

Ever BLOOM

STORIES *of* LIVING DEEPLY ROOTED
AND TRANSFORMED LIVES



by women of
Redbud
WRITERS GUILD

**Compiled by Shayne Moore
and Margaret Ann Philbrick**



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Dedicated to all women who have yet to find freedom in Christ in order to embrace their story and share it with the world. We believe in you, and we pray this book will help you “walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give.
Take the mercy, accept the help”

And then the day came,
when the risk
to remain tight
in a bud
was more painful
than the risk
it took
to Blossom.

—ANAÏS NIN

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Stephen King explains in his acclaimed bestseller *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, “Honesty [in writing] makes up for a great many faults . . . but lying is the great unrepairable fault. Liars prosper, no question about it, but only in the grand sweep of things, never down in the jungles of actual composition, where you must take your objective one bloody word at a time. If you begin to lie about what you know and feel while you’re down there, everything falls apart.”

The distinctive culture of Redbud Writers Guild is our sense of community and our noncompetitive support for one another. Redbud is born out of a small group of women sharing the writing experience. Since the beginning, members have met together regularly. It is a safe place to create, to take risks, and to be honest.

Redbud has grown to include women from all over the world with a vision and a mission to fearlessly expand the feminine voice in our communities, faith, and culture. More often than not, our meetings now happen on social media and monthly mentoring video calls. Our community overflows with generosity toward one another and support for each other as we live into our Christian faith and our calling and vocation as writers.

Honesty is the heart of every good and true story. Connecting with a group of safe journey-women is a game changer. Many of us can testify to this truth. How many books, proposals, articles, and inspirations have been born in Redbud? Sitting together sipping wine or coffee, eating chocolate and warm apple crisp, even staring at a computer screen—community brings our writing off the page and into the here and now and into relationship.

And it keeps us honest. To have wise and discerning readers thoughtfully digesting newborn ideas can seem intimidating until you are blessed to go through the loving process. It keeps us honest, emotionally and spiritually, to see and hear how readers receive what we have written. We are challenged in the places where we can go deeper or need more clarity, and in the places we ought to cut altogether.

In these pages, we hope you see our honesty, and we invite you to join your story together with ours. At the end of each selection, you will find a writing or journaling prompt and a prayer to assist you.

May you be blessed by our stories as you find your own.

Shayne Moore, *Founder, Redbud
Writers Guild, NFP*

Margaret Ann Philbrick, *Vice President,
Redbud Board of Directors*

INTRODUCTION

We Write

by Margaret Ann Philbrick

We write
when fear rattles
our two a.m. feedings,
menopause flashes,
and our just lost his third job husband
rolls over again.

We crawl
down laundry strewn stairs
to set keys clicking
our kitchen table hopes
for healing, wholeness,
the end of terror.

We believe
in the singularity of our coffee mugs as
companions to
sermons, essays, proposals
composed alone, but
shared and shredded
as sisters.

We write
through cancer,
deadbeat fathers,
bipolar daughters,
dementia mothers,
and if He gives
a deep water immersion
of courage, our secrets.

We tuck
in cafe corners,
town libraries,
California wine bars,
numb and broken
because even Yeats
dulled the pain.

We listen
for a whisper
in the falling Redbud blossom speaking,
SLOW DOWN,
breathe, sing, see.

We envy
the unattainable,
the Proverbs 31 woman
and we try,
yes, we try to
climb Kilimanjaro,
crush HIV,
dance out urban decay,
set a table,

catch a fish,
and feed them.
Oh, we feed them,
words.
Every word,
we write,
for Him.

■ P R A Y E R

Heavenly Father, thank you for making yours the great story. Thank you for being the crafter of our stories and the feeder of our souls. I entrust mine to you. Lord, please reveal how the story you are calling me to tell reflects your gracious gifts and life. I ask for sacred space, time, and patience to receive your good gifts and share them with the world. Amen.

■ W R I T I N G P R O M P T

Describe an experience of feeding others.

Roots



The Woman Under the Palm Tree

by Jenny Rae Armstrong

I was nine years old when it happened, peering out the window of our second-story apartment in Monrovia, Liberia. The multiplex we lived in was in a good area, popular with internationals; the families on the top story were from India, the Peace Corps volunteers across the hall were American like us, and Mrs. Richards, the Liberian woman who owned the place, claimed the bottom level for her sprawling family, which seemed to be made up entirely of women and children. It was right across the street from JFK Hospital (ominously dubbed the “just for killing” hospital by the locals), where Mrs. Richard’s live-in nieces, nephews, grandchildren, and I took turns donning my Care Bear roller skates and zipping down the cracked concrete wheelchair ramps, launching ourselves into the foliage that had muscled its way up through the pavement. We had a coconut tree in the front yard, a persimmon tree in the back, and a high concrete wall separating the clean, well-kept courtyard from the neglected street.

But if you looked out our hallway window, you could see the part of town where people lived in zinc shacks and cooked their meals on “country stoves,” camp-style burners with an open flame for boiling rice and frying plantain. It wasn’t off-limits necessarily—I’d venture in that direction to buy peanut candy and sour green oranges from market ladies, and several kids from that neighborhood would come over to play four square and teach us Bassa cuss words—but it was not a place where we spent much time.

I was standing at that hallway window, gazing down at the scene unfolding just outside our wall. A woman was curled up on her side

under a palm tree, worn T-shirt stretched thin across her torso as she shielded her head with her dusty black arms, lappa-clad knees tucked close to her chest. The man kicking her wore camouflage, and had a government-issued machine gun slung over his shoulder.

I was horrified.

It wasn't that I hadn't witnessed beatings before. I had. It wasn't unusual to see mothers beating their children for disobedience or mistakes, preparing them to survive in unforgiving circumstances. Cries of "Rogue! Rogue!" would ring through our neighborhood as mobs chased down petty thieves; my father would sprint out the door to try to stop the flogging sure to take place when the offender was caught. But this was different, an armed man beating a helpless, cringing woman. And I had heard the whispers, the muted conversations adults thought I was too young to understand, about what men with guns did to women.

I heard my father's footsteps approaching and stood as still as possible, expecting to be shooed away from the window. But he stopped a few steps behind me and just stood there, watching the scene over my head. Or maybe watching me watch the scene. Then he sighed, turned, and walked away without a word.

The tectonic plates of my young soul shifted. Why wasn't my father, my hero, going out there to help the woman? What was different between this and all other times when he had intervened?

Slowly and sure as sunrise, it dawned on me that the gun threw the weight of the government behind the man and the violence he was meting out. It occurred to me that since this was happening in broad daylight, the soldier was probably the woman's husband, her only source of economic support. Maybe she didn't have a mama like Mrs. Richards, a fierce and competent matriarch, to scare away the riffraff and shelter her when things turned sour. If my father charged out there and did what every fiber of his Midwestern upbringing was undoubtedly screaming at him to do, it would

likely spur the man on to further violence, and make matters worse for the woman.

For the first time, I understood that there were some problems my father, the strong, white, influential American man, couldn't fix.

He couldn't fix it, because the scourge of violence against women is not a simple battle that a strong army can rush in and win. It is a pandemic, a highly contagious pathogen that eats away at the hearts, minds, and souls of men, women, and children. It is a noxious weed that spreads more spores when attacked with swinging machetes. Strategic intervention is necessary, but you can't just treat the symptoms or mow the weed down from the top. You need to go deep under the surface, identify the source of the disorder, and neutralize the violence where it begins, in the small seed of pride, disdain, bitterness, or despair dropped into the human heart.

But if a tiny seed could sprout into that pervasive ugliness, why couldn't a tiny seed of something better, something stronger, overtake it and choke it out? I had seen the native foliage break through concrete at the "just for killing" hospital, knew that tiny living organisms with interlocking root systems could decimate ugly gray structures that had stood for generations. Maybe this was not a job for warriors, for powerful men with worldly influence. Maybe this was a job for gardeners, for people with patience, persistence, and a steely commitment to making the world a more beautiful place, one soul at a time. A job for elderly grandmothers and outraged aunts, for concerned sisters and countercultural men—for little girls armed with nothing more than righteous indignation, a life to spend, and a willingness to put their hand to the plow.

I felt a seed of something better, something stronger, drop into my nine-year-old soul, and I patted the soil around my newly acquired resolve.

What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.

—Mark 4:30b–32 (NIV)

■ PRAYER

Jesus, perfect Lamb of God, you know what it is to suffer the helplessness and horror of violence. Strengthen me to stand against injustice; give me wisdom and courage as I work for shalom. In your name I pray. Amen.

■ WRITING PROMPT

Describe a time when you felt helpless in the face of injustice. What did you or anyone around you do about it?

The Tamarisk

by Jen Pollock Michel

It was dismembered in a morning. Before I had returned from driving my children to school, the crew had assembled. They were severing limbs with alacrity when I arrived. Weeks earlier, when a city arborist had knocked on the front door, conveying they'd "need to take her down to the stump," I had nodded and feigned sadness. But the truth was: I had no attachment to the diseased tree. Three years in our Toronto rental home was not adequate time for loyalty or grief, not when the future would uproot our expatriate life. Indifference was one luxury of our impermanence.

But when the chainsaws were loosed unexpectedly on a gray October morning, my detachment was felled like timber. I was angry that no one had informed us of the scheduled surgery, saddened that no one had insisted on good-byes. When the hard-hatted men broke the tree's brittle skeleton, I thought in alarm of the picture my youngest daughter had hoped to take. "I want to remember what it looked like." Before we could devise proper burial rites, the tree was mulched.

In the final chapter of Wendell Berry's novel *Jayber Crow*, rapacious Troy Chatham razes the last grove of trees on his dead father-in-law's farmland. Having exhausted the land by his appetite for profit and growth, Troy tries staving off bankruptcy with the one remaining source of income: logs. "What did he have left?" Jayber, his neighbor, asks himself, outraged. "Another cutting of timber, maybe, if he could wait another hundred or two hundred years."¹ To Troy, the trees were merchandise—logs to be felled and hauled away and sold. To Jayber, the trees represented not trunks and branches to

be bundled for market but the stability of generations. They were a community's self-recognition, landmarks by which one knew to find his way. Trees provided roots of memory driven deep in the soil of years.

I confess to having lived much of my life without roots. When I was a child, my family packed and unpacked life every three years in a new city, often a new state. Like other American families, we chased the tail of opportunity. My father had been a high-school teacher, then a graduate student. As soon as he finished his dissertation, we moved from Indiana to East Tennessee for his first professorship, marveling that Southern soil could be so ruddy. Several years later, we left the red clay and the fragrance of dogwoods for another teaching job. A promotion. But even then, we didn't stay. Because when my grandparents' health failed, our tours of duty ended and we moved home (if it can be called that) to Ohio, the place where my mother had spent her childhood.

It is easy to say that I regretted my family's transience: children fault their parents something. But if I lamented my geographic instability growing up, I didn't leave it behind, even after marrying a man born and raised in the same Chicago suburb, a man who knew how to stay put. Opportunity waned, and we moved. And moved again. Sometimes we moved for career; sometimes for the dim sense of a call. Usually it had felt right. Always it had seemed necessary. But now that we've lived in Toronto for five years and our bureaucratic paperwork has been renewed twice, I've begun to grieve the roots we have failed to plant. The children have grown tall and lean. And still—we have no permanent address.

I find it immensely hopeful that Abraham, the hero of our faith, might also have been called a wanderer. He was called by God, quite insistently, to leave Haran: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house" (Gen. 12:1 *esv*). Despite God's simultaneous promise of a new home, Abraham spent the remainder of his years wandering. His life replayed the same song, like a narrative needle

catching a groove. Abraham pitched tents and pulled up stakes. At the time of his death, the only land Abraham owned was the cave of Machpelah, which he had purchased as Sarah's burial site. Even Abraham's nephew, Lot, managed more stability than he (that is, before brimstone and fire hailed on Sodom). While Abraham was a man of tents, the author of Genesis notes that Lot's house—a more permanent structure—had a roof beam (Gen. 19:8).

Genesis 12 records God's sure promise of land and family to Abraham. I'll give you roots, God said. But if we're honest, throughout the course of his life, Abraham endured constant threat of instability. Famine. An insecure water supply. His wife's barrenness. Most terribly, in haunting echo of chapter 12, God issued another tripartite command in Genesis 22: "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go" (Gen. 22:2 ESV). On his way to Mount Moriah, Abraham must surely have found himself wondering about the divine method. In this moment—and in others—God's promises loomed like a mirage on the horizon; they seemed to evaporate the moment he got near them.

The author of Hebrews examines the resilience of hope that Abraham exercised in Genesis 22—indeed, throughout his entire life. Like others who followed in his stead, Abraham came to believe that permanence could never be wrested from the land. Yes, by the sure grace of God, he was living the home-going story of the gospel, but home wasn't about the dirt beneath his feet. In all that wandering, Abraham learned to desire a better country. From Haran to Canaan to Egypt and back, Abraham learned to follow a God who had prepared for him—and for all of God's children—a greater city. That future hope made it easier to risk, easier to lose, easier to trust. It even made possible the binding of his own son, his only son, the son of his greatest affection—the son of God's promise—on an altar.

In the rented life that is mine, I can only hope I am gaining something of Abraham's faith. The future stretches before me, and she slyly keeps her secrets. Where is home? Where will I be in five years?

Or twenty? For while my husband has recently been offered a position in Toronto that looks to afford us several more years in Canada, and we will even begin application for permanent residency, we do not assume guarantees. We do, however, begin seizing the invitation of the in-between places: find solid ground. There is greater permanence than a permanent address. Most importantly, we look to learn that the God of Abraham—not the land, not the son—is himself the reward (Gen. 15:1).

In an inconspicuous scene from Abraham's life, the patriarch seals a treaty with Abimelech and secures ownership of a well. That water symbolizes prosperity, permanence, provision. Beersheba, he calls the place—well of the oath (Gen. 22:31). To honor the promise-keeping God and his promise of home, Abraham plants a tree—a tamarisk. Different from the strong and sturdy oaks that Abraham first encounters upon his entrance to the land of promise—trees owned by the Canaanites—the tamarisk is the tree of the wanderer. As Bible scholars note, it is a tree often planted by the Bedouin for the purposes of shade and feeding the grazing animals. It survives with shallow roots in sandy soil.

When Abraham plants the tamarisk, he calls on the Lord, choosing a name that speaks permanence: Everlasting God. Nevertheless, the tale of the tamarisk doesn't conclude Abraham's journey, for Scripture records that "Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines" (Gen. 21:34 *ESV*). But it does remind us that for every wanderer, roots are possible in the stable soil of God.

■ P R A Y E R

Lord, help me to be content with your way of establishing home in my life. Sometimes it feels unstable, haphazard, a jigsaw road of twists and turns. At those times, turn my heart to your promise in John 14:23—

that you and the Father and the Holy Spirit will make your home in us.
Root me in this truth, as my heart's home. Amen.

■ WRITING PROMPT

Where do you feel most rooted and at home?