



**"...within the war we are all waging with the forces of death, subtle and otherwise, conscious or not - I am not only a casualty, I am also a warrior."**

*Audre Lorde*

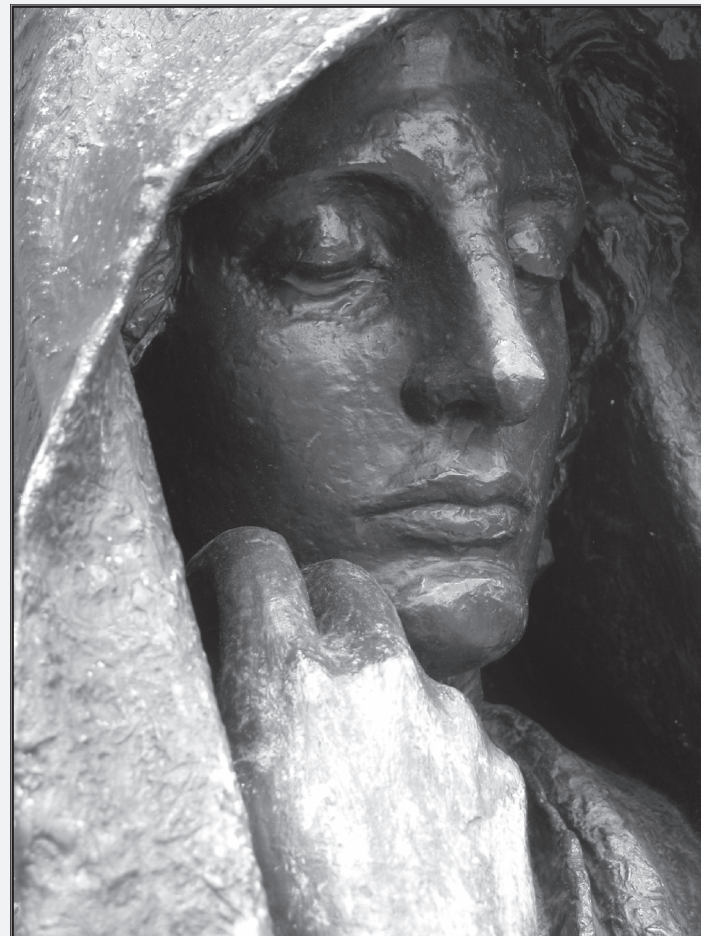
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**Fall 2006**

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**Death, Grief  
and  
Surviving**

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Fall 2006

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*Sinister Wisdom* is a multicultural, multi-class, female-born lesbian space. We seek to open, consider and advance the exploration of community issues. We recognize the power of language to reflect our diverse experiences and to enhance our ability to develop critical judgement, as lesbians evaluating our community and our world.

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## Submission Guidelines

**Submissions and correspondence** for SW #71 only should be sent to: sbirdstone@hotmail.com or to Chrystos & S. Birdstone, 3250 S 77th #8, Tacoma, WA 98409. Send material for SW #72 to fran@sonic.net or Fran Day, PO Box 1180, Sebastopol, CA 95473. See page 7 for details. Please read the submission guidelines below before sending material.

Everything else should be sent to Sinister Wisdom, POB 3252, Berkeley, CA 94703. Check our website at [www.sinisterwisdom.org](http://www.sinisterwisdom.org).

### Submission Guidelines: Please read carefully.

Submissions may be in any style or form, or combination of forms. Maximum submission: five poems, two short stories or essays, or one longer piece of up to 2,500 words. We prefer that you send your work by email in Word. If sent by mail, submissions must be mailed flat (not folded) with your name and address on each page. We prefer you type your work but short legible handwritten pieces will be considered; tapes accepted from print-impaired women. All work must be on white paper. Please proofread your work carefully; do not send changes after the deadline. A self-addressed stamped business-sized envelope must be enclosed. If you want acknowledgement of receipt, enclose a separate self-addressed stamped postcard. GRAPHIC ARTISTS should send B&W photos or drawings (duplicates) of their work (no slides.) Images sent electronically must have a resolution of 300dpi for photos and art, and 600dpi for line drawings. TIFF's and PDF's are preferred. Include a short biographical sketch written exactly as you want it printed. Selection may take up to nine months.

We publish only Lesbians' work. We are particularly interested in work that reflects the diversity of our experiences: as Lesbians of color, ethnic Lesbians, Jewish, Arab, old, young, working class, poverty class, disabled, and fat Lesbians. We welcome experimental work. We will not print anything that is oppressive or demeaning to Lesbians or women, or that perpetuates stereotypes. We do intend to keep an open and critical dialogue on all the issues that affect our lives, joy, and survival. Please contact us if you have a new theme you would like to see explored. We are looking for guest editors for future issues.

Sinister Wisdom, Inc. is a 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization. We provide free subscriptions to women in prison and psychiatric institutions (20% of our mailing list), as well as reduced price subscriptions for Lesbians with limited/fixed incomes. \* Enclose an extra \$10 to \$50 on your renewal to help cover publishing costs (larger donations accepted). \* Give Sinister Wisdom for birthdays, holidays, and special occasions. \* Please consider doing a benefit or subscription drive for Sinister Wisdom in your area.



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Uncredited photos and artwork by Sue Lenaerts and Judith K. Witherow



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## Notes for a Magazine

If anyone decides that an issue about death, grief and surviving is too depressing to read, she will miss a major chance to understand how this threesome profoundly affects Lesbians. The overwhelming majority of writing on coping with illness or death is geared towards the heterosexual community, neglecting what often are some of the most difficult aspects for Lesbians.

The writing in this issue makes it clear that we need to define what is required to help one another surpass unnecessary mental and physical suffering. Too many times planning is either neglected or done in such a way that the medical establishment won't adhere to the wishes of either partner.

There is one certainty in life—none of us will escape death of self or numerous loved ones. During the past few years a number of famous women and women activists in our community have passed away. Added to this number are countless family members, partners, friends and pets who loved us as we loved them. Knowing how to ease the ongoing pain requires the input of everyone who has survived such trauma.

Sadly, I speak these words from recent experience. The sudden death of a precious younger sister intensified the agony more than I ever imagined possible. In retrospect I feel her loss more than that of my parents. Perhaps the death of someone younger eludes my understanding. I thought sharing the editing with my partner of thirty years, Sue, would uncover the feelings we were suppressing, and help both of us work through the grief. This belief couldn't have been further from reality. No one truly knows what tragedy feels like until it touches her personally. Every individual has to experience loss and recovery at her own pace.

To begin the quest for answers to the countless questions involved, we need to understand what brought each to this place in time. The stories, poetry and artwork woven together in the issue speak in heartbreaking terms about what losing a loved one involves.

Reading about the crushing grief of so many others non-stop brought me to my knees countless times. We know the inner and outer suffering when it's our own, but when the description of borderline unbearable pain is repeated over and over and over again by strangers, it touches a part of us we never knew existed. If we truly care for each other as a community, we should be willing to share these burdens when they arise. Offer needed help without waiting for an invitation. Should your mind start searching for an

excuse, don't be surprised at the quietness of your phone when the Spirits whisper your name.

If you learn nothing else from what's written and shared, be sure to have others help monitor the care provided when a crisis occurs. Death is not the only outcome of various health matters. I've had enough close calls when hospitalized to know mistakes happen on a regular basis. Trust your instincts and the knowledge of those who are aware of the overall situation.

Equally important is recognizing that the amount of time for grieving is limitless. No deadline exists when losing someone you love is concerned. Grief is like pain—whatever affects you is the worst possible ache. You can't compare your own pain to the hurt of another. Understanding, without placing time limits, is a major step in the direction of healing.

The tremendous work by the women who contributed to this issue of *Sinister Wisdom* will insure that others believe Lesbians seriously need to confront death, grief and surviving as an important ongoing effort. We need to recognize that we are as closeted in our outlook on loss as we have been in every other aspect touching our lives.

In closing I'd like to say we regret that contributions by everyone couldn't be published. Even a double issue didn't allow for room to include all of the submissions. In an effort to make sure a variety of ideas on this subject were covered, some writing and artwork had to be omitted.

Last, but not least, if Honey hadn't shared and supplied non-stop work, this issue wouldn't have been possible—like so many things in life.

Judith K. Witherow



Photo by Sue Lenaerts



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## Upcoming Issues: Call for Submissions

See Submission Guidelines on the inside back cover. Please help spread the word about these issues. Thanks.

#70 Sinister Wisdom's 30th Anniversary Celebration Issue  
 Forthcoming Spring 2007  
 Editor: Fran Day

#71 Two Spirit Women of First Nations      Deadline: March 1, 2007  
 Guest Editors: Chrystos (Menominee) and Sunny Birdstone (Ktunaxa)

Colonialization has marginalized Indigenous women (as well as men), making Native Dykes almost completely invisible. We celebrate the survival of Two Spirit women of First Nations in this issue. Submissions may be in any format - taped interviews, dialogues, as well as fiction, poetry, etc. Please respect certain definitions, which have often been violated - ie. we ask for work from Lesbians who are Native in this lifetime only, recognized by their tribes or communities (although a BIA number is not required) and willing to use their name rather than a pseudonym (this is to help prevent submissions of non-authentic work). We define Indigenous Dykes as coming from the Americas, as well as the Pacific (Hawaii, New Zealand, Australia), with a land base (ie. reservation, rancho, etc.) and a tribal affiliation (Maori, Koori, Cree, etc.). Government recognition of tribal status is not necessary (ie. we recognize the Duwamish). We are particularly interested in stories from dykes who were in residential schools, Elders, incarcerated, & in honor of those who have passed on (Barbara Cameron NationShield, Smiley Hillaire). Edited by Chrystos (Menominee) and Sunny Birdstone (Ktunaxa). Megwetch.

Send material for #71 only to: [sbirdstone@hotmail.com](mailto:sbirdstone@hotmail.com) or to Chrystos & S. Birdstone, 3250 S 77th #8, Tacoma, WA 98409

#72 Utopia Deadline: August 1, 2007 Editor: Fran Day  
 Send to [fran@sonic.net](mailto:fran@sonic.net) or Fran Day, PO Box 1180, Sebastopol, CA 95473.

Details at [www.sinisterwisdom.org](http://www.sinisterwisdom.org)

Pam McAllister

## Grief

Evicted from happiness,  
I arrive at grief's shabby motel,  
suitcase in hand.

The conditions are appalling,  
with tear stains everywhere -  
    in a corner of the ceiling,  
    around the hissing radiator,  
    under the sink.

The bed is lumpy; I won't sleep.  
A bare bulb glares; all is bleak.  
There are etchings on the wall,  
stark memories, black and white.

I know every corner of this room, I've visited before,  
remember well the smell of dust and mold.  
The wallpaper has faded from blue to gray.  
It's peeling or has been torn as if one could allay  
This useless clawing, a gesture of despair,  
the futility, fear, frustration that's here.

I vow not to stay long,  
but for now, these stains, peeling paper, bare bulb  
are all I need. The clock is unplugged;  
the curtains drawn.

I trust I'll want the sun, flush hours, flowers,  
concerts, friends again, but for today  
observe the "Do Not Disturb" sign  
and stay away.  
I've closed the door  
and moved in.

Meredith Pond

## **This Morning**

*(for Joan Dickenson)*

A cardinal as red as a valentine  
perches on the fencepost this morning  
and in the neighbor's yard, the silver oaks  
reach up through the white sheet of sky  
as if to beckon you back to earth.

You could be here, Joan, all healed,  
perusing today's politics in the paper  
as I bring you some tea and remind you  
of that morning on Block Island  
when you decided to do another load of laundry  
well before the others were even awake.

I found you standing on tiptoes, bare breasted,  
reaching into the dryer with both arms  
disappeared deep inside, feeling for a sock  
or one of your startling bandanas.

You have resplendent breasts, I said,  
and you turned, smiling, to show me  
your handiwork laid out on the table, all neatly folded,  
like a baroness from the Middle Ages revealing her riches.

We were East of everything that day  
twelve miles out from Galilee and Sand Hill Cove  
sharing a week of writing and cooking  
and good company with our friends

Your old blue station wagon in the ferry lot  
on the mainland waited for you to return  
like a devoted dog sound asleep on the warm asphalt,  
not worried about anything, and with no idea  
of your body giving out, or up, or in, any time soon.

"Love each other," you said on the phone  
from your hospital bed. "Love each other."  
Staring into the receiver, I promised to try.  
"Get well," I said. "Please."

Carolyn Gage

## Keening in Bangor

*On March 27, 1998, at 9:30 PM on a Friday night, two sixteen-year-old girls, Cass Roberts and Emily Stupak, drove their car into a grove of birch trees at a speed estimated by police to have been over 100 miles-an-hour, at “Dead Man’s Curve” on Levant Road, just outside the town center of Levant, Maine, west of Bangor. Cass and Emily were in love with each other.*

“Keening” is derived from the Irish word, “caoineadh,” meaning to cry or lament. It is a deep, heartfelt vocalization over the dead, somewhere between a scream, a sob, and a wail. The sound of keening is profoundly disturbing to the human ear, which may be why it has been associated with supernatural traditions. It was believed that keening provided the soul of the recently deceased with a chaperone to the Otherworld. To keen too soon after death was to risk waking the devil’s dogs, who could potentially intercept the soul in its passage. On the other hand, if the keening was too long delayed, there was the danger that the soul would have already departed for its journey in a perilously unchaperoned state.

Whether as a spirit escort or a catharsis for the living, keening was perceived by the Church as a political threat, and, for a time, it was banned as a pagan practice. Silence was officially instituted as the only dignified and appropriate response to grief. Apparently, those piercing, eerie, and peculiarly female-sounding wails were considered outside the bounds of Church decorum and colonial occupation.

But grief itself lies on the extremity of human experience, and what more fitting expression than a sound situated on the boundary of human expression? Keening has been characterized as a way of emotionally purging an unassimilable loss, in much the same way as vomiting (another indecorous act) can purge the stomach of potentially toxic content.

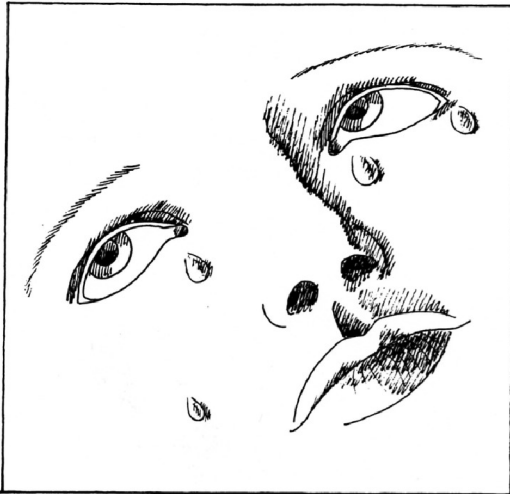
I practiced keening for the first time this year. It was in a small town in central Maine, about two hours north of Portland, where I live. I had gone there on a mission. One might even call it a pilgrimage. I wanted to visit the site where two sixteen-year-old girls had driven their car at what was estimated to be over a hundred-miles-an-hour into a grove of birch trees. The treacherous ninety-degree curve in the road was known locally as “Dead Man’s Curve,” but these deaths had been no accident. There were no skid

marks, alcohol had not been involved, and a suicide note had been left on the seat of the car. The contents of the note were never disclosed to the public, because the police had chosen to turn it over to the parents. Their official explanation for their silence? “The families have already suffered enough.”

No doubt the families suffered, although I am not sure what it means to “suffer enough.” One thing is clear: The two girls had suffered beyond what they could bear. And nobody was allowed to talk about that. The silence was and is still deafening. Keening has been banned. By the unspoken

rules of small-town preservation of family secrets, keening had again been banned.

The media gave the double suicide perfunctory, evasive coverage, either out of respect for the privacy of the families, or concern for their own reputation, or both. The disappeared note, which could have relieved the media of their temerity over ascribing the “L word” to the victims, had been



Crying Womon

Sudie Rakusin

ignorantly suppressed. In a small rural town in the middle of Maine, people would not have understood that lesbianism was an integral part of the story and that acknowledgement of it would have been a mark of respect for the dead. Instead, they would have taken their local newspaper to task for sensationalizing a tragedy and desecrating the memory of the girls. High school friends, possibly even more intimidated than the press, shuffled their feet and gave vague responses to reporters: “You never saw one without the other . . .” and “They were always pretty much together.” One especially brave classmate, went so far as to say, “I hope this has made kids think . . . Did they know we loved them?”

Probably not. According to one recent study, 97% of students in a public high school hear homophobic remarks from their peers.<sup>1</sup> One reporter in Iowa found that the typical high school student hears anti-lesbian or anti-



gay slurs more than twenty-five times a day.<sup>2</sup> In a fourteen-city study of gay, lesbian and bisexual youth, 80% reported verbal abuse, 44% reported threats of attack, 33% reported having objects thrown at them and 30% reported being chased or followed.<sup>3</sup> Lesbian and gay youth are two-to-six times more likely to attempt suicide, and this population may account for nearly a third of all completed suicides among teens.<sup>4</sup> In the Massachusetts study, 46% who identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual had attempted suicide in the past year compared to 8.8% of their peers.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the silence of the press, there were the rumors. According to a source close to one of the girls, they had both come out to their families just one day before the accident, and the members of one of the families had been Christian fundamentalists – fundamentalists who viewed homosexuality as perverted and sinful. If this was true, it might explain why only one family had reported the girls missing on the night of the accident.

If it is true the girls had just come out to their parents, this paints us a painful picture of the girls' last day together. Had they been forbidden to see each other? Had they spent the day together anyway, knowing that they were defying their families? The day was a Friday. Were they unwilling to face their first weekend without any contact with each other? The time of death was 9:30 PM. How long did they drive around? Had the suicide been planned earlier in the day, or was it a last-minute, panicked response to the approach of their curfew? Were they afraid to go home? Was this the first time they had ever violated curfew, openly defied their parents? Were they afraid of violence? Was lying an option? Wasn't there anyone, anywhere to whom they could turn? Was the note something they composed together, agonizing over the precise use of words that would enable the world to understand their love – or was it something hastily scrawled, just minutes before acceleration?

The accident was not reported until the next morning. Their car had been hidden from view under a canopy of branches bent low from the winter ice storms. The tree that they hit was large for a birch, about two feet in diameter. Badly gashed, it did not fall. The police speculated, judging from the damage to the car, that the girls must have been traveling very fast and died immediately on impact.

I had difficulty at first locating this “Dead Man’s Curve.” There were two roads with the same name, more or less in the same county, and I had driven to the wrong one. Failing to locate any part of the road that could even remotely qualify as a “dead man’s curve,” I had given up and stopped

at a coffee shop. Rechecking my sources, I realized my error and was soon on my way to the other road. This time there was no need to search for the site. It was impossible to miss. About a half-mile outside of town, at a right-angle bend and under a grove of birch trees, there were two white, wooden, hand-made crosses. A photograph of one of the girls was nailed above the gash on the tree that had been hit. Someone had lettered the names of the girls on the crosses and painted a tiny red heart on each of the opposing arms of the cross, where they touched—almost.

I had not really planned what I would do once I located the site, but suddenly here I was. I parked on the opposite side of the road and crossed to the birch grove. There were few cars on this country road, and I was alone. It was a fall day, rainy, and most of the leaves from the trees had already fallen. As I stood there, the idea of keening came to me. I felt a pain deep in my chest and a constriction in my throat. It was as if there was something stuck inside me that I couldn't get out. Strangled with grief, I was simultaneously choking from rage. And so I began. The sound came spontaneously. The constriction in my throat shaped the sound of my pain, and perhaps this is why keening is so cathartic. It gives voice to the unspeakable. I thought again of the Church's ban on keening, relating it to the silence and media blackout on the motivation for these girls' deaths, the censorship of their final words -- words that may have been intended to change the world, and words that easily could have done just that.

What happens when people are not allowed the full expression of their grief? Is it true that an emotion not fully expressed, is one that is not fully felt? And when one does not feel one's feelings, what happens to them? In the case of these deaths, some of that taboo grief was transformed into fear. Fellow lesbians in the high school were deeply traumatized by this event, taking a giant step back into their closets. Some of the stifled grief was transmuted to anger directed at the dead girls, that they could not work out their problems, that they should have shown more consideration toward their classmates than to kill themselves. Where was the anger toward the police who made the high-handed decision to protect the contents of the notes, clearly in opposition to the intention of the girls who martyred themselves in part to get their story out? Where was the anger toward a church that condemned them to hell? Toward parents who could not accept the sexual orientation of their own daughter? Toward the journalists who were too cowardly to challenge the codes of small-town homophobia, who were complicitous in covering up a story that could have galvanized the

entire country around the issue of lesbian/gay-baiting and its horrendous consequences? Where was the anger toward school officials who have traditionally turned a blind eye to the sexual harassment and lesbian/gay-baiting that has made school a living hell for so many students?

There was nothing I could do for these two girls now. They were dead. But I could do something for myself. I could keen. I could stand by the side of this road, in front of these birch trees, and I could let out the sound of my pain until I was empty of it, until I was free of it, and it would not sour in my gut as fear, or guilt, or shame, or anger against myself. I could stand there and I could keen for all the unchaperoned spirits of lesbians and gays who have had to leave under similar pressures, similar torments, and with similar violence. And then I could leave that spot, the birch trees still resonating with the sound of my bitter keening, and I could drive away with a renewed commitment to social change, with a strengthened courage to stand up to oppressive institutions and individuals, with a deeper love for my own lesbianism.

References:

<sup>1</sup> *Making Schools Safe for Gay and Lesbian Youth: Report of the Massachusetts Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth*, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Carter, Kelley, "Gay Slurs Abound," in *The Des Moines Register*, March 7, 1997, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> A. R. D'Augelli and S. L. Hershberger, Lesbian, gay and bisexual youth in community settings: Personal challenges and mental health problems, *American Journal of Community Psychology* 21:421, 1993

<sup>4</sup> Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey (MYRBS), Massachusetts Department of Education, 1997.

(Statistics originally compiled by PFLAG )

Susan Eschbach

## Blessings on this day of challenges

As the fluorescent light  
from the nurses station shines  
a wedge into this room,  
bless the darkness just before  
this morning.

Our eastern window does not yet  
wear the sun  
as I pull on jeans, a sweatshirt,  
sneakers, comfort  
for the wait.  
Bless the soft feel that surrounds me.

Soon the stretcher will arrive,  
your ride to surgery, but  
they are late and I indulge  
the blessing of our bodies  
warm, stretched side by side on this hospital bed,  
waiting.

Dawn peeks, we  
rest longer.  
Blessed rest.

Down thirteen floors into  
underground rooms,  
we are greeted by nurses,  
blue and green scrubs,  
early birds tidying their  
nests, readying for their day.  
Warm eyes, gestures of accommodation,  
welcome, can I get you another blanket,  
can I raise your head a bit.  
Bless their commitment to caring,  
to making us safe.

Delay, another patient emergency,  
delay indefinite.  
May that patient be protected from fear.  
Blessings of patience while we wait.  
I am thankful for my strong back while I sit and stand,  
stand and wait.  
It is a blessing to feel fit enough  
for this.

I sit with you  
on your bed,  
your eyes both weary and frightened.  
I feel the texture of the cotton blanket.  
My hands warm the curves of  
your legs  
rubbing gently to warm you, to reach  
into where you are sealed away  
preparing yourself  
And I know that together in this  
we are holy.

Back to the under rooms,  
nurses, now  
tubes, anesthesia,  
I am told to leave.  
Your eyes are frightened.  
We sing the Sh'ma, you say you  
will chant it.  
I know you can will your way  
through this, as can I.  
We are blessed with strong wills.

The family waiting area is  
well conceived, inviting  
sustaining.  
Computers update families,  
tell us how to pace our wait, when  
to hold our breath.

There are separate rooms for privacy,  
tears.

I work a puzzle

551 pieces.

A friend comforts me, we  
chat, the Sopranos, George W,  
new books.

To talk about my pain, my  
fear, I must look at the puzzle pieces  
grab onto an edge  
focus on color, shape, or  
fly into pieces, more  
than 551.

It is a blessing offered to families here, and  
a blessing of friends.

One doctor from the team  
of many, comes to speak,  
describe, deliver an account.  
She is competent, measured  
clear, strong. I  
appreciate her skill and am deeply  
thankful for her good judgment.

Medical care is a mystery of many  
facets, at once direct, sure,  
effective, yet limited, vague,  
partial.

Rabbi Hoffman says Jews heal  
with medicine, hope and prayer.  
Bless these offerings for they are what we have.

One more waiting room.  
They are prepping you, for  
what I wonder. Prepare me for you?  
Prepare you for the coming  
challenges?

It is close to dinner, well past it  
actually. I rest with my head back against the wall,

to breathe, to sing softly  
the Sh'ma.

So far I have breathed through  
hours of challenge with an  
appreciation of the extraordinary blessings  
of the ordinary.

I have not been one wrestling  
with God.

I am thankful for that on this  
day of days.

And we are not done.

It is our 16<sup>th</sup> hour of this day.  
The electric Shabbat candles shine  
and a moment's quiet finally settles in.

For two and a half hours  
we pleaded, demanded, negotiated,  
questioned a bureaucracy slow to  
relieve your pain.

My fury rose. Nearly blinded.

Balancing angry demands with  
patient diplomacy, this conflict,  
like a wall, blocked my throat. I felt  
like a cannon half discharged, no successful release,  
no tamped fuse. The medicine arrived.

I am blessed with this fury to get things done.

You worked hard to gather yourself

Breathe.

Respiration rate alarms and my touch on your arm,  
a reminder to, literally,  
breathe.

Blood pressure dancing.

You need help to move your head on the pillow.

I count 11 tubes.



I, so often scornful of our  
allopathic ideas, am thankful for those  
researcher who have configured  
the equations for adequate doses  
of drugs.  
You rest.  
I breathe.

I am thrilled merely to  
sit here. I am my beloved's  
and my beloved  
is mine.  
Adonai echad.  
Perhaps the day is completing.

I am blessed  
by this long day  
where I could find hope  
and prayer  
and deep appreciations,  
let go at times of fear,  
despair,  
find courage in what is sacred,  
and find sacredness in what  
just is.



Kamila Rina

## again

i don't want to watch you die. (again.) i don't want to watch you die again.

you are soft and pink and dying. in my arms. you're bleeding, but mostly inside. like me. your face and neck a little mottled, that's all. red spider-cracks on your cheeks, sides of your neck; your mouth a little dirty — caked with blood like mud. you can't breathe. your mouth tries to gasp in some air, but all it manages is an empty o like a fish... i think your air pipe's crushed. your face chalky white, red spiders on your face, mouth like an o, blood crusts at the corners... horror tiptoes in. in a few moments you will be dead.

i can't watch you die. i turn my head. if i don't watch, it can't happen.

you are dying while i hold you. i turn my head. i can't meet your eyes. i betrayed you; i didn't protect you. i am not a good mother.

you are quietly bleeding & suffocating in my arms. you are my baby. i am just a child too, and your mother. i can't protect you. i am nothing like a mama bear, i'm a frozen scared girl, called dirty so often i believed it, as interchangeable men climbed on top of me, as my father's tongue & a cattle prod twisted, braided good & bad like bread, broke the stems off my neurons, rewired my body to have pleasure seizures during torture.

they told me they broke your neck as punishment. for me being a whore. for shaking under some man's mouth or with a baton up my cunt. for tempting "good" men with my sinful kid body.

i understand i am a bad girl. twisted, immoral, coldhearted. yet i'm frantic with pain, my heart so swollen & raw it's straining out of my ribcage. a heart that got chewed up by my father, my mother, the johns — they all took a piece as they fingered my tiny child cunt walls, stuck penises into my unhinging jaw... a heart seeping agony in soft slow drops.

i'm a child whore whose father impregnated her while she shook under him in pain and orgasm and tearing flesh... i am tainted, bent, rusted, worth nothing — and i have nothing, except you my baby. and i love you, with all the intensity of a desperate child lost to herself long ago, who finds her humanity in the pools of her daughter's eyes & refuses to let go. you are mine and i am yours and to each other we are still-good, still-human.

i want to buy your life. i ask. (beg, plead.) they say they'll. let me. they lie. after i have licked and sucked and gagged and lain under and smiled and moaned and stroked and fucked enough dead-eyed bodies, they let me hold you one last time before they burst your trachea with a violent squeeze. like a peanut shell. they tell me of the death sentence before they carry it out. so that i know it's an execution for my crimes. so i know it's my fault. so i hate myself and not them.

i am watching my baby die. i am crying, crying so hard my father slaps me, wild sobs echoing off his palm. inconsolable. i will cry every day. until my adolescent mind breaks and collapses like her trachea, and buries the picture of her spider-shot face.



Bleeding Heart

Photo by Judith K. Witherow

it is years later. i am a broken, despairing adult, and I am excavating, tearing up my mind, looking for the source of the rust, the oily shame. i sift out the horror: her face, the myriad thieving johns, my father's dick inside me, tongue on me, hands everywhere taking taking choking (mother grandmother uncle fuck no one was safe), the clinking of money, my flushed scarred cunt, my guilt, the punishment, my animal grief that wants to claw the world apart...

and in the cinema of my torn mind i am watching her die again. and again. her hours-old face pinned to my retinas, stunned & gasping. and i'm crying again, my howling penetrating the thin walls. i think, my neighbours are gonna call the cops. i think, people must die of pain like this.

they couldn't afford to leave her alive. she was evidence of what was done to me, she was my new mote of hope, of redemption. so dangerous. she was never meant to survive. but i was her mother, and i was all she had, and i didn't save her, and i'd felt her head on my breast, her tiny fingers against mine, and i loved her with all the passion in my scarred child body, and i didn't save her. what i feel is not as simple as grief or guilt or helplessness, it's a new country, a geographical space soaked with her absence. there is no coming back from here. we the animals in this stark landscape are forever changed, forever chained.

Riggin Waugh

## No Lights, No Sirens

The paramedic says I cannot  
ride with her in the back.  
Regulations. I plead, offer

to sign a waiver, promise  
not to tell. I want to be there  
for her this last time. I hold

my mother's hand, talk softly to her  
the whole ride. Her eyes scared,  
her voice silent, like never before.

I can't remember when she got so little.  
At the hospice, I string twine across  
the room for all the get-well cards,

when getting well is no longer even  
a prayer. Then I wish away the pastor,  
the people from church, even her girlfriends.

Later, I bring in my old German shepherd,  
who my mother's always called her only  
granddaughter, to say goodbye.

But this night my mother is no longer  
conscious, the dog smells, and I return  
her to the car. I hold my mother's hand

for another hour after she dies.  
Then I take down the string of cards,  
and pack up her few belongings

in her blue cardboard suitcase,  
older than I am and empty  
but for some loose bobby pins.

In my mother's apartment at five a.m.,  
way past sleep, too early to make calls,  
I give the dog a bath.

Pat Browne

## Fierce Love in Times of Storm: A Love Letter for Aggie

*Fierce as death is love,  
Relentless as the nether world is devotion;  
Its flames are a blazing fire.  
Deep waters cannot quench love,  
Nor floods sweep it away.*

*The Song of Songs (8: 6-7)*

The names themselves are full of music: Plaquemines, Atchafalaya, Belle Chasse, Meraux, Calliope, Pontchartrain, Tchoupitoulas, Fountainbleu, Carondelet, Arabi, Chalmette, Jean Lafite, Algiers, Bayou St. John, the Audubon Zoo—where “they all aks for you.” Your eyes always lit up when you chimed all the lilting variations of the fugue of the places you loved in and around the city of New Orleans. When we flew in together for the first time in November 1989, you leaned into my shoulder and began to teach me the geography of this city: Lake Pontchartrain with its twenty-six mile causeway; the beautiful empty, green, green swampland threaded with long needle pine west of the city; the looping crescent in the mighty Mississippi that gives the city its nickname; how so much of the “West Bank” is east of the “East Bank,” how the city was reclaimed, claimed from the swamp, how it rests in the delta that stretches for another eighty miles before touching the Gulf of Mexico.

That first time, and all our trips after, before going home to Algiers we stopped at Café du Monde for beignets and café au lait. We always sat outside under the green striped awning across from Jackson Square where the buggies pulled by mules in straw hats lined up to squire tourists around the French Quarter. We breathed the humid, pungent Louisiana air. Then, never passing up a chance to be on the water, instead of the quick route to the West Bank over the bridge, we took the Canal Street ferry, always the ferry. From the deck you pointed out the powerful roils as the ferry struggled against the enormous current of the river. Then we drove down General de Gaulle, past the Mary Joseph Residence for the Elderly run by the Little Sisters of the Poor where Mama spent her later years, turned left onto Woodland, then right onto Finland and drove down a canopy of live oaks to a little blue house dwarfed by an overarching tree. Home. Home to Mama and Papa

until he died in February 1990 and then to Mama until she became one of the uncounted and “delayed” victims of Hurricane Katrina in October 2005.

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I disappointed Aggie in my response to the city she so loved. Where she saw beauty, I saw mold and mildew eating the houses alive. Where she rejoiced in a wild, wonderful diversity of ethnicity and culture, I felt a palpable racial tension gnawing at the heart of the place. And hot. It was so hot for this Minnesotan. We flew in once in July of 2000 at 11:00 p.m., and it was still 101 degrees. I whined and dragged along behind her to our rental



car. Now February, that’s another story, February, when the azaleas bloom in New Orleans while blizzards rage in Minnesota. I remember an early spring afternoon lying on the grass with Aggie in City Park eating snow cones. I loved her city that day. But I didn’t love it fiercely as she loved it fiercely. Until Katrina. Katrina changed everything, opened my eyes to the beauty of a city lost. I understand now, Aggie. I understand at last.

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In the first days, as I waited anxiously for news of your family, I could not stop watching TV. It became so clear so very quickly that the city you loved doesn’t exist any more. New Orleans is gone. You would be profoundly sad.

The devastation for the poorest of the poor who had no way to leave is so utter, hope so irretrievable from such despair. From the roofs of the Fischer housing projects at the foot of the West Bank Expressway where it curves south and west, near the General De Gaulle exit, people held up signs, waving and begging for help. Those rescued were abandoned on the bridge without food, water, or shelter from the blazing sun. I will never forget the image of the woman whose husband of fifty-four years died after two days on the bridge. After five, she was still marooned there sitting next to his body.

Incrementally, passed on from one sibling to another in the moments when someone’s cell phone worked, the news came that Aggie’s two brothers and three sisters who had been living in and near New Orleans were all safe, but scattered now to four states. Mama was evacuated by bus with the other

residents of her nursing home to a nursing home in Baton Rouge where no one in the family lived. Aggie's family's story is a microcosm of the city's story, of the city's diaspora. And no, the loss of Mama is the final wave in a river of devastation that began to flow in shortly following the hurricane and the breach of the levees. The first euphoria of pure survival soon gave way to the ordeal and trauma of living in the aftermath.

Accompanied by two of the Little Sisters of the Poor from Mary Joseph, Edna finally was able to get to Mama three weeks after the hurricane. She found her ill, dirty, and alone; and she could not track down either a nurse or an aid willing to help her. When she finally got Mama cleaned up and fed her and got someone to weigh her, she found that Mama had lost twenty-five pounds in three weeks. She was starving. The sisters from Mary Joseph urged Edna to move her somewhere else. It didn't take any urging, but finding a good nursing home was another story. In a family conference by phone and e-mail, Aggie's brothers and sisters decided to move Mama to a nursing home in Colorado Springs near Aggie's youngest sister, Margie. Margie, the youngest, whom we all tease for wearing rose-colored glasses—her rose-colored glasses that we are so grateful for because we all need them so desperately—sent everyone little e-mail updates to the whole family about how Mama was doing: She was able to go to Mass again; she was eating a little; she was singing with Margie in the courtyard as Margie practiced her choir hymns for the following Sunday.

But Mama had lost too much ground in Baton Rouge. She could not recover from the starvation she had endured there, and she began to fail more each day, until she began to slip away. John, George and his daughter Tina, Charlie, and Paul and Grace all flew out to be with Mama and Margie. Edna was the last to arrive and held her breath all the way longing for Mama to stay until she had a chance to say goodbye. Mama waited for her, as Aggie had waited for her in the blizzard almost two years ago now. Mama died early in the morning of October 30, two months following the hurricane, one of so many uncounted and delayed casualties of Katrina.

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All I can believe, all any of us can hold onto, is that Mama came to be with Papa and with you, Aggie. You died two years ago this December after such a long, long war with breast cancer. Now, witnessing from afar the death of the city you so loved, I finally understand her beauty. I am so sorry that it took me so long. Please forgive me.

I am holding close your stories: How Mama and Papa, following a period of terrible poverty and transience after moving the family from

Panama in 1967, were finally able to scrape enough together to buy the little house on Finland on the West Bank only a block from the river. How, so implausibly, so miraculously for you, the house came with a horse stabled nearby. A house with a horse. How they let you keep the horse if you earned his keep. How you brought broken-down Cezanne from the far edge of neglect and starvation. How he saved you. How you rode him every day on the levee and swam him in the batcher. How you cobbled together costumes and rode him in Mardi Gras parades every year. How you lay in bed at night and listened to the music of anchor chains playing out into the river from the tugs and barges waiting until dawn to come into the docks up river. In the wake of the hurricane, in the wake of your death and Mama's death, all these stories are treasures now.

You were passionate. You loved life passionately. You loved life fiercely. You loved me passionately and yes, fiercely, in a way I had never known or imagined. I loved you deeply, but as a Minnesotan loves. You were very patient with your Irish/Scandinavian/Ojibwe former nun. I remember you telling me that you were sure you could wake up my passion. You did, but never as much as you had hoped. Your cancer did the rest. When we began our six and a half year war with your breast cancer, I became a mother lion. My own fierce love for you woke up then. We stood shoulder to shoulder day after day, year after year fighting for your life.

In the months since the hurricane, I have awakened almost every day in a wash of dread. All the questions come tumbling out again: How can we bear the loss of those we so deeply love and go on breathing? Breathing is hard work, Aggie. Some moments, in the ordinariness of eating breakfast, taking Solstice outside, sorting laundry, breathing becomes a little unconscious again, and just happens. Other times, like catching a glimpse of your blue canvas clog on the closet floor this morning, the next breath catches in my throat like a fish caught and lurching on a line. And then I hold onto the breath after that breath because for less than a breath, you are here with me again. I can see your foot slipping into that shoe and going on about whatever simple chore we were up to, grocery shopping maybe, a haircut, the hardware store, the farmers' market. All the lovely ordinary moments that I let pass by without savoring, but savor now over and over again. I would give every breath remaining to me to just see your foot, not even your beloved face, just your dear foot, just your foot. That would be enough. I love you fiercely. I grieve for you fiercely.

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I am ashamed to say, my dear sweet Aggie, that it also took Katrina, and it even took Mama's death, for me to truly understand your fierce love for your family, as a family. From the beginning, I always loved them as individuals simply because you so clearly loved them. You were tenth of thirteen—thirteen!! You rejoiced when, early in our years together, your whole family gathered at Chicot State Park (We all called it "Chigger" State Park for apparent reasons.) for a family reunion. I walked around in a daze and kept saying when we had a rare moment alone, "But there are so many of you! I can't even begin to keep your sisters and brothers names in my mind, let along all your in-laws, nieces and nephews. And it is impossible to talk to anyone because everyone is talking (read shouting) at once." And, patiently, patiently, you would say, "Honey, that doesn't matter. We're all here!" At all the family gatherings since, I was befuddled, overwhelmed, awed, and wandering on the periphery of a swirling family love fest. My own broken, strained, tense, tenuous family prepared me for none of this festival of chaos. More is better.

When you died in December 2003, there was a memorial service for you in New Orleans two days after Christmas, and everyone came home. I was still in shock and barely registered anything. But when Mama died after the hurricane, and the whole family gathered for her funeral in New Orleans, a ravaged family in a ravaged city, I got it at last. I longed to be with them, all of them, because I longed to be with you. I found myself loving them fiercely and being loved fiercely in return. In your absence in this time of the loss of Mama, I became in truth her seventh daughter, as she had claimed me for many years already. "Just call me 'Mama.' You're my daughter too." She seemed to delight in having seven of each that way. And she always loved that I used to be a nun. It didn't matter to her one bit that I had left the order. Just being one for fifteen years was somehow enough for her. And in the last years, especially after your cancer returned with a vengeance, she would often say to me, "Now promise me you will stay with Aggie. Don't you ever leave her!"

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After arranging for Mama's body to come home to New Orleans for her funeral and burial next to Papa, Edna flew home with a stop-over in Minneapolis. I met her there, and we flew the last leg into New Orleans together. Flying in, as you did so many years ago now, she leaned into my shoulder and began to teach me the geography of the hurricane. She pointed out the color of Lake Pontchartrain, so far from anything even remotely resembling blue. She pointed to the now dead swampland, gray and brown

instead of luxuriant green. All the long needle pines were either blown down or drowned in polluted brackish water. They looked like Minnesota tamaracks, gold in the fall. As we came upon the city, we started to see all the blue roofs. A city full of blue-tarped roofs, FEMA roofs she called them. Just before landing, we circled over the heart of the city, and the curved roof of the Superdome stood out starkly on the skyline. How could it ever shake the nightmare images of the days following the hurricane when the poor and lost gathered there?

In those first couple of days, before the rest of the family arrived, Edna and I drove around the city together making preparations for Mama's funeral—church, funeral home, cemetery, florist, a place for a family dinner on Friday night, the enormous challenge of finding an open store to look for a dress for her daughter Tina. I rode shotgun with Solstice by my feet, checking off our lists. The more we drove around, the more the extent of the devastation and its impact on every detail of their lives began to sink in. True recovery seems far, far away as the city exists day to day in survival mode. But mourning, survival didn't seem so foreign to us. We both missed you so much on these forays, especially looking at Mama's blue casket and choosing her blue dress. And we both felt you deeply with us.

By Thursday afternoon and evening, all the family began to arrive home, most with their own families. It's a long list: Ruth, Robert, George, Florence, John, Mary Helen, Charlie, Paul, Eddie, Aggie, Michael, Edna, and Margie—still probably not in perfect oldest to youngest order, but at least all accounted for—impossible to recite at all without chanting your name too.

The logistics for housing us all wouldn't be easy because there are no hotel rooms available in New Orleans; all are still housing relief workers, police, firefighters, construction/deconstruction workers. From Colorado Springs, Edna had called the two Little Sisters of the Poor still at the Mary Joseph Home for the Elderly. Mary Joseph was a very familiar place for me. We had visited Mama there for years and Aggie's memorial service was held there a few days after Christmas in 2003. Immediately after the hurricane, the National Guard had taken over the nursing home for their headquarters. The two sisters were still there dismantling and salvaging what they could for their nursing homes in other states. But because they had so loved Mama, and because they knew the family's situation, they promised to somehow make it possible for Mama's family from out of town to stay there.

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In this time of the loss of Mama, your sisters and brothers claimed me fully as their sister. Sent by the rest, Margie came to find me in the bathroom

at church to come ride to the cemetery with “the girls” in the limo. When I looked at her puzzled, she said in simple, not-to-be-argued-with explanation, “You are Aggie,” took me by the hand and led me along to join the rest of your sisters.

Later, they all shouted out to me to come join them under the live oak tree in the front yard for a picture of the sisters. One of the brothers shouted out, George, I think, “When did Aggie get so gray?!” And oh, how I hold dear the sad privilege of standing with your sisters and brothers in your place. How I listen over and over again in my heart to Margie saying so simply, “You are Aggie.” I want nothing more than to be part of this festival of chaos, this complicated festival of love.

The weekend of Mama’s funeral your sisters and brothers gave you back to me. I watched your sisters’ hands, your hands, the same honey skin, the same delicate blue vein, the same way of holding a newspaper, the same gestures while talking on the phone. I listened to the lilting rise at the end of a sentence in your brothers’ voices and heard deeper echoes of your own. In moments when they smile or laugh, their eyes crinkle almost closed. The familiarity took my breath away. They all gave you back to me. They reminded me of what I have lost forever.

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Driving home from the airport on a clear Minnesota night, I saw a falling star, the biggest and brightest ever. My heart sails in its wake, as I always sailed so happily in yours, flying south, south into the deep bowl of the night in the Crescent City.

When I went to sleep that night, I dreamed we launched our beloved canoe into the headwaters of the Mississippi and began paddling to New Orleans.

*Somos el barco. Somos el mar. Yo velo en ti. Tu velas en mi.  
We are the boat. We are the sea. I sail in you. You sail in me.*

*(from the folk song, “Somos el Barco” by Lorre Wyatt)*

Maria Fama

## Jeans Jacket

I know you are dead

Hanging clothes, packing clothes  
folding and sorting clothes

I know you are dead

I open the drawer

you are dead

I close the drawer

you are dead

in the closet out of the closet

you are dead

But where is your jeans jacket?

the jacket I loved redolent of you, the elegant chef

the faded denim contained your world

extra-virgin olive oil soaked the blue fibers

the fabric breathed garlic cloves and Tatiana perfume

I never pictured you dead

wiry, strong, and resilient

wearing the jacket till

the first deep snow

you must've given it away

before you died in August heat

without a word

If I had the jacket

I'd stroke, pat and fondle each cotton strand

I'd rub it like a genie's lamp

cuddle and place it under my pillow for dreams and poems

you are dead

the jacket survives you

on some other one

far away or down the street

you are dead



Photo by Morgan Gwenwald

A dreamer wears it on the job

you are dead

A teenager strolls the mall in it

you are dead

the jacket's on an artist, a housewife, a revolutionary

feeling restless in the night searching  
for art and understanding

cooking and sewing and playing the piano

I know you are dead

I hang sort fold the clothes

I know you are dead  
and wandering still.

Tee A. Corinne

## My Beautiful Friend

On October 22, 2005, I drove north to Portland to see Beverly Brown. We had been lovers for sixteen years. She broke up with me last December, moved out the following March. For the first month and a half, she phoned me every evening, later twice and then once a week.

Beverly has known she has cancer for two and a half years. I thought I was going to visit her to say goodbye. What happened was a closure and an opening as well. We had been estranged and we were no longer.

I had not seen her in four months. Earlier in the week, I had e-mailed her to see if it was all right for me to come, but she hadn't responded. The messages being sent out by the organizer of her caretaking, MB, were dire and implied imminent demise. Jeanne encouraged me to just go, as did Beverly's brother, Ron, who suggested I arrive shortly after he would. I knew he would help me get in if anyone should try to bar my way.

The drive takes four hours during which I considered different scenarios. What if some woman met me at the door, arms crossed, and blocked my way. In the past, Beverly had made a list of all the people she wanted to be protected from. Would I now be on that list?

I arrived early enough to use the bathroom at a local coffeehouse and pick up a cold Ginger Brew. At Beverly's duplex, Ron and his wife, Sharon, came out of the front door as I approached. They told me Beverly was just then getting dressed. I followed them back inside. K., MB's partner, was sitting in Beverly's reclining chair holding a drooling infant. Beverly is a cleanliness freak and has never been fond of babies.

Introduced myself. Thank god for a childhood growing up in the South. Southern ladyhood protects me from so many confrontations. It has taught me, beyond all else, to keep my mouth shut. These people have to go on caring for Beverly. I must not alienate them from her or me.

M. came in, greeted me, and told me that Beverly was so changed that she had been shocked when she saw her. She told me, sotto voce, that Beverly had told her if I turned up I should be welcomed. Had she told M. this the night before, earlier in this day? If it had been me, I would have called the estranged lover immediately. If M. had called me, it would have saved me hours of anxiety.

Beverly walked in using a cane. She was much changed and quite yellow brown but did not look nearly as bad as I had expected. Her eyes were

bright and excitedly looking around. Her face lit up when she saw me. I can't remember now if I got up and gave her a hug. I think I did, but relief was my overwhelming experience, relief that she was happy to see me and also that she was not exactly at death's door yet.

K. went, taking the baby with her. Beverly looked at the tissues left behind and asked her brother to put them in the garbage, wash his hands, and bring her a glass of water. She was so much the same at her core that I almost laughed. Did her eyes really twinkle as she looked at me, a look that was almost conspiratorial?

## PHOTOGRAPHS

Small talk. I was bored. I told her I had brought my camera and would like to take pictures. She said good, that she had been trying to get others to take photographs of her, but no one would. I set up my tripod and took several close-ups of her face. Beverly asked Ron, Sharon, and M. to leave and come back in half an hour. She had me lock the front door then started taking off her clothes. She had lost a lot of upper body mass and the jaundice extended to her waist. From there down she was swollen and distended from fluids not being cleared from the body. There were feces in her ostomy bag, but I told her not to worry about it. I could Photoshop it out later if I needed to.

She stood, turned for me, walked across the room, turned again. I took one hundred and fourteen pictures in less than half an hour. We finished. I helped her dress. She sat in her chair. The night before, her mother had called unexpectedly wanting to know if I had seen Beverly lately. When I told her I was going up the next day, she asked me to give Beverly a hug for her. I told Beverly this. She agreed to the hug.

I knelt before her and put my arms around her. She put her cheek against mine. One of us said, "I love you." The other said, "I love you."

She said, "Sometimes I just miss you holding me."

"Ditto," I answered.

## PORTLAND ART MUSEUM

I unlocked the door. People came back in. I said I would leave, but asked if I could return in the evening. Beverly said that Ní Aódagáin would be there after 5 pm and I might want to visit with her. I agreed to come back between 5 and 6.



Beverly, Five Days Before She Died

Photo by Tee A. Corinne

Then I drove to the Portland Museum of Art to see the new wing. Beverly and I had always enjoyed going to museums together and I wanted to be able to tell her about it. She had tried to find other museum-going companions but complained about how slow they walked or the way they stopped to read all of the wall texts.

I had about an hour and a half before the Museum closed, but I am good at speeding through exhibits, stopping only when something really catches my eye. The newly acquired Clement Greenberg collection was



fabulous, made up of all those New York-based artists whom he helped to fame by writing about them. I saw a woman reach out and tug at a piece of wood on a Louise Nevelson sculpture. No alarm went off. What is going on here?

I went to the bookstore and found a postcard of Beverly's favorite Marsden Hartley painting which is in the older section of the Museum, then I went to visit the Hartley and other beloved images including some beautiful Japanese prints.

I ate food that I had packed for the trip: energy bar, soymilk, peanuts, sunflower seeds. Beverly was sleeping when I returned and M. was explaining to Ní Aódagáin what to do and when to do it. I listened. Then M. left and Beverly joined us. It was obvious that she wanted to know what was going on and to be part of it. She put the Hartley postcard on the table near her and looked at a book on Washington Women Artists that I had bought. It did not hold her attention for long.

Later, she was sitting up on the side of her bed to eat and take meds. I sat down next to her and lightly rubbed her back. Remembering what she had said earlier, I sat near enough that our bodies could touch. She leaned her face into my hair. "You still use the same shampoo," she said with obvious pleasure.

She appeared to be nodding out, so Ní Aódagáin asked her if there was some reason that she didn't want to lie down and go back to sleep. "Yes," she said. "Tee's here."

I encouraged her to lie down and told her I would stay. She asked Ní Aódagáin to leave us alone. I asked Beverly what she wanted and she said, "Tell me about the Museum," and I told her about all of the New York School paintings, but also the large, early Joan Brown impasto and how surprising it is to me that she has been dead for fifteen years. I described the six- or seven-foot Leonard Baskin block print of a standing nude male holding a bird. I'm sure he did the initial drawing with brush and ink, then cut around the interlacing marks, creating an image of beauty and delicacy and power. I told her that I missed going to museums with her, missed having her to talk art with. "Me, too," she said.

"I love you," I said.

"Me, too," she said.

All this time I had been holding her arms lightly, touching her, keeping contact. She drifted off to sleep and I went on sitting there, tears coming down my face. Went out and Ní Aódagáin held me and we sat briefly outside so I could cry, then came back in where we could hear her if she wanted anything.

## LATE IN THE EVENING

She woke and came into the living room. I had been told that she wasn't eating, but she had an appetite and wanted ravioli. The evidence in her ostomy bag showed she had been eating something. I found potstickers, but she wrinkled her nose. "Too much meat," she said. I asked if she wanted the kind of cheese ravioli that she used to keep in our 'fridge. "Yes," she said.

"We'll get you some tomorrow." She ate chocolate ice cream, soup, fruit.

Kristan came over to change her ostomy bag and I thought about how glad I am that other people are taking care of all these details. I'm glad that Beverly gets mad at other people for making her take her medicines, and not at me.

I thought about the person who has been going around saying Beverly told her that she had accomplished all she wanted and that she was ready to go. Crap. This may be true in the short term, that knowing she was going to die soon, Beverly set out to accomplish everything she could with the time and energy she had left. But Beverly was a woman who started and ran a popular education non-profit organization, wrote books and essays. She wanted to make a major impact on the world. And she wanted recognition. She often talked with me about wanting to receive a MacArthur Award, often referred to as the MacArthur Genius Award, fifty thousand dollars for each of three years with no strings attached. The money would have been nice, but she wanted the acknowledgment, the validation, the peer group affirmation as well. Part of the sadness of the current situation, for me, is that she has surrounded herself with people who don't even know what a MacArthur Award is.

I would ask if she wanted me to leave and she kept saying she wanted me to stay. She would become agitated if she thought I was going. I left around eleven and went to Charlotte Hutt's sister's home a few blocks away, lay awake thinking and watching the patterns of branches and leaves on the tree outside the window, the moon moving across the sky. I thought about the word *reconciliation*. How unexpected that we were now, so simply, reconciled, as if the seven-month separation had been a chasm that we have leapt across. Yesterday I was single and thinking I might soon have another lover. Beverly had broken up with me ten months earlier, had moved out seven months ago. Today, again, I am fully connected, fully engaged.

## SUNDAY MORNING

In the morning, I went to the grocery store and picked up cheese ravioli, cheese tortellini, and a six-pack of paper towels. Her room smelled of urine when I entered and I mentioned this. She said she was embarrassed about it, that Ní Aódagaín would wash the sheets.

The night before I had put on gloves and washed dishes. Beverly laughed. “You know how to do it right,” she said. I know how she likes dishes washed because I like them done the same way, lots of suds and hot water. I washed countertops, rinsed dirty milk and soymilk containers, combined bags of garbage. Perhaps someone is coming on Monday to clean and straighten. Perhaps it isn’t important. Beverly, along with always caring about hygiene, was always incredibly messy. This house is an accurate reflection of that, but at home she always wanted cooking and eating surfaces to be clean.

Sometime during that second morning of my visit she was standing near her bed looking at me. “I was going to ask you to come,” she said. We just stood there, looking at one another. The distance between us, perhaps six feet, seemed larger, not smaller, by her statement. Yet I was glad to know that my intuition had been right, that what she hadn’t been saying over the phone for two weeks was that she wanted me to come. Stubborn women, we are, and proud, strong qualities that can also get in our way.

Beverly went to the bathroom to try to pee which was still proving difficult for her. Ní Aódagaín and I sat in the living room where Ní Aódagaín told me about her trip to New Orleans and how she was working out things with her lover. After a while, Ní Aódagaín called into the bathroom to ask Beverly if she was all right.

“Yes,” she answered, “I’m enjoying listening.”

## THE BATH

Ní Aódagaín started doing laundry. Between us, we did four loads. M. came in and Beverly announced she wanted to bathe and she wanted me to help her. She turned and looked at me and asked if that was all right.

“Yes.”

Those end-of-life intimacies are so dear. I remember helping my grandmother bathe in her eighties and being surprised at how unselfconscious she was. I felt like it was a gift that she would reveal her body to me and felt the same way about Beverly wanting me to help with her bath. What she

really wanted to do was wash her genitals and legs where the urine had dried.

I sat with her a long time as she relaxed enough to urinate. When she was finished, she washed her hands and asked me to hand her a paper towel from the shelf. She said, “I couldn’t get them to keep things clean enough,” meaning she had tried keeping her own cloth towels separate, but that other people would use them, so she had resorted to paper towels.

“I knew what you were doing with the paper towels as soon as I saw them,” I said.

She put her arm around me and leaned against me. “You know me,” she said. “These people,” she pressed her lips together and shrugged toward the rest of the house, “they don’t really know me.” She looked at me and smiled wryly. “You don’t know everything about me, but you know who I am.”

“You don’t know everything about me either,” I said. She brushed her lips across mine. It was one of two kisses she gave me, testing, teasing, territorial. Each was as soft as a bird’s wing, so swift and gentle and then it was gone before I could even react. I remembered all the other kisses, all the other ways she had been with me over those many years, my beautiful, smart, funny friend.

“It is so hard,” she said, “being hovered over.” She made a face. “So hard being made into an object, a thing.” We had discussed this before, the distaste she had for people wanting to help by fawning over her, using her and her illness to fulfill some kind of need of their own.

I finished drying her off and helped her into her old blue robe.

## RESOLUTIONS

Driving home, I thought about the people who had told me to cut her off, cut her out of my life and move on. These include a counselor who kept pushing me to say that Beverly was being abusive to me, that I had been in an abusive relationship. To me, Beverly was dying. She was angry and confused and lashing out and I was there. As Charlotte said, “Poor Baby, she is scared to death.” I thought also of the friends who said that Beverly had made her choice to leave me and that I should let go, too. If I had listened to them, I would not have had this last incredible weekend with her. She died five days later.

## BEVERLY'S LEAVE TAKING

On October 27, 2005, the Thursday after my weekend visit with Beverly, I felt her presence as I walked my dog in the back field. Later, Jane Mara called to tell me Beverly had died a few minutes before ten a.m. I wrote a brief message containing Mara's information and sent it by e-mail to friends and acquaintances. When I came to one name that I wasn't sure I should send the message to, I paused wondering if it would be better for this person to learn the news from someone else. The lights blinked, then went out and came on again.

I remembered that Beverly and a friend had made an agreement that if one of them died and came back, they would try to signal to the other that they were there by blinking the lights. "OK," I said to her, "I won't send this one."

The electricity didn't waiver the rest of the day.

Throughout that day, however, I had the sense of Beverly being present with me and that we were talking, although most of the time no words were being spoken. I had yet another chance to tell her how much I loved her. She was a warm presence and seemed jubilant. I was arranging to have a wake that evening, phoning and e-mailing our friends. In the early afternoon, Jeanne Simington called to ask if I needed help cleaning and preparing for people to come over. I said, "No. Beverly is here. I'm enjoying her company. I'll call if she leaves."

At ten minutes to four, I knew she had gone and called Jeanne to take her up on her offer of help.

The following day, as I was driving through Mt. Sexton Pass, the Rogue River watershed spread out before me, I was thinking about how I was going to have to come out to yet another class about my lesbianism and about Beverly's death, otherwise I would not be able to teach effectively that day. I was also thinking about how scary this was. First I felt her presence, then it was as if she slipped into my body just under the skin behind me. I felt her stretch out her arms along my arms and wrap her fingers along with mine on the steering wheel. In my mind I heard her say, "Don't be afraid. I am here. I am OK." She repeated this until I was near the foot of the mountain.

I regard these visitations as gifts and am grateful for the final flutterings of her indomitable spirit.

Michelle Sewell

## For Gloria

I get you back when you are broken  
no more than a bag of bones.  
The arrogance has vanished from your paper thin shell  
That puffed up pride that convinced you  
you deserved better  
leaving me behind  
your first self indulgent act

I get you when you can barely hold up your head  
our relationship is that of patient and nursemaid  
Your beauty has fallen away from you  
All you are left with is a weak grateful smile  
from thin cracked lips  
But I take you back and treasure you  
as if you were the Hope diamond.  
I know everyone wonders why

Why have you come back to die with me  
Was I not good enough to live with

Ours was never one of equal love  
But we are making new memories  
the betrayal has been excised  
It no longer lives here  
It no longer matters

You are sick with cancer  
I am sick with you  
You no longer in need of a muse  
No longer creating anything  
except the occasional temper tantrum  
Instead I am your cool water  
there to put out the fire of fear  
that creeps into your belly late at night

We are nearing the end  
Soon I will be able to set your burdens down  
And take up those that are rightfully mine.

But the choice to do it all over again  
I would take you back.

Tita Caldwell

## Her Face in the Mirror

*My sister Eva had been suffering from increasing memory loss and dementia for several years. Since we lived in different countries, I was not able to stay as closely in-touch as I wished, but I tried to call her every couple of weeks.*

*One day I heard the now-familiar touch of panic in her voice when she came to the phone. "What's wrong?" I asked.*

*"Oh, Tita, I feel terrible. I can't remember anything. I don't know what's wrong with me," she cried.*

*I wanted to reassure her "But Eva, you recognized my voice right away, and you remembered my name."*

*"Not recognizing your voice would be like not recognizing my face in the mirror." These words, spoken with complete clarity, were the last she ever said to me.*

I remember when I was seven, sitting cross-legged on her bed watching her brush her long, platinum-blond hair. Eva, who was four years older than I, and Ami, barely eleven months younger than she was, had just returned to Guatemala after four years of boarding school in Sweden. Eva was eleven years old, this pale and beautiful stranger, my oldest sister, with eyes that looked sad, even when she saw me in the mirror and smiled. I was sure she would grow up to be a movie star, with her unblemished skin and her deep blue eyes beneath our grandmother's heavy black brows.

A quiet, serious girl, Eva was obviously my father's favorite. As I looked at my own face in the mirror, next to hers, it was easy to see why, as mine was covered with freckles, and my teeth were crooked, showing a gap when I smiled.

I was excited to have my sisters at home again. They had been stolen from my life, leaving a deep emptiness, and had now been returned to me. We were strangers, who barely spoke the same language since I remembered little Swedish, and their Spanish was almost gone, but we gradually learned to be sisters again.

As teenagers they were sent off once more to boarding school, this

time to the States. They were practically grown up when they finally returned to Guatemala. Eva and I shared a room for a while. Although she never talked to me very much, I somehow knew that she was the one in my family who loved me. When I graduated from high school, she and her husband were the only members of my family in attendance, as my parents were at a cocktail party. When I looked out at the audience, Eva's face was the one that mattered.

I left for college in 1949, and it was ten years before I returned to Guatemala with my family for the Christmas holidays. Eva was a beautiful and elegant woman, and I could tell that she didn't know what to do about me in my thrift shop clothes and my long, straight hair pulled back in a pony tail. She wanted to take me shopping and to her beauty parlor. Although uncomfortable, I gave in, as I was always hoping for her approval.

I continued to visit her every few years, and she always welcomed me into her home, although sometimes I could see that my alternative life style was a challenge. After my divorce I moved to Mendocino County. In 1974, when I arrived in Guatemala, with two hippie friends with whom I planned to travel around the country, Eva was shocked, although she remained courteous.

In 1978, when I was living in Cabbage Lane, women's land in Oregon, I received a message to call my sister Eva. When I reached her she told me that our mother had suffered a stroke, and that I should come right away if I wanted to see her before she died.

Although I hated to leave my tiny cabin in the canyon and Debra, the woman with whom I had fallen in love, I decided to depart immediately.

"I'm really not surprised," Eva responded when I told her about Debra, "I'm glad you told me. Just don't say anything to Ricardo," she begged, referring to her husband, "he'll never understand."

She became more open with me, and we talked for hours, revisiting and examining every detail of our lives. She told me that she had been suffering from anxiety for a long time, and it would sometimes take her hours of preparation to feel secure enough to go out and face the city. We had finally become good friends and confidants.

I was able to see her more frequently in the 80's, as she visited her daughter in Santa Monica, and began to see doctors in Los Angeles. She was starting to lose her eyesight, and became more dependent on her husband, who in turn seemed to become totally devoted and protective of her. The three of us had good times together, going for walks and to our favorite Mexican restaurant.





Garden Woman

Sudie Rakusin

Around 1990 I got a call from a friend of theirs, saying that Ricardo was seriously ill and they were flying him to Stanford Hospital, where he would probably have surgery. Could I meet the plane the next day, and help them get settled?

When I picked them up, I instantly saw how ill he was, and that Eva was really frightened, and appeared confused. I had reserved a motel room for them near Stanford, and after checking him in to the hospital, I took Eva back to the motel, where I would stay with her for a couple of weeks.

Her eyesight had deteriorated a lot, and it was impossible for her to fill out forms, or to tell the denominations of U.S. currency. “Why” she exclaimed with frustration, “If the U.S. is such a civilized country, why can’t they use different colors to distinguish their paper money, like every body else does?”

She became confused very easily. At first I assumed it was due to the problems with her vision, but then I began to wonder what else could be wrong. Fortunately, I was able to take some time off work and spend most of each day with her, taking her to visit Ricardo who had undergone by-pass surgery. I also had to make sure she ate, as she tended to forget about it. For the first time I felt like the big sister, with a heart full of protective love.

One day I brought her to my house: it was the first time she had ever

been in my home. I wanted her to meet my family of friends, and she loved their warmth and friendliness. “Now I won’t have to worry that you don’t have a husband to take care of you as you have such good friends,” she said when we were driving back to the motel.

After they returned to Guatemala, I ached with missing her.

The next time I saw her, Ricardo had brought her to Santa Monica for more medical consultations. Her eyesight was very bad and she could no longer read. “Can you imagine never reading another mystery?” she asked me, “never being able to look at pictures of your children?”

“No,” I said, “I can’t.”

She had started repeating herself, asking the same questions over and over again, especially worrying about what time it was. Ricardo would answer her with great patience, always explaining everything that was happening. The doctors were reluctant or unable to make a definite diagnosis, but we were all beginning to think that maybe it was Alzheimer’s.

Whatever the cause, Eva’s ability to take care of herself was declining, and she was gradually becoming more childlike. She kept her charm and sense of humor, however, and her curiosity about what was going on around her.

Her husband and I, who had often argued in the past, learned to put our political differences aside in our love for Eva, and our desire to help her be as happy as possible throughout this often terrifying time of her life. The three of us would sit on her big bed watching television. Ricardo and I are both hard of hearing, so she would have to repeat the words we didn’t understand. We, in turn, would have to describe the actions that she couldn’t see. We laughed a lot. Those were some of the best times I ever spent with my sister.

At the same time I grieved for what I had lost, the sister who shared many of the same childhood memories, the same perspective on family and the cultures we had experienced. I missed our endless conversations; I had lost that friend. But in her place was a lovable, funny, mischievous, and sometimes confused and frightened child, whom I loved unconditionally, yet with the pain of knowing that I would lose her also. Eva, who had always been very reserved and standoffish, was now affectionate, letting me hug her, and sometimes she even told me she loved me.

Her memory loss worsened. She agonized because she couldn’t remember the names of her children, or the everyday words she needed to express herself. She often didn’t recognize people. “I don’t understand why that man who comes every day is so nice to me. I think,” she confided, “that

he slept in my bed last night?” “That’s Ricardo” I answered, “your husband.”

The next to last time I saw her, she had become silent and unresponsive. As I sat with her, stroking her hand, and talking to her, alternating between English and Spanish, she would look at me momentarily, as if wondering who I was, and then her eyes would turn away. Mourning the lovable childlike sister I had lost, I thought again of the last time we had talked, and wondered if it had ever happened that she had looked at herself in the mirror and not recognized her own face.

When my brother-in-law called me in June, 1995, to tell me that she was very sick, I rushed back to Guatemala. Arriving at the Dallas airport, I learned that I had missed my connection and would have to wait a few more hours. I burst into tears, and found a corner near the restroom to sit and weep while rocking myself

Ricardo met my plane late in the evening, and took me directly to the hospital to see my sister, who looked so tiny, lying in a big hospital bed in a coma. I wanted to pick her up in my arms and carry her out of there, but instead I sat and talked to her for a while in Swedish, our childhood language, thinking maybe she could hear me. When we went back to the house I asked Ricardo why she was in the hospital.

“Maybe the doctors can still do something in the morning”, he said. I reminded him of the talks we had had years ago, when both he and Eva insisted that they didn’t want to be kept alive artificially, and Eva had showed me the book “Final Exit”.

We sat in silence for a long time, and at last he said that I was right. He then called each of her children, who were due to arrive the next day, to get their permission to bring her home.

It was a comfort when the kids arrived. We sat in her bedroom for two days, talking to her as well as about her, our love spilling over her with every word. She never regained consciousness, but we were sure she could hear us. When she died in the middle of the third night, in her own bed, we were all there.

The next morning, men from the mortuary brought a casket which they placed in the living room, as Guatemalan law does not require embalming. After my nieces had bathed and dressed their mother, we placed her in the casket, and continued to sit with her and say our goodbyes. She was buried that afternoon, in the pouring rain.

Janet E. Aalfs

## Swallows on the Coast

Forked tail of the blue-  
black swallow slips beneath

a sun-splashed eave.  
My father has died

singing still, the light  
sharper than before.

Dark-eyed, fearless,  
the sea watches. He has died

again, each time deeper, ashes  
ashes we all fall down

soft in the wind. Spray  
pearls through cracks

in the burren, cranes-  
beak petals dipped

in red. No longer afraid  
the light has given

up on him, he disappears,  
wings folded inside

my heart, shattered  
flaring into blue again.

Meredith Pond

## Home

The place where our friend  
 who hasn't been here for a while asks me,  
*How can you be here without her?*  
*It feels so empty now.*

But I just shrug and answer,  
*This is all I know. And besides,*  
*I still love her, even though she's gone.*

But after a while I do leave home for Lake Michigan and then head up the coast to the music festival near Hart, knowing that the company of 7,000 women will indeed cheer me up.

The first morning at 9 a.m., I practice the merengue and the cha-cha-cha in salsa class, learning turns and dips with Claire and Sparkle and Anna Zee, and then eat yogurt and granola to Maria Callas arias playing from a loudspeaker suspended over my hay-bale table near the kitchen's fire pit.

The rest of the morning I'm at a workshop meditating with a San Francisco witch, where I meet Lena, who calls herself Swan Womon, because of the winged tattoo on her left breast. She helps me gather delicate golden flowers called St. John's Wort in the field around the night stage for my work shift at the healing center (the Womb), and then she shows me where her tent is—in the Twilight Zone—and I notice the leather straps hanging from a branch above her two-person blue dome. I try to keep from running away as she whispers how she wants to fuck me in the low branches of that red oak behind her tent, or on the ground, or in the back of her truck, if it would please me. And I forget how I manage to change the subject, but we end up laughing, and we brew some artemesia tea for two in the stainless steel mugs I pull out of my backpack. All dreamy, rocking in her hammock, we watch the breeze taunt the aspens.

After a while I wander off towards the smell of pine needles and hot popcorn, and I run into Claire again. We walk down the dusty road to the Over-40s tent and listen to stories of the old days, and how it was to be queer back then. The woman talking is seventy-six years old. A classic butch in her day, she's all decked out with a Bryl Cream pompadour, a pack of Lucky Strikes tucked into the sleeve of her ironed white T-shirt, and a

big red sedan parked on the land (so she says). Her life back then was all fistfights over who would squire the femmes around Pittsburgh, and the story of how she fell in love with the town's femme fatale. In those days, secret signals opened doors and she packed three pieces of women's clothing on her body *everywhere* she went. I look at her cane and imagine her then, about 25, with the world at the tip of her tongue

Across the road at CampTrans, Leslie Feinberg is talking about gender, about who is a *real* woman and who isn't. I'm sitting between a man who used to be a woman and a *new* woman with bangs and red hair just like my mother's. And I just can't stop wondering why our lowest common denominator is handbags and silk stockings no matter what we do.

Later I interview Tribe 8, a punk band playing tonight, chem-free, pierced, and tattooed from tongue to clitoris, and I learn to spell "mosh pit" and wonder if I could ever throw my body off that stage into the arms of a hundred screaming slam dancers. *Sure* jump. Jump. The little silver sphere spiked through Linnie Flipper's tongue shines with saliva as she chats with me about who likes to be on top, and how her friends got off drugs, and how she knows so many women who were raped before they were thirteen. And I'm thinking yes, yes, she could be my daughter. Before I know it, I'm invited to an S/M party (password: "Clean and Sober"). But I don't go.

I stretch out on the soft grass in the meadow to watch the crescent moon scythe the treetops, as the sky disappears into a million stars.

Tonight the Perseid meteor showers are scheduled for midnight, and women are talking about thousands of meteors shooting across the heavens. *Who* makes the schedule for something like that? And maybe I fall asleep and maybe I don't, but all of a sudden I think of you and I feel more awake than I've ever been, the blood pulsing my heart in sync with drums that never seem to stop, a wild rhythm way back in the woods somewhere, women dancing around a bonfire. And right then a shooting star arcs across the horizon, blazing silver like the tail of Glinda's wand, then splits in two and disappears, leaving me with sudden sorrow.

How could we know  
 what was ahead for us,  
 what black and fickle moon  
 would hoist the sunrise  
 like an old shoe from a brackish pond  
 and laugh at our forever coming to an end.

All alone now, I go back to the Goddess Circle and untie our rings from the chain of flowers and colored threads wrapped around Her carved oak body. Our anniversary is tonight—or it would have been—right here where we first made love five years ago, where I'm kneeling now, under these stars, in front of the gentle face of this Ancient One, the protector of this sacred place. And I laugh, remembering that you had mosquito bites on your ass for a week after that. And how we rode around afterwards on the shuttle bus to the front gate and back all night long just to keep away from the bugs. I shake away the memory of your body as I wrap these silver rings in doeskin and sage and strands of our hair. I make an easy bundle, tie a final knot, and tuck the bundle deep in the hollow of a linden tree at the edge of the meadow where I'll sleep tonight in a circle of stones, a medicine wheel, the wheel of time.



Michigan Tree

Photo by Meredith Pond

What love we have left will always be here, safe in this tree, wrapped in silver and soft light and the memory of each other's arms.

Sleep forever, my love,  
 in this mother tree, this secret  
 place, soft with decomposing wood.  
 Think of me the way you knew me once,  
 before we began the list of *what now* and  
*you never do*.

This land heals me, breathes  
 life back into my heart, a place  
 where 7,000 women call me home  
 every August, and you and I entwine  
 forever in the hollow of this tree.  
 No bodies this time, only dreams,  
 quiet dreams of life without darkness,  
 without each other, shooting star,  
 shooting star.

The next morning I take a walk with Claire on the Whistle Trail behind the acoustic stage, and we make love on a bed of maidenhair ferns (her dental dams, made in Australia, are tasty). But I'm not used to her body, and our pleasures stop and start like an old record stuck between songs. Afterwards my mouth tastes like the inside of a balloon, and that taste stays with me for the rest of the day. Until later on I see Lena Swan painting her body in glitter and rainbows. She calls to me, *come and play*, but I keep walking.

Give her your restless days,  
 your tantrums, your demands, but  
 I'll have you here, always, in these stars after midnight,  
 half asleep, in my dreams in the morning,  
 at sunrise on Beltane before anyone else is awake  
 and no one belongs to anyone.

I remember how you slid your hand inside me, deep,  
 like the hollow of this tree, for a moment,  
 for a year, forever, and I let the stone fall  
 from my heart as I watch the moon rise  
 and let the tears come.

Swan Womon is persistent and cajoles me to her latex gloves and black leather. We should be on a barge floating on the Nile or in a scene from the Hunger. I watch the shadows conjured by her Coleman lamp as she fucks me to the Red Sea and back again. Then Ireland and Yeats and Maude Gonne, the love of his life, and I wonder if I really have gone mad. Because this is a women's festival, and here I am letting this woman fuck me silly while I'm imagining a poet, a god in his own right, a lover, a worshipper of this one magnificent woman for all his life, and how she tortured him with promises, and how he waited for her, waited for years, and longed for her pilgrim soul, as he watched his own life pour out from his broken heart as she eluded him, married someone else, traveled around the world without him. And how without love the heart shrivels like aging silicone, like leather straps drying in the sun.

And later, in the middle of the night, Swan invites me to another S/M scene, somebody tied to a tree, whipped, begging for more, and I wonder if any torture could ever match that morning you moved your heart and your love to another woman's home and you pleaded with me, *Please don't watch me do this. Please don't watch me leave.* And for three hours I sat in some fast-food place downtown drinking coffee and staring out the window at a tree painted on a building while I tried to remember to breathe.





After the Rain

Photo by Meredith Pond

Home. Where it is, where it was,  
 where it will be. Where time passes  
 and I walk the dog, watch the moon,  
 visit friends, and read and read and read.

I follow Cassiopeia, Orion, and Scorpio as the constellations arch over the  
 autumn sky night after night until one evening in late October, I meet a  
 woman at a poetry reading and she kisses my hand and invites me,  
 invites me *please*,  
 to enjoy the moonrise, all creamy and full, from her bedroom window on a  
 blustery Hallomas eve.

And then I'm home again. The place  
 where a friend who hasn't been here for a while  
 says, *Hey, did you move some furniture  
 or something? It feels so good to be here again.*  
 And I remember that sweet kiss on my hand,  
 that moon in the window, and I shrug and answer,  
*This is all I know . . .*

Janet E. Aalfs

## Gloria, I Remember

Gloria, I remember  
how you loved the fallen  
leaves. You looked up  
into branches, shadows on your face.  
Twirling a crimson leaf  
by the stem you said  
*cuando vives en la frontera*  
*people walk through you,*  
*the wind steals your voice.*

Later the strong press  
of dark pulled us  
through a tunnel.  
Protected within  
that dream snake, mountains,  
oceans, stars rushed by,  
web at the center  
reeling us out  
on story threads of light.

How you loved the swirl  
of words, spiders at work  
in the cornfields. *Mestiza*,  
you sang, *touching the dirt*  
*to your forehead, your tongue,*  
tasting a yellow kernel and finding  
it sweet, returning your footsteps,  
your voice, to this  
and every crossroad.

*In memory of Gloria Anzaldúa,*  
*1932-2004,*  
*brilliant lesbian poet-scholar-teacher,*  
*crosser of bridges and chasms,*  
*seeker of justice, leader in peace,*  
*generous friend.*



Fran Day's Altar for Gloria Anzaldúa

Photo by Roxanna Fiamma

Shan Casey

## nana love

you share your insanity, not so much in intimacy rather  
 as the slip shows from your lovers skirt.  
 in your butch oxford shirt and O'Keefesque jackets  
 maybe as your bra shows thru your male attire?

I can't stand you, full of my youth, my arrogance,  
 think I've seen your kind before.  
 though, as the love leaves my life, mother, partner, friends  
 leaving the scene of the harms, your face becomes familiar, reassuring somehow.

your old car with a big plastic storage container floating on top  
 you search the roads for carrion to shovel up and  
 treat sacred one last time before a  
 proper burial of your choosing

you failed at mothering your own flesh, yet you become mother/father to me.  
 a compliment to your partners mothering of me  
 loving me in your brutal truths "honey, you're getting  
 fucked with your clothes on"  
 served with Irish oatmeal and toast  
 cold water in the face of my naiveté

and how you loved me when I thought no one could.  
 held me up and through until - weakly-  
 I might support my own weight.  
 shakily taking a few toddling steps toward my new life

now you are gone, not physically.  
 just the insanity sneaking up and putting a bag over your head.  
 your search for road kill culminating in a  
 complete loss of life

who will find you, Nana  
 scoop you up from the side of the road  
 put you to your peaceful,  
 sacred rest?

Janet Mason

## Somewhere Between Hell and Eternity

Five years later, tears still come to my eyes when I think about my mother's death. I could not replace my final memories of her with a previous, healthy image until at least a year after she had died. During this time, I asked myself over and over why I waited until the last possible moment to tell her what a good mother she was. Even though I did finally tell her, I don't know if she heard me. She had slipped into a coma early one morning, and my father and I took turns, at their home, sitting at her side until the nurse came.

I told my father to talk to her. I had read once that a person who is in a coma could actually hear and understand when someone speaks. I left the room as my father held her hand and spoke to her and when I came back he said she was trying to tell him that she loved him. I did see her jaw moving back and forth, so perhaps she did hear him and was trying to answer. When the nurse came, I asked her how long my mother would be in the coma. As the nurse spoke, she turned to my mother, bent down, and as she put her hands along the sides of my mother's face, she died.

Her breathing, which had become slower and further apart, simply stopped.

I took my mother's death extremely hard. All the strength that I had when I was taking care of her drained out of me. In the first months, and even through the first year, I became ill frequently and was often so tired that I had to take a nap in the afternoons. I dreaded talking to casual acquaintances because when they asked what was new I would have to tell them.

When I went through my mother's things, it was evident that she did throw out her sketches and drawings. But in the very back of her portfolio, hidden in a small brown envelope that I hadn't seen before, I found a certificate that said my mother had completed the course requirements for Commercial Art in the Adult Educational Program of the Bucks County Technical School. The certificate lists the dates she attended as 1974 to 1975. These were my hell-on-wheels high school years that blurred together so badly that I barely remember my own life. I certainly have no memory of my mother attending a commercial arts program. My father didn't remember

anything about my mother taking this course either. The artwork that she must have produced to obtain the certificate is nowhere to be found. The absences in my mother's life continued after her death.

Next to her bed, she left a small spiral bound notebook with a few pages filled in. I opened this notebook, after her death, with great anticipation. It felt as if my mother had come back to talk to me. A few pages are filled in with her handwriting that grows shakier by the page. The last entry, written in pencil, is entitled "A letter to my unexpected daughter-in-law, Barbara." In the last month of her life, my mother told me that she was writing this letter. When I encouraged my mother to show it to her, she said, "I don't want it to go to her head." Every year on my birthday and on Mother's Day, Barbara thanked my mother for giving birth to me. "You always make it sound like I had her just for you," my mother would retort. In the beginning of the letter to Barbara she writes, "Many times you thanked me for giving you Janet. Now it is my turn to thank you for lending her back to me these past months of my illness."

Upstairs, in the room that was my mother's bedroom before she became too weak to climb the stairs, I found another notebook. It is titled *A Woman's Book*, and its pages—which have a quotation from a woman writer at the top of each page—are mostly blank. But several of them are filled with her handwriting—the letters are strong and the ink dark, her usual handwriting before she became ill. On the opening page, dated 1984, roughly ten years before she died, she wrote, "I am proud of my daughter...because she is herself—honest, loving, and is kind to her parents (penciled in after this, she wrote) and other poor slob."

There is much that I have not had to go through in the process of my mother's death. Since my father is still living, I have not had to sell the house and its contents. Because my mother died when she was seventy-four, I did not have to witness a prolonged old age for her, the possible dropping away of her faculties, her sight, her ability to care for herself over a long period of time, or, God forbid, the erosion of her mental capacities.

My mother's keen mental perception was the most important thing to her and she was lucky to have it—despite the intense physical pain she suffered—right up until she slipped into a coma in the early morning and died several hours later. I knew it was near the end, and I was hovering around her the night before, fixing her blankets, reading to her, asking if there was anything she wanted. Finally she made her last statement to me: "Janet, stop bugging me and go do your work." Then she said "Good Night,"

precisely and sternly, with a firm grasp on her last shred of dignity.

I am grateful that I did not have to put my mother into a long-term care facility or nursing home. She wanted to die at home and my father and I were able to give her that last gift. Still, I wish she had been able to live into her eighties or nineties like I had expected her to. I see middle-aged women with elderly, barely able to walk mothers and I envy them. I wish I had known what my mother looked like as she grew older. Sometimes when I see old women who slightly resemble her I search their faces for clues. A year after my mother's death, the hardest part was still ahead of me. To simply do what was expected—to go on living without my mother—was no small feat.

In the course of five years, there came a time when my mother's death no longer defined me. I don't remember exactly when, maybe several years after her death, perhaps sooner or later. When I saw people I had not seen in years, it was not the first thing I told them about. My grief had ceased to consume me.

When my mother was alive she was the buffer that stood between me and eternity. I had heard stories of adult women and men who had left their chosen adult homes to go back and take care of aging parents, and after their parents had died they could not return to their former lives. They felt they had lost their place in the world.

My story has a different twist. It felt impossible for me to go back to the place I had grown up. But I had to. My father continued to live in the house he had shared with my mother. He was getting older, his eyesight diminishing. Eventually, he totaled his car and gave up his license. He needed me, and I began visiting more frequently, though I still wasn't spending as much time there as I had during my mother's illness.

At first I felt split. I was there but not there, dreaming about other places, other lives that were not my own. I managed to keep the details of my life intact, but on some basic level I no longer knew who I was. After a few months this feeling passed. But still when I went back to where I came from I felt physically ill, and I was not proud of this fact. Cloudy days—the sky pressing down on me like a curtain of lead—are still the worst. “I smell the plant,” I said to my father outside the diner where we had been having lunch. It was a cloudy humid day. The scent of the plant hung thickly in the air. My father declared that he didn't smell anything. “I see the plant,” I said, pointing to a smokestack point up from the horizon behind a warehouse on the opposite side of the highway from us.

My father looked to where I pointed, but didn't say anything.

What he does point out, repeatedly, is that the nurse wrote down my mother's cause of death as cardiac arrest. Her heart did stop beating at the end as everyone's does. But it wasn't her heart that killed her; it was the cancer. The nurse was most likely following protocol in filling out the death certificate. I tell my father that there must be more cancer around than anyone admits. He says nothing. The wife of one of his closest friends from the plant has died of cancer. The man who lived next door to my parents for more than thirty years died of cancer. His wife has been in and out of the hospital. All she will say is that she is being treated for "female problems." The wife of another co-worker of my father's from the plant also died from cancer. Like my mother, this woman's cancer had spread to almost every organ of her body.

The numbers are not high enough to make this a Love Canal. But there are local stories about other women my mother's age, physically fit and active, who just like her woke up with a crushing pain and found out that they had cancer and it had metastasized. The man my father met while having coffee at McDonalds around the corner from his house said that his wife died during the biopsy. "You must have the wrong person," this man said when the hospital called. "My wife can't be dead. She's never been sick a day in her life."

Maybe this woman was a gardener, too?

Maybe not.

I don't know if toxic chemicals in the air, soil, and water seeped into my mother's bones. Any more than I know if it was the food she ate, the electric range she cooked at for thirty plus years, or the resentment she carried all her life toward the father who physically abused and then abandoned her. Most likely it was a combination of all of these factors.

The plant is only part of my internal landscape, the geography from the present that hooks into my past, leaving me feeling as if I am suffering from jet lag by the time I make the forty-five minute drive back to my home in the city.

I came to the conclusion that if I didn't make peace with where I came from, its ghosts would haunt me forever. Gradually, as I began to make notes of the voices that entwined and conflicted from the past and present, my feelings about where I grew up started to shift.

I need my father as much as he needs me, perhaps more. In the neighborhood where I grew up, where I have lost contact with everyone I ever knew, he is my only link to the past. My father reminds me of who I



am. So many of my strengths have come from my mother, but they have come from my father too—from his steadfastness, his humbleness and simplicity, his quiet sense of humor.

Still there is this wide sad gulf between us: the absence of my mother, his wife.

Despite making amends with my past, I am restless. I have a need for an alternative landscape inside of me. Not to replace the one I grew up in—now built up more than ever with suburban strip mall consumerism—but rather to place beside it. I have always been fascinated with Greece so I begin to plan a trip. I intend to go alone and make a pilgrimage—just as my mother traveled to England alone after her mother's death. The time is right. I am forty. My mother's death, and the taking care of her, is behind me. My father, at age eighty-one, is still able to get around. He walks four miles every day. His friends drive him places. He can survive for a month without me.

It is in the planning of this trip that I begin to pick up the conversation with my mother from where I left off. A friend tells me that in the neighborhood called the Plaka, in Athens, there are tavernas where for the price of a meal you can break your dishes against the wall afterwards. My mother was the one who broke dishes—and eventually me—not my father.



But he finds this amusing, saying, “Think of all the money they save on dishwashers.”

One day, visiting my father, I picked up a book of poetry I gave to my mother years ago. It is titled *A Book of Women Poets from Antiquity to Now* and is edited by Alik Barnstone and Willis Barnstone. My mother read the book so often that it split down the center. She taped the spine back together with gray electrical tape. I opened to the table of contents and saw that my mother had checked off her favorite poets. There are pencil check marks beside the names of all the female Greek Lyric poets. These are the poets who have so vividly captured my imagination: Sappho from the sixth century B.C., and the female lyric poets who write in the centuries after her, particularly Praxilla and Korinna.

When I went through all the letters my mother had ever written me, I found, in her handwriting, a stanza from Korinna.

*I Korinna am here to sing the courage  
of heroes and heroines in old myths.  
To Tanagra's daughters in their white robes  
I sing. And all the city is delighted  
with the clean water of my plaintive voice.*

In the same group of letters, I found a scrap of paper where my mother joined my name with Korinna. *Janet-Korinna*.

My mother often told me that she wished she had given me two names. Perhaps this was her way of doing it, leaving a message for me to find after her death. In doing so, perhaps she was pointing me in the direction of my own destination.

This is where the conversation begins again.

I am now the same age as my mother when she gave birth to me.

We would have many new things to talk about.

We could begin with Sappho, who had a mother and a daughter, both named Cleis. The three of them contained a certain universe. My mother was the first woman in my life, and as her only daughter, I was the last woman in her life.

The two of us encircled eternity.

Riggin Waugh

## Janie's Saxophone

When she died, her tenor sax became mine.  
For a while, I took lessons. For a longer while,  
I didn't. Today I unfold the music stand,  
recalling how the metal pieces clip together.

The sun shines through my bedroom window,  
as I wipe away a year's dust from the big black case.  
When I lay it across my bed, my German shepherd  
awakens, but only for a moment. I open the trunk

and again I'm dazzled by this shiny brass  
woodwind with mother-of-pearl keys,  
lying in the box lined with fake black fur.  
I slide the leather strap around my neck,

the hook hangs below my breasts. A wooden reed  
rests in my mouth while I tighten the screw  
connecting the neck to the horn. I insert the reed  
and grease the cork before attaching the mouthpiece.

I try to remember how to play a B flat.  
Piano is easier. I warm up with a few scales —  
G major, F major, D major, nothing fancy.  
My dog jumps off the bed,

heads for the living room. It has been so long,  
I almost forget which fingers rest on which keys.  
Almost. It's not like riding a bike. I remember  
to pull my lower lip ever so slightly

over my lower front teeth. I remember  
not to clamp down — to relax. I remember  
what “enharmonics” means. I remember  
legato tonguing, but I’ve forgotten

how to do it. I remember my embouchure.  
I play the only three songs I know,  
and I play them slow, maladroit slow,  
not sexy slow, but with no audience

I am Charlie Parker, I’m John Coltrane,  
I am *baaaad*. I play “Misty” and think of Johnny Mathis.  
I play “The Christmas Song” and think of Nat King Cole.  
I play “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas,”

and think of Judy Garland, which makes me think  
of Janie. It’s December. Of course, I would play  
Christmas songs and think of Janie.  
I unhook the horn from the strap around my neck.

I remember to clean inside the sax  
with a contraption Janie made with flannel,  
a piece of clothesline, and a fishing weight.  
I put the horn away, maybe for another year.



Judy Freespirit

## Some Thoughts on Not Dying

*In April of 2005, Judy Freespirit (a long-time lesbian-feminist, fat and disability rights activist — see Sinister Wisdom issue #66) was close to death — at one point doctors and friends thought she would die within twenty-four hours. Intervention by friends, change of medication, alternative healing, and a move to a decent nursing facility changed her prognosis from “two weeks to two months left” to “stable.” While injuries sustained in the most critical parts of her illness left her unable to walk, she continues to gain strength with physical therapy, and can be transferred to her scooter for extended forays into the world. Her “coming back to life” is a phenomenal testament to Judy’s own courage and will, but also to the ways the medical profession over-drugs and gives up on patients that doctors and staff deem “difficult.” The following is taken from a series of taped interviews she did with Cathy Cade between May and December of 2005. Those interviews are in the process of being shaped into book-form, focusing on both Judy’s experiences and those of the friends who came to her aid. (Elana Dykewomon)*

I’m not quite ready to die now. There are things I want to do first now that I know I’m creative and intelligent. I’m 69 and it took me all these years to find my strengths. I also believed everything was useless, “no point trying” and “you can’t fight city hall,” which I learned from my family of origin. It took me many years to unlearn that attitude. It has taken over 50 years of a combination of activism and therapy to get to here from where I started. I started out way below level and I’ve been clawing my way up this muddy canyon for all these years. Sometimes I think I am now at my PEAK of CAPACITY, yet I’m so physically sick that I can’t actually do 99% of what my mind can imagine. It’s so frustrating.

While I’m not ready to let go yet, there are days now when I feel nearly hopeless. About six weeks ago when I was in the hospital, I was extremely ill and the life energy was so drained and I was so drugged up with pain medication they called “palliative care.” I felt very at peace. The doc told me to get my affairs together since I wasn’t going to live for very long, maybe a couple of months. I have the advantage of having been so near death. Well, I wasn’t unconscious and I didn’t see any white light or clouds or wings. Of course, at first I felt terrified and then a huge relief not to be in pain, not to have to worry about money or relationships, or whether I was going to die or not. I just got so peaceful. Even though I was highly drugged, I was very

rational in my thinking. I made really good decisions about what to do before my death. While I felt very weak, I also felt very competent, capable and strong at the same time. I thought, "Ok this is as far as I'm going to go, I've come a long way from where I started. In fact, my life has been miraculous. I've done what I came here to do and it's time to go." I don't have any sense of what happens after you die. I'm your basic agnostic. What I don't know, I don't know and I don't try to make up something in my head.

While I was at peace, I was simultaneously sad. Then when I started getting better, I started to feel worse and worse. The better I got, the worse I felt. My problems came flooding back to me. I had let go of having to deal with my taxes and of who is going to take care of my 93-year-old mother. Now I'm back in the middle of having to do all these things, only I'm sick. There are times when I wish I had just died. I don't feel suicidal, but sometimes I wish I could die, which is different. Wonderful people walk into my room almost on a daily basis, sometimes three or four at a time. They are so loving and so good and kind that I keep wanting to live. Not only did I realize that I'm an OK person, but I just started being able to accept people loving me, after all those years of feeling like a piece of shit because of messages put in my head as a child. So I want to scream at every parent, "Stop being so over-controlling, stop being so absent. Show your kids you love them!"— things like that and more. I'm sure nobody intended to torture me. Everything that happened was a response to other people's pain from their past and back and back and back. But I want it to stop. I keep saying I can't die, that I have to stay around to help my grandkids, since I'm their safe haven. I want to get better enough to really make a difference.

Rheem Convalescent Hospital is supposed to be one of the better skilled nursing facilities (SNF) and I think it is. People working here are basically good, but no matter how good people are, they make mistakes. Therefore if you're sick you better be prepared to have yourself or somebody else looking over your shoulder because the staff can really screw things up badly. It's all unintentional, but almost every day when they bring my pills, something is wrong. Something that is supposed to be there isn't there or something's there that isn't supposed to be or the dosage is wrong. My advice is, if you are sick don't try to deal with an institution on your own.

One of the reasons I'm as sick as I am is that I had been given medications for years that had negative effects. I've heard that a very high percentage of people in hospitals are there because of mismanaged medications. So I'm very scared. Even though I trust the people, as people, I don't trust the system or that they know enough to get it right.

I'm always afraid that things are going to get worse. I'm here unable to walk because of things that were done to me in hospitals or on the way to the hospital. I went to the hospital four times last year and each time I went I came away with something I didn't go in with. The last time I went in to the hospital I went home with shingles, which I'd never had before. Getting me to the hospital the third time created terrible infections in my legs because the fireman insisted on putting a really tight seat belt around my ankles so I wouldn't fall off of the gurney. I kept complaining that it was painful and I have poor circulation in my lower extremities but they kept saying, "It's for your own good." I've spent three or four months trying to heal the damage that was done from that one trip.

Once you've had these experiences you tend not to call for help when you need it. There were MRI and CAT scan tests that I couldn't have when I was in the hospital because the machines they have were not built for more than x number of pounds. It has to do with hospitals being a profit-making industry, even when it's a government run place. Money comes before people. It's a fact that I live with. I can get what I need if it is already within somebody's budget or someone else's guess about how large people can get.

I'm just coming out of a few days of severe depression. It feels very good coming back. I cried all day long for several weeks. Everything made me cry and I just couldn't stop. I hardly ever cry, but this was real sobbing. When I was married I didn't cry for ten years. Most of the time I was crying when I was alone and needed something really badly and I couldn't get a nurse to come.

Since I've been doing co-counseling I feel a little safer to cry with people. I'm aware that much of my sadness has to do with loss. I just seem to keep losing more and more the older and sicker I become. I have a lot to cry about these days. I don't want to hold things in and have them come out sometime when they don't belong. I want to get through them and out of them.

When the staff is here they can't take my weeping. They say, "Don't cry, don't cry, everything's going to be all right. You want some pills?" I get into little kidding fights with them, for example, with Maria whose heart is really in her work. She says she agrees with me about crying being helpful, but she still has to say that it makes her feel bad. When I cry, I say, "Maria, it's OK for you to feel bad if that's where you are. In fact, if it makes you cry, that would be good too." And then we laugh together. The tears usually

end when a friend of mine arrives or phones.

For example, I often feel powerless when I need to use the bedpan. Once when I had to go in the worst way, I pushed the buzzer and pushed the buzzer and forty minutes went by. Ten minutes into that forty I started crying and I just got louder and louder and felt worse and worse and worse. It was a very hot afternoon, so hot I could barely stand it. I threw off all my covers and took off my nightgown and the curtains were not closed so people walking up and down the hall could look right in here. I was completely nude, lying here in bed and wailing.

I was uncomfortable because I didn't have a sheet that would stay on my bed and the mattress is plastic and it was hot. I decided to turn on my side to get some air on my back. I was holding onto the side rail to keep from falling and it looked like I was in a fetal position. If they see you in a fetal position, that's an emergency. One of the attendants finally came in and went, "Oh my God" and went running out of the room and came back with two nurses. "I just need a bedpan," I said. They were very scared and started putting cold compresses on me and new sheets on the bed and turned a fan on.

I was four hours too early for an anti-anxiety drug and I really needed it bad and they couldn't reach the doctor to get permission to give me one right away. It's nine o'clock that night, the phone rings and it's my dear, old friend and ex-lover, Ariana. She never calls me at night. We often talk at six in the morning. She's one of the best therapists in the country. Most people don't know that because she doesn't have a degree. She has worked with the most seriously psychotic people on skid row in Los Angeles. We talked for 15 minutes and I felt better and went to sleep. After she acknowledged that I had a right to be upset, and listened to everything I said about my pain, I told her, "I don't want to kill myself, but I feel like I want to die, I feel that bad. I don't know what I'm going to do." She said, "Of course you know what you're going to do, you're going to tough it out. There's nothing else to do." She was right as usual. I hate it when she's right, even if I do love her.

When they sent me here from Alta Bates Hospital, they sent me for hospice care for maybe two months due to low heart, lung and kidney functions. The doctor here took what they said and acted as if it were true. As time has gone by, I've been getting stronger and stronger. Finally, about a month after the projected date of my demise, she said, "Boy, you sure are making a strong comeback. Your heart and lungs are really not all that bad.

The kidneys are still a problem, but ...” something meaning I wasn’t at death’s door. That was a huge bit of information, though I already knew that I was getting better.

The staff at Alta Bates didn’t believe in me. They didn’t know that I was a fighter. They didn’t know me at all. I was really sick. Everybody who knows me and who was visiting me was terrified because they could see that the life was going out of me. I do feel very proud of what I have accomplished in my life, given where I came from (and I don’t mean Detroit). In a small circle, I’m respected and cared for. That’s way more than I ever expected. I’m not done yet. There’s a whole world that’s all screwed up and I know that I can’t personally fix it, but I want to be one of the people who is making things better and more humane. I want to be one of the people who makes history rather than just one who reads it. Compared to great stars and heroes what I’ve done is nothing, but it’s huge to me, because it is so much more that I ever dreamed I could accomplish. I never thought I could publish a book, or even a story. I have over forty publications. People tell me they like my work. That’s a major contradiction to what I had believed growing up.

A long time ago I heard that some people were buying caskets in advance and using them for furniture, like chests. Ever since the Loma Prieta Earthquake I’ve been ruminating on what I was going to do with my body when I die, having come close to death that day being on the Bay Bridge during that earthquake. I knew I didn’t want to be cremated because Jews have been burned too often in my lifetime. I didn’t want to be buried because I’m asthmatic and figured I couldn’t breathe if I were buried. I know, it’s not rational. Ask any asthmatic, I’m not alone in this. I went to the Unitarian church in the first place because that was a question I needed help with—what to do with my body. Last year I read about this place where they do natural burials with no chemicals and everything is done to preserve the environment of the space. I thought, that makes the most sense to me. It’s a grassy field with trees with a little stone that comes from the region. I’m going to have a stone and all it’s going to say is “Judy Freespirit.” Some stones don’t say anything, but I want to be immortal.

When it came up that I wouldn’t live long, I thought of a man at our church who is a good carpenter/artist and that I would like to ask him to build me a casket out of plain pine, which is the Jewish tradition. Then I got the idea of asking people in the church to paint it because plain pine is kind of boring and it would give people a chance to participate in a ritual. Some



of my friends have already made plans for the ritual, and one of them has even measured me for the casket. Now that I'm thinking that I'll live awhile, it will be a chest where I store my blankets and sheets. It will be high enough so that I can use it as a bench to sit on.

So from not knowing what I want to do with my body, I think I've come a long way. I picked a grassy meadow at Fernwood in Mill Valley. It's near a grove of oak trees that attract Monarch butterflies. People coming to visit me will have a nice view. It has to do with having power. I have spent so much of my life feeling so powerless. When I was married, all the furniture was picked by my husband, because he had a stronger will than I did. He always won the arguments. This is something that I can absolutely make all my own decisions about. It feels silly on one hand and important on the other.

As soon as I realized I wasn't going to die—it took about three months—I got really angry. Now I had all the problems I had before plus all the ones caused by this illness. When I'm having a bad day, like last week I had a bad cold and a fever, I think, "Why didn't I just die?" I didn't really mean it, but the thought did cross my mind. On days like today, I'm so glad I'm alive.

When everybody was sure I was dying, people put a lot of their lives aside and spent time with me. People I hadn't seen in years came out of the woodwork. People across the country heard about me and wrote me letters. I initiated contact with people with whom I had unfinished business. They were people whom I didn't necessarily want back in my life, but I wanted to say good-bye or tell them something positive about their role in my life that I had not yet previously disclosed. Now they're back in my life and I'm alive. I guess it could be worse. I had never anticipated that so many people would be there for me. Some were old friends and some are fairly new friends. My friendships have deepened tremendously. I feel more loved than I ever did before, but I still have to work at it. Some things die hard.



Joan Annsfire

## Surrender

your gray hair, wild with neglect,  
your mind fraught with disorder,  
hollow despair resounded  
at the death of your child,  
my mother.

Nembutal nights  
followed alcohol-infused days  
as you descended deeper  
into the grief-stained well of memory.

the bones of her body  
hung suspended between us,  
just above the desperate breath of evenings,  
where her spirit hovered, brushed past us  
in dry, sleepless rooms;  
separate cells of need and longing.

you stepped upon this earth  
in careful balance on a razor  
self-consuming as a candle,  
burned down to only anger.  
regret, a hot wax coating  
as you slid further,  
further.

the air hung thick with sadness,  
your eyes, black as a river,  
that day you made your last surrender  
and your life-force drained  
like water.

sliced open and abandoned  
by the world that took  
your daughter.

Marcia Perlstein

## Your Suicide, My Mop-up

February 15, 2006

Dear Colleen,

I'm beginning this on an odd date having written to you since your death in 1972 only at the immediate aftermath (as self therapy/survival) and for eleven anniversaries thereafter. So to be writing in February, instead of August 3, somehow feels strange. However, this letter provides me with an opportunity to re-cap and update. Choosing this format and venue enables me to share our story. Ever the educator, I hope it will be instructive to those considering suicide (who hopefully will reject the option) and to the survivors who have lost someone special to the ravages of this choice. Finally, this letter, just as all the others, allows me to connect again with you, experience our love as well as your exit, revisit some of the wonderful memories that we managed to pack in during our seven years; smile at all I learned from you including Christmas, scrounging around for second hand treasures, nature, science, and San Francisco. The list could go on; this is merely the tip of the iceberg.

Some of what I'm about to say in this letter you've heard before (out there somewhere, that is) because all these letters were written after your suicide. I'm going to repeat myself because this letter is being offered to *Sinister Wisdom*, in the hopes that our story might bring some measure of comfort or understanding to survivors of their lover's suicide. One of my current sadnesses for you, for your premature departure from me and this earth, is that you missed out on the growth of the LGBT movement. You also missed out on technological advances that would have blown your mind, kindling that marvelous sense of wonderment and joy that many of your research findings provided you with! I remember when you were doing your research and had to go to that room with the large computer that took punch cards and you always needed the help of the person on duty. Once you put the cards in and didn't push the next button quickly enough and the machine read "reader idle in mid-run." You hit the machine and said, "I'm not idle, just stupid." You got banned from the room for a week for hitting that machine.

I know many readers will find ours is not a unique tale; it is yet another common example of the cost of the closet. I lived with the double whammy of the pain of losing you (triggering my guilt, confusion, and self doubt) as well as the concomitant complications of continuing to hide.

I also know that if you lived in these times, you would be one of the leaders of LGBT civil rights. Just as you were a founder of Science for the People (whose mission was to make scientific discoveries that add to the quality of peoples' lives and that are truly accessible to grass roots folks, etc.), ever the activist (anti-war, civil rights) you'd now be carrying the banner for our own civil rights. In fact, Colleen, did you see me marching in 1987 the same path in Washington as I had marched in the 60's with Martin Luther King for black civil rights? I wept as fellow straight travelers supported us in the same way, literally on the same path. You would have been with me.

I have to confess that I think of you less frequently now but one of the recurring themes seems to be all you're missing out on: TIVO, computers, nouvelle cuisine, hybrid cars that get 61 miles to the gallon. We're living on a stretch of paradise now with our own dock and view of Discovery Bay in the state of Washington. You would have loved washing the dishes here because, in addition to getting your fingernails clean as you always used to say, you can view the ever changing patterns of water, see an occasional deer and many different birds, whose names you would have gotten to know. I still say "there's a bird!".

### **Immediate Aftermath**

Well Colleen, to re-cap: After you suicided my grief was prolonged, disabling, and extremely lonely. I have since learned that it was far worse because I preserved your insistence to remain closeted. You had good reason; it was hard enough for you to be a woman at two prestigious universities, teaching and having your own lab and experiments. It would have been objectively dangerous to come out. I concurred, cooperated, kept your secret. After your death I fiercely protected your/our secret, compounding my loneliness and puzzling my friends. Nobody quite understood why I was "taking it so hard" and for so long.

I had to fight lots of 'shoulds' about grief. My therapist thought I should be angry at you. I couldn't and can't to this day. If I got angry; it would be about me and your suicide was truly about you. I was deeply disturbed at how much I had missed about the depth and breadth of your

suffering prior to your suicide. In fact, I took down my shingle for a period of time believing that if I hadn't helped you, I was going to miss something important with the clients I was working with. They deserved a whole and smart therapist. I was shattered and clearly not on top of my observational game; I had been emotionally clueless about your pain. We were geographically so distant; you were teaching medical students at Harvard and running your lab (incredible honors for a twenty-six year old) and I had my practice in Berkeley. If you'd said a word, I would have chucked it all and been on a plane to be with you. But we had talked about how busy you were teaching by day and in the lab every night. We concluded, mutually I thought, that I should remain in Berkeley. How hard it must have been to have kept quiet in our last phone conversation, hours before you ingested your cyanide.

Another big piece of the immediate aftermath was the effect on both your sisters, still in high school. I stepped in for a long time as substitute big sister. They were so creative and loving. Spending time with them helped all of us "keep your wonderful memories alive." They didn't have permission to speak your name at home since your father said you'd committed a sin by suiciding. I sat at your family's Thanksgiving table for many years after your death.

## **Long-Term Aftermath**

### **1. Making Lemonade**

My grief was painful and prolonged since you had died so young, leaving such a puzzle, and the giant elephant in the middle of the room of our relationship. I went from a person who never cried (Bronx bravado learned through roots and rearing) to someone who bawled if anyone asked "how are you?"

I eventually tried to make some lemonade out of the awful lemons you left me. One of the things that really angered me was everyone telling me that my grief was going on too long and I "should" get over you and move on with my life. That annoyed me for two reasons: 1) everyone's grief is private and individual, and folks should not have to fight for permission to grieve as they wish; and 2) there is a prejudice in our culture that we are more entitled to grieve deeply over a lover or primary relationship than a close friend or roommate. Since they didn't know we were an "item," they thought I was grieving too long for simply a roommate. As it happened, you

were my primary relationship for seven wonderful years. However, even if you hadn't been, I feel that uncoupled yet intimate friendships deserve the same respect as coupling.

In fact, each of these issues has led me over the years, after much thinking and feeling, to become an "expert" and share my findings with others. I have trained other therapists in the area of grief and suicide. You'll be pleased to know that I even have a suicide joke, which at first horrifies; then goes over well in these workshops, much in the spirit of the humor we shared.

As for honoring all forms of intimacy, when I hung my shingle out again I started seeing all manner of connections between and among people, from polyamorous relationships to roommates, mothers and daughters, etc. I'm working on a piece now, "Intimacy is More than Coupling," which I tried out at the Women's Building aging series last year. My central thesis is that even coupled folks are experiencing a temporary condition. One will pre-decease the other and those who have made intimate friendships, formed extended family and community with others will fare better than those who have isolated themselves inside their primary relationship.

Yes, Colleen, I just turned sixty last June; you would have in October. I've gone from adolescent concerns to aging issues. Suicide is no longer the centerpoint of my existence. By the way, though sadness has always been my primary feeling when I think of you, one major area of resentment towards you is that you planted in me the idea of suicide. I never considered it an option. Since your death, whenever the going gets emotionally extremely tough, I tend to consider suicide and then reject it. I resent that I have to go down that path at all. It hadn't been part of my arsenal of choices prior to your use of it as an answer. I so wish that you could have considered other options, been more open about your pain, or, as I discovered are the most important things in preventing suicide, allowed the strength of our connection to have helped you feel less isolated, and bought some time, realizing that today's pain can diminish and recede tomorrow or the next day. If you exit this earth you have no opportunity to catch a better wave when it floats in.

## 2. Soul Reclamation

So let me tell you more about what you've been observing all these years from your place in the universe. I had an extremely hard time with relationships. When asked about my coming out process I have to describe

it as “checkered:” seven years closeted with you; several years going back to men (since part of my stinkin’ thinkin’ after you abandoned me was that I was being punished for being with a woman), then, beginning in my late thirties returning to women with yet another promiscuous adolescence. Some of it was fun, much was empty for me. Then, a seven year relationship with a woman eighteen years older than me who left me very abruptly. However, not much pain for me over that loss. Your premature and sudden exit trumped anything else; no pain could match what I went through after you left. Finally, where I am now: in an eighteen year relationship, minus six months for a lesbian drama about nine years ago. We learned much from our temporary break-up; though not perfect, we are very strong. However, when we started out, I couldn’t let her all the way in emotionally.

I needed Richard Olney’s Self Acceptance Training for that. I quip that I turned to an eighty five year old male shaman to learn about tender energy. As you know, I had been in an advanced training group with him and fifteen other peer therapists for more than twenty years (until his death). We have continued on our own with the periodic use of master consultants. Nyla and I went to one of his workshops in Mexico. I was still talking about you, still regretting not being able to get closer to Nyla, which resulted in many petty squabbles to cover the deeper emotional distance. He felt that you still held part of my soul. He offered me a very intense and painful process, witnessed by the others (including Nyla) in our training group. He helped me travel to the lower regions, beyond consciousness and ask you to return the piece of my soul that you possessed.

I can just see the cynical scientist in you laughing at all this. But I can equally see the floating you, out there in a larger universe “getting” this and what it meant to both Nyla and me. It truly worked and I thank you for returning that which you kept for far too long. I recognize that you couldn’t have held my soul without my complicity. This process helped me see how I am truly a lesbian as well. Something which you never quite allowed yourself to experience with truth and pride. I have never been comfortable with men, never been entirely myself, always tried too hard to please. With Nyla, I am really me: positive, negative, complicated, strong/weak, happy, sad. I am not afraid of losing her if I speak my truth; I can let her in all the way without pretense or posturing. Reclaiming my soul from you to make it available to our relationship helped me understand once and for all my choice of women over men.

## Full Circle: Knowing that You are Smiling Wherever You Are

So Colleen, for my sixtieth birthday, my friends helped me organize a party where I was the entertainment. For about one hundred fifty of my nearest and dearest I was Bronx Bred Baby Boomer offering the U.S. premier of my act “Bull in a Dharma Shop.” (I know you saw it but I like how it plays on the page so I thought I’d re-cap.) Folks came from every important thread of my life including family; extended family; friends from long term groups including Jewish lesbian and Dick Olneyites; comrades from various movements including Radical Elders Oral History Project, Out and Equal in the Workplace, Women’s Feminist Activities, and Berkeley politics; interns, ex-interns, and trainees; colleagues from Berkeley Therapy Institute, Psychotherapy Institute, Alternative Family Project, East Bay Volunteer Therapist AIDS Project, and Berkeley Grief Support Project (the latter two for which I was founder and first director); women from the larger lesbian community in San Francisco, Berkeley, and Sequim, Washington; and other colleagues and friends, LGBT and straight. The place was humming!

Many things about that night were extremely moving. Both your sisters came. Gail brought her hubby and adult daughter saying she wanted her daughter to get to know me a bit better. Our contact over the years had waned. I had held your secret all this time, though they had figured it out long ago. At my party their surmisals were validated. I offered them the opportunity to meet next time I visit so that I can answer any questions they might have about you/us. As you know, Gail suffered long and hard after your death. I found her a lesbian therapist with whom she did pretty well.

I can’t answer why I held your secret so long. The story I told myself was that I was honoring your legacy the way you would want it honored. However, the fallacy in that is that the world changed so much since your departure from it that old choices no longer were relevant. Emotionally, I couldn’t wrap my mind around that and couldn’t exactly envision who you would be today. So I kept you frozen as I knew you and honored the promises I made to you then. All of that is over and I am looking forward to talking with your sisters if they should avail themselves of the opportunity.

Goodbye again Colleen, “rest in peace perturbed spirit.”

Oodles and Poodles and Matzo Balls of Love,  
Marcia



Stacy Traiger

## Thursday Night Sketches

This summer I'm learning to sketch.  
 A white cup, thick and heavy and empty.  
 A banana, soft and spotted, against a round lamp.  
 My third drawing was the leaf.

I stared at lines and shadows, intimate,  
 and could not throw away the model.  
 It sits on my kitchen table, on the drawing,  
 drying and fading to a dull papery tan.  
 I watch it die: shrivel, flatten and pale,  
 sides droop onto the paper, stem twists up.

The pencil-drawn leaf is unchanged, vibrant.  
 It mocks the dying leaf. 'You are a living thing,  
 and you are dying. I am an imitation of a living thing  
 and I cannot die. Soon you will decay, and I  
 will be the only representation of your life.  
 I will become you.'

The drawing has not become the leaf, cannot  
 become.  
 But I am changed by the act of drawing.  
 I notice leaves now. I look at bananas, see  
 flat sides and corners, stems and bruises,  
 the particular arc of this banana which is different  
 from the arcs of other bananas. Cups too. I notice  
 curve and heft, light reflecting off rounded sides,  
 the rims and handles, each distinct.

II.

We rarely meet their children,  
 don't see them at work or home.  
 At the cancer support group,  
 we ask diagnosis and treatment,

compare side effects,  
talk of tumors and wills.  
We speak new priorities and old regrets,  
flaunt scars and wigs, make one whole body  
from our combined missing parts.  
Most survive into remission and move on.  
Some have recurrences. Some die.

We notice dying.  
We hear confused phrases  
and half-lost thoughts,  
see drugged movements,  
body no longer responsive to brain.  
We long-term survivors  
have seen this before, heard  
tumors spreading and growing,  
blotting out clarity, muting mobility.  
We watch for the silences.

### III.

Shirley, going deaf  
after a lifetime of adventures,  
moved slowly, dozed in the meeting.  
She knew and accepted; we wished  
we'd all die old in our sleep.

Junior's death was sudden.  
Handsome and thoughtful, he looked worn,  
left ear burnt shut in a roofing accident,  
tattoos from doing time.  
In remission and remarried, he returned to roofing,  
had a heart attack at work, died quickly.  
The unplanned funeral was simple and quiet.

Bett was swollen and incoherent. Lung cancer  
spread to her brain, pain meds loosened her  
tongue.

We let her ramble, knowing she would die soon,  
all we could do was listen.

Delores was fighting it.  
Hearing her diagnosis, she cried that once,  
didn't cry again, she told us proudly.  
Breast cancer spread to her lungs and liver.  
She drew on her bald head, baked brownies,  
refused to stay home, refused  
to give in. When she died,  
her lover brought us brownies, crying.

Aaron was tired  
after three brain tumors.  
He was young and Mormon,  
talked of his wife and two sons.  
Weeks later, he couldn't walk.  
Neurological damage, the doctors said.  
Cane to wheelchair, clarity to confusion.  
He struggled for speech. We listened,  
speaking quietly during the long pauses  
when he fell asleep mid-sentence or mid-bite,  
pizza sliding from his hand.

#### IV.

These quick sketches  
cannot represent the dead,  
cannot become them.  
But I am changed  
by the act of remembering.  
I notice lives, seeing  
flat hands, spotted and bruised,  
light reflecting off moist eyes,  
the arc of each person, distinct.

I notice my life, the lines and shadows  
as I curve and pale, twisting towards death.

Jean Sirius

## How It Was

*Here's what I think: I think the reason we have hearts is so they can be broken. All the nice stuff, the limerance, the passion: it's all just bait. I think the breaking is what teaches us compassion, moves us along the path toward becoming fully human. A hundred years ago in the U.S., nobody achieved adulthood without sustaining a loss—a parent or a sibling, or both, or several. People knew what it was to grieve. Nowadays, what with clean water and advances in medicine, people get to be fifty without that experience. I think this accounts for the curious heartlessness of American social policy—the policymakers have missed the crucial lessons grief offers.*

*I never forget that I was very lucky. I had eighteen years of something some people don't have for five minutes. Unlikely as it sounds, my partner's death was the happy ending: we stayed together; we worked things out; we didn't give up. When you love somebody, you give a hostage to fate. Sooner or later, if you keep at it, somebody's going to die. And if you love her, it doesn't matter if you've had five weeks or fifty years, it's always too soon. The last words Cara said were "I love you." The last words she heard were "I love you." She died with my hand on her heart, and if she'd held on another two weeks, she'd have taken me with her.*

In January of 1989, I started back to school for the first time in twenty years. I'd dropped out of Colorado State University in favor of sex, drugs, and rock & roll, and I was dropping back in because desktop publishing was about to devour my job as a typesetter. I took a math class and an art class, where I learned to do collage. Cara came down with a cold that month. Since she'd suffered from allergies all her life, she didn't notice that her nose was still blocked up until March. She started looking around for an ear-nose-throat specialist to take a look at it.

We'd been together for ten years. We worked hard, at the beginning, to build a shared culture that supported us equally. We had choreography for disagreement; we had algorithms for making decisions. We'd put in the work because we believed it would pay off over the decades: we were going to grow old together.

It took a few months to get an appointment. The doctor said it looked like polyps to him, and scheduled the surgery for September, when he got back from vacation. Since Cara and I had no *legal* relationship, I was in no

position to do what I wanted to do, which was invade his personal space and say, “There is something *growing* in my wife’s *face*. Fix it *now*.” Cara wasn’t concerned. I held my peace.

While waiting for the surgery, we filled out paperwork and got forms notarized, so that “in the unlikely event,” I would be the person making decisions about Cara’s healthcare, and nobody would try to keep me out of her hospital room. One great thing about living in the San Francisco Bay area is that every hospital knows the drill: same sex partners happen, and if you make us unhappy, we will sue you.

The surgery took several hours longer than predicted. I knew this was not good. When Cara was finally in the recovery room, the doctor pulled me out of the waiting area. He said a lot of words ending in “-oma,”\* and I longed for a cigarette. (I’d quit two years earlier.) I didn’t tell Cara when she asked, still groggy from the anesthetic. She’d know soon enough, I figured. While she slept it off, I thought, “She’s leaving me, and I didn’t even know she was unhappy.” I promised myself that the last thing she was going to know in this life was that she was loved.

I recognized that the cancer was hers, however she came by it. Decisions about how to handle it belonged entirely to her. I am a strong personality: it takes iron discipline not to steamroller innocent bystanders, nudging reality into shapes that work for me. The hardest thing I did for the next eight years was to ask Cara what she wanted, and make it happen, and not offer advice unless it was specifically requested.

In an oncologist’s waiting room, we accidentally opened the wrong envelope, and learned what Cara’s surgeon had seen. Wherever he probed around the tumor, he found more cancer. The only way he could have excised it all and left a clean margin was by doing a “semi-headectomy.” We sat in stunned silence, we grappled with despair, and then we reassured each other that doctors don’t know everything, and miracles happen. Cara then did everything in her power to forget what she’d read.

Later, alone, I sat with the horror. Cara with half her head. Could I bear it? Would I run away? I conducted a thought experiment: if Cara’s leg were amputated, would I still love her? Of course I would. How about both of them? That and an arm? Both arms. When it came right down to it, I decided, if Cara were just a brain on a plate, I’d still be loving her, and doing whatever I could to help her follow her path. Then I didn’t have to think about it any more either.

The specialists recommended experimental radiation treatments; the first happened to fall on my fortieth birthday. Cara asked what I’d like to do

to celebrate; I said something quiet, maybe dinner out with our friend Anne. She got through the treatment, we had a nice dinner, and then we came home. As we opened the front door, a dozen women yelled, “Surprise!”

In the middle of all this, Cara had found time to arrange a party for me. No one has ever loved me so much. I was lucky to get through the evening without sobbing.

At treatment’s end, Cara and I chose to live as if she were cured, even though nobody said any such thing. She returned to the job she loved at UC Berkeley, and I went back to school. We had five pretty good years before the accumulation of health issues made it clear she was having a recurrence. No particular treatment was offered this time. Hospice was recommended. She said she wasn’t that far gone.



the anniversary pictures\*\*

She kept working. As before, I tagged along to medical appointments, taking notes, keeping lab results, reminding her of questions she’d had. Cara was not interested in her prognosis. (As Warren Zevon said, unless a doctor has a gun to your head, he has no business telling you how long you’re going to live.) Whenever health care professionals seemed on the verge of pronouncing one, I’d get right up in their face and make them stop.

In the summer of 1996 Cara fainted and sustained a concussion. She went on disability. I set up a table at the foot of the bed and made collages. It pleased Cara that something beautiful was happening amid all the unpleasantness, and it soothed my spirit to have work whose outcome I could actually control. I made a series of cut paper collages and a series of torn paper ones while fetching, cooking, monitoring her fluid intake, doing whatever was needed.

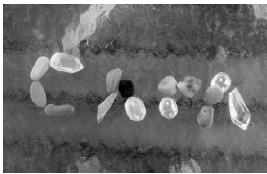
We had help from our communities—Cara’s co-workers and friends, my electronic buddies at BMUG (a computer user group), and the pack of wild college students who’d adopted me at Mills College. They organized themselves to support us, helping with cooking, cleaning, and giving me a couple of hours away from the house once a week.

In January of 1997, Cara had a stroke. I became her legs. We’d drape her arm over my shoulders, put my arm around her waist, and we’d get

there together. A month later, I broke a finger (mercifully, on my nondominant hand). Her mother promised to fly out from New Jersey to help. By the time Agnes arrived, six weeks later, the finger was healed, and it turned out she wasn't good with crises. They had an opportunity to spend time together, though, and I kept an eye on them both.

Cara's family firmly believed that if you didn't say it, it wasn't true. Returned to New Jersey, Agnes would call and ask how Cara was doing. I'd say, "She's getting weaker." She'd say, "Well, I'll just have to pray harder." I'd think, "Fine. You do that."

As we approach death, we run out of landmarks. Sometimes we get frightened. Cara and I had been practicing pagans for almost two decades, but as the abyss opened at her feet, she cast about for magical solutions, and



Photos by Jean Sirius

settled on the faith of her childhood. She started watching Christian religious programming on television. I didn't argue with her; if she was watching something I couldn't stand, I just left the room.

We had hospice by this time, which is to say hospice sent nurses, a social worker, and personal care assistants to our house, and there was a doctor to prescribe morphine. In the last month, the nurse tried to convince me that Cara should be moved to a skilled nursing facility, so I could catch up on my sleep. (Cara and I shared a bed the entire time, and I was in the habit of rising up to partial consciousness several times a night, to check if she needed anything, or was still breathing.) In the last couple of weeks I was experiencing short episodes of sleep deprivation psychosis, but I was damned if I was going to let them take her away. I knew they wouldn't bring her back. My reluctance offended the nurse; I had to explain that I didn't believe Cara would survive the transfer.

In my belief system, dying trumps everything. The person doing it gets to make all the decisions. Cara never believed she was going to die. She chose denial: it was her family heritage. At the very end she imagined that if she believed hard enough she'd get a miracle. I had to agree that there are miracles, and if anybody deserved one, she did. She never asked me if I thought she was dying, because she knew I'd tell her. Once, slyly, she asked

if I were in her situation, what would I do? I said I'd do all the things that give me joy as much as possible. I'd do every kindness I was capable of. I'd make art as long as I could. I'd open up my heart, and make sure that everybody I loved knew exactly why.

For a week I watched her as she listened to music, which she loved, and drew pictures, and talked to her friends. She dictated letters to send to friends and family. When I caught her in the act of doing me a kindness, it damn near killed me. I was sorry we didn't get to talk about the dying while it was happening, but it was her call, and I respected it.

The social worker from hospice happened to be in the house on Cara's last day. Even though Cara was in a coma, I'd left them alone together, in case Cara had something to say to her. Also, I didn't like the idea of talking over her unconscious body. (People in a coma can still hear, I think.) Laura knew the signs and called to me, so I was there for Cara's last breath. I put my hand on her heart and told her I loved her, and it was okay, and she could let go.

And then I went into shock. I was still walking around, doing what needed to be done, but my body mercifully shielded me from the full extent of the pain. I know this only in retrospect. At the time, I was amazed that my body could hold so much unhappiness, and yet there was still room for the air to go in and out. I felt like a tiny boat on an angry sea, and the waves threatened to swamp me, and all I could do was hang on and weep and wait for them to subside.

Cara's mom called to ask about her daughter's life, for accuracy in the hometown obituary. I had to tell her that Cara had never actually finished her master's degree. And I asked to be identified as Cara's partner. When it was printed, I'd been transmogrified into a "friend." Agnes said she had no idea why "they" had changed it. She was old, and I didn't argue with her. I knew she'd done it because she was embarrassed. She was dead in two years anyway.

Then somebody from personnel at the university called to ask for the names and addresses of Cara's next of kin. I said, "That would be me." She said, "No, according to statute, any unused vacation pay goes to the next of kin, a spouse or blood relative." I explained that Cara had clearly and unequivocally designated me as her sole beneficiary. I called the people she'd worked with and reported the incident. I mentioned it on BMUG. People wanted to show up somewhere and demonstrate their disapproval. Eventually, the functionary was persuaded that even though it wasn't the letter of the law, the path of least resistance was to send me the damn money. This was





Altar for My Dead

Photo by Jean Sirius

*An altar for my dead. In front, a scarf Cara gave me. A kukui lei she brought back from a visit to Hawai'i. A nipple-shaped paperweight from her desk. Two lavender crystal balls that belonged to Cynthia, who died this year. Some stars Cara used to wear in her lapel. A pipe bead necklace she got at a powwow. A shell necklace from Hawai'i. Many of her earrings are hanging from pots. At left, an Indonesian flying mermaid and a gold ornament. In back, the box her ashes came back to me in. Three of my purple heart-themed collages on the wall. Various goddesses. Artwork by friends: on the left, a collage Keiko Kubo made on the Day of the Dead the year after Cara died; middle, a collage Tee Corinne made, incorporating a photograph she took of Cara; right, another Tee photograph, of Bev Brown (who died last October) and me. To the left of Tee's collage, the bride figures we put on our fourteenth anniversary cake. To the right of it, a polaroid snapshot of Cara with Isis and Hecate (our cats, who died in 1989 and 1992). It's leaning against a candle holder made by my friend Florence, who died in 2005. The wooden snake wrapped around the pot in front of the double portrait was also made by Florence, with help from Bobbie, who also died in 2005.*

before domestic partnerships. Maybe it's better now. I know the call gave me a shot of adrenaline; it may have done me good, in a perverse way.

We'd been careful to have all our legal ducks in a row, with powers of attorney and wills and joint accounts so that when "one of us" died, the survivor owned everything, and all the relatives had better be nice, or they might not get anything. I was good. I asked if there was anything the parents might like, by way of remembrance. I put aside the things of Cara's that had belonged to her grandmother, and passed them back to her family.

Six months after the death, I consulted a psychic, who said she saw a book I was going to publish, which would help me reconnect me with Cara in some future life. "Too tired, couldn't possibly," I wailed. She said, "Nevertheless."\*\*\* She also noted that I was so utterly spent that it would be months, and maybe years, before I could get back up to empty. This was true. When I had reached the bottom of my reserves, I just started digging.

The grief changed me. For a year I didn't know exactly who I was, what I liked, what I could do. I couldn't concentrate enough to read, and I'd read myself to sleep every night of my life since I was six. Turned out I could cook, a little. I couldn't sleep through the night any more. Kept rising up to near-consciousness, noticing Cara wasn't breathing, and waking the rest of the way up. Every hour or so. I did two last collages, to finish the set I'd been working on, and found I couldn't bring myself to do any more.

I'm kinder now, certainly. I know down to my roots that whatever I find to love in this world will eventually go away, and I recognize the importance of loving it the best way I know how. I'm clearer about what matters and what doesn't. And I'm fearless. I've survived the worst thing that could possibly happen; life holds no terrors. I've traveled alone, walked dangerous streets late at night, and always feel perfectly safe. Maybe somebody's looking out for me. Or maybe I'm not afraid to die. There are worse ways to be in the world, for as long as I'm in it.

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#### NOTES:

\* The diagnosis was adenocystic carcinoma. Cara was the wrong age, sex, and color to get it. I have no use for statistics.

\*\* On the fifth anniversary of Cara's death, I photographed her name spelled in various substances: flowers, pebbles, eucalyptus leaves, quartz crystals and river rocks, bay leaves, oak leaves.

\*\*\* In 2001, I published *Seeing Double/Rose Windows*, a collection of the collages I made while Cara was dying. It can be found online at <http://www.jeansirius.com/newbook.html>.

Siverbear

## Where Do Poems Come From

like the last leaves  
that have clung through winter  
to float down on a chill wind,  
words fall  
on the barren page

dying embers  
flickers of the once bright fire  
spark to thought?

but seeds bursting from the pod  
though carried by the breeze  
rarely grow to rhyme.

it is not the warming fire  
the whistle of the kettle  
or the company of friends

but  
the lonely wail  
of a distant train  
that draws the wandering line

nor does the rising  
sun inspire  
words of living color  
but the darkest hour  
of night

it is the ends  
that force the heart  
to write.

Carmen de Monteflores

## I See Her in Her Braids

*The laughter in the garden, echoed ecstasy  
Not lost, but requiring, pointing to the agony  
Of death and birth. (T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets)*

An image of a terrace at the summerhouse. I see her in her braids with the ribbon bows sticking out from behind her ears. She looks tall standing in the front driveway partially in the sun. We took pictures there. She, in a green dress with white diamond shapes; me, in a white blouse and plaid skirt that my father brought from the U. S. I am 16. She is a year and three months older than I am, the sister I never had. I'm smiling at her. She smiles also but has a more serious look.

Someone, who I had not heard from in years, leaves a message on my voicemail: had I heard anything from her family? I call right away after I get home from work. It is about 7:15pm. She says my cousin had died. She committed suicide.

I light a candle. It burns for a long time. I pray for her spirit, to be released, to be healthy, to be together with our ancestors. I wonder about the suffering and anguish that must have led her to take her life. I had heard she was depressed. I didn't give it too much thought. People go through stuff. I keep asking myself questions: how did she do it? Did she leave a note? Did anyone know what was going on with her? Was she ill? I wonder whether I should have visited. She invited me on several occasions to come and stay at her house. I made excuses to myself: that I had to work, or I didn't have the money, or couldn't take the time. Now I think: could I have helped? Did she talk to anyone? Can anything explain suicide?

I pray to our Abuelita, our grandmother, to help me understand, or accept. To help me pray. To help me love. I think of my yard. My garden. I think of the garden of my childhood, where I played with all the cousins. I try to remember: Did she run in the rain with us, or ride down the driveway in roller skates? I climbed trees. She read books. She was the older one, the one who knew things, who walked me home from school when I got my first period and gave me instruction.

Why? I keep asking myself. What brings someone to that place of not wanting to see the beauty of the world any more? I think about death. I think: I may be dying. Then I think: I am dying. Life is about dying but it is

also about living. I remember walking to a friend's house and how I loved the surroundings she created. There was a morning glory on the fence, lilies and irises bordering the entrance. Beauty is worth living for, as is the music I hear now on the radio. My cousin had said in a brief letter many years ago that she loved flowers. I see the photo of Mami and Abuelita that sits on my desk. I ask them to ease my cousin's passage, to help her let go of the pain. To bless her. She will be pure spirit now. Like them. And some day I will also join them in that endless dimension. I let grief and joy enter my heart together. Life and death side by side. The candle keeps burning.

I remember what is left of the fence of my childhood home. I associate images of the house, when it was there, with my cousin. That was the last place where I really knew her. Our lives separated when I left home, not too long after the photo in the green dress was taken. Her young presence floats near me, coming in and out of my consciousness.

I hear that a person's belief about how much time she has left in life makes a big difference on how she feels and also on how long she will live. I resist understanding how a person can get to the point where it is more difficult to keep living than to die. I want to affirm life.

Clearly life must have been intolerable but, why exactly? At what point does life become intolerable? At what point does our instinct of self-preservation, our connections with others and our inner resources fail to give us enough meaning and reason to keep living? What is that moment when the lifeline breaks down and we are let loose in meaninglessness? And at what point does death become less frightening than suffering?

What do I do in the face of such unanswerable questions? I take refuge in everything I have loved in my life. Again I conjure images of my childhood home: the huge flamboyant trees, next to the house, that burst into fiery blossoms in the summer; the ripe mangos hanging from low branches; the smell of heat coming off the cement walks and the smell of rain coming. In spite of whatever suffering I have had in my life, the balance has tipped for me toward enjoyment. I was loved growing up. I had the yard and the animals, art and books, imagination, the richness of music and the spiritual promise of the Catholic Church. I have been very lucky. But fate had a different design for my cousin. She lived with a narcissistic and addicted mother, with the threat of emotional and other kinds of abuse in her life.

There were periods when they lived with us. She lived in poverty except for the help the family gave her mother. For a while she, her mother and brother lived in the projects. The unit had bare, dirty, thick cement walls. There was barren, hard-packed ground around the buildings as if the place

had been stripped of any adornment that would soften the scarcity and deprivation. Her father had abandoned the family. Could a possible betrayal as an adult have recreated the pain of her father's desertion?

She worked hard and grew up to become a well-respected professional surrounded by beauty, comforts and family. What was the corrosive force that undid her? It is easy to say: depression. But that's just a word. Some people live under seemingly devastating and horrifying circumstances and they keep living. I think of Abuelita's humor and graciousness. She had nothing. No material possessions except a few items of clothing. But she commanded respect and never was depressed or negative. My thoughts about my cousin resurface every day. At what point did the first idea of suicide come into her awareness? Why was there such dearth of expression in her few letters? Was she on some kind of medication? Was she a functioning addict? Did she have a terminal illness?

Today I found out that she shot herself. Her violent ending makes me think that she didn't want it to fail, that she wanted to make sure it was instant and fatal. But was it also a result of anger? Why did she have a gun? I keep going over the fragments of information I have hoping to find clues or reach some conclusions, but they keep being just that, fragments. The family doesn't say what happened.

I search deeper into myself for answers, no longer about her death but about my disconnection from her. I am afraid of alienation, the soul-devouring loneliness she must have felt. And I didn't go visit. I finally have to accept that I didn't go because I was angry and I was ashamed. I was angry that she didn't care for my family, or me, as she had when we were growing up. In spite of her invitations to visit I knew that she would not have had time for me. And I was ashamed that now I was the poor relative. It takes courage to face any loss. I didn't want to face that we were no longer sisters.

It takes courage to face death. I am not sure how brave I will be when it is my turn. But, I cried last night for all my losses. Losses of lovers, of family, of country, language, identity, and loss of home.

Now my home is within myself. Perhaps my cousin was homeless in her world.

Elliot Femynye bat Tzedek**Tisha B'Av**

9 Av 5757

12 August 1997 c.e.

Before shul last night, over dinner, I spoke with Otter about Terri. I laughed a bit about how the anniversary of this particular death fits into Jewish liturgy – mourning a non-Jew, patriarchy-hating lesbian separatist who took her own life. “Kaddish,” Otter said, “is for the living.”

And so I knew I would rise, speak her name and say Kaddish, knowing it was for me, but still feeling it for her, too. I couldn't attach to her name the prayer/phrase “may her memory be for a blessing.” Blessing is not the right gerund. Warning, perhaps, or grieving. Or maybe other nouns: her memory as a caution, a counsel, an omen, an alarm, a siren, a beacon, a flare, signal, torch. “Caution, warning, alarm!” her death flares, “you sit mourning the destruction of the Temples, in a world where lesbians are desperate enough to be destroying themselves.” In shul, which is, after all, a Reconstructionist, social-justice based group, we read, after the Eichah, a piece about how mourning the ancient loss of the Jewish homeland isn't enough, how we must also act for all who are homeless today. This is a good thing. We didn't say aloud that the Israeli government is still bulldozing Palestinian houses, that Israeli settlers live in Palestinian homes. I assume, though, that the members here know these things, and had them in mind as we davened and read. But who was there to mourn the destruction of lesbians, of women, of Terri Lotz? Only me, and Otter, rising to say a prayer whose words would have appalled Terri. To say a prayer whose words in and of themselves don't move me: let god's name be made great and holy, be blessed forever and....

The saying though, the repetition, the echoes through thousands of years, the public time and space to remember, the marking of the anniversary of the death as each year passes – there is no Lesbian space for this, no Feminist place I could go to today to mourn my dead. And so I stand, and begin: *Yitgadal veyitkadesh shemey raba...* and the tears come and no one stares.

*Tisha B'Av (the 9<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Av) is a holiday that marks the historical destructions of the temples in Jerusalem. It is marked by a twenty-four hour fast, and the reading of solemn liturgy including Eichah (The Book of Lamentations)*

*Mourner's Kaddish – the Jewish prayer for remembrance of the dead. It isn't about death, but is a prayer invoking god's greatness and power in the world, closing with an invocation for peace.*

Loonwomon

## Precious Dog Love

Bereft that is how I feel  
left  
bereft  
left behind in the dust of life  
while my doggiest best friend  
becomes fairy dust  
so insubstantial  
so incompatible with these arms  
but still want to grab on and hold  
so tight  
hold on to fur and flesh and bone, dog body  
hold on to soft squishy teddy bear now  
no more warm furry face  
to greet us at daybreak  
paws washing face  
licking, wiping and washing your face  
every morning  
first thing  
now your face is in the wind  
in the whispers of the trees  
in the coyote foot prints  
in the snow ice sparkles  
in the sun  
in my heart

I opened my arms to hold you  
in your last moments  
your head like water splashing  
bounced over into them  
your breath came hard and fast  
your chest, a bellows pumping your heart  
your wind moved out  
and stopped  
you gasped  
then again



once more  
 and were gone  
 No more bellows  
 No more beating heart  
 No more dog spirit in the body  
 I lie awake at night  
 missing your steady breathing  
 on the floor beside my bed

We walked singing  
 "Step by step the longest march can be done"  
 pulling your sweet dog body  
 on the sled to your final resting space  
 in the heart of the land  
 I lay holding your head  
 as the snow covered both of us  
 her soft flakes drifting down  
 as A. uncovered your grave  
 so loving prepared by E. two and a half years ago  
 when we thought your days were numbered  
 you outlived every expectation  
 you stayed beyond your body's natural endurance  
 you waited until the moment  
 when you knew your love for us had totally been received  
 you filled us with your love in life  
 now as the grief rushes out in waves  
 your love rushes in  
 to fill up the empty spaces  
 your compassion has been  
 an ever present reminder  
 that we deserve better  
 than what we got  
 the first half of our life  
 we are now bound and determined  
 to live up to that truth you gave us  
 gift wrapped in a  
 furry  
 friendly  
 forgiving  
 golden package of precious dog love



Girl and her Dog

Sudie Rakusin

I am learning that true grief is mingled with moments of joy in remembrance of the beloved and touches of their spirit on the heart. This is in stark contrast to the grieving and loss process that I have been in, for the last 15 years, over the recognition of my lost childhood and the loss of my health to severe Multiple Chemical Sensitivities (MCS). Since 1991, my dog has been my constant companion through homelessness, the reliving of childhood trauma, and rebuilding a life within the limits of my disabilities. Shortly after I got her I became homeless because I could not find accessible housing with MCS. Shortly after that, while camping in a friend's back yard, I got back my first incest memory.

Within a couple of years of recovering memory after memory of severe sexual abuse, I discovered that “we” have multiple personalities. Our dog loved us through it all. She was there in ways that no human could have

been. As we lay awake at night in our tent, shrieking in terror, she lay calmly at our side. She could tell the difference between the fear in our flashbacks and fear with a present time basis, in which case, she was on her feet, raising the alert, with a tremendous deep throated barking ready to defend us against any threat.

Having a dog gave us the courage to share the puzzle pieces of our past because we felt safety in her protection, a security we never had as a child. Her love helped new children emerge, each carrying a fragment of our history, a memory of incest, ritualized torture, child pornography, or child prostitution...there were more perpetrators than we can count, more rapes than we will ever remember. We survived our childhood by creating multiple selves, but we survived the recollection of the horror because of our beloved dog. She came close to our bed for pats and comforted us as we sobbed and screamed out our grief over our lost childhood. She calmly gentled the little one who was afraid of dogs and learned to accept "cat girl" who initially startled her with her yowls. She stayed out of our way when we raged and patiently accepted us in our varied expressions of grief. One despairing night, her presence in the back seat of the car kept us from throwing ourselves from a bridge.

Do I paint her as an angel? While she may be now, she wasn't always! There were nights she took off, roaming the forest. Three year olds walked wailing through the darkness, shrieking "I want my doggie," and throwing temper tantrums in the snow when she did not hear or come. But she always returned eventually and slowly but surely, we all learned to trust her love. She hung on long past her physical endurance to make sure we fully received her love for us. When we, in those last moments, asked her forgiveness for all those screaming ranting times, she replied quite clearly in our head, "you wouldn't have been you if you weren't screamin' and yellin'."

Thank you for your everlasting love and compassion, my dog... Thank you for saving my life!

## Loss Lingers

Pain lingers on the tip of my tongue  
 I worry it like a small child worries  
   a lost tooth  
 Yes, it's still there  
 That gaping hole

Where my dog once was  
Today we had the first new girl  
return since she died  
It was oh so painful  
She has the composite memories of  
over 100 little ones to  
compare her experience to  
Oh, how it hurt  
to not have the soft touch of fur  
the patient presence of brown eyes  
the readiness to accept  
each new small person  
Into a better world than the one they  
left behind when they tucked themselves  
away neatly into a corner  
of the compassionate void  
So grateful we have others to  
greet new ones and in our solidarity  
The new ones can see and feel us  
close inside  
It's amazing what they notice  
That they heard and took in the  
Writing that we did about dog love  
It gave her a reference point  
Upon her arrival  
the most tremendous sadness and grief  
retched out of us  
From one who knew but never knew  
the dog love that should have been  
hers  
Like the lingering taste of sweetness  
That mocks the emptiness of a mouth  
That has never enjoyed a caramel candy  
But only gets what is stuck in the  
crevasses of a back tooth.

*Sweet Dog Buddy*  
*January 7, 2006*

Teya Schaffer

## Rope

I read my diary while you hallucinate  
 on morphine and the hunger for another day:  
*one more friend dying*. In the loop of a paperclip  
 you discover a promise of eternity while your feet,  
 compelled, dance the rocker forward  
 and back. The last threads of your fine red hair  
 float on the chair's weave.

Across the bay, where the women gather  
 and shout when shouting's called for,  
 an artist declares her designs on my body;  
 crayon sketches of raven and flame for my chest,  
 ocean for my belly. She prepares line and reel,  
 supposing what lives beneath water  
 can be raised in the air.

In this house, seaweed clings to our rocking.  
 We are the very act of going under,  
 lifesaving rope restored to its coil.  
 I lift my eyes from the page  
 and begin, "There's an artist—"  
 You open your hands as if to release me.  
 The dying can never measure  
 our distance from shore.

*for Sandy*  
 (1951-2000)

Gigi Ross

## Flung, Holding a River

*(for Uncle Bobby)*

I dream he is lying in a box  
I'm late for everything and only clocks talk  
Nothing is as it should be

Shrill ees loud as waves  
Shards of words hum tones  
My curly-haired brother, eyes sewn closed,  
lies in a box.

Don't just look.  
Shake him.  
Tickle his feet with a feather.

## At My Father's Funeral

The last day I saw you alive. You had me  
wheel you up and down the corridor,  
yelled for me to put you on the elevator,  
tried to wrench my arm to make me take off  
your restraints. *Do you want to hurt me?*  
Your head nodded, eyes shone.  
Two hours later, I said goodbye.

Suzanne Gary

## First Anniversary of Her Son's Suicide

*(for Noelle)*

She scatters flour-fine ash  
in Lake Tahoe

just before it freezes  
deep, aching blue  
absorbs everything

surrounded by slopes  
where she taught him to ski

giant, shimmering peaks  
Such white  
hurt through sunglasses

What a year  
to try our love

Every day an anniversary  
of something he did

She is not ready  
to be touched

At Ocean Beach  
the last cupful of ash  
washes back  
undissolved

Lying beside her  
I wish I could be

the edge of a clear wave

snow, tears

something besides

these hands

Chana Wilson

## Devil's Slide



My mother plummeted into dying like a car careening off a cliff at Devil's Slide, and plunging toward the gleaming Pacific. There was no turning back from the descent.

We'd been to see her oncologist, who delivered terrible news. She told my mother, "Your cancer has spread to your liver. The chemotherapy is not proving effective. You have perhaps a few months to live." My mother and I left the appointment in shock. It had only been four months since her diagnosis of ovarian cancer, followed by the relentless

interventions of surgery and chemotherapy.

By the third day after our visit to the doctor, she'd had no bowel movements for three days and was moaning with pain. I called the doctor's service. The weekend on-call doctor listened to my explanation of the symptoms. Then he said, "She may have a blockage, which would be very serious. I will admit her right away. Will she need an ambulance?"

"I'll bring her," I said.

"We're going to the hospital," I told Gloria. She was lying reclined on the couch. "I'll get your shoes."

"Can't wear them," she gasped, short of breath. "My feet are too swollen. Just bring my slippers." She struggled up. She was wearing navy sweat pants, and I noticed the elastic waistband was straining against her bulging belly. It had grown huge in just a few days. I knew what this was, and knowing it made me want to cry. I'd finally done some reading of medical texts and learned a new word with both Greek and Latin derivations: *ascites*—fluid buildup in the abdominal cavity from liquid that seeps out of the bloodstream when the liver isn't functioning or from cancer.

At the hospital, mother was wheeled away on a gurney. I waited, paging absent-mindedly through a *People* magazine, while they performed tests. After her scans, the good news was that she had no cancer growth blocking her intestines. However, she was much too ill to return home. I followed as she was wheeled to a room in the oncology ward. She'd just settled in bed when



a nurse came in and closed the curtains. “We’re going to be performing ascitic drainage,” she informed us.

A doctor arrived with a big needle. I held my mother’s hand and turned my head away, trying not to look, but I kept sneaking glances. She gasped and clenched my hand while the doctor shot her with anesthetic, cut a small incision, and inserted a thin tube into her abdomen. She was left with a larger tube coming out of her, and a drainage bag hanging from the tube.

Those first days of her hospital stay, I spent my free time with my mother, but kept meeting with my therapy clients. Even though it was clear she was extremely ill, I was holding in mind the doctor’s three to four month prognosis, which meant it was too soon to stop working. There were moments when I did some of my finest, most connected work, able to be right there with my clients’ suffering. In other sessions, I felt the cold weight of the seconds ticking, the unbearable waste of time lost with my mother. I could barely stay in the room.

One day, I stepped out of my mother’s room and went to find the nurse who’d been caring for her. She was sitting at the nurses’ station. She looked up and smiled.

“I wanted to ask you something.” I started awkwardly. How to ask this?

“Yes?” She looked at me encouragingly, her face soft. (I liked this nurse, thought she was real *mensch*, because when my mother had said to her, “Do you know I’m gay?” as she was taking her blood pressure, she’d simply smiled and said, “Great. Thanks for telling me.” At first I’d felt a bit embarrassed—why did my mother need to make a point of that?—followed by discomfort that I still had so much fear of sticking out, and then an admiring *of course*—a recognition that it mattered deeply to my mother to be accepted as herself, especially her gay self. Now, at the end, she wanted no more hiding.)

“Well...well,” I struggled to find the words, “it’s just that I’ve never seen anyone die, so I don’t have a sense of a timeline, of where my mother is in the process. I was wondering—I thought since you’re an oncology nurse and you’ve seen so much—you might have an impression about my mother. Do you have a guess about how long she’s got?”

“Hmmm,” she answered, “people can surprise you, living longer than you’d ever guess. So...I could be wrong...but I don’t think your mother’s got real long. Perhaps she has a few weeks.” I managed a whispered “Thanks,” and turned to go back to Gloria’s bedside.

Once, she awoke with a start and stared at me.

“Chana!” she called, sounding alarmed.

“Right here, Momushka.” I’d taken to calling her every endearment and nickname I’d ever used. I reached over and took her hand.

She exhaled slowly, “Hard dream, intense,” she said. She didn’t tell me her dream. She squeezed my hand and let go, her eyes looking off to the right, her face pondering. “*Yes, that’s it, that’s what it means,*” she whispered to herself.

She looked at me then with soft, big eyes, and said quietly, “I’m dying, aren’t I?”

Our eyes held. I inhaled, long and deep, and then let the air rush out of me. Another breath. “Yes,” I answered. “You are.”

We sat in a timeless moment, looking at each other, suspended by the truth.

Then, she said, “I didn’t want this; I wanted to live. I’d hoped at least for a long remission. But here it is.”

“Yes,” I concurred. We hovered in the silence of that.

Then, I cleared my throat. “There’s something I want to tell you, something I’ve been thinking about. I hope this doesn’t sound too weird. You know, all my life, whenever I’ve wanted to freak myself out, I’d imagine you dead, and I couldn’t see how I’d go on, how I could have a life without you. But now, with Dana—even though I will miss you *terribly*—I can see how I’ll go on.”

“That’s marvelous, darling. Knowing you have a partner makes me so happy.” Her eyelids drooped, and she dozed.

When my mother woke, a half-hour later, she continued as if we hadn’t paused in our conversation. She reminded me that she had made plans several years before with the Neptune Society to be cremated for a pre-arranged price. She told me where in her desk to find the Neptune Society paperwork and her Will. I was impressed—and grateful—that she’d had the foresight to deal with this in advance; I couldn’t imagine myself ever getting around to such a thing.

“Now, there’s something I need you to do,” she said. “Let’s not prolong this thing. If I start to go, I don’t want them bringing me back. I need you to do whatever it takes—whatever paperwork—so they don’t try to jumpstart me back with those damn electric shock paddles. I absolutely don’t want that.”

“I understand. I agree, that makes sense. I’ll take care of it,” I assured her.

The process of getting the Do Not Resuscitate form put in my mother's chart happened in a blur. My body marched from point A to point B, lead weights in the belly, doing what was needed on remote control. My mother must have signed the form, and perhaps her doctor had to as well, but all I remember is standing in front of the counter of the nurse's station handing them the completed piece of paper. Sure, I supported the idea of no heroic measures for a terminal illness—in theory; I didn't want to prolong my mother's suffering. Underneath that belief, a part of me wailed: *Stop! Don't take my mother! You want me to just let her go?*

Friends of my mother came by throughout each day, and sometimes while they sat with her, I'd go eat, or go to the hospital solarium, or take a walk in the neighborhood. Once, when I was off doing an errand, Gloria called Dana at work. "Please come see me," she said. Later, Dana told me how she had stroked my mother's hair, sitting close. How my mother had said, "I know you'll take good care of her."

Hearing that, I wept, which I had taken to doing frequently when I was at home.

One night, in the dark of 4 AM, the phone rang. It was a nurse calling from the hospital. "Your mother won't let us do any procedures on her, not even take her temperature. She's gotten paranoid; she says we're trying to kill her."

"I'll be right there." I'd been awake when the phone rang, sitting in a rocking chair in the spare bedroom, rocking and crying. A nightmare had woken me—I had them all the time now. I was too agitated to fall back to sleep, and I'd tiptoed out of bed, not wanting to wake Dana.

I found my mother with her arms gripping the bedrails, her nostrils flared, her mouth in deep frown. It took calling her name several times for her to focus on me. "Sweetheart...Gloria...Gloria...Momushka—" her head turned toward me then.

One hand reached for me, and I grasped it. I tried for a soothing tone. "The nurses tell me you're frightened that they're trying to hurt you, but it's okay. No one here wants to hurt you."

She released my hand, groped for the bed control, and held the button down while the bed whirred as she rose to sitting. Her eyes were wide with alarm and bright yellow-orange. "It's this feeling—this feeling I can't get over it, even if it's not real—this horrible feeling that they're trying to kill me."

I saw the terror in her face.

“Yes, that feeling—something *is* trying to kill you,” I said, “but it’s not the nurses. It’s your own body that’s trying to kill you. It’s the cancer that’s out of control.”

“Oh yes, it’s my body.” Her face eased with that simple, brutal truth.

“I’m right here, I’ll stay with you,” I said.

“Yes, stay...,” she said, her voice dropping off. The next moment, she slept.

Later that morning, breakfast arrived, and she picked at some scrambled eggs, and nibbled on toast. I ate her leftovers. It was one of those bits of time when she was both relaxed and lucid. *Maybe this would be a good moment to ask her*, I thought. It wouldn’t be that odd, as now our conversations were laced with non-sequiturs.

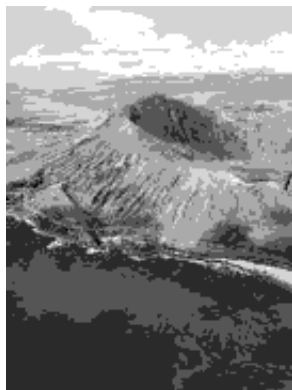
“Hey Glor, do you remember that trip that Dana and I signed up for to the Big Island next spring?” I asked.

“Sure, I remember.” Her head lowered, and she looked unspeakably sad. Then she looked up at me, her eyes brimming with tears. “Hawaii—you and I—we never made it, did we?”

“No.” An ache gripped my chest. “God, I wish we’d gotten to.” *What was I thinking? Maybe this was too weird to ask.*

“I was wondering—how would you feel if, um—only if you want, of course—would you like me to take your ashes with me, and put them in the volcano?”

She laughed then, the only true belly laugh I’d heard from her in weeks. “Wonderful, yes, that would be wonderful,” she beamed, eyes alight. “Throw me into the fire, into the volcano. Throw me back to the Mother!”



Chocolate Waters**Janet Sergi Lives**

She peers out my forgotten photograph,  
 hanging along the frame like a ghost.  
 This woman people mistook for my sister.  
 There we are in Kodachrome:  
 Me and Janet and Lady Wolf,  
 the Australian sheep dog that loved her.  
 I loved her.  
 Like my sister.  
 I prayed for her  
 to live and she did.  
 In California she thrived  
 until Lady Wolf was attacked  
 by wild dogs and died.  
 Janet's anger came back.  
 The tumor came back.

I last saw her a dozen years ago.  
 She was 33,  
 raising hell in the Oak Ridge Convalescent Home,  
 cursing, throwing lunch at the attendants,  
 calling in Jesus freaks to save her.  
 We drove around the parking lot in her wheelchair.  
 I was steering, crying.  
 She asked if I would forget her.

Tonight I phone the home.  
 A Mrs. Nelson answers:  
 "Sometimes Janet wakes up,  
 eats like a pig, curses like a sailor."

Her father's dead now. Her mom's insane.  
 Her brothers have so little time,  
 but Janet hangs on like a weed,  
 breathing in and out on a single bed  
 at the Oak Ridge Convalescent Home  
 in Fruitvale, California,  
 calling for her sister.

*\*Janet Sergi, who was a founding mother of the radical women's newspaper, Big Mama Rag, died in 1993, a year after this was written.*

Rachel Pray

## Sestina for Two Women

Four sodden years by now have passed  
immersed in treacherous pursuits of loss.  
Two women thrown headfirst into the waves,  
we swim now for our very lives.  
A simple dream, this longing for a child  
has carried us far out to sea, weighted with fear.

The Buddha spoke of facing fear,  
embracing change, all torrents pass.  
How could he know a woman's need to have a child?  
There is a limit we are testing to the soul's capacity for loss.  
We forget life  
as grief propels us through our days, unwavering.

Let me explain how strong we are: resilient waves  
of hope vanquish our fear  
month after month, each time we try to create life  
with donor sperm. We wait expectantly to pass  
beyond this place of barrenness and loss  
into the fertile landscape of "with child."

My darling, we have loved each other many years. A child,  
we thought, would be the union of your body and my heart, woven  
intricate and dear to us as our own breath, not lost  
and lost again in early death. You didn't need to speak the words we feared —  
your face of ashes told me hope was past -  
as for the second time a spot of blood foretold the end of fragile life.

I can't remember how it was to live  
in blissful absence of desire for a child.  
Melted down to ore, essence of longings past,  
I crash my puny will into the waves  
and nearly drown, afraid  
to save myself by turning back to face what has been lost.

Two pregnancies miscarried, two dreams lost.  
In shock, we tell ourselves the only remedy's to live  
as if the joy of birth will come as soon as we have buried fear  
and grief. How close those hungry ghosts of children  
creep, elusive as receding waves.  
Laughing, they pass

just out of reach, blithe and unaware of loss as phantom children  
are, full of potential life. They do not hear us call to them or see us wave  
as fearlessly they dive into the swell, not thinking of their future or our past.



Chelsey Clammer

## Silent Conversation

The first time I tried to kill myself I wanted some attention. I was an angry college student, angry with my family, my friends, the world, and my life. I needed a change and I thought that death was the ultimate—and best—change. The second time I really didn't feel like being alive. I was going crazy and thought that every one of my friends and family wished me dead. What's the point of breathing if you just have to breathe some more, knowing that nobody wants you to keep up the process of inhaling and exhaling? I just wanted to get permanently away from the depression that sucked up all of my positive thoughts and emotions. When I ended up on the third floor of Shoal Creek—a mental hospital in Austin—I had to convince all of the therapists there that I didn't try to kill myself because I was gay. Yes, I was a young woman who was gay, and yes I felt like dying, but the two issues were completely unrelated.

Just because I didn't fit society's constructed heterosexual norm didn't mean that I felt like death was the only way to reconcile my sexual feelings. Hell, I was proud of my sexuality and had never even considered that my lesbianism had anything to do with my depression or attempted suicides. I just knew it didn't, and it annoyed the hell out of me that the nurses and doctors insisted that my chosen sexual orientation was just cause for depression. And while I know that people have killed themselves because they weren't allowed to express their gender or sexuality, this, however, was not me. *I've been out and proud for over four years!!!* I would scream at them. But they didn't get it. They just couldn't understand how a suicidal lesbian could avow that she was comfortable with her “deviant” sexuality. My depression wrapped around my life, suffocating me, but it wasn't my sexuality that spawned it. I blamed my depression on the fact that I was bipolar, a genetic—and I would say situational—“disease” that I supposedly inherited from my father.

My father was an alcoholic, bipolar, and detached man. His oscillating emotions resided in the more depressed and drunk periods than the high and laughing manic stages. In my young, angry mind he was the one to blame for my depression and attempted suicides. These feelings were backed up by some indelible moments in my life where I realized that my father did not act like the typical father that all of my friends and their nuclear families



experienced—the father I always wished he could be. His drunken sprees led him to watching porn in the living room when he thought I wasn't home. The alcohol amplified his depression, and he frequently threatened while in his dark inebriated stages. *I would walk through a fire for you, Chelsey!* He would slur to me in a drunken haze. *But I don't want to be alive. I want to die now.* I would be crying and wishing that he would just go ahead and off himself so that I didn't have to have this fight with him every time he drank. *Then just go ahead and kill yourself already!* I would scream through my cold tears. *Our lives would be much happier without you.* I stormed out of his room, afraid but also excited that he might soon be gone. He never did commit suicide, but his depression and alcoholism never gave up the fight.

When he wasn't drinking, he became a work and golf-aholic. Weekdays he escaped from his family and life by working as a top manager for a food company, while on weekends—when I wanted him to go to my softball tournaments or my sister's swim meets—he chose to play golf with his work buddies. Take away the drink from an alcoholic's life and something must replace the obsession. Golf and work quickly became my father's drug of choice in his infrequent sober years.

In my youth I felt abandoned by my father. These feelings transformed into hatred and anger as I grew into a teenager, and would later provide me with a source of pain to wallow in when I felt depressed. Because my father chose to barely ever spend time with me, I felt unloved, abandoned, and unimportant in his life. While I innately knew that my father loved me, he never showed it other than buying me expensive shit that I really didn't need. Occasionally he would give me a big, ensconcing hug when I felt depressed, but those times were few, and as I grew older and more spiteful towards the man, I rarely let him close enough to me to actually perform that kind of contact. In fact, I never really had any sort of contact with him. When I came out to my mother she was accepting and proud of me, and while I knew that my father really wouldn't care, I still wanted to avoid any sort of conversation with him, especially about who I was dating. My mother outed me to my father, and even when my first girlfriend lived with us, my father and I never discussed my sexuality or relationships. We just didn't talk. As I entered high school he started drinking again (something he hadn't done in four years) and eventually lost his job because of it. Those years were the worst for my mother and me as we both hated him but felt like we had some duty to still be in his life. If we didn't take care of him, who would? But with each lie that he told us, our love staggered and it took a lot of effort for my mother to not divorce him. I still think she should have left

him years ago, but that's not my choice to make.

So my present-but-absent alcoholic and bipolar father gracefully gave me his genes. It was easy to blame this man whom I never respected in the first place for all of my emotional problems. It's interesting how because of having such similar characteristics—bipolar, depression, compulsive-obsessive tendencies, opinionated—we were never able to have a civil or meaningful conversation. The first time I was put in the mental hospital he visited me, and I shuddered with rage as I looked at him from across the table. He was there to tell me that although our relationship was tainted by vexation and silence, he wished I could have talked to him before I decided to try and kill myself. He was there to let me know that he would listen to me—no matter what I had to say. But I wasn't listening to him. His presence pissed me off and made me even more depressed. He represented everything that I hated, everything that made me want to kill myself. Because of this man, I thought, I was depressed and angry. I felt as if my life was hopeless and full of confused hate aimed towards the world, stemming from the affect that he had on me. My father's genetics gave me this manic-depressive illness, and his lack of fathering made me feel rejected and striving for attention. It's easy to blame others when you don't want to face your own problems.

The second time I ended up in the mental institution (only three days after my initial release), I soon found out that my father was three floors above me, detoxing his vodka-soaked body in rehab. He had drunk himself to his own rock bottom. As I was struggling with my desires to live, my father was found passed out in the middle of a grocery store parking lot at 11 o'clock one Tuesday night. This moment was symbolic for everything that I hated about him. When I found out that he was depressed and drinking while I was in the hospital, I felt ashamed and outraged. Ashamed that my father would do something that embarrassing and crazy, outraged that he was drinking while I was going through my own problems. My suicide attempts were a way for me to show the world how hurt and lonely I felt, and while I didn't want to have anything to do with my father, I did want his love and affection—no matter how much I despised him. I was the depressed and crazy one here! How could he be so selfish at a time when I was being crazy and needed the attention of everyone around me, regardless if I liked them or not? I hated my father. I never trusted him. I wished him dead.

I thought the pain and anger would vanish once he permanently went away. Two years later, I was cursing myself while I sat at his funeral. After wishing my father dead for over ten years, the only thing I want now is to



have him back. The night my father died he had been threatening suicide, again, but after an emotional “talk” (screaming, actually) with my mom, and a night’s sleep to let the vodka wear off, he woke up ready to start a new life. A dollar and fifty cents in dimes was found counted out on his dresser, waiting there to be picked up and traded at the local corner store for a Sunday paper. He had a heart attack. My mother was asleep in the next room, comforting herself in a deep slumber, soothing the pain of their drawn out and emotionally abusive marriage. She awoke to an unsettlingly quiet house, and found my father barely alive in an awkward position, slouched against his bed and nightstand, his faithful dog curled up behind his legs. As my mother gave him CPR, she felt the ribs crack beneath his graying, cold skin, and then called the paramedics. He was revived after much effort, only to be brought to the hospital to die an hour later.

After he died, my body—my gender—felt different. I felt like I had acquired a different gender, or that my gender had switched to a different position. Minnie Bruce Pratt describes in *S/he* that, “When my father died, [my mother] took me to their room, to his closet, and asked if I wanted any of his clothes. She expected me to want something. I chose a white cotton dress shirt, a thin black-and-red striped tie, and his summer panama hat. Later that year, when I did poetry readings in the South, I wore his clothes. When women asked me what the hat meant, I said it made me feel powerful. Was I cross-dressing as my father, for my mother? I thought I was becoming a lesbian” (Pratt, 164). My mother also had me go through my father’s closet and pick out any clothes that I wanted. My father was a large man. His

XXL-size clothes would be gi-normous on my smaller body. This simple fact corroborated my suspicions that my mother never had the intentions of offering his clothes for me to actually wear, but that she looked at me as someone who could take on the masculine roles that my father held. The clothes symbolized this for her. Gender is performed in so many ways—body language, voice fluctuation, personal characteristics—but one major appearance of gender is through clothes. I perform my own genderless gender through the jeans and t-shirt that I wear. My sexuality is also an aspect of performance. When my mother suggested that I wear my father's clothes, I couldn't help but question if her image of me dressed as my father was supposed to erase some of her loneliness. Is my new role in life to be the embodiment of my father's memory? In the weeks after the funeral, I did feel as if I had to become more masculine toward my mother, thus allowing her to feel vulnerable for once. My father's death instilled in me a feeling of big-masculine-dykeness that encouraged me to become the dependable "man of the house." Through grief, clothing became a space of transformation.

Who am I without my father? I feel like a more masculine woman without him, but also find myself crying out for the fatherly love and strength that I have given to him after his death. Now that he is gone, I can imagine him as the father I always wanted him to be. Through my grief I find comfort in constructing the relationship that I always wanted. I realize, a bit too late, that while our characteristics clashed, my father was someone that I loved. It is also through his death that my father has helped me to understand that love, regardless of gender or personality quirks, can withstand any amount of hatred, that love extends beyond the breaths we take.

And, ironically, I do wear his sweatshirts, although never in public. Sometimes I feel like my father is inside of me, that his warm spirit comes into my stomach when I am sad, or depressed and lonely. When I wear his clothes, it lets me feel as if he's giving me one of those big, comforting hugs that he would occasionally engulf me in when I really needed love from another human being.

I have grown fonder of my father in his absence. I have conversations with him that I always wanted to have when he was alive, but my angst towards him and his unwillingness to confront me prohibited them back then. We are friends now.

Jeanne Lupton

## With My Mother at The Women's Museum

*in a photo are thick woods, a clearing, an indentation in the ground in the shape of a woman. the artist has pressed her body into the earth's body. burned her image deep into a streambed in Iowa, thinking Cuba, Cuba. my mother pressed herself to life. i am my mother's image burned deep. we walk among smooth statues in cool marble halls. my mother is an artist too. a survival artist. in a video, a woman's body covered with fabric bands. one by one she plucks the hands off her. flings them away. becoming naked. all the while chanting get your hands off me, get your hands off me. we watch until the last hand is flung. my mother laughing. she likes it. get your hands off me, my mother says to cancer. get your hands off me. it grasps her so tightly she can barely breathe. my mother breathes less today than yesterday. it's getting harder. panic comes when she can't catch her breath. my mother is a survival artist. the cancer isn't letting go. at the end we are naked. i am her image burned deep.*

## My Mother Asleep

*I awake in the night in my mother's house. Down the hall she's talking in her sleep. I can't hear the words but listen to their rhythm through the humming house, the closed doors. This is not the usual groan or crying out of my mother's cancer nights. She is safe for now, at peace. Someone is with her. They are communing. I lie awake, listening. She murmurs, then is quiet, listening to her dream companion. Murmuring and quiet, an hour or more. Finally she says, "We'll leave it at that." My mother sleeps. Through the night I hear her low groan, her crying out for my father, four years dead. She sleeps. My mother is dying. In time, I'll sit by her grave an hour or more. We'll commune, my mother and I, safe, at peace, and leave it at that.*

Pat Gowens

## Death, Disability and Gifts from the Future

After my sister, Cathy Murphy, died suddenly at the age of fifty from her disability, I was wracked with guilt and grief. (Or are those sentiments synonymous after death?) Guilt.... because I had failed to see how weak she had become and how poorly she was feeling. When she came to a protest on Martin Luther King Junior's Birthday, she said she was too weak to carry a small sign, but I took no notice. When I saw her on Easter with her face cut up from falling out of bed in hypoglycemic shock, I talked to her about keeping pillows on the floor. To make the guilt worse, I had barely been talking to my sister the year prior to her death. The fight she mysteriously dredged up, and dragged out, was over something I told my nephew thirty years earlier!



Cathy by Elita Nieri

The grief over losing her was longer lasting than the guilt. Cathy had been a musician before her illness made it impossible to play guitar. She had written several tunes but had been unable to record them properly because she had no equipment. Shortly before Cathy's death, Mom and I chipped in to buy her a good recorder and microphone, but she died before having the chance to use them. She and I had written a light-hearted song together, "Love Is a Risk"—I wrote the lyrics and she wrote the tune—many years ago, but had never recorded it.

When I listened to miscellaneous tapes I found among Cathy's belongings, I found she had written three more tunes, but had never mentioned them or asked for lyrics. Introducing the first song, she listed the guitar chords, and then stated, "The Name of this song is "Life Is Scum." She proceeded to sing a beautiful, haunting, sweet ballad intoning la, la, la, la, la. A song with a wild and meandering tune was "New Song." The third tune had no name at all. Only the first song included her guitar accompaniment, which meant she had written it a long time ago while still able to play her instruments.

In addition to writing songs, Cathy had produced a huge songbook with all of the lyrics and chords for 134 folks songs of the US, Ireland, and Mexico. She learned the lyrics (sometimes playing a record over and over),

typed each one on a manual typewriter, and made copies of all of the songs. She created 15 songbooks so we could sing together at family gatherings. She also taught herself to play each song. She learned the harmony while the rest of the family sang the main tune.

After Cathy died I realized that as much as I loved many of the songs, without Cathy playing and singing them, I didn't know some well enough to sing without her! We had never recorded most of them. The only songs I found recorded were the love songs that she sang for weddings, and one short tape she had recorded for our ma.

Did I mention regrets? So many regrets after losing a loved one. Somehow we seem to think we have forever to take care of business. Cathy had always reminded us her life expectancy was only 25 years from the onset of her illness, which meant she could die by 37. Perhaps when she beat that expectation, I somehow thought she'd live to old age.

After Cathy died, I wrote the lyrics for "Life Is Scum." I decided to write a ballad that would describe the life of Mary, a disabled mom who along with Cathy was a member of Welfare Warriors Board of Directors. Mary also had a short life expectancy and when Cathy met her at meetings, she would joke, "I see you're still alive." Cathy would love the lyrics, which described the YWCA welfare workers' attempts to kill Mary by forcing her to work off her welfare benefits—forcing her to "work or die." (Milwaukee is the only city in the US where the cash welfare program, called W2, is privatized. YW is one of four very cruel private welfare departments.)

While still deeply grieving the loss of my sister, I went to Illinois to speak at a University. I had never before sung while giving a speech, but now Cathy inspired me to sing her song, which I called "Mary's Song or W2 Life is Scum." I also sang part of a song she and my brother had written, "Positive Mental Attitude," which describes the prejudice against people with disabilities.

*"You can lose an eye or ear; no one lets you shed a tear,  
They tell tales and tales of quadriplegics typing with their teeth,  
Or one-armed jugglers, two-toed dancers,  
For every plight they've got an answer,  
Let a smile be your umbrella when it's raining everyday;  
But they tell me I'm supposed to have that Positive Mental Attitude;  
That Positive Mental Attitude will get you through the day..."*

I began to include "Mary's Song or W2 Life Is Scum" in all speeches after that. It never fails to move an audience to absolute silence and nearly to tears. It is a powerfully beautiful ballad.

Six weeks after Cathy died, I went to a retreat for activists at Windcall in Montana. I was still very sad. I brought along Cathy's tape of "New Song" and worked on the lyrics for the song, which I named "Long Live Mama Earth." One day while singing and swimming in a pond, a red bird flew around me cackling exactly like Cathy cackled—and Cathy was a redhead too.

After a week we learned that we would be dining with and entertaining our hosts the next day. The four of us activists decided to perform poetry, music or whatever. I never imagined I could finish the lyrics in one day, but an amazing thing happened. I sat at a typewriter listening to Cathy's la, la, la, la in my ears and like magic the final verses materialized and were perfect. I knew Cathy was the inspiration. During a phone call the next day my mom reminded me that *the day before was Cathy's birthday*. I had been magically inspired on Cathy's birthday...yet I had never realized it because I was not keeping track of dates while in the Montana mountains.

Despite my heartache at losing Cathy, I have been amazed at how she gave so much to me after her death. I sing "Long Live Mama Earth" every time I visit the lake. Folks across the US and in Ireland have heard Mary's "Life Is Scum" story of welfare privatization and its abuse of moms through the beautiful ballad Cathy composed. Singing has become my way to reach folks with sad and harsh truths. It had never occurred to me to combine music with speaking until Cathy called to me from the future.

## Mary's Song or W2 Life Is Scum

*(This is a true story)*

Mary's man left her with one tiny baby  
 She needed support so she didn't say maybe  
 She went to the welfare the YW ran there  
 The Y told her she had to work, or die



Cathy and Pat Dancing

Photo by Elita Nieri



Mary had heart disease so she couldn't please  
 YW women who kept her pay  
 Much as she wanted to make her own way  
 To try to work both jobs would soon end her days, end her days

Mary decided to ask for a hearing  
 She thought that the Y bosses would be more caring  
 She went to the hearing where Kim Coleman did say  
 "We can't let you lay around home all day"

Mary got sicker, the docs couldn't figure  
 But still doc wouldn't defy the Y  
 Finally lupus was doc's diagnosis  
 Still YW welfare want Mary to die, work or die

Mary's new worker said, "We all know pain and strife  
 Don't think we're letting you just lead a lazy life  
 You must work everyday, for not a cent in pay  
 Don't ask for help, you must do it alone"

Ann Hadley was her name; She played a dirty game  
 With illegal sanctions that cut Mary's check  
 When Mary stopped her with bosses and doctors  
 Ann took her insurance to make Mary die, work and die

Mary's sweet baby will never know mama  
 Unless we the people together will stand up  
 To fight the rich man and professional scams  
 Who make money off poor folk however they can

Let us all come to fight those who make life scum  
 Wars for greed waged on mothers in need  
 Throughout our life span we all will need a hand  
 The people united will take back the land, take the land

*~composed by Cathy Murphy; lyrics by Pat Gowens*

Chocolate Waters

## Headstone for Dad

The one the military gave him sucked,  
squat disagreeable hunk of rock.  
He deserved better  
for all the action he saw in Japan, Korea, the Pacific,  
the hash marks on his sleeves,  
the two purple hearts, bronze star  
- a myriad of others whose names  
I don't even know.

He did get a three-gun salute  
from both the Navy and the Marines,  
and a handsome flag carefully placed in my mother's lap  
by a young cadet who had more tears in his  
eyes than my Mom.

Dad was a medical corpsman in WWII –  
117 pounds, he once carried a general  
twice his size  
on his back  
through enemy fire.  
So fearless  
the guys made bets about whether Waters  
would return from combat each day.

My Dad was not a grandiose man,  
but I wanted his tombstone to be grandiose.  
Ten years since his death,  
my sister writes a note,  
“We're getting a new headstone for Dad;  
Mom is paying for it.”

Ruth Mountaingrove**David, My Son**

When my son David died at age 25 they didn't discover his body for six months.

I didn't know until the sheriff came on our land Rootworks, went up a road no one was supposed to use and knocked on the door of an unoccupied cabin. Caroline, Jean and I were elsewhere celebrating Candlemas.

When he couldn't find us, we were in the cabin below, he came back down that road destroying small evergreens, putting ruts in the road. Jean, who was furious at the damage he was doing asked him what he wanted.

He wanted me. He wanted my son's dentist's name. I gave him our former dentist's name, Dr. Sturm and his address, Elkins Park in Pennsylvania, but I had no idea why he wanted it. He said it was for purposes of identification. He said there was a body found above the commune Mountain Grove and they thought it might be David's, but they weren't sure. We hadn't seen anything of David since last July when he was in Grants Pass at the same time we were. Then he was living at Mountain Grove.

Since we weren't sure, there was a wait while I hoped it wasn't David, but the newspapers were sure it was. One of the communards had come upon the body. He had been out walking in the woods, and he went screaming down to the main house. David had hanged himself. They called the Sheriff..

I never saw his body. One of his communard lovers made a pine coffin for him and carved a beautiful wooden marker for his grave. David was gay. He was also schizophrenic. Four voices, rages, walking down the center of a well traveled blacktop road with speeding cars and trucks. He wanted to die. The anguish that he experienced was too much for him to bear.

No matter how much you prepare yourself for the death you are never ready.

The memorial was held at Mountain Grove. My oldest son and my daughter carried the coffin with other communards to the meadow. All of us stood in a large circle, with the pine box in the middle, holding hands with the communards. Of the lesbian community there was only Caroline, my partner Jean and myself. We were the only lesbians from our local community. This was the time of separatism in 1979. I understood, but it hurt not to have that support.

It was a cold windy day and toward the end of the celebration after all

had spoken about David, a hawk flew down and then soared away. It felt to me as though that was David saying good-bye.

It was February. We had another issue of *WomanSpirit* to get out. Some gay men had traded their drafty cold house for the use of our camper and went off to the bay area. I huddled with my grief under a quilt in the upstairs bedroom while Caroline, Betty down from British Columbia as a volunteer, and Jean went on with the magazine. Occasionally they would consult me about the work but mostly they left me alone.

Back home, my partner who had never known the death of one of her children or siblings, whose mother was still alive though she had lost her father before I knew her, really didn't know how to help me. I had already had both of my parents die while I was in my thirties, and my first son who lived 3 days after delivery when I was twenty-five.

We had just moved onto our land, and my partner spent a great deal of time out in nature getting acquainted with our land. I retreated to our loft library to draw with a large black fiber pen in a large sketchbook my grief. To separate into words which ran on each other, his writing so I could read it. A slow process.

Later I was able to write this poem which is really a song, a lament, a lullaby. He was my artist son, my writer, my poet with little control of his creativity.

## David O David

David O David  
Swinging from a tree  
Swinging in the summertime  
Swinging merrily  
Laughing and shouting  
From the swing hung branch  
In the sun drenched summertime O

David oh David  
Swinging from a tree  
Swinging in the summer breeze  
Singing merrily

Fly through the air  
In the sun hot summer breeze O

David oh David  
Swinging from a tree  
Swinging in the summer light  
Floating easily  
Dropping down, down to the ground  
In the clear cool summer night O

David Oh David  
Swinging from a tree  
Swinging in the winter time  
From the winter tree  
Hanging oh hanging  
Finally free  
In the cold cold winter time O

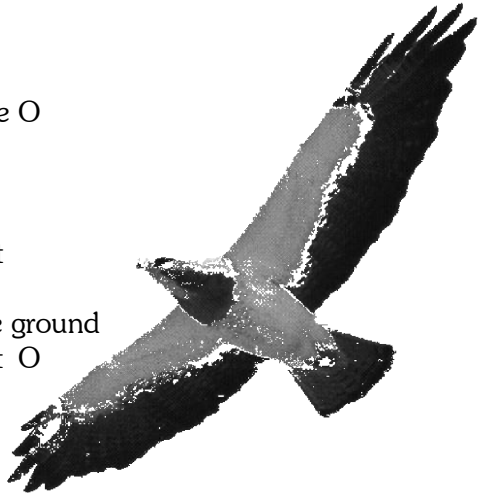
David oh David  
Swinging from a tree  
Hanging in her branches  
In her own mercy  
Blown and turned  
Turned and blown  
In the cold cold winter time O

David oh David  
Hanging from a tree  
Your were found in wintertime  
On a winter tree  
The birds know your eyes  
The rain weathers your skin  
in the cold cold winter time O

David oh David  
Hanging from a tree  
You were found in winter time  
On a winter tree  
Broken through your fear of dying  
Free free free  
In the cold cold winter time O

David oh David  
Hanging from a tree  
Have you solved the riddle  
Solved the mystery  
Why we live and why we die  
In the cold cold winter time O

David oh David  
David oh David  
David oh David  
Have you solved the mystery?



*This was healing for me, and it has been for other people when I have sung it.*

Esther Liedolf

## Dead Brother

My brother died  
and I still can't grieve his death  
the way I grieve his life.  
Selfish to the core,  
and still  
trying to suck  
my loved ones  
down  
with him.

My sister tried  
to help him  
but got sick  
from his house  
laden with animal shit  
worn into the rugs.

Ma lost her first-born  
to prescription drugs  
and too much Rebel Yell.  
And he took her spirit-

They are making the choices  
to live  
that he  
was too selfish to make.  
Narcissistic sucker!

I started to grieve him  
years ago,  
when he did not care  
that I was hooked

on speed,  
but cared a lot  
that I would not  
sell his drugs anymore.

I lost my brother soon after,  
when he refused  
to take me  
to the hospital  
the night  
his friend  
raped me;  
and would not  
accept how  
his betrayal  
violated me more.

What happened to you  
big brother?  
When did your heart  
turn cold?  
The people in your life



Daisy Wolf Womon

Sudie Rakusin

had no idea  
we even existed.

Our sister  
is recovering now.  
She pulled  
it all together  
and made a life  
that earns respect  
for the choices  
she makes everyday  
to survive.  
Ma survived you too,  
like she has  
survived everyone else  
in her life.  
The total matriarch,  
more than  
forty years now.

But where are you  
when she really  
needs you?  
Same place you've  
always been,  
only now  
your body is gone too.  
Dead and gone.

They're still saving your ass,  
And cleaning up  
the mess of your life  
that has worn  
our hearts thin  
by your need  
to take the rest of us  
down with you.

But we're not going.

Elliot Femynye bat Tzedek

## Bo Dog Teaches the Meaning of Tashlich

That September  
 standing on the creek bank behind Estelle's cabin  
 each woman in turn stepped to the water  
 held onto her pages of earnest reflection  
 until the ink trailed away  
 and then released her secrets to the stream  
 as the shofar sounded, announcing  
 a cycle's end and beginning  
 I held and then released my page  
 only to watch my loyal sheepdog  
 leap in                    swim out  
 and faithfully haul my escaping possession  
 back to me, announcing my carelessness  
 with her sharp bark  
 Again I tried to free my regrets  
 and again  
 but Bo dog had little tolerance  
 of humans' propensity  
 for losing track of the sheep

Years later            when she began slipping into the stream  
 I leapt in and hauled her back  
 three times  
 Surgery            prescriptions    a ramp  
 uneaten food warming in the oven  
 credit cards at the vet ER  
 carrying her sixty-five and shrinking pounds  
 up and down the stairs  
 for six weeks  
 so she could carry out her duty and passion—  
 keeping watch as I slept—  
 always was I there    beside her            just as I had been  
 when she first learned to swim  
 my hands holding her weight and my voice  
 urging her to swim back upstream



A long night            fifteen years later I knew to stop urging  
 She listened as I poured out my gratitude  
 closed her eyes            breathed deeply  
 and lowered her head  
 into what we both knew was her last dreaming

Now the only weight for my hands to release to the water  
 is any fear  
 that one more leap  
 could have brought her safely to the bank.

Enough is enough      dogs know  
 all things living are always floating downstream

Each fearless leap to fetch them back  
    is the very nature of desire

While the nature of life  
 is the inevitability  
 of the current

and the nature of love  
 is the blessing of  
 keeping watch  
    every time they return  
 and keeping watch  
    as they swirl      out of reach

*Tashlich – a ritual that is part of Rosh Hashana (Jewish New Year). Probably adapted from European folk customs, tashlich involves going to running water and emptying the crumbs and lint from one's pockets as a way of letting go of the final remains of the old year. Today, most people throw bread crumbs and blow the shofar (trumpet made from a ram's horn).*

Stacy Traiger

## Grief Monologue

wash hands, set up supplies: towel on table, new syringe, alcohol swabs, medicine bottle from frig. carefully open syringe package and check parts. open medicine bottle and wipe top with alcohol swab. stick needle into rubber top of medicine bottle, draw out dosage and recap needle. expose skin and swab target area with new swab. pick up syringe, uncap, balance hand and insert needle at approximately 45 degree angle to skin surface. push back of syringe to administer medicine into tissue. when syringe is empty, remove needle from body and recap. swab skin as necessary. place used syringe and medicine bottle in red plastic hazardous waste container. place used alcohol swabs in regular trash. fold towel and place in clean area until next dosage is required. wash hands again. move on to next activity.

do not think. do not allow the mind to question these actions. do not cry while administering dosage. do not think about the needle piercing one's skin by one's own hand. refrain from noticing the bruises which develop in areas of repeated puncturing. do not run fingers over the toughened skin. do not remember being filled with poison, then pumped full of prescriptions to counteract the poisons. do not think about yet another loss, another betrayal.

only remember how this medicine allows me to breathe more easily. remember the dizziness and nausea that drag me to the floor, gasping for air, because of the poisons. because my body is fighting the poisons and fighting the cancer and fighting to breathe. this medicine helps me breathe, helps my body produce blood cells which bring oxygen to the brain, and gives me the strength to walk from one bleak room of the dusty apartment to another.

the medicine gives me the strength to survive another treatment, another poisoning. but don't think of it as poison. keep a positive attitude. do not give up, whatever else, do not stop fighting, keep fighting for my life. relax and breathe and fight like hell to survive. imagine the poisons as healing white light entering my body, protecting me from the cancer, helping to defeat the cancer. do not think of the poisons as defeating me. do not think of throwing up meal after meal. do not think of the permanent i.v. line, the medical hardware placed under my skin, the tube pushed into my artery. do not notice the pulsing of the tube in my neck as the poisons, which must not be poisons, are pumped into my body, pumped through my heart into every cell, causing unknown damage. do not question if i am still human, do not even consider such thoughts.

focus on the healing light. focus on fighting, on breathing. do not feel like a victim. do not feel like an innocent victim in a badly directed nightmare, expecting to wake up screaming but safe. i am not safe; nobody is safe. there is no hiding from the sickness and the sickening treatments, the pity and fear, the fear, the anger and not knowing what will happen, not knowing how this awake nightmare will end.

don't think about that either. stay positive, focus on healing, on fighting the disease, on getting well again, waking to a healthy day, moving beyond cancer. don't dwell on the many losses, don't let the grief pull me down. do not think about how close i am to dying. do not question why i am surviving when others are not. do not question why i am sick. do not blame myself for failing to stay healthy in a health-obsessed culture.

take credit for fighting, for surviving, for doing what i need to do, but don't blame myself. keep a positive attitude, focus on being well again. the way to get better is to believe i am getting better, to always imagine myself getting

better. i do not have the luxury of wallowing in depression. my body must be strong to fight and survive, my mind and emotions must serve as soldiers in the war for my life. because i could lose.

but don't think about that, don't think about anything. don't think, don't feel, don't remember, don't question. just do what i have to do. then move on with my life. don't remain stuck in the past. grieve if i must, for surely i must, but grieve and move on.

because there is no way to grieve such a loss. no way a human can comprehend this disease or its treatments. no way for the mind to make sense of the changes, of the wasted time, of the life left in ruins. no way to know why i survived. there are no lessons that can justify the horrors. there are lessons, yes, important ones. but there is no way to regain that false sense of immortality, no more innocent youth to misspend, no more trust that being good and living healthy will protect me, or anyone, from a horrible death. no more belief that my small corner of the world is a safe place. no more believing that i've endured enough pain, that i deserve a happy life. there is grief and anger and loss and pain and failure, existing side by side with the perfectly amazing fact that i am still alive.

so i cry when i see the winter mountains sparkle white against a clear blue sky. i cry at the mountains, cry at the warmth of the sun. watch the ocean waves and feel my throat close in sadness, see the wildflowers blooming for another summer and feel tears on my cheeks. crying now for each time i didn't cry before, and for each time i did. crying for the treatments i tried to face bravely, for the dehumanizing tests and procedures. crying for every day i filled that syringe, every time my hand moved forward to stick the needle into my own flesh, piercing my skin despite the screaming in my head. the needle waited patiently, so i saved the tears, put aside the grief. and now i cry to the mountains, grieving my incomplete death.

## Conversation

My death and I go walking every morning.  
 Arm and arm we stroll behind the waving  
 tail of my foxy, alpha dog. I plan my  
 funeral and she occasionally nods agreement.  
 "Lesbian sisters, friends, family will gather.  
 I see them sitting, heads bowed. Suddenly  
 there is music. They rise and move toward  
 the door. The song is *I've Got The World  
 On A String.*"

We round a corner, new daffodils bend in the  
 soft air. "Is that too boastful?" I ask. My death  
 shrugs. "How about *Forget Your Troubles  
 And Just Get Happy?* Too jazzy? Or maybe  
*His Eye Is On The Sparrow?* Too specific?  
 How about no music? Shall we have a  
 Quaker Meeting? It will be expected."

My death smiles and pauses to watch a  
 robin cross the sidewalk. I understand.  
 There is time. Tomorrow we will  
 consider again.

Later, my death lies on my pillow,  
 nearer than my lover sleeping beside me.  
 Calm spreads over the bed and into every  
 part of the room. I feel silence throughout  
 the house as solid as water and as  
 vacant as air. "Will you be here when I  
 am gone?" I ask. "Will you comfort  
 my love?" My death shakes her head.  
 "That's not possible," she whispers.  
 "That is not my talent. She won't know me."  
 I sigh,

My death turns to look out the window.  
 The night is dark. There is no moon.  
 I am tired. I move closer to my lover,  
 let my arm gently fall across  
 her shoulder. "Tomorrow we'll talk about  
 letters and where to have the reception."

Angela Lester

## My Sense of Longing

*Dedicated to  
My mother Ella Louise Robards Lester  
Death January, 2005 to breast cancer  
My father Walter Lester, Jr.  
Death November, 1979 to suicide*

*Peace be with them both.*

I'm coming home soon, Momma and Daddy,  
Make room for me.  
It won't be very long,  
I'm coming home.

I need you each passing day,  
I think my emotions grab me each time.  
Oh, I miss you much.

I'll be there,  
Don't you worry about a thing,  
Cause Angela's coming home to you both.  
Yes, I miss you much.

Momma, I'm tired,  
Daddy, I'm wounded.  
I'm coming home soon.  
I miss you much.

I need love. The pain  
That I suffer each moment,  
I can't take it no more.

I'm coming soon, Momma and Daddy.  
I miss you much.

Joyce Frohn

## The Loss



Search

Photo by Judith K. Witherow

We are missing one. We-the family, the circle- are broken.  
Our song will be forever missing a note.  
Our puzzle is missing a piece.  
There is no comforting us ...  
Except-  
We know what the picture on the puzzle is.  
We know what the song sounds like.  
And we will never forget what either one is.  
Whenever we gather we will glance around for one missing face.  
And feel absence and know loss.

Hawk Madrone

## Butch Hug

I did not know Bev very well when I learned that she had had emergency surgery, and a diagnosis of colon cancer metastasized to her liver. The partner of a friend in our writers' group, she was an interesting woman to share a dinner with sometimes after the group had met at their house. I knew she was an intellectual, a rural sociologist-activist, and a master gardener. A visit to her always lush garden, vegetables and flowers almost prehistoric in size, was an invitation into the heart of this woman, as she modestly awed any who would listen with her methods, her attention to detail, and the quantity of green growing things she could cram into a very small bed with no sacrifice to quality.

In the wake of the surgery, and subsequent bouts of chemotherapy, Bev and her partner needed help. Several of us volunteered, and I drove the weekly two and a half hour round-trip most weeks for the next two years. At first I helped with simple bedside caretaking. As Bev slowly mended and tried to resume as much of her life as she could despite a dim prognosis, she and I grew a friendship. I helped her with some of that gardening, as well as other tasks around their land. Sometimes I drove her to doctor appointments – or was simply good company as she drove – and accompanied her grocery shopping, where I'd push the cart and follow Bev around the store. We worked together, she doing all she could, which often equaled what I might do alone on any day tending my own country home, and I had not had major surgery. I did the things Bev was no longer able to do: push the loaded wheelbarrow, get up on the roof to spray the moss, carry the heavy pots she planted with tulip bulbs, an annual gift for her partner.

Each visit, rain or shine, I would join her on her daily swift walk around their meadow. Bev aimed for three miles each day, running the last couple hundred feet while I watched and waited, outdone by her decade-younger perseverance and stamina, no matter the illness and the awkwardness of the ostomy bag, which had forced her to give up daily black denims and wear pocketless black scrubpants, the drawstring waist pulled up over the bag.

Sometimes we just sat together and talked, our conversations ranging from the global to the immediate, hearing each other's pains and joys. But mostly I listened to Bev, while I massaged her feet and lower legs. She loved those rubs, and I cherished this way I could will healing through my hands into her body. Though we would always share a quick hug around the shoulders at the end of our visits, those massages were a gentle physical manifes-



tation of what Bev saw as our butch-bonding. We had more than one conversation about Lesbian identity as I accompanied her on her road of illness, life, and impending death. I would always good-naturedly insist I was neither butch nor femme; I was a woman, a whole person.

“Well, of course, I’m a whole person, too,” she’d laugh, “but we are both butches!” It was important to her, I think, that butches be honored in a Lesbian world that was more and more leaning toward lipstick and mainstream acceptability. And as country dykes, she knew me for a sister, a hard worker, a woman who, with my land partner of thirty years, keeps up with the countless tasks of off-the-grid living, with a “we can do/learn/take on anything” attitude. So we teased each other – well, mostly Bev teased me – as we walked and talked and toiled together.

When Bev moved away to the city, I saw her less often. Soon after she moved, I drove my pickup loaded with some of her belongings to her small city duplex and spent a couple days being pals, doing errands together, walking the city streets, trying to keep up with her determined pace. The following month I helped with the driving when she needed to relocate her aged mother back to California. And she twice stopped briefly at my isolated country home when she returned to this area for medical consultations, grateful for a deep drink of womensland, of forest and open spaces.

I did not see Bev again until a weekend in late August. It was on that visit that a major change seemed to be brewing. She already had lived a year and a half longer than the worst-case statistical probabilities. Never one to complain much about the physical toll the disease was taking, that weekend I heard her groan now and again. The pain was beginning to dominate her attention, and her spirit.

One afternoon we had gone to the market, where she picked out the few staples she could still digest. At the end of one aisle, she slowed, said quietly, “You remember how I’ve always said how much I love life?” I nodded, remembering keenly her positive attitude, her love of the earth’s beauty and determination to stay around to enjoy it. “Well, I don’t care anymore,” she said. And I understood the eloquence of those groans. Daily life was being taken over by the disease, by dealing with its effects and the care it required, with little left over for brilliant conversation, her holding forth on the international political scene, or the state of health care for working people. She still would tend pots of luscious displays of cosmos, daisies, and other flowers I did not know the names of, transforming a corner of the little backyard into a haven of color, a reminder to herself of who she was, of the gardener in her. But something new was happening.

“You may have been here for the shift,” she said, seated in her old family rocking chair, having decided she was not up to our going to see a movie after all.

Along with Hospice care, a group of old and new friends in the city made it possible for Bev to stay in her home as the cancer spread and her energy waned. They visited her regularly and organized the grocery shopping, laundering, housecleaning, and handling of special needs. They were valiant, but most of them had jobs and/or families, so when it became clear by mid-October that live-in help was needed, a few of us country dykes pitched in.

By the time I arrived, Bev could no longer manage the care of those pots of flowers in the backyard. They had become unruly, a confusion of color and spent blossoms. And I found a greatly changed Bev as well. In the two months since I had last seen her, her legs and feet had swollen so badly the skin was blistered and cracking, her abdomen bulging with the multiplying tumors, while the rest of her body had thinned, the bones of her face outlined, her wrists weakened. Her hair, a long frizzy white bush before chemotherapy, lay dry and limpy at neck-length. Walking was difficult, even with a cane, though she got herself from the small bedroom to the much smaller bathroom, varied her lying in bed with sitting in the recliner in the living room. The pain-dulling medication had been increased, though I learned that Bev was taking less than most people in her condition. Yes, that sounded like Bev, refusing to be numbed by medication, wanting still to have a say in this minute-by-minute transformation, staying as much involved with – and in control of – her care, and her demise, as she could be.

\* \* \* \* \*

From October 21 to October 24, 2005, I companion my friend. I am spelled for one overnight's solid sleep away, and am joined now and again by others who change the ostomy bag, run errands, and inform the wide circle of Bev's friends of her progress. As the hours pass, the shock of Bev's altered state becomes less raw for me, and I relax into understanding the gift of this death watch. As she always has, Bev is teaching me about what she knows best. Now, instead of enlightening me about the best seed varieties, or opining about some political magazine article, she leads me through this dying.

The pain medication must be taken every four hours, and I am anxious about waking up for the nighttime medications. I need not have worried. Each night, at the right hour, Bev calls my name loud and clear, and I respond with ease, wide awake, glad to be here with her. As I approach the doorway to her bedroom, I see she is already sitting up on the rented hospital bed, feet on the floor, her body on schedule for the oxycodone and morphine, for relief.

During one of these late night medication times, she has been dreaming. She barely enunciates, her lips forming hardly any letter I can read. When it is just the two of us in these nighttime duets of need and care, in this quiet, this simplicity of sleeping, waking, being, it does not matter that I do not always understand what she is saying. What is important is that I am listening, caring about every word I cannot easily, if at all, decipher. Here and there I catch one – “dream”, “turncoat” . . . . Then she asks “You would not do that would you?”, speaking the question with a pointed-to-me clarity, her heavy eyes now open to me.

“Do what?” I ask, my words softly spoken, my voice a reflection of my caring.

“Turn turncoat,” she says.

I calmly insist “No, I never would. I am here, loving you.”

I am convincing.

She smiles.

Her feet are too swollen for massage, so I slowly stroke her back through the black cotton turtleneck, lightly knead her aching shoulder, rub and rub to give ease, to give touch, to connect her body with mine. These moments we do not talk, this touching a completion for me. After that one night away, when I had come back refreshed, Bev was sitting on the recliner, visiting with another friend who had been with her through the night. She was clear-eyed and lively, beckoned me to come close – as I did so she lifted her right arm, bent at the elbow, her forearm reaching toward me. It took me a moment to understand that she wanted me to hold my forearm similarly, to lean in and place my arm against hers. When I did, she grinned and said “Butch hug.” This was her greeting, her welcoming me back, an affection she could enact. I rejoiced in her smile, her reaching to me, amazed at her intact sense of humor. Though I still felt miscast, I went along with the joviality, gladly pushed my forearm against hers, yet felt a gap that I would rather fill with tenderness. Now, in the silence of the night, I rub her back and she welcomes my touch, this simple giving to each other: her back, my hands.

One morning we are sitting in the living room between medication sessions, Bev taking a break from lying down. Sitting up has its discomfort as well, but at least it is a change. “Dying is hard work,” I say carefully, “and you are working so very hard.” I am acknowledging her, knowing her for the valiant woman she is, for the courageous ways she has lived with disease and pain. She nods, a rare time when she has accepted adulation from me.

Later that day, visitors arrive, too many for the small living room, too many for Bev’s focus, so I take an amble around the block, smell roses blooming in one well-tended yard, admire plantings all around the

neighborhood; then I sit on the stoop and chat with others going in and out. When nearly everyone has left, I go back in to help Bev take her medicine, and find her still sitting in the recliner, her face radiant, open, happy, as though she has been infused with love, receiving and giving.

During the night I help Bev get repositioned in the narrow bed, then arrange the pillows just so to give ease to her back and neck. Minutes pass. Bev breathes, eyes shut, or barely open. I sit on the upholstered desk chair, pulled up beside her. Her bone-thin face resting on the pillow is a candle, the focus for this vigil. I watch, and wait.

“Tell the people ... I am grateful,” she says clearly, “and soon ... they can get back to their work.”

I assure her I will tell them, then ask, in almost a whisper, “Is this hard work you are doing finished?”

“Soon,” she says, nodding.

There are more words, indistinct, a frown ... then her eyes open to clarity, her hand rises to my face and she briefly strokes my cheek with one bent knuckle. “You take care of yourself, “ she says.

“I will,” I tell her gently, honestly.

Sip of soymilk, water, more milk ... the oxycodone pill ... one-half the task accomplished. Then rest, her head against the pillow. I wait, study her face. I learn patience, respect the pace of the dying, honoring what’s left of Bev’s ability to be in charge, which can mean a half hour of sitting waiting for her to get clear enough, awake enough to take the medications. Just as I am about to lose it (it’s so late, I’m so tired...) and think to say something mildly bossy, Bev opens her eyes, asks for the small jar of milk, then the liquid morphine. She can no longer administer these meds herself – the bottles too hard to open, the dropper needs too much dexterity. I open, fill, tell her it’s ready – she opens her mouth for a quick squirt. Then milk.

She has trouble keeping the glass steady (a canning jar, actually, her preferred), so I keep my hands nearby, under hers, ready, but not interfering. If there is a wobble, I can rescue both her and the bed sheet from a soaking. So I am cradling the space beneath the half-pint jar of soymilk as she drinks, then smiles, and says “They call this a chaser. It’s a chaser.” I think if she could, she would be belly-laughing, as I chuckle at her ability to be jocular still. She sips, rests the jar on her lap, sips again, rests .... Then she has had enough and I remove the jar to the nearby little table, placing it exactly as she instructs.

“Shall I put the bed back down now?” I ask, wanting her to be as comfortable as possible. Her “yuh” is a short breathy assent, and I push the button, the bed lies back, cradling Bev’s upper body with it, an electrically-controlled laying down of her.

Pillows to adjust, covers to straighten, place the flashlight near enough so she can find it, or at least know that it is there; place her old black tank-top beside her head so she can lay it over her eyes as the light, insisting through the window blind, becomes annoying. She is settled, comfortable, slipping into morphia. This session, now at about forty-five minutes, is about to end. She will sleep, probably for at least four hours.

“I love you, Bev,” the words never more sincere.

She has heard me. She opens her eyes and this smile of hers buds in her blue eyes, draws up the sides of her mouth, blooms on her cheeks. “I love you, too,” she says, as she reaches her hand to my face, a soft stroke with her fingertips on my cheek.

And sleeps.

Tenderness fills the space between and around us. Does she know it is me she is loving? I think so, but it really does not matter. There is love here, in her, in this person caring for/tending to her.

This is my last night with Bev. Three days later, with yet other friends at her bedside, Bev’s hard work is finished.

\* \* \* \* \*

When I began those last days with Bev, when I was concerned about ‘doing it right,’ I thought I would not want this way of dying for myself. But how else to do it? How to stay away from mind-numbing drugs, and also not be engulfed by pain? How to enact my own death, bring my life to an end and not go through this process Bev was in? How not to need women to sit and wait, and wait ....

Bev taught me to go deeper than all that: death is a passage in all our lives, and we sit and wait each other through it. It is a part of what we women do. Just as we gather to celebrate a landyke’s 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, we take turns keeping watch over Bev’s dying. This vigil asks of us to stretch our presumed limits, to learn yet more about patience, compassion, devotion.... This vigiling may not be fun like that birthday party, but it is important, an essential chapter in all our stories. This chapter, too, must be lived, and told.

Maria Fama

## Why I Don't Play Guitar Any More

My fingers freeze  
there is hurt on the strings  
heartache on the fret  
memory unfolds one stark day



While I was strumming STREETS OF LAREDO  
she was making soup in her just a week dead mother's kitchen  
ironing her freshly widowed father's shirts

While I was practicing ROLL OVER BEETHOVEN  
she was home writing a note, swallowing pills  
beginning her sleep toward death

While I was noting chords laughing with my band  
she was caressing a green pillow  
her brain slowing her mind slipping away

While I rode the subway home tapping out rhythms  
her heart stopped

While I walked in the door with my guitar  
seeing her there, thinking her asleep  
her spirit might've watched me tiptoe  
trying not to make a sound  
putting down the guitar  
taking tortellini out of the fridge for supper  
wondering if I had time  
to buy her favorite sugared taralli

When I moved the guitar  
                                   I saw the note    the cup    the pills  
 my guitar case    so heavy    so black  
 an explosion    in my head    my heart

the world turned upside down

I could not revive her

the music    inside my head

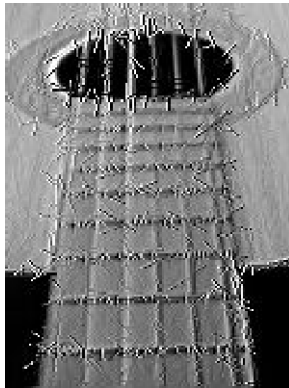
                  a dirge

joking policemen    gawking neighbors    the coroner  
 her body carried out

my guitar case    my heart    so heavy    so black

the music

                  a dirge.



Susan Eschbach

## Silence

*There is a silence draping over us, both diffuse and opaque. At times, it is warm, comfortable. Sitting next to you while you sleep, in the hospital, I write, listen to my music in quiet earphones. You cannot hear what I hear, what is moving me now. I don't sing as I used to, loud, unrestrained. I don't tap my foot. I enjoy the sounds but am also silenced. Today, this is OK. I am OK with your need to rest, to disappear, into sleep, defending against your thirst and hunger, waiting for more tests requiring you to be parched.*

*But*

*I miss you. There are accumulating months of your naps, the couch, the bed, the car on trips. Rest, sleep, heal, escape pain. And so I tell you less and less about my day, my thoughts, how I feel about your illness, our history together, our relationship; how I rage, cry, fear; how the kids are, what they did in school, at dinner, with friends, in the yard; their homework; their ideas and what they each said today; what new lessons I tried to teach the seventh graders; gossip at work, among friends; what I may make for dinner and what is on the shopping list; a phrase from the paper, a book and what that made me think of and how it's related to a conversation we are always having; and what I am wondering we should do next to take care of you, and the kids, and what about me?*

*This silence, this amount of space between us, so unfamiliar, something I thought I needed on occasion, makes me so lonely.*



Joan Annsfire

## Midnight Sun

(for Valeri)

*"Seeing stars during the day, sunlight at night, or  
seeing red flowers in one's dreams are all  
signs that transition to the otherworld has begun."*

*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*

Breathe out, breathe in  
you are thin and brittle as summer grass,  
every bruise a map  
of life's turbulent lessons.

Breathe out, breathe in  
each atom of your being engaged  
in this choreography of artful determination  
soon you will be nothing more than clear light  
dancing over a dark universe.

Breathe out, breathe in  
tables piled with food, closets filled with clothes,  
your room overflowing with friends,  
the rhythmic rush of voices chanting.

Breathe out, breathe in  
drink from the deep cup of emptiness  
take in a place without war,  
sleepless nights or sadness.

Breathe out, breathe in  
the Tibetans say that  
when you see stars during the day  
or sunlight at night you will be ready  
to meet your demons and your deities.

Breathe out, breathe in  
the otherworld sings its lullaby in your ear  
let death descend gently as a beam of midnight sun  
and begin your journey cloaked  
in dreams of red flowers.

Lynn Brown

## It All Seems Like Dying

I have spent the past three days crying and grieving at random without holding back. Sometimes I find myself using my rational mind to alter the emotional flow. I have to remind myself to let go. I want to stop the feelings because the loss is so acute and viscerally painful that I experience a crazy-making sense of anxiety. I think these feelings will never change. I imagine myself unable to function. I get scared to reach out. I am entranced and horrified by the depth of my vulnerability and the nakedness I feel.

On a deeper level, this onslaught of feelings seems to be a cleansing that I believe is a soul change. An opening has been created in which to release and heal old wounds, repressed and stuffed memories of hurt, and feelings of rejection and abandonment. This internal cleansing began one spring with a change in my eating habits and escalated when I entered into what I imagined was a safe and trustful relationship with another woman. These two changes in my life created a powerful space in which to move. I created an understanding with myself to allow an awareness of my needs. Unfortunately, the other person abruptly chose to close down one day. I worked on staying with all the positive changes that were part of the alchemy of the romance, but the dark side was not easily dismissed. Many buried issues were triggered by this time of loving and, for me, violent leave-taking.

The grieving needed to be explored, but I wasn't willing to receive its deep and exhausting revelations until now. The physical armoring I've utilized over the years to hide my various fears and desires is falling away. I find myself assisting the loss and new awareness with as much consciousness as I can muster. It all seems like dying to me as my heart and ego struggle with the flow of information from my past and try to integrate and release these feelings into the present. My attachments to the mirrors of my love are coming and going in painful disarray while I bear witness. Most of the time I cannot sit still long enough to surrender to the peace of the present. I take long walks and do yoga to remain in a strong connection with my body, but my mind is still haggling over the mysteries of loss and confusion. I am mourning for love, for my friends who died of accidents, drugs, AIDS or cancer. I am crying for the attention I didn't have when I needed it in my childhood. I am weeping for the loss of care and beauty annihilated by the thoughtless forms of greed we breed so endlessly in our America. I am



Death Beckons

Photo by Judith K. Witherow

solitary but I do not feel alone. I am a woman grieving with a desire to lay bare a fresh palette where my tears will fashion a blessing for courage and strength for love to come shining through.

The sense of loss and grieving is still fresh in my mind after ten years. My nightmare has modified. I am less involved in new fears. Around me there is great love and affection. Grief is supported by a budding circle of friends and a wonderful love. I find that fears of abandonment, unworthiness, and injustice still haunt my landscape and I confront them as old acquaintances that need continued boundaries and truth. I believe there is respite in community and an opportunity to give and receive shared healing for our own and the world's sorrows. We have a rich, generous, hand-woven safety net of love that comes from the minds, hearts, and bodies of the women in our lives who keep it well tended, open, and full. Grieving turns to gratitude for the gifts we have to give each other.

Julie R. Enszer

## Steel Shapes Our Lives

from the car she sat in  
at the stop light  
to the steel girders  
in the truck next to her

from the steel  
fasteners that failed  
to the wheel chair  
transporting grandmother

from stealing time  
against disease  
to history crushing us  
in mother's memory

from childhood, mother steeled  
us for loss She admonished  
"You kids don't know how lucky  
you are to have me here, healthy"

my sister was  
stolen from us  
so swiftly  
sitting in steel

at her funeral  
mother shrieked,  
"It should have been you, not  
Lara, it should  
have been you"

years earlier, when  
I came out as a lesbian  
mother wished on me  
the familial, feminine curse:

Lupus a steel needle  
pierced my arm proving  
my blood is clean  
my body, healthy

I survived My sister's  
middle name, Diane,  
secured her fate  
shared with mother's cousin

both crushed by steel  
at this particular time  
at this particular age

we live in an era where  
steel shapes our lives

Lisa Kraft

## Constant Blame

constant blame  
plagues me, a high fever  
that won't go away

grasping  
at tenuous flickering  
moments of happiness

that sometimes come  
between the long hours  
of dread  
and sorrow

i will never be able to let go  
to break the bonds  
of guilt that wrap  
so tightly around me

if only you had talked to me  
or called me up  
just to cry, to let me say i love you  
before you had taken your own  
precious life

am i to constantly replay  
that painful time  
in order to pay your penance?

to constantly hear  
those words of my father...  
lisa, come home  
your brother is dead.

Catherine Friend

## Losing Ambrosia

When my partner Melissa and I started a farm, we knew almost nothing about farm animals, so we learned quickly as we acquired fifty sheep, a llama, lots of ducks and chickens, and a goat.

The goat, Ambrosia, was going to feed baby lambs. I'd read about this great idea in a book, but actually making it happen was a little tricky. However, when we ended up with three lambs whose mothers couldn't feed them, it was time to try.

First, I tied Ambrosia's head and fed her grain to distract her. Then I knelt, and using my head, pushed the 170-pound goat hard up against the wall. I made sure I was well balanced, for when the grain was gone, Ambrosia would be also. Head firm against her flank; I scooped up the nearest two lambs--both about a day old and a little confused. Sheep udders are high and round, goat udders low and pendulous, so the lambs' instinct to nurse high meant they'd never find the teats without help.

I pushed and pulled two squirming lambs into position, and they 'latched' on. The third lamb roamed underneath me, nosing its way up my ribcage. Even though I wore a sweatshirt, bent over as I was, gravity turns even the most flat-chested of women into a meal source. That third lamb came dangerously close to latching on to exactly what she was looking for, but I pushed her away just in time. As the warning goes: "We're professionals. Don't try this at home."

After the lambs nursed three times a day for three days, Ambrosia's milk passed all the way through their digestive systems, so both ends of each lamb smelled familiar (to her, not to us). The next morning I looked out the window. There she stood, munching her cud, with three little lambs fighting over her udder. They began following her everywhere. She nickered if she couldn't see them. She lay down and let them climb on her--a happy blended family. Ambrosia performed this mothering miracle for us year after year, teaching us, and visitors to the farm, that an animal didn't have to look like her in order for her to love it.

But then one frigid January afternoon Melissa stopped into the barn to check on things. Ambrosia was standing by the big door, seemingly fine, but when Melissa returned thirty minutes later, Ambrosia had begun trembling and grinding her teeth. Melissa took her temperature. We gave her a few medications we had on hand, but we didn't know what was wrong with her.



Within minutes, she dropped to her knees, trembling violently now, her vision glazed and unblinking, then fell over on her side. Melissa ran for the phone while I knelt by Ambrosia's side, the cold weather forgotten as I draped myself over the convulsing goat, praying that she was not in too much pain, whatever was coursing through her body.

The vet came quickly, but before he could really get the IV going and do much, Ambrosia stopped convulsing and died in Melissa's arms. We stared in shock, Melissa rocking the 150-pound goat gently. "Ambrosia, Ambrosia, don't go." No response. Within thirty minutes she'd gone from a healthy animal to a dead one.

As the vet quietly packed up his equipment, Melissa and I struggled for control, hanging on until the vet's taillights disappeared around the curve in the driveway. I don't remember much of that night—we spent it crying and wondering what we could have done differently. Had there been signs of something we'd missed? Would another drug have helped? Why had she convulsed so violently?

The next morning Melissa did what she did best—take action. We'd recently met a woman who worked for the Minnesota Science Museum, and she'd told us the museum had an extensive collection of animal skeletons that scientists across the country came to study. Melissa called Jackie and asked her if the museum needed a goat skeleton.

Jackie practically yelped with excitement. Just the day before the museum employees had been discussing an upcoming exhibit of Catalhöyük, an excavation in Turkey, one of the first places man ceased his wandering and

settled into a city. The Science Museum needed to entirely recreate the dig because the Turkish officials wouldn't let them remove anything from the country. The museum had almost everything it needed, except goat bones.

That very day, Jackie braved the icy roads to drive down in her SUV for Ambrosia's body. It took four of us, but using a plastic sled, we hoisted our beloved goat into the back of Jackie's car. Melissa and I were oddly comforted—at least Ambrosia's death could benefit someone.

Melissa's only request of Jackie's boss was that, after they examined Ambrosia's body, they would let us know if they found anything to help us understand why she died. Two days later the call came. Ambrosia died of a massive aneurysm in her brain. There was absolutely nothing we could have done to save her, or the three babies she carried.

A few months later, we visited the Science Museum, and spoke with Jackie. When I mentioned we were going to attend the laser show, she gave us both a funny look, then took a deep breath. "You need to know, then, that in the hallway you take to the laser theater, you'll pass a large window into one of the science labs. In that window we have a working display showing how insects help us clean dead flesh off the skeletons we keep here."

Melissa figured it out first. "Ambrosia."

Jackie nodded.

As we entered the hallway and passed the large window into the brightly lit lab, I focused on my shoes and did not stop until I reached the theater. Melissa, ever the scientist, stopped. She could tell it was Ambrosia by the hooves—they had needed trimming before she'd died, and they still did. A few signs in the window explained the process, and Melissa felt the whole exhibit was well done—educational and interesting.

We were still heartbroken over Ambrosia, but at the same time filled with pride that she was teaching people even in her death.

—Excerpt from *Hit By a Farm: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Barn*, by Catherine Friend, published by Marlowe & Co.; [www.hitbyafarm.com](http://www.hitbyafarm.com).



Suzanne Gary

## Beverly

*(for Charlotte)*

I step into  
the noises and smells  
of the nursing home  
with the nice-girl name  
where you ride the bed  
like a wing toward death

Rubber-soled people  
feed you, place pills  
on your tongue  
exercise your arms  
I hold a book

in front of you  
turn the pages  
of the Grand Canyon  
Sequoia National Park  
where you drove  
the new Jeep last year

Now it sits  
in the driveway  
and you can't cross  
the room, remember  
my name. Words  
have blown out the window  
on a breeze

The tumor in your brain  
is behind the wheel  
now, chauffeuring you away  
I close the book  
A space enters your eyes

The sky  
a stack of blue  
bricks  
in your window

After a false alarm  
the fire station  
next door has gone quiet

The flag in front  
hangs as limp  
as your hand

Your fingers stay curled  
through sirens and bells  
engines erupting  
out of their box

Your eyes stay closed  
or fixed on a balloon  
tied to the foot of your bed,  
a vase of tall  
paper sunflowers

Your mind  
has left, but I might find it  
like a slipper  
under your bed  
if I sit quietly  
in this room choked with grief  
flowers that are not flowers

And afterwards  
I will drive  
the Jeep  
Your hands will slide  
into mine  
like gloves  
steering us toward Sequoias

you have seen  
since we last spoke  
or a Grand Canyon  
I couldn't have  
found alone

Shirley Brozzo

## One More Time

I never really knew how sick my dad was, until my mother, Sarah Millimaki, called me from his hospital room to say he was failing. By “failing,” I knew she meant he was dying. I was at home, having returned from the hospital myself the week before where I had given birth to my daughter, a little blue-eyed blonde, who obviously resembled her father and not me. My husband, Joel, was at work, so I bundled up Tiffany and drove myself back to the hospital.

Holding Tiffany close, I ran for the elevator transporting me to the sixth floor to see my dad, Axel, and find out for myself what was going on. I stopped short, outside the room where he lay enveloped by white sheets, connected to a myriad of tubes and blinking machines. Mom looked up when she heard me approach, put her finger to her lips to hush me, and motioned for me to stay where I was. She came out.

“Oh, Annette, I am so sorry I didn’t call you when this happened. You just came home with the baby, so I called the ambulance.”

“What happened?” I asked, handing my daughter to her grandmother. I listened anxiously as she told her story, while focusing on her first grandchild.

“Well, you know, he just hasn’t been the same ever since he left that mining job for Pickands-Mather. All those years of working underground did something to him. He ached all the time from that rheumatoid arthritis. And he was always so cold. Remember how we had to have the heat turned up so high, I could hardly stand it?”

Tiffany yawned, and we both looked at her making sure she was all right. Just as quickly, she settled back in.

I said, “Yes, I remember all that. We girls ran around the house in our shorts in the middle of winter. I hated it when we were teenagers and wanted to have sleep-overs, but we couldn’t because he had to get up and walk around throughout the night. Had to keep those legs moving.”

“I know, honey. It’s been hard on me too, you know. Now he’s got what they call black lung disease. It’s taking his breath. For the last month or so I’ve had to take him outside and let him breathe fresh air. But last time he. . .” I watched her shake, breaking into tears. Handing over one of Tiffany’s cloth diapers to staunch the flow, I gently extricated the baby from her arms.

"I couldn't lift him. That's when I called the ambulance. Oh, Annette, it doesn't look good." My mother slumped against the wall, brushing her gray hair behind her ears. Once again, she rubbed the new diaper across her face. Quietly, our family doctor, Dr. Jamison, walked up.

"What's this? Annette, I thought I sent you home with this little bundle." Peeking inside her pink blankets, he said, "Well, she is looking much better than the two of you. I think you should follow her lead and go home for a nap, Sarah."

"I can't Dr. Jamison, he's dying. I have to be here."

"Sarah, it's true that he isn't going to be a healthy man again, but, he is not dying today. I'm sure you will be taking him home by the end of the week." Just as he finished talking a voice on the intercom paged Dr. Jamison. He headed down the corridor at a brisk clip for a man of his age.

True to his prediction, Dr. Jamison discharged Dad by Friday. Mom and I had just arrived as Dr. Jamison was giving him his last instructions. The two men, who used to be hunting buddies, eyed each other up.

"Yes, Frank," dad said, "I'll take these little blue pills three times a day with my meals and the large yellow one at bed time. And no more smoking."

"Good," said Dr. Jamison. "Then you should live to see your new granddaughter get married."

I watched the exchange between the two old friends and knew that they knew that the other was lying.

\* \*

Tiffany and I visited often during those first few weeks after he came home. In the beginning Dad was unsteady on his legs, so he started using crutches to get around. The low-income apartment, with a combined living room with kitchenette, that they were forced to live in now was barely large enough for two people. While trying to adjust to using his extra legs, he kept bumping into the recliner or the coffee table.

"How are you doing, Dad?"

Through clenched teeth he said, "Well, it hurts to walk, but it hurts even more if I'm not moving some." He took another slow turn around the apartment.

Chilled by the fall air, he wore his blue, flannel bathrobe over his pajamas. His strength was gone from his arms, so when he fastened the belt, it didn't stay tied and the robe flapped open, wrapping itself around one crutch or the other.

“Damn it!”

He hardly ever swore, so when I took a step toward him, my mother shook her head. From the look in her eyes, I figured I’d better listen this time. Dad threw his crutches to the floor, wrestled the robe from his body, and slumped to the couch. His chest sunk and rose as he tried to get his breath, then he wiped his forehead with the discarded robe. I watched as mom went to his side. Even when he tried pushing her away, she sat beside him, stroking his hand.

Later, Mom said, “My whole routine has changed. I feel like I’m watching over you kids again. He doesn’t sleep well, so I nap when he does. He might eat a half a bowl of chicken noodle soup.”

I knew things were not good when I overheard him say to Mom, “I don’t trust myself to drive the Buick to the store. Get Annette to take you.”

This became my new routine. Mom called and I would bring Tiffany over. Once she was fed and had a dry bottom, I’d buckle her into her baby seat, placing it on the floor before the TV, where the latest Lions game was playing. Dad always said they were fine. Even though I wasn’t there to see it, I’m sure the two of them watched football until Tiffany fell asleep and Dad nodded in and out. In short, they bonded.

\* \*

Just after tax time when I was visiting, I noticed Dad walking a little straighter and a little longer. Mom said he even ate a small bowl of oatmeal with brown sugar and butter and that he drank two cups of tea. I had to go pick up some money to run to Walgreen’s for them.

Mom said, as she was handing me a twenty, “Your father’s run out of those little blue pills again. Now, I’ve called up Mr. McGregor in the pharmacy and he’ll have them ready for you. I don’t know why you didn’t marry him in the first place. He seems like such a nice man”

“Mother, do you want me to go to the drugstore or not? Stop trying to set me up with Bill McGregor.”

When I returned with the prescription, Dad was sitting on the wooden bench in front of their brick building. Running his hand across the varnish, now in need of a touch up, he said, “I can’t even keep up with the little stuff any more.”

“Daddy, Tiffany is walking around the furniture. It won’t be long before she takes a few steps. She is always babbling. I can’t wait for her to say *mama*.” I tried to distract him with stories about his granddaughter.

\* \*

The weather was fine in June, so I put Tiffany in her St. Vinnie's stroller and we went to see my folks. Today was a special day; Tiffany said her first word. It wasn't *mama*. It wasn't even *dada*. No, her first word was "*papa*." I didn't have to wonder who was coaching her!

Before we left home, I called my mom to tell her that we were coming and to be prepared for a surprise. She said Dad had wandered out to the garage, so he would be outside to greet us. We were about a half a block away when I saw Dad emerge, looking down the street toward us. Tiffany was chanting, "Papa. Papa. Papa." I was sure the whole neighborhood could hear her by now.

"Papa. Papa. Papa."

With a big smile on his face, my dad headed toward us. For a man with a cane, he moved at a good pace. Making it as far as the bench, he stopped to sit down, wheezing. Once out of the stroller, Tiffany tottered to him, trying to climb onto the bench. Smiling as she sat beside him, she patted his hand. He patted hers back. Everything was right between them.

"Watch her, Dad. She moves pretty quickly now."

"Annette, I raised four girls of my own. I know what I am doing."

\* \*

By summer when Tiffany could walk, Dad took his cane in one hand and his granddaughter's hand in the other, and took her outside. He knew that Mom and I were watching from the kitchen window. On rainy days she banged on the patio door, angered that she couldn't go outside with her papa.

"I know, Baby. I don't want it to rain today, either. Come on. Let's go see if there is some baseball on TV." He held out his hand to her and she followed him, reaching for his outstretched fingers.

The day after the rain was more fun for the two of them. Even in 80° weather, Dad wore his insulated jacket, while Tiffany had on her sun suit. About fifty yards from the house he stopped to teach her how to throw rocks into the puddles. The little gullies in the alleyway were just the right size to fill with small rocks that one-year-old hands could handle. From the kitchen window I could see Tiffany stoop to gather up just the right rock. Sometimes she dropped them and wiped her hands on her clothes. She shared with Papa. While Dad stood back to toss his rock, Tiffany

walked right up to the edge and dropped hers in, causing a splash.

Through the screen I heard Dad say, “Don’t get your feet wet, or Mama will make us go in.”

“Wet,” she said.

\* \*

In September Dad had a relapse. This time it was bleeding ulcers. After letting Mom out of the car at the front door of the hospital, I’d drive around back, below Dad’s window. Taking Tiffany out of her car seat, I let her run around. Meanwhile, inside the building, Mom helped Dad over to the window. My parents stood together for a few minutes, watching Tiffany play and wave to them, and then they’d disappear from sight.

“It’s a real chore getting him in and out of bed, but he is so cranky if he doesn’t see her.” Mom looked wiped out herself by the time I picked her up again.

This was only the beginning of several hospitalizations for the man who spent his youth mining. As Mom and I waited for Dad to come out of his latest surgery, she confided in me.

“It is so hard to see your father like this. He used to work all day in the mines, sometimes putting in double shifts. There were plenty of times he’d take me out dancing at the bars. You know how he loved to putter in the garage, making furniture. Now, he just wanders around. He picks up his saw or hammer, then puts them down again. I don’t know how much longer I can do this.” She buried her face in my shirt.

Dr. Jamison’s instructions were similar to last time. Keep using crutches, take the pills, and grow old.

Mom called me up crying, “He wants to see Tiffany.”

I could hear him in the background yelling, “I’m not taking those damn pills.”

Once there, Tiffany crawled into bed with him, where they watched football together. She shared her sippy cup and fed him animal crackers. When she thought he was cold, she covered him with her “blankie.”

“Sarah!” he hollered. “When Annette takes you shopping, get this girl a football. What’s that soft one called? Surf?”

“Do you mean Nerf?”

“That’s it. Nerf. Get her one of those. We have to start practicing.”

“Yes, dear,” my mother said, handing him his blue pills and a glass of water. He took them without saying a word to her.

“Give me a kiss, old woman.”

“I’ll old woman you,” she said, kissing him.

\* \*

All winter long he tossed the ball with Tiffany. By spring the snow melted, and Tiffany was ready to play some “real” football with her papa.

“Annette, where’s her jacket? We’re gonna play football.”

I put Tiffany’s jean jacket on her, retied her tennis shoes, and sent her toward the door.

“Football. Wif Papa.”

“Ok, baby. Keep your jacket on.”

“Not a baby.”

“Ok, then, big girl.”

At twenty-one months, she was big enough to hold the door so her Papa could get through it with his crutches. Out on the lawn Tiffany threw the ball toward him. He steadied himself with his crutches and kicked the ball back with his left foot. She ran to chase it and threw it back. Once again, he kicked it toward her. The third time she threw it far right of him. Slowly, he moved to retrieve it.

“Papa, can’t you run on them crutches?” Tiffany asked.

Barely able to control my own laughter, I watched as my dad stopped in his tracks, opened his mouth and laughed out loud, a long, chuckle from deep within his stomach. He laughed so hard, he started coughing. “She asked why I couldn’t run on those crutches.” Again, he burst into laughter. Tears gathered in the corners of his eyes. “What a pistol she is.”

Later that night my mother called me to come over. “Leave Tiffany home with her dad.” Anxiously, I sped the few blocks to their house. By then they were both outside. As I flew out of the car, I watched my mother prop him up against the brick wall just outside their door. Getting closer, I heard him cough.

Mom asked him, “Can you make it to the bench?”

He shook his head, and then slumped against the wall, clutching his chest. Before I could get to them, he pitched forward, over her shoulder.

“Axel. Axel.”

“Daddy!”

Mom tried to push him off her. I grabbed at him, too, but she hollered, “Call the ambulance, Annette. Go!”

I ran for the phone, knowing it was too late.

Kit Kennedy

## The Cat Contacts My First Lover

how long is 25 years

how far is Manhattan from San Francisco

come visit

best if your kitties bring their own toys

you'll like it here

fog doesn't last long

maybe she won't cry  
when she folds that old black sweater  
which she never wears

what's inoperable cancer

what does dead mean



Stairway

Photo by Morgan Gwenwald



Trena Machado

## Didn't Feel Like Myself

the minister of our church. at the door. 11:00 p.m. she took one look at his face and knew. he said. he has been killed. i stood at her side. hip level. looking up at the minister delivering those words. foreign words that meant nothing. my mother cried out. into her chest. put her hand over her mouth. lifted her face up. down. up. nowhere to look. she wanted to have him in our home. open casket. for two days. until the funeral service was performed. and. taken. to the cemetery. in the living room. the folding chairs were set up in rows. i was in the hall. i had tried to help with the chairs. make them straight. they were bulky to move. the rubber tips on the chair legs stubbed and bumped and did not slide. the day before the funeral service. and the day before that. i looked at him. so still. fear down my back. the fear. making. me feel i am betraying him. where was my father. whose lap i sat on. being afraid. a betrayal. felt bad not wanting to look. turned away to the hall at the foot of the marble gray casket. morning sunlight. in a broad bright swath. from the bedroom window. poured in. random. movement of dust particles. up. down. jumping. jagged. floating. drifting. i was caught in those dust particles for minutes at a time. with him. behind me in the casket. speechless. my throat closed. alone. in the house. looking at the dust particles. suspended along with them. had never been aware of them before that. have been ever since. at the funeral service i went into the hall. i was dressed up. nice shoes. a nice dress. can't remember the shoes or dress exactly. didn't feel like myself.

Donna Matucci

## Forever Changed

Saturday August 16<sup>th</sup> 2003, I left our campsite early that morning to go to a workshop with Rhiannon. My girlfriend was going to be at the workshop area next to us at Kay Gardener's memorial service. Rhiannon wanted to end the workshop early to attend the service. She had us sing a beautiful tribute to Kay. It stayed with me as I joined Jean and our friend Bobi at the service. I found a scrap of paper and quickly jotted down the words, later sticking it in my journal.

That night Toshi and Sweet Honey rocked the land in one of the most memorable concerts I attended. All those woman on their feet, generations of mothers and daughters watching mother and daughter as we all sang and danced. I could feel a connection of past and present--this theme that I had been spiraling around in all day inspired by having seen Alex Olsen at the earlier memorial. It seemed like a confluence of the raging river we rose up from and the righteous waterfalls that are currently splashing sense into this world.

I had waited on the phone line on Friday only to have a brief conversation with my mother ending abruptly with her having to use the bathroom. She had gone into the hospital three days before I left. I had taken her to the emergency room because of a nosebleed that wouldn't stop from the Coumadin she was on. She had gotten up during the night to use the bathroom, slipped and fractured her leg. I felt relieved when I was leaving that she would be in rehab until I got back. I thought this would make it a little easier on my sister whose daughter just had surgery and was diagnosed with cancer that same week.

On Sunday we were excited to see Bobi's girlfriend Nancy who had been practicing for the Drumsong Orchestra all week. I ran into a friend from Buffalo I hadn't seen in many years at the performance. I thought it was ironic to see her here having left my dog with her ex, Tracy, who now lives in Michigan. After the concert Jean and I spent part of the afternoon packing up a little and then headed to Day Stage. I was looking forward to the candlelight ceremony that evening having left the festival before it in years past.

We scanned the crowd and walked across the open area at the top heading towards the trees for shade. Just as we sat down Denise approached me. Perhaps someone else would have heard the announcement and recognized my name. Perhaps had we not just seen each other that morning and had the conversation about Tracy taking care of Vita, she wouldn't have made the connection and effort to find me. She told me the facilitators had announced my name and that I was to call Tracy.

Jean held me tight as we made our way toward Crafts. She tried to reassure me it was about Vita, me knowing it was my mother. Jean found Tina who works in Crafts and took us to the closest phone. I called Tracy and she asked if I had spoken to anyone in my family. She told me to call my niece.

Maria answered the phone and asked if Jean was with me. There are no words to describe the feeling of your body completely out of control when the impact of the incomprehensible hits you. Jean took the phone as I collapsed to the ground having heard the words; "Grandma passed away yesterday morning."

Two and a half years later I must pause as I write these words. My eyes well up, my heartbeat quickens, and my breath is short. Emotions ran rampant, time stood still. The one feeling I remember was panic, being four hours away from my dog and ten hours from my home and family.

A series of events that are a blur occurred after that. Through the blessings and good graces of friends and strangers, we were taken in a van to our camper. Jean packed us up, and Bobi and Nancy followed us. By the time we got to Tracy's, it was too late to continue. I woke that night in Tracy's bed and remembered. It still did not seem possible. The journey back to Buffalo felt eternal. I was traveling back through my life that had forever changed. When I arrived home Monday, all the relatives from out of town had arrived. All the arrangements were complete. The wake was the next day, and the funeral the following morning.

It was hard to consider going back to Michigan the following year. Jean had not missed a year in the past seventeen. She tried to be supportive to whatever I needed. I think it was June when I realized I needed to return to Michigan. I needed to heal, to mourn in my own way, to have a different experience than the trauma that was stuck in my mind, and move on.

That summer I was looking through my journal and found the scrap of paper with the words to the song *If I had the wings of a dove, wings that would take me where I want to go. I would fly from the utmost way out into space. No, no, no, no, no...there is no hiding place.*

On the first anniversary of my mother's death, I had a memorial ritual for her at the meditation circle and asked our friend Deb to sing that song. Life is so serendipitous to consider that I was sitting at a memorial service in this space the year before as my own mother was transitioning. Last year at the second anniversary, I sat by myself crying at the meditation circle, hearing the voices of the woman singing in the next area.

When I opened my eyes, I spotted a piece of smooth wood under some leaves. I brushed away the leaves and saw the remnants of the candle I had burned on a piece of driftwood brought from home for an altar the previous year. I now appreciate this most sacred time to coincide with the festival each year, and to have a place to return to remember and be surrounded by the love and support of the women there.

Pam McAllister

## Alien in the Land of the Yellow Eyes

We step bravely into the hospital room  
where my sister is dying  
in a landscape of soiled sheets,  
bubbling tubes, and green plastic bed pans.  
The four liver patients watch each other with  
yellow eyes, bewildered.  
Jewish, Puerto Rican, Pakistani, and Anglo,  
they make a nation of the sick,  
speaking the common language of pain,  
the language of fear and fretful nights.  
My sister reaches her bloated hand  
through the bars of the bed  
to pat the arm of the Pakistani woman  
who doesn't speak English  
then turns to glare at us with a sneer,  
"You can't understand,"  
as though we plan  
to ascend into heaven when our time comes.

In the movies, the sick ones die  
with dignity and violins.  
When they call for the nurse, one comes running.  
They die with words of forgiveness and gratitude,  
not curses and accusations.  
In the movies the dying never need bedpans  
or social workers to translate insurance forms.

But this is real life  
where visiting sisters become invading strangers,  
immortals who stumble across the alien terrain  
with thoughtless cliches about getting well soon.  
The sick resent us.  
We keep our heads down and apologize for living.

Mary Meriam

## Handheld Objects

Knife

My sister slipped and fell  
 Into a pit of hell  
 And so a sharp knife  
 Of pain became my life

Pen

I hold my pen and write  
 Words to stop the night  
 From drowning me in black  
 I want my sister back

Penny

Sally worshipped Denny  
 One day he dropped a penny  
 She picked it up to hold  
 But Denny dropped her cold

Wand

My sister told me fronds  
 Of grass are fairy wands  
 Her dresser drawer had things  
 Like folded angel wings

Lock

My name is Sally Jane  
 They say that I'm insane  
 But mommy stole my mind  
 And locked me up inside

Needle

The doctors all agreed  
 That Sally's constant need  
 Was pharmaceutical  
 By syrup, pill, and needle

Bottle

I'm ten years old, and she's  
 Sixteen—no, Sally, please—  
 She swallows Bayer one  
 By one—the bottle's done

Candy

A wicked witch will trick  
 Her kids and make them sick  
 Until they'd rather die  
 Than eat another lie

Flower

I walk the lonely valley  
 Of longing for my Sally  
 Imprisoned for no reason  
 Season after season

Key

She loves the holidays  
 From institution daze  
 Eternity TV  
 The gatekeeper's key

Brenwyn

## Turning the Wheel

*I noticed how bright blue the veins on her chest were as the daily dose of chemotherapy trickled in tick by tick, drop by drop, spreading across her pale white skin like roadways on a map. We didn't talk about it.*

I wrote this about my mother after finally allowing myself to feel the grief of her loss. I had been numbing my feelings for years, trying to forget the chaos and violence of an alcoholic household. No one in my family ever talked about their feelings. They yelled, threw things or did the silent treatment. Before my mother was diagnosed with cancer, there was a blanket of resignation that had settled over her. I saw her fade from emotional and physical abuse, apathy eating at her slowly from the inside out, first turning into alcoholism, then a fatal disease.

Shortly after she died, I came out as a lesbian. While always having strong attractions toward women, my declaration of sexual preference was also a rebellion against the patriarchy. But being raised in an alcoholic family had taken its toll. I craved intimacy with women, yet was terribly insecure inside of myself. I chose relationships with emotionally unavailable women to recreate the pain of abandonment so I could continue to drink.

Despite the pain, the presence of strong women in my life helped me see that there was another path. I read *Drawing Down The Moon*, by Margot Adler, and *The Spiral Dance* by Starhawk. A seed was planted about earth spirituality. Then, a lover introduced me to Elizabeth Kubler-Ross who was leading a series of workshops around death and grieving in Virginia. I attended a workshop and quickly realized the importance of working through loss, anger and guilt with others. The seed began to stir. One day at a bookstore I picked up a publication called *Womanspirit*, published by a group of radical lesbians in Oregon. Oh, my Goddess...my seed sprouted wings! It was like I had been given a compass, a map, and some comfortable walking shoes on the road to recovery.

Still, the road contained many bumps and potholes. My brother was paralyzed in a car accident after driving drunk. My father died of liver disease. Soon I was the only one left to help my grandmother. She died at 104 years old while my hand was on her heart. This time I wasn't numb. I reached out and gathered friends around me. I honored her passage with flowers and



Pond Woman

Sudie Rakusin

candles on an altar made up of her favorite belongings.

Finally, I made it to Oregon and found the community of women I had read about 20 years ago. Death nor illness are isolated events here. A fabric of caring has been woven over the years into an extended family that grieves - and celebrates - together.

Beneath the full moon, women gather. It is so quiet that one

can hear the wind stir across the meadow. Candles sit in each of the four directions. Sage is lit and passed for cleansing. Then the circle is cast.

In the East, we open our minds to the healing feathers of the Bird Grandmothers. As they sweep out negativity, we find clarity to honor our vision.

In the South, we offer our anger to the Fire Grandmothers. May they spark embers of frustration and discontent into a blazing fire of transformation. We honor our power.

In the West, we shed our tears to become the watersheds of collective grief. KwanYin, The Goddess of Compassion and Mercy, listen to us without judgment. We honor our sorrow.

In the North, we open our hearts to healing. Wisdom Keepers lend us strength to face the changes ahead. We honor our bodies.

As the rattle is passed, each woman takes her turn. One is angry about the war. Another has just lost her lover. Someone's roof is leaking - again. Some women sing. Others cry. A few are silent. Whoever has the rattle is listened to in caring silence. Our stories are shared while the sacred grandmothers gather and hold council. They nod in approval as we heal our wounds and reclaim our power, turning the wheel.

Teresa Campbell

## Coping With Loss

When I was 34 years old I was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis (MS) and had to face the future of living with a chronic incurable disease. I wondered what quality of life I would have and how the disease would affect my life. Would I be able to continue to swim, hike, travel, work, and take care of myself? Or would I end up in a wheelchair or nursing home unable to see to my most basic needs? I had always been an independent person and did not want my life to change, but as I continued to have symptoms I knew the person I had been was disappearing. My physical and/or mental functions and the ability to be independent decreased. As I started to use one cane and then two canes to walk and experienced increased mobility problems, I grieved for the loss of my mobility to walk independently. At one point I felt so sad I considered suicide as a way to escape what I could not control. However, I did not commit suicide because I found enough things to enjoy in life and felt it could always be done at a later time if needed. It relieved some stress to know I had an escape if life became unbearable.

When I was diagnosed with MS, I was the type of person who liked to wear dresses and heels, and others told me I was attractive. It was not long before my balance problems and the spasticity in my legs forced me to wear slacks and sturdy walking shoes. I felt my whole identity had changed, and I grieved the loss of the person I had been. I found acceptable shoes with flat heels and pantsuits; since this was the time women were starting to wear pants more, I soon felt back in style. I still envy attractive women who can dress as they want, but I can live with the person I have become.

My bladder became a major problem soon after I was diagnosed with MS. When I started losing some control over my urination sometimes I wet my pants or urinated on the floor and felt very embarrassed. I read about bladder problems with MS and saw a urologist who ruled out bladder infections. I read health catalogs and found advertisements for pads for bladder incontinency and started ordering and wearing a variety of pads. I will never have complete control of my urinating, but I have learned to do what I want by wearing pads that collect the urine. I always carry extra pads with me and change them as needed. I also catheterize my bladder 3 or 4 times a day to empty it. Since my bladder has a very small capacity, it soon



fills again. Taking antibiotic medication on a regular schedule has prevented bladder infections. When I take cruises I always take extra supplies of pads. I would not be able to buy them anywhere near the ship. Having lived with MS for such a long time, I have learned to adjust to my bladder's needs and feel more comfortable in controlling the possibility of urine leakage. Since I am a nurse, it was easier for me to learn to self catheterize my bladder. I would love to have a normal bladder but know it will never happen. Instead I look at the positive abilities I have, and, in some way, they compensate for things I cannot change.

Rachel Naomi Remen, author of *Kitchen Table Wisdom* and a psychiatrist at the University of San Francisco, California, wrote, "The way we deal with loss shapes our capacity to be present to life. More than any thing else, the way we protect ourselves from loss may be the way in which we distance ourselves from life."

I loved to travel and found ways to accommodate my disability. With two canes I climbed the Acropolis in Athens, sailed a rented boat down the Thames River in England, watched the sun set over Milford Sound, New Zealand, and watched the Bolshoi Ballet perform *Swan Lake* inside the Kremlin in Russia. When it became too difficult to travel by plane using a wheelchair, I took cruises and explored the Caribbean, Alaska and Mexico. Purchasing an accessible van meant I could transport my scooter and visit places anywhere in the United States I enjoyed. One of my first trips was to the Four Corners (New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada and Utah), and the second was to Yosemite National Park. I grieved the loss of each method of travel I could no longer use, but felt there would always be a way for me to travel; I just had to find it. Instead of distancing myself from life, I continued to actively participate in it.

When I was no longer able to climb the stairs to my house I grieved my loss of mobility. Then I bought a stair glide to carry me up the stairs because I wanted to be able to get out of the house whenever I wanted.

When my immobility increased I bought an electric scooter so I could cruise the streets and engage in "people watching," and visit my favorite park. I also wanted to attend social gatherings in accessible places.

I had been with my partner, Sue, for only one year when I was diagnosed with MS, but she said she wanted to stay with me. We met when she joined the faculty at a university where I was already teaching. We started spending a lot of time together, and, after a few months, she moved in with me. In the beginning, I had few restrictions on what I could do, and we traveled to distant parts of the world for our vacations. We had an active

sex life and were very much in love. Every year brought new adventures and I felt I would always be able to do what I did.

I taught at the university for twenty-two years and chose to retire when I felt it was too demanding of my energy, and I had other things I wanted to do. I had a sabbatical and used sick time to have one year off before I decided to take a disability retirement. I never regretted that decision, and although I enjoyed the years I taught, I made an easy adjustment to retirement. My life was soon full of travel, social events and writing. Once a year, I have lunch with the faculty with whom I worked and we have an active discussion about what we are doing. They have all retired and enjoy life very much. They will always be my friends.

As my disability increased and I became frustrated with watching my ability to do things change, I often lashed out at Sue with displaced anger. She felt helpless to help me, and at times we spoke of moving apart. A friend suggested couples counseling and we set up appointments with a psychologist. The sessions lasted for a year, and in that time we were able to define our stressors and modify how we reacted to them. We learned to talk more about what was bothering us before it reached a fight level. Each of us also had individual therapy to help each of us deal with problems related to or not related to my disability. It was difficult for me to accept needing psychological help, as I felt I should be able to manage on my own. I found that talking with a therapist relived some of the stress, and I was able to look at a problem and how I might manage with it in a different light.

Sue also assumed more responsibility for helping me meet my needs. At times she gave me a bath when I was unable to take a shower, and she helped me with self-catheterization when I needed to do it and could not do it alone. As a nurse, she watched over my health needs and saw that I kept my needed physical and dental appointments and took care of me when I was ill. It was not easy for me the first time she had to help me with fecal or urinary incontinence; I felt I had regressed to being an infant again. I soon found I did not have secrets from her; she knew my weaknesses and strengths. She was not only my partner, but at times she was my caregiver. It was difficult for me to reveal my very personal needs but somehow I did and we adjusted to new roles. I assumed responsibility for finding and paying for individuals to clean the house and do the laundry while Sue did the shopping and cooking.

At least once a week we date by going out to a movie or play and to dinner because we enjoy each other and being together. We recently celebrated our 40th anniversary so whatever we have done has enabled us



MS

Photo by Sue Lenaerts

to stay together in stressful times. Our active sex life has been replaced with a more romantic intimacy. We still kiss and hold each other while thinking of times and events we cherish.

At times I felt like I had burned out with living and was unable to give to my partner or others because I had so many needs of my own. I was unable to give--not because I did not care but because I had not adequately grieved. Grieving is a form of self-care. I'll never again be the person I was in 1966 when I was diagnosed with MS. And I'll never be able to do the things that person did. I liked the person I was when I was diagnosed with

MS, and I'll never be able to do the things that person did. I will always grieve that loss. My life did not end when I was diagnosed with MS. It just changed. I needed to grieve the loss of who I was before I could accept the person I had become. Grieving will be an ongoing process because my health status will continue to change. Being an optimist, I hope it will improve.

A desire to recover is a natural response to loss. Loss and grieving are painful, and we want to be happy again. To institute the recovery process I tried some of the following:

I read about my disease because knowledge is power. A feeling of self-knowledge gives us a sense of power over what is happening.

I found out how to best take care of my self and what recent research had revealed. I started on a new medication to control but not cure my disease. I joined a support group so I could talk with others who had the same disease and discover how they were coping. Studies have demonstrated that talking about our experiences can decrease blood pressure and increase the immune system's ability to fight disease.

Learning to operate a computer, I started writing stories for magazines.

In the past, I joined a gym to swim and use the equipment and started to work out three times a week. I can no longer swim but I still use certain machines twice a week. I feel physically good when I use various machines and know I am keeping some muscle tone in place. Exercise releases endorphins, a group of peptide hormones that bind to opiate receptors that are found mainly in the brain. Endorphins reduce the sensation of pain and increase a sense of well-being.

I can no longer work in the garden, but I can grow plants in the house and watch new life take hold. Sue sees I have flowers in some rooms every day. New flowers make me feel alive and happy and satisfied with life.

I like people and continue to maintain contact with friends by arranging to get together, or by phone or by emails. I know that numerous epidemiological studies have demonstrated that socially isolated individuals are at greater risk for health problems.

I know grieving and coping are difficult, but I feel I can cope with what life throws me and be a stronger person. My life did not end when I was diagnosed with MS; it just changed. I grieved every loss, but I continue to focus on what I can do.

Carla Schick

## Remembering

Years like strong summer  
 rainstorms and water shedding  
 down into near empty streets I remember  
 my father's face  
 his hands pointing to the letters  
 I was beginning to read I falter  
 over the sounds his East European accent  
 the cigarette always between his fingers

I never did get angry  
 only the sorrow of his death  
 was muffled in a darkened apartment  
 shades drawn laughter banned

No one told me about dying  
 I memorized every detail  
 pushing open the heavy metal door at the entrance  
 of the hospital a waiting room ceiling  
 cracked green peeling paint chips  
 rough edges the odor  
 of ammonia

they made me wait  
 drawing pictures of moon  
 and sun and rainbows  
 throughout the operation  
 he would not survive

When I wanted to say  
 good-night  
 no one led me to his door  
 "too sick" they said

"tubes running up his arm  
 the missing leg  
 recall him bouncing you  
 on his knee"

if you will remember anything at all

Louise Moore

## Memory

September 11, 2001

Will stand as their monument  
They will always remember  
what they were doing  
how they heard

As they grow  
they will turn to lovers  
in the dark of the night  
and ask them

Where were you when...

They will refuse to date the ones  
who have no memory of the  
day

Until they age  
and there are more  
and then which ones will be  
etched  
in granite

There are still a few  
with the memory of Roosevelt  
or Morrow's voice  
talking about other planes  
which arrived unexpectedly

What will be the reference point  
Will it be a president  
Another building full of bodies  
not now with us  
Or just  
a president's brother

I have two now  
the brains and blood  
on the wife's dress  
and the towers

My father has more  
Two with planes arriving  
unexpectedly  
he has stopped counting  
Doesn't have to have a  
monument  
to remember  
evil exists in this world

Peg Neff

**Sheila Hein**  
**May 2, 1950 - September 11, 2001**



*lesbian • photographer • gardener • workaholic • my partner  
for seventeen years • the love of my life • my soul mate •  
my closest confidante • my best friend • my entire world •  
gone in a flash at the pentagon*

Nancy Taylor

## The Unimaginable Gift

“Nancy?”

“Hi Dad!” I replied cheerfully.

“There’s been an accident.”

“What?!” I sat down and dread seeped in.

“Your mother, your mother...” my dad’s voice trailed off.

“What? What! What’s happened to mom?” I asked childishly afraid.

“She was in a car accident,” my dad’s voice broke into a thousand pieces.

“She was killed instantly. She’s dead.”

“No. No! I’ll have to call you back.”

I jumped out of my chair and ran aimlessly down the hallway. My air supply had been cut. I strained to breathe as my heart beat faster. My head spun and the words “She’s dead, She’s dead” reverberated over and over again. The implications of these words navigated through the choppy seas of impossibility.

A woman, whose son was dying of adolescent MS, stood in the distance. I ran to her and opened my mouth, but a hushed silence fell. “Help me, help me,” my eyes pleaded. Anxiety and disbelief overwhelmed me. I felt my legs tire and give way. I crumpled without grace, without dignity. In a desperate attempt to keep from falling, I wrapped my arms around the woman’s waist and held my head to her breast. “My mother,” I sobbed uncontrollably. “My mother is dead.” I choked on the words as they tumbled out of my mouth. The woman placed her arms around me and held me close. “Shh...it’s okay,” she cooed softly. The burden of death and dying was upon us.

On the plane the next morning, I sat with my head on my legs and buried my face in my hands. Visions of unimaginable dread and despair filled me. The first wave of my mother’s death vacillated between dream-like horror to irreconcilable disbelief. Tears fell uncontrollably with flash flood fury. I looked up and stared out the window. The Southwest plains stretched far and wide. Clouds drifted in heavenly hues of white and the sun shone brightly from its nearly upright position. I leaned back in my seat and closed my eyes. I felt the plane swerve slightly to the right. The only sound I heard was the low hum of the engines at cruising speed. The plane



hit a small air pocket which prompted me to open my eyes.

I watched as the sun crept slowly into the cabin from the windows on the left. As the plane continued its change of course, the light subtly flooded the entire cabin. I felt the sun dance lightly upon my face. Peacefulness washed over me and I lay back in my seat and closed my eyes.

“Nancy?”

“Mom?”

The voice began in the center of my chest without sound. I felt the words rise and make its way through my throat to the top of my head.

“I’m okay. I’m all right. Everything’s all right.”

The questions that plagued me throughout the night were answered. I rested in the warm sensations that vibrated throughout my body. Cast in a golden spell, I shifted my position so I faced the sun directly. My body heaved a sigh of relief.

“Nancy, everything’s all right. You have to go on with your life.” I devoured the message hungrily and nodded in quiet acquiescence.

“I have to go now.” I drew in a deep breath. Holding to the sensation as long as possible, I felt the light and warmth ebb from my face and the darkness and cold return.

“Don’t go Mom. Please don’t go.” I begged.

“Go on with your life Nancy.”

I closed my eyes tightly and clenched my fists. What was once bright now left me gloomy. I opened my eyes and looked at my partner Sam. Beside me, she slept motionlessly. I touched her hand and she instinctively inched closer to me. I slipped my hand into hers. I held it tightly in fear that I would be carried away suddenly, without warning.

Over the loud speaker, the co-pilot announced, “Wanted you folks to know that there have been some delays getting into Dallas Fort Worth today. We’re altering our course a little, but expect to arrive at the gate on time. So sit back and relax.” Audrey awoke and smiled. I smiled back feebly.

After a few minutes, the pilot interrupted the quietness of the cabin with his Texan drawl, “Hello Ladies and Gentlemen. This is the Captain. Just wanted you to know that we’ll be at the gate as scheduled. Uh, if you look out from the left side of the plane, you’ll see the city of Altus.”

To the right was the small town of Altus, Oklahoma. I looked at its dusty-colored structures and houses with curiosity and disbelief. To the north, I saw the air force base. This was the town where my father and mother met; where they fell in love, married and I was born. A sweeping wave of loss hit me. I wept bitterly. My mother reached from the beyond

and showed me Altus, a quiet town that bore little significance to the rest of the world, let alone interest. In that moment Altus was everything. I stared out the window and watched it go by. I held its image in my mind long after it passed. I leaned back in my seat and cried. I felt the voice, “Go on with your life Nancy.”

Sitting in the funeral parlor, my brothers, their spouses, Sam, my dad and I waited for the funeral director to arrive. The room was brightly lit and decorated in bright pastel colors. I smelled lilies, magnolias, and hyacinth mixed with sweet perfumes and heavy colognes. My brothers and I didn’t speak and avoided eye contact. Sam talked to my dad who had divorced my mother long ago. Grief hung heavy in his eyes. The embattled years of resentment and bitterness between my mother and him were momentarily put aside.

The funeral director walked in from the hot July sun and greeted my youngest brother, “Hello Roy.”

My brother, a police officer, took the man’s hand and shook it firmly. “Thank you for doing this Ray. We really appreciate it.”

“I’m sorry I have to meet ya’all under these circumstances,” he looked at us all. “I’ve heard so much about your family from Roy. Because Roy and I go back a long way, I wanted to be part of this today. It’s the least I could do.” The group nodded silently. “From the outpouring of flowers, cards and other condolences, I must say that your mother touched a lot of people.” He paused. “We’ve received so many flowers. We’ve been unable to put them all in the viewing room. We’ll take the other flowers to the funeral where we set them up if that’s all right with you?”

“Yes, that’s fine,” my oldest brother, Bryan, said. My dad turned to Ray and thanked him. “If there is anything you need, I’ll be at the front desk. I’m so sorry about your loss. You can go in when you are ready.” Ray turned and walked down the corridor to another viewing room at the other end of the hall. There another bereaved family sat. I watched as the father rose and met him. I looked at his daughter whose grief-stricken eyes were moist and swollen. Her grief took my breath away.

We entered the doorway to the viewing room. The room was filled with flowers of vibrant colors and varied sizes. My mother’s coffin was silver with black streaks. Inside, it was lined with ash gray chiffon. It stood in the middle of the room against the wall. My brothers and I split from our group and made our way to the casket, which was mounted on a silver bier. The upper door of the coffin was opened. It was our first view of our mother since the accident. She was dressed in the orange and gray suit she

wore on the seminary's inauguration day. She wore her favorite reading glasses and her hair was styled just as it was in the picture I gave to the hairstylist. Her repose was serious and serene. Her motionless body disturbed me as I had never known her to sit quietly for any length of time.

My brothers and I moved in unison to our places. Bryan stood at the head of the casket, Roy directly opposite her face, Freddy at her side and I at her waist. We were lost children seeking comfort. She lay before us. I watched as Bryan bent down and stroked her hair. Roy touched her face lightly with his forefinger, and Freddy with one arm draped over the casket and his head buried in his armpit, held her arm tenderly and gently. I wept silently. I turned her hand slightly and looked at the scar on her palm. I felt the bump with the tip of my finger. I remembered the story of how she cut her hand on a bottle when she was a little girl. The finality of her life violently rummaged its way through me. I held her hands and felt my palms warm to an inexplicable energy that passed between us. Heavily, I exhaled. Bereaving hearts sought suckling intimacy. Heart-wrenching sadness and undying love filled the room.

Weeks after the funeral, it rained. The smell of wet pavement mixed with the grasses' fresh scent filled the air. Outside, I walked barefoot in the front yard and felt the mud ooze through my toes. The summer shower provided a much needed respite from the sweltering heat. I meandered through the neighborhood until I stood before old Melaney Creek. I climbed on a large cow grate and watched the water babble playfully over the rocks and stones of my youth. Faded memories suddenly came alive, the convenience store, the red bricked church, and my old elementary school. Memories of my mother flashed, slowing just enough so each image figured clearly frame by frame. Feelings accompanied the images, the anger, the pain, the joy, the indifference. Recaptured in time, each moment neither moved nor stood still.

Walking past our childhood house, I realized how little it was. How could anything that small house four raucous children? I looked at the extension my dad added to the garage. I remembered my mother's proud face and how she beamed when she showed the room to her friends. I remembered my mother's love for my father. I remembered she loved to watch him play baseball. On late summer afternoons, she drove my friends and me to the Tennessee River. We drank Fresca and sat on a large patch of Dutch clover near first base. She showed us how to weave the clover into necklaces, bracelets, and tiaras. Adorned in our hand-made accessories, we were queens of the diamond. It was one of the few times I heard my mother laugh.

Turning up the street to my mother's house, I saw something strange on the sidewalk. As I looked closer, I realized it was a clover necklace. I stared at it in wonderment. I looked around, hoping to find the little girls who left it behind. I saw no one and heard nobody. I looked up at the sun and strained to look beyond its brightness. It warmed me. My eyes began to water and I closed my eyes, only to see the outline of the necklace against the backdrop of my temporary blindness. I knelt and picked up the necklace. I examined it thoroughly. Each clover stem was tied from one to the other as we had been taught. I held the necklace to the sun and watched as its green and milky white colors blended. I placed the necklace around my neck and walked to the elementary school's red clay baseball field two hundred yards away. I stood behind home plate and touched the necklace again. "Peppermint Patty gets a necklace." I smiled and chuckled. The voice rose through me, "Go on with your life..."

That night as I drifted to sleep, I felt the voice stir within me. It made its way from my chest to the center of my forehead. It gently nudged me from my dream state. I opened my eyes and felt the dead calmness around me.

"Nancy?"

"Mom!" I replied as though she lay next to me. "Are you happy?" I asked.

"Yes." Her presence radiated emphatically. Happiness glowed inside me despite the darkness of my sorrow. I smiled and gazed at the stars outside the window.

"It is more than you can imagine." The meaning of her message floated loftily above me. I smiled as my mind was invited to the realms of possibility.

"Go on with your life Nancy. It's more than you can imagine." Sensations of peacefulness settled within me. Vibrations increased in intensity and volume in passing waves.

I felt the presence withdraw slowly. Time and place melded in the sound of chirping crickets. I lay staring at the ceiling for several moments. I reached for the necklace that still hung around my neck. I touched the wilting flowers one by one. "It's more than you can imagine" softly resonated within me. I placed my hands on the necklace and pressed it hard to my chest. I felt a warm presence lean against my back. "Yes Mom, it is more than I can imagine," and closed my eyes.

Lilith Rogers

**Spring 2000**  
*(for Martha Courtot)*



Out her living room window  
 so much life happening.

The young brown couple  
 across the street  
 sitting on their tiny porch  
 drinking morning coffee  
 reading their mail  
 brushing their hair  
 kissing and touching  
 rubbing  
 her very pregnant belly.

The garbage truck  
 comes and goes  
 the PG&E crew  
 puts up a new pole  
 the next door neighbor  
 calls her cat.

But in here  
 so little is happening.

Martha sits  
 quietly dying  
 as I slowly, gently  
 massage  
 her small swollen feet.

From the little stereo  
 beside her big easy chair  
 Nina Simone  
 sings softly the same songs  
 she sang to us  
 fifteen years ago  
 as we made wild love  
 to one another  
 all the green spring  
 afternoon long.

Izabela Filipiak

## A Somebody Else's Funeral

The idea that Lili had not died and only forged the story of her own burial in order to claim my attention, struck me as absurdly true. While deep down I knew this wasn't possible (she couldn't have gotten all my schoolmates involved in the scheme), it made me furious at her dying (or her pretending to be dead). It was then Halszka who ably oversaw the arrangements and approached my estranged friend's last rites as a family matter. In the end we packed up the wreaths into the car trunk and spent the night at my parents' house. Mom didn't look sick yet and was just a bit crazier than usual, but the mildew that filmed mirrors and bed linens had a dulling effect, so we just said goodbye in the morning and drove down the wide road that promised to take us to the windswept beaches of Hel peninsula in less than one hour (according to the road signs). The air was cool, sharp April air, but the formal suits that we put on for the occasion restrained us, and we duly turned into a side street that took us to the church.

There, before it, in a drafty courtyard laid out of singed brick, my high-school pals, faded seaside belles hang on, overshadowed by the church's impressive structure and outnumbered by the swarms of old ladies who blocked the entrance to the chapel with their black-clad bodies. At last the path to the coffin cleared, and we all entered in single file. Some other time I'll tell you more about it, but that is how it ended: Halszka kind of had to push me outside, back onto that airy pseudo-gothic court, where I got scared, because Lili couldn't possibly stage that, she'd never let herself be seen so exposed, dull, and vulnerable, so it was real.

There was no point to protest, we were already drawn into the routine; as soon as the crowds of rosary ladies and sparse tired-eyed men in raincoats rushed into the main church, we followed them to witness (with a mixture of relief and regret) the coffin, already locked and relocated. Elegant and alien, it held center stage, evenly positioned between the oak pews in front of the altar. The mass began with a flow of air to the pipes. A priest stood before the crucifix — a dazzling white against the reddish-brown of the brick walls, intoning an improvised prayer or speech — or both; the priest's voice wasn't soothing, it was grave and forceful. He reminded me of a bookkeeper expecting the world (so why not the underworld) to turn more or less according to the books, and I found it consoling. A togetherness in life and death was within arm's reach, crossing myself felt good, just as did

kneeling and standing, until the priest's words "Lord's servant Alina entered into a union with Christ" shocked me back into a stubborn *apart* mode. It was as if we had been unknowingly transported to somebody else's funeral.

Bemused, I just settled for watching Mrs. Zahl as she sat across from us, her unruffled dignity wrapped in a wool coat with a remarkable gray-haired man next to her who looked nothing like a stinking drunk Lili had maintained her stepfather was. Nor was she Mrs. Zahl any longer; only her unmarried daughter's last name hinted at a foreign lineage. She would be still called Gertruda; the given name sounded German all right, but not outlandish to our Slavic ears, only familiar; it brought in tow home and order, embroidery and *Kinder, Kirche, Kuche*. But the daughter's was a stage name, appropriate for a silent movie star, a Greta Garbo cabaret impersonator, a warrior princess, or a problem youth's therapist who wouldn't bear her own children nor be dragged into the church alive. This was, I reasoned, why Mrs. Zahl went for Alina instead. Perhaps she regretted not calling her daughter Alina in the first place. Maybe she hoped God in His eternal mercy would prompt resurrection: the coffin would open and her daughter, called upon, would step out and be Alina for good.

Watching my former high-school pals return to their pews didn't suppress my resentment. And what did I expect, a boycott of a holy communion in response to the strange banning of a name? With their eyes cast down they kneeled, as if prepared to end their earthy travails in the church aisle. The coffin's journey didn't end, it was lifted once again and carried to the cemetery. When we parked our compact green car, which went by the pet name of Frog, by the wire-mesh fence, the cortege was already there, as if transported by means of holy power. I'm going to skip all that now, on some other occasion I'll tell you about it, crowds and more speeches and a mound of flowers, meanwhile please find comfort in watching Roma, the way I did then, our maverick schoolmate, balancing on the edge of somebody else's tomb, as she hugged her grown-up daughter who winsomely maintained an equilibrium right before her. It made me think about the high-school days when Roma had been frequenting night-clubs and screwing wealthy Arab tourists, which put her in the top bracket of the earning scale in our seaside town. Roma wouldn't have even considered me then, but she trusted Lili, and I yearned to get closer to that girl who was familiar with many mysteries. In the second year of high-school, with the aid of a sailing songbook I made my way into Lili's house, while Roma dropped out of school and from my view.

But this time Roma approached me herself, she wanted a ride to the wake, and she felt like talking. Why not let her settle in the back seat with a

young man sporting a sizable gold chain round his neck whom we thought to be her daughter's boyfriend, but he was Roma's. Daughter was studying law, Roma explained proudly, and there was a baby girl, too. Roma's mother lived with them and helped a bit with the infant. So it was possible, even viable, four generations of women crammed into one enchanted maidenland flat, with men hovering around like drones, with their own living room windows facing Lili's kitchen; neighbors dressed in stylish short sheepskin coats, ash-blond, tall and hardboiled. It turned out Roma was surely the last person to see Lili alive (that is, the last one *among us*), but I mustn't talk about it now, I have to hurry up and get us to the wake.

The wake we attended was not the one announced by the priest, but a modest reception one of our ex-schoolmates Aldona booked in the restaurant of the hotel *Anthracite* (a name that recalled its yore as a former miners' resort by the marina). Past the drafty hotel's entrance we were ushered into a winding dining room that smelled, somewhat appropriately, of damp curtains.

At a long and graceless dinner table my former classmates kept exchanging their comments at a racing speed.

"Do you know these dunderheads are vision impaired?" Beata, the class wisecracker was apparently ruffled. "Did you see the tombstone, Iska?"

The diminutive made me flinch slightly. I had accustomed myself to being a proud bearer of a name given to baby girls by parents who wanted to upgrade themselves, or mothers who wished for their daughter to have a mind of her own. It worked. There was a high percentage of Izabelas among accomplished women of my generation, to list an art critic, a TV host and a first minister. My partner, on her end, called me Flea.

"Was there a tombstone?" Ola who had once sat next to Beata in the second row and turned pious with age, had trouble catching up.

"Someone's done a rush job, really."

"I've found it very tasteful." Our mistress of ceremony, Aldona, a former anorexic, a class Cinderella turned grande dame, pronounced a judgment.

"Tasteful?"

"Black marble won't ever get out-of-season."

"Lili often wore black." Kalinska, who was the first one to get pregnant and also to divorce, looked about ready to duck under the table. My dazed mind registered an alert: had Lili been sleeping with her? A divorcee in need of consolation: a happy chance unlikely to be skipped.

"And the shape – angular, simple but gracious. With silver lettering."

"Mrs. Zahl's got good taste." Julita, willowy and stylishly ugly, the



smartest one in our class, had turned generous with age.

“But what age was Lili now?” Beata wouldn’t relinquish her point. “Was she 41?”

“What month was she born?”

That one was to me.

“In June.”

“So she wasn’t 41 yet! She was 40.”

“I can follow that kind of reasoning,” I threw in, “like, oh my God, 40 years old, too young to die, but 41’s ready to bite the dust.”

“But what did she die of?”

“Mrs. Zahl has been very unclear in this respect,” Julita spoke up. “She makes it sound like it was heart failure.”

At this point some of my former colleagues expressed surprise Lili had a weak heart, while others made an ad hoc list of various illnesses Lili had presumably suffered from. There were plenty.

“Every time I’m being asked about my age I say I’m thirty nine,” Beata pitched in casually, while my inner radar scanned her: never married, a close friend. Had Lili bewitched her, too? “I think my scale won’t go beyond that number.”

“Did you see Mrs. Zahl?”

“I was afraid to speak to her.”

“I kissed her. I mean, at the condolences. She just stared at me and I didn’t know what to do. It was frightening.”

“You didn’t.”

“I don’t remember Mrs. Zahl ever being so religious when we were all still in school.”

“Oh my God, where did she pull these old ladies from!”

“After she married Lili’s stepfather, that changed, don’t ask me why. As a rosary circle director she’s well respected, isn’t she.”

“She’s been overheard saying that Lili had been abandoned by her friends in hard times, which was the immediate cause of her death.”

“We are the bad guys!”

“That’s a little unjust, but you can’t blame her back, she’s lost a daughter.”

“What were the hard times about? Does anyone have an idea?”

“Nah, the usual.”

“She did actually hold a job, no?”

“Sure, she did,” Beata confirmed soberly. “Lili was all into it, especially dyslectic kids, took all kinds of workshops and trainings, but you realize that in our wonderful country she got paid shit. So Mrs. Zahl was always there bringing packed lunches.”

“It’s good she didn’t mind.”

“No, I mean, soup, mashed potatoes and such, so what, if Lili kept borrowing money left and right.”

“Do you remember our class reunion? Lili told me later she had regretted not coming. She said she had no money.”

“That’s kind of dumb,” Beata deadpanned. “She could have said that beforehand.”

“When was the last time you spoke to Lili?” Julita wanted to set it straight.

“In the early spring of 1998,” I reluctantly admitted. Some weeks after a so-called coming-out feature appeared in *Cosmo* with one unfortunate remark Lili wouldn’t forgive me, or would she? Halszka had been holding my hand for a while now, and my suave friends didn’t bat an eyelash.

“Five years ago! When did you last speak to Lili, Beata?”

“In the summer.”

“So no one spoke to her recently? How about you, Kalinska?”

The divorcee shook her head no. I glanced at Roma who sat at the far end of the table and didn’t seem to hear.

“Could any of you tell me what was the deal with that name? Every time the priest said: ‘Let’s pray for our sister Alina,’ I was getting chills,” crowed a tall, blond, baby-faced beauty whose name actually was Alina.

“That was creepy. I’ve never heard Lili wanting to be called anything but her own name,” confirmed Beata. “She was very fastidious about that. No derivatives and certainly no Alinas. So the tombstone presents a formerly unknown to me Lili Alina. Have you ever seen her ID?” She addressed me as a fellow expert. “Did she have a second name there?”

“No, she was just Lili Zahl.”

“So I’d say, too.”

“They must have gone for her baptismal name,” Julita yawned. “She was baptized, no?”

The mushroom soup arrived, most welcome and hot.

“I’m kind of surprised that Mrs. Zahl dressed Lili in a suit. But I liked it,” Ola admitted.

“It wasn’t a man’s suit, it’s just the way she dressed.”

“In my opinion Lili looked very nice,” Aldona took little sips of her soup. “A little pale, short hair but nicely combed and a little lipstick didn’t hurt...”

“Lili never used lipstick,” Beata objected.

“But it suited her.”

“It wasn’t bad, it had a little golden gloss,” Alina sided with the host.

“If lipstick had to be there, it should be of a darker shade,” Beata dug in her heels.

“You are right,” Julita nodded expertly. “Her lips had a natural dark shade which used to go along with the framing of her eyes.”

“I think she looked horrible,” I dared to interject.

“What do you mean by that?”

“That garish lipstick but also her hands.”

“Hands usually look horrible.” Aldona argued with competence.

Halszka glanced at me. “I don’t want to be brutal, but she spent four days in the freezer.”

“Did anyone actually talk to Mrs. Zahl?”

“She was scary,” Beata admitted. “I’ll talk to her when she gets over it, if she ever will.”

“And the brass orchestra, what did you think of that?”

“Have you ever heard Lili saying that she wanted a Gypsy band at her burial?”

The women stared at me, puzzled. I blinked.

“Beata, you must have heard of it, didn’t you?” My voice had a strange edge to it. “No,” she said flatly.

“You never heard her saying this?”

“She’d never discussed the particulars of her burial with me.”

“It was all very casual, she didn’t present me with her will, either.”

“And what have I been trying to tell you, Isabelle? Lili wouldn’t let people come too close to her.”

“How so?”

“She kept separate drawers.”

Whatever she’d been keeping in them, the part of my past stored in one of those drawers was gone.

“She used to say it every now and then, so I thought it was kind of a common knowledge... So, I guess, it wasn’t.”

“She’d let each of us know as much as she wanted us to know.”

“She kept you in these drawers, too,” Alina laughed. “I mean some of you.”

We were finished with our quiche and beets.

“I wish I could talk with Lili about that burial of hers,” I sighed. “We could meet and compare our viewpoints.”

Janell Moon

## Two Worlds

You never got to meet my friends,  
even though I promised.  
You would have loved the two women loving  
each other behind the veils of Pakistan,  
their children napping nearby. How can we know  
what will explode, when death is curving  
its way toward us? In my new world,  
you have not died and we are running  
across a long wide beach, your leopard strides  
leading us. I want my body back.  
I want you to stay here. But you push  
me to my world on the edge  
of the continent, and I smell  
the salt sea air humans have smelled  
for thousand of years where old birds trill their songs.  
The air, oh, the air, knows where it belongs.



Linda Zeiser

## Tanka

Even this ocean  
even this refracted light  
calls me home again!  
Beyond Time's vast distortion  
opaque memories linger.

*(for my mother on the day of her death: June 21st , 2005)*



One long magnolia  
clinging to the tree of life  
in such a fierce storm.  
pink and white desperate buds  
so adorn my anguished heart!

Stars, stars, endless stars  
in the middle of my heart  
middle of my life.  
All worlds collide with fury  
when gates of wonder open

Inconsistencies...  
even in this light, a few,  
studying her eyes.  
A frail reminder of love  
as a snowflake falls to earth.

Rebecca Frye

## Body Loss

You were not supposed to  
want it  
          anyway. The doctors,  
your friends your family  
look at you like a puzzle  
born without a piece  
and nod politely, wide eyed with a smile  
that says, “not for you.”

Still, when you are a  
woman who loves another woman  
your body does not  
stop           looking every month  
for the trumpeting of life of the  
announcement of possibility. Your body  
swells and shifts and releases  
preparing for the arrival of eternity.

Yes - her body is also able  
but you want it. Your body.  
Your skin your muscles your bones.  
Yes - even the 3am feedings  
the PTA meetings. Yes - But, more.  
Your body wants to be  
remembered by someone or maybe itself -  
to split its soul into the Earth into the daughter  
who will hold a hand or the son who will smile  
And you try and you wait and  
you stand on your head and you lift your hips  
and finally in desperation you even lift your lips  
in prayer. But, it does not come.  
And it will never come.  
Not for the form of your love.  
But for your body your skin your bones  
turning towards blasphemous betrayal.

How do you grieve when nothing has been lost.  
When the loss is vapor    only a dream of



Bodyworks 2

Saskia Scherffer

what might have been but refused  
to find its way.

It is your own.  
This new you -  
born to a world that only  
remains.

Marjory Nelson

## Jean

My friend Jean Livingston was an extremely independent, private woman who, in December of 1995, developed a disease, Guillian Barre, that left her almost completely paralyzed. For months she lay in a coma. But then the disease retreated enough so that she regained her mind, her ability to breathe on her own and to speak—with difficulty. Although she could lift her arms, they trembled so violently, she couldn't control them. She couldn't scratch her own nose.

When she fell ill, her close friend, Tiana, called everyone she could think of to spread the word that Jean needed our help. Those who responded created a core group that researched her illness, discussed all decisions, met with doctors, challenged them, pleaded, fought for quality care and were there for Jean as much as possible. Over the year and half of her illness, while the composition of the group changed, it was always clear that Jean was in charge of her own care.

When Tiana called me, I hadn't seen Jean for years. We'd met down at the Women's Centers on Brady Street, when we were both on the new staff of Options for Women over Forty. After I left the staff, our friendship continued: we hung out, went to bars, talked about politics, history, god. And then in the mid 80's, we lost touch with each other. As I considered joining the group, I was concerned--not about being with illness and perhaps, death, but the idea of caring for anyone so completely dependent brought up fears from my years of conditioning as a woman--a wife and mother--that my needs came after everyone else's. Would I give up my life for hers? Once by her side, would I be able to walk away? Some friends had already told me that because they couldn't do this, couldn't say "no," they couldn't participate.

There were a few family members and very close friends who chose to be at the center of her care. This was incredibly taxing for them. They were part of the group and felt supported by it, too. We all did. We kept a spiral notebook in her room where we entered our visits and all the information we had gathered about her disease, her needs, her doctors, her progress and her pain. It was an important means of our communication.

There was so much about the disease—which primarily strikes children—that we didn't know; nor did the doctors. Every decision was



difficult. We held meetings as needed in Jean's room. We had parties, too. We helped her celebrate her 60th birthday with food, flowers, balloons and plenty of laughter. Jean's degree of dependency thrust all of us into a much more intimate relationship with her.

At first I felt awkward and clumsy in her care making, sometimes I dripped food on her chest or down her chin, but I got better at it. We all did. During long evenings that I spent alone with her, we began to push back the boundaries that separated us. She wanted so much to live. She talked about her experience in the Air Force, in the Reserves, and in the Civil Rights movement in Montgomery, Alabama, where she met Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. All her life she pushed herself to learn, to understand. Often the only African American woman in a sea of white faces, she tolerated our racism, gently chiding us when we could listen.

Jean's physical condition deteriorated. She often gagged. The doctors found a tumor at the base of her skull that was inoperable and would kill her. She and I talked more and more about her dying and what that meant to her. Over and over, she said that she wanted to have a good death. For Jean, that meant to die peacefully without a struggle.

She who had always protected her independence and privacy, gave herself to the process. Her trust of us was profound. Of course she made many compromises, she had to. She would have preferred to die at home, but realized it couldn't work, she needed more care than we could provide, or she could afford. Her final move into the Coming Home Hospice in the Castro district in San Francisco was very difficult, partly because of a young white aide who wouldn't take direction from this old black woman. But that aide was soon replaced. We were watching.

In order for me to talk with her at this level, I had to let down barriers around my own heart. Although Jean and I had shared many aspects of our lives, we'd never expressed that caring. Back in the late 70's and early 80's when we were seeing each other, we were concerned with proving our strength and independence. In those days, we believed we had to look very sure of ourselves to make the kind of changes we envisioned. There was no room for doubt or despair, grief, or sadness.

In those last days with her, as I faced my own barriers, and let them down, Jean met me there in the darkness. She told me she was glad I was her friend, words I cherish. It was an opening of our hearts together, for all of us. Although we had practical matters to deal with, essentially, it came down to this, this opening, this intimacy, learning to feed her so she wouldn't choke, to hold a cup just so, to scratch her head, massage her hands, or

simply hold them when they would shake. It's the kind of intimacy one has with a child or a lover, but not necessarily with a friend.

We became a circle around her, a web that held her, helping her to live and finally, helping her to die. As she lay in the center of her white bed, her bittersweet chocolate face thin against the pillow, her black hair tightly braided against her head, we gathered around her like hovering shadows. We became a new and different kind of family: Black, Latina, white. We became what our earlier vision had dared to dream.

We who had met in a garage off an alley and called it a Women's Centers; and then dared to buy a building of our own, we who learned to make decisions by consensus, who learned that our timid voices had to do with how we had been treated; we who practiced karate, who declared that god was a woman; we who examined our own vaginas, cut our long hair, threw away our bras and dresses, exploding ideas of who we were expected to be—we were not barbies; we who declared we were just as good as or better than men, we who dared to love other women; we who declared that old women had great value in a society that treated them as hags and throwaways, we who took over the streets and dared to dream a revolution, and made ourselves homeless in order to create a new kind of home where little girls could sleep in peace, undisturbed by hungry fathers; we named the unthinkable, and said there is another way, a better way.

We gathered around Jean and held a meeting, because that was what we knew how to do. We took turns speaking, careful that one person didn't dominate the conversation, for we were meticulous about equality. In our talking, we explored, we wondered, we questioned, because that was what we knew how to do. We gave each other hugs, we sat in silence together. We kissed her face, we stroked her hands and forehead, we sat with her in the encroaching night. We named the darkness, but we couldn't shout it away, or liberate the day without the night. We couldn't stop the night.

Jean was proud of us. She told her doctors that she had a committee to help her, that she was not alone.

I took Jean a meditation from Stephen Levine which starts: "May I rest in my heart." When I said that first line to Jean, I was thinking about her heart, and said, "May you rest in your heart." When she repeated it, she gave it back to me: "May you rest in your heart." So then I had to say, "May I rest in my heart" so that she would say the same. This is how we said it together.

*May you rest in your heart,  
 May I rest in my heart.  
 May you be free from suffering,  
 May I be free from suffering  
 May you be healed  
 May I be healed,  
 May you rest in peace,  
 May I rest in peace.*

We'd say the lines together several times, elaborating on each phrase: "May your heart bloom like a flower," "May my heart bloom like a flower." She had me write it in her notebook so others could say it with her, too.

Jean's acceptance of her helplessness was awesome. She had a great capacity for friendship. She was still making new friends the last week of her life. After a few months at the Coming Home Hospice, she said, "this is a good place to die." Her acceptance of her dying, even though there was so much more living she wanted, was a triumph. From what was the most helpless place, she created a life for herself of dignity, a life that drew in around her a circle of people who loved her and were thankful for the opportunity to be with her.

I went to see her the morning after she died. Others of our group were there: a palpable strength that had sustained us all. She looked peaceful, her long struggle ended. Tiana, who'd been with her, said she drew her last breath while she was asleep. I sat by Jean, and thanked her spirit for letting me be part of her life, and of her dying, for helping me to be more alive to myself, to my own heart. She had a good death.

A few weeks later, we carried out Jean's wish that we have a great party at her apartment to celebrate her life, and to choose a memento from among her things. Members of her medical team were there, all of us a group that had surrounded Jean, and been changed by our experience with her.

Jean, you have bloomed in our hearts. Rest now in the Big Heart of the Universe.

May, 1998

Barbara Taylor

## So Long Old Mate

No more sweet smelling country lanes  
with insects blissed on honeysuckle.  
Adieu those treacherous rocky paths  
leading to misty mountain tops. And valed  
to invigorating freedom runs o'er broad  
silver stretches of sparkling fresh sands,  
arriving at horizons and sunsets  
no more, and gone forever.

Yet, this empty silence is broken by the  
sounds of your bark, the jingle jangle of  
your chain and your tag; that clump, then thump  
as you hit the floor, and those relentless  
scratchings at my front door — it is still open  
I await. Such folly this, for I buried you  
shortly after you died, in the crumbling red  
soil of our Mountain Top, and there, alone  
I cried and cried and cried.

Today, I have planted eucalyptus trees,  
in sadness, alone with my naked despair.  
Your smell and your glistening red hair  
is still here, but alas, without you, there's  
no love, no cheer. Over fourteen years we'd  
shared this life, through many adventures,  
tribulations and strife, and at the end  
of each day, you were always there,  
to offer your warmth and trust for my care.  
Oh, a dog is woman's best friend, they say,  
you can get another any old day,  
but there will never be one like my old  
faithful friend, so to you my dear "Macha",  
sincerest thoughts and love to you I send.

So long old mate.

Judith Rechter

## Fall Out of Bed

We left St. Johns and Sunrise Care.  
 I felt my mother sighing in transit  
 cold body drained under a sheet.  
 I wait for the doctor to sign the certificate  
 dementia and heart failure.  
 Mom hated flying never traveled alone  
 refused to eat or drink. The doctor says  
 a system slows quite peaceful  
 as you slip into unconsciousness.  
 I question the doctor's opinion  
 but we share a love of flight.

The doctor recently visited his homeland  
 and I have returned from London.  
 We don't say she died from broken ribs  
 and fractured pelvis. We sleep light  
 and no one tosses us out of bed one night.

## Two Daughters

You have just lost your father and my mother is gone two weeks  
 Do you think it's a preordained tryst *both were so difficult and lively*  
 They put up such a struggle in heaven or meeting in hell *who can tell*  
 We were joined once by our bones and flesh *it's true that they might join too*  
 Or look at us and cluck at the queers we've become *what fun*  
 Wherever they are, we're ornery and strange *they had to be different*  
 Such idiosyncratic blessing from daughters who are not *indifferent*

Gabriella West

## Gorse Lodge, Greystones

It was the summer of 2002, and my plan was to return to Ireland for my sister's wedding. I had originally left Ireland for California at the age of twenty-one. I was going back at thirty-five as an overweight, stressed-out legal word processor who identified as a lesbian but who had not been in a relationship for four years. I hadn't seen my mother for five years, and the guilt was beginning to weigh on me.

Every homecoming was always hard for me. The very idea of home itself had disappeared a few years before, because my mother had been forced to leave the spacious house in the country that she'd shared with my stepfather, a wealthy lawyer. She had moved to Greystones, a small coastal town south of Dublin, where she lived in an old, mildewed brick house called Gorse Lodge located off the street at the end of a long lane. It was as quiet, as remote, as she could make it, and she practiced homeopathy there, living mostly by herself with her three feisty Jack Russells (father, mother and son), but sometimes enlivened or tormented by the presence of my adolescent half-brother.

My mother's long, stormy marriage to my stepfather had ended when he revealed that he had been having an affair with a young female colleague in his law office in Dublin, and insisted that she should be the one to move out after several years of marital limbo. She had never really recovered from this final betrayal. I'd thought when her marriage ended that we might finally have a better relationship, something I'd always yearned for. Yet visits home to see her often embittered me. However, when I'd published a lesbian-themed novel the year before, she'd been genuinely delighted, and I'd been touched by her response.

I was met at the airport terminal in Ireland by my soon-to-be brother in law Neil and my brother Rowan, whom I had not seen since he was sixteen. They were as quiet and subdued as I, and as I sunk back into the front seat of the car speeding south, I asked casually how my mother was. She'd mentioned something about being quite sick in her last email to me. She'd always been obsessed with her health, popping vitamins and eating a strangely Spartan diet of fruits, vegetables, oatmeal and seaweed, punctuated by binges of ice cream and chocolate. What did "quite sick" mean anyway?

There was a silence in the car, and Neil finally spoke. "She's not very well at all," he said, his eyes on the road ahead.

Neil dropped me off at the end of the long lane leading to Gorse Lodge. The door opened and then it was just my mother and me. We regarded each other for an uncertain moment. It was strange for me because I hadn't seen her in five years. She was much thinner, her hair long, and there was something ghost-like about her, ethereal.

We greeted each other awkwardly, and she said, "You'd better come in; I have something to tell you." I followed her in, sat down at the living-room table, and was almost immediately presented with the news that she'd had breast cancer for years and in the past few weeks it had metastasized to her liver. "I started feeling really sick, and could feel a point pressing on my stomach," my mother said, choosing her words carefully, "and I called the doctor in. He told me it was almost certainly a liver tumor. He said I should just take care of myself and go to the wedding." She finished in an almost upbeat fashion, the wedding being perhaps the last reminder of her life as a normal person.

I sat shell-shocked, silent. "Did you *know*?" my mother asked, as if my knowing this secret would have been the most shocking thing of all to her.

"No," I said numbly, shaking my head. And then, "but why didn't you tell me?"

It was her turn to be quiet and then she said something like, "You were so far away. I didn't want to burden you."

My mother said that *she'd* known she had a lump for ten years. She'd decided to treat it by herself, homeopathically, and not have it removed. She didn't want my stepfather to know, especially as the prolonged trauma of his affair emerged soon after and took all of her attention. She had never trusted Western medicine. She thought she could treat it successfully. Only my sister, brother, and my mother's best friend, an older woman, knew the truth.

And now I knew. Here I was, sitting beside my mother, a dying woman at the age of fifty-seven. Her mother had died after many years of chronic illness at sixty-one. Now it looked like my mother would join the ranks of the women of her family who had died prematurely, starting with my great-grandmother Ruth, who'd died of scarlet fever in the early 1920s, leaving behind my hapless grandmother, her four-year-old child. Ruth's picture hung framed on the wall, I noticed, as I looked around my mom's house for the first time in years. This bespectacled but pretty-looking young woman with a strong face could have been my mother, could have been me.

What was going to happen? For my mother, it was business as usual, for a while, for as long as she could endure it. The first day, I crashed, which

was the usual pattern for me coming off a transatlantic flight. The next day, we went grocery shopping. She walked slowly, with great effort, but I could not bear to think about how difficult it was for her. I could not foretell how long my mother had left. Some horribly insistent inner voice told me that it was days rather than months, even though my mom's words were stoic and defiant.

We drove to have lunch with my sister on that rare sunny day, and my mother oscillated between moments of cheerfulness and moments of evident exhaustion. I took a photo of her and my sister sitting at an outdoors restaurant in almost identical black tank tops, a shrub flowering behind them against a fence. Their skin is pale, but when I got the photo back I was shocked to see how worn and sunken my mother's face looked. Still, it's one of my favorite pictures of her because she's smiling and her face looks gentle. It's also the last picture ever taken of her.

We even walked on the beach that day, her last time out with the dogs. That evening, we watched a movie from the fifties; film being one of the loves we had always shared. It was "Hiroshima Mon Amour." Now I see that my mother loved the film because of the narrator's sense of exile, a persecuted outcast from her French village because she slept with a German soldier. My mother had not been back to visit her family in the U.S. for twenty-five years.

That evening or perhaps the next, I experienced for the first time in my adult life a sense of things falling apart. I looked over at my mother and it hit me that she was going to die soon. I stopped speaking, curled up in a chair at the other end of the room. When my mother asked me to come sit beside her on the couch, I did so, but began sobbing uncontrollably. I felt the boards of the room move under my feet. It was a sense of fragmentation, of the world literally falling apart, because the central person in my life was poised to leave it.

"I can't help you feel better," my mother said sadly. "I can't even help myself." She expected this outburst, of course, because I'd always been the sensitive "feeling" one in a family where feeling was mocked, was taboo. Anger was OK, sadness very much a threat to the status quo. But my mother walked towards me that night and hugged me for a long time. Holding her, I tried to say silently that I would be strong for her, and would try to help her. I wanted to say "I love you," but the words wouldn't come. As I walked towards my bedroom, I looked back and she was looking at me. I guessed the words were stuck in her throat too.

Guilt. Sadness. Anger. In the next few days, it was clear that my mother was not going to make it to the wedding. She "forgot" her





Portal

Photo by Morgan Gwenwald

appointment to get her hair done. She took to her bed the day after she drove me to meet my sister. She stopped being able to climb the stairs. Her body was weakening. It was frightening how quickly she slid downhill. It ought to have been *very* frightening, but nobody was acknowledging what was going on. My sister didn't

want to know; she just wanted her day to be perfect and she had vowed that neither of her parents was going to ruin it.

I lived in limbo, going into town on the train to be snubbed by my sister and doing a reading at her "rehearsal ceremony," then going to a play with an acquaintance of mine, an older woman who told me firmly and gently how little time my mother had left, how there was nothing that anyone could do for her now. I cried most of the way home in the empty train, drying my tears to walk into my mother's bedroom and tell her that I had a nice evening and ask her if there was anything she wanted.

I could almost see the sands of time running out, yet did "normal" things to appease my mother, like packing some books and collectibles from childhood into boxes to be shipped back to America while she lay in bed watching me. They were the last things of mine that my mother had kept since I left home, and she had done it carefully, stowing them in a closet in her bedroom. It was all too obviously grinding to a halt, my childhood, my adolescence, my tenuous and difficult relationship with my mother, all my anger, all the bitterness at being emotionally abandoned by her that I'd felt for so long. It had to be jettisoned now because there was so little time left.

Now there was just us, in present time, with the unspoken knowledge that her time was nearly up. I could see that her mind was fighting to stay lucid, to stay here, while her body was giving up, being pulled towards

deterioration and death. Surrounded by homeopathic remedies in glass bottles, she drank filtered water, but stopped being able to eat after a few days. Her urine was a dark orange. She made little sounds all the time, and I did not want to think how much pain there was behind those sounds. Her whole life, which had been about struggle, was focused on this one last struggle.

My sister's wedding was barely a blip in this slow parade towards death. A few days later my sister cancelled her honeymoon and came to look after my mother. I had asked her to consider it, and to my astonishment, she responded. My mother mostly just wanted to keep people away. She refused to see her own sister, visiting from America for the wedding. She got angry with me when I protested this. "It doesn't help me to see people," she said. Implicit in her words were, "it only helps them."

It took a week for her to die. My sister was trying to get her back to bed when she slumped and turned gray. I held her too as she died, telling her, "It's OK, we love you," while my sister said, "breathe."

I hope she died knowing that she was loved. My stepfather arrived, stunned, and kissed her gently on the cheek. When my sister and I sat down with him, we were curiously calm. He did not show any obvious emotion besides shock. We too were dry-eyed. We discussed arrangements. That night the undertakers came to take her away and they brought her back in a coffin the same night. I was collected enough to ask them not to put makeup on her. My sister insisted that she should be laid out in the parlor, where my mother and I had watched movies only days before. It was peculiarly eerie for me to sleep in the same house where my mother lay in her coffin.

Lyrics, the male Jack Russell whom she had loved and complained about for years, was a changed animal. He lay beside me the next night as I tried to sleep, wretched and alone. He was limp, despondent. I was actually afraid he was going to die too, of grief. I was more overwhelmed than grief-stricken, I thought. I did not understand what grief was supposed to feel like. I did not know that these feelings of uncertainty, fragmentation, of my life barreling out of control as I watched, stunned, were all a kind of grief. Grief to me was wailing and rending of garments. But as Lyrics lay beside me, I understood that his defeated, deflated air was an expression of true grief. I felt like a toy that had been wound up too many times. I was worn out, moving very slowly, yet filled with anxiety and unable to rest. A few people said they were worried about me. People who knew her said I looked like my mother. I had never heard this before.

I returned to San Francisco to a mass layoff at my company. I was one of the ones let go, just a month or so later. A full-time temp job distracted me for a time. When I talked about my mother's death, it seemed as if it had happened a long time ago, even though it had only been a few months. I kept dreaming about her, though, and feeling her presence in my day-to-day life. Once I sensed her coming towards me in the Trader Joe's parking lot. It made me smile and shiver. Another time I sensed her putting her arms on my shoulders as I sat at my desk. In my dreams, I kept apologizing to her for the fact that she was going to die. These recurring dreams did not cease until one night I said to her "I'm sorry you're dying," and she replied, "I'm sorry you're suffering."

Sudden thoughts of her sad last days often brought tears to my eyes in the midst of what should have been festive events. But I understood that it was not a failing in me that I was affected this way, painful as it was. It would have been a failing to be unaffected, surely. Meanwhile, my sister had gotten pregnant around the time I got laid off and gave birth to a blonde baby girl. Gorse Lodge was repainted and sold by auction.

Life went on. More than a year after her death, I scattered some of her ashes off a pier in Santa Barbara, surrounded by her father and sisters. The ashes fairly leapt out of the jar into the sea, and I sensed she wanted to be released. I felt that her questing spirit was finally free. If mine still felt leaden, burdened, then that was the way it was going to have to be. I had not been a happy person before my mother died, but I had been a child in many ways. Now I was becoming a grown-up. It was bearable to be older, I thought, as long as you had a source of love in your life. A year after my mom's death, I met a woman on a group hike to a long-extinct volcano in the Oakland hills. Her mother had died when she was twenty-five, and that bonded us. Somehow life drew us together despite our many differences.

It is difficult to grow and evolve when you don't allow love to fully enter your life. I am breaking that pattern now, but for a long time I had to grieve alone. My love for my mother is much more forgiving; I feel compassion for her mistakes rather than resentment at her failures. I don't want to repeat them, yet know that my destiny, even perhaps *my* final illness, is linked with hers. The loss of my mother, the heaviest blow in my life, has also freed me to be my own parent. I feel more peaceful since her death, knowing that this is a relative thing, yet hard-won and very real. Surrounded in my apartment by many of her things, I feel more peaceful than she ever could.

Vicki Currier

## In a Deeper Sense

*I'm not good at comforting people especially when someone dies. Prior to this experience I didn't know what to say or what to do around those experiencing loss.*

*Someone I loved with all my heart was murdered.*

*I learned that healing or dealing with grief doesn't come from what's said or by what someone does for you. It comes by your own understanding of why you loved that person in the first place. It comes when you conclude that it's going to be okay. Only when you pass on those life lessons you learned together can the healing begin. This is my lesson in losing someone.*

Her name was Lisa—that's what her friends called her. She was ten years older than I and a waitress at Denny's for years. We were best friends. Our kids played together, attended school together, and on more occasions than I like to count, ate together when money was tight.

We lived about half a block apart, but you'd never know it. Our husbands broke and fixed our cars together. They drank and battered us together. We were one of those tight-knit-all-around-abusive-lower-class families.

No matter what came our way, Lisa and I were always there for each other. In the evenings during the hot summer rains, we would play in the downpour in our little summer dresses, hair and clothes plastered to our soaked bodies. We'd dance and hug in the dark, never speaking of what was on our minds or in our hearts.

There were mornings when I would wake up and sneak out of bed, out of the house and down to Lisa's. I would go into her room and climb in bed, and we'd just hold each other. She was my rock and I, hers. She held all my pain and fears because she couldn't hold her own, and vice versa. We escaped our abusive situations together. Lisa went to her mom's, and I went to the streets. We never lost contact, and at one point, I moved in with Lisa and her family.

We were never intimate. It wasn't that type of relationship, but it went beyond friendship. If you have ever been that close to someone, you know what I'm talking about. Would our relationship have deepened had the circumstances been different? I'd like to think so, but now I'll never know.

I committed a number of crimes, and now I'm doing twenty years flat at Mabel Bassett Correctional Center in McCloud, Oklahoma. While I was



awaiting sentencing in county jail, I got a phone call from Lisa's mom. Lisa was beaten to death in a drug related attack on August 16<sup>th</sup>.

Lisa is survived by her mother, Jeanne, who now calls me her daughter, and by two sons, Nigel and Levon. Nigel, 20, and Levon, 18, call me their godmother. I feel like I've taken her place on earth, and I don't want it. I'd rather take her place in the hereafter. Lisa was the good, kind and caring one of us.

She didn't deserve this. She should be here with her mother and sons.

I haven't been free since before her death so sometimes it's hard to believe she won't be home when I get there. I don't know how to help anyone deal with the loss of a loved one. But how I deal is to keep her alive in my mind. I write to her once a year on her birthday. I also help her sons. My sons and I love and remember her with each breath we take.

Lisa taught me it's okay to be me. I have a "wife" now. I've known her since sixth grade. We've been together going on seven years. Lisa taught me about true love and about caring for and helping other people. She also taught me it's okay to lose as long as you don't stay down.

Some of the lessons we learned together were hard lessons about abuse, drugs and crime. We both paid a dear price for those lessons: she with her life and I with my freedom. But, in a deeper sense she saved me.

Riggin Waugh

## Funeral Arrangements

Nearly five years before she died,  
my mother left specific instructions.

*Kalas Funeral Home. I have talked with Mr. Kalas.  
Viewing 7 to 8:30 PM — followed by half-hour service.  
Dr. Harrell doing service — short not flowery.*

We try to follow her wishes, but a half-hour service  
in a funeral parlor will not do. She'd been modest —  
about this at least — her expectations restrained.

Both viewings, and the funeral held the next day,  
are packed. She'd be pleased. Her old pastor,  
Dr. Harrell, who knew her well *and* liked her,  
performs the service in her church. The pallbearers  
are men from the congregation. All the men  
in my family are either too old or too dead.

*I would like Doris Lehosky to sing  
“What A Friend We Have in Jesus” — Dad’s favorite  
“Whispering Hope” — Mother’s favorite  
“My God and I” — my favorite*

Fortunately, Mrs. Lehosky is not taking her family  
to the beach until the following week.

*The decision whether casket is open or closed  
rests solely with my three daughters. If closed,  
then use my dress I wore to Nora’s wedding.  
Take bra, underpants, pantyhose, slip, and dress —  
no jewelry, no shoes. The next day — graveside  
service in Princess Anne. If open casket, use long  
sleeve, high neck dress — one with small design.*

Her logic was simple. The cancer had inflated  
her right arm to twice the size of her left.  
She didn't want it to show — didn't know  
death would shrink it to normal size.

*Quotes of cost from Mr. Kalas (April 30, 1986)*

*I looked at caskets — all Batesville \$895*

*S-826-A — Vintage Bronze*

*S-817-B — Monogard Mandarin Bronze Roseland*

*S-895-B — Alameda Rose*

*Pick the one you like best. If one daughter wants casket closed and others want it open, then leave it closed.*

*I feel the trauma to that one would be too great.*

We leave it open — a barbaric custom perhaps,  
but that's the way it's done in our family.

A closed casket makes death easier to deny.

An open casket makes goodbye more tangible.

*Because of Jeff's work, he will know  
gratuity for Doris singing and Dr. Harrell.  
I feel Jeff can conduct graveside service  
since he will attend anyhow.*

Yes, it was safe to assume her son-in-law,  
a minister, would be there. At the graveside,  
three hours away, my sister's husband reads  
from a half-page mimeographed sheet,  
never once mentioning my mother's name.  
After that three minutes, Uncle Hollis,  
already starting to show signs of Alzheimer's,  
asks quite clearly, "Is that all?"

I am thinking the exact same thing.

*At this time I still do not know if I will be buried  
in Presbyterian Cemetery or Beechwood.  
Mr. Hinman was to check beyond Granddad.  
If three sites, Lucy, me, and Bill. If only two,  
then Bill and I will be buried at Beechwood.  
I have four graves there — Lot 132-C 133.  
Deed in safe deposit box.*

My mother is buried in the Presbyterian cemetery  
in Princess Anne, in between my father and  
the grave waiting for Grandma Lucy.  
She left nothing to chance.

Jessica W. Giles

## Ode to Sarah

It's a simple story, actually. Lots of people might be inclined to make it more complicated than it is, but to me, there's only three things you really need to know. One, we loved each other and never stopped. Two, we hurt each other for sport and neither of us knew why. And three, Sarah is dead and that's no one's fault but his.

Like I said, that's my telling of it. But ask your Aunt Leila the next time you see her. She might have a different take on it.

It was sunset and Sarah and I came down the path like music, laughing and running and dancing circles through the air. It was a beach walk, I'm sure you've seen ones like it before, maybe in Capitola or somewhere. A trail, a wooden staircase down the bluff to the sand. Where the blue water spans out huge in front of you and where the air smells like salt and sage. Sarah's hair was flowing behind her and that almost cut the edge off the haunting feeling I had deep inside of me that something wasn't quite right. But that's the observer *me* talking, watching hours months years later, from a distance, where I can see better.

She's out ahead of me and I am hypnotized, lulled, by this long flowing skirt clinging to her legs and grazing her calves. Her feet are bare and sandy, and my shell anklet hangs low around her right ankle. She is the goddess. She turns back to smile at me, sweet and wicked, daring me, and her eyes shine in the light. Her blonde hair is tangled from the sea water, her lips still pink and full from having kissed me just minutes ago, under the redwood trees. This is a picture frozen in time. A picture of a majestic girl, strong and graceful and alive. My body was electric with desire, and the irony of this is not lost on me.

And then the picture churns and closes in on itself and I am in a dreamlike, underwatery trance where my body cannot run. Rustling on my left. A flash of faded denim and the sound of a deep breath out, like a whistling wind through a valley. The steely barrel of a gun peering out of tall grasses. And it is at once so loud the entire world goes quiet. These images, freeze-framed and silenced. I scream, falling into blood as footsteps go laughing into the night. And this is the part I don't really like to talk about, because I don't much feel like thinking about her lying on the ground like that, in a stained heap of broken dreams. See, she was my girl and she





Photo by Morgan Gwenwald

made the world warm and blue and breezy and magical. And there's very little in the way of breeze or magic since she's gone.

I cried for months. I cried and cried until there were no tears left. And then I cried some more. And I screamed and I shook and I vomited and I stared at my empty pale face in the mirror. It's searing really, the beauty of her life and death. God, the beautiful romantic moment that was her death is fucking unbearable. I've always wanted to tell you, but these are things I'm not sure you could bear. Things I wasn't sure I wanted you to bear. Because I've always tried to protect you, shield you from the storm. And that's a battle long fought. A price seldom paid except when I am alone and I imagine that I hear you upstairs calling *mama mama mama* and I think for a moment you are three again, with your hair in a tangle atop your head and your thumb in your mouth and your cheek wet with tears.

Sarah and I used to lay on her bed and stare up at the ceiling. I've spent no small amount of time trying to figure out exactly what we were doing there on her bed together, day after day, not touching, in the hot summer of my nineteenth year. What was I doing there, breathing in silence next to her brown skin? On those days, heaven and hell were close neighbors.

That was in the beginning, before her fiery diamond and soft pillow kisses, before her breath on my neck and in my hair, before we lay down in the leaves to the smell of wild strawberries.

And oh god, there are songs that bring me back to her, where I feel her in my heart and lungs, where she's with me again, like a whirling dervish, spinning and twirling, hair flying and catching the light. And none so much as that one she used to whisper to me as she took me into her dancing arms... *in the darkness at the end sister I'll kiss your golden hair, I'll hold the gate and watch you dance into the crystal air, and I'll just disappear, and I'll just disappear...*

But she never did disappear, not really. She's in here, with me. And she's in the air out there. I breathe her wherever I go. We all breathe her in, every day, and you do too, even though you never even knew who she was. And if you walk that path down to the beach when the sun is low, and if you look so carefully, you can still see her there, a faint stain of red, raped every day by the stepping feet of surfers carrying their boards to the continent's edge. And can't you almost hear their careless banter; *dude, sweet, check out that left...*

But you know, that bothers me more than it probably would bother her. *No worries*, she would say. Because that's the kind of girl she was. Sometimes I imagine she'd even like it, that she'd appreciate these boys carrying some part of her down to the water, so she could surf too. Yeah, that would be Sarah, catching waves even in death.

And not a day goes by that I don't wish I could kiss her, run my hands through her golden hair, kiss the sunshine off her warm bare shoulder. And all of my life I blow in the wind that her laugh left behind.



Teya Schaffer

## Nettle

Now she has days narrow and delicate  
as a nettle slid inside skin.  
If we could write meaning into words:  
exhausted.  
Her heart drops a bucket  
to pull up blood from her feet.  
Her arms ache with effort,  
the pulse hard driven.  
She reaches for the help  
we offer animals  
bringing their deaths  
to the vet. Her friends  
have pills,  
a prior experience,  
a dictionary of pharmaceuticals,  
a bitter ignorance tasting,  
the text suggests,  
like drugs in water.  
They prepare tea.  
Yellow grains float  
out of suspension,  
gather like sugar  
at the cup's bottom  
and must be retrieved.  
They spoon liquid  
into her mouth,  
carry bitterness  
in chocolate pudding.  
More? she asks.  
More, they answer.  
Two spoons. She turns,  
baby bird, towards each.  
A night of waiting  
and ever after  
the days widening.

Cynthia Rich

## Coda

*Barbara Macdonald and I lived and worked together for twenty-six years until her death on June 16, 2000 at the age of eighty-six. These four journal entries, written in the period after her death, are excerpts from Mindfall, my record of our last years together.*

*Those years still startle me—that they happened, and that they were such a gift. In 1995, we had traveled to the U.N. Mid-Decade Conference on Women in Beijing and on to Tokyo to celebrate the Japanese translation of Look Me in the Eye—Barbara gave lectures, readings, press interviews and addressed the largest society on aging in Japan. A few months after our return—and after years of combating the assumption of mental instability in old women—she began to show signs of Alzheimer’s. Her struggle, of course, had been with the arrogance of that assumption, never with the possibility that dementia could happen.*

*Our relationship had connected us in three powerful ways. We had worked to deconstruct “old woman” and to combat an ageism which we saw with special sharpness because of the twenty-year difference in our ages—the excitement of that political life ended, of course, with Alzheimer’s. Our lovemaking also ended in those last years, though the sensuality persisted, like an invisible membrane still connecting us.*

*But also, in trailers and studio apartments, we had shared a sweet domestic life. On August 5, 1997, I wrote, Barbara was always—not just the cream in my coffee as the song has it, but my cream and my coffee. Now there is no more coffee, but she is still my cream.*

*So for many reasons—including my experience with my own dyslexias, which baffled me for many years before I learned about ADD but were to give me a way to relate to Barbara’s altered consciousness—this was a rich and valuable time for both of us.*

*(I will be pleased to send a free copy of the unpublished m.s. of Mindfall to anyone who contacts me at .)*

July 1, 2000

On Tuesday I brought Barbara’s ashes home from the cremation service. Janice came with me. She’d done this before and expected it might be truly hard. It wasn’t, really. Maybe I walled off feeling because it was so unreal:

taking the elevator in a high-rise to an antiseptic little office space with one window and a large woman behind a desk who was politely “sorry for my loss.”

What I wasn’t prepared for was the box. Not the box itself, which was nicely simple and black, but the weight of it. I thought I remembered hearing that ashes were terribly light, and that’s what I was braced for, like cleaning the fireplace in the desert. When she handed me the box I was shocked by its heaviness, like stone. It seems crazy now, but I was sure they had weighted the box to give it substance, and I was furious. “It’s so heavy,” I said, and she just looked at me with large, steady eyes and said, “It’s the ashes.”

I didn’t believe her and left with the box, horrified. “It’s like lipstick,” I said to the elevator, meaning it was as if she’d been embalmed with make-up and permed hair.

In the car I railed to Janice, who looked puzzled and said, “You know, ashes are really very heavy.”

So instead of grief, what rolled over me was a huge relief, calming me. It wasn’t fakery—it really was Barbara; she had that much substance, that much reality. I felt restored, on center again.

Back home, I put the box of her ashes behind a cupboard door. I don’t think about them, or plan to or need to, until the fall when I will go with Janice and Mannie to the desert to scatter them. But then I suddenly remembered that twenty-five years ago, in “Do You Remember Me?”, Barbara anticipated her death:

*The strangeness of that idea comes to me at the most unexpected moments and always with surprise and shock; some times, I am immobilized by it. Standing before the mirror in the morning, I feel that my scalp is tight. I see that the skin hangs from my hips, and below my stomach a new horizontal crease is forming over which the skin will hang like the hem of a skirt turned under. A hem not to be “let down,” as once my skirts were, because I was “shooting up,” but a widening hem to “take up” on an old garment that has been stretched. Then I see that my body is being drawn into the earth—muscle, tendon, tissue, and skin is being drawn down by the earth’s pull back to the loam. She is pulling me back to herself; she is taking back what is hers.*

*Cynthia loves bulbs. She digs around in the earth every fall, looking for the rich loamy mold of decayed leaves and vegetation, and sometimes as she takes a sack of bone meal and works it into the damp earth, I think, “Why not mine? Why not?”*

I wrote a formal letter to Joe and Jay to ask them if, in October, I might plant three iris bulbs in the back yard and use some of her ashes for bone meal. I told them I very much wanted to respond to her wish, to complete that circle from our first home together in Cambridge to our last home. But not unless they felt fully comfortable. Today, each stopped by to say, with caring and courtesy, yes, of course.

In October, I'll know what I feel about Barbara's ashes. Until then, those feelings are on the shelf, with the simple black box.

July 13, 2000

Every now and then I take out a memory of Barbara and polish it gently, a fine coin. Once when we were new lovers, I went into the Cambridge post office while she waited for me, in the car I thought. But when I came out, started towards her down the street, she was standing in front of the hood of her car, one leg bent and her foot on the bumper, so smart and jaunty and smiling with so steady a pleasure as I walked towards her, and I thought, I want to remember this always.

Or, these last years, we'd drive off just for a few hours, maybe to La Jolla for black bean tostadas at Don Carlos' Taco Shop. There'd be a moment on the 5 freeway, someplace past the Old Town exit, when she would take into her cells that we were going a little further than our usual rounds, moving out in the world, and her eyes would widen and her face begin to glow with the pleasure and freedom of it. I'd glow, too, with her pleasure at this simple gift.

I want to keep the memories lively and shining, but experts say the more often you remember an event the more distorted it becomes. I can tell it's true. So it's like some Greek myth, where your long lost lover is following you out of Hades, but the gods tell you, that if you look back to be sure she's there, she will disappear. What's a lover to do? I approach my most precious memories fearfully, as if I might chase them away.

July 15, 2000

When I was going to the Center to be with Barbara, and guessed she was dying, I bought a one-time camera to take her picture. Partly I felt ghoulish—what right had I to invade her privacy when she couldn't say no—and partly I still do, as I write this. And still I did it because I was not sure it was an invasion, and I was sure how powerfully I wanted to. In those weeks her spirit was so present, without word or expression, a sort of

luminous essence that filled the room. It wasn't only me —Barb Potts just told me that Nancy told her the same thing after she came to visit. I wanted to catch and hold that mystery because I thought later I might belittle it to myself. I took three pictures then put the camera away. I knew she was in there and when I went to Kathy's birthday party, I finished the roll with pictures of laughing guests.

Sitting in the RiteAid parking lot in Hillcrest with the package of photos in my hand, I'm caught between eagerness and dread. Will she really be there? What will it mean if she is? I tear open the flap, let the happy faces spill onto my lap, and grab the three I'm waiting for.

She's there. They are bad pictures, grainy, pale. But she's there—the spirit of that room, that time, that last time lingering on the edge. The spirit I've been drinking in these past days, re-reading her work, watching the videos of her talks. A spirit I begin to take in now from a larger view.

And I lose it. It's so large I can't contain it. At first its huge power is centered in the pictures. In my grief so vast it's close to. horror, I realize that this is what I might have felt about Barbara's ashes.

I had watched Barbara's spirit leave her body with the kind of finality you can't argue with, and so I knew in a deep way it wasn't there among her ashes.

But the pictures! They are filled with, her, her spirit floods out from them, and it is immense.

So immense that I can see no way to live with them. I can guess that this is how I might have felt about her ashes—How can I keep them in the house, this huge presence? But how can I let them stay anywhere else?

The dilemma seems to me unbearable, insoluble.

I come home, bearing the charged envelope. I don't see how I can stay here with the pictures, and I have nowhere to go. It's Saturday evening and everybody is living their life, except maybe Barb or Nants and they are—each—grieving their breakup and don't need to receive this mammoth grief. Besides, during Barbara's illness, after the death, I never felt this urgency to be with someone, and I'm afraid that urgency would go into my voice, leaving whichever friend I called on no choice. Even the day of Barbara's death, when I called Janice, I didn't have that edge; I was at peace, and I could have been alone. This golden evening, my need is immense, I'm drowning. I struggle against it, promise myself it will go away, that if I meet it alone, I'll be stronger for it, but I don't believe it. I give in. Janice's voice is ready and unalarmed by my need, though I keep my own smooth and open all kinds of escape hatches for her.

I drive wildly sobbing to Pacific Beach with the packet of pictures on the dashboard. She's waiting at the window and when she gets in the car, I pour my grief onto her lap.

We drive a few blocks down to the beach where we sit, and I wail and don't care which of the young men and women in their shorts and halters may hear me. I tell Janice what I realized on the way to her house—what I am grieving for today.

I know I have always appreciated Barbara, seen and valued who she was, and as I've joked, even after twenty-six years of living packed together in a trailer or one-room apartments, still am a wide-eyed groupie. I told her so, in every kind of way, so I've no regrets for that.

Still, these last days of surveying her work of twenty-five years, watching and hearing her speak on the videos, have been the time for taking in at another level her whole life, her whole stance—a wider and deeper view than I'd ever been able to take.

At the same moment, I can see it's not Barbara only. I realize that this must be true of everyone, that nobody can take in the fullness of another human being while she is still living. They are unfinished, in process, they may still disappoint or surprise—it would be senseless or crazy-making to try to sum up anyone every month or year or decade. And we are in process, too, unfinished in relation to them. So it doesn't matter how deeply we've valued, admired, appreciated. We can't fully appreciate until after death shuts the door on the new, the changeful. It's only then we can fully take measure.

My grieving, as I spill it out to Janice, is: I can now see Barbara whole—whole as someone who has been present for less than a third of her lifespan can see. I take her in as if for the first time because with deeper knowledge. So while I know it's false, my feeling is, I never appreciated her.

And with that new appreciation, another grief: I can't let her know how much I value her now.

The platitude goes: "We must tell people how much we love and value them while they're still here to hear us." Well, sure, of course, but in the larger sense it's a crock. We can't know it, much less tell them, while they're still here to hear us.

October 17, 2000

It's October, planting time. Yesterday, I went to Anderson's Nursery and found three Dutch Iris Blue Ribbon bulbs, in a shade of blue that Barbara wore a lot. I got a cheap bulb planter and three little white markers.

This morning an early fog is creeping up the street, and I'm feeling



apprehensive. Maybe I won't do it right, whatever that means—plant the bulbs in the right way, feel the right way, do loving honor to Barbara. I'm even more glad I'm doing this alone, except maybe for Barbara, so I can fumble my way. Joe is in Paris and Jay is teaching school; I have the whole day to fumble if I need it.

It's a quarter century since I planted a bulb and my dyslexic insecurities thrive on that. I can't believe it myself, but I call Walter Anderson and actually ask them if it matters what the weather's like on the day you plant. One of the hallmarks of these insecurities is I have no idea of what's important. I put on an old oxford shirt of Barbara's, turn up Bach's Double Concerto on the CD player, and place the black box of her ashes in front of it on the kitchen table. I take the bulbs, the planter, a kitchen knife to loosen earth, and a copy of *Look Me in the Eye* to the back of the garden.

First I sit and read the passage. It clears my spirit, helps me feel how much she wants me to do this. I sit down beside the flower bed and start to work in the earth, loosening weeds, preparing the space. When I press the planter in with the force of my arm, I'm still worrying if it's exactly the right depth, if I should loosen more earth below the bulb, if I should moisten the hole before I plant. Once on A Street, Barbara was ill and asked me to plant some seeds in her garden, and I found myself sobbing above the damp earth, the flood of my own doubts pouring out of my eyes. Today I sweep it all away, reminding myself that nature has done this for eons without so much anxiety, freeing myself to think of Barbara instead of myself.

And I do, and it starts another kind of sobbing, not of fear and frustration but of loss. She has left me, and she was a central meaning of my life. Somehow I will restructure my life without that meaning, or with it in another form, but this morning I know the size of the hole.

So when I go to bring out the box, I'm still weeping. Sitting on the ground, I open it with my knife and then the plastic bag. Barbara was right. This means more than scattering. As I bring up ash in my fingers and work it into the earth, the connections flow. I still know, as I did in June, that she doesn't reside in the ash, but I'm connected to the earthiness that was always part of her spirit, and her wish to have that affirmed here, this way.

When I come back into the house, I see on my hand the light chalky dust. It's not the first time I've had her body on my fingers, lodged under my nails, and it feels sweet and right as those times.

Like those times, I've given her a gift and given myself one at the same time.

Sandy Tate

## Grief

Shards of glass slice through my soul  
Confusion, numbness, and of course,  
Depression

My agony is a daily visitor  
Can't skirt around grief  
Have to go through it  
The experts say

Yellow fog clouds my vision  
But not my last horrible memories  
My best friend, my confidante,  
My bedrock  
So comfortable to be with

My two grandmothers, Sarah and Lillian  
My mother, Ruth  
And now Henrietta, sister of Ruth  
Last of the women who loved me unconditionally

Sometimes, I can't remember where I've been  
No, I'm not demented  
Just out of my mind with terror  
Why, I wonder, does terror have to join sadness  
As if one could not exist without the other

I knew I loved her, needed her  
But to miss her like this?  
I mean, if I'm so numb  
How come I cry at the thought of her  
How many times driving down Highway 12  
Do I have to sternly pull myself together  
My vision blurred with tears

Can't get the sight of her dead out of my mind  
 Shall I tell you how she looked?  
 Shall I describe her pain?  
 It haunts me still  
 'If I had a gun, I'd shoot myself,' she said

Shall I describe my guilt?  
 Can't seem to beat myself up enough  
 Never spoke my feelings  
 Never told her how I'd miss her  
 How could I when I'd break down?  
 My frantic hope she'd live  
 While I watched in terror during nine days on Morphine

The milestones tick by  
 The first New Year, my birthday  
 Concerts, plays, planetarium, travel  
 Without her  
 It's not that I mind going alone  
 It's just that I want her next to me

She was brilliant, sarcastic, witty, brave,  
 Forgiving, angry, compassionate  
 A righteous feminist  
 And so much more  
 Her DNA a part of me

Friends ask, 'How're you doin?'  
 I say 'Fine'  
 But I lie  
 I am bereft

*Dedicated with love to my aunt, Henrietta Quattrocchi*

Jane Mara

## In the Vestibule

*(Written after being with a friend when she died)*

Through one door  
Mystery  
Unfathomed  
Reaches  
Peace  
Perhaps  
Tunnel  
White light  
Harps and Angels  
Bardo  
Home.

Through the next  
Personality  
Heavy  
with  
Longing  
with  
Delusion  
Dislike  
Baggage  
Accumulates

I ache  
for  
Freedom  
for  
Simplicity  
of  
Mind  
for  
Clarity  
of  
Space  
for  
Emptines

Society beckons  
Identities  
Wanted  
Costumes  
of  
Preferences  
Glitter  
Invite  
Seductive  
with  
Promises  
Satisfaction!  
Happiness!

Dubious  
I  
Hesitate  
Lingering  
Lingering

Activities  
Called for  
Eating  
Shopping  
Time  
Narrows  
Space  
Thickens  
Clutter  
Grows

Here  
 In the Vestibule  
 Memory  
 Carpeted  
 Beverly's home  
 Beverly's face  
 Focus  
 Pristine  
 Nothing  
 Peripheral  
  
 Lightness  
 of  
 Air  
 Presence  
 of  
 Being  
 Beings  
 Invisible  
 Silence  
 Grace  
 Space  
 Full  
 of  
 Emptiness  
 Heart  
 Full  
 of  
 Peace  
  
 Here  
 I  
 Am  
 Light  
 Though  
 I'm  
 Clothed  
 In a  
 Body  
 Bev  
 Only  
 Light  
 Gone

Into  
 Mystery

Here  
 In the Vestibule  
 I  
 Loiter  
 Lonely  
 Left  
 Out  
 of  
 Both  
 Worlds  
 by  
 My own  
 Design  
 and  
 Not yet  
 My  
 Time.

Magic  
 Enfolds  
 Me  
 Too  
 Precious  
 to  
 Vacate  
 How long  
 Can  
 I  
 Stay  
 Here  
 In the Vestibule  
 Between  
 Life  
 and  
 Death?

Judith K. Witherow

## Cardboard Coffin

There isn't a day the memory of someone I loved and lost doesn't claw at my being in an unguarded moment. Sometimes I find myself laughing softly about past events shared. More often, the pain is so raw, its physical intensity causes me to stifle sounds that only an animal would recognize.

On December 2, 2004, my younger sister, Josie, died suddenly at the age of fifty-six. Doctors were rarely a choice. With Josie they weren't used except for the birth of a baby. She didn't have insurance, and according to the state, she was too "rich" to qualify for Medicaid.

Josie's death certificate reads like a shopping list of curable diseases. Curable, if money is available for the medical establishment to provide continuing treatment. This represents an insurmountable obstacle for many.

The night Josie was found unconscious, an ambulance was phoned to transport her to the closest hospital. It was a small hospital unequipped to deal with someone in cardiac arrest. The hospital personnel spent the night calling larger hospitals to have her admitted to their ICU. Each said they had no space, and to call another hospital. It's amazing how fast intensive care units fill to capacity when they learn the patient is without insurance and has life threatening illnesses.

My sister had one of the most tragic lives I could ever write about. To know that she died like she lived is more than I care to put on paper, but two incidents come to mind.

As an older sibling I looked out for her from the time she was born. The sister who now sits and relives childhood incidents from the Appalachians. One day we were sitting on the rough-cut steps leading upstairs. Josie was six years old, and I was ten. For some reason she asked what I would buy when we were grown and rich. Being anything but gut-sucking poor never occurred to me. I couldn't answer the question, but the memory of the smile on her childish round face still haunts me.

She said, "I do! I'm going to buy all the cans of chicken noodle soup in the world and eat every bite!" With a hug around my neck she followed it with, "And, I'm going to share it all with you."

Years later we bought a house that had electricity and running water. One winter night Josie woke me to go downstairs with her. I was fourteen and she was ten years old. She wanted me to sit on the steps and share a can of cold spinach. I whispered I wasn't hungry and gave her the greens.

It borders on unbearable that later in life when there was enough food, she became too sick to eat. I pray the Spirits have her plate heaped high, and

there's a kind smile on their faces when they remember Josie walking that dirt road with legs bowed because of rickets.

Seated between my oldest sister and brother at the funeral home, I saw our beat-down life flash before my eyes. I'm now the one inventing how much kinder Josie's death will be than her life was.

I tried to look at Josie's precious face while blocking the view of the cardboard coffin that held her until the cremation took place. Why didn't we think to drape that brown box with a blanket? Why wasn't there insurance money for the burial she deserved? Why did those of us who could spare some money have trouble coming up with enough for the price of her cremation and the use of a room to lay her out so we could see her one last time? (It didn't take long for the funeral director to see that pushing anything expensive on us would be a waste of time and commission.)

No one spoke because words couldn't push past the lumps stuck in our throats. So many words needed to be said, but no one was brave enough to try emitting a sound that would break the barrier holding back a massive wail of sorrow.

None of that proper stuff we see so often at funerals on television where everyone quietly accepts the death of a loved one. Proper! Proper? What in the hell is proper about the loss of someone you loved more than life? When material possessions were never a part of your life—flesh is what holds everything together.

I looked around to see if we'd sufficiently "imitated" other funerals. There was enough money scraped together to buy a book for visitors to sign, and the memorial cards almost made it until the end of the first showing. Thank you notes would have to be bought at the store. At this point my memory went blank, and I was drawn back to what brought us to this dreaded place.

Family members, without number, made sure everyone had "decent" clothes to wear to show how we respected the recent loss of a loved one. (We've learned that going through each other's closets is a major part of the death ritual.)

When I knelt beside Sis one last time I took care not to damage the cardboard container holding her beautiful being. What irony. When she was born she either slept in a small box or a dresser drawer. Fifty six years of non-stop work should have earned her a better send off.

As I kissed Josie goodbye I didn't give thought to the tears silently falling on her and that disposable coffin.

Stifled sobs. Cardboard coffins. Poverty never allows you to forget that anything more might be considered as passing for something you weren't meant to be—even in death.

Laura O'Brady

## Time

Time trickles,  
Crawls  
You don't need a drink  
You don't need to pee  
It's not time for your pills  
You don't need anything any more  
Not from me  
Not here  
Not anywhere  
And all the time  
All the time I used  
In caring for you  
Listening to your breathing  
For your call  
Sits, congealed, in the silence  
Useless  
Needed for nothing at all



P. E. MacDavid

## To Jane

Right in the middle of life  
 When everything was just fine  
 A life was cut too short  
 Without a strong sign

Everything that could've been-wasn't  
 Everything should have been better  
 The whole thing should've been versed out  
 As well as a well-scripted letter

The life left behind dangling in air  
 Grasped for a life when you weren't there  
 Traveling to a place that life takes us now  
 Trying to hold onto how we really care

We search for peace  
 We search for love  
 Our memory of you  
 Included in our dreams  
 It'll keep us going  
     In our hearts  
     In our minds  
     We love you

*In memory of Jane. She died in her sleep at home. It will never be the same. She is missed by her family and friends. And me!*

Lynn Martin

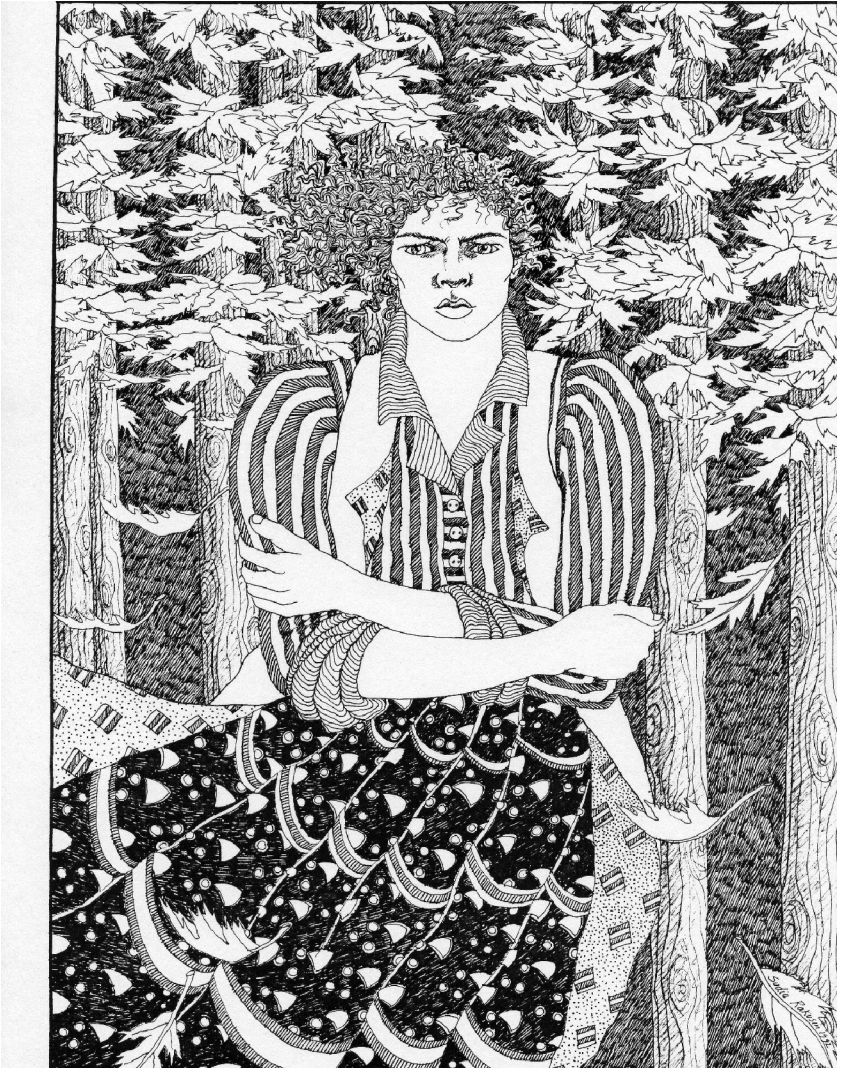
## Letting Go

Psychologists, New Agers, Twelve Steppers and people you meet on the street all say it; letting go is the first step toward healing. Autumn lets go into winter, adolescence into maturity, sorrow into joy. Hospice helps the terminally ill to let go of life and enter the sleep from which no one awakens. We are continually letting go of dreams, illusions, toys and unlived stories; the worn out, no longer possible, no longer working. But what if you are always seeing the first two-wheeler bike you ever had leaning against the supermarket wall? Or what if your best friend has just died and you see her strolling the Common, her shadow touching the bandstand as she walks by? Or waving at you as she hurries through the doors of the library? What if the person you loved once decides, for whatever reasons, to disappear from your life and her voice rides each wrinkle of the dying light? What if an endless procession of those who have died of AIDS appear in your dreams nightly?

It isn't as if I haven't tried. I have written good-by a hundred times. I have joined others in rituals and memorial services. I've cried endless tears. I'm grown up enough to know losing a bike and your youthful self is not the same as losing a friend.

It is easy to imagine letting go of a red balloon. As easy as opening your hand to the sky a blue heartbeat away. It is easy to imagine a leaf kidnapped by the river and tumbling its way to the sea. But I can't seem to let go of love. Memory insists. Mary Oliver says,

*To live in this world  
you must do three things:  
to love what is mortal,  
to hold it,  
against your bones knowing  
your own life depends on it  
and, when the time comes to let it go,  
to let it go.*



Gooseflesh

Sudie Rakusin

This is such wise, beautiful advice. Let go and love again is what it says to me. I long to do so. If only someone would tell me how. It's hard to let go of how grown up and proud I was as I raced through the streets on my big bike. It's difficult not to recall my friend arriving rain spattered and laughing to insist on a wet walk. Or my lover taking my hand and insisting this love was real. Or a certain young man saying, "They will find a cure and I will be its first miracle." He died five months later. If I knew how to stop those soft, caressing voices, letting go would be a cinch.

Maura Ryan

## Searching for Dyke in My Family History: The Process of Creating Survival for My Lesbian Memory

I keep a wallet-sized black and white photo on my desk. The back of it says, in swirled handwriting, July 1947, Hudson Falls, NY. My father, almost two years old, wears a baby's jumpsuit and sandals and looks intently at his lap where his baby fat hands pet a content grown cat. There is someone sitting next to him, someone no one has ever mentioned in my presence. She looks at the camera and smiles, her head tossed back slightly. She leans behind my father, one arm is covered by him – they were sitting that close together.

I found this treasure while looking through my grandmother's old pictures after she passed away five Augusts ago. My parents and I wanted to give her the gift of dying comfortably at home, but after caring for her in our home for years, she died during one of her many trips to the hospital. I held her hand, at three o'clock in the morning, when she let go of her last breath. I kept her rosaries and the gold cross that rested on her coffin during her service.

The photos weren't in an organized album; they were piled on top of each other and kept in an old tea chest. Most of them had to be pulled apart from the stickiness of years in an attic. I noticed everyone in her old photographs – if I hadn't met them I knew stories about them. I would say to myself, *oh, look how young Aunt Kathleen looks* or *that must be Uncle Sean because he's standing in front of that old grocery store where he worked*. The picture I would take home with me and place on my desk, though, was different. In it, my two-year old father shared the frame with a butch woman.

I knew her instantly. She wears all men's clothing: dark trousers and a beige short-sleeved shirt with a ribbed neck lining. She wears no bra and her breasts fall naturally toward (without touching) her navel. Her hair is army-base short on the sides with a romantic lift on top. She is smiling a confident dyke smile. She is the kind of woman I love.

This was 1947 in Hudson Falls, NY. I know from my dyke history books that although some lesbians were identifying as butch during this time, most of them had to keep shoulder length hair (that they would wear in ponytails at the bar) to keep jobs. There was a three pieces of women's

clothing rule – if you didn't make the cut you could be arrested for cross-dressing – but just try arguing with a cop who's already beating you up that you actually have three of the required pieces. How did she get away with having such short hair? How was she wearing all men's clothing? How is it possible that such an intimate part of my dyke history was captured in a photograph with my father?

I took the photograph out to him where he was working in the garage. *Dad, who is this?* He wiped the sweat off of his forehead with the back of his arm and squinted at the picture, *It's me.* I shook my head. *No, who is this?* He looked more closely, took it out of my hand to hold it at a far-sighted man's arm's stretch, *Oh,* he said, *that's Mary's friend.* He handed the photograph back to me and went back to his work.

My great Aunt Mary - she was my grandfather's sister. I keep two of her photographs with me. In one of them, she stands outside in the snow with my grandmother: they are both wearing fur coats; a couple inches of black stockings with seamed backs are visible between their coats and black high heels. Their hair is curled and styled perfectly; their lips are tiny red hearts. Mary has the same look she always gave the camera – distrustful, challenging, confident. In the picture you can read the intimacy of their relationship in the way they stand – it looks like they dressed together, took the time to match each other. I can imagine them dabbing on each other's lipstick and borrowing each other's rouge. They look like family, like sisters who are in on a secret.

In the other photograph Mary is holding me. I am three years old and sitting on her lap smiling. Her hands hold me gently around the waist and her lips are resting on the crown of my head – she is giving me a kiss. She has aged. The color photograph tells me something I couldn't see in the black and white photos of her youth: she had red hair. I don't remember meeting her, but this is my proof that we shared a physical space, that we touched.

She never married: a spinster, if you listen to my family tell it. When I was young my mother would threaten me with her fate: whenever I thought I was better than boys I would hear, *you'll end up like your Aunt Mary if you're not careful.* My grandmother never verbally colluded in this lie. She knew Mary too well. Her silence, though, let me believe that being manless was something that happened *to* a woman, not something she chose.

When I was really young and obsessed with the idea of marriage I would ask why she never married and I would get the same response every time, *she was just too set in her ways.*

*Set in her ways* is the way my family talks about lesbianism. My Aunt Teresa is also set in her ways. All my life when I've said something flippant, crass, or clever my parents have looked at each other and said *just like Teresa*. When Teresa visits and her comments falls on the outlandish they look at each other and say, *just like Mary*. Since I've moved in with a butch woman and started my graduate studies my parents have started to tell people that I'm set in my ways. We're different than the rest of the women in our family. We're set in *our* ways, we can't be molded. We refuse.

I've always had my suspicions about my Aunt Mary — it's probably rare that a spinster is actually a single heterosexual woman. Still, it wasn't until this photo of the woman my father calls *her friend* that her dyke status was confirmed for me.

Mary was a femme. She wore her hair just so. There are photos of her in trousers when all the other women are wearing house dresses. She knew how to wear a dress. She had intense longing eyes. More than fifty years later than when this picture was taken I live as a femme dyke who chooses to partner with butch women. It troubles me that my proof of her unwavering lesbian desire is in a photograph of her partner. Butchness is visible lesbianism - the rest can be shoved under the family tapestry of euphemisms.

My grandmother was the first member of my family I came out to. I was probably sixteen. She was eighty-one and so far into senility that I knew if she told my parents I could blame her ramblings on the dementia of an old woman. We were sitting at our kitchen table together, I had just poured her a cup of her morning coffee, and I managed, *Grandma, I'm a lesbian*. She nodded and said *that's nice*. I asked, *do you know what that means?* She blew on her hot coffee, *why, one who lesbians, I would say*. She smiled in a way that told me she knew what I meant and winked. She never mentioned it to my parents.

I remember my grandmother's stories well. Her mother died when she was eleven, leaving her to practically raise her sisters; she hated her father (but never told me why) and barred him from her home as an adult woman. She grew up on a farm where she and her sisters would sneak into a nearby barn and steal pickles that they would save to eat with chocolate cake. My grandfather was her only love; I reminded her of him so much. She had five miscarriages before having my father. As a small child I would sit in the kitchen (where I would later tell her I was a lesbian) and eat afternoon cookies while she told me her stories. In her final weeks of life my parents and I were on a near constant watch of her. During my watch I would feed

her yogurt or applesauce (it was all she could eat) or I would brush her hair and tell her that she was such a knockout we would have to beat the boys away with a stick. Mostly, I would sit at the edge of her bed and hold her hand while she retold me her stories. I would trace her blue veins with my fingertip over hands that were aged, but like mine. A couple of nights before she died I asked her if she knew that I loved her; she nodded. I kissed her forehead, *you have my heart, honey*, I told her. She still does and I still have her stories.

No one gave me Mary's stories and no one told me when Mary died. I want with her what I have with my grandmother: her legacy of stories, to be the one who looked after her before she died, to tell her that she's in my heart. Without her stories all I'm left with is the reassurance that a femme knew what it was to be dyke in my Irish Catholic family and a picture of a butch (I like to believe) she spent a life with.

I wonder how long they were together. My father didn't guess that the butch was Mary's partner just because she was a butch – he thought and nodded as if he remembered – *that's Mary's friend*. I believe that he really remembers her. That he was thinking, but didn't say, *that's Mary's friend, the one I remember – sometimes when the family would let her come around we would play games together, she would tie my laces when they came undone or let me win sometimes when we played hoops. Sometimes I would catch them in the kitchen when everyone else was outside for a barbecue holding hands and twirling around like they were on a dance floor. They loved each other. She loved Mary. They were happy together. They spent years together.*

I keep the photograph of Mary's butch on my desk because her defiant female masculinity in the 1940's makes me feel brave, because she reminds me that we have to work to record our dyke lives so that nobody can be left wondering about how we really lived them, and because she is my familial link to dyke history. She is the intricate piece that bridges the gap between my biological family and my chosen family of queer people. Keeping her picture close to me is my way of welcoming her to my family. Having her picture as proof means that the official story of what passed between her and Mary is no longer just friendship.

Lynn Strongin

## Do We Have Enough Heat

Do we have enough heat

from the furnace of the belly  
this giant  
our house?

The sky is white as whipcord  
as rope  
and candles

the missing piece  
is you.

who lit my cigarettes, who poured our coffee  
who bolted away, highstrung horse  
who whispered like Russian syllables

albino mouse.

## Half-a-Century Old

Half-a-Century old  
this wheelchair I tip,  
narrow, a child's  
the manufacturer long folded,  
parts no longer available:  
I look at it  
parked by my bed in an emergency



when an air tire blows:  
 silver wheels rolled me thru college,  
 X-frame bent on one night-flight  
 tossed in the hatch  
 for transcontinental  
 (there's the rip in the fabric from rough handling).  
 California  
 Berkeley streets  
 always I stopped by  
 rocks or steps

Kingdom come,  
 wheels rolled me thru oiled golden Sun  
 high desert  
 over snow  
 & crackling ice in the Watermelon Mountains  
 spill of the Rockies, Sandias.

Took me late one night away from my country thru immigration  
 those evenings of tonic  
 & gin

Lime coldwater railroad flat where I came for love, one dozen  
 hothouse roses in my hand  
 me the girl with coke-bottle green eyes  
 up to my 61st winter  
 a lintel I could not cross & fit in Old Rickety, so still & rusted

It won't fold  
 the cross-bar bolt is locked & flaking:

My throat—I cannot clear my throat  
 to sing  
 one morning after a bleak sleep of nightmare & tears.

Alice Mohor

## losing

fine I respond  
to greetings asked  
but now is unlike  
all times passed

challenged before  
by time or health  
work or leisure  
lack of wealth

years of long days  
now gone too fast  
problems to come  
exceed all past

we are here  
because of you  
from now to when  
be with us too

please do not leave  
before you go  
hard time be quick  
good time be slow

## pause

I had thought  
of losing someone  
suddenly

I had never thought  
of losing someone  
slowly

could my love  
be enough  
to comfort

could my love  
be enough  
to soothe

could my faith  
be enough  
to endure

Barbara Taylor

## Moving On

She never left me, nor departed, when  
dark skies dimmed our intimate encounters.  
Body, hands, lips her touches, so gentle  
like these golden memories of today:  
unyielding, forever held closely to  
my weakened broken heart, love enwrapped  
in union, civil and civilized, till deaths we both do part.  
Decades on I feel she's here. Emotions  
stir on hearing our music once again.  
I imagine that wicked smile. Profound,  
her placement was, a deep impact upon my life.  
But now it's truer that I say I want  
to take another lover, feel only  
the friction of soft breasts, make love on lush  
green lawns of clover. I want to say, "Now  
the time is here! Time for a brand new day  
of switching off, then turning on  
to recklessly start over, to free myself  
from uninvited loneliness  
or restless somber silence.

Rachel Pray

## Approaching Sestina

What is it, then, Father  
that brings us to this place of loss  
after years of trying to be close?  
I know grief has penetrated deep  
As smoldering fire draws  
oxygen to feed its weakened heat, we watch

old embers flicker then ignite, close  
and bright enough to burn, ash deepened  
to flame. Why do we dance, Father  
around the fact that she is lost?  
Fifteen years and mention of her name still draws  
blood from your face. You pale as I watch.

My mother died too soon, too young to bear the loss.  
She wasn't given time to mend things, pull us close,  
prepare us all for what you could not be, a father  
left alone. Desperate to forget, to draw  
the bedroom blinds, you buried her silk nightgowns deep  
in Salvation Army bags, kept only her watches.

As if she had never drawn  
you to her tenderly in the deepening  
hush of night. You have nothing of her, Father  
save those still, broken watches.  
Worn beyond repair, marking time in close  
quarters, twenty-five years together, lost.

My hair is red, my skin is fair; I have my father's  
faithfulness, my mother's rage at what was lost.  
Do I remind you of her when I'm close,  
inspire memories etched deeply  
in the features of my face — how can you watch?  
Her eyes, her breasts, her teeth, drawn

from carbon, marrow, bone to mock you, Father  
with all you've tried to close  
your mind and heart against. How deeply  
you were loved, how terrified to watch  
the woman you had sworn never to lose  
sicken, weaken, fall away from you, drawn

away as you watched, into the depths,  
death's close embrace, your wife and lover lost.  
Drawn to that dark place, you and I cast one shadow, Father.

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## Books Reviewed

by Lilith Rogers

### MIDWIFING DEATH: RETURNING TO THE ARMS OF THE ANCIENT MOTHER

by Leslene della-Madre illustrated by Monica Sjoo

266pp 2003

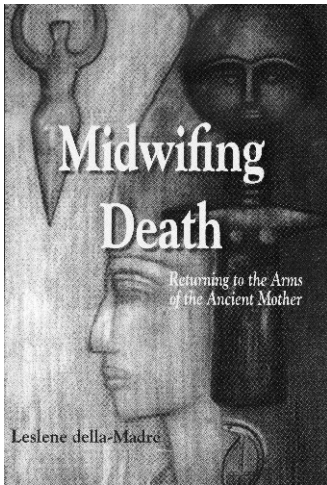
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Grief is a part of spirit/earth-flesh mind/body wholeness. To feel it deeply and openly, as many people do in various cultures, for example, by the cutting of hair, wailing and not washing for long periods of time following the death of a loved one, is to be fully present with the wholeness/holiness of life and mystery beyond our control and understanding. The patriarchal mind does not understand such abandon. It would rather have grief be hidden and controlled.

In the prehistoric times of women-centered cultures, women were the priestesses to the dying. I also feel from the way in which many tribal people collectively deal with life passages, women probably grieved together and shared the grief of their losses in these ancient times. (pp. 232-233)

In *MIDWIFING DEATH*, Leslene della-Madre reaches deeply into many areas of death and life that most of us in modern American culture have never traveled. For this reason alone, it is an important book for us to read. But it is also important for many other reasons—as an historical understanding of what the ancient Goddess cultures knew of death and what follows after, as a guide to how we can better attend to our friends and loved ones as they are dying, and as a way to prepare for our own inevitable deaths. As della-Madre says in her Invocation, “As I have worked with death and dying for several years now, I have become increasingly aware of a searching need in the human psyche to find solace and peace in the dying process—not just a wanting to be at home surrounded with loved ones, which can be truly wonderful, but a need that calls out to open to love and to shed fear in the face of death itself.” (p. 13) She then proceeds to tell us how to create a “beauty field” for a dying loved one, how to help the person get past her fear and how to get past our own. This book is a weaving of herstory, meditations on life and death, anecdotes from della-Madre’s life and travels—both physical and spiritual, taped conversations with spiritual teachers and writers like Vicki Noble on the subject of death, and tales of



the deaths of people whom she has midwived, including her own father and mother. It is also a strong indictment of the patriarchy and its emphasis on the father god, its glorification of violence, power over, materialism, fear and distrust. She advocates a return to the study of and the ways of our ancient mothers. della- Madre quotes from anthropologist Marija Gimbutas who did ground breaking work—literally and figuratively—on our ancestors from the Neolithic world. For 20,000 years, these ancestors believed in a nurturing Goddess rather than a wrathful God. They lived in harmony with their natural surroundings

and with one another. And they viewed death as natural occurrence that returned them to the arms of the Great Mother.

This does not mean that the ancient ones did not grieve for their dear departed. della-Madre has included in her book images of grieving women from those thousands of years ago. Just as death is a natural part of life, so is grief. But, as quoted in the beginning, there are ways to express grief that allow it to be a healing experience and ways to suppress it that only further its pain. Throughout this remarkable text, there are the beautiful, powerful images of the Swedish artist and radical anarcho/eco-feminist Monica Sjoo. Sjoo was the co-author with Barbara Mor of the influential work *THE GREAT COSMIC MOTHER: REDISCOVERING THE RELIGION OF THE EARTH* (1987). Sjoo also speaks in the preface of this book of the disastrous consequences we all suffer from the rule of the patriarchy. And she speaks movingly of the tragic deaths of her two sons and what she has learned from those deaths. Sadly, Sjoo herself died in August of 2005 just as this book was finally completed. I highly recommend *MIDWIFING DEATH*. Just as women are reclaiming the birth experience as a natural part of life that can and should, whenever possible, be performed in our homes with our loved ones present, so, too, we are reclaiming the death experience. As della-Madre says, “Freedom awaits us in life and in death when we finally shed the outworn conditions of our self-inflicted suffering of the last 5,000 years and embrace the truth of our ancestors known for much longer.” (p.158)

*For orders, contact the author directly at [info@midwifingdeath.com](mailto:info@midwifingdeath.com).*



Bodyworks 1

Saskia Scheffer

*“I struggle to talk from the wound’s gash, make sense of the deaths and destruction, and pull the pieces of my life back together. I yearn to pass on to the next generation the spiritual activism I’ve inherited from my cultures.”*

Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Let us be the healing of the wound*



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## Contributors' Notes

Janet E. Aalfs, poet laureate of Northampton, MA (2003-2005), director and head instructor (1982-present) of Valley Women's Martial Arts Institute for Healing and Violence Prevention Strategies, and a founding member of Lesbian writing groups that met for over 20 years, has had her work published in a variety of journals and anthologies. Her most recent books of poems are *Reach* (Perugia Press, 1999) and *Red* (self-published chapbook, Thousand Hands Press, 2001).

Joan Annsfire: The first poem I read in public was at my mother's funeral when I was twenty-two. Since then I've written quite a bit about death and the grieving process. I find the fact that this life is finite to be both compelling and a great motivator to just get on with it, whatever it happens to be. I've been writing seriously since my bout with cancer fifteen years ago and my poetry, memoir pieces and essays have appeared in various literary journals and anthologies.

Brenwyn founded *Harvest, A Neopagan Journal*, in Boston in the early 80s. She worked extensively on the *Kwan Yin Book of Changes* by Diane Stein. Her writing has been published in *WeMoon*, *EarthWalk*, *MaiZe*, *The Rook*, *The Anchorage Times*, and the *Taos News*. Currently she lives in southern Oregon where she writes and teaches kids.

Lynn Brown has always been a poet and lover of language, the creation of gardens, vision and touch with the intention towards friendship and healing.

Pat Browne grew up in Minnesota and attended graduate school at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. For 15 years, she was a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondolet. She left the community in 1987 and shortly thereafter met Aggie, her soul mate, the love of life, her true north, her only star. Both Aggie and Pat worked for the United States Department of Agriculture in Washington, DC where they founded the first organization for gay and Lesbian federal employees. Aggie and Pat began their war with Aggie's breast cancer in 1997. They celebrated their civil union in November 2001 in Vermont in the midst of Aggie's chemotherapy following her first recurrence. On August 11, 2003, just four months before Aggie's death, they traveled to Canada to be married. In

their own truth, they had already been married for 15 years, but still loved hearing those words spoken for them. Pat now lives in northern Minnesota with her service dog, Solstice, and with Aggie's spirit and love.

Shirley Brozzo is a member of the Keweenaw Bay Tribe of Chippewa Indians in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. In May she will graduate with an MFA in English Writing from Northern Michigan University. She is currently employed as the Assistant Director of Diversity Student Services and is an adjunct instructor with the center for Native American Studies, both at NMU. Shirley has three adult children, Jamie, Brandi and Steven. She and partner Liz have been together for 18 years.

Tita Caldwell is a 74 year old Lesbian living in Oakland, California. A longtime activist, she has recently started writing and is a new member of OLOC (Old Lesbians Organizing for Change).

Teresa Campbell is Professor Emeritus at San Francisco State University. She has had 40 short stories published in a variety of magazines or anthologies. She is the author of the book, *Life is an Adventure*, which can be ordered at any bookstore or Amazon, com. She has lived with her partner, Sue, for 40 years.

Shan Casey is an all-around rabble rouser, mother, daughter, partner, writer, activist, mid-west born femme dyke, currently living in Brooklyn, New York.

Chelsey Clammer received her BA in English and Feminist Studies from Southwestern University in Georgetown, TX. Currently, she is working at Book Woman, the only feminist bookstore in Texas, and is writing her first Lesbian novel. In her spare time she is applying to various graduate programs in Women's Studies.

Tee A. Corinne's artwork has been identified with *Sinister Wisdom* since her cover and poster for issue #3 in 1977. She is the author of one novel, three collections of short stories, and several poetry chapbooks. Her most recent book of art, *Intimacies: Photos by Tee A. Corinne*, published by Last Gasp of San Francisco, was a Lambda Literary Award finalist.

*Editors' Note: Shortly after submitting her work for this issue, Tee A. Corinne*

was diagnosed with a rare form of bile duct cancer. As we go to press, Tee is working from her home on multiple projects as her time and energy permit. She is attended by her friend, Jean Sirius (another contributor to this issue), and many friends and volunteers from her southern Oregon community. Updates on Tee are posted at [http://jeansirius.com/TeeACorinne/tee\\_update.html](http://jeansirius.com/TeeACorinne/tee_update.html).

Tee's papers are housed in its Special Collections at the University of Oregon Library. Send your memories of Tee and the descriptions of the impact her work has had on your life to: Linda J. Long, Manuscripts Librarian, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Library System, 1229 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 94703-1299.

Vicki Currier (Iggy) shares her story about the loss of her best friend from the Mabel Bassett Correctional Center in McLoud, Oklahoma.

Fran Day is an activist, educator, writer, reader, editor, vegetarian, and friend. She was born in 1942 in Nebraska and grew up rural working class; her maternal ancestors were from Ireland, Scotland and England (paternal ancestry unknown). She has been active in numerous social change movements and was part of the following collectives in Denver, Colorado during the 70's: Big Mama Rag Newsjournal, Woman to Woman Bookcenter, and Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW). She helped organize the first Take Back the Night March in Denver. She has helped plan and organize many additional gatherings, forums, readings, and events. She currently lives in northern California where she teaches part time at Sonoma State University; she enjoys connecting with Lesbians around the world through her work editing *Sinister Wisdom Journal*. She is passionate about Lesbian culture, community and friendship.

Carmen de Monteflores: I am Puerto Rican, a Lesbian, a writer and psychotherapist. I am also a mother and grandmother. Spirituality is central in my life and is intimately connected with my love of nature and with my faith in the healing power of creativity.

Julie R. Enszer is a writer and Lesbian activist living in Maryland. She has previously been published in *Iris: A Journal About Women*, *Room of One's Own*, *Long Shot*, the *Web Del Sol Review*, *Poetica* and the *Jewish Women's Literary Annual*. In addition to writing poetry, she is writing a novel. You can read more of her work at [www.JulieREnszer.com](http://www.JulieREnszer.com).

Susan Eschbach: I am a fifty year old White Jewish dyke with two children. Their other mother and my partner of 16 years died in 2001 of a very invasive cancer. These poems are from a collection I wrote during that extraordinary time. I live in Ithaca, NY with my kids, teach middle school children, and have a sweet precious new partner. After the horror I was blessed.

Roxanna Fiamma: I was born in Denver, Colorado in 1943; Italian American (Olive Race), grew up working class. I came out as a Lesbian in the late 60s and as a Separatist in the mid 70's. I taught Physical Education in Denver until I retired in 1993. I live in northern California where I enjoy life with my Dear Companion Dog, Phaedra and Land-Mate, Fran.

Maria Fama is the author of three books of poetry. Her work appears in numerous publications and has been anthologized. In 1998, she was named a finalist in the Allen Ginsberg Poetry Awards. Fama has read her poetry in many cities across the country, read one of her stories on National Public Radio, co-founded a video production company, and recorded her poetry for CD compilations of music and poetry. Maria Fama did her undergraduate and graduate work in History at Temple University. She lives and works in Philadelphia. Fama's poems were recently awarded the 2002 Aniello Lauri Award in Creative Writing.

Izabela Filipiak is a playwright, a poet, and a historian. Her books include *Absolute Amnesia*, *Madame Intuita*, and, most recently, *Realms of Otherness*, the 760 pages long presentation of Maria Komornicka (pronounce Ko-mor-neetz-ka), a tragic and transgender author of Warsaw-based 19th century modernism. Filipiak holds a doctorate from the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw and is an affiliated scholar at the Beatrice M. Bain Research Group at UC Berkeley. She is one of the first public figures in Eastern Europe who challenged the ramifications of her culture by her public coming out. For the past 15 years she has been a role model for the growing LGBT movement and more than one generation of creative women in Poland. She is presently working on a memoir.

Judy Freespirit is now living in Oakland California with the round-the-clock assistance of Shinay, her lovely caregiver from Mongolia. She plans to spend the rest of her life doing exactly what she damned well pleases. Her memoir *I Nearly Died Laughing* written with Cathy Cade and Elana Dykewomon will hopefully be out sometime in 2006.

Catherine Friend farms in Minnesota with her partner of twenty-two years. The author of five children's books, with a sixth forthcoming in 2007, Catherine would rather write than wrangle sheep, but is proud she can do both. She has a B.A. in Economics and Spanish, and a M.S. in Economics, neither of which she has used for years. She has held an impressive array of odd jobs, such as packing cheese and sausage gift boxes, weeding on an organic vegetable farm, and working an assembly line packing boxes of Christmas decorations. For many years she taught writing for the Institute of Children's Literature. She works as a freelance editor, gives writing workshops, volunteers on the local library board, does chores on the farm, and wears an Elvis watch.

Joyce Frohn has been previously published in *Tales of the Unanticipated*, *Writer's Digest* and about fifty small press magazines.

Rebecca Frye lives in rural north Georgia with her partner and step-daughter. She currently works in Human Resources and will begin graduate school in the fall at the University of Georgia to pursue a career in clinical Social Work.

Carolyn Gage is a Lesbian-feminist playwright. She is the author of five books and more than fifty plays, most of them with Lesbian themes. Her play *Ugly Ducklings* deals with Lesbian child suicide, and is the subject of a national documentary released in 2006. Her catalog and more information about her work are online at [www.carolyngage.com](http://www.carolyngage.com)

Suzanne Gary: Born in the Midwest, reborn in San Francisco during the 70's where I came out with much love and support. Recipient of three Hopwood Awards for Poetry from the University of Michigan. My work has appeared in the *Berkeley Poetry Review*, *Sapphire* and *Plexus*. A second chapbook, entitled *Blood in the Water*, will be out soon.

Jessica W. Giles is an Assistant Professor of Psychology and Human Development at Vanderbilt University. Her scholarly research focuses on the development of social cognition, and she is particularly interested in gender development, violence prevention, and children's involvement in the legal system. Her creative writing deals with themes of femininity, violation, resilience, emotion, and the sexual body.

Pat Gowens is the editor of *Mother Warriors Voice*, a 20 year old, activist, mothers-in-poverty international newsjournal. As a Lesbian motherist, she makes sure that each issue of the *Voice* includes at least 3 pages of LGBT news and stories, especially struggles for social change. Subscribe for \$5-\$25 (sliding fee). Send to *Mother Warriors Voice*, 2711 W. Michigan, Milwaukee, WI 53208; 414-342-0220. Or go to **welfarewarriors.org** and pay via PayPal.

Morgan Gwenwald has been documenting the women's/LGBT community for most of her life, compiling thousands of images of events, actions and people along with a pioneering portfolio of Lesbian erotic imagery. Since leaving New York City and moving upstate she has returned to her exploration of fine art photography, finding joy in those deep and complex creative experiences.

Kit Kennedy: My work appears/or will appear in *Animus*, *Bayou*, *BombayGin*, *Buckle &*, *Clara Venus*, *The Comstock Review*, *Defect Cult*, *fulva flava*, *HALJ*, *I'M HOME: What's It's Like to Love a Woman* (anthology), *The Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review*, *Pearl*, *Phoebe*, *Rogue Scholars* (online), *Runes*, *Sinister Wisdom* (#59/60), and *Van Gogh's Ear*. I live in San Francisco.

Lisa Kraft is a 38 year old Jewish Lesbian who still doesn't know what she wants to be when she grows up! She dabbles in poetry and writing, painting, and art, and is working hard to find herself. She lives in Oakland with her 2 dogs and 3 cats.

Esther Morris Leidolf is an intersex educator/activist with a background in public health data management. Her work has appeared in *Sojourner*, *The New Internationalist* (UK), *Our Bodies OurSelves* (new edition for a new era) and various intersex publications. She lives in Jamaica Plain with her partner and their 16 year old son. Her writing can be found at **<http://BanterAndMuse.homestead.com>** and **[www.mrkh.org](http://www.mrkh.org)**. Contact info is **[banterNmuse@juno.com](mailto:banterNmuse@juno.com)**.

Sue Lenaerts, a computer professional and photographer, draws on her earlier experiences producing feminist publications and books to co-edit this issue of *Sinister Wisdom*. An anti-war organizer in the 1960's, she helped found the DC Rape Crisis Center in 1972 and the Feminist Alliance Against Rape in 1974. She was the first out Lesbian to serve on the Prince George's County, Maryland, Human Relations Commission. She designs

and maintains websites, including [www.sinisterwisdom.org](http://www.sinisterwisdom.org) and [www.welfarewarriors.org](http://www.welfarewarriors.org).

Angela D. Lester is a 33 year old Lesbian poet currently incarcerated in Indiana. To correspond in friendship, write Angela Lester, 811 West 50 North, Rockville, IN 47872.

Loonwomon writes in the many voices (and names) of her multiple selves. Her political writing appears regularly in *Rain and Thunder: A Radical Feminist Journal of Discussion and Activism*. Earlier work has been published in *For Crying Out Loud*, *The Cutting Edge*, *The Goddess Calendar*, *Hikane*, and *Maize*. She began writing in the early 90's to speak out against and heal from the devastating effects of surviving a childhood of severe sexual abuse and torture. She has worked hard to create a safe life for herself completely separate from her white middle class family and their involvement with the KKK, other white supremacist groups, and the multi-million dollar sex industry that abused her. With the love of her dog and many supportive Lesbians and her connection with the spirit of the Lesbian land where she lives, she has moved from basic survival and near constant terror and grief to a life full of poetry, song, nature, and gardening which she can embrace and live. Her "Radical Words" can be found at: <http://loonwomon.livejournal.com>

Jeanne Lupton hosts Synergy Women's Open Mic in Alameda and leads women's writing groups in the East Bay. She writes poetry and memoir. [jeany98@aol.com](mailto:jeany98@aol.com)

P. E. MacDavid: I have been writing poetry since the early 80's. Most are Lesbian love poems and emotionally driven from falling in love. I have recently been disabled by an autoimmune disease. This has given me the avenue to pursue my passion for writing.

Trena Machado: I was born in West Virginia and have lived most of my life in California. The California state of mind is a constant source of satisfaction within my bones. I have written all my life and have one book in print, *Out Of Nothing*. Four years ago, I started RAW ArT PRESS ([www.rawartpress.com](http://www.rawartpress.com)) with the goal of providing an affordable path for the women in my community to be published. I am now working on publishing *What I Want From You: Voices Of East Bay Lesbian Poets*, in collaboration with Linda Zeiser, which will be out in 2006.

Hawk Madrone has been living on remote womensland in southern Oregon for thirty years, where there are gardens, music, spiritual ritual. With her animal companions always nearby, she is a woodworker, gardener, photographer, baker, woodswoman, writer, who, at 67, purposes to do Tai Chi as a way of life. In addition to her chapbook, *Creation Story*, her poetry and prose have been published in *Womanspirit*, *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives*; *Natural Bridge*; *We'Moon:Gaia Rhythms for Women*; *Manzanita Quarterly*; *Lesbian Review of Books*; *Maize*; *Harrington Lesbian Fiction Quarterly*, and in the anthologies *Our Lives: Lesbian Personal Writing*; *The Poetry of Sex*; *The Wild Good*; *An Intricate Weave*; *Gardening at a Deeper Level*; *Small-Town Gay*. Her memoir of life at Fly Away Home, *Weeding at Dawn: A Lesbian Country Life*, was published by The Haworth Press in 2000.

Jane Mara is a psychotherapist, writer and mediator laboriously making her way back into the everyday world after six years of relatively cloistered spiritual practice. Moving as if through molasses, she finds being with and writing about dying and death oddly comforting.

Lynn Martin: Poetry published in: *Calliope*, *River City Review*, *South Florida Review*, *The Garden State*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Sinister Wisdom*, *5 a.m.*, *Connecticut Review*, *Earth's Daughters*, *Ancient Mariners*, *Out in the Mountains*, *Bloodstone*, *Sweet Annie Press*, *The Centennial Review*, *Friend's Journal*. Anthology: "Heartbeat of New England, James Fowler, editor, 2000 Anthology" "My lover is a woman," Ballantine Books, Leslea Newman, editor, 1996. Non-fiction published in: *Mystery Review*, Canada, "*Martha Grimes' Children*", Spring 2000. 2004—Commentary, NPR in Amherst, MA; Lynn recently returned from a residency at the Vermont Studio in Johnson Vermont. She was honored in Washington, D.C. for work in the AIDS epidemic by a national organization called Experience Works, Prime Time Awards.

Janet Mason's literary commentary is featured regularly on This Way Out, an international Queer radio syndicate aired on more than 400 radio stations in the U.S. and also in Australia, New Zealand, and throughout Europe. She is also a contributor to the *Gay and Lesbian Review* (from Harvard). Her poetry and prose has been published in more than 60 anthologies and journals, including the *Exquisite Corpse*, the *Brooklyn Review*, *The Advocate*, the *Harrington Lesbian Fiction Quarterly*, and in many previous issues of *Sinister Wisdom*. She is the author of three chapbooks of poetry, two from Insight



To Riot Press. She teaches creative writing at Temple University and her breasts are on a poster. Her piece in *Sinister Wisdom* #68 — Death, Grief and Surviving is an excerpt from her manuscript *Tea Leaves: a memoir of mothers and daughters*. She invites you to visit [www.amusejanetmason.com](http://www.amusejanetmason.com).

Donna Matucci: I have a master's degree in Education and have been teaching for 21 years. I teach special education at the elementary level. I am also a yoga practitioner for 14 years and will be completing yoga teacher training this summer. I hope to write children's books in the future. My writing to this point has been for myself.

Pam McAllister: A life-long reader and writer of poetry, I have studied with poet Joan Larkin (*Housework*, *A Long Sound*, and *Cold River*). My poems have been published in *Sinister Wisdom*, *Out of Line*, and *Radical America*. I have also had poems accepted for publication in *The Penwood Review* and in the anthology *Becoming Fire*, published by the Andover Newton Theological School. I have participated, as both author and audience-member, in many poetry readings. Most of my energy as a published author has gone into writing nonfiction. I edited the anthology *Reweaving the Web of Life: Feminism and Nonviolence* (New Society Publishers, 1982) and *Spirit and This River of Courage*. My most recent book, about working against the death penalty, is *Death Defying* (Continuum, '03).

Mary Meriam is a Lesbian poet-activist with an MFA in poetry from Columbia University. Her poems and essays have been published in *So To Speak*, *Bay Windows*, *Queer Ramblings*, *Wicked Alice*, *Lodestar Quarterly*, *Sinister Wisdom*, *Street Spirit*, and *Harrington Lesbian Literary Quarterly*. Her chapbook of sonnets (*The Countess of Flatbroke*, Modern Metrics, 2006) features a cover drawing by Sudie Rakusin and an afterword by Lillian Faderman. Find Mary on the Web with her friends at Woman-Stirred <http://woman-stirred.blogspot.com>.

Alice Mohor: I live in a college town in the south. I work out with small weights and like to read, watch TV, play croquet, two-step dance, and go to the movies. My favorite place to be is the beach. I teach elementary physical education and use poetry that I write to help my students learn, understand, and enjoy movement.

Janell Moon: I am a San Francisco bay area poet with four published poetry volumes including *The Mouth of Home* from Arctos Press. I also have four spiritual nonfiction books including *The Wise Earth Speaks to Your Spirit* from RedWheel/Weiser/Conari.

Louise Moore has been publishing her writing on an ongoing basis for over twenty years. Her writing hats have included art critic, technical writer, poet and storyteller. Her most recently published poetry appeared in *Cityworks*, and annual published by San Diego City College.

Ruth Mountaingrove takes her chosen name from a commune she lived in 1971 - 72 with her partner Jean Mountaingrove before they were evicted by a cabal because they were not only feminist but Lesbian. Ruth, at 83, is a poet and a songwriter, a mother and a grandmother. Being a Pisces she naturally lives next to the Pacific Ocean.

Peggy Neff was the first Lesbian or gay partner to receive an award from the federal September 11th Victim Compensation Fund. A photographer and massage therapist, Peg has recently sold the home she shared with Sheila and moved to Delaware.

Marjory Nelson is a seventy-seven year old radical Lesbian feminist who lives in a growing community of old dykes in senior housing. She's active in OLOC (Old Lesbians Organizing for Change), the History Committee of the Woman's Building, and trying to save our Bill of Rights.

Elita Nieri returned home to Lima Peru after living in the US for nearly 30 years. She has magical hands and creates beautiful works of art in a variety of mediums. In her latest creations she turns oranges into exquisite boxes by cutting an orange in half, turning the orange peels inside out, drying them on two slightly different-size forms, sanding them and painting designs or scenes on them.

Laura O'Brady I am a 64 year old disabled Lesbian landyke, trying to survive alone after breast Cancer took my partner of 19 years. I write, edit, garden, feed birds, take care of my land. And grieve.

Marcia Perlstein, Marriage Family Therapist, has been a practicing therapist, trainer of pre-licensed interns and veteran therapists in Berkeley

and San Francisco since 1967; currently in Sequim, Washington. In 1974 she edited *Flowers Can Even Bloom in Schools* which will be re-issued in the coming year with a violence/ bullying prevention and attention chapter and she'll resume consulting in public schools. She is prepared to offer her five to ten minute stand-up comedy routine as an opening act to progressive LGBT and other coalition causes. [scraggse@earthlinknet](mailto:scraggse@earthlinknet)

Meredith Pond shares a home in Takoma Park, MD with another writer included in this publication, a dog, and an attack cat. Now 58, she wrote her first poem, "Leaves," which she sold to her relatives for .25 cents a copy when she was eight years old. Her current project is a memoir about growing up in Rhode Island. You can contact her at [pondmeredith@aol.com](mailto:pondmeredith@aol.com).

Rachel Pray is a writer, naturalist and equine specialist with an M.A. in English (Creative Writing) from San Francisco State University. Her poetry and photographs have appeared in various literary journals and magazines, including *The Advocate*, *Liberty Hill Review*, *California Quarterly*, *Mudfish NYC*, *The Larcom Review: A Journal of the Arts and Literature of New England*, and a recent anthology, *Kiss Me Goodnight: Stories and Poems by Women Who Were Girls When Their Mothers Died*. She was a Finalist in the 2001 National Writer's Union Poetry Competition, which was judged by Adrienne Rich. Rachel lives in Los Angeles with her partner/spouse of fifteen years, Laura Weinstock, and their daughter, Talya.

Sudie Rakusin is an artist whose love and concern for the Earth and Her creatures influence all of her choices and permeate her work. Sudie's art has been widely reproduced in newspapers, magazines, and calendars and can be found in such books as *The Once and Future Goddess* by Elinor Gadon, *Seasons of the Witch* by Patricia Monaghan, and *Wickedary, Outercourse, Quintessence* and *Amazon Grace* by Mary Daly. Sudie lives outside Hillsborough, North Carolina, on the edge of a meadow with her Great Danes, surrounded by her gardens and the forest. To view more of Sudie's work, visit her website, [www.sudierakusin.com](http://www.sudierakusin.com).

Judith Rechter: Originally from St. Louis, MO, but now a native Californian having lived there much longer. I am bi-city, living between Berkeley and Santa Monica. I have taught English and Comparative Literature in MO and CA. I worked in an Arts Program as Writer in Residence in Seattle. I'm now retired. My poetry is published in numerous places. This

year I have four poems that will be published in a bay area anthology published by Trena Machado and Linda Zeister.

Cynthia Rich (b. 1933) is co-author, with Barbara Macdonald, of *Look Me in the Eye: Old Women, Aging and Ageism* (Spinsters, 1983, 1991, 2001) and author of *Desert Years: Undreaming the American Dream* (Spinsters, 1989). She lives in San Diego where she is co-founder of The Old Women's Project—[www.oldwomensproject.org](http://www.oldwomensproject.org).

Kamila Rina is a passionate disabled poor Jewish low-femme dyke, poet, and a survivor of child prostitution & pornography. She was born & grew up some in Eastern Europe, but currently lives in Canada with her precious voice-recognition-enabled computer. She loves books, trees, and chocolate.

Lilith Rogers is a long time writer, gardener and lover of women. You can order her beautiful CD Rom book *Persimmons and Other Lesbian Erotica* by emailing her at [Lilithrogers1@Juno.com](mailto:Lilithrogers1@Juno.com). She is currently performing her one woman show “Rachel Carson: Her Life and Work” to great acclaim. You can email her about that, or call her at 707-523-9907.

Gigi Ross: I see my poetry as part of what seems to be my larger calling—giving people opportunities to go deeper, getting in touch when they are at their most authentic. To that end, my recent published poetry has been in a newsletter devoted to contemplative spirituality and in a book on group spiritual direction. My own poetic process mirrors my understanding of prayer: listening deeply to the true voice inside and then shaping the poem by letting it be what it wants to be.

Maura Ryan is a feminist femme dyke and scholar of gender and sexualities. She is currently a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Florida and studies GLBT social movements and Lesbian mothers.

Teya Schaffer: My work has appeared in anthologies and journals for over twenty years, most recently in *Margie*, *Bridges*, and *Coming Out of Cancer*. Her book *A Ritual of Drowning: Poems of Love and Mourning* won the Pippestrelle Best of the Small Press award. She has recently discovered that

teaching grammar is a natural pleasure for someone who loves playing with words.

Saskia Scheffer: I am Dutch by origin and have been living in New York since 1981. Mostly I am a self taught photographer, with the help and guidance of a few great teachers and many influences. The 2 images reproduced in this issue are the result of the desire to photograph what I felt during a time of deep grief and sadness. They are part of a series called *Bodyworks*, in which I used my body to convey an emotion. I could barely think about my grief, even less talk about it but I very much needed a way to express my sadness. The visualization of feelings I could not verbalize was empowering and healing. It provided an unexpected source of power and strength.

Carla Schick: I have been previously published in *Sinister Wisdom*. I have also been published in the *Peralta Press Journal* (2000 and 2001), Word is Bond, and will be published in the journal *Defect Cult*. I won an honorable mention in the 2003 Barbara Mandigo Peace Poetry Prize.

Michelle Sewell is an award winning screenwriter and poet. When the Jamaican born artist-activist is not behind the mic, she is behind the scenes organizing and collaborating with other poets and performers. Her work can be found in the *Campaign to End AIDS* anthology, *Port of Harlem* (May – July 2004), iRoster.com, and on seeingblack.com. Michelle's new anthology, *Growing Up Girl: Voices from Marginalized Spaces*, was released April 2006. Visit her website: [www.thepoetryfix.org](http://www.thepoetryfix.org)

Silverbear (Rand Hall): I have been a part of the Womonwrites family since 1979. I loved and cared for my partner, Nancy Valmus for 10 years until her death in 1996. This poem, written in 1995 is the last thing I put to paper until this year. Writing, always a way to deal with the challenges of life, had become just too painful. Recently I was told that I am still “looking for another Nancy but won't find her, she was one of a kind.” I live in Florida near the Gulf with my kitty, Valentine, but head for the mountains as often as I can. With the love and guidance of my Native American “grandmothers” I may be on the right path once again. Mitakuye Oyasin (We are all related)

Jean Sirius is from Kansas, but likes her home in Oakland better. She is the author of three books of poetry, including *Lesbian Love Poems*; a book of collage; and three books of photographs. She is white, middle aged, and opinionated. Her website is <http://jeansirius.com>.

Lynn Strongin b. NYC (1939) grew up during the war years both in the deep South and in the Northeast. Polio at age 12 left her confined to a wheelchair. Soon after, she began to write. Will have 12 books by mid-2006, work in over thirty anthologies, fifty-five journals. Work recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Her anthology *The Sorrow Psalms: A Book of Twentieth Century Elegy* will be published in June 2006 by the University of Iowa Press.

Sandy Tate opened the first feminist gift store in the country in Los Angeles in 1975. Member of OLOC, (Old Lesbians Organizing for Change), born 1935, Jewish, working class.

Barbara Taylor: “Each day demands that I write and my fingers touch and feel the earth.” Barbara writes prose and poetry, and is a regular at Live Poets’ Poetry Slam evenings. The natural environment, politics, peace and women are the main themes. Her poems have been in print, on local, community, national, internet radio and various literary e-zines including *Flashquake*, *Triplopia*, *Tylazine*, *Sinister Wisdom* and forthcoming in *Harrington Lesbian Literary Quarterly*. Barbara writes from the sub-tropical Rainbow Region of New South Wales, Australia, where inspiration, peace and freedom to create, comes from the serenity and beauty of this special area. Samples of her diverse poetry with audio are at: [batsword.tripod.com](http://batsword.tripod.com).

Nancy Taylor: I currently live in Oakland California where I teach English as a Second Language. I have lived in the Middle East, traveled throughout Europe, and served in the United States Army. I live with my partner of four years (Stephanie) and our two Maltese dogs, Popi and Cali. I love reading and writing and walking with my dogs in the Oakland hills.

Stacy Traiger has been in remission from Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma for seven years. Her writing has appeared in *Dykes*, *Disability & Stuff* and *Sonoma County Women’s Voices*. She lives in Alaska with her partner and their dog.

Elliott Femynye bat Tzedek: I'm a Jewish dyke writer living in Philadelphia. I've had several pieces in *Sinister Wisdom* in the past, as well as poems, essays, and reviews in *off our backs*, *Sojourner*, *Lesbian Review of Books*, *Lesbian Ethics*, and other Lesbian and feminist journals and newspapers. I have pieces forthcoming in *The Harrington Lesbian Fiction Quarterly* and *Poetica*, and work published recently in the online journal *Awakened Woman*.

Uncumber (Lucinda Sangree) I was born in Arkansas and lived in the South until I entered Graduate school at the University of Chicago. In 1957 I moved to upstate NY and have been here, except for two brief periods in Africa 54-56 and again 63-65. I began writing fiction, memoir, and poetry after coming out as a Lesbian first to myself and then to friends and family. Women's Writing Workshops with Irene Zahava in NY and the Feminist Women's Writing Workshop (FW3) based in NY have inspired and helped me in the past few years. I met my partner 23 years ago. We are both retired. We have a garden and grow a lot of garlic; we like it, but the deer do not.

Chocolate Waters: During the "second wave of feminism," Chocolate Waters was one of the first openly Lesbian poets to be published. A pioneer in women's publishing and in the art of performance poetry, she has toured throughout the United States, but makes her home in Manhattan. Her three collections: *To the man reporter from the Denver Post*, *Take Me Like A Photograph* and *Charting New Waters* were produced by Eggplant Press during 1975-80 and are considered classics of the early women's movement. Her CD, 'Chocolate Waters Uncensored,' which spans three decades of groundbreaking work, was released by Eggplant Productions in 2001 and may be obtained at [www.chocolatewaters.com](http://www.chocolatewaters.com).

Riggin Waugh lives in Takoma Park, Maryland. She has edited two anthologies: *Dykes With Baggage: The Lighter Side of Lesbians in Therapy* (Alyson Books, 2000), and *Ex-Lover Weird Shit: A Collection of Short Fiction, Poetry, and Cartoons by Lesbians and Gay Men* (Two Out Of Three Sisters Press, 1994). She has a master of fine arts degree from American University.

Gabriella West: I live in San Francisco and have been published in several anthologies, including *Best Women's Erotica 2004*; *Zaftig Well Rounded Erotica*, *Hot Ticket: Lesbians, Sex and Travel* and *Early Embraces*. My first novel *Time of Grace* was published in 2002. I'm currently reviewing non-fiction for *Publishers Weekly*.

Chana Wilson is a psychotherapist and writer who lives in Oakland. She is published in the journal *The Sun*, and several anthologies, including *The Next Step: Out From Under*, *Mentsb: On Being Jewish and Queer*, and *I'm Home: What It is Like to Love a Woman*. She is currently completing a book-length memoir about her relationship with her Lesbian mother.

Judith K. Witherow, an American Indian, writes about life experiences with disability, sexual orientation, race, class and gender. Her work appears in numerous anthologies, magazines, women's studies textbooks and Lesbian/feminist publications. Judith is on the Board of Directors of *Sinister Wisdom*. Her book of poetry *All Things Wild* was reviewed in *Lambda Book Report*. Judith won the first annual Audre Lorde Memorial Prose Contest for Non-fiction. She was the first female umpire in her county. [www.jkwitherow.com](http://www.jkwitherow.com)

Linda Zeiser is a poet with a penchant for Asian verse...a teacher, a lover, an amazon, a fierce warrior and a Lesbian who unites this East Bay sisterhood with her Works in Progress venue at Montclair (monthly) and her landmark Lesbian poetry anthology *What I Want From You: Voices Of East Bay Lesbian Poets*, in tandem with publisher Trena Machado of RAW ArT Press. Linda's primary purpose in this lifetime is to deepen and enflame" her sisterhood of fellow Lesbian poets "with a sense of wonder at all they possess!



Judith's Dia de los Muertos altar

Photo by Sue Lenaerts



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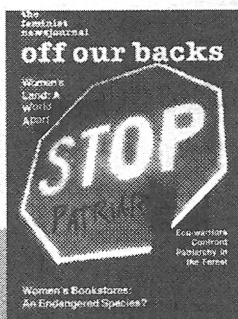
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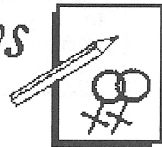
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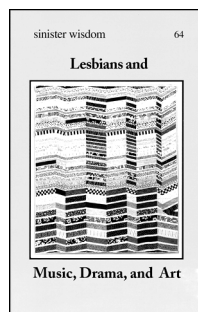


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