

SUTHERLAND LECTURE
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THE REMEMBERED GATE AND THE UNOPENED DOOR

In preparation for this evening, I read some of the previously published Sutherland Lectures. I should not have done that. They were all eloquent and profound and learned—and they also had footnotes (a terrifying thing, since footnotes imply research, something I have successfully mostly avoided for years, writing fiction as I do.)

How can I provide them with footnotes, I wondered. What research can I do for this speech, which will probably come mostly from my heart and my memories and my imagination, none of which are annotated at all?

So, as a procrastinating device, I did research on Zena Sutherland herself. I already, of course, knew who she is, and what she is, because I know who and what she has been to me; and that is who and what, surely, she has been

for many years to all serious writers of children's literature:
a beacon.

(I could have used other words—guide, sage, mentor—but I chose "beacon" carefully. Zena has been the bright, bright light by which we navigate. I think she has alerted many of us to rocks. And I know she has steered us through some very treacherous places at times, and helped many of us moor our flimsy vessels in safe harbors.)

But I couldn't get a footnote out of that, because that description, too, came from my heart and intuition. So I did research.

I found that Zena Sutherland graduated from the University of Chicago in 1937.¹ Aha! A footnote!

But my mind wandered at that point, exactly when I should have been going on to read about her further degrees, her many awards, her many publications, her travels and her titles. My mind hovered around 1937, with a sense of fondness and familiarity, because that was the year I was born.

And what that means, chronologically, is that as I was cooing and gurgling in my Honolulu bassinet—and being read to (because there are old home movies of me, still an infant, wiggling in my mother's lap as she holds a book and

reads to my 3-year-old sister – who reaches over angrily and pinches me from time to time to make me hold still because I am distracting my mother)—at that very moment, in Chiacgo, Zena Sutherland was setting forth on a course that would shape my literate life, and that of my children, yet to be born, and theirs.

I love thinking about these kinds of connections.

I am writing these words at Easter. In my church, the Episcopal Church, we are all taught about the doctrine of Apostolic Succession: the amazing fact that Jesus ordained his disciple, Peter, saying, "On this rock I will build my church" and that every bishop and priest since that time has been ordained in an unbroken line of laying-on-of-hands that go back to that first ordination.

Is that analogy sacriligious? Irreverent? Not to me it isn't.

It makes me think, too, of Patricia Polacco's remarkable book, Pink and Say, (and thereby I create another footnote) and its words:

"When my father finished this story he put out his hand and said, "This is the hand, that has touched the hand, that has touched the hand, that shook the hand of Abraham Lincoln."²

And it makes me think of every parent who told – or read, and sang - a story to a child, who grew up to tell – or read, or sing - that story to her child, who grew up to tell – or read, or sing - that story to her child.

Those stories have shaped who we are, and what we have become.

Thank you, Zena, for having overseen some of that shaping.

Titles are very tough for me. I never create a book title until I have finished writing the book. How else can I know what the story is about, what it means, until I have told it?

I always go about the creation of a character, first. Then I set a series of events in motion – starting, usually, with one precipitating incident (A soldier calls, "Halte." A girl, mourning her mother, stands and walks away from the body. A puppy is abandoned in an alley.) I move the character through those events, and the character responds *the way that character would*. Each response triggers new events—and the character again responds *the way that character would*.

It's much too glib, too falsely self-deprecating, to say that the character takes over. I don't lose control. I have, after all, created the character. What he does, or she does, is entirely dependant upon me. But it happens in a subliminal way and sometimes takes me by surprise. I want it to. I love those surprises, wait for them, yearn for them.

And it is only after such a series of controlled surprises that a story finds its way to an ending—and only then that I can understand it, asses it, find its meaning, and create its title.

For that reason, titles are tough. They are the last meticulous task before the book is finished.

I've often told groups of kids that the best title in the I know of is not one of my own but is a one-word title they all know: JAWS. (When I say the word to them, they all begin humming the music that it brings to their minds.) JAWS says it all, doesn't it? It says: *this is going to scare you to death. It is going to be about a monstrous, gaping, dark thing—with teeth— that will chase you down even in your nightmares.*

And it says it briefly. It is the hardest thing of all, to be brief.

And all of this not-so-brief explanation is preliminary to my describing how excruciating it is when "they" – the anonymous "they" who plan and arrange such things as the Sutherland Lecture – ask you for a title some months before the lecture is to take place.

Yet this time a title came to me. It came to me from T.S. Eliot. I don't know how. Years ago, when I was a pretentious college freshman pretending to be an intellectual (I did this mostly by dress, taking up the wearing of a too-big trench coat that I bought at an Army-Navy store) I frequently quoted T.S. Eliot. But it was always lines from "The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock," a favorite of college freshmen of that time—we all felt existential and bored, and were overly fond of comparing ourself to a pair of ragged claws scuttling across the floors of silent seas. (I can picture my late mother's eyes rolling as I repeat this line tonight, and as I describe that hideous trench coat)

Lucky you, that I didn't turn to Prufrock, didn't send the committee the title: "*The Floors of Silent Seas*" and doom us all to an evening of adolescent angst and ennui (though it would have been fun to come up with the costume once again: it would have involved black tights and turtleneck, as well as the trenchcoat, and some very frayed and dirty

sneakers; and I would have had to speak to you through clouds of smoke, which today would get me kicked out of any self-respecting public place. But those nicotine clouds were *de rigeur* in the 50's.)

Instead, I turned in my mind and memory to Eliot's *Four Quartets*. For those of you who, like me, are many years beyond our formal education, I'll remind you that *Four Quartets* is written as four poems, each taking its title from a place important to Eliot; and each section has five parts, rather like a piece of music. This quotation comes from Part 1 of the first poem, "Burnt Norton"...³

BURNT NORTON Part 1

*Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden.....*

*Other echoes
Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?
Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,
Round the corner. Through the first gate,
Into our first world,*

Now—although I may have done you a favor by recalling Eliot to your mind—there is not a one of you here tonight who did not, on hearing that passage, think immediately of an earlier piece of writing.

She put her hands under the leaves and began to pull and push them aside. Thick as the ivy hung, it nearly all was a loose and swinging curtain, though some had crept over wood and iron. Mary's heart began to thump and her hands to shake a little in her delight and excitement. The robin kept singing and twittering away and tilting his head on one side, as if he were as excited as she was. What was this under her hands which was square and made of iron and which her fingers found a hole in?

It was the lock of the door which had been closed ten years and she put her hand in her pocket, drew out the key and found it fitted the keyhole. She put the key in and turned it. It took two hands to do it, but it did turn.

And then she took a long breath and looked behind her up the long walk to see if any one was coming. No one was coming. No one ever did come, it seemed, and she took another long breath, because she could not help it, and she held back the swinging curtain of ivy and pushed back the door which opened slowly--slowly.

Then she slipped through it, and shut it behind her, and stood with her back against it, looking about her and

breathing quite fast with excitement, and wonder, and delight.

She was standing inside the secret garden.⁴

I doubt very much if T.S. Eliot ever read The Secret Garden. It's what kids call a "girl book," I think. My mother read it to me, and I read it to my daughter; but when my daughter had a son, and the son was old enough, she read him David Copperfield instead.

But the door into the garden is a universal image. The hidden place where flowers are waiting. Down the passage... Towards the door... Round the corner... Through the gate...

Listen:

Alice opened the door and found that it led into a small passage, not much larger than a rat-hole: she knelt down and looked along the passage into the loveliest garden you ever saw. How she longed to get out of that dark hall, and wander about among those beds of bright flowers and those cool fountains, but she could not even get her head through the doorway; `and even if my head would go through,' thought poor Alice, `it would be of very little use without my shoulders. Oh, how I wish I could shut up like a telescope! I think I could, if I only know how to begin.' For, you see, so many out-of-the-way things had happened lately, that Alice had begun to think that very few things indeed were really impossible.⁵

My very first memory is of a door.

I have other early memories from Hawaii, but those are reinforced—perhaps they've even been created—by the home movies, so that although I think I remember watering flowers in the garden of our home outside Honolulu, perhaps it is only the recorded scene: me, two years old, wearing a blue dress, holding a watering can almost as large as myself, solemnly tilting it to dribble in the hibiscus.

I think I remember the beach at Waikiki. But that scene, too, was made permanent by my father's camera, and I have watched it again and again: the child with her shovel, with the breeze blowing her hat, so that she laughs and reaches up again and again to fix it more firmly on her head.

But here is no snapshot, no movie, nothing recorded of the child standing in the doorway. And no visible props: watering can, blue dress, windblown hat, because I am inside the memory, looking out. It's a blurred fragment of a memory, and the smell of flowers is there—there seem always, in the memory, to be flowers growing up along the side of the open door.

I described the memory to my mother again and again, and she always shrugged and said she didn't know. "There was a neighbor," she said, "who had a flowering vine around her front door. I suppose you stood there once. What difference does it make? What does it matter?"

She was right, I suppose, that it makes no difference in the great scheme of things, to know where that doorway was, or why—no more than a toddler—I lingered there long enough that it became a part of my first consciousness. But it haunts me. It was a glimpse of my first world.

*Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,
Round the corner. Through the first gate,
Into our first world*

My mother was an efficient and practical woman, a military officer's wife, one who had mastered the niceties of entertaining and the practicalities of packing, who never complained and who knew how to launder silk and when to use a fish knife and who never wore white shoes after Labor Day. It startles me now, looking back through old photographs, to see her holding my hand in Panama—I was only three—and to notice that my dress was crisply starched

and ironed. Yet we were just passing through Panama briefly; we were living out of suitcases. How did she do that?

But she was not one to sift through vague memories, searching for meaning. *Get on with it*, she would say, if she were still here. *Put it behind you*. That's the way military wives had to think, I suppose, because so much of their lives consisted of putting things behind them. "We're moving," Dad would announce; and Mother, uncomplaining, would get out the trunks. (But that is exactly why it haunts me: because it is behind me, in my own past, part of what shaped and propelled me. And the who: when the poem says *find them find them...* Who? Who?)

The next doorway is no longer a fleeting half-remembered mystery but instead the solid conventional doorway of our apartment in New York. I remember my mother running to it, in tears, calling to my father, who had just left—who was only a short distance away and could therefore rush back to her—and I listened, puzzled, while she told him what she had heard on the radio. Something about Pearl Harbor. I was four and a half.

It is the same doorway, the New York one, where my sister and I stood, new hair-ribbons in our blonde hair, to be photographed on the day we began kindergarten and third grade.

By now, at five, I had a secret. Looking at the snapshot of the little girl with her neatly buckled shoes, holding her sister's hand, I can remember the feeling of the secret. This was the beginning of the double life I would lead from that time on, and still do today: the writer's life, which is both lived in the moment with all the attendant proprieties—but also the simultaneous hidden narrative, which is shaped and re-shaped, told and re-told (surprisingly, always in the third-person)—but never aloud.

The little girl can read, my secret 5-year-old self said, in the narrative that flowed, always, inside my head, even as I stood at the front door to be photographed. *And no one knows.*

My sister, three years older, had explained the process to me in her methodical, matter-of-fact way. Each day she had brought her books home from the New York school, and when I hung on her arm, distracting her from what she called her "work" (though I knew it wasn't. Daddy went to work. What Helen did was books, and I knew books were not

work), she explained it to me impatiently: that the letters had sounds, and if you put the sounds together, they formed words.

After that, when she was gone each day, leaving me alone, I studied the books in our bedroom, looking carefully at the stories I knew by heart, figuring out the sounds, and which sound went with which letter, and before long it made sense, fell into place. Not all of it. There was a book about a turtle named Humphrey, and I could see that Humphrey's letters didn't work exactly right, and I had to make an exception for them.

There was another book called Mr. Popper's Penguin's and "Mr." was another word that didn't fit the rule—but I could figure it out, because I knew the story; and soon I was seeing *other* "Mr."s and felt that I had found a small secret inside the larger one of reading. This gave me a sense of excitement, of glee. After a while I spent a lot of time searching for the small secrets and it was more fun than any of my games or coloring books. McCall's, my mother's magazine, contained a funny little secret, almost a joke, the "Mc" : I imagined that it had, for some humorous private reason, left out an "i" (for surely, I knew, the word should have been "Mic.")

My father had "Maj" in front of his name, another little abbreviated joke, because I knew it should be "Major." He wore a uniform that told his title, Major, and a special hat that he let me wear sometimes, only in the house, never outside. I marched around the New York apartment, wearing the major's hat and my pajamas; my father told me I am the best floor show in town.

After the radio said "Pearl Harbor" and my mother cried, my father set up his camera one day, sat in front of it with the magical button in his hand, and took his own picture. He turned it from film into a real picture in his darkroom. Sometimes he let me stand with him there, in that spooky place with its red light. (Thirty five years later he would give me the Leica he had used that day.)

The picture my father took of himself in 1941 haunts me today. He looks sad in it. He looks pensive, and tired, and perhaps angry at what is happening to him and the world. At the same time I can see in that picture the gentle eyes that I remember.

He made a copy of the picture of himself for my mother, who put it into a frame; and he made tiny ones for my sister and me. My fastidious, orderly sister put hers

neatly away in the drawer that held her underwear, but I carried mine like a talisman, in my pocket. Very soon I had lost it, the same way I lost my doll's small shoes, my yo-yo, and a ring that my grandmother gave me. "Carelessness," my mother called it, and sighed. "If you'd only—" she said.

And then, like the lost photograph, my father, too, was gone. A door of my life closed for me when my father went away. "To the war," my mother said. "To the Pacific."

Then New York was gone, too; our apartment was gone; and now we lived someplace else, someplace new. We lived with our grandparents, and Mother had a new baby, a boy, and she had to spend a lot of time upstairs with him, trying to keep him quiet because the noise of his crying made my grandmother *very, very nervous*. A lot of things made my grandmother *very, very nervous* and I seemed to be one of them: my messiness, my carelessness. If my shoe was unbuckled or my hair-ribbon untied, or if there were grass stains on my knees, she would tell me to march. "March, young lady," she said, as if she didn't remember my name, and aimed me toward a bathroom to wash and tend and tidy myself.

I remembered the days in New York when my father clapped his hands in time, and I marched, wearing his

major's cap, my chin in the air, and everyone laughed and loved me. Now they didn't. Now Mother only loved the baby, my sister only loved her new friends—and I was too little to go outdoors alone and find any of my own; Daddy was gone; Grandfather only loved his bank, where he spent each day; and Grandmother said I was untidy and rude and take that scowl off your face, young lady, and march.

But in the kitchen was a broad brown lady who loved me and let me sit on a chair with my legs dangling and watch while she cooked. She told me stories. She sprinkled cinnamon on my fingertip.

She showed me what was behind a door next to the refrigerator, and I was amazed and made powerful by the knowledge. A staircase! Not at all like the grand wide staircase, the one with a tall clock on the landing, which we climbed to go to our bedrooms, this one was narrow and dark; at its top, another door opened and magically we were in an upstairs hall, next to a linen closet.

Now I had a separate, surreptitious life, in my grandparents' house. Not even my sister knew about the servants' staircase, and I could navigate a new geography for myself, disappearing if I heard my grandmother's imperious footsteps in the hall, emerging next to the

refrigerator to be greeted with a conspiratorial grin from the cook. I could flee. I could hide. And there was a place for me, now, in that big silent house: the staircase where, when I opened the door at the bottom, I was greeted with welcoming affection.

And I could test myself—my own courage—with it, too, because when the doors at either end of the secret staircase were closed, it was impenetrably dark. I hid in the staircase, shivering with terror, telling the narrative: "*The little girl was in a dark, dark place but she was very brave...*" Sometimes the door at the bottom opened, and a wedge of light sliced up the stairs; a maid, her arms filled with folded laundry, would find me and ask in amazement what I was doing there.

And though I answered light-heartedly that I was playing, the truth is that I was not entirely certain what I was doing there, crouched and frightened in the darkness. Only now, sixty years later, do I see that I was arming myself, in a way; I was testing myself, rehearsing panic, loss, and helplessness; assessing my own cowardice and courage, and at the same time reassuring myself that the door would always open, that the light would always find its way in.

My brother grew and became more human at the same time that my sister was moving farther away from me, defecting into the world of approaching adolescence, which I disdained. She and I had matching desks, but now she changed hers into something she called a "dressing table," thumb-tacking flowered chintz around it to form a skirt. I still kept my precious hoard of paper, pencils, crayons, paper clips, and rubber bands, so that I could play teacher, or librarian, or secretary (any human who had a legitimate need for desk: that's who I wanted to be, someday). But Helen had now cluttered hers with bobby pins and curlers and jewelry, and I knew with surprising bitterness that she and I had little in common any more. Even the books we read were different. Hers were about young women who became nurses and moved into a world where they would do great good, go to dances in their off-duty hours, and marry a doctor.

(What causes that disparity between children? Two children in the same family, surrounded by the same bookcases, wearing matching pajamas to bed each night, and sleeping in beds so close together that we could—and often did—reach out and hold each other's hands. Yet she breezed through life with no doors unopened. And I, like

Alice, sat again and again in dark passageways feeling mis-sized somehow, trying to make myself fit into places that seemed elusive but endlessly tantalizing. And I tried unceasingly, and with enormous (and always private) satisfaction, to shape myself, to learn myself, with books. (She never did, never needed to.)

I read Indian Captive—entranced that the author and I had the same first name—and I became the girl in the book, Mary Jemison, whom the Indians called "Corn Tassel" because of her pale blond hair. In my secret life, I too was Corn Tassel. Walking to school each day was no longer the familiar route of four Pennsylvania small-town blocks, past Barnhart's Grocery Store and the Evangelical United Brethren Church, past the St. Bernard who slept and slobbered in front of his house on West Street; now the dog was big game to be tracked, and the short-cut behind my grandparents' house was no longer an alley but became a path through an alien forest.

And no one knew this but me.

My mother read The Yearling to me, and my life was changed by it. When she finished, I took the book to my room and read it again, to myself. 400 pages; and I knew

already what the end will be: I knew that the rattlesnake would strike, that Jody's Pa would survive the snakebite; that he would allow Jody to keep the orphaned fawn; but that eventually the fawn, Jody's pet, Flag, would have to die. I knew all of it. There was no suspense in the story for me now. No what next. But the why would remain. And the song of it.

I read it again because of the sound of the words, and with the realization that they could be placed on the page so that they became like music, and that on top of the sound and rhythm and cadence, the words were the answers to the why's, and would mean more than just the story: they would create something deep and real and lasting in ways that I appreciated but did not yet comprehend. I read a paragraph on page 400 over and over again, to myself:

...He found himself listening for something. It was the sound of the yearling for which he listened, running around the house or stirring on his moss pallet in the corner of the bedroom. He would never hear him again. He wondered if his mother had thrown dirt over Flag's carcass, or if the buzzards had cleaned it. Flag— He did not believe he should ever again love anything, man or woman or his own child, as he had loved the yearling. He would be lonely all his life. But a man took it for his share and went on.⁶

There was something about Jody's acknowledgement that he would be lonely all his life. The fact that he listened for the lost thing. I knew that boy better than I knew my own sister, whose growing passion for people named Van Johnson and Vaughn Monroe made her a stranger to me now.

From the time that I read The Yearling, and other books—The Secret Garden, My Friend Flicka, Thimble Summer, and countless others, at about the same time—I yearned with all my eight and nine and ten-year-old heart to become a writer. I had thought "secretary" might do, because I had watched the secretaries at Grandfather's bank, with their importantly organized desks and their grand complicated typewriters. But when books became part of my life, I knew that desk and typewriter and glasses dangling from a cord around the neck: those things weren't enough. Words were the difference. I practiced in my spiral-bound notebooks: making sentences, rearranging them to say the same thing in a different ordering of the words, then saying it again in new words so that I could compare the sound, and the way the words looked on the page.

I made things rhyme, and then told the same things again without the rhyme, to see which way sounded better. I wrote overblown romances, plots lifted from my mother's Daphne DuMaurier novels; then I tried to write them as poems. One began:

*She lay upon the rocks,
Her face turned upward toward the sky.
Her lifeless face was cold and pale.
We never will know why...*

You can see that I had not mastered some basic principles of either metrics or grammar. It appears that we don't know why her face is cold and pale (it should be obvious: she is dead, after all) when what I meant, of course, was that we were in the dark about why she had flung herself (take my word for it, she had flung herself; the actual flinging appears much later, in another stanza, in a flashback) from a cliff.

Actually, it's a little misleading anyway, pretending that we're mystified, because for many pages it is all explained: the doomed romance, the jilting, the cruel lord of the manor. The epic poem concludes with these lines:

*Had she but lived
I would have loved her even more.
But no, she now lies dead*

Upon the rocky shore.

thus bringing us full circle back to the present after an intervening flashback that covers twenty years, a lot of notebook pages, and many lines that end with rhyming words like "cloaks" and "hoax" or "stallion" and "medallion." It is not entirely clear how "we" turned into "I" by the end. But a lot of things can happen during the course of a Gothic romance.

(I have not footnoted that poem, which is housed in a very private collection.)

I did not show my attempts at writing to anyone. In those days, my elementary school days in the 1940's, creativity was not part of the curriculum. My school had no library. We read no fiction, no poetry, did no writing. Once a month we had a class I dreaded: a class called "Music" in which a music teacher came and taught us a song. We sang in unison, standing beside our desks. "*Oh Danny Boy...*" we would quaver, as the music teacher, a pitch-pipe to her mouth, stalked the aisles, leaning over to hear our individual voices, blowing into her terrifying tool to see if we were getting it "right." (In retrospect I feel sorriest for the sixth

grade boys, with their unreliable sopranos that stumbled into baritone unexpectedly now and then. "*O come ye back when summer's on the meeeaaadow...*" must have been true torture for them.)

To have shown my notebooks to anyone—teacher, perhaps, or the Public Librarian (who was a figure as terrifying as The Music Teacher. She was a nameless woman who sat behind a high desk and spoke in a whisper if, indeed, she spoke at all. One time—Gestapo-like—she made a telephone call to my mother, telling her that I had checked out an unsuitable book. Its title was A Tree Grows in Brooklyn)—to have confided a creative thought to such a stranger would have been unthinkable.

My notebooks were my secret. They were my way of trying to make myself fit, like Alice in Wonderland, into a place I had begun to glimpse:

she knelt down and looked along the passage into the loveliest garden you ever saw. How she longed to get out of that dark hall, and wander about among those beds of bright flowers....

Of course the unsupervised writing had to be a lonely enterprise. *He would be lonely all his life. But a man took it*

for his share and went on... No wonder the description of Jody had meant so much to me. I know it now, quite clearly and without regret; but I think I knew even when I was nine that writing is a solitary, heart-breakingly happy pursuit.

Today when I see classrooms where "creative writing" is a part of the curriculum, my child-self envies those children, busy at their desks, writing—and editing, and re-writing, and even "publishing"—their stories. But at the same time: well, picture for a moment, if you can, Alice with a mentor, with a guide of the most wise and benevolent sort, investigating the passage with her. Helping her along. The door flung open. The garden enthusiastically revealed. "Now, Alice," I can hear the mentor saying, "let's examine the flowers. Let's name them and sort them and think about them and let's brainstorm. Let's cluster. Let's dialogue. Then, when we've done our best: let's share them! Let's copyright them! Let's publish them!"

I am being harsh, and I know that all of the teachers in the audience are wanting to pelt me with whatever is at hand: rolled-up Scholastic Book Club orders, small blue erasers with Happy Faces, Uni-ball fine-point pens aimed like darts at my heart. So I'll hastily explain that I'm overstating to make a point. Of course it is important and

even exhilarating to guide and teach children to be coherent and careful and yes, "creative" writers. I would have loved such a teacher and such a course of study with a passion, when I was nine or ten or eleven.

But I would still have kept my secret notebooks. The beginning writer needs a dark passageway in which she flounders and can't find the key. "*A man's reach should exceed his grasp, else what's a heaven for?*"⁷ (Ha. Another footnote.)

Thinking back now, I wonder if my happy struggles as a beginning writer were as private as I thought. I remember viewing my own family as two sets of matched pairs: my mother and sister, domestic and organized—I thought of them as Meg and Marmee (I was Jo, of course)—and at the other end of the spectrum, my father, returned from the war to find a little boy to complete his pairing-up, as together he and my brother tinkered and pattered with electric trains and eventually chemistry sets and cars, things of no more interest to me than the sewing machine that my mother and sister shared.

And yet. And yet! On my thirteenth birthday, my father gave me a typewriter. Today, of course, half the 13-year-

olds you know have their own computers. But this was 1950. And in 1950 this was an astounding gift: a Smith-Corona portable typewriter with smooth dark green keys; and my name was engraved on the case, just below the handle.

Why did he give it to me? I don't know. It may have been simply that he was sick of my sneaking into his office and using his typewriter; maybe he was nervous about the damage I might inflict as I endlessly, noisily taught myself how to type.

But I like to think that he gave it to me because he recognized who I was, and what my dreams were, for the future. And I am immeasurably grateful that he never—never once—leaned over my shoulder, to see what I was doing with his gift.

I used that typewriter through high school and college. It went into a closet, along with my dreams of being a writer, and stayed there, unused, through an early marriage and the arrival of four children. But it came out of storage and was dusted off when I went to graduate school and began to write, in my thirties. I used the old Smith-Corona to write my first book for kids, A Summer to Die. I was thirty nine.

My father was over seventy by then: retired, living in Florida. He sent me a gift to celebrate the publication of that first book, in which he appeared, as Meg's father. It was an electric typewriter.

I began – after a protracted education, after interruptions, (sometimes happy ones like the births of babies), and after a few false starts, as a writer for adults. Anyone who wanted to do a truly boring dissertation, with a wealth of footnotes, could find many articles by me in adult publications throughout the 1970's. But it was not until I went back and timidly pulled at unopened doors in my past that I realized I should be speaking to children.

I am not certain how I knew I must do that. But it was as if, as a writer, I was still in a passageway, or a vestibule, and had not reached the place I needed to go.

A Summer to Die wrenched open the excruciating door of loss. My beloved sister had died young. She was the one who had shown me how words work, using her own fist-grade books, when I was three; the one who took up Cherry Ames and curlers while I stuck to my classics and unkempt pigtails and we were briefly, childishly, estranged.

My family, stoic, Wasp and Nordic, was silent after the loss.

*Give sorrow words: the grief that does not speak
Whispers the o'er-fraught heart and bids it break.*⁸

Shakespeare tells us to give sorrow words. But it took me so many years to do so, coming from a tradition such as mine, which taught me not to open a door on such darkness.

Having done so—having felt the weight of the closed door lifted—I began to hear from the children and families affected by the book. And only then, for the first time, did I perceive that when I, as a child, sought from stories something that I had no name for, it had simply been unquestioning intimacy I needed. A place to listen with one's heart. Glimpsed light spilling from a warm kitchen into the dark staircase where I sat alone.

I went back to other unopened doors of my past. I remembered, suddenly, the little girl I was once, lonely in my stern grandmother's house, warmed and welcomed only in the kitchen, by the black woman—who had a name but was called only "the cook"—and whom I had last seen at my

sister's funeral, as she stood apart and alone at the cemetery. Her own grandchild had been murdered years before, and now, thinking of it, I realized I did not even know where that child was buried. Yet that woman (her name, which I had not known then, was Fleta Jordan) had stood beside my sister's grave and mourned.

I mentioned the story of the cook to a friend of mine, a sophisticated writer for adults. She shrugged. "Sure, write it," she said. "Ethel Waters can play her in the movie."

So she saw it as a stereotype, and made me uncertain. I went back to the little town where my grandparents, long dead, had lived. Their house belonged to the local college, now. But the cook's house, down by the railroad station, I what had been called "the colored section"—the same house that had been pointed out to me, as a child, as "hers," though it would have been unthinkable for me to enter it, then—was still there, and I was told that she was still alive. Ninety-five years old.

I opened that door. She had been told I was coming, and she was in a wheelchair, wearing her best dress. She opened her arms to me as she had done so many times when I was four. Now I was forty-two. "It's Miss Katharine's little girl, come back," she said, in welcome.

When I wrote her story, and mine, in a book that was eventually called Autumn Street, it was another way of looking back on loss, but this time on injustice, as well, and mindless prejudice, and dignity newly defined.

A sentence in the book describes the two children—me, the child I was; and the cook's grandchild, who had been my friend—trudging through snow together. It describes our footprints "layered over and lost" in the swirling snow. I felt, going back there in my mind, as an adult, as a writer, that I could see the footprints again: as if the snow had ended, the air was sharp and cold and clear, and the two little sets of prints were frozen there; and that now—for the first time— I could follow them and understand their destination.

This sense of recognition, of re-discovery, has happened to me again and again. It happens each time I start to write a new book. Sure, "ideas" come from the places that I often describe to children: an overheard fragment of conversation, an anecdote told at a dinner party, a newspaper article, a casual thought that begins with the phrase "what if..." Those are all triggers. But a trigger has to create some force, some action: and for me that

action is a catapult back in time to the unopened door. To the remembered gate into a garden of my own past that I was too young, or too timid, or too unready—to enter then.

Last week, during his school vacation, my seventeen-year-old grandson James, who used to be Jamie, visited me. Long ago he and I read James and the Giant Peach together. I remember a car trip when he was seven, and had been visiting at our New Hampshire farmhouse. I read Stone Fox to him from the front seat, half turned so he could hear me, and when we approached the place where we usually stopped for ice cream his grandfather slowed the car; but Jamie called out, "No! Don't stop!" – *meaning not for ice cream, not for anything, just don't stop and most of all, don't stop reading this book.*

My grandson is now six foot one and has four earrings. His computer user-name is so repellant that I won't tell it to you; but he assures me that it is simply a phrase from a favorite rock group (and why that is supposed to be reassuring I am not sure). But when he lumbered in his size-12 sneakers out to the car last week at the end of his visit, he was taking with him a book he had asked to borrow. It was poetry. I had introduced him to a poet named Billy

Collins. This is the concluding stanza of a poem called "On Turning Ten" which my grandson, remembering his ten-year-old self, had liked:

*It seems only yesterday I used to believe
There was nothing under my skin but light.
If you cut me I would shine.
But now when I fall upon the sidewalks of life,
I skin my knees. I bleed.⁹*

I know from the letters I receive every day that there is a whole generation of children realizing with dismay that what they used to believe no longer holds true. What they used to believe about their families. About their parents. About their schools. About their own possibilities.

It's why they respond to the fictional character named Jonas. Like them, he used to believe.

At seven I was a soldier, the Collins poem says. At nine a prince. But now I am mostly at the window watching the late afternoon light...

In the next-to-final chapter of The Giver, Jonas falls from his bike. Like the unnamed boy in the Collins poem, he skins his knees. He bleeds.

But he rights himself and goes on. He does so because he has had glimpses through doors opened for him by the Giver.

As a child I peeked through doors held open for me by writers like Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Betty Smith, Mary O'Hara, Eleanor Estes, Marguerite DeAngeli, and so many others. Today's children—and those who are already, wearing their big untied sneakers, mostly at the window, watching—have all of those and so many, many more.

Remember doorstops? You see them in antique shops today. The little black and white bulldog with the four slightly curving legs? He was a favorite of mine. And my mother had a heavy iron frog, with bulging eyes and a self-satisfied smile. He sat there with resolute firmness so that the door would never slam closed.

Zena, bless you. You are the Johnny Appleseed of doorstops.

The fourth, and final, poem of Eliot's Four Quartets is called "Little Gidding." It concludes like this:¹⁰

LITTLE GIDDING PART V

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, unremembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning.....*

And don't we all try, all the time, to re-discover the beginnings? And thereby to know it for the first time?

Quick, said the bird—find them, find them....

Who? I asked at the beginning of this talk.

Eliot refers to the echoes that inhabit the garden. And echoes are simply our own voices. They come back to us disguised. I wrote once, of echoes: *...your voice would return to you. From all the passages where you had been, from the place where you stood in dark so heavy it*

*smothered you, and from the places you had not yet felt your way along, your message would return...*¹¹

In the final paragraph of The Yearling, Jody—now a young man—wakes because he has heard a voice call out. He realizes it was his own voice, calling from his sleep: but it was not his adult voice. It was a boy's voice, the voice of the child he had been.

Think of Jonas going down a hill on a sled. "...he was aware with certainty and joy that below, ahead, they were waiting for him..."¹²

Who is waiting for Jonas at the foot of the hill?

You are. I am. All of the past—everything he had been denied—is there, waiting for him. He is arriving where he started, and knowing the place for the first time. The certainty and the joy come from finding the unremembered gate. And the door of understanding, swinging open as a welcome.

As a book does.

Thank you.

¹ Universty of Chicago Magazine, Volume 9, Number 5, June 1998.

² Polacco, Patricia. Pink and Say.

³ Eliot, T.S. The Four Quartets

⁴ Burnett, Frances Hodgson, The Secret Garden

⁵ Carroll, Lewis. Alice in Wonderland

⁶ Rawlings, Marjorie Kinnan. The Yearling.

⁷ Browning, Robert. Andrea Del Sarrto, line 97

⁸ Shakespeare, William. MacBeth Act iv. Scene 3.

⁹ Collins, Billy. The Art of Drowning.

¹⁰ Eliot, T.S. The Four Quartets

¹¹ Lowry, Lois. Autumn Street.

¹² Lowry, Lois. The Giver