In order to fulfill the requirements for Kent State's writing minor, Kris Shearer wrote a reflective statement as a preface to the "Short Story" section of her Writing Portfolio (ENG 40010). Under the direction of Dr. Terry Sosnowski, Shearer compiled four short stories she had written at different points in her life. Along with exploring the technical aspects of fiction writing, Shearer explains how writing stories is "often a cathartic process that alleviates the stresses of everyday life."

In *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, Rachel Naomi Remen concludes that telling stories is not only a way of passing time, but also a way that wisdom and heritage are passed along and that stories contain the stuff that help us live a life worth remembering. In addition, Remen suggests that stories are like compasses, guiding us and showing us what is both good and evil about humanity and ourselves. Stories can, and perhaps should, provide guidance to and commentary about humanity, but, just as a poorly constructed compass will lead its owner astray, the message of a poorly written story will lead readers to a destination the author did not intend. In addition, a compass provides only guidance; it does not take its owner by the throat and jerk her toward a destination. A story that is overly didactic will lose effectiveness amid blatant rhetoric. A story's message, therefore, should not be beaten over a reader's head; rather, the message should be so woven into the fabric of the story that the reader does not consciously detect a "message." A well-constructed story combines content, voice, point of view, and tone to relay its meaning.

The four stories included in this portfolio developed largely out of issues which I, someone I care about, or perhaps someone I'd only heard about needed to work through, or current world issues that concerned me. Using "real" issues, however, does not automatically make a story easier to write. Attention still has to be paid to craft components. Most of the stories here went through at least three drafts before I decided they were complete.

"Saying Goodbye" won Kent State University's Virginia Perryman Freshman Writing Award in 1998. In spite of its award-winning status, "Saying Goodbye" went through two revisions two years later when I workshops it in a fiction writing class. Many of my classmates thought the story left too many questions unanswered. In addition, the characters needed more development and the original ending was unsatisfying. I agreed with many of the suggestions and made some changes. For example, the final paragraph was absent in the original version. In addition, my original characters seemed wooden, and I habitually "told" the reader instead of letting the reader experience the story for herself. Minute details, such as Lorene's change of mood with seasons and her letting the Christmas decorations sit in the basement, had greater impact on the reader than simply saying "Lorene was manic depressive," as I did in the original version. Furthermore, one student suggested I change the narrative point of view from first person to omniscient third person. I tried this, but the story begged to be written in first person. This story from the third person point of view lost its emotional impact. With first person, I felt there was a greater chance of reader identification; third person left the reader on the fringes of the story as a detached observer. "Saying Goodbye," a very personal story for me, was the first story I workshops in class. The experience of taking criticism of a story such as this taught me that writers must learn to distance themselves from their projects, to see their work through the eyes of others, if they are to improve and grow as writers at all.

The original version of "One" was written in 1986 just months after the birth of my daughter, when I was 23 and my husband and I were raising two small children. The idea came out of my feeling frustrated with my life and wondering how it might have been different if I'd known everything during my
teen years that I knew at 23. In addition, I often looked at my children—particularly my daughter—and wished I could shield them from life’s hurts, yet knowing that doing so would impede their growth into productive adults. The basic plot and voice of “One” remained relatively constant over the years of revisions, but the setting and characters changed. The original story took place in a park, with the main character having a solitary picnic lunch; though I thought I had a workable story, something I couldn’t define wasn’t quite working. I later often used my own bathroom as a retreat and when I saw a magazine picture of a woman in a bubble bath staring contemplatively ahead, I decided that “One” worked much better in a bathroom setting. In addition, in the original version, the young girls were not named and were identified only by age. I decided to subtly clue the reader by naming them all derivatives of “Elizabeth.” I believe that this story, maybe more than any other included here, reflects my development as both writer and woman because its changes and development so mirrored my personal change and development.

“Flesh Wounds” was one of those rare stories that writers tend to view as gifts. Dr. Terry Sosnowski, director of this portfolio, had asked that I write a new story. I had no idea what I was going to write about and spent a week forming and then rejecting several ideas. One Saturday afternoon, I sat playing cards with my husband and children. I happened to glance up and notice scars on my daughter’s upper arm, scars from wounds that were self-inflicted as my daughter engaged in the latest teen craze of self-mutilation. I spent that Saturday evening and all day Sunday in a writing frenzy. After I finished the story, I went to bed by six in the evening and slept for thirteen hours, taking the story to class the following Tuesday to workshop it. “Flesh Wounds” in its current state is largely unchanged from the version that originally came out on my computer. However, the ease with which “Flesh Wounds” appears to have been written does not mean that there was no sense of craft involved. I chose the viewpoint—first person/second person—in part because someone had said she’d never seen a story written in second person and didn’t think it could be done. The rebel in me found that a challenge!

Furthermore, “Flesh Wounds” deviates from my other first person stories in that the narrator is male. Though I made an attempt to write from female first person, the story just didn’t work; I believe, in part anyway, because that’s not the kind of story I wanted to tell. I truly wanted a story from a male’s point of view, and I wanted to write a story with a narrator who was affected by the action, though not necessarily directly involved. The male voice of “Flesh Wounds,” then, demonstrates how people who seem comparatively detached from a situation can still be injured or affected. In addition, one version of the story is written as straight first person because someone told me that first person/second person was “too experimental.” Again, the story just didn’t work in straight first person. The story isn’t about only the daughter; the story is about a family, and possibly a marriage, in crisis; the narrator addresses his thoughts to the wife he cannot confront in person. Furthermore, using straight first person seemed to shift the narrator to the fringes of the story rather than in the midst of it. As in “Saying Goodbye,” removing the narrator from the action lessens the story’s impact, so I reverted to the original viewpoint.

Finally, “Water Dancing” was a difficult story for me. Of all the stories here, “Water Dancing” is the most ‘fictional.’ There are few elements in this story that reflect my true life: I am fond of dolphins and the story started as a dream I’d had several nights, which is described in the opening paragraphs. When writing a story that is largely autobiographical, a writer has something to draw from; “Water Dancing” did not have that emotional launching pad. Initially, all I had was the dream image at the beginning. Next came the character of the little boy; I knew the boy had some physical impairment, but it took another two weeks before I honed in on deafness. I initially balked at the deafness because I knew little about it, but the more I tried to force the boy to have a different impairment, the harder the story became. It took me nine months to write this story—I won’t even begin to expound on the similarity between this and giving birth—and, oddly enough, the story was not written in linear fashion. After the initial dream image, I wrote the ending; the rest of the story came, painfully, in exhaustive stints of writing and rewriting as I experimented with scenarios that could logically lead to the conclusion I’d already written for the story. Initially, I used a parental kidnapping theme to complicate the story; however, that theme didn’t work. The father had no logical reason to kidnap the child. The more I fought to make the kidnapping theme fit, the harder the story was to finish. Once I allowed the story to be more about the mother, however, the process accelerated considerably. Despite the difficulty of writing this story, I think this story
pushed my growth as a writer. This was the first
time I'd ever really had such difficulty writing, and
this story taught me to push through the haze
toward the finished product. Furthermore, "Water
Dancing" destroyed the myth that stories—or
anything for that matter—absolutely must be
written in linear or chronological fashion.

Each of these stories manifested differently;
each of these stories has its own unique voice.
Startlingly, each of the divergent voices in the
stories is mine. In fact, I once joked to a professor
that fiction writing was a form of legitimized
schizophrenia. Writing fiction has been, to me, an
exploration of myself, a creative way to experiment
with my own beliefs and opinions. Writing fiction is
often a cathartic process that alleviates the
stresses of my everyday life. But in addition to
being cathartic, fiction writing often leads me to
solutions that have, through the compass of
everyday logic, eluded me.