



6-15-2009

## Departing Moments

Judith Pokras

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview>

 Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), [Nonfiction Commons](#), [Photography Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Pokras, Judith (2009) "Departing Moments," *Westview*: Vol. 29 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol29/iss1/8>

This Nonfiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Westview by an authorized administrator of SWOSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).



# Departing Moments

by Judith Pokras

I know exactly the day we met. It was Monday, May 5, 1970, the day following the murder by the National Guard of four Kent State students, part of a crowd protesting the Vietnam War and the invasion of Cambodia by Richard Nixon. A colleague invited me to attend a meeting of a small group of political activists. “Just some people getting together to plan ways of getting involved,” she said. The timing was right. I took her up on her offer.

The group of about ten was passionate in expressions of outrage over this most recent incident of violence in a violent age. These were people who were more in touch and knowledgeable than I about so much of what had been going on during the sixties that was now extending into the seventies. I was interested. There was an intensity in the air that I felt an affinity for.

Additionally, it was clear, at least to me, almost from the moment I arrived, that he was the most attractive man in the room. Tall, about six feet, with a casually trimmed beard and deceptively gentle eyes, he knew he was being watched, while he enjoyed his role as one of the hosts of the evening. Plans were being made to charter a bus for a trip to Washington and the major protest taking place the following week. Although I passed on that first trip, we began dating soon after, and that was when I fell into a bustling, somewhat chaotic, totally idealistic world—new, exciting, intellectually seductive.

He took an apartment in the East Village, the most radical of neighborhoods in those days. Ginsberg strolling down East Third, hanging out at Katz’s deli, chestnuts roasting in the fall, and green Army jackets for us as we walked the streets. He introduced me to jazz, his first love, and with friends, unable to afford the price of admission, we would sit on the steps of one of the most famous clubs, listening to Mingus, Sonny Rollins, and the recently deceased Coltrane. We spent pretty much all of our spare time together. We traveled by bus

to Newport, Rhode Island, then hitched rides to the jazz festival. He practiced his tenor sax in my small apartment, not so pleasing to the once-friendly neighbors. I learned to cook chili, cornbread, and ribs for our frequent guests. I enjoyed having a circle of friends—even if they were all his—coming together for food, drink, music, and stimulating conversation. It was all new for me. We read Hesse and Kerouac, and we earnestly examined the ideas of the Buddhists and the Tao.

Shortly after we began our relationship, he was fired from his mainstream advertising job for trying to radicalize the office. This made me the main breadwinner and gave him more spare time. I began to become sleep-deprived, which led to a general state of hysteria. He wanted me with him all the time, except when he didn’t. After about six months, as his rent became more difficult to maintain, he announced it was time for us to live together.

I was ambivalent. For one thing, there was no space in my tiny studio apartment, and for another, I was worried about my independence, which, on some level, I knew I had already lost. At the same time, I was still very much intrigued by my introduction to and involvement with this lifestyle that he was introducing me to. I wasn’t ready to let go, and so I continued to let him take the lead. I abdicated power over my life under the mistaken impression that I had ever really had it. My friends, not cool enough, faded into the background. I no longer had time for dinners and long telephone conversations with them. And then, too, ideas we had once shared were no longer quite so compatible. We were all in the process of defining the paths we would take as we attempted to move more definitively into the adulthood of our lives.

There was more to know about his world. We talked all the time. He wanted to change a lot about me. “You need to become sexier in your dress,” he



would say, oblivious to the magnitude of change he was asking me to make. "I know you have it in you." He thought it a compliment. Sexual freedom and experimentation would become an issue of contention later in the relationship, as the demands he later attempted to introduce were really out of the question for me; but in the beginning the focus was on clothing and appearance. He would take me shopping and insist that I buy low-cut, sheer blouses that made me uncomfortable and self-conscious. We had engrossing conversations, though, about life and its meaning, about goals and ideas we were exploring. We could spend an entire day talking, discussing the world, where we were in it. He informed me that service, as in my teaching, was the second highest calling, but art, as in his playing music, was clearly the first. He was the guru, and I was the student of his world view. He needed a lot of care and attention.

I remember the first time I heard Jane Fonda speak. "What do you mean you never listen to WBAI? BAI is the place," he mumbled, turning the stereo to the point on the dial, while I retained my focus in the kitchen. After dinner, relaxing on the sofa together, the clear, self-assured, deeply melodious voice of Hanoi Jane drifted into the quiet room. Back from her most recent trip to Vietnam, she was recounting her experience of broadcasting, from a helicopter loudspeaker, her message to the troops about the evils of a hopeless war and evil-doers, Nixon identified, who continued to instigate and occupy, bringing devastation and death to a country they did not understand.

I was in awe of her self-appointed role as anti-war spokesperson. Where did she get such a strong voice? From what place inside her had she found this kind of courage? By this time I was going with him to Washington demonstrations. Listening to the Vietnam vets earnestly protesting the war after having seen it firsthand, I was impressed and moved. Here was a passionate, idealistic, romantic world in which so many were living, yet it was a world I had somehow missed. I maintained my usual

stance of observer rather than fervent participant, but I was very much engaged by everything this relationship was teaching me.

The times themselves continued to be violent. There were riots at Attica, the Weathermen, an accidental bombing in Greenwich Village, and Patty Hearst, all following assassinations and one protest after another, in spite of earnest efforts to reach compatible understandings. Visits to his Long Island Italian parents involved heated and exhausting discussions illustrative of the generation gap. At some point in the mid-seventies — although I can't pinpoint the exact moment — the focus changed for us, as it did for many others, from one of protest and fighting back to an effort at finding an alternative lifestyle that would allow for some peace in a chaotic world. Maybe people just got tired; maybe they became resigned to the injustices.

He decided we would take a trip across the country and made plans for an "On the Road" cross-country trip with his best friend, who had just acquired a puppy named Monk. By this time I was teaching in a storefront literacy program in the ghetto, and it was fairly easy to get time off.

The work, intense and absorbing as it was, involved more volunteering than actual paid employment. All of us at the school contributed to helping support it, as well as ourselves, and supplemented surviving with outside work. For me, it was waitressing (I did not excel in this profession); others at the school painted apartments in their "spare time."

We set out in mid-May in an old Ford; the two of us, his best friend, and Monk. The plan was to follow Route 80 right through Middle America. It was the route taken by Jack Kerouac in his famous journey. I remember Kansas and the heat. We slept in the car or in sleeping bags on the ground when we could; we stayed, now and then, with people we met on the road; we stopped for short visits with old friends who had moved to various parts of the country. One of the most memorable for me was a stay in New Mexico, where we witnessed Native



American festivals and colors in nature so dramatic that one understood completely the enchantment of Georgia O'Keefe. It was during our few days in New Mexico, in the small desert cottage where our friend lived, that we watched the resignation of Richard Nixon on TV.

Often there was not enough money for real food, and we would buy a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter to share. If, after a few days of this, we decided we could afford a *real* breakfast of eggs and bacon, I found that the sudden introduction of nourishment made me dizzy. I had also developed a most excruciating toothache, the pain of which I still remember. There was, of course, no money for a dentist, so I suffered along with this the best I could. I continued trying to get used to not being taken care of, as well as not having enough autonomy to take care of myself. It was a difficult adjustment.

When we hit Los Angeles, after San Francisco, we were supposed to begin the journey home. It was the end of August, and we were expected back. But the two friends decided we needed to see the Northwest, and so we headed for Oregon and Wyoming. Although I didn't think I would make it through the extension of this journey, it turned out to be the best part for me. Wyoming is cold in early September; at least it was that year. We stopped in magnificent Grand Teton National Park and then headed for Yellowstone. It was midnight when we drove into the quiet of the park, looking for a place to camp. There, suddenly, frozen in our headlights, stood a huge elk with massive antlers, majestic—breathtaking! Yellowstone did not disappoint. It was stunning. Finally, we headed home, taking shifts to keep each other awake so we could make the best time possible. Families at home were getting angry. That was, after they stopped worrying.

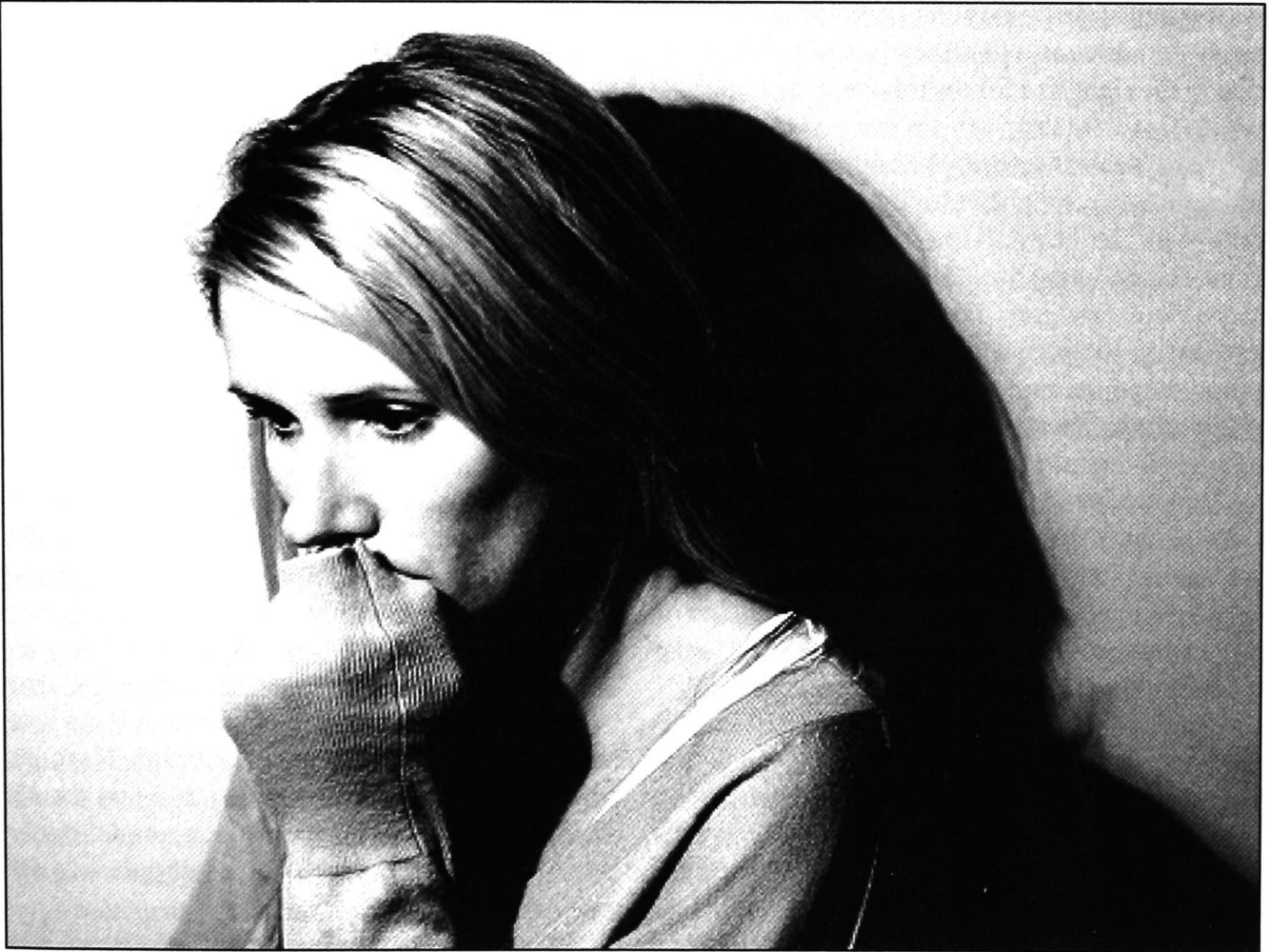
The following year he was still unemployed. I worked and exhaustedly met all of the financial and household responsibilities, while he stood on the corner, contemplating his destiny. Clearly, New

York City was no longer working for us. The three of us, now four—our friend had a new lady in his life—rented a house on a small mountain about a hundred miles north of the city. We climbed the mountain almost every day, hiked in the woods, baked bread—not very well—and we females scrubbed floors. Back to waitressing, I would stand on the highway to flag down the large bus coming up from the city and get a ride to the diner where I worked or to the laundromat, in the desolate, depressed town nearest us. Everyone worked but him. His friend drove a school bus, and we two women worked at the diner. He never would discuss the fact that he was not working or, from my point of view, carrying his share. He was stoic in this, and it enraged me. Not only was I angry, but I could not find any satisfactory way to justify his behavior to myself. This life was too hard for me. I was in over my head, and I could see no way out.

At the end of our year on the mountain, we did not renew the lease. We returned to New York. With no place to live, we slept on the floor of a friend. We babysat for her, while she went to work the night shift. Then we went to work. This allowed us to save most of our earnings. We were heading for a new beginning as we attempted to reintegrate, just enough, into the mainstream of society to allow for more effective survival. I went back to teaching; he got a job selling sheet music and then managing a music store that, as its elderly owner planned his retirement, was on its last legs. Intensely determined to succeed, he would call on me late at night to help create window displays, something I knew nothing about. This again made it difficult for me to maintain my alertness during my own work the following day.

When we had saved enough to start our next home, we began our search. This apartment would be one we would choose together. It would go beyond our usual, less-than-favorable, less-than-stable circumstances. An apartment search in New York City has a deserved reputation as a nightmare experience. We decided to take the offensive in





*Photo (detail) by James Crittenden*

hopes of alleviating some of the frustration. We were determined to find a “deal.”

We chose our street—crosstown Upper West Side, prime real estate with solidly built high rises erected before WWII, known by the natives as those prewar buildings. This was a neighborhood with a cultural ambiance acceptable to those of us who, in those days, considered ourselves alternative types. Apartments had beautiful moldings with thick, sturdy walls that guaranteed privacy. Many of them were still under rent-control or rent-stabilization laws that required below-market rents that might even be affordable. Such luxury was very difficult to find, and even if one got lucky, it took some doing, generally in the form of money under the table. The one with the power was the

super. He was the one who knew when the next vacancy would occur.

We would “work the street,” he said, and that is exactly what we did. We walked boldly into lobbies of exclusive buildings, day after day, to inquire about vacancies. Unfazed by a negative response from the doorman, we would ask to see the super. On the third day of our mission, we found *our* super. He showed us an apartment on the third floor that he explained was exactly like one on the twelfth that would become vacant in a few weeks. We would have to sign, sight unseen and after a tacitly-agreed-to understanding that *this favor* would be worth about \$200, and we excitedly signed. We were back and ready for a new and productive beginning, or so we thought.

Moving in with only the barest necessities, a friend found us an old fifties Formica table just exactly the right size for the tiny breakfast nook. A window in the kitchen, as well, denoted total luxury as far as I was concerned. We bought a cheap dining room table and chairs for the living room, and that—with our bed and dresser, a few lamps and some dishes—constituted our basic belongings. There were, however, the *precious* possessions—my library, his stereo and music collection. The night we moved in, he focused on setting up his music center, leaving me to take care of the rest of the unpacking. My books stayed in their boxes.

Now that we had the apartment, he no longer cared about the money for the super, which I felt was not only an obligation for a rare favor, but also insurance against future services we would most certainly need. Eventually, I paid the money to the super quietly out of my salary.

This was a practice I would become more adept at as we continued in our new lifestyle. There was clearly no money for shelving or bookcases, he said. We fought often about money. I think he became so frugal in part as a result of his upbringing but also in response to a lack of confidence that income would continue. He was right about this.

A few months into our new life, he lost his job. The music store folded. Here I was again in charge of the finances but not much else, outside of the housekeeping, shopping, and cooking, that is. Somehow I ended up, once more, scrubbing floors at 3:00 a.m.

It didn't take him too long this time to find a new position. He got a job selling advertising for one of the local neighborhood newspapers, the kind that were distributed free to apartment lobbies. Again, he approached it with an intensity that was exhausting for both of us. He seemed to think that I could advise him on how to succeed. "Woman behind the man," he said. But I didn't have a clue. I was busy with my own work, as well as my many household responsibilities, none of which he shared. His involvements always engulfed

him so completely that he was, in fact, unable to participate as an equal partner in our life together, even if he had cared to. In the meantime, my books remained in boxes, causing me daily upset. I had never been without my books. The living room remained empty.

After a while the idea began to enter my mind that the boxes weren't so bad—easier to move, I thought.

By our second year in the apartment, living room still empty, I was again exhausted. We had now been together close to 12 years. A strange sensation began to come over me: I was starting to feel as if I did not exist. The ground was no longer firm beneath my feet. I was lost somewhere in the middle of this relationship. We were both totally involved in living his life.

Where was mine? The sensation grew stronger. The more exhausted I became, the more I felt that I was living in some parallel universe. Where was reality? We pretty much stopped talking. No more hours of conferencing about his job. I just wasn't there anymore. My biological clock was definitely ticking, but this did not seem a likely place to attend to it.

One night, while cooking dinner, I had just finished putting the chicken in the oven when, out of the kitchen window, I saw a large, black dog lying on the ground in the lot across the street. From where I was on the twelfth floor, I couldn't tell much about its condition. After watching for a while and not seeing it move, I decided to head down.

Filling a large plastic container with ice cubes and cold water, I grabbed a sweater, turned the oven on low, and left the apartment. The lot had a fence around most of it, with a small opening near the far end. As I moved toward the dog, I could hear her whimpering softly. She was a Great Dane. Her stomach was severely distended, as if she had just given birth. I felt a wave of intense anger sweep over me. My face became flushed, and spots danced before my eyes. As I moved closer I began a soft



clicking sound and murmured softly; I called to her quietly.

“What a beautiful baby you are. Are you having a bad time of things? Would you like some cold water? Can I help?” I whispered.

The dog quieted for a moment; her ears perked up, listening to my soft voice. Lying still, she watched me somberly. Then, with a sigh, she raised her head and, pulling herself along the rough concrete, moved slowly a few feet toward the container of water.

I sat down, waiting while she took a long, noisy drink. Then, standing on wobbly legs, she began to move closer to me, somewhat calm, definitely less frightened as I extended my hand. I stayed still as she sniffed around and then sat down next to me, watching intently. The dog did not have a collar on, yet she did not look as if she had been in the street for very long. Although she was clearly weak, she was not dirty or smelly, and there was no mange. This seemed to be an animal only recently put out. We sat quietly for a while. There was no need for words. We both knew what we needed to know. We knew that we were friends.

Looking up, I saw him coming down the street. His head, as usual, bent over, concentrating. His long, lumbering strides moved his body forward as he mused. Attempting a quiet wave so as not to frighten the dog, I held my arm high and, rotating my hand from the wrist, was able to catch his attention. Seeing me, he turned and began to move in our direction. I could see resistance enter his face as his eyes took in the figure of the dog next to me.

“I’ve had a hard day, so don’t start with me.”

“What happened?” I asked, ignoring his instruction.

“The theater people canceled the account.”

“I’m sorry; I know you were worried about that.”

“Yeah, well, they weren’t happy at the office about it. That’s a big commission lost, you know.”

“We’ll manage,” I said. “We always do.”

“So what’s going on here?” He looked me squarely in the eye, gesturing toward the dog, who was watching us quietly.

“She’s been put out,” I said. “It looks like she just gave birth. See her stomach?”

“We can’t take her.” He said it sharply, defensively. “You know, she’s too big.”

“Well, I’m not leaving her here to starve,” I said.

“You’ll have to, because she’s not coming into the house. You don’t know where she’s been. I *really* don’t have time for this now.” His voice was rising.

“Well then, let me take her to a vet,” I pleaded. “Let them find her a home.” I was looking for a compromise I could live with.

“Right, a vet; do you think we have money for a vet? We’re hardly paying the rent.”

I was quiet, diplomatically not reminding him that it was my salary that was paying the rent.

“Take her to the ASPCA,” he said, making one last feeble effort to acknowledge my need.

“Absolutely not. You know they will only put her to sleep.”

“Well, you have to leave her here for now,” he said, ending the discussion. “Let’s go up. I’m hungry, and I have calls to make.”

“You go up. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Well, don’t take too long.” His voice was lower as he returned again to his own consuming strains.

Watching him walk slowly away, head down as before, I moved close to the dog and, stroking her head gently, tried to explain.

“I have to figure out what to do about you. Lady,” naming the dog without realizing it. “I’m going to get you some food, and tomorrow you and I are going to a really good vet. Will you be all right till then? What do you think? Can you hold on for one more night?”

Looking into Lady’s sad eyes, I wasn’t sure. “I think some nice warm dinner is going to help you feel much better. I’m going to get you some food



and fix a place for you to rest tonight. You stay now; I'll be back soon." Looking back at her as I left, I could see her watching me move away, sitting still, ears perked up straight, turning her head to my voice as it faded, with a questioning look.

Upstairs, I put his meal on the table and set the pot to boiling up a mixture of brown rice and barley in a little soup stock for some flavor. When it was done, I pulled an old blanket out of the closet. He watched me from the table, going about my business with grim determination. For once, a glare in his direction seemed enough for him to know that this time he had better let me be.

Downstairs again, I opened the large, plastic, covered bowl and set it down in front of Lady, who sniffed and poked once or twice at it with not much interest. The blanket was more welcome. When I laid it out in a double layer up against one corner of the lot fence, the dog moved quickly to the middle of it and settled in. With the dish of gruel close by and a ticking clock for comfort, it was becoming time to go. It was getting dark quickly now, but I needed a few more minutes with Lady before I could bring myself to leave.

"I will watch over you from the window tonight," I murmured, "and tomorrow we will get you to the vet." I cradled the dog's large head in both hands as she nuzzled into my palms. With tears welling, I pulled myself away, wondering at the same moment how I could allow myself to leave, against every fiber of instinct inside me, and yet I did.

I prepared for a night vigil, lighting a large,

thick candle and placing it in the window, hoping it might give off some warmth of spirit that would be felt way down in the dark, cold lot. I sat down in a chair nearby and tried to read, but couldn't.

The night wore on. Around 11, after he had fallen into his usual deep sleep, I changed into a warm cotton robe and, pulling the chair up next to the window, wrapped my woolen shawl around me and concentrated on Lady. *I bet her puppies are beautiful*, I thought. I was remembering all the sadness I had known in animals. I had always somehow identified with that sadness as an embodiment of the essence of life. An animal's pain was, to me, expressive of a depth of pain not often acknowledged by the human species.

*When an animal is hurt*, I was thinking, *it is clearly the most base or weakest part of a person that gives permission to neglect it. And a woman, my inner voice continued, would have to be lost in a sea of helplessness to permit such a crisis of conscience to occur and not rise up in fury against it.*

About 4:00 a.m. he awoke and, missing me from our bed, came groggily into the room.

"You really are being ridiculous about this," he said angrily. "You can't save all the animals of the world; haven't you figured that out yet? Now, come to bed. That dog is fine, for God's sake."

There were no longer any words left. I was mute.

"Alright," he said. "Tomorrow take the damn dog to a vet." He turned back disgustedly toward the bedroom. "Now, let's get some sleep. Jesus, I





wish you'd spend half this amount of time worrying about me."

I was focused on the candle, which created a line of demarcation between the darkness outside and the black emptiness within. There was no real place of safety or strength left inside me.

Somewhere in that dark and desolate night, I must have slept, because when the light of day finally arrived, I didn't notice. When I did open my eyes, it was after nine. He had left for work without disturbing me, and I was late. The lateness of the hour didn't matter. In fact, nothing mattered anymore.

I called the office to say I was sick and wouldn't be in. Then, pulling on jeans and a sweatshirt, I moved quickly down toward the lot. I could see Lady lying on the blanket. The dog didn't lift her head or acknowledge my approach. Sitting down next to the silent animal, I lifted her head into my lap and sat for a while. It was too late.

They sent a truck from the ASPCA and took her away. I didn't watch. I was packing a few suitcases with some clothes.

Then I left.

Although we talked a few times afterward, we both knew that this leaving, unlike earlier ones, was nonnegotiable.

\* \* \* \*

Looking back on those years now that they are distant memory, I wonder at times if what we had was love. I am certain there was love in it, but I think that, coming as we both did out of early

dysfunctional experiences, neither one of us knew how to love in genuine or healthy ways. I do know for sure that he had opened up the world for me, introduced me to understandings and a world view that I might never have known had it not been for my experiences with him. I am glad for that; my life is richer because of it. But he invaded my life in ways that were unacceptable, unforgivable. My family had appropriated the first 20 years of my life, and he took a significant portion of the second 20. But the fact is, I allowed it. It was my pattern, what I knew, and somehow on that deeper level of consciousness, where so many relationships are formed, we had to have both subliminally recognized the ways in which we reinforced and enabled each other. My story is about the ending of a relationship, but endings imply beginnings, and they, too, need to be acknowledged and remembered.

These days I ferociously guard my privacy, my autonomy. There are people in my life whom I love. I love members of my family and some of my friends with whom I only recently reconnected. I love some of my students. But no one is allowed in past a certain point. My phone is generally turned off. People think I screen my calls. That is not the case. I refuse to hear my calls until I decide that I have the time to acknowledge them. Today I set the boundaries of my life. I believe that the nobility and dignity with which that beautiful animal faced her death inspired in me the power, the courage, to face my life.

\*\*\*\*\*

