



A Damnable Convenience

DOGGEREL by MICHAEL JAMES

CATHERINE SEVENAU

Positively Haight Street 1968

An excerpt from *Passages From Behind These Doors: A Family Memoir*

1968 was the year Eldridge Cleaver published *Soul on Ice*. He and his wife Kathleen, who had the most immense head of hair I'd ever laid eyes on, banked at my teller window. It was the year of the Yippies, Black Panthers, and the SDS, the year Martin Luther King was shot in Memphis—sparking riots across the nation. The day after his murder, hundreds of black kids from Poly High rolled down Haight in a tidal wave, smashing storefront windows and overturning cars.

1968 was the year of the sweeping anti-war protests, the Tet Offensive and the My Lai Massacre, the year the Viet Nam war ripped our country inside out. It was the year of the Democratic National Convention and the Chicago riots. Sirhan Sirhan assassinated Bobby Kennedy at the Los Angeles Ambassador Hotel, women were branded as bra-burning feminists, and 32 African nations boycotted the Summer Olympics in Mexico City. Richard Nixon was elected president, and Apollo 7 and 8 were launched.

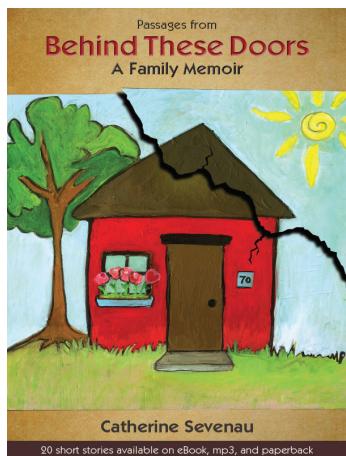
I existed in the eye of this turbidity—not oblivious—but not overly concerned or connected to the world's chaos. Dressed in my starched white button-down collared blouse, navy A-line skirt, pantyhose, white flats, Coral Sea lipstick and a helmet-head Summer-Blonde flip, I watched with detached interest the swirl of humanity through the plate glass windows of my dad's five-and-dime.

In my world, 1968 was the year the neighborhood stores closed, leaving empty shells with boarded windows. Customers were fed up with grungy panhandlers constantly asking for spare change to feed their mangy bandana-necked dogs, tired of stepping over stoned fourteen-year-old runaways who looked like five miles of blank road, and had it with being hustled by dreadlocked junkies, spaced-out punks, and blissed-out barefoot bums. The regulars hailed streetcars to Irving or took the bus over to Market, then eventually moved out of the Haight altogether.

1968 was the year Daddy's store closed. The Summer of Love, the riots, and the changing times did my father's business in. I find it worthwhile to note that his history echoed the same song from fifteen years earlier, the times again cracking my Dad's foundation and walls. Once again he sold his stock, boarded his windows, locked his glass front doors, and—once again—left town.

1968 was also the final straw for my mother. That was the year she ended her life in a small motel on Whittier Boulevard, closing a chapter on mine.

*Catherine Sevenau, a longtime Sonoma Valley resident and Realtor®, will read selections from her book, *Passages from Behind These Doors: A Family Memoir*, at 7:00 p.m., Thursday, November 13 at Readers' Bookstore in Sonoma. Sevenau's memoir explores a turbulent childhood: the breakdown and broken dreams of her fractured family; being raised by a thirteen-year-old sister, and living with an unhinged mother. The narrative is characterized by brutal honesty, humor, irreverence and grace that reflect her will not only to survive, but to thrive. A reception follows the reading.*



I am the big wind, I scatter all before,
Blow dust into the neighbor's eye,
Skid leaves under his door.

The noise I make when I blow full force,
Will deafen some, too bad of course.

Gardeners love the work I do,
And if old folks grumble,
I'll blow them too.

My din fills ears, fumes sear the nose,
With those who use me, anything goes.

I own the air of little towns,
Darling in fact of gardening clowns,
The "Mow and Blow" boys of backyard fame,
Who cannot give my work a name,
All love me, wear me, come what may,

Will hope to use me every day.

If you don't like me, go complain,
You won't get far, I'm not to blame.
It's you stuck far back in the past,
When silence was a thing to last.

Look not for it here or anywhere,
In backyards, out beneath the star.
Not now, for here there's no one cares,

What row I make, what ugly stares
From old man Giles who hides his ears,
And keeps the dust from off his cars.

Oh how they fly, those Autumn leaves,
Urged up and onward in my breeze,
To escape the dry, hot wind below
Bright reds and yellows—all my show!

MICHAEL JAMES came to California in 1953 after school in England and Germany. Drafted during the Korean War, he attended Cal on the GI Bill, majoring in English, German, and French. He then studied and worked in business before doing what he always wanted to do: he became a high school teacher, retiring in 1993. "I have been writing busily since joining the Sonoma Writers' Alliance in this century."