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# Driving with the Dead: Stories of Loss, Journey, and Wonder

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DRIVING WITH THE DEAD: STORIES OF LOSS, JOURNEY, AND WONDER

A culminating project submitted to the faculty of Dominican University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Masters of Arts in Humanities

by

Valerie Silver  
San Rafael, California  
April 21, 2015

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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the Chair of the Master's program, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of Department of Humanities in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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## ABSTRACT

We humans —across time, cultures, and geography— struggle with the awareness of our own mortality. Rather than accept finitude, we embrace ideas of boundlessness and perpetuity, and perceive ourselves as beings in constant motion, as *travelers*, in life as well as in death. We rely on metaphors of inner and outer journey to express life challenges and opportunities, and envision our deceased to be similarly *en route*: crossing over, passing on, ascending or descending, and, ultimately —hopefully— transcending to some higher realm. My culminating project explores the relationships between bereavement and journey, mourning and wonder. It is a collection of loosely-linked, non-fiction narratives using motifs of travel and transportation to consider the complex and creative ways in which the living interact with the dead. Managing loss and making peace with impermanence is a timeless and universal human pursuit. Story, art, memory, imagination, and metaphor are tools we can use to help traverse this unmappable terrain.

Dedication



To my mother and father, always traveling alongside me.

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## Introduction

A year after my mother's passing, I attended a bereavement workshop offered by the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center. On the final meeting of our six-week session, we six participants tentatively approached the subject of afterlife, or at least the spectrum of possibilities associated with afterlife. This led some of us to volunteer stories about experiences of "feeling a presence" or "hearing a voice" of a deceased loved one. Each tale was true, yet as inexplicable to the teller as it was to us listeners. I felt honored to be trusted with such private stories, but more than that, I felt transformed by the seminal place each story held in the life of its teller.

Remarkably, three of the stories shared on that day took place inside automobiles; mine, about my dead father's last request, was among them. At the time, I noted this coincidence of cars with interest and began to wonder how many other people might also have had experiences of "driving with the dead." As my story linked with others' stories, a sort of alchemy transpired. Themes of mourning, transportation, and wonder began swirling inside my head. Was there something about the self-contained, private space of automobiles or the forward momentum of travel that encourages memory, imagination, or mystery to bring us into closer proximity to those we have lost? How do metaphors of journey speak to the human condition, and how might stories of transit and journey help us keep our bearings during times of loss?

Philosopher Gabriel Marcel observed, "It is of the soul and of the soul alone that we can say with supreme truth that "being" necessarily means "being on the way (en route)." Whether or not you believe in the existence of the soul, it is in human nature to regard ourselves as beings in motion, perpetual and boundless. Even with our built-in awareness of mortality, we are generally

ill-equipped to fathom our own non-being. We embrace instead metaphors of motion and transit to express our life experiences: we follow our paths, cross bridges when we come to them, travel down life's highway, and embark on inner or outward journeys. And a majority of us perceive our dead to be similarly in motion: passing on, crossing over, descending or ascending, traveling alongside us, or, hopefully, transcending toward some higher realm.

It is in this spirit of being *en route*, in life as well as in death, that I offer these writings. This project explores the mercurial landscapes of bereavement and their unexpected junctures between the living and the dead. All of these stories are true, though some may push the boundaries of belief. The majority of these pieces are grounded in the everyday world of love and loss, and feature literal comings and goings involving real forms of transportation: cars, trains, ladders, chariots and rocket ships. The first section, *Cars*, presents a series of brief, personal accounts —my own and those generously given to me by others— about vehicles as places of sanctuary, connection, healing, and unexpected revelations. The second section, *Trains*, is denser in tone and wider ranging in content. It moves beyond the personal to the communal, and features historical events and figures. The final section, *Ladders, Chariots, and Rockets*, expands its perspective to the universal, to consider themes of art, spirituality, and wonder. The sections presented here are selections from a larger work in progress. In exploring the diverse, creative, and complex ways in which we interact with our dead, I have come to understand that no one truly grieves alone. I wish you solace on your journey.

## PART ONE: CARS

## My Father's Voice

The spring after my father died, I was heading home down a long stretch of Highway 5, Portland to Santa Rosa. Driving on mental auto-pilot, an hour passed, then two or three, green miles rolling by me. That is when I heard it, a voice from somewhere not on any map: "I want my boy bar mitzvah-ed," it said. The Philadelphia accent was unmistakable, my father's tone was kind, but unequivocal. As if this were the most natural request in the world. As if I were raised an observant Jew. As if my socially-challenged seven-year-old would rejoice at attending religious school. As if *bar mitzvah* was verb and not a noun.

I should have felt awe, I should have felt wonder, and I did... and I still do. But in that moment of hearing Dad's voice, what I felt most was thrown for a loop. How would I, a secular Jew, possibly prepare this kind of path for my son? How could I, a *spiritual-not-religious* person, join a synagogue without feeling like an outsider, or worse, an impostor? My first response to my father's pronouncement was to try to negotiate for a different outcome. "Why are you telling me this now?" I pleaded. "You won't even be there."

But the dead are hard bargainers. As soon as that thought left my mind, the revelation came. Of course he would "be" there. Wasn't he here right now, asking me to do this thing I did not know how to do? I was so busy arguing with the message that I had overlooked the miracle of the messenger. If Dad had found a way to ask this of me, he must have had a pretty good reason or at least a vantage point that I could not fully appreciate. I knew in that moment that I would find a way to honor my father's request even if I didn't have a clue how to go about doing

it. I knew in that moment that I had been given a tremendous gift, but also a tremendous responsibility.

In life, Dad was an exceptionally generous man. He always followed his loved ones' interests keenly and surprised them with books, videos, items, or outings to support and fuel their passions. In this case, he gave both his devoted yet resistant daughter and his clever yet distractible grandson the great gift of a running head start to pursue the improbable path he had set us upon. It took me five years of approach and avoidance before I could join a synagogue. It took my little redhead the same five years to settle down enough to embrace the idea of Hebrew school. All that while, the story of Poppie's voice remained our guiding light, our motivation, our talisman, our promise to keep.

My son was on the cusp of twelve years old when we finally knocked on the synagogue door. Late in the game or not, we were welcomed by a learned, irreverent redheaded teacher named Marcia, a self-proclaimed ADHD adult with a background in special education. She taught us early on that each of us finds our own Jewish path at our own pace; some may find meaning in the letters of the Torah, others may find it in the white fire swirling around the letters. Among other things, Marcia revealed that her Hebrew name was *Moishe*, which translates to Moses, an extremely rare name for a Jewish female. *Moishe* was also my father's Hebrew name. I could not help but feel that from Moses to Moses my son had been delivered. It had taken some years of wandering, but finally we had arrived in exactly the right place at exactly the right time.

The day of Bryce's bar mitzvah was joyous beyond expectation. He read from the Torah, chanted in Hebrew, and gave a sermon which wrestled with the nature of God. From the bimah, I told the story of hearing my late father's voice while driving down the interstate, how his

unexpected words had sent us on a journey we would not have otherwise embarked upon; opened our eyes to wonder, and set us on an ever-deepening path of gratitude for a community and a heritage we were only just beginning to discover.

\*

It has now been eleven years since I heard my father's voice, but the gift of that singular event continues to reverberate in my life. If it wasn't for Dad pointing me in the direction of the synagogue, I never would have attended the bereavement workshop which first inspired the creation of this project; I would never had had my ear so finely tuned for stories about driving with the dead.

Writer Barry Lopez said, "the stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive." My father was my first storyteller, and I believe he saved his best one for last, for the time when I would need it most. And like all good stories, this one has no true ending. I will do my best to care for it. And give it away as it is needed.

## Car Lights

My sister likes to tell that one of the last things my father did before his illness confined him to bed was buy a new car for my mother. That way, Mom would have one less thing to worry about later.

### I.

The first time the lights went on was shortly after my father died. My mother went down to the garage one morning and found the room eerily lit. The little Volvo was ablaze with light: headlights, brake lights, dome lights, all. Awed and a little bit rattled, Mom rushed for the control panel to turn everything off. She quickly recalled that in this new car, the electrical system was fully automatic; only the ignition key could turn the lights on or off. She went upstairs to fetch her keys, turned the engine on, then off again. The lights dimmed right on cue. To make certain, she repeated the sequence: on, then off again. No battery drain. Everything seemed back to normal. Mom sat for a moment, collected her thoughts, then went inside to call me. “Your dad,” she said when I picked up the phone, “is funny.”

### II.

The second time the lights went on was four years later, following my uncle’s memorial service. Alan was seventeen years younger my Mom, more like her son than her sibling. Her grief was profound. Though Alan’s send-off was celebratory, his ending had been stunning. No one is supposed to die while trying to rescue his dog from a train.

It was late dusk in Santa Barbara when the service let out. The fog was just settling in. My mother, sister, and I wandered the field-turned-parking to look for my mother’s silver car. We



weren't lost exactly, but without bearings among the makeshift rows of mourner's cars. At last we came upon our small sedan, obscured behind a passenger van. From its headlamps and windows streamed long shafts of light, radiance beaming north, south, east, and west. Outward and upward. For a moment in that clodded field, we exhaled. We gave ourselves over to those particles of light: lifting, floating, dissolving imperceptibly into darkness.

## The Contents of a Car

It took a month after our mother's passing for my sister and me to approach the contents of her unused car. Like any other time capsule, this one held an assortment of items both useful and decorative; it spoke of a particular life at a particular time and place; it held stories for posterity. In the blink of an eye, my sister and I had become posterity.

It took both of us together to unlatch the passenger door, breathe in the stagnant lavender air and take a look inside. This is what we found:

- One black brocade jacket, petite medium
- one wide-brimmed cloth sun hat
- one purple chenille knit hat
- four pair of knit gloves
- lavender eye mask
- floral yoga mat
- soft pillow
- four pairs of reading glasses
- one light-up magnifying glass
- *A Small, Big Life* by Dean Koonz.
- *Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*
- loose change: pennies and dimes mostly
- Newman's Own wintergreen mints
- stoned wheat crackers in a baggie
- woven lavender ribbon wand
- floral kleenex tissue holder
- small wicker basket
- three floral pens
- travel umbrella
- business cards
- note paper
- bandaids
- nail file
- Roluids

For me, each item we sorted, each decision of what to keep and what to pass along, represented a further dismantling of my mother's life. To disperse and rearrange her possessions was to disperse and rearrange her presence in our lives. If not for my sister's determined efficiency, I would have considered and cataloged each item in that car with the reverence of a curator handling relics from a holy site. Instead, I quickly jotted down words and saved them for some future use. Then I moved on to the next item and the next, because that is what the living do: we stay in motion, we make decisions, we navigate our grief; we try as hard as we can to shape some substance from our sorrow, invent new ways to hold on to the things we have to let go of.

## Driving with the Dead

My sister drives around Sebastopol with a snapshot of our mother on the passenger seat beside her. Mom, at 80, was beautiful in her purple corduroy jacket and freshwater pearls. She was smiling unselfconsciously for my camera, a rarity in her post-Bell's Palsy years. In life, our mother was not much of a traveler, but since her memorial service three years ago, she has been continually on the go. She and my sister completed a 2000 mile road trip to British Columbia two summers ago, their companionable silence punctuated with podcasts of book talks, soundtracks of show tunes, assorted CDs. Early on, when I gently teased my sister about her new driving partner, she responded, "I like having her near me." That was all she needed to say.

Although my sister had no intention of making our mother's photograph a permanent installation on her passenger seat, grief traffics in mysteries. While Lorie was transporting a stack of items home from Mom's memorial service, she noticed this small portrait smiling up at her. She liked it and set it apart from the others to look at later. When the rest of items came into the house, that image stayed behind inside the car.

Over time, I've come to accept this photograph in its simple plastic casing as a sort of traveling altar, a loving and protective icon clocking the miles alongside my sister. Still, on the infrequent occasions when I drive with my sister in her car, I am surprised anew to see our mother's face looking up at me. "Hi Mom," I say as I transfer her photograph from its esteemed position in the front seat to a comfortable spot in the back. I am always truly happy to see her. She is beaming. She is beautiful. She likes it when her daughters take a drive around town together.

Mrs. Zoerner's Compass

Plastic Jesus

I don't care if it  
Rains or freezes  
As long as I've got my  
Plastic Jesus  
Riding on the dashboard  
Of my car

Through my trials  
And tribulations  
And my travels  
Through the nation  
With my plastic Jesus  
I'll go far

~Ed Rush and George Cromarty

Many of us believe or wish to believe that in this lifetime, we do not travel alone. A significant number of Americans display saints and other protective guardians on automobile dashboards, visors, or rearview mirrors. Where I live in Northern California, Buddha, Quan Yin, or totem animals are just as likely as Jesus, Saint Christopher, or the Virgin of Guadalupe to ride alongside us. Collectively, these historic and mythic deities travel hundreds of thousands of miles a year on national roads and highways. Individually, they remind us of where we have come from or where we may be headed; they sanctify our vehicular spaces; they help us keep our bearings.

My earliest memory of driving with a saint occurred during my mid-century Southern California childhood. Our neighbor Mrs. Zoerner had an ivory-colored plastic Mary at the helm of her Town and Country station wagon. Mary rode front and center upon the dashboard, arms

outstretched, palms open, head bowed reverently. She was also perched directly above the car's compass, a glossy plastic globe with a floating dial which oscillated each time the car shifted lanes or turned a corner. From my Jewish, six-year-old, backseat vantage point, Mary was otherworldly and mysterious. Her downcast eyes seemed to guide the movement of the cardinal directions. Even though Mrs. Zoerner was clearly behind the wheel, I somehow felt that Mary was in charge of the car's true destination. The one thing I did not understand was why she seemed so sorrowful about her powers of navigation.

## Nancy's Kaddish

Down and back, down and back. A loop de loop, a lifeline. Twenty years of Saturday drives, fifty Saturdays each year. Nancy loved her mother. She rarely minded the time it took to go from Healdsburg to Rohnert Park, Rohnert Park to home again. She liked the motion of the miles and the circular routine; she liked the way the highway linked together town with town, mother with daughter, Saturdays to Saturdays, as if they would go on forever.

Each time Nancy visited her mother at the senior living complex, Diane would greet her in the lobby, eager to get the show on the road. A trip to Costco was always high on her list, as she could never resist the pizza or hot dog samples offered freely in the grocery section. After an afternoon of noshing and browsing, shopping and laughing, mother would treat daughter to an early dinner at the Olive Garden. They would both order the minestrone soup and salad combo, and split a piece of cheesecake for dessert.

In the twentieth year of Saturday visits, life as they knew it spun down a blind alley. Diane became ill and Nancy became the one to plan and decide. Pastimes of errands and eating were overtaken by concerns of healthcare and comfort. Drives around town became walks down the hallway, gradually settling into bedside arrangements.

After her mother's difficult passing, Nancy became as a displaced person, unsettled and anxious in the vastness of Saturdays. On one of these days, racked with restless longing, Nancy got into her car, drove to Rohnert Park, got off at her customary exit, turned around, and

came back home again. Inside she felt just a little bit crazy, but her grieving self had found a gear to slip into, a remembered rhythm it needed to pursue. Southbound. Northbound. Off-ramp variations. The rolling miles became a ritual prayer. In this way, Nancy mourned her mother: summer, fall, winter, spring, until a cycle of Saturdays had been driven and accounted for.



## Marilyn's Friend

My friend Marilyn has a girlfriend who converses regularly with her late mother, but only while driving alone in the car. The chats are usually brief, slipped in-between runs to the bank or the grocery store. Rosalind checks in with her mom about her day just as she always had, updates her on the latest goings-ons, asks for guidance when she needs it. Often, I was told, she gets answers. What is most remarkable to me about these conversations is how routine they have become in Rosalind's life. She has found a way to accommodate the loss of her mother while continuing their immutable bond.

Marilyn, knowing about the loss that I carry since my own mother's death, asked me if I ever talk to her.

"Still too hard," I said.

"You might try," she gently shrugged, as if nothing more could possibly be lost. The problem is, I have tried. And continue to try. And when I do, it is my mother's absence and not her presence which spills into me. Talking *to* my mother, I have discovered, requires an entirely different skill set than thinking *of* my mother or talking *about* her to other people. Even after three years, I can't much get beyond the following three phrases: "Hi Mom," "Thanks, Mom," and, "I love you." Even the words, "I miss you," though not unlike, "I love you," almost always choke in my throat. Sentences more complex than that and the conversation pretty much falters.

I envy my friend's friend her easy loquaciousness, her ability to converse with her mother's spirit, to pick up where they last left off traveling down the road in her Oldsmobile. I am saddened to be so tongue-tied with my own mother, especially since talking, for us, was a

nightly routine. Could it be that it is as hard for her to find the words as it is for me? Perhaps this is just something which will evolve over time or requires techniques which I haven't yet developed. Of course, there is always the possibility that spoken words will never be our common language. Perhaps we will find our way back to each other through dreams, old movies, pink camellias, or children's books. Or maybe my mother has been patiently waiting for me to discover what she had been trying to tell me all along, that my voice has always been here, tucked inside the curving black letters of the alphabet, waiting for the right time to arrange itself upon the printed page.

## Jen's Dog

Allie the cocker spaniel was Jennifer's childhood pet. When the beloved dog was advanced in age and ill of health, Jen received a pre-dawn, long distance call from her parents in Southern California. They would be putting Allie to sleep that day. Jen showered, wept, got ready for work. It was her day to drive carpool with her housemate John, but she was in no shape to drive. John volunteered. His car was parked on a narrow lane around the corner from their Sausalito apartment. They walked the deserted, early morning streets in silence.

When they arrived at John's car, Jen glanced at an unfamiliar truck parked just behind them. In its passenger seat sat a cocker spaniel, a twin to Allie in every way: the deep honey color, the bouffant hairdo, the straight, tall, alert posture. At first, Jen thought she was seeing things. She had never seen this dog or the truck in the neighborhood before. The owner was nowhere in sight.

"John... is there a dog in the cab of that truck behind us?"

"Yep."

"Is it a cocker spaniel dog?"

"Yes."

"I am not hallucinating?"

"No."

Jen felt all at once at peace. Her tears, a surge of gratitude. It was as if Allie, via canine proxy, had come to say goodbye to her. After that morning, neither the truck nor the spaniel were seen in the neighborhood again.

## Stop! Sit!

### I. The Deer Lady

One night as I was lighting luminarias at an annual cemetery event, a mother who had recently lost her grown son recounted the following story:

“I was driving on a foggy night, nearing a bend in the road with a lot of trees. I was turning into the curve when I heard my son’s voice shout, ‘Stop the car!’ His tone was so urgent that I pulled to the side of the road immediately. Right then, a herd of deer crossed in front of me. It was unbelievable. My heart was pounding, so I sat there for a while. When I was calm again, I started the car. I drove a short distance, then heard my son’s voice shout again, ‘Stop the car!’ I got onto the shoulder. More deer bounded out in front of me. After the last one crossed, I heard, ‘Okay now.’ I would have been in a wreck if my son hadn’t warned me. Maybe I would have died. I felt him so close around me. Surrounding me with love. Protecting me.”

### II. Judith’s Grandfather

Forty years ago, late at night on Highway 10, an elderly driver was weaving erratically, her acceleration ranging from fifteen to forty miles per hour. Judith was trying to keep her distance when the car in front of her rear ended the old woman’s car. Judith swerved in time for the left side of her front bumper to hit the right side of the rear bumper in front of her. Both vehicles came to a stop. Judith was in the act of unbuckling her seat belt to get out of the car when she heard her Grandfather’s voice boom in her ear, “Sit down!!” She did as she was told. The next instant, her Toyota was rammed from behind. Her car was totaled and she remained

alive. She knew it would have been otherwise if her dear grandfather, gone since her childhood—the one who had taught her to read in his old-world, book-filled study— had not commanded her to stay exactly where she was.

## Doctor Joe

It was 1954. Kate's older brother Joe had recently been accepted to Stanford for his medical residency. In the waning days of his internship, he was called to attend in the emergency room after a thirteen car collision on Interstate 5. After working through a thirty-six hour shift, twenty-seven year old Joe collapsed and died from undiagnosed coronary heart disease.

Decades later, Kate was headed south on a different freeway to visit her mother in the hospital. She was consumed with worry because a biopsy had just revealed two malignancies in her mother's colon. Kate told me that while she was driving, she had a sense of her brother's voice reassuring her that everything was going to be okay. "I don't know how to describe it: I felt his presence in the passenger seat. I couldn't see him or hear him, but his presence was tangible...like I could reach over and touch him."

Even with the comfort of Joe's nearness, Kate remembers being a bit unsettled by his message. She wanted to ask him, what do you mean that everything will be *okay*? Okay as in Mom will live through this health scare, or okay as in she will soon be joining you in heaven? But no further explanation was forthcoming.

It turned out that Kate's mother made a full recovery and lived in relatively good health until she was eighty nine years old. Even now, Kate marvels at this unbidden encounter with her brother's spirit, and the 100% accuracy of his prognosis.

## Kevin Dreams of Cars

My friend Kevin doesn't for a moment believe in traveling souls or any form of afterlife. Nonetheless, she generously gave me these stories to tell because they happened to her and they are absolutely true.

### Dream I:

Kevin and her mother are driving alone together in a car, deep in conversation. She is telling her mom that it was wrong that she had died and left them. If they had to lose a parent, Kevin reasoned, it should have been their father. "We can live without him, but we can't live without you."

Her mother considered this for moment, then listed all the reasons it had to be the way that it was. Kevin remembers not a single item from that list, but awoke from the dream with a feeling of acceptance and understanding which she carries with her to this day.

### Dream II.

In this scene, Kevin is driving with her late grandmother. They are on a coastal road, perhaps Hwy. 1 in northern California. The scenery is breathtaking. Kevin is telling her grandmother how much she misses her. As they talk, her grandmother begins to fade away, first her body, then her bones. It is a very natural progression, and not in the least disturbing. When the bones finish their disintegration, Kevin gathers them in her arms and lifts them to the winds. They disburse to everywhere. Her dreams ends there.

### III. Driving, Not Dreaming

A week after Kevin's mother died, she was driving in the car with her five-year-old daughter. From the back seat, Kylie said, "Grandma's watching over me. She has her hand on my shoulder."

"Okay," Kevin shrugged good-naturedly, and continued driving down the road.



## Betsy's Dad

Betsy's dad loved cars. In his youth, he raced stock cars and later refurbished everything from 1940s coupes to 1970s dune buggies. In 1951, he purchased his pride and joy, a 1948 woody station wagon. He drove that car for 45 years. When he knew the end of his life was near, he sold the woody on a Wednesday, went to bed, and died the following Sunday.

That was in 1996. When it came time to disburse her dad's ashes, Betsy flew out from Colorado, rented a Subaru at the airport and drove herself home to Santa Ynez. The family agreed that they would scatter Syd's ashes around his favorite places in the Valley. They waited until dusk for their clandestine adventure. Betsy got behind the wheel and her elderly mom sat in the passenger seat with the container of ashes propped up on her lap. Betsy drove slowly around town, retracing her dad's favorite walking routes, while her mother dispersed lid-fulls of ashes from her rolled down window.

By the time they arrived home it was misty and dark. The two women headed inside to make dinner. When they came out to the car the next morning, they noticed that the length of the passenger side was emblazoned with ashes. They knew they should have been horrified, but with Syd's love of cars and his famously dry sense of humor, the banner of ashes seemed exactly right. Mother and daughter got into the Subaru and drove 75 miles to meet with their estate lawyer. Clearly, Dad was coming along for the ride.

## Rikka's Mom

Rikka and Patrick lived as caretakers for Rikka's mom for the last few years of her life. Whenever the three of them drove anywhere together, it was customary for Rikka and Patrick to sit in the front seat, while Mom in her car coat sat in the middle of the backseat, bracing herself so she wouldn't get carsick, each hand clutching an opposite door handle.

When the day came to pick up Mom's ashes from the mortuary, Rikka and Patrick were presented with a red velvet bag. As if there were no other option imaginable, Patrick placed the velvet bag on the back seat, in the middle, and buckled it in. He covered it with Mom's car coat and off they drove, home again, the three of them.

## The Dispossessed

They traveled by flatbed truck, by wheel barrow, and by handcart: stone angels, Jesuses, virgins and saints; solar lamps, wind chimes, banners and whirligigs; deer statues and dog statues, bird statues and frog statues; hearts, teddybears, trophies and trains; handmade signs and messages on paper; *look for rainbows* painted on stone. Alongside the hearse, alongside the shovels, alongside the mowers and trimmers and blowers, they line shelves by the hundreds: mementos of mourning in silent communion, an unintended altar banished from view.

The presence of these now-sequestered items once transformed Pleasant Hills from a “burial park” to a place of solace. The angels and the solar lamps, the stone frogs and the butterflies reminded us that bereavement had a thousand faces, that no one truly grieves alone. These altars humanized this place, heartened us, and held our stories.

Their recent exile came at the behest of Management to “preserve the beauty and aesthetics of the cemetery,” and “ensure the safety of those who visit and those who maintain it.” In spite of the professed intent, the mass dislocation of these items from grave sites to utility shed have profoundly altered the aesthetics of the cemetery. The lawns are bereft. The dead still rest beneath them, but their mourners have been dispossessed.

Although a brochure created to explain the policy change purports to understand “the desire of families to pay tribute to their loved ones,” it fails to understand the desires of mourning: to sustain relationships, cultivate stories, commune with the dead. Artifacts of bereavement --however humble, weathered, or kitschy-- are not merely tributes, but expressions of how we manage loss. They are objects sanctified by grief; symbols and deeds of hearts broken

open. They inhabit a world beyond the safety of manicured lawns, beyond logic, beyond words, beyond prayers. They hold reverence that can never be wheeled away, beauty beyond what the eye can see. They are envoys of the inexpressible: *you are somewhere I cannot be; may this offering carry my love to you; may this offering be a bridge between here and there.*

## PART TWO: TRAINS

## Death to Reach a Star

*While we are alive we cannot get to a star, any more than when we are dead we can take the train.*

~Vincent Van Gogh

*Carousel*, the Broadway musical by Roger and Hammerstein, is a 1945 adaptation of Ferenc Molnar's 1909 play, *Liliom*. Before the American team set the story to music, German director Fritz Lang created a darkly comic, stylized film of the play in 1934. In both adaptations, the main character is a carousel barker from the wrong side of the tracks who does not seek but achieves redemption years after his death. In the Lang film, Liliom takes his own life after a failed robbery and is transported to the afterlife on a high-speed art deco train. In *Carousel*, carnary Billy Bigelow accidentally dies on his own knife in an attempted mugging. The 1958 film version of *Carousel* opens in a deep blue twilight with Billy sitting high atop a ladder, spit-polishing stars on the outskirts of heaven.

\*

Painter Vincent Van Gogh considered one of the great, eternal questions to be: "is life completely visible to us, or isn't it rather that this side of death we see one hemisphere only?" In one of his many remarkable letters to his brother Theo, Van Gogh mused about stargazing, travel, life, death, and immortality: "to look at the stars always makes me dream, as simply as I dream over the black dots of a map representing towns and villages. Why, I ask myself, should the shining dots of the sky not be as accessible as the black dots on the map of France? If we take the train to get to Tarascon or Rouen, we take death to reach a star."

## King's Cross Station

In the concluding book about the fantastical world of Harry Potter, author J.K. Rowling chooses King's Cross railway station as the setting for an afterlife conversation between the newly "slain" Harry and his deceased headmaster Dumbledore. Upon his arrival to the light-infused waiting area, Harry looks around, unsure of his bearings, unsure whether he is dead or alive, coming or going.

A lengthy conversation between Harry and Dumbledore ensues. At its conclusion, Harry realizes that he is more alive than dead, but still in an in-between place. Dumbledore reminds him that he still has a choice to make:

"We are in King's Cross, you say? I think that if you decided not to go back, you would be able to...let's say...board a train."

"And where would it take me?"

"On," said Dumbledore simply.

With just a few words, Rowling suggests the possibility that choices about afterlife can be a conscious decision. In so doing, the author celebrates powers of human imagination. Before the mist descends and envelops Dumbledore altogether, Harry decides to return to life rather than board the train *onward*. Before he goes, he poses a final question to his now ethereal headmaster:

"Tell me one last thing," said Harry. "Is this real? Or has it all been happening inside my head?"

"Of course it is happening inside of your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?"

## Neudörfl Station

*In the unconscious region of the soul we are speaking continually with the dead.*

~Rudolf Steiner

Neudörfl, Austria, 1867: A young boy sits alone on a long wooden bench in a railway station waiting room. Perhaps he is reading a book. Perhaps he is daydreaming. A heavy door opens and an unfamiliar woman walks in. She approaches the boy and says, “Try to help me as much as you can --now, as well as in later life.” She turns away, walks into the wood-burning stove and disappears.

The boy later learned that a distant female relative had taken her own life that day at the approximate time as his train station visitation. He did not tell his parents of his encounter for fear of they would not believe him. In fact, Rudolf Steiner would not speak publicly of this event for almost 45 years. When he finally did, before an audience of hundreds, he declared it to be one of the pivotal moments of his lifetime, the exact instant when the world of “Creative Beings behind the world” opened up to him.

This son of a rural stationmaster grew up to become an acclaimed philosopher, writer, lecturer, architect, artist, spiritualist, and Goethe scholar. Much of his later esoteric teachings explored karma, Christianity and the experience of the afterlife. He is best known today as the founder of Waldorf Education and biodynamic farming. From his early train station vision to the last day of his life, Rudolf Steiner believed unwaveringly in the unity of the seen and unseen worlds. He dedicated his life trying to discover the scientific foundations of consciousness and



the non-material world, areas many neuroscientists are avidly exploring today, more than one hundred years later.

In 2011, a Rudolf Steiner Celebration Train journeyed from Cologne, Germany to Vienna, Austria, in honor of the spiritualist philosopher's 150th birthday. The train made several stops along its route to celebrate significant places in Steiner's life. One such stop was the Neudorfl railway station. There, a modest plaque dedicated in 1928 hangs above the doorway: "In this house there grew up in the child the foundations of his spiritual world."

## To Treblinka

It is told that a hymn affirming faith in the coming of the Messiah was sung by hundreds of Jews being transported by train to Nazi death camps. Yitzchak Dorfman writes that the most affecting and lyrical version of the centuries-old verse, *Ani Ma'amin*, is attributable to Reb Azriel David Fastag, who “reportedly composed the tune in a cattle car while being taken to Treblinka.”

Fastag was known in Warsaw for his lucent voice, especially melodic at the high holy days when he and his brothers sang the liturgy in synagogue. It is told that during his deportation from the Warsaw Ghetto, amidst the stench of death and overcrowded humanity, Fastag closed his eyes and saw the words of the twelfth principle of Jewish faith appear in his mind. From this vision came a melody, which he first hummed, then sang. From Fastag’s lips, the tune spread from car to car, taken up by all who were able: *Ani Ma'amin b'Emuna Sheleima, b'vias HaMoshiach; v'af al pi she'yismamaya, im kol zeh, achakeh lo b'chol yom she'yavo*; “I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the *Moshiach*; and even though he may tarry, I wait each day for his coming.”

It may be asked how a people headed for annihilation could believe with perfect faith in anything. Perhaps this is a song not only about believing in the Messiah, but also about the human necessity of having something to believe in. Implicit in the hope for a messiah is the hope for continuity, for a better future, for a moment beyond this moment, beyond suffering; if the Messiah is still to come, then the story isn't over yet.

Perhaps it wasn't the words or meaning of *Ani Ma'amin* that mattered most of all to those who sang it on the death trains. Perhaps it was the quality of the melody or the capacity of music to transcend the here and now. Or perhaps it was the very act of humming or singing, the lifting up of voices together at a time when the known world, including language and meaning, had been turned upside down. Maybe what mattered most in the singing of *Ani Ma'amin* was to be heard, to be known by one another; to *not* feel utterly forsaken.

## Clattering Train

Who is in charge of the clattering train?  
The axles creak and the couplings strain...  
and the pace is hot and the points are near,  
and sleep hath deadened the driver's ear,  
and the signals flash through the night in vain.  
For death is in charge of the clattering train.

~Edwin J. Milliken

(From "Death and his Brother Sleep," as quoted by Winston Churchill on the floor of the House of Commons, March 19, 1935, during a debate on the escalating air power of Nazi Germany).

Without the committed participation of the the German railway, *Deutsche Reichsbahn*, the transport and extermination of over three million Jews and Roma from Nazi-occupied Europe would have been impossible. What is little known to this day is that every Jewish "passenger" had to pay for his or her own tickets in order to board the train. According to BBC journalist Tristina Moore, "Adult prisoners and children over four were charged a fare - four pfennigs per km for adults, two pfennigs for children - earning the railway millions of marks. From 1941, trainloads of 400 or more people, which amounted to huge overcrowding, received a 50% discount."

Additionally, the German government paid the *Reichsbahn* a set subsidy for each prisoner it transported to the extermination camps. According to research conducted for the German "Train of Commemoration" project, receipts taken in by the *Reichsbahn* for mass deportations between 1938 and 1945 totaled the equivalent of \$664,525,820.34 in US dollars.

Sixty-three years after the end of World War II, the contemporary German Railway publicly admitted its complicity in the exterminations of millions of people during the Holocaust, including 1.5 million Jewish children. After much controversy, a touring exhibition titled *Special Trains to Death* was launched in Berlin in 2008. The touring train cars were to stop in many cities carrying artifacts and documentation about the 11,000 Jewish children transported from France to Nazi death camps between the years 1940 and 1944.

One adamant opponent of this historic exhibit was Harmut Mehdorn, then head of the *Deutsche Bahn*. He long asserted that a working railway station was not the place for such exhibit, as it would put off some commuters from using the trains. Earlier that year, Mehdorn had also tried to refuse passage of another railway exhibit carrying biographies of many of the 4600 Jewish German children deported to death camps from Berlin. In an effort to block the project, Mehdorn wanted to charge the *Train of Memory* the equivalent of \$110,000 to travel from Berlin to a commemorative event culminating at Auschwitz.

After months of controversy, intense pressure from the German government and Jewish organizations overrode Harmut Mehdorn's objections to allowing the traveling holocaust exhibits. The German Transport Minister, Wolfgang Tiefensee, was among the history trains' biggest proponents. "I'm glad that people will be confronted with this topic in a public place on their way to or from work, because the question is still one for everyone, not just the railways to answer - how was it possible that people allowed such crimes to happen?"

## Necropolis Railway

Beginning in 1854, Londoners could buy tickets for themselves and the coffins of deceased loved ones aboard the London Necropolis Railway, departing daily from the Waterloo station. The Necropolis was the brainchild of Sir Richard Braun and Richard Spyre in response to severe cemetery overcrowding, perpetual exhumations, and rampant health epidemics sweeping London at that time. The railway utilized modern steam trains to transport the dead and their mourners to new burial grounds 23 miles outside of city limits.

The modern three-story Necropolis station featured two mortuaries: distinct waiting rooms which separated the first and second from the third class mourners; a grand entrance and staircase for the upper classes; a smaller entrance and staircase for the lower classes; and, a state-of-the-art hydraulic lift to raise coffins to platform level. Passengers and train cars were discreetly separated by class and religion to prevent accidental intermingling of both the living and the dead. In an architectural gesture of respect, the glass roof over the station “was positioned in order that no shadow be cast on the hearse carriage waiting at the platform at the time the trains were scheduled to depart.”

Ticket prices for Necropolis Railway funerals were partially subsidized by the British government. This financial assistance made dignified, single-plot burials possible for the lower classes of London for the first time in history. A second class ticket cost one pound, provided choice of plot location, and offered the option of erecting a permanent memorial. Third class tickets were reserved for the indigent class. While neither plot selection nor memorial markers were options, neither were mass graves. The new railway also broke with convention by

permitting burials on Sundays, thus allowing the poor to attend funerals without missing a day of work.

The Necropolis railway, progressive in many ways, never achieved great popularity with the bereaved of London. Still, the service operated continuously for almost ninety years. It permanently ceased operations on April 16, 1941. That was the day German bombs were dropped over the glass-roofed station, falling like great shadows from the starlit sky.

## Train Ride

All things come to an end  
Small calves in Arkansas;  
The bend of the muddy river  
Do all things come to an end?  
No, they go on forever.

~Ruth Stone

The narrator of the poem, “Train Ride” contemplates the ambiguities of finitude and immortality as she surveys the passing autumn landscape from the window of a moving train. Throughout the verse, questions and declaratives about the ending/unending nature of existence roll and repeat in plain spoken language as the train winds its way through rural and man-made terrains of the American South.

Poet Althena Kildegaard called Ruth Stone, “a poet of grief and wonder,” one who had “a way of grieving without losing [her] balance.” Stone knew intimately the lasting affects of losing a loved one, specifically her husband, Walter Stone, who had inexplicably taken his own life in 1959. Ruth Stone lived and wrote for more than fifty years after her husband’s suicide, working steadily to express and navigate the continuous presence of Walter’s life and death within the parameters of her poetry.

In “Train Ride,” the momentum of the journey culminates in a resolute, contradictory declaration: “All things come to an end/ No, they go on forever.” In these lines, Stone allows readers to make peace with the paradox of loss, as both statements are equal and true, and incontrovertible, like parallel rails which never intersect, essential for moving the train down the line.



## Three Crossings

### I.

In the spring of 1937, just five months after her beloved Anne Sullivan's passing, fifty-six-year-old Helen Keller found herself on a train heading west. A few months earlier, she had received what she knew to be a precious gift: a summons from a friend to champion the rights of the blind in Japan. At a time when she was heavy with grief and uncertain of her life's purpose, Keller wrote in her journal, "Today my head is buzzing with a letter that seems the call of destiny."

The first legs of her journey were by train, from New York to Kansas City, Kansas City to California. After crossing the Sierras, Keller's companion Polly Thompson finger-spelled town names from Sacramento to San Francisco. The shapes of those names in Keller's open palm evoked memories of a train trip she had taken years before with both her mother and her teacher. As the miles rolled by, Keller expressed in her journal the paradox of feeling at once so near to her lost loved ones, yet so utterly bereft. "How tantalizing it is now to feel them ever nearer and not be able to pour into their ears my overflowing new experiences and catch their reassuring words in the strangest, most bewildering journey I have ever taken. As I contemplate the immeasurable changes in my life since the death-curtain fell between them and me, this country, not Japan, seems the foreign land."

Keller had little time for contemplative mourning once she crossed the Pacific. She and Thompson were in high demand and constant motion from the moment they arrived in Japan. As Keller was regarded both as a living saint and a celebrity, great crowds of people gathered to welcome her wherever she went. In Tokyo, the two women were received by the Prince,

Princess, Emperor and Empress of Japan. They visited hot springs in Hakone, were fitted in kimonos in Kyoto, touched the sacred bronze Buddha in Nara, and were moved by the hospitality of the people of Hiroshima. Sometime during this trip, Keller, a life-long lover of large dogs, encountered the story of Hachiko, Japan's nationally cherished dog. On her tour of Akita Prefecture, she either requested to meet or to have an Akita Inu like the famous dog. The honor fell upon a young police department instructor to bring his puppy named Kamikaze-Go to meet the revered Miss Keller. It is reported that her affection for Kami was so profound that Ichiro Ogasawara, after consulting with his family, made Keller a gift of his beloved sesame-colored Akita.

Keller's lecture tour was abruptly curtailed with the outbreak of the Sino-Japan war. She and Thompson sailed home aboard the Chichibu Maru on August 12, 1937, with Kamikaze-Go sharing Keller's stateroom. During that sixteen day crossing, the two became deeply bonded. As Keller later commented, "If I cried for loneliness for my beloved teacher, he would put his big paw on my knee and press his cool nose against my cheek and lick away the tears."

Keller later noted in an article for the *Akita Journal*, "If ever there was an angel in fur, it was Kamikaze." Sadly, in spite of the best care available, her new companion died of distemper just five months after arriving in America. Keller was heartbroken. When the Japanese government learned of Keller's loss, Ichiro Ogasawara was contacted again by the Minister of Foreign Affairs to present her with another Akita. Although relations between Japan and the United States were extremely tense during that summer of 1939, a littermate of Kamikaze-Go was located and sent across perilous seas to America. When Kenzan-Go arrived safely at the Port of Brooklyn and into Keller's waiting arms, the press was there to document his arrival. In this

way, Helen Keller is credited with being the first person to bring Akitas to America, and with their arrival, came the story of Hachiko.

## II.

Three years prior to Keller's trip to Japan, a Tokyo newspaper headline captured the imagination of the country: "Faithful Dog Awaits Return of Master Dead for Seven Years." The dog's name was Hachiko, a light brown Akita Inu who, the story goes, appeared at the Shibuya Train Station at the same time each day to await the late Professor Hidesaburo Ueno's return from work. That article was written by Hirokichi Saito, a former student of Professor Ueno's and one of the founders of the Japanese Dog Preservation Society. During the 1930's, Saito wrote multiple articles about Akitas. These were times of rising nationalism, austerity, and sacrifice in Japan, times when people needed something positive to believe in. The tale of Hachiko is credited with uplifting a nation, creating interest in Japan's only native dog, and rescuing the Akita breed from the brink of extinction.

Hachiko's story began in 1923 when he was given as a gift to Hidesburo Ueno, a professor of agriculture at Imperial University. Ueno named his pup *Hachi* after the Japanese word for eight, as he was the eighth-born of his litter. In Shinto and Buddhist traditions the symbol for eight is considered to be auspicious, linked with life force and infinity. It has been poetically translated to mean, "to heaven and back again." The professor and Hachi became deeply attached to one another in their sixteen months together. They lived in a small village outside of Tokyo, not far from the Pacific Ocean, within walking distance of the Shibuya Railway Station. The two customarily walked to the station together each weekday morning

where Ueno would board a train and Hachiko would return home or loiter near the station, waiting for his master's return. Professor Ueno was fifty-four years old when he was taken by his fatal stroke, reportedly while lecturing at the university. That was the first day the four o'clock train pulled into the station without him —the first day of what would become a nine year vigil for Hachiko.

The day Hachiko died was declared a national day of mourning. Newspapers published a photograph of his body lying on a piece of burlap atop a wooden palette in the baggage room of the Shibuya Train Station. Ten uniformed station workers, Mrs. Ueno, two unidentified adults and a child gather in solemn prayer around the cherished dog. After the photo session ended, the outer parts of Hachiko were expertly taxidermied and put on display in the National Museum of Science; the rest of his remains were cremated and buried next to his Hidesaburo Ueno at Aoyama Cemetery in Tokyo. Hachiko received full Buddhist rites, which continued for forty-nine days.

Today, the story of Hachiko's loyalty is part of the social fabric of Japan. Books, movies, and toys abound depicting this famous dog. Toward the end of his life, a bronze statue of Hachiko was erected near his usual waiting place. Melted down to make armaments during World War II, it was recast after the war, thanks in part to international donations. Today, this monument is the most popular meeting place in Tokyo. It is believed to be a place of good omen for young people to declare their love for one another: love, it is hoped, that will be eternal. Each year on April eighth, a Hachiko Remembrance Day is celebrated at Shibuya Station. The area around Hachiko's statue transforms into a temporary shrine arrayed with food offerings,

chrysanthemums, banners, and burning incense. A speech is given before a formally assembled audience. Heads bow, prayers are chanted, cherry blossom petals drift to the ground.

### III.

At my uncle's memorial service in 2007, his partner Robin told the story of how Alan first decided to get an Akita Inu. For months, she said, he would bring piles of books on dog breeds home from the library. He would stack them on his bedside table and page through them at night, learning about traits, qualities, dispositions. Alan was a discriminating man. He was searching was not just for *any* dog, but for the *best* dog, one that would be smart, loving, obedient, loyal, and true.

Alan was in his early fifties then and had waited a long time to open his life to another dog. His first dog, Joff, had been both a son and a brother, a teacher and a disciple. Alan had never forgiven himself for not being home that 4th of July when firecrackers sent his Golden Retriever bolting from the yard and into oncoming traffic. It took him nearly thirty years to lug those dog books home from the library.

I like to imagine that somewhere in his bed-time reading, Alan came across the story of Hachiko, and maybe even the role Helen Keller played in popularizing Akitas in America. How could he not have been touched by the tale of such a faithful dog? Perhaps it was exactly the thing that drew him in. Perhaps he felt drawn to Akitas as if by a summons, the way Helen Keller had felt drawn to Japan, as if answering a call of destiny.

When it came time to get his Akita, my uncle left nothing to chance. He hand-selected his puppy from a highly regarded breeder and named her Sable for her lush, deep, charcoal-colored coat. Sable, according to Merriam Webster, is the color of ink, ebony, and raven; in its plural form, sable carries an archaic meaning: *black clothes worn in mourning*. The dog, Sable, thrived in Alan's care. The two went to work together daily for nine years at Alan and Robin's trendy home, garden, and clothing shop situated alongside railway tracks in a small Southern California town, walking distance to the Pacific Ocean. Sable's warm welcomes and over-sized presence became an essential part of the customer experience. In addition to having impeccable manners, she was smart, loving, loyal, and true.

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Newspaper accounts of the accident reported that the pair were walking toward the beach in their customary way: off-leash, mid-day, shop to street, tracks to ocean, as they had done a thousand times before. But for Sable, something was different about that day: the scent on the air, the wind on her fur, the distant rumbling along the railroad tracks. Something that day about the oncoming train made her plant herself at the crossing and fiercely stand her ground. When the warning horns sounded a second time, Sable barked more urgently, more protectively perhaps, and refused to leave her post. It was noted that Alan was on his cell phone at the time, but clearly saw the danger. He shouted and gestured. He ran away from the tracks then back again. He tried to pull or push or chase Sable out of harm's way.

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How does one memorialize a loyal man, one who died trying to save his dog from an oncoming train? There are no bronze statues for this sort of deed, no books, no movies, no public commemorations. After the shock of the incident wears off, and the anger, and the disbelief, after the raw sorrow subsides, what remains is a singular parting gesture: a man reaching out to save a best friend's life. An explicit affirmation of love.

The altar was draped in richly patterned silks from Viet Nam, purchased on Alan and Robin's last buying trip together. Two urns were placed upon the cloth, side by side, their contents co-mingled. One was provisioned with a glass of single malt whiskey and a Cuban cigar, the other with a soup bone and a hand-tooled leather leash. Between the two, a framed photo was placed. A man and a dog reclining, embracing in a bear hug. Vases of zinnias, from Alan's own garden, blazed on around them.

## Further Crossings

Alan Shapiro was only sixty years old when he died. Because we orbited in close chronological proximity, I always thought of him as somewhere in-between an uncle and an older brother. He was ruggedly handsome, generous when he could be, hip before hipsters. He thought highly of his own aesthetic sensibilities, especially when it came to music, movies, food, fashion, and design. His arrogance, thankfully, was tempered by a wicked wit, a self-deprecating humor, and a deep and abiding affection for those he held dear.

In the days immediately following Alan's accident, his partner Robin brought her raging grief to the doorstep of a clairvoyant friend. After questioning the deceased about what he could possibly have been thinking, the psychic reported the following unequivocal response: "What, are you kidding? I'd do it again in a minute." The syntax, the word choice, the self-defensiveness were pitch-perfect Alan. Stubborn and singular, he was nothing if not a man of his convictions.

Some years after my uncle's death, I felt compelled to read internet stories about others who died in the act of trying to save animals, not just from the paths of oncoming trains, but from cars, buses, and boats as well. The most extreme case was a train engineer in India who sacrificed the lives of several hundred passengers in an attempt to avoid hitting a solitary cow. In most cases though, it is our pets we try to save, primarily our dogs, who often survive these attempts while their humans do not. The majority of those who perish during rescue attempts are men and boys. A noble band of brothers or a brotherhood of fools? I do not know the answer. For a time, it comforted me to place my uncle in the company of other lost ones who I imagined acted from similar instincts, impulses, or pure, blind love. It also comforted me to place my



family beside their families, struck as we all were by the same thunderbolts of loss, the same lightning rods of doubt scarring our remembrances.

Recently, while grappling with how to put this story to paper, I hammered the following string of words into my computer's search bar: *Alan, Shapiro, Train, Dead*. The results that came back to me were worthy of an ouiji board. Articles about my uncle's accident popped up surrounded by links to "Wherever My Dead Go When I am Not Remembering Them," the title of a poem written by Alan Shapiro. That is, by the *poet* Alan Shapiro, not *my* Alan Shapiro — someone dead whom I was, at that moment, remembering. The poet with my uncle's name was unknown to me at that time, yet there sat his work in silent vigil beside his namesake's obituary. Astonishingly, Shapiro's poem about the ambiguities of loss and remembrance is set in a dimly-lit, other-worldly railway station.

Near the ending of "Wherever My Dead Go," a long anticipated train rolls into an underground station. The doors of memory open upon those waiting on the platform,

And you hurry to the spot  
you don't know how you know is marked  
for you, and you alone, as the door slides open  
into your being once again my father,  
my sister or brother, as if nothing's changed,  
as if to be known were the destination.

The poet seems to be deliberately ambiguous as to whether the "you" being addressed is the person doing the remembering or the person being remembered. It is as if to suggest that in mourning, the boundaries blur between the two, or become no longer relevant. In this remarkable poem, it is the final line, "as if to be known were the destination," which resonates most deeply for me and underscores all that is lost when someone we love dies. Not only do we mourn the

continuous absence of our loved one but also the loss of being intimately known by another soul: a timeless human yearning.

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Dario Robleto, the American visual artist, spends much of his time engaged with what he calls, “the creative response that comes from love and loss.” He holds in deep regard the things that people create as a way of managing and living with grief. Such artifacts can be songs, letters, photographs, altars, works of art. The primary value Robleto finds in such objects is the way they help us understand loss as part of the human condition, the way they connect our lives to others’ lives, our stories to other stories. In other words, expressions of bereavement, if we are open to them, can help us to make new connections, to know and be known by others.

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My uncle Alan Shapiro knew his share of loss and hardship. He wrestled with angels as well as with demons. His contemporary, the poet Alan Shapiro, has also experienced dark times. He has spoken publicly about his losses of both a brother and a sister and written numerous poems about the conditions and circumstances of mourning. When asked in an interview about his thoughts on the healing powers of poetry, he replied, “I can’t afford to embrace the belief that art redeems our losses, nor can I afford to live without it.” Perhaps what art can do is provide a process or a platform for our human need to express grief, a means to shape the unshapeable into some kind of tangible form; art can create for our broken hearts a temporary shelter, a momentary way station, a place to rest a while before heading on to our next destination or crossing.

## Postscript: Shibuya Revisited

In the spring of 2013, two years after my mother's death, I had the rare opportunity to participate in a ten-day study abroad program in Japan. Like Helen Keller, I was in my mid-fifties at the time. Though I hadn't traveled internationally in over 30 years, the unexpected gift of my mother's inheritance made this trip a reachable star. At that time, I knew nothing of Keller's journey to Japan, nor of her historic link to Akita Inus. I marvel now at the way my tour of Tokyo, Hakone, Kyoto, Nara, and Hiroshima, echoed Keller's geographic footsteps.

While I was in Tokyo I felt compelled, in the way of the pilgrim, to seek out what I could of Hachiko. I had known his story for several years, had even sent Robin a tender picture book about his life a year or so after Alan died. Somewhere deep inside me, I carried these stories about men, dogs, and trains and I took them with me to Shibuya Station. When I arrived at that place—now the world's busiest, most vibrantly electrified intersection—I approached Hachiko's iconic statue, patted his head for good luck, and, like hundreds of thousands before me, had my picture taken. I had marveled at the masses of people of all ages who waited politely for their turn to do the same thing: touch the dog's nose, pet his feet, leave an offering; record the moment for posterity.

Across the city at Ueno Park (named for a *different* Ueno) I tracked down one of Hachiko's final resting places at the National Museum of Science. In the crowded gift shop, I purchased a souvenir notebook with tiny Hachikos silhouetted on every page. Then, in solitude, I ascended the curving staircase in search of the dog himself. Though I ordinarily go to great lengths to avoid displays of preserved animals, this was not an ordinary visit. I was on a mission.

I had read about how Hachiko's taxidermist was considered a true artist and about the "improvements" he had made in the process of preservation: a signature floppy ear had been uprighted, eyes had been made a little more slanted in keeping with the fashion of the times. When at last I came face to face with Hachiko in that softly lit, sparsely visited third floor wing, I was realized that I was not fully prepared. There he was, standing attentively inside a large glass case, looking outward, *looking at me*. In the quiet of that place, in the invisible company of Alan and Sable, I bowed my head to the most soulful taxidermied creature I had ever beheld. And to the stories that connected us all.

## PART THREE: LADDERS, CHARIOTS, ROCKETS

## Ladders

### I.

Stranded at SeaTac on Concourse B; a five-hour wait for a two-hour flight. It's late now, most shops and restaurants are grated for the night. People around me are settling in, dozing in chairs, or lounging on benches, eyes cast down toward hand-held devices. I do what I always do with flight delays, pace and pace and stalk the corridors for public art. I come to a juncture of stairways and escalators and before I can decide which way to go, a glint of metal slants into my vision. I follow it upward, a familiar shape poised above my head: a ladder, stainless steel. Then another. And another. Three ladders in all, motionless yet ascending. My momentum stalls. The ladders lift me from the flux and flow of other travelers, reorient me in space, invite me to look, to see, to think about transcendence. *Can a ladder be a form of transportation?* Tonight it can. Stuck here as I am in an airport terminal, any metaphor of mobility is worthy of consideration.

I walk the perimeter of the stairwell and keep my gaze on high. As my perspective shifts, more ladders appear: four now, at varying angles and altitudes. They are substantial, large enough to climb on, but not utilitarian. Their wings confirm this. Or are they not wings, but flames? Or flame-like wings, burning but not consuming. Jagged shards of frosted glass rise along the ladder's rails, like brokenness ascending. The closer I look, the more I see: swirls and glyphs and tiny ladders etched upon translucent wings. Ladders upon ladders drifting upward, but to where? The concourse ceiling? The wild blue yonder? The Great Beyond? For an instant I wonder if this installation might be a memorial to those lost in flight, but then I decide no, or at least I hope not. As fitting as this setting is for such a tribute, those of us with flying "issues"

would prefer not to remember the unknown dead while waiting at our gates. It is enough that our own dead, suitcases in tow, are always traveling alongside us.

## II.

Impossible, in my current state of strandedness, not to think of mythic Jacob, asleep in the wilderness with only a rock for a pillow. Not until his splendid dream of course, with transient angels moving up and down those fabled rungs, did Jacob realize his hallowed whereabouts. The revelation that the sacred was beside him all along made Jacob cry out in astonishment. But don't encounters with the mysterious almost always take us by surprise? Moments of wonder, like rushes of grief, often strike unbidden and in the least likely of circumstances. In Jacob's case, opening his eyes to wonder changed everything: the trajectory of his life, his people's history, even his own name. And although much else transpires in this story, it is the ladder linking heaven with earth that we remember, it is the ladder which has inspired thousands of years of interpretive tales, paintings, sculptures, and music to tumble from its rungs.

But why a ladder anyway, standing upright in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of a dream, almost squarely in the middle of the book of Genesis? Surely, ladders of transcendence did not spring into the Western imagination out of the clear, blue sky.

## III.

In the beginning was the ladder. Or near the beginning anyway. Before, during, and after Jacob's ladder was codified in Torah, indigenous cosmologies throughout the world featured ladders in ritual, art, and story. Traditions from Iceland to India and Asia to North America have

celestial ladders, ropes, or stairways linking the seen with the unseen worlds. Shamanic traditions in South America use reed or vine ladders to help their dead access higher spirit realms; Australian Aborigines envision ladders to the afterlife as fiber ropes, sunbeams, or the starlit path of the Milky way. In Mali, the Dogon people place miniature spirit ladders on the altars of the dead to help their souls reach the world of their ancestors; ancient Egyptians placed model ladders in tombs of their elite to hasten their transport to the afterlife.

In addition to aiding ascension of the dead, ladders also have a long tradition of providing pathways for deities and shamans to travel back and forth between the earth and the cosmos. Buddha is said to have descended from heaven on a jewel-encrusted ladder, while the prophet Muhammed is told to have risen to heaven on a ladder of golden light. Although contemporary spiritualities may no longer believe in literal ascension on literal ladders to literal afterlives, the idea of ladder, of linear progressions from earthly to etherial, from lower to higher states of being or consciousness, is still a familiar one. We continue to link inner journeys with upward journeys: *excelsior ad astra*. We are creatures of ascension, of symbol, and of seeking.

#### IV.

Sculptor Lin Lisberger writes that ladders are “one of the most fundamental architectural forms, suggesting movement through space and endless possibilities.” She considers her hand-crafted ladders (along with boats, cars, and bridges), to be essential foundations from which to build human narratives. And she is not alone in her structural affinity. From the stone etchings of neolithic times to illuminated medieval manuscripts, from Tibetan thangas to Renaissance paintings, from the mystical etchings of William Blake to the abstracted paintings of Chagall,



Miro, and O’Keeffe, artistically rendered ladders have expressed our visions, conveyed our questions, pondered the possibilities of our transitory existence. From where do we come, to where are we going? How do we get from here to there?

It has been noted many times that humans are the only creatures both blessed and cursed with the knowledge of our own mortality. Making art is one of our many responses to that awareness, a way of exploring complexities and conditions which intellect alone cannot fully experience or explain. Religion writer Phillip Zaleski says that writings about spiritual matters (under which the topics of death and bereavement are often classified) can be viewed as “a rung on the ladder linking heaven and earth.” A rung, perhaps, but not the entire apparatus. Patty Smith, in her eloquent book-length elegy, *Just Kids*, wryly laments that writing has its limitations: it cannot wake the dead. Yet art can console us. It can enable us to offer our dead a continuing place in the narrative, a material presence in a world in which they no longer dwell.

V.

A ladder is a story of constancy and yearning, of motion and stillness, of mourners and dreamers. Do our souls live on after death? Do the spirits of sentient beings climb ever upward? I cannot speak for how or where the dead may go, or if they go anywhere at all save in our memories, imaginations, and the legacy each leaves behind. But I do know this: a mourner’s journey does not proceed in a linear way, neither from down to up nor up to down. No maps, few guides. It is a winding way of forwards and backwards, of footholds and free falls, of ever-shifting vantage points. It is one foot in front of the other, from rung to rung, and the vast empty spaces between each rung. It is in that emptiness where great sorrow may abide, but also great

wonder. Rabbi Gershon Winkler, in *The Magic of the Ordinary*, reminds us to “relinquish the absoluteness of the known—even for a moment—to create space for the unknown.” What else is death but the relinquishment of the known? What else is life but the embrace of the unknown?

## VI.

One night each December, for about eight hours or so, the rolling lawns where my parents are buried transform into something of a sprite’s night, a wonderland, a shimmering field of earthbound stardust. This effect is achieved by hundreds of *luminarias* arrayed on headstones and monuments, along walkways, beside fountains and roadways. An hour before dusk, waves of volunteers arrive to light each candle: step by step, row by row, soul by soul. By sundown, the transformation is complete: multitudes of flickering lights reaching from the earth to the heavens; multitudes of tiny lights uplifting our hearts to some higher where.

On one such night, I met a woman who told me of an experience which brought her out of great despair following the death of her only son in the Iraq war. While attending a personal healing retreat, she participated in a guided meditation. During the exercise, she had a vision of a curved, undulating, ladder form. The image filled her with a deep sense of connection, continuity and completeness. Although she did not understand it at the time, she drew a sketch of her vision so that she might always remember the feeling of resiliency it brought her on that day.

The next time she visited her son at the cemetery, she was stunned to see another visitor installing a large kinetic sculpture on a nearby grave. It was a three dimensional model of her meditation vision: a ladder-like structure with no beginning and no end, spiraling continually on ambient breezes. It looked not unlike the winding staircase William Blake rendered in his

painting of Jacob's Ladder; but most closely, it resembled a creative rendering of what many call the "ladder of life," the helical structure which links us all, *l'dor v' dor*, generation to generation: the double spiral of DNA.

## VII.

In my own circle of transcendence at Seattle International Airport, I switched from contemplative to active mode. I wanted to view artist Norie Sato's art ladder installation as I imagined she intended me to: as a being in motion, arriving or departing, moving vertically or diagonally, on stairways and escalators. I wanted to follow *Wings of Transition* to its terminus, to see where it might lead me, to discover how this story might end. As I ascended, new ladders materialized, some with wings unfolding, others poised in closing. There were eight now: like industrial-sized butterflies, ungainly, gleaming, flocking purposefully, their rung-ed thoraxes inclining toward a vaulted, windowed alcove at the top of the concourse ceiling. I followed their static migration until I came upon ladder number nine, the uppermost, the exultant, the most transcendent, as it continued on its way.

## Chariots and Rockets

### I.

In modern times, archeologists in China, Russia, Bulgaria, and across Western Europe have unearthed remains of chariots and their accompanying horses, some dating back almost 4,000 years. All were ceremonially arranged in burial sites of ancient rulers, clan leaders, or warriors. Sometimes the deceased were laid to rest inside or beneath their chariots, sometimes in adjacent locations. Such burials spoke to the power, status, and prestige of the deceased, but also signified communal beliefs that these vehicles and their sacrificed steeds were necessary — symbolically or literally— to swiftly convey their owners to the afterlife.

Chariots as vehicles of transcendence also have their place in teachings and lore of classical religions. In Greek mythology, the god Hermes conducted the dead to the afterlife in a chariot, while the Norse goddess Freya ruled the hereafter from a cat-drawn chariot. Hindus regard chariots as a form of a temple on wheels, while Buddhists understand the symbol of the eight-spoked chariot wheel to represent the eight-fold path. In the bible, prophets Elijah and Elisha both ascended to heaven in chariots, while Ezekiel's vision of this fiery, winged vehicle became the wellspring of Jewish mysticism.

### II.

In the waning days of the Apollo missions, Art Garfunkel wrote a song posing the figurative question: *Do Space Men Pass Dead Souls On Their Way To The Moon?* Just over two decades later, small portions of cremated remains from a select group of souls began riding rockets into space, some orbiting the earth, some landing on the moon, others being sent into

deepest space on “permanent celestial journeys.” Such hitherto unimaginable excursions have been made possible by a Houston-based enterprise called Celestis, whose mission it is to “honor the memory of loved ones through post-cremation memorial flights.”

Among the famous to take these voyages have been Star Trek creator Gene Roddenberry, actor James (“beam me up Scotty”) Doohan, and Mercury VII astronaut L. Gordon Cooper. Given the venue, it isn’t surprising that the remains of space enthusiasts, astronomers, and physicists commonly rank among the *Celestis* “passengers,” but they aren’t the only ones. Wives, husbands, mothers, fathers, daughters and sons from outside the field have also been launched, many of them, according to their on-line obituaries, after facing extraordinary physical or circumstantial struggles. For the families (and in some cases the communities) who sponsored these flights, sending these loved ones upward to the stars was the purest form of tribute.

At first I was put off by the hype and dazzle of this kind of commercial use of outer space, by the very idea of cremated remains being sent up in groups of 24 lipstick-sized containers, each inscribed with a name and brief send-off message: “Exploring new worlds,” “Stars will shine brighter,” “Fly free.” But that was before I watched the Celestis’s promotional video and caught sight of the mourners gathered at the launch site. That was when I realized that the technology may be new, but the impulse behind the ritual, the gesture of assisting departed souls on their journeys upward, was a timeless human endeavor.

III.

Essayist Rebecca Solnit says, “Leave the door open for the unknown, the door into the dark. That’s where the most important things come from, where you yourself came from, and where you will go.” In traditional burials, our posture of mourning is downward cast, heads bowed, eyes focused not just upon the earth but into the earth, dark and deep, unsettlingly cleaved. But humans have infinite variety in the ways we honor, inter, send off, and memorialize our dead. After the Celestis rocket lifted off in a roaring, fiery blast, I observed the bereaved as they lifted their eyes, tilted their heads, inclined their whole beings upward as they watched the “spirits” of their loved ones whirl and rise and disappear from sight.

For the living, death is never the end of the story. Grieving has its gravity and its weightlessness, its darkness and its light. Chariots and rocket ships, separated by a span of two thousand years, represent the swiftest and most powerful technologies of their days. Although neither vehicle was designed with the afterlife in mind, our imaginations have anointed both to transport our departed across unmappable terrain.

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