

Writing From the Ground Up:

A Transformational Writing and Yoga Retreat

Words from Retreat Participants

Bernardsville, New Jersey

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I Want to Say

by **Susan Lembo Balik**

I've found nirvana in Newfoundland
where one side is watershed,
the other acres of stables, fields
and state forest, a place
where my horse's friends live,
where still he looks for them
over the fence, pines for his herd,
a place where a farm house sits,
naked in its simplicity
weathered like an old man
who wears the sun and wind
in the deep crevices of his face,
a place where the woods
wrap around me
like my favorite blue sweater,
where I can feel the vibration
of a woodpecker, glimpse
a ground hog as he appears,
disappears
appears from its hole,
a tortured game of hide-and-seek
for my Jack Russell,
a place where the black bear
lumber sometimes
claiming rightful ownership of the lane
where the wood posts
on the front porch are rotting out,
one entire post missing,
utterly beautiful
in its broken symmetry.

Poem from a ginko walk

By **Paul Carlson**

Do you hear it?
The stillness of no wind
But the new ferns on the path
And the old fallen oak
Tell me the wind
Has visited these woods
Do you see it?
The green-gold of new growth
Inviting the stuttering nuthatch
And oscillating goldfinch
To search for food and
Find a new mate
And there—Listen!
A red-bellied woodpecker
Calls, and says
These are my woods
I see you stumbling up
The steep rocky path
So rest now
On the stump sprouting
With new life
Come back another day
To walk through my trees
And see if the orchis has bloomed

I want to say

By **Paul Carlson**

I want to say that I have always loved living here. At forty degrees latitude give or take. Pennsylvania, Virginia, Illinois. New York, Maryland, Pennsylvania again. I am a suburban, preferring trees and open spaces to concrete and skyscrapers. I have lived in houses with yards. Gardens and shrubbery, sidewalks with corner stores. At six I would walk to the corner store and buy a pack of baseball cards for a nickel. They came with bubble gum. Maybe I'd get an Ernie Banks. My grandmother loved the Cubs. If I had some extra money, I'd get a Good Humor. An ice cream sandwich. We lived in Chicago but not in the loop. A quiet south side neighborhood of small houses. My dad was away in Korea.

I learned to ride a bike and was allowed to cross 103rd so I could pedal past Rosemary Meade's house. She was my first girlfriend. First grade, first girlfriend. I never told her, but I think she knew I was smitten. The first of so many. Six years old with no helmet I rode a mile away across busy streets to see if my love was out front or on the sidewalk.

I want to say how much I loved spending time by myself. Playing outside in my grandmother's gravel driveway that always puddled when it rained. More fun then. To see if my toy trucks went under water. Could make it across to the other shore. I had a cowboy outfit and toy guns, but my favorite hat was a train engineer's cap. My uncle in Centralia worked for the Illinois Central. Uncle Vester, on the mother's side, always wore a cowboy hat and boots and a string tie. And talked about trains. My uncle Harold, my father's brother, had a model railroad setup in a special room in his house in Palatine. When I visited he would run the trains for me and show me the models he was building—freight cars, passenger cars, a locomotive.

Some days I would walk past the corner store, a few blocks further to where the commuter trains would stop to pick up passengers to go into the city. Sometimes my mother and I would ride a train to go downtown. To the museum or the planetarium. I saw the dinosaur skeletons there for the first time. I learned all the names and got books with pictures of Tyrannosaurus rex, Triceratops, and Diplodocus--which I mispronounced by stressing "doc" instead of "plod." In the planetarium, when they turned off the lights and projected the stars, I would feel enfolded by the universe. The lecturer would use a pointer to show the constellations there at forty degrees north at nine pm in whatever month it was. And then, on a clear night soon after, I could go across the street to the vacant lot and look up. And there were the same stars. The real stars. Maybe not as bright as in the planetarium. But I could recognize the Big Dipper, or Orion, Scorpio, the brightest stars or maybe a planet that glowed with steadier light.

Later, we moved to New York and then Pennsylvania when I was nine. I found that libraries had many books on the stars and planets, and theories on how the universe came to be. One day I went to check out a pile of books and the librarian said that I couldn't check out adult books. I came back with my mother who made it clear that I should be allowed to check out any of the science books. I was only nine, but I could read and understand them.

But then I discovered baseball. The dinosaurs, the stars and planets, the adventures of polar explorers were set aside for perfecting my batting stroke and learning to throw a curve ball. And when it was winter or dark and I couldn't play ball, I checked out all the books I could on the great players, the great teams, books full of records and statistics, which I memorized in hopes of finding a kindred spirit who would talk baseball with me. My father couldn't keep up. Neither could my schoolmates.

So I made up a game that I played with myself, using a marble and a tiny bat that was actually a ballpoint pen. I pinned paper bases to a rug and created outfield fences with pillows. Everything was to scale. I took up the whole rec room. Dad was at work, Mom was in the kitchen, my sister was studying in her bedroom. So I had lots of room. My sister could hear me talking to myself, narrating the games I played, keeping score using real players and real teams. From time to time she would pass through the room and say, "You know I can hear you talking to yourself all the way upstairs." I think she meant it as a criticism but I just nodded and said, "Uh, huh."

Silence

By **Denise DiFulco**

I want to say nothing
I'd rather be quiet, hidden, still
A secret unto myself
The witness to you, to me
To all that is
But these eyes, they speak
Brilliantly green
The mystery between
Their words small and lustrous
Their meaning vast and dark

By **Larry Krips**

At Rest

A fallen tree rests,
its bare limbs arch to ground
no longer yearning.

Creativity

A clear thought appears
reflected in that water
urging just to be.

At Ease

Peace sways easily,
between my lumbering steps
just knowing intent.

Innovation

Buddhist prayer flags
gently wafting the ancient
into a new world.

Attuned

Birds call across trees
to warn, alert and beckon.
Survival's wisdom.

Skin

Crenulated bark,
protecting sap's ingenious
nurturing of life.

Affirmation

And here on this deck
a forest waits only for
my admiration.

Writing From the Ground Up

By **Donna Maccherone**

Keep looking, says Mary Oliver. Go outside and keep looking. Look up to a sky that is wearing flannel when everyone wants gossamer. Look outward: dogwood, mountain laurel, magnolia. The canopy grandly drapes its mantle. Look down to the ground. How many creatures underfoot and what kinds? How far must I travel to be surprised by joy, as Emerson spoke of and Thoreau walked toward? A walking tour of sorts brings me not just outside but inside, inside myself. I'm waiting for the light to go on, to be illuminated from within. If we say a light bulb can go off in your head, why not a candle to be kindled in your soul? In my soul? It's the walk I must take without looking back. Not to edit or revise or review or revamp. Just keep looking. It is here somewhere, and if my eyes fail me I must look with my fingertips, with the tip of my tongue, with my ear to the ground to hear the sound of my feet in the dry leaves. It speaks in the shuffle of a mouse, however muffled, or in the woodpecker's tattoo. And what of that unidentifiable but insistent bird? A whirr from its throat, a trill through the trees.

Deep breaths and now I smell it. Though I thought I had been robbed of that sense and the memories that ride on the wave of scent, the whiff of new-mown grass. Out here I smell something of that fresh cut lawn and behind it is the sweat of a man. My father in his undershirt, unshaven. It is a late summer Saturday and there are chores to be done. Oh, that memory is rich. I keep looking. I follow my nose, trick myself into smelling the aroma of the woods, the wan-wood leafineal lying in wait for Margaret to be grieving, but it's only spring and Margaret grieves in fall when the goldengrove's unleaving. Ah, but as the heart grows older... its knows the urgency to keep looking because really how many more seasons do I have left? How many more springs to go round and round, to catch a dragonflies in jars? There's the memory, right there: We are singing those songs of Joni and Pete and Dylan—all of us kids and our father, too. But not until the chores are done. Sweep now, rebel later.

All I've come from creeps up on me here among the maple trees as I listen not to my sister's guitar but to robins and jays and whippoorwills. I breathe deeply the truth that can only be found out here in the woods where, Emerson said, is perpetual youth. He meant the rebirth of all that once lived, I know. But the youthful spirit inside the self is born there, too. Keep looking.

Work
by **Julie Maloney**

I watch the others walk further than I
Deeper into the woods
Away from where I sit
In the sun

Half-full, afraid to rest
The petals of the bush in the back
Move in the breeze
Thank you, I say, for doing the work.

I leave
Go in another direction
Look both ways
When I return
The petals have stopped dancing
“You, too,” I say, “You, too, are tired.”
And so I wait
Listen to the noise of the cars in the distance

Exhale
 Round my spine
Once it was straight like the tree closest to the chair
Where I sit
Years ago I sat like this
On the deck off my kitchen
Before I swam across the ocean
Or did I fly?
I hear a plane
This is the only reason I mention flying
Lost in the blue
I find green
Afraid to move
I could lose it all

Perhaps if I plead with the petals
“Dance, goddammit, dance,” they would hear me
The bottom petals shiver like my thighs
A bird flies overhead
And then without warning
Every single petal moves its head
Nodding in agreement with my wish to be still.

Nature Speaks

By **Brian McPherson**

I see rocks under the tree.

Rocks born under the sea and then buried there until the mountain lifted them and erosion and time hauled them to the surface.

Now they breath in the oxygen and absorb the acid rain and the afternoon cry of the warbler.

I can hear them: "Here we are," they exclaim as they soak in the warm rays of spring sunshine, nourishment for the transformation even now in progress.

The logs sit above them, up the hill a bit.

All eleven pieces cut the same way and stacked with the cracks forming lines in the aging wood that show where to cut them into pieces of oak pie.

The peeling bark that forms the crust tells me they have long given up life's energy.

But they still speak.

I hear them repeat the refrain of a once majestic tree that swayed in the breeze until a chainsaw altered its trajectory.

Beside the pile of firewood the red blossoms of laurel lift their slender petals skyward, offering their thanks for the sun's sustaining power.

I almost don't hear them. The abundance of blooms in the air nearly drowns them out, but then the voices of contagious joy come through, high above the lower energies served up by the logs and rocks.

I sing to the rocks, logs, and flowers in my mind.

We are connected by this thought, this consciousness. This universe.

The Amaranth

by **Kate O’Kula**

May arrives in Aleppo.
Flowers are a long gone memory.

Today shrapnel exploded
a five year old child,
his sweetness vaporized
into swirls of grey dust
tinged pink,
and, once settled,
revealed him to be everywhere.

His mother, his father,
the Imam, their neighbors
pick pieces of his flesh
from shattered walls
and shards of living

to put in a vase
to put in a grave

while a world’s grief, in resonant timbre
plays over and over
— an amaranthine melody
searching for a new world
where the barbarous are uprooted
and nascent innocence is nurtured,
where love-lies-not-bleeding.

Note: Amaranth - undying flower; example Love Lies Bleeding
Bissel Cove

The Ginko Walk

by **Kate O’Kula**

The fiddle head fern
uncurls herself
fret by fret, reaching
toward a distant star
hovering high in the shadows.

A nearby acorn
bursts through winter worn shell
implanting his pent up core
downward, toward the roots
of the oaks creating shadows.

Shameless in naked yearnings
both yield to the God
within the sun, however feeble,
within the earth, however cold
within my eyes, however blind

By Marcia Sherman

1)

A Price Far Above Rubies

Two glasses of wine, please.
Sorry, that happens all the time.
These gems will pay for the wine
and the meal, and the beds, yes?
Oops, glad you caught that one.
Rarely get a pearl so large.
How did this happen to me?
Out of a kindness shown.
A cup of water shared.
A crust of bread halved.
And the next morning - these riches,
with every sentence.
There is no stopping it.
My sister? My half sister.
No, she is not so happily afflicted.
It always draws a crowd.
That is why we chose this little inn,
with no patrons.
You may think of this as a gift.
But it can be a burden,
a danger even.
Some have thought to keep us, to hurt us.
We have learned to recognize greed.
Wow, that sure is a splendid emerald.
Yes, yes, take what you want.
There is always more.
Well, that was a fine meal.
The wine was excellent, although rather spicy.
I am uncommonly weary.
If you could just show us to our room?
No need to...
I said...
What I want to say...
Stop!
Sister!
Thank the man for his hospitality.
Oh indeed it is a huge snake, and deadly.
There now, quick and painless.
Sister, do not look so squeamish.
Haven't you got used to this by now?
Go get the gems on the bar,
leave the pearl and the emerald for his wife.
Off to bed,
and say your prayers.
We may need the protection.

2)

budding shrubbery
blooming flowers, spent seed pod
maiden, mother, crone

Clearly, I have a lot to say

By **Craig Sherman**

Clearly, I have a lot to say
Words, neither right nor wrong
Words, which I can't keep at bay.

It scares me some times to let it all out.
To face the critiques,
those naysayers
Especially, my doubt

But forward I go
Blindly into the night
I'm compelled to, I must
For some greater purpose I know I can trust.

I've always wanted the truth
To smash down the walls
To get to that place,
So I don't feel so small

Only Eternity Knows for Sure

By **Craig Sherman**

I walked with my tall friends today as they towered over me. I squinted from the light above as I looked up at them and smiled. Their leaves powered by the whispering wind, waved me on and encouraged me to move forward and up the hill.

Beneath my feet the ground talked to me too. It was the rustling of the leaves, the crunching of the gravel, and the snapping of the twigs that kept me company.

I passed through the graveyard of what was left of their friends. Those that had once stood just as tall, had now since fallen. Although, I think they were the most beautiful of them all because they reminded me of the fragility of life.

For after we all fall and no longer breathe life,
what remains of us can still provide shelter and life for others.

At least that's what I see in this forest but it is only eternity that knows for sure.

The Face of the Earth

By **Emily Vogel**

1

And the wind chime takes flight into the April air. And the wheelbarrow remains overturned in the dirt, and the hunky piece of wood beside it could be mistaken for a dead animal. I walk gingerly so as not to stamp on your face. Because your face is the face of a woman in labor, some dead of night, when all of the hospital staff are exhausted. The earth, woman with child, daughter waking before dawn and speaking the language of blue ghosts. The earth. Let me not commit you to the usual genocides. Let me not become the genocide itself, railing at you with noise and the heft of my body. Let me be weightless. Let me be the deer that scarcely even touch the ground with their hooves in front of my house. Let me know, like them, that everyone at once needs to be left alone. For the branches on the trees know all too well, and I am ignorant: an ephemeral human cast upon by some great unblinking eye. And I cannot look into the eye, because it would be the first gesture to finally kill me, and let me sink beneath you, like a lover.

2

It is not dark outside, but it is dark outside. The last face I saw was a somber one. There is the hollow sound of birds, and everything everywhere seems to unravel like the daylight. But it is yet daylight, and there are these little white flowers, little white butterflies, the whites of a thousand eyes. What eyes if not the eyes of the air, a blind predestination. It is April, and there still lingers a dearth of life---but for these white flowers, like palms open to the sky, in a gesture of prayer. But for this woman sitting alone, the earth holding her like a cradle or grave. But for Venus, or the self, an annihilation to the abstruse and natural world. But for the hunger in the mortal's gut, the story of heaven, the spirit reeling between the branches on the trees when we die, having no words to articulate, no song, except the inaudible breath of leaves.

The Thing About The Woods

By **Emily Vogel**

I don't want to say what I really want to say. The birds are scarce here, but when one of them is seen moving through the trees, it's like my daughter's hand, waving in front of her face in an autistic spasm of delight. I don't want to say it. The noise in my head has dissolved and become the distant whir of an airplane. I want to say that I liked it a lot in the beginning.

The birds are more bountiful now and the sky appears to be shifting in its own intermittent sunlight. Would this be the beginning? Ever shall be; Amen. Let there be no definitive end, let there be no interminable winter, no wailing prior to the sun. And then, let there be no wailing at all. The airplane has traversed, passed over me like a wailing of wind.

I don't want to say it. In a dream I ran deep into the woods, and stood at the eternal edge of crisis. I wanted to stand there forever in an evasion of the modern world. I wanted to stand at the edge of continuing to run. I wanted to feel large. I want to say glide, suspend, hover, not return. My children itch in my brain and I must return.

I cannot leave. I wanted to say endure the bottom of the sea. So quiet there, like a deaf ear. I wanted to say that it's lonely here. My children reaching their arms upward, in want of being carried by a Mother. And I am Mother, and I am fish at the bottom of the sea, and I cannot come up for air.

I don't want to say it. There is a produce truck raging through my living room. There is a technological glitch deep in the woods. And here on the earth, there is too much gravity, and also too much defiance of gravity. Where are we? Skidding through cities, hotels---bags and gadgets et. al. I don't want to say it. Yes, I'm glad for all things eternal; things that subsist, in spite of it.