

BERNADETTE

I was late to marriage,
late to motherhood.
When I met Jamie in New York,
something blossomed in me
that had been dormant.
His jazz club became my hangout,
I dressed up every night
with some place to go.
He was the owner, and I was his girl.

Jamie's mind had layers of learning
like geologic strata.
He was a born teacher,
a shamanistic poet
and spirit guide for many.
His love was like cool water
from a deep well.

Returning home late at night
after he closed the club,
we stepped over passed-out drunks
in the vestibule of his building
and took the rickety, smelly
elevator up to his penthouse
on the eleventh floor.

From the living room,
you could step out on the rooftop
with the city sparkling below you,
but the walls were crumbling,
and the water pressure so low
that if we wanted to bathe,
we ran the bath, took the dog
for a walk around the block,
and came back to a tub
that was only half full.

The apartment had its charms,
particularly in a snowfall
on a cold winter night,
but it was no place to raise a child.
When Jamie lost the lease on the club,
we moved upstate to my hometown.
He was willing to leave the city

to make a life on my terms.

Jamie took to our small town
between lake and mountains.
He started a jazz festival
and developed a local following.
He reinvented himself as a therapist
and college professor,
author of memoirs, a novel, scripts.
Poetry was at the heart of it,
touching everything he did.
As a therapist, he connected
patients to myths and archetypes.
*If you cannot see the pattern,
you cannot know what traps you,
or what will set you free.*

He had the festival, and I had
my voice students and dance classes.
Music was the living stream
that nourished us. Words fail music,
sometimes love is a sound
that doesn't need words.

Carolyn completed our family,
our darling, doted-on daughter,
without the advantages
and disadvantages of siblings.
Sometimes Jamie was too wise for her.
She didn't want to be seen so well.

I thought Jamie and I would grow
old together. Then he got sick.
Cancer was the inevitable leveler,
bringing us down, down, down,
after seesawing between hope
and doubt, searching for cures,
reading between the lines
of what the doctors said
for what they didn't say.

I was there to support him,
not to make decisions for him.
I trusted him to know
when to stop trying.
For a while he was excited about

an experimental drug trial in Cuba.

He talked about going there
like it was a vacation,
but he didn't qualify.
M.D. Anderson was our last hope.
Looking back, I think it was crazy
to go to Houston in his condition.

He worked hard to finish his book,
between illusion and despair,
glimmers of wisdom, like twinkling
light between dark trees at twilight.
With his great generosity,
he wanted to give what he knew.
He believed in the quest,
the sacred journey. Even today,
when I read his words,
I feel his soft brown eyes
shining on me.

But the day he held that last book
in his hands, so rushed by his publisher
into print, it was marred by misprints,
he laid his palm on the cover,
not opening it, and looked away.

Grief has its own timetable.
It can't be hurried along.
So it was for Carolyn and me.
Jamie was our foundation.
Without him, we were adrift.
We each had to find our way to shore.
Plagued by migraines,
Carolyn missed so much work
she had to quit. I didn't mind
helping her out for a while,
but I couldn't afford it forever.

We grew into our routines.
Carolyn had Ezra, their dog Pete,
and their life in Brooklyn.
I had my mother, aged ninety-four.
She lived half a mile away
in her own house, and every day
I brought her dinner at five o'clock,
alternating with my brother,
who brought her breakfast.
When Jamie was sick, my brother
had taken over. Now it was my turn.

The spring before he died,
Jamie programmed the jazz festival
one last time. It was his memorial:
mid-September, the warm golden sunlight
reflected off the lake, and the horns,
reeds, percussion and strings all glinting
as their melodies rose in the air
played by musicians who'd returned
year after year and become
like family. Sometimes
I imagine an echo still lingers there,
and Jamie is listening.

That was one of the great days
of my life. Afterwards, everything
got darker. Fall led into winter,
and winter into spring with agonizing
slowness. I worried about Carolyn,
how to help her. I was a ghost of myself,
my expression in the mirror so sad
I forced myself to smile. At first
I could only manage a grimace,
but I practiced every day
until it got easier, and I looked better.
When I looked better, I felt better.
You use what you have.

A year after Jamie died, I returned
to a museum we both loved. I stood
before one of Jamie's favorite paintings
and remembered what he'd said about it
as if he were standing next to me.
Tears welled in my eyes. I realized
Jamie is always with me
if only I can look into my heart.

That August was my high school reunion.
I was of two minds,
but I talked myself into it.
On the evening cruise on the lake,
I opened a closed door to my past,
and Bill was there waiting
as if he'd never left.
In fact, he'd come back
after a career in tech in California,
long divorced, with four grown
children living all over the world,

and grandchildren in college,
or starting out on their own.

He was very different from me,
and yet not so very.
We'd never dated,
but we double-dated,
most memorably at our senior prom.
Funny how Bill remembered
what I'd said after the dance
when the four of us went
skinny-dipping in the lake
at two in the morning,

Bill was our class valedictorian.
I'd thought he'd go to Swarthmore
like me, but he changed his mind
and went to Yale for track and field.
He was state champion in the high jump.
I had forgotten how much I admired him.

All that fall we got reacquainted.
He was gentle. He gave me time.
Together we went hiking and biking.
We had fun working out together.
I was in the best shape I'd been in years.
He gave me back a self I had lost.
Every day he came with me
to bring my mother dinner.
He fit into my life and took up
residence in my heart.

When we were together,
it was as if we were teenagers again.
We gossiped about each other's families.
We went on trips to see the farm
where his father was born,
the house where my grandparents
lived when I was growing up.

But the past would mean nothing
if it were just the past.
Experience seasoned us
and made us more tolerant.
When I sometimes call Bill Jamie
in the reflexive way old people have,
he doesn't get upset.
At his embarrassed smile,

I realize what I've said and blush,
but he's already forgiven me.
He gives me room to make mistakes.
What better sign of love is there?
Wherever Jamie's spirit is,
I hope there is no jealousy.

OFF THE GRID

Will death come like blackness
came to my computer screen?
It went dark and wouldn't turn back on.
Like CPR on a heart patient,
I tried codes to restart it.
Briefly it came on, sputtered,
then went black again.
In the morning, it wouldn't wake up.

When I die, I would like to disappear
into the surrounding silence,
but there is the problem of the body.
It doesn't disappear. It fails.

I am my body, but am I inextricable
from my body? I imagine my release,
invisible in the intersecting circles
of two hawks overhead.

I feel soft breezes,
and all that blows through me
is tinged with that mystery.

Yahrzeit

My parents were rarely on the same wavelength.
Most of the time they talked at each other,
not to each other. But here they are,
by a quirk of the Hebrew calendar,
yoked forever and forever,
until the end of time,
sharing the same *Yahrzeit*,
although one died in February
and the other in March,
two years apart.

Every year I pray for them together
and speak their names together,
before my congregation.

MORNING SWIM

The island sparkles in the morning,
Grasses nodding, leaves waving,
All alive and moving, yet still rooted.

The day passes in sunlight and shadow.
Billowy clouds blow across the sun.
What seems like silence
Is full of sound.
Rocked by gentle waves,
I float between deep blue sky
And dark blue sea,
Bathed in endless waters
That are cold, healing, and bitter.

LATE SUMMER, BLOCK ISLAND

The air gray, still, and parched.
The rain, when it comes, is a sprinkle
dripping silently on the ground.
The mourning dove's call is backdrop

to the sea's suck and ripple
that speaks of longing
and sadness, buried hopes
like lost wrecks off rocky shores.

From the marshes comes the trilling
of red-winged blackbirds, in the thicket
the cardinal's chirp, the meadow lark's whistle,
chatter of a hawk chased by crows.

In the afternoon, sunlight behind
banked clouds glints off a sea
as pale as isinglass, reflecting back
my memories as I write,

until the day when words will be
all that are left of me,
words and images
and other people's memories.

Bury my body deep in the earth,
but may my soul roam free
in the shadows under the trees,
in the dancing hearts of flowers,

the setting sun and the rising moon,
the barred clouds and winds that move them,
the waters where I love to swim,
beloved haunts of my essential solitude.