

EVE JOSEPH

## *Intimate Strangers*

*...the sun will die in its sleep beneath a bridge  
and trailing westward like a winding sheet—  
listen, my dear—how softly night arrives.*

—Baudelaire

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HEN I WAS TWELVE my brother was killed in a car accident. In 1965, the year Allen Ginsberg introduced the term “flower power” and Malcolm X was shot dead outside Harlem’s Audubon Ballroom; the year T.S. Eliot died and Bob Dylan’s “Like a Rolling Stone” was on its way to becoming a new anthem, death was regarded as a taboo subject. Not a lot was known about grief; in particular, not much was known about what to do with a kid whose brother had suddenly died on the other side of the country.

I spent the days between the phone call and the funeral playing with my collection of small plastic horses in the basement. The smell of lilies drifted down the stairs, and when I surfaced the funeral was over and everyone had gone home. I watched my mother gather armfuls of lilies and throw them in the trash can.

Thirty years after his death, I found a poem by a friend of my brother, in which I learned that his body had been shipped across Canada by train in a blue casket. Why that stays with me I can’t fully explain. There is a story about a tribe of nomads crossing the Sahara Desert

who pause every few hours in order to let their spirits catch up with them. It seems right that it took my brother four days to arrive at the place he would be buried. Right that he came across the country in a casket the colour of the sky.

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The hospice where I worked for over twenty years has been paved over and is now a parking lot. The chestnut trees that lined the street outside the patients' rooms are gone, along with the wild cherry trees that bloomed each February in a kind of mockery of winter. The old hospice, or Bay Pavilion as it was called, was a one-storey horseshoe-shaped building built around a garden. These days they call hospice gardens healing gardens. Back in 1985 the garden made no such claims; a gardener's garden, its *raison d'être* was to revel in its own beauty. For some patients it was the garden of their childhood; for others, it was the garden they wished they had always had.

In one of the rooms facing the courtyard, cherry blossoms blew in through the open window and fell on a sleeping woman. I remember looking at her pale skin and black hair and thinking she looked like Snow White in a Red Cross bed. Her window, like all the others on the unit, was kept slightly open to allow the spirit to leave.

One summer night a patient asked to be wheeled outside in her hospital bed to sleep beneath the stars.

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Derived from the Latin *hospitium*, meaning both "host" and "guest," hospice is an idea as well as a place. When I looked up the root for "hospitality" I misread "friendliness to guests" as "friendliness to ghosts," and thought that was not entirely inaccurate. It has been said, by those who can see, that the dead walk the corridors holding hands: mothers with daughters, brothers, grandfathers, wives waiting for their husbands, and others nobody knows who are just there waiting.

In North America, we don't quite know what to do with our dead. We plant trees and engrave the names of our loved ones on memorial benches overlooking the ocean; we gather as families to scatter the

ashes but are not quite prepared for their weight and texture or for the way the wind doesn't disperse them as we had imagined. In movies, human ashes seem more like stardust; the bright dust, in the night sky, we imagined as children.

The reality is somewhat different. When we scattered my mother's ashes off the dock in front of the Cannery Seafood Restaurant on Burrard Inlet they didn't lift in an ethereal manner; rather, they turned a luminescent green as they sank in the water and swirled downwards. It appeared as if my mother had turned into a fish and left us abruptly with a flash of her new emerald scales.

Some of us are more pragmatic than others. One woman, a potter, whose father died at hospice, mixed his ashes into wet clay and shaped him into a set of coffee mugs.

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The lilies my mother threw out would have been *lilium longiflorum*; trumpet-shaped flowers native to the Ryukyu Islands of Japan. The lilies that are mentioned in the Bible as the white-robed apostles of hope found growing in the Garden of Gethsemane after Christ's crucifixion. Lilies that were said to have sprung up where drops of blood fell.

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It is a complicated thing to be employed to help people die. On one hand it is a job, a way of paying the mortgage and supporting a family; on the other, people who work with the dying are doing the work that was traditionally done by families. Tolstoy wrote, in *War and Peace*, that if a relative was sick, the custom was to seek professional care; but when a loved one was dying, the custom was to send the professionals away and care for the dying within the family. These days, the dying are most often cared for by intimate strangers.

It was not unusual, when I worked with a nurse on the palliative response team, to be called to see a patient at home in the middle of the night. We would spot the house a block away by the light glowing from one of the bedrooms; most often, there was an oxygen sign on the door with a red line through it to indicate no smoking. *Blood of the*

*lamb*, only this time signifying the house had not been passed over. Because we arrived at a time of crisis, all formalities dropped away; we were, in those hours, the closest people on earth to the family. Time slowed, the way it does in crisis, the neighbourhood slept on. Death was a presence that shared the night with us; not the grim reaper or the black angel, not the rider on his pale horse or Allah's Azra'il. It was something quieter than that. It was in the rocking branches and in the voice serenading; it entered us from the soles of our feet.

In some strange way we needed death's presence on our visits to the dying. There are no words in English to explain this; the closest, in Spanish, is *el duende*, the spirit of evocation. "The duende," wrote Federico García Lorca, "is a power, not a work. It is a struggle, not a thought." Working with the dying is not solely a question of ability *but of true, living style, of blood, of the most ancient culture, of spontaneous creation.*

In order to do the work, it was necessary to call upon everything: weeks spent at sea; the arrivals in new ports at dawn, the departures; books I had read; strangers whose lives intersected with mine; roosters that crowed at noon and rifles that fired at midnight to bring in the New Year; the grain elevators where my brother shot squab and the trains that arrived at the yards with their golden cargo; the war stories my mother told me; a song, one night, rising from a burnt church. What I learned in school, to put it simply, was not particularly helpful.

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I was fifteen years younger than my brother. He left home when I was just a kid. I remember his black hair and chiselled cheekbones and the way he bounded up the stairs three at a time. When he was a student, he took me to the room he rented near the university and showed me some empty cages that were built around the outside of the house at ground level. The cages, he told me, were for the gorillas the circus no longer had any use for. It never occurred to me to question him; even now, I can imagine my brother falling asleep to the grunts and hoots and barks of the great apes filling the city night with the sounds of the jungle.

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Language, says ethnobotanist, Wade Davis, is not simply a set of

grammatical rules or a vocabulary, it is a flash of the human spirit. A window of sorts into the cosmology of our individual lives. Pain speaks a number of languages. On one level it needs no translation; on another level it requires that we become translators and interpreters if we are to be of any help. The doctors and nurses who do this work understand the language of pain. They have as many words for pain as one imagines the Bedouin must have for wind (the Inuit, we are now told, have really only twelve words for snow). *Sharp, dull, aching, crushing, searing, tingling, red, white, hot, cold, malevolent, familiar, cat-like, ghost-like, jabbing, nagging, scalding, flickering, ravenous, blinding, shooting, boring, wrenching, nauseating....* For some, it just hurts like hell; for others there are no words at all.

Those who work with the dying must learn to think like the poet who reaches for language the way a child reaches for the moon, believing it can be held in the hand like an orange at the same time it shines on in the night sky.

Many people, in their last days, speak of one thing in terms of another. Metaphor, the engine of poetry, is also the language of the dying. Without metaphor how could we understand the man on his deathbed who tells you a yellow cab has pulled up outside his house and says, even though it has the wrong address, he'll go anyway? Or the woman who asks where she will live when they jackhammer her street? How could we understand the man, dying of leukemia, with four young sons, who tells us he is driving a school bus full of kids and his brakes have failed? How could we see what the woman crouched on her knees on her hospital bed sees when she smiles and tells the doctor she is peeking into heaven? Without metaphor how could we comprehend the Buddhist woman, in the hours before her death, who insists that the heads of all the flowers in her garden be chopped off in case the smell of jasmine, rose, lavender, and lilac hold her back?

The metaphoric language of the dying is the language of the boatman. Derived from the Greek, to transfer or carry across, metaphor is the language of transition: a bit like the falsework of the whole dying process, it holds us up until the crossing is strong enough to get us to the other side. Aristotle believed the use of metaphor was a sign of genius. The dying as geniuses. On some level we know we will all be there one day. Climbing into the yellow cab idling at the front door.

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The twenty-eight year old woman, who slept beneath the stars at the Bay Pavilion, had a rare form of bone cancer. In the days preceding her death, the bones of her ribcage were so brittle that one or two broke whenever she rolled over. For pain she was on a morphine drip with breakthrough doses given subcutaneously through a butterfly in her upper arm. I was new to the work and horrified to learn that our bones could snap like twigs. The counsellor who met with her every day listened to her talk about what it was like to be trapped in her body; together they explored how each bone that broke was an opening; the cage cracking was the only way the woman could fly free. She used morphine to try to get on top of the pain and metaphor to try and understand it.

Of course, things don't always go as planned. One afternoon we were called to the home of a man who was extremely restless. His wife, who had not slept for days, was beside herself. While the nurse drew up a syringe of haldol, I spoke gently to the man telling him it was okay to rest: "you can rest now," I said. He looked at me and lay very still; his wife, overjoyed, couldn't thank me enough. I felt good, even a bit smug, until he motioned his wife over and asked her to call their lawyer. "Why?" she wondered. "Because," he said, pointing at me, "that woman just arrested me." "Whatever works," I thought to myself, "whatever works."

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When I was very young I buried the birds that flew into our windowpanes, and goldfish that floated belly up in their glass bowls, in my backyard. I dug holes with my mother's silver spoons and made little crosses out of Popsicle sticks. I also carried a bouquet of wildflowers and practised walking like a bride. I didn't understand death or sex; it was the solemnity of ceremony that I loved. My first funerals were like weddings.

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Each one of us brings our own beliefs to the work. I came to mine one death at a time. It is not uncommon for there to be periods of restless-

ness shortly before death. In clinical terms it is known as pre-death restlessness and is diagnosed by the medical profession as a kind of delirium brought about by physical changes. I'm not so sure. Over time, it began to appear to me as if the dying ventured out on a kind of test flight; as if they were working hard to figure out how to leave the body. Episodes of agitation were offset by periods of deep stillness, periods in which family members would comment that it felt like their loved one was not there. It was as if the *silver cord* binding the spirit to the body, in the Book of Ecclesiastes, stretched farther and farther until it finally snapped.

Imagine the dying as test pilots: figuring out the best way to recover from spins, breaking the sound barrier, flying straight toward the sun, bailing out when the plane is going down.

In addition to bringing our beliefs to the work, we also bring what we do not yet know about ourselves. We don't know our tolerance level or saturation point. We don't know what enough will look like. A nurse I knew, who burned out after eighteen years on the job, calculated that she had helped over fifteen hundred people die. She left hospice and went to work in labour and delivery where she vowed to deliver fifteen hundred babies before she retired. We don't know that sometimes we will be profoundly moved by the beauty of a death and other times we will be horrified by the reality. There were nights, after a difficult shift, when I would take my clothes off and drop them outside the bedroom door. Nights I didn't want to touch my children. Once, after a visit where the smell of death was too strong, the nurse I was with stopped the car, got out, and buried her face in a lilac bush.

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I visited my brother's grave, for the first time, thirty years after he died. I went with my mother and sister to the cemetery only to find it had just been mowed; all the flat headstones were covered in grass and impossible to read. In a sea of green my mother sat down on a broken red bench in front of her son. I don't know if we found him or he found us. It doesn't matter. Our first experiences with loss shape us in ways we don't understand at the time. I had no idea, when I studied social work and went to work at a local hospice, that I was trying to site grief

through the scope of my past experience. I needed to find my way out of the basement.

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A friend of mine, who works with the dying, says she does the work in a state of constant forgetting. "It is not enough to have memories," wrote Rilke, "you must be able to forget them when they are many, and you must have the immense patience to wait for them to return." We forget in order for the work to go on; at the same time, we go on with the dead inside us. My brother, the woman whose bones snapped like twigs, the man climbing into the yellow cab. My mother. The innumerable others.

I left hospice after two decades. For a long time, it was not just work; it was a calling. Not a religious call, although one can't do the work without a deep sense of the mystery that surrounds the dying; rather, it was the thing I did that made me feel most alive. Like writing poetry. Hopkins referred to the state of being aware, responsive, and open as *the taste of the self*. A state, paradoxically, in which we are fully present at the same time we disappear. To work with the dying was to enter the darkness without a map of the way home. It was to merge, briefly, with something greater than ourselves; to accompany them as far as possible and to stand alone under the stars they disappeared into.