

## Why does a writer write? Because.

Jane Piirto

Writing and a writer's life are integrally combined. Jane Piirto shares how voracious reading, life experience, passion, hard work, and a sense of place emerged as the written word for her. The experiences of writing of poetry, novels, and non-fiction are included in this overview of a writer's life to date. Excerpts from *A Location in the Upper Peninsula* (1995). New Brighton, MN: Sampo Publishing. Third printing, 2004.

Why does a person write poems when there's nobody out there to read them? I subscribe to several literary journals where poetry is published, and have a large collection of poetry books by contemporary writers, but I guess I'm unusual. Yet I'll wager there are few people who haven't been moved to write a poem to a love, in the throes of emotion — anger, sorrow. I asked a graduate class how many people read poetry for pleasure, and of the 30 teachers there, many of them English teachers, only two admitted to it. I know that when the poets on our campus give our annual reading, only a few people come unless the professors have assigned the students.

I like to go to literary readings because they remind me of worship. The air is filled with considered words, and when the artist—the fiction writer, essay writer, or poet—can savor and can express out loud in a dramatic fashion, these words—naturally, the writer has to be able to perform—I leave the reading with a feeling of spiritual awe. Perhaps the hard work required of the listener at such events is the reason people don't buy, read, or attend to poetry.

For me, who has been writing poems for many years now, poetry is a natural means of expression. By this time, I know when an incident happens, that I will write a poem about it. I get an indefinable feeling of edginess, anxiety that is only assuaged when I write the poem. I work with pen in my journal, or on my computer, in line form. The fun of writing a poem is revising and revising, thinking, trying out, reading it out loud, singing it in rhythm, seeing whether it fits some urgent mental format that seems to arise through the writing. Writing poetry is an exercise in specificity. Finding just the right word, trying it out, counting its syllables, check-

ing on its connotations, or seeing where it will lead the meaning, all provide great pleasure to me.

I really don't write for the reader because I know I have few readers and will probably always have few readers. I write and revise as a form of seeing clearly and saying well. I am in a state of elation as I sit thinking, or drive around, mentally trying out different words, running back and forth to the word processor to print out just one more version to see whether this one works. It may take years to get it so I don't want to revise it anymore.

Such a private, personal passion playing with poetry is! No chance of fame or fortune. The elite art, some people call it. Some of my poems have been inspired by various events. A few years ago I wrote an essay, "My Writing Life," where I tried to explore the roots of my own creativity, in response to what I found about creators in my nonfiction books. Here is an excerpt with some modifications, from the book, *A Location in the Upper Peninsula*.

My childhood in Ishpeming, Michigan, was spent reading and playing in our woods and minepit-filled neighborhood, Cleveland Location. I remember my father and mother talking about buying my Uncle Art's house when he moved to California. This house was across town on Empire Street, near the city playground. The house had a small rocky bluff in the back yard. I cried and carried on at the thought of moving so far (about 1-1/2 miles). I couldn't imagine living in such a citified neighborhood, with just that small bluff, even if it was near the playground and the ice rink and the football field and tennis courts.

Our neighborhood had some of the first mines in Ishpeming, iron of such high quality it started a mad rush among would-be metal moguls. We had rock to climb and pine groves in which to play. The name of the school system was the Ishpeming Hematites, and hematite is what we had in abundance in our neighborhood. We had maple woods with rutted roads where horse-driven carriages used to take Sunday drives and stop at open-air fireplaces for picnics. We used to play in the woods, imagining ladies in long dresses with wicker picnic baskets and checkered tablecloths, languishing in the clearings near the fireplaces.

We had the homes and manicured grounds of the mine bosses from the Cleveland Cliffs Iron Company. We used to sneak onto the property and play spy, watching the goings on of these foreign, wealthy bosses from

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Cleveland We took a path through cow fields and cedar swamps to Cedar Lake, where the boys swam naked at the west end of the lake, at a place called Rocky, and we girls swam in swimming suits at a beach called Shallow, or at a place near a rocky bluff called Pointy, on the north side We had to blind our eyes as we passed Rocky on the way to the girls' beaches, and a guard boy would lead us by We peeked, though, and saw naked boys diving from the rough dock and diving board the boys had built for themselves

My parents didn't buy Uncle Art's house across town. We have never been sorry My mother still lives in Cleveland Location I go home there several times a year, and walk in those woods, climb those rocks, and sit on top of Jasper Knob The concept of "place" is very important to my creativity, and much of my writing is inspired by the various places I have visited and lived in. The very land itself inspires me In my research on creativity and creative people for the books and articles I've written and for the speeches I give, adult creativity is often shown to be shaped by free imaginative play during childhood. Many inventors, for example, come from rural backgrounds. Being able to play freely, without the invading eyes of adults, was a gift of our neighborhood to us.

The reading, the constant, ceaseless, compulsive, careless reading, also shaped my own tomboy life. When I wasn't playing outside, I was reading My mother has a sketch of me in my braids, reading *Bill Cody: Hero of the West* I hated to pose for her so I would read during that boring hour when she would sketch us. The artistic mother with an attitude toward books, art, and life that was unconventional and different from anybody else's mother, is also common in biographies of creative people, especially writers.

But I was and am, the reader I read four, five, sometimes six books a week, all from the Carnegie Public Library on Main Street I still go there for books every time I come to town, and I belong to the Friends of the Library, devouring their semi-annual newsletter sent to me in Ohio, where I live I read my way through the children's room where I can still recall the precise spots where the Bobbsey Twin books and the Cherry Ames Student Nurse books were on the shelves Miss Dunden, the kind librarian with the wooden hand, let me go upstairs to the teenage section and then to the adult section, in fifth and sixth grade. Our parents didn't buy books for us; my mother said that was a waste of money when we could find anything we wanted in the library, and for free.

I got decent enough grades, and in junior high was

put in what we called the "A" class. Our English teacher, Mrs. Fritz, brought back for several of us small red Austrian flags from her summer home in Salzburg, Austria, as a reward for learning to diagram sentences the fastest. My verbal interests also extended to the theatrical or oratorical, for I remember our scary principal, Mr. Ikola, inviting my friend Carolyn and me to give our declamations down at the high school, for an assembly in front of the high school kids. Mine was "The Old Woman and the Clock," where I shouted "Ti-i-ick tock, Ti-i-ick tock" in a very dramatic fashion. Both Carolyn and I now do a lot of public speaking, so maybe those early declamations were helpful.

Reading music was also a part of my reading life, and I took piano lessons from Miss Schugren, played clarinet and saxophone in band and orchestra, and sang in every singing group around. Our family has great singers, and we spent many hours singing with our Aunt Siiri or our Aunt Martha playing the good old songs, with Uncle Ernie playing the trumpet, and all the family singing, harmonizing, and knowing the words by heart We sang everything from hymns to love ballads. My little sister Rebecca learned to use her great big voice early, sitting next to me as I played show tunes and accompanied myself singing

I also became one of the church organists and my sight reading got a lot of practice because I was a lazy practicer and didn't always go to rehearse the service on Saturdays in the darkened Finnish Lutheran church I would just go and wing it, trying to play a little faster than the stolid Finnish-Americans singing the hymns They remembered me trying to urge them along, and when I transferred back home after two years of college away, I tried to get my old organist job back, so I would have some spending money. The church council refused, sending the minister to tell me that I jazzed up the hymns too much. But I can still sight read quite well, and enjoy playing tunes for groups that gather around the piano, even today I found that this amateur singing and playing is not uncommon for writers, when I attended several writers' conferences years later.

Being a good Finnish girl, doing everything expected of me, my class standing and membership in the National Honor Society was acceptable but not outstanding There was no hint that I would take up writing, except for my constant reading I didn't write anything for personal pleasure or expression, except letters. I had several aborted attempts at keeping a diary. Years later, I heard that our high school English teacher, Mr. Renz, had invited some other kids to join a summer writing group I wasn't invited to participate, so he probably

viewed me as not having enough writing talent for such enrichment. Maybe he'd be surprised that I'm the one who turned out to be the writer. We had to memorize a lot of poetry in his class, and I am very grateful. The influence of the Bethel Lutheran Church was great. Although my parents didn't go to church much when I was little, I was sent, and thrived there. Teaching Sunday school to kindergartners helped me discover my love of teaching. Singing in and directing a choir helped me discover my love of music. Attending Luther League meetings on Tuesday nights helped me in leadership.

My theatricality on stage (I am still comfortable and rarely get stage fright when I am in front of a class or an audience) led me to be a "singspiration" leader. Singspirations were group singing of gospel choruses: "Hallelu, hallelu, hallelu, hallelujah! Praise ye the Lord!" and "For God so loved the world, he gave his only son / to die on Calvary's tree / from sin to set us free." I would direct and cajole the audience to sing louder, with more feeling, softer, with more passion, and they would respond. I loved it. I was reminded of those singspirations when I was a school principal and led a school of young children in cheers for our chess team. "Give me an H!" I would shout, "Give me a U!"

Another childhood influence was the movies. Oh, I loved the movies. My friends and I would go to the double features on Saturday afternoons for \$12 plus \$.05 for popcorn. There would be two black and white movies, cowboy films, and then a serial. Each serial had 12 episodes. There were newsreels and preview of coming attractions beforehand. A cartoon also preceded each movie. I would act out these movies in fantasy play on the bluff across from our house, and would spend days thinking about the plots. Two favorites were *Pinky* and *Laura*, and later in high school, *Rebel Without a Cause*. I later wrote a poem about my teenage love for James Dean, as a part of a series of poems of types of love. My mother and father had to make a rule I could attend only one movie a week, just as they had to make a rule that I couldn't read at the table. Here is a poem about my love for James Dean, written 20 years after he died in an auto crash.

**I Will Never Love Anyone  
the Way I Loved James Dean**

In his red nylon jacket at the planetarium  
Hiding out at the old mansion from that gang  
No cause to be a rebel. I would have loved him  
James—Jimmy—with his sidelong grin, those cute  
Glasses, shucks, blinks, a little wave in his hair.

Shy, shambling, no football jock.

A poet, not a hood.

Natalie as hot for him as for splendor with Warren  
Which reminds me of Shelley and her tragedy  
with Montgomery, who reminds me of James Sean.  
And there was Natalie, mothering poor Sal, as I  
would have  
And your kisses, James!

I would have helped him, too, Natalie  
Elizabeth, after Eddie-Debbie you are not good  
enough. For the touch of him my mattress rose  
and fell, alone in my room with tears for crashes  
In crushes in flames of giant lovers in Eden

It was the purest love I've known for love's sake.  
In just 15-year-need, the very greed  
For love that's unrequited  
I murmured prayers to him before my prayer:  
Dear James Dean, James Dean, don't be dead  
You can't be dead, don't be, don't James  
Do James oh James oh.  
I took up with Jesus soon after <sup>1</sup>

We were good Lutheran Christian kids, and got "saved" by Jesus during the summers in high school. Every summer we in Luther League would go to Bible Camp and during that week we would get saved, declare Jesus as our personal savior. Every fall we would "fall away," to worldly pursuits such as the dances at the Youth Center and later at the high school gymnasium. We would dance with the girls to the fast numbers, booming loud Elvis Presley and Gene Vincent. Then, when a slow dance would come on, The Platters or Pat Boone, we would retreat to the sides of the room and hope a boy would ask us to dance. At Bible Camp those fundamentalist Lutheran evangelists would preach hell and damnation to us vulnerable teenagers and scare us—for a little while, a few weeks, a few months.

But one year it really took, that salvation. We were determined not to fall away. It was the summer before our senior year in high school. We came back and put away our tubes of lipstick, our pancake makeup, our perfume. We carried our Bibles wherever we went so if we got a chance to witness, we would. One of my best

<sup>1</sup> Publication history: (1979, Feb.) *Calyx* (1986). J. Lipman (Ed), *Glass Will and Testament* (p. 111) University of Toledo: Toledo Poets Center Press (1995). In *A Location in the Upper Peninsula. Collected Poems, Stories, Essays* New Brighton, MN: Sampo Publishing

friends was elected to the Homecoming court that fall, and rather than go to the dance, she and her date and me and mine, who was on the football team, left after the award ceremonies and drove in her date's Volkswagen, in our formal gowns, to the Coffee Cup in Marquette to have coffee and not be tempted with evil rock and roll and darkened rooms for dancing. Again, in the studies of writers I have read, there was often a spiritual search and conversion during adolescence, and so I am not unusual here, either. And, like those other writers, the salvation didn't "take" with me, either.

Friends and I carried on fervent correspondence, writing Christian epistles to each other, deconstructing verses of the Bible from our daily devotions, doing literary criticism before we knew there was such a thing. Recently, one of those friends and I sat down and she read her letters to me that my mother had stored in her attic and had recently returned to me. We looked them over and recognized our searching teenaged selves.

Being a child of the working class, and the oldest child, I was the first in my family to go to college, though in the Piirto family it was expected that all grandchildren would go. All my cousins did. I chose my college without counseling or aid. I don't even know if our high school had a counselor, and I missed the testing for the SAT, for some reason or another. I wanted to attend Suomi College in Hancock, Michigan, a Lutheran College of Finnish origins. My year at Suomi was not academically challenging, except for a course from Professor Saarinen called, one semester, "Christian Doctrine," and the other, "Christian Ethics." I had no idea what he was talking about and I loved it. My mind was strained and stretching. I started to read the existentialists and remember struggling through Martin Buber's *I and Thou*, Kierkegaard's leap of faith works, Sartre's *No Exit*, and Camus' *The Plague*.

At Suomi, even though it was a Christian college, my reading of these dense texts and those wild drinking guys from Michigan Tech, across the Portage Canal in Houghton, caused me to fall away again. The Suomi College Choir went on a tour to the east that year, and when we Finnish American rural girls saw how short the skirts were in New York City, we rolled our waistbands and put on more red lipstick. I remember the Staten Island Ferry and the old Finnish church in a run-down neighborhood in Brooklyn. I remember the bus driving out of New York City and me looking out the windows vowing, "I'm coming back to you someday, big city." And I did, 23 years later.

Like most young girls, I wrote my few boyfriends letters and love poems with carefully chosen lyrics. I

would write and rewrite these letters, trying to be cool and say it right and not tell him out loud how much I missed him. The right words were very important. One had to be cool yet ardent. Erotic love is a great impetus for poetry. Emotion rules and there are few people who haven't scrawled a few love lines to a love. I have no surviving copies of those first love poems, but I continue to be inspired by Eros, even today into my mid-fifties.

I transferred from Suomi to Augsburg, in Minneapolis, feeling that I wasn't being challenged academically at Suomi and wanting to experience life in the big city. When I got to Augsburg, the academics were very challenging. I began to write more poems and to read poetry books. I remember sitting in a park near the University of Minnesota campus longingly writing a longing love lyric to a boy in my American Lit class on whom I had a crush. The girls in the dorm started to call me "our intellectual," and one girl even gave me a book about science and philosophy that I couldn't understand. I was glad she considered me so smart as to be able to understand this dense writing. However, my sentimental teenage self had been badly educated; in my American literature class, I did a paper on Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, failing to see its sentimentality. I got a D+, my first—and last.

But times were hard on the Marquette Iron Range, and my father had been demoted from the shops to the diamond drills, where the Company was exploring for beds of iron ore, and so I left Minneapolis and transferred to the state university near my home, Northern Michigan University, where I majored in English. My first paid writing job was when I was appointed the editor of the college newspaper, *The Northern News*, during my senior year. Before I got the job as editor, I was a feature writer, and it was in that position that I first got into trouble for my writing. I wrote a feature on us commuters, where I used the term "Negaunese," a term one of my drama professors, Dr. James Rapport, used to describe the U.P. brogue that people from the area speak.

All the commuters ostracized me. Only Jimmy would dance with me at the Venice Bar and Roosevelt Bar in Ishpeming, where we college students hung out, doing the twist on weekends. The next issue of the newspaper was filled with irate responses to my feature. Thirty years later, people still tell me they remember me as that traitor who wrote that article about commuters. I recently reread the article and still view it as a decent attempt at satire being used to argue for social change (e.g., the commuters were being ostracized and ghet-

toized and the university should do something about it) I was to attempt satire again, when I wrote my first novel years later.

Now I have studied writers in my books, *Understanding Those Who Create* [note from 2007: and “*My Teeming Brain*”—the title is from the Keats’s sonnet: “When I have fears that I may cease to be / before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain.”] I realize that many writers get into trouble for their writing. When they merely think they are telling the truth, they offend people. This tendency to be frank has not left me as I’ve aged. I still get into trouble for my writing, and when I speak to high school writers, they often come up to me afterwards and tell me about the underground newspapers they’ve written and for that have been banned when “I was just trying to tell the truth.”

The next fall, my senior year in college, I was not only a player in the political life of the university, for as editor I was expected to write editorials and to have opinions, but I seemed to have gained confidence. The English faculty nominated me for a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship and to my surprise, I made it through all the interviews to become a national alternate. I graduated Magna Cum Laude. I wrote poems and more poems and was dating, among others, a poet, an older student, a veteran, who loved literature and taught me a lot. He used to say I looked like Simone Signoret. Boy, I loved that!

That senior year at Northern also introduced me to a professor of modern literature who taught me how to read text closely. Many people reading this will remember Mr. Richer and “Araby” and how we had to read it over and over again. Now we educators call his methodology “teaching for deep understanding,” where depth, not breadth, is the goal. The faculty at Northern Michigan University also urged me to change from my major of secondary education and to apply to graduate school with the aim of getting a PhD in English. They were true mentors and exemplars.

However, I fell in love with a young man from Ohio, who was stationed at K I Sawyer, the local Air Force base. We U. P. girls liked the “base guys,” as we called them, though some of our fathers wouldn’t let us date them. The influence on the U. P. of us girls meeting and dating guys from all over the country, who were stationed at the air base, has been great. I married this Air Force, E-3 radar technician, and I dropped my full ride graduate fellowship to Michigan State for a PhD, as we were going to have a baby. My long-held virginity had fallen to assault from an expert (and very handsome) seducer.

For the next seven years my writing was on hold as I finished up a master’s degree in English at Kent State University where my new husband had started as a freshman. He and I had a baby boy, Steven, and we lived the married student life in campus housing, where he filled our soup pot with rabbits shot with his bow and arrow in the field between the apartments and campus. His love of the wild outdoors and my lonesomeness for the Upper Peninsula led us to move back there, where he studied geography and regional planning and I taught as an instructor in the English department. A second child, our daughter Denise, was born, a year before he finished his master’s degree. Those years in Marquette were heady ones; Northern Michigan University had hired a cadre of Young Turks from around the country to teach in its new four-course plan. We partied and talked and we women formed a consciousness-raising group in 1970, to discuss the burgeoning women’s movement. The Vietnam War was affecting our students, as they strove for deferments and grades to keep them legal. I taught for extra money at the Air Force base, and heard about the Air Force role in the war.

We were living in Marquette when the killings of protestors against the B-52’s bombing Cambodia happened at Kent State. Being an alumna of Kent State, I was particularly affected. I remember calling my friend Shirley, who still lived in Kent, and she described the tanks and helicopters roaring around the town. Northern Michigan University students and faculty, and community members, had been having sit-ins and had marched around the courthouse and had readings of poems and lectures as about Vietnam, and I had participated, but it wasn’t until 1990 that I wrote this poem about that time, from the viewpoint of a teacher who taught extension courses at the air base. Here is a poem I read at Kent, for the 20th anniversary remembrance of the 1970 killings.

*Postcard from Kent State, 1990*

### **The Big Birds**

*Written for “A Gathering of Poets,”  
20th Anniversary memorial of Kent State*

in 1970 the B-52’s lined up  
at K I Sawyer Air Force Base  
in Gwinn, Michigan  
the Upper Peninsula  
were painted sky blue  
on their bellies

camouflage green and brown  
on their backs  
so when they dropped  
napalm and bombs  
they couldn't be spotted  
from below or above

these planes in the Midwest  
called Birds  
by their managers  
stood out huge  
in the blueberry forest  
on runways on the sand plains

behind chain links on the base  
these very planes  
flew to Vietnam  
through Guam  
and the Philippines

reminders to us remote northerners  
of what the pilots and navigators  
who lived among us did at work  
"We are just in a quiet, dark room"  
one of my students, a navigator, said

"Lights blink, gauges beep  
All is quiet It is very restful.  
We get the orders from the ships  
find the coordinates  
and fly in

"We are so high, miles high  
we barely feel it  
when we loose the bombs  
Same thing with napalm  
If we bother to look down

"we see a flame  
small as a match in a cave.  
We're home in a couple of days  
I come to class"

After the killings at Kent State  
I went out with my daughter, Denise  
9 months old, in the backpack  
my son, Steven, 6, at my side  
my Another Mother For Peace necklace on.  
"War Is Not Healthy For Children  
And Other Living Things"

collecting donations  
in the trailer court  
where we lived in Marquette, Michigan  
passing useless petitions

to stop the bombing in Cambodia.  
Two of my neighbors slammed the doors.  
Others gave a dollar, two, five  
for me to send somewhere  
to some central place

in hope  
our children  
would not be murdered  
when they go to college  
So far it's worked.

My husband got a job as a regional planner in South Dakota, and we moved for his job. I had made sure that I obtained my teaching certificate before we left Michigan, but I was "overqualified," meaning too expensive, unhirable at any high schools near our residence of Watertown, because I had six years of experience and a master's degree. I decided to retrain and received another master's degree, in guidance and counseling, from South Dakota State University. I worked as a high school teacher, guidance counselor, and school public relations administrator, in Florence, and in Brookings, South Dakota, for two years

The time in South Dakota was a time to look at myself and wonder. The first year there I didn't have a job, and I remember my husband bringing a woman he had met over for lunch. "You'll really like her," he said. I fixed tuna fish salad and wore one of those hostess gowns that were popular in the early 1970s. When they came, I noticed she had great legs in high leather boots below a fashionable miniskirt. I still remember schlepping lunch to them in that nightgown, while they talked business. That is when I realized I needed to work, to have some serious occupation besides mothering and wifing.

I had tasted professional respectability as a college instructor at Northern Michigan in Marquette. I wanted validation. I wanted a forum where I could work out my thinking. I began to write poetry and short stories seriously and to practice writing seriously. I saw my first submitted story and my first submitted poetry published in the *South Dakota Review*. The writing became necessary as a means of validation and of self-therapy. That is, now that I didn't have college teaching, where, with my speaking and thinking out loud, I vented my

thoughts and worked on my ideas, I *had* to write them down I still use writing to heal myself. Once I fell in love with a totally inappropriate guy, married. I wrote a novella to get it out of my system. It's unpublished, but who cares? It made me see straight.

Several other catalyzing experiences happened in South Dakota, which freed me to put my poems to paper. One was participating in an acting workshop with the Minneapolis Children's Theater Company, where I had to fall back into someone's arms, trusting that the person would catch me I felt released. The physical led to the emotional and the poems started and haven't stopped yet For a rigid and shy Finnish American, this was a very difficult thing to do; I couldn't trust in my words, my verbal aces and barbs, to get me out of this touchy-feely situation, but had to trust silently and physically. This experience seemed to free me in some strange and miraculous way, and the poems poured out

I told my friends and husband I wanted to practice, practice, practice, and that I would write a poem a day. I remember just after going to bed one night, my husband asked me, "Did you write your poem today?" I hadn't, and so I got up, went into the living room, and wrote a poem about a fly I had killed in the sink Other workshops in gestalt therapy taken while I got my counseling degree also helped me break through my critical self-censorship to put words on the page and to take myself seriously as a struggling writer. The stresses on the institution of marriage in the early 1970s, where sexual freedom and expression were touted and exhibited, also played a part in my needing to write it down One of my first poems illustrates my struggle, as a young mother, to find space and time to be a serious writer

### Poetmother

the afternoon is calm  
silence time to write  
the paper is green  
like the summer

the mind floats into  
itself like distanced  
birdsong with images  
bright as the kitchen sink

the polished coffee table  
slowly right there  
the words twist from  
the images and

the fingers take dictation  
fast and willing  
then the back door  
slaps and his feet  
in dirty sneakers tramp

then the voice begins  
"Mom where are you  
I can't find anyone  
to play with

take me fishing  
where's the juice?"  
(mom I want)  
(mom I own you)  
"You can't catch me!"  
and the front door crashes  
and a little girl runs  
shrieks laughing through  
the shatter  
I sit up  
try again  
for stillness

During that time, I had a poem published in a new little magazine called *Jam To-Day* that a writer friend at South Dakota State University told me about The presence of other poets in South Dakota helped me learn what a budding poet had to do: submit, submit, submit, work, work, work, even if the work is rejected It was a poem about the last time I saw my father, Christmas of 1973. He died on April 1, 1974

We moved from South Dakota back to Ohio, near my husband's home, where he took a job working with his father in the furniture sales business I began work on a PhD at Bowling Green State University Finally. My work in English at the master's degree level, and my subsequent teaching of English at a university, had led me to realize that I didn't want spend my professional life teaching freshman English with its interminable flow of papers to grade, nor did I want to spend my life reading and writing criticism of literature I know this was nery to think, but I wanted to write literature, not critique literature.

I decided not to get a PhD in English, but to get one in educational administration and supervision I thought I could run a school as well as any coach. Besides, an administrator's pay is better I've never regretted this decision, although my friends and professors at South Dakota State University thought I would be better suited to a field like English or counseling psychology if

I were going to go into education for my PhD I have subsequently written books and articles, and taught undergraduate and graduate students in each of these fields, proving you don't have to have a degree in it to publish in it

The children and I lived in Bowling Green for nine years; their father lived there for five. They attended elementary and high school there. While in this fine town, I became involved and friendly with the writers, the literary community surrounding the MFA program at Bowling Green State University, and continued publishing poetry and short stories. The Toledo Poets Center founders, Joel Lipman and Nick Muska, are also close friends. Other literary experiences were at writers' conferences, the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference in Vermont, and the Aspen Writer's Conference in Colorado among them. The Bread Loaf Conference was rather intimidating and snooty, and the Aspen Writer's Conference gave me settings for future fiction projects and friends with whom I still correspond.

I even founded a small literary press, Piirto Press, that was in existence for seven years, which published sets of poetry postcards and poetry chapbooks. I self-published a well-received chapbook of poems about parenthood, *mamamama* (Sisu, 1976). As a job while I was in graduate school completing my work and doing research on my dissertation, *The "Female Teacher": The Feminization of the Teaching Profession in Ohio in the Early Nineteenth Century*, I became involved in the National Endowment for the Arts Poets in the Schools program, through the Ohio Arts Council. I did writer's residencies in Ohio schools in the late 1970s and early 1980s. During those years I also taught as an adjunct professor in the women's studies program at Bowling Green State University and worked in the affirmative action office.

While finishing my dissertation, I was contacted by the placement office. Would I be interested in a position as consultant for education of the gifted programs in Hardin County, about 60 miles away? Yes. I went to the library and read all I could find about smart children (there wasn't much then), and I interviewed for, and got, the position. It was February 14, 1977, when I began the day job, the career, I still have today, my career in the education of the talented. Little did I know that call was to be so auspicious. I still am employed in the field of the education of the talented. I worked in Hardin County for 2 1/2 years, and then I took a similar position, up over the border, 60 miles north, in Monroe County, Michigan, as a coordinator for gifted and talented programs with the Monroe County Intermediate

School District. At that time, my marriage broke up.

I continued to write and to publish and to be involved in the literary communities of Ohio. I was awarded an Individual Artist Fellowship of \$6,000 in fiction in 1982. What a moment that was, opening my mail and seeing that news. That review panel of out of state writers didn't even know me! They had faith in my talent and they didn't even know my name. I remember taking my children out to dinner at Bowling Green's fanciest restaurant, as a celebration, when the check arrived. But the Individual Artist Fellowship was more than money to free me up to write. It was validation that perhaps I could write that novel I'd been saying I wanted to write.

That summer my children were set to spend a month with their father and his new wife in Port Clinton, Ohio. I was on vacation from the Monroe County job. I thought I'd take a road trip, drive across country all by myself. I mapped out a route that had me stopping overnight with old friends each day, as I would work my way to Port Townsend, Washington, to the writer's conference there. I would have adventures along the way, be a modern, free woman in her car. I might pick up a cowboy at a bar in Montana. Who knew what adventures would befall me? My friends thought it sounded like a great idea. I called my mother, telling her of my plans. She said, in a quiet voice, "I thought you wanted to write a novel. Isn't this a good time to do so, without the kids there?" I ranted and raved about how I have never taken a vacation by myself, about poor me, the single mother, with two kids, working her fingers to the bone, commuting 120 miles a day, and now? What nerve she had to suggest I actually put my fingers on the keyboard and try my skill. The next morning, I called her at 7 a.m. and said, "You are right. Thank you." And I applied my posterior to the chair, put my fingers on the keyboard, and began.

That summer stands out as one of the most creative in my life. I wrote my first novel, *The Three-Week Trance Diet*, while I was blessedly alone in my own house for the first time, with our Chesapeake Bay retriever, Maynard Ferguson's, head on my foot. It was the first extended period of solitude I had ever had. I was 40 years old. I remember writing ten pages a day, every day, chortling at the typewriter as unbelievable, funny, satiric and, I hoped, truth-telling characters came out of my mind through my fingers onto my IBM Selectric. I had the practice of having written a dissertation, and so writing a novel, a sustained project, was not as difficult as I had believed. I couldn't believe that plot was coming out so automatically. Later, one of the review-

ers called it "intricately plotted." It must have been all those years of reading novels, novels, novels. I wrote the novel in a month, and the first draft was pretty much the final draft. It was easier than I ever imagined it would be. Where is the tortured writer crumpling up pages and throwing them into the wastebasket, agonizing over each sentence? That writer wasn't me. And it never has been. Still isn't.

I began to send the novel around, hoping to interest a literary agent. No luck. I have never been able to interest a literary agent, although one did contact me when I got the Individual Artist Fellowship. When he found out I wrote short stories, he told me to write novels, novels, novels, and more novels, and then he might, he just might, be interested in seeing my work. I also entered the novel into the Carpenter Press First Novel contest. Carpenter Press was a respected small press that publishes fiction, one of the few that does. It was their tenth anniversary, and they wanted to celebrate by publishing a first novel. I also put together the collection of poems called *Postcards from the Upper Peninsula*. It was published as a chapbook by Pocasse Press in 1983. The Upper Peninsula was, and still is, magical to me, though I live in Ohio, and the collection reflected that.

I wrote at night, late, sitting up in the living room, after everyone had gone to bed, during the late 1970s. At the time the chapbook was published, the year 1982-1983, I was also appointed to the literature panel of the Ohio Arts Council, where we read grant proposals by small presses and literary journals, and helped to fund them. This was a lesson in the frustrations small presses have in publishing and staying afloat, especially small presses that publish poetry.

My novel, *The Three-Week Trance Diet*, won the Carpenter Press Tenth Anniversary First Novel Contest, over about 70 other entries. Carpenter had several judges who judged the manuscripts anonymously, and the book won by a fraction of a point. It was published early in 1986, with a copyright of 1985. At that time I had changed jobs, and was now living in New York City, the principal of the Hunter College Elementary School. If risk-taking is an aspect of the creative person's life, I have been told that the risk I took in just picking up and moving, dismantling a four-bedroom house in Ohio and moving to take a job on the Upper East Side of Manhattan with no idea of where I would live or with whom I would be friends, could perhaps be called such.

After publication of *Trance Diet*, I immediately began writing another novel, *The Arrest*. The Ohio Arts

Council appointed me chair of its literature panel, and I flew back from New York City to Ohio for three years for the panel meetings, seeing my friends in Ohio and staying in touch with the writing community. I continued to write poems and short stories, some of which were published. A short story manuscript was a finalist in the Iowa Short Fiction contest one year. I also began a nonfiction book, called *Principal*, about being the principal of a high-pressure, multiracial, urban school for high-IQ students. All three of these, the short story manuscript, the novel, and the nonfiction book remain unpublished, though the novel has been nominated for the Pushcart Publisher's Award and it has been a finalist in several contests, and the nonfiction book was sent to Hollywood by a friend who thought Jane Fonda's people might be interested. Can you imagine that? I can't. She wasn't.

I got to travel: The U.S. State Department asked me to consult with American schools in the Near East and Southern Asia, and I went there for six weeks, to five countries. I traveled to Finland for a joint conference between Finnish women and Finnish-American women. One of my most popular poems was translated into Finnish and performed there. This poem came about by mysterious circumstances. One day, while working in Ohio in the late 1970s, I had the urge to pull off the road and write the first draft of this poem. I later found out that my grandmother had died at that hour, that afternoon. I believe that she lives through this poem, as many people have responded to it with thoughts of their own, hard-working immigrant grandmothers. I read it at the end of many speeches I give, as a salute to my dual writing life, the scholar and the creative writer.

### Grandma You Used To

keep a boarding house you fed pulp cutters  
and ore dock men and railroaders up at 5  
each morning packing lunch buckets  
changed their beds fed them dinner too  
for three bucks a week *work work work*  
you yelled to my mother and aunt at dawn  
sleeping behind the draped arch front room  
(now my mother feeds you baby food)

Grandma you came over  
on the boat to the promised land in '07  
from finland to be a maid in the U.P., Michigan  
they beat you your cousin took you away  
to the next town you were 19 you cleaned up  
after rich people; *work work work*

you yelled at my grandfather a handsome lad  
dark wavy hair who drank 'til you  
divorced him when people didn't get divorced  
(now my mother changes you)

Grandma you scrubbed  
floors at the hospital a scouring maid  
dumb finn crabby lady on your hands  
and knees a cow a garden and four kids  
can't even talk english waiting on people  
all your life; *work work work*  
you yelled at your grandchildren whose mother  
was having a baby on your hands  
and knees scrubbing clean floors  
(now my mother spongebathes you)

Grandma your mother  
wouldn't marry your father in Finland  
she was a weaver travelled then town to town  
with you the fatherless child the outcast  
laughed at and scorned so when I came to you  
pregnant with my new young husband you held  
my hand on your knee and said love each other  
in a language I never learned: *rakastakaa*  
before you died you wanted to make for  
my mother serve her just one cup of coffee<sup>2</sup>

When I got this job I still have, in Ohio, my old stomping grounds, I came back to my original profession, college teaching. My writing continued; I always write poems, for myself, for friends, and I submit to the occasional journal that asks me. Life in this quiet existence in a quiet college town has helped me publish two long nonfiction books that have gone into second [and third] editions. I won't talk much about my scholarly writing here; just know that it is grueling, difficult, and detailed. For the Macmillan book I had an acquisition editor, a production editor, a copy editor, an art editor, a photo editor, a marketing manager, and their various assistants calling me and asking me things I had to obtain permissions and releases. I had to read, understand, and summarize many books and articles. I was very tired when it was all over. Many professors who write textbooks are at universities, which have graduate assistants and teaching load reductions, but the place I work is a small college and doesn't have those amenities for professors doing research and writing. I did those two books in three years, and I am proud that I was able to do that. Don't ever put down a person who writes a textbook. It is very hard work and requires a lot of stamina.

Another thing that happened when I moved to Ashland was I went back to the Lutheran church. I felt a real spiritual yearning after New York City, and when I attended the Trinity Lutheran Church on Center Street here, I found myself weeping at the songs and at the liturgy. My mother said with great assurance, "Don't worry. That's just the Holy Spirit working." For some reason, my sense of being a Lutheran and a Finnish-American of the third generation came together as I joined the choir and sang in a women's trio. I had left the church as a cynical intellectual in the early 1970s, and neither of my children was confirmed, though they were baptized. But I found my way back to the spiritual home where I had spent my youth in Luther League, Bible Camp, and two church-related colleges. The landing has often been rocky, and often comforting. My problems are those of making that Kierkegaardian leap. But that's another autobiography. I have taught spiritual autobiography courses here and there, and they have been nothing short of miraculous, in the sharing that has been engendered by communal writing about deeply meaningful experiences.

As we age, they say we get more concerned with ultimate meanings, and become much like we were during the pure searches of our mid-teens. My quiet life as a professor and writer, with my kids grown and gone to their adult lives, has fostered the thoughts written down here during this year of my life and at this place where I live now, as have my researches for the books I write. None of us knows what will happen next. But one thing has not changed, and that is, that I can still return home, to my place, as my mother remains in good health and lives in the same house. Here is my 1995 Christmas poem, written in gratitude for that fact.

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2 Publication history: (1978) *Images*, 4 (3), p. 10 (1981) *Finnish Americana IV*, p. 69 (1983) M. Karni and A. Jarvenpa (Eds.), *Finnish American Writers* (p. 69) New Brighton, Minn: Finnish Americana Press (1983) *Postcards From The Upper Peninsula*. Pocasse Press (1986) J. Lipman (Ed.), *Glass Will and Testament* (p. 114-115). University of Toledo: Toledo Poets Center Press. -also in "Courageous Women: A Photo-History of Finnish-American Women." Photo exhibit that toured US and Europe, 1985-88 -translated into Finnish and performed at Kuopio University Reunion of Sisters Project, 1987. (1989) M. Karni and A. Jarvenpa (Eds.), *Sampo: The Magic Mill*. Minneapolis: New Rivers. (p. 64) (1992) *75th Anniversary Anthology*. Helsinki, Finland: Otava. (1995) *In A Location in the Upper Peninsula: Stories, Essays*. New Brighton, MN: Sampo Publishing. (1996) *Advanced Development 7*. (1999) *Silent Midnight Snow Comes Down*. Sisu Press.

## A Blessing

uprooted trees  
sawed into logs  
we wander  
far from our source  
our houses abandoned  
heedless of our souls  
we break ground  
for new foundations

driving  
in lake effect snowsquall  
up the peninsulas  
between the lakes  
Erie Huron  
Michigan Superior  
across the spangled Bridge  
the deep black straits below  
into dense deer-dangerous forests  
an eerie

Spike and I  
200 miles to go  
sliding on unplowed roads  
snowstorm beating  
wipers slapping  
music drumming  
I come each season  
to my old bed  
in my old room  
near the ancient red bluff

my mother's dog jumps  
my mother feeds me  
pea soup, rye bread and tea

in the morning  
small languid snow falls  
slow winter dawn lifts

on old apple trees  
on a white hill  
the old house sighs  
*you are home*

this, at least,  
has not changed

In 1993, I was awarded another Individual Artist Fellowship from the Ohio Arts Council, this time in poetry, for the amount of \$5,000. I jumped up and down

shouting, "For Poetry? For Poetry!" when the letter arrived. Out of over 300 writers submitting manuscripts, I had been one of the ten who was chosen by out-of-state anonymous judges. The public validation this gave me has given me more confidence in my poetry writing, and in 1996, I self-published another chapbook, called *Between the Memory and the Experience*. The spiritual searching continues, and even into menopause, my erotic reasons for writing have continued, and the words, "spirit," "desire," "longing," and "shame" have come to take on new, middle-aged meanings for me as I try to make metaphoric sense of it all. I am still listed in the *Poets and Writers Directory of American Poets and Writers*, as both a poet and a writer, one of only about 1,100 writers who qualify by the publishing standard they set. My writing is constant; only the genre changes.

I am figuratively going for my own jugular these days. My dreams have taken on immense importance to me, and I am exploring the work of the archetypal and depth psychologists, the hermetic, the Gnostic, and eastern traditions, while I continue to be moved and shaken by my own traditions. I can't speak for other women writers of my age, but wisdom seems to be arriving rather slowly. Some of these thoughts and desires I express metaphorically in my poetry, which, it seems to me, seems to be getting more and more urgent. My scholarly writing and my creative writing have begun to feed each other even more, as I conducted a study of themes in the lives of 75 contemporary writers in 1994, which will be interfaced into a new book on the psychology of the creative writer, with the addition of 75 contemporary male writers. Writing and speaking/reading requests continue to arrive at my doorstep. I'll close with my title poem from that last collection. It indicates my present and always confusion. You could subtitle this poem, "where creativity resides."

## Between the Memory and the Experience

between the memory and the experience  
between the photograph and the periphery  
with intuitive and parsed phrases  
for salvation, doubt and irony  
run over by pale images become sharp  
twisting and turning in synapse of wire  
sad more than joyful  
the years of the fog of life  
brooded upon as if the magi of words  
could clarify meaning like heat to butter.  
what has it meant?

truth told a lie  
by telling like a hurricane  
by the process itself a swirl  
wind gathering water to make waves  
deep within the basin of oceanic consciousness  
between the memory and the experience  
"This novel is about the divorce," I tell him  
offering the code from a cardboard box  
in my red trunk  
"And this is about being a mother."  
the blue folder of unpublished truth  
no one would know unless I told

(1994) *Talented children and adults Their development and education*. NY: Macmillan  
(1995) *A location in the Upper Peninsula Collected poems, stories, essays*. New Brighton, MN: Sampo Publishing  
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