposed to be reading. San sent me a book to read, with strictly Christian beliefs. And that was a whole other ball game, because I read a chapter, and then the next day got the book out to read, but I’m going—I had to tell San I didn’t know if I could follow through with what she wanted to do with me. We haven’t come to a conclusion on that yet. My belief is that our essence, whatever that is, goes off somewhere. And I believe that that essence can come back. Because I’ve read enough things about people that can remember things from another life—kids. They tell you where a street was, or somebody’s name, and there was no way they could know it unless they’d been there in the first place. So that’s a question in my mind. But it’s not God sitting up there on a golden throne and wearing a golden crown, waving a—what’s he waving? Well I guess it depends who you talk to [laughs]. Some people took it literally. So I guess I’ll have to wait and find out. [giggles]. Remember back when I asked you and Catalina about indigo children? And I had the feeling you might have more of it than Catalina, it was just a feeling and I had no proof. So I’ll come back and haunt you—not haunt you, but speak in your ear. Just don’t tell anybody, or let them know and I’ll see if I can speak to them too [laughs]. That’s about as close as I can tell you. I don’t know if I’ll meet my own family who is already gone, I have no clue. Neither does anybody else. Even when I’ve read—people who’ve died and come back—they don’t even agree! If it was all exactly correct—in other words, if I asked you if you went to kindergarten, I could ask another little kid that lived in a different state, you’d tell different tales but there’d be a similarity that you could tell yes he/she went to kindergarten. So that’s kinda—it’s still up in the clouds for me. I have no “this is the way it is!” Obviously your mother never got—I wanted her to go to bible school. I asked both Cindy and Mike to go—Mike went—I think it was a two year thing—I think he finished one year and said he didn’t want to go back. And I said ok, you did what I asked. You don’t wanna go back, ok. Cindy—it’s a little fuzzier. You’ll have to ask her. It was a summertime thing, I don’t remember what it was called. She didn’t go for very long.

[If you could choose how to be remembered, what would you want people to think?] I don’t care. I’m not going to be here. Whatever I did, or whatever I’m remembered for, I hope I lived a good enough life that I meant something to people. That’s it.
[Laughs] How can I give advice to anybody at my age? I guess that’s it.
activism— for ourselves and our posterity

“It’s not our job to toughen our children up to face a cruel and heartless world. It's our job to raise children who will make the world a little less cruel and heartless.”
— L.R. Knost
Fanny Lou Hamer was born October 6, 1917, the youngest child of twenty to two poor sharecroppers. She was born and raised in the area known as the Delta, bordered by the Mississippi River—some of the most fertile farmland in Mississippi, where some of the most insidious racism flourished alongside the cotton. Not much had changed for African-Americans in the hundred years between the Civil War and the day Hamer bravely stepped onto the path that would lead her to be an unexpected hero of the Civil Rights Movement.

Hamer was the wife of Perry “Pap” Hamer and a mother to two adopted daughters, Dorothy Jean and Virgie Ree. Like many black women in her time, she was forcefully sterilized by eugenicists without her knowledge, believing she was being hospitalized for a routine surgery. This was not the first nor the last injustice she faced due to her race.

On August 31, 1962, a few days after discovering that a black person was allowed to vote, she and seventeen others boarded a bus destined for the county courthouse to become the first registered African American voters from her home county. At the courthouse, the Jim Crow-plagued south, the eighteen were met with opposition, given stringent literacy tests and quizzed on the Constitution and Mississippi law. None of them passed and were blocked from registering. Disappointed, they boarded the bus home, but the backlash did not end there. The bus was stopped by a policeman on a phony charge of looking too much like a schoolbus and the passengers were fined all the money they had on their persons. Upon their return, the passengers were told that they faced eviction and losing their jobs. This did not phase Hamer: voting was a right she would take for herself, no matter what stood in her way. She left her home and family, since as a sharecropper she lived by the fields she worked, and moved in with a friend. She moved frequently; it was dangerous for anyone to help her, given the threats her registration had incited. By November, she decided to try again: she had studied some law and the Constitution, and now without a house or job, she felt she had nothing her opponents could levy against her. She and her family were supported for a time by funds raised by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), an organization in which Hamer would become heavily involved. Hamer passed the test. Her next obstacle was the poll tax, which prevented poor citizens from voting.

Shortly after, she began working and traveling with the SNCC. Though she would associate with other organizations dedicated to the rights of African Americans, such as the SCLC and the NAACP, the SNCC appealed to her for its emphasis on education and it emphasis on the common citizen and that the poorest people were the most vulnerable. Throughout her life, Hamer maintained the deeply held belief that everyone should be respected and have the right to influence their own destiny, no matter their color—a belief that would cause some tension in her later years of association with the SNCC, when the leaders of the organization began to exclude white members on the basis that this was a black fight. Hamer felt that it would be counterproductive to segregate themselves. In her first year with the SNCC, while on a trip to teach at a “Freedom School”—a place where poor black Mississippians could go to learn about the voting process and their legal rights—she and the other people on the trip were arrested for sitting at a white-only lunch counter, following a number of similar sit-ins across the country. At the jail, they were brutally beaten. For Hamer, not a young woman, this caused increased damage to her already limping leg and may have been the beginning of her eye problems. This violence did not deter her from the movement, but rather drove her forward.

As a leader in the SNCC, Hamer was somewhat of a mother figure to both the student workers and the groups she traveled to speak to. One of her favorite ways of inspiring others was through song: Hamer had a low, majestic voice, and had learned many spirituals from relatives working in the fields. One of her favorites, “This Little Light of Mine,” became a national symbol of the Civil Rights Movement. Hearing it, an audience member remarked that she seemed to have “force enough for all of them.” In 1963, she helped organize the “Freedom Vote,” an unofficial election for black voters to share their voices and their desire to participate in the political process. Though it had no impact on actual election results, it was a symbol that African Americans were fighting for their right to vote.

The next year, seeing that the Democratic Party would not commit to black voters’ rights nor support black candidates, Hamer and some of her colleagues formed the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and Hamer ran for Congress after speaking at the first of three Democratic National Conventions that she would attend. She and all of her fellow party members were defeated—but because so few African Americans were allowed to vote, Hamer and two of her colleagues, Annie Devine and Victoria Gray, led a congressional challenge stating that the election of the previous year was illegal. Their challenge was struck down, but in the process, the women became the first black women to sit in Congress while the results of a challenge were read.
During this time, advances in Civil Rights were made, such as the Selma march and the Voting Rights Acts, but they were counterbalanced by increased hate crimes by the Ku Klux Klan against activists and voting rights workers. Hamer herself made a bittersweet trip to Africa, where she was both pleasantly surprised by the difference in racial dynamics and saddened that the situation was so much more dangerous for black Americans. She also brought a lawsuit against the registrar of her home Sunflower County about discrimination in voter registration. After activist James Meredith was shot during a peaceful march for civil rights, Hamer and many others joined the march for civil rights, helping black citizens register to vote along the way.

In 1967, Hamer joined the Loyalist coalition, a less “extreme” party with a mix of black and white delegates to be sent to the Democratic National Convention. Hamer turned her attention to the plight of poor Mississipians and spoke honestly at the convention—including her opinion of the prospective democratic presidential and vice presidential candidates. In another move to combat poverty and hunger, which Hamer and her family members had suffered from firsthand, Hamer began the Freedom Farm cooperative, which included a vegetable garden and a pig bank and taught poor citizens how to access the programs available to them for assistance from the government. Over its five years before it ran out of money, the Freedom Farm fed and employed hundreds of poor citizens. Because Hamer saw that poor black citizens were educationally disadvantaged, Hamer joined Head Start, a program that promoted early childhood education, fought hunger, and assisted with healthcare. Even within this program, she saw rampant discrimination and brought another lawsuit against Sunflower County, stating that the school systems remained illegally segregated.

In 1971, she ran for the state Senate of Mississippi, and perhaps because she was unable to afford a campaign, lost to her white opponent. However, fifty other black representatives were elected, a landmark for Hamer. Later that year she invited to speak at the Women’s Rights Caucus in Washington, D.C., though she had differing views from many traditional feminist ideas. By the 1970’s, however, Hamer was in her fifties and her health was declining. She was granted a lifelong community service award by the Congressional Black Caucus in 1976, before her death the following year. She died a symbol of rapidly accelerating fight, a speaker of honesty, justice, and a protector to thousands—truly one of the mothers of the Civil Rights movement.
Madres de Plaza de Mayo

Not every act of motherhood is driven by love and tenderness: some are fueled by rage. The Madres de Plaza de Mayo are a group of activists who encapsulate the ferocity, solidarity, and dedication that is characteristic of motherhood. Their action was born out of pain, and they refuse to let anyone forget the crimes that were committed against their families and their country.

Between 1976 and 1983, Argentina experienced one of its darkest periods. Following the presidency of Isabel Perón and the subsequent rise of Jorge Videla to power, the country experienced military dictatorship and a civil unrest. The time came to be known as the “Dirty Wars,” but truthfully, it wasn’t a war at all: it was a genocide carried out by the government against suspected political insurgents. Leftist revolutionary groups like los Montoneros and el Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP) were special targets of the state’s vindication; it was also, however, an ideological genocide, and scientists, journalists, progressive Catholics, lawyers, artists, union leaders, and scholars of all types—anyone who may contradict the word of the governing party—were also quashed by state efforts. It was an era of terror and suspicion. People would disappear overnight, or be killed in a demonstrative fashion, or be imprisoned or held ransom in concentration camps.

Employees of the government who opposed the dictatorship, or were accused of such, were “transferred”—a euphemism for state sanctioned murder, and having their body thrown to sea. It is estimated that a total of 30,000 people were killed by the state in less than a decade.

In April of 1977, mothers gave up on their fruitless questioning of police and began to gather in the Plaza de Mayo, the city center of Buenos Aires and site of the Presidential Palace, to demand information about their disappeared children. 14 tentative women began to meet every Thursday to protest. The regime not long after, in a move designed to dispel insurgents’ efforts, made meetings of three or more people illegal. In response, the Madres kept marching through the square, but walked two-by-two, arm in arm, to show that they were not afraid. The Madres faced enormous risk, and the regime indeed unleashed their wrath, and many of the Madres themselves also disappeared, including the original president of their organization, Azucena de Villaflor. On December 28, 1978, they were forcefully expelled from the Plaza.

This did not deter heartbroken and enraged mothers from all over Argentine: in fact, it spurred them on, and the Madres de Plaza de Mayo grew to hundreds and then thousands of women. In 1979, they began meeting in churches in secret and became an official organization. They began to publish a bulletin in La Nación.

They also began to wear their most iconic symbol: the white headscarves, on which they would write the names of their missing children and loved ones. They are called panuelos, and they represent diapers, an ultimate symbol of motherhood and the tenderness they hold for their children. Many also carried signs and pictures of their lost sons and daughters.

Not surprisingly, their fight yielded little respect or compliance from the dictatorship, and the Madres were viewed as communists and insurgents. They did not gain any information when the regime fell in 1983, and they were angered and disappointed by the lack of punishment of those who carried out the state’s atrocities. The establishment of a new democracy did not repay the crimes they had been subjected to, and they refused to forget. Their purpose evolved: now they clamored for justice and for the punishment of those who perpetuated the state’s injustices during the Dirty Wars. Their activism has led to the trials of more than one thousand conspirators in the regime. They still have not received information about their missing children, however, for the government documents were destroyed, or are classified—modern Argentina takes a revisionist attitude toward its history and is loathe to discuss its mistakes. Las Madres are an inconvenient reminder of the lives that were lost for these brutal mistakes.

Las Madres were important not only for defying the military dictatorship in their country—they also burst through a very strictly constructed gender dynamic in Argentina. During this time, there was a rigid separation of labor: women were in the house and even their hobbies were harshly defined—they were considered too stupid to be interested or participate in politics, and expected to be passive and non-confrontational. Las Madres changed that. They have always been vehemently a women’s only movement to ensure that their voices are not overpowered by men’s, as they are in every other sector of society. This caused some controversy, as many mothers worried they were stunting their movement by barring male family members from fighting with them. Las Madres also believed, however, that women were more emotionally strong than...
men, and that men would force them to wait passively for extensive bureaucratic processes rather than demand immediate action. The movement created a new space for women’s representation in a male-dominate political atmosphere.

Las Madres have marched every Thursday for the past 40 years, and they keep marching. Their focus has expanded to fight numerous injustices in Latin America and beyond, and they have received international support from organizations like the United Nations Human Rights Commission and Amnesty International. A public statement by Las Madres:

We realize that to demand the fulfillment of human rights is a revolutionary act, that to question the government about bringing our children back alive was a revolutionary act. We are fighting for liberation, to live in freedom, and that is a revolutionary act. The day in which there will be no more hunger, that justice will be done, that the murderers will be in jail, then we will have accomplished a revolution. To transform a system is always revolutionary.

They serve as a paragon for justice and a watchful eye for oppression. Las Madres attest to the endurance of motherhood: some of the founding mothers are still marching today, upwards of 100 years old. They cry out for injustice, not only against the victims of genocide, but against their mothers as well: something is torn from a mother when you harm her child. Their strength, and their white headscarves, like a white dove of peace and mourning, are a steadfast symbol seen around the world.
to conclude
The need for mothers doesn’t stop when you hit adulthood. Indeed, it might never. I was reminded of this recently, when I came down with a particularly bad flu. I was awake getting sick for two days straight, hallucinating from fever, dehydration, and abdominal pain—and my mom never left my side. You might love someone, but you wouldn’t make doctor’s appointments at four in the morning or sleep on a cold bathroom floor next to someone who retches every time they sip water unless that love was fierce and protective, like a mother’s. I’m nineteen, and I may make poor choices, but for the most part I’m capable of taking care of myself, and yet my mom did it anyway. She caught the same virus two days later, and she still wouldn’t listen to my apologies. She said it herself: “It’s what moms do."

Moms, plural. The old adage is true: it takes a village. Sometimes members of that village may not be aware or intentionally involved in the growth of a child, but their contribution is essential nonetheless. I think each person is impossible to define with a single, stagnant identity. They have a million “selves” within them, stolen here and there from people they admire—selves who make appearances in specific social situations, selves who create, selves who vary wildly in their confidence, selves who may never come to fruition but exist in your daydreams—and it occurred to me that most of the selves I see in myself were informed by other women. Then I realized that maybe the reason being called “mom” was such a high compliment among my friends were the values inherent to motherhood: caring, passion, advocacy, camaraderie, support, trailblazing, and so on. A mother’s influence is reflected in her children. I decided to reflect on my own mothers (since giving birth isn’t the only act that qualifies someone for motherhood). The women I have featured in Mama Who Bore Me (perhaps it is more aptly titled The Village Who Raised Me) are only a small fraction of them; it seems to me I still owe some thanks to others who continue to teach and inspire me.

Thank you to my teachers who encouraged me to speak my mind, celebrate my success, and not downgrade my own intelligence. Thank you for giving me material to read, running conflict management, and writing recommendation letters. Thanks for letting me out of your class for other activities, for casting me and watching me in plays, and for supporting me through the process of discovering how I handle stress. Thanks for telling me to offer a “shit or get off the pot” ultimatum when my own well-being was at stake. For teaching me to dance, helping me get published, sending me to cool talks, and giggling over nerdy books with me. For being the fiercest quiz bowl coaches, standing up to arrogant administrators, and reminding everyone that girls can do math and science, and that art and music and literature aren’t worthless. Thanks for your dedication, passion, and treatment of each student as an individual.

Thank you to every librarian in my life, for running book clubs, teaching me computer skills, and letting me file papers and meticulously shelve books to my heart’s content when I worked for you. Thank you for teaching me empathy, for asking the hard questions and opening my eyes by letting me live the story of countless characters. Thank you for checking in and out the obnoxious stacks of books I would take every two weeks, for saying hi to me in the grocery store, and for not disapproving when I ate through the YA section and moved up to adult fiction. Thanks for creating a space that’s open to everybody, that acts as a source of information and growth as much as entertainment.

Thank you to my friends’ moms, for loving me like your own and welcoming me when I spend as much time at your home as my own. For insisting that I call you by your first name, for force-feeding me, and for driving car-fuls of kids to social events. Thanks for protecting us from aggressive men at amusement parks, for taking me to your places of worship, and for inviting me to spend holidays with your family. Thank you for keeping me in your heart years after you’ve seen me, for gossiping with us kids, and most of all, for letting us know when we’re being ridiculous.

Thank you to the gamut of older friends, for calling me Little one and Shrimpy and Mini Me. Thank you for driving me around for half of high school, for letting me in on all the inside secrets, and for writing endless letters and laughing over people we thought were cute. Thank you for trusting me to come out to, to give advice on topics I’m not qualified in, and for passing the baton and teaching me to be a leader in your footsteps. For teaching me to stand up to boys and unabashedly give my opinion.
to those who try to silence or diminish me. Thank you for teaching me how to do makeup and flirt at the same time as teaching me to study and giving me job tips. Thanks for encouraging and accommodating my poor choices, breaking me out of my comfort zone, and taking care of me in the aftermath. Thanks for inviting me over to cook things and sing goofy songs, and for criticizing movies and authors with me. Thank you for constantly saving my mental health; reassuring me, building up my confidence, and spreading such pure, unconditional love to each other. You strengthen me with every kissy emoji.

Thank you to my female coworkers. Thank you for teaching me without being unnecessarily strict, for helping me handle my mistakes, and for managing with compassion. Thank you for helping me find someone to switch my shift so I could go to my grandfather’s funeral when the head manager wouldn’t let me. Thank you for telling me stories from your years as a firefighter, moving all over the country. Thank you for laughing over the dishes, for making jokes about our bakery’s “fresh buns,” and for backing me up when I was being unduly harassed. Thanks for trusting me to take care of your own children. Thank you for running the tightest ship, keeping me on top of deadlines, and for proving that working doesn’t have to be a dreaded experience.

Thank you, finally, to my sisters, both by birth and by choice. We’re growing up alongside each other and trying to swim through waves of self doubt. Thanks for the laughter, for feeling exactly as uncertain as I do and relying on each other at social events, and for giving music and book and website recommendations. Thanks for living with me, talking until very late, sharing medicine and clothes and plants. For being colleagues and co-workers, serving on councils together. For all the lame nights in, venting sessions, silly Snapchats, and pictures of cats and guinea pigs. For the camping trips and joint bubble baths and post-breakup sleepovers, for brunch and crafts and exercise classes we don’t want to go to. For being there for the first kisses, the first failures, the first vacation without parents, the first car accident. For being honest and open with each other, for picking up where we left off, for not expecting anything at all. May we one day be the women our mothers have taught us to be.

“Biology is the least of what makes someone a mother”

-Oprah Winfrey
Another Mother:

Other incredible women who came before me

Anne Hathaway (both incarnations)
  Bastardilla
  Belva Lockwood
  Brittany Howard
  Catherine Brewer
  Ching Shih
  Claudette Colvin

Dame Katerina Te Heikoko Mateira
  Dame Maggie Smith
  Edith Head
  Ellen Degeneres
  Eva Weiss
  Eve Ensler
  Gabriela Mistral
  Grace Lee Boggs
  Grace O’Malley
  Guerilla Girls
  Hedy Lamarr
  Ida B. Wells
  JK Rowling
  Jodi Picoult
  Kalpana Chawla

Liliana Wilson
Mary Cassatt
Mata Hari
Policarpa
Poly Styrene
Raye Montague
Rigoberta Menchú
Ruth Bader Ginsburg
  Sally Ride
  Sarah Caldwell
  Sophie Scholl
  Violeta Chamorro
  Virginia Woolf
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