

GATHERED WORDS

2021



**Selections from the
Creative Nonfiction
Writing Workshop**
of the
Huntsville Literary Association

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Huntsville Literary Association's Creative Nonfiction Writing Workshop

HLA's Creative Nonfiction Writing Workshop began in February 2020, facilitated by Melissa Ford Thornton and Jessica Temple. Despite holding only two meetings before moving online due to COVID-19, the writers managed to meet monthly to share their work with each other, offer feedback, discuss examples, and provide writing prompts. In celebration of our first year, we created *Gathered Words*, an anthology of the work produced and polished during that year, and held a reading to showcase the writers' selections. This 2021 anthology is our second annual publication from the work crafted in the CNF workshop. We are pleased to share our stories with you!



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Suddenly

Courtney Hill Gulbro

The cold air stung as I left the house that Tuesday morning in November, walking with my sister Ann down the block to meet the bus in our mountaintop neighborhood. I was in eighth grade and Ann was in seventh. Steppenwolf's "Magic Carpet Ride" was No. 4 on the charts, and we went to school with siblings of the band's guitarist—a brush with fame. On this particular morning, I was taking paper plates for a party in PE. I hated gym class; all the burpees and climbing and running were pure torture. Thankfully there'd be none of that today.

Living near the first bus stop meant Ann and I got to sit for the trip down Monte Sano to school. Although I wasn't a fan of getting up early, I loved having the long ride to talk to my friends. We boarded then split up to sit in our usual places. Ann slid into a seat near the front on the left, I went on about halfway back to the right. The rows started filling with other junior high kids, some driven by their parents to the early stops before every seat was taken. We chugged around our end of the mountain, our bodies rocking with the stops and starts. Happy greetings filled the nooks and crannies as more and more climbed on board. By the time we started down the other side, kids stood in the aisle, hanging on tighter at the hairpin curves. The din of chatting was punctuated by the familiar buzzer of the emergency door as the older kids sitting in the back bumped the handle. The driver yelled for them to stop. Our bodies swayed and bumped in unison as the bus made the turns along the winding mountain road. Mid-sentence I noticed across my seatmate's shoulder that the trees seemed to be going by more quickly. All of a sudden we moved faster and faster. Then a jolt—my head bumped the bar on the seat in front of me. Everyone leaned left as the bus tilted.

On a Sunday afternoon three months earlier, my parents, sisters, and I sat at the picnic table on the patio, finishing up bowls of homemade ice cream. The relaxing, end-of-summer mood tightened

when Daddy said, "Girls, we need to discuss something important." The tone in his voice was serious but not like we were in trouble or anything.

"Your mother is going to the hospital tomorrow."

I blurted out the first thing that came to my 13-year-old mind.

"Is she pregnant?"

Mama and Daddy both laughed at that.

"No. They're just going to run some tests to see why her hand has been doing what it has. You've noticed that, haven't you?" Daddy glanced around at we three daughters. We murmured yes, nodding.

While Mama was in the hospital we stayed at my grandparents' house up the street. It wasn't much different than when my parents went on their yearly get-away, just the two of them. Except this time my father was there, too, when he got in from the hospital every night.

One morning I awoke to hear Daddy on the phone. I couldn't tell what he was saying, but it sounded like he was crying. He left before breakfast to get to the hospital. Things were tense that day.

Later we learned that the doctors thought my mother had a tumor and only days to live, but they wanted to do another test. The results showed constriction in an artery in her brain. She wasn't out of the woods, but it was treatable. A week or so after school started in September, Mama was discharged from the hospital with instructions that she not be irritated and that her surroundings remain calm because of her risk for a stroke. Suddenly, everything had changed. My sisters and I tried to be on our best behavior.

From the jagged opening at the back end of the bus a cold draft blew through to the gaping hole where the windshield should have been. I tried to make sense of the books and bags all around me as I lay on one side of the overturned vehicle. My glasses were broken, but I could tell it was darker with only one row of windows letting in the gray light. I heard my name and saw a boy I knew from church standing near the windshield, his arm reaching out to me. There was no one else on the bus.

I started to get up and noticed paper plates scattered nearby. I reached over to gather them. "You won't need those," David said.

I climbed through the windshield, stepping gingerly around the broken glass and across the front end, the bus lying on its side. We walked across the street to a house where kids milled about, dazed. Ambulances and police cars surrounded the area up and down the street. I found Ann and saw that her lip was bleeding. An EMT approached and told us to go to one of the waiting ambulances. My thoughts flew to my mother, still recuperating. I couldn't let my parents hear about the wreck on the news or get a call from the hospital.

"No," I said. "I'll call my father—he'll come get us."

Inside the house across from the wreckage I stood in line for the phone. Kids and adults were everywhere. I heard someone say, "They're stacking people up in the ambulances." Then, "There's somebody dead in one of them."

A woman shushed him. "Now we don't know that," she said.

Our family doctor met us at the ER crowded with kids and parents. He told Daddy to take us to his office a few blocks away, where we were examined and x-rayed, and Ann's lip was sutured. At home we rested in bed. The news including our names had made national papers, and distant relatives and friends called to check on us.

The next afternoon I awoke to hear my grandfather coming down the hall. "Can't these girls get up to see their Granddaddy?" he grumbled. Our bruises and aches were forgotten for a few minutes as we enjoyed the ice cream sandwiches he'd brought, reminding us of his treats from summers past. We didn't know that a month later he would be gone, a few days after he got to watch man orbit the moon.

The rumor we'd heard came true. Three ninth graders had been thrown from the back of the bus, and one was killed. Another had a serious brain injury that kept her in ICU for quite some time.

In an instant everything changed. That morning I'd thought about my friends and what would be going on—the party in PE, maybe activities or tests in class to look forward to or dread. Suddenly none of that mattered. Out of the blue, brakes failed, the bus sped down the

curve and turned over on its side, then top, then the other side—kids falling, hair flying, books and bags and papers following us around.

One family lost a child. We all lost the boy who was a friend to everyone. Many of us were banged up or worse. Even now, fear and grief well up in my chest when I think about it.

Thirteen years afterward I was living on an island in the mid-Pacific when my mother met me in Hawaii for vacation. As I watched her board the plane for home, I had no idea it would be the last time I saw her. Six weeks later she died suddenly of a stroke.