

## The Art of Grief

The air is clean sheets, my rocking chair still.  
A pigmy owl comes to perch on the porch  
rising moon staring full on through the firs.

I sit with grief.  
I mother it,  
holding its little hot hand.  
I don't say *Shhh*.  
I don't say *It's okay*.  
I wait until it's done with having feelings,  
then we stand and go wash dishes.

Cracking the bedroom doors,  
stepping over creaky boards,  
we kiss the children,  
feeling sore like getting back  
from climbing mountains,  
training for a marathon.

*I'm with you all the way,*  
whispers my grief.

Then, splashing water on our face  
we stretch beneath the moonlight  
one big shadow  
one small.

## Mill Creek

Mill Creek is a boy  
running a maple stick  
along a new unpainted  
picket fence  
forever.

In June we pitched  
a tent on the far bank,  
Jonah making fire,  
Martha stacking wood,  
and you setting out  
food on a log.

Our morning voices blended  
in the dawn with honeybees  
buzzing in the huckleberry  
bushes, the steady beat of  
water washing rocks  
and birds gathering their breakfast.

But this year in March the air froze,  
and it rained all through May.  
The honeybees are silent.

The new green tops of fir trees  
are already two feet tall,  
and our offspring,  
determined as ever to be happy,  
are off with their friends  
starting their own lives.

Now,  
when black shifts to blue,  
one lone bird  
breaks the stillness  
with one  
sharp note.

Alone, I sit  
on the bridge  
I built  
for us.

## Loss and Love

Your last wish has come true.  
I spread your ashes on the Navarro River  
just above the swimming hole.

Staring into the water as you passed,  
I suddenly undressed  
and jumped into the water to be with you.

Drifting down the pool  
feeling myself take on your spirit  
I emerged a new man.

As I drove back up the mountain to our cabin,  
our whole life together flooded back to me  
like the tide at Limantour.

When the memories receded,  
what stayed washed up on the beach for me to examine,  
was the day that Cassie cut the umbilical cord:

the last safe day for mailing college applications.

All she said that morning was that she'd like our help making a final  
check of the applications before she took them to the post office.  
Tranquility still reigned after a peaceful huckleberrypancake breakfast as  
Cassie called you into her bedroom for the editorial last rites.  
I followed so that I could help, too,  
and we each were given an application.  
You had Vassar; I had Bowden.  
It was a nice little calm before the storm.

I was surprised to see the same spelling error that I had circled twice  
before on her essay, ...and circled it again. You began discussing a point  
of style on an essay we had all massaged to death in the course of the last  
two months.

I didn't say:  
*Haven't we settled that? Don't mark on it, she'll have to do it over.*  
It was too late.

You started getting into it with Cassie.  
I joined in, and after some discussion  
which included only a little emotion,  
Cassie decided against the change,  
but now the essay had to be printed out again.  
It was noon as Cassie took off for printing, copying

and the post office.

We were about to leave for our lovely day at the mall  
when the phone rang

I heard you say:

“Your disk?

“What does it look like?

“What is it labeled?

“You think it's in your room?”

Cassie must have said:

“Can you find it in my room?”

*...and you didn't say: Can I find it in your room? Can I find it in your room? This room with three months worth of clutter on the desk, this room with all of your umpteen activities of the last week represented by items of clothing, books, gum wrappers, paper, pencils, tiebacks, hair clips, backpack, sleeping bag, not to mention the hundreds of whatnots all over the floor, the bed, the futon, the chair, the dresser. I am supposed to find your computer disk in this room? I can't believe you. Are you numb to all the times I have asked you to clean it up? I gave up on your room long ago. It is no longer my responsibility. Wasn't it you...? Wasn't it you who said it was none of my business? And now you are making it my business to find a disk for you in this room? I have failed as a mother. I have allowed you to get to the brink of leaving home, to the brink of college, without arming you with the capacity either to get into college or to succeed when you get there. You are not only naive and childish in your writing, but you are sloppy and careless. You keep making the same spelling errors. You are a procrastinator, too. It is passed the eleventh hour; it is 12:30pm on the last day for applying to college, your applications still have mistakes, and now you are so disorganized that you can't even get those mistakes corrected without my help. How old are you? Seventeen! My god how you try my patience, child! Come home and clean up your own damn room, and then maybe you'll be able to find your own goddamn disk.*

Of course, that's not what you said.

You said, “O.K.,”

and started looking hastily and anxiously  
around the room for the disk.

So, finally, I said with some impatience,

“Look, we have plans for this day. We are already late. It's her disk; it's her responsibility; she needs to come home to find it herself. Besides we have looked, and we can't find it.”

Then I left the room.

I presume that you said something like that, because you emerged from her room moments later (empty handed), went to the front hall closet, got your coat, purse and keys, and we went to the car together to start our day together.

That is when my guilt began.

*That was harsh* said that little voice,  
which I hoped you didn't hear, as we drove down the hill.  
Then, again, as I sped up to get on the freeway:  
*Your daughter needed you.*  
*She's trying to get into college, for heaven's sake.*  
*She needs help.*

You said, "I am so mad at her."  
And I didn't say  
*There! Now you're talking,*  
...but I was glad that for a moment we had something  
upon which we could build a common experience.

"Well, this is great," I said to you,  
trying to shift out of the noise in my head. "I am looking forward to  
finding something that you really wanted for Christmas."

I turned on the radio. Noise.  
New station: noise.  
New station, *Wait let's see what this is...*

Click.  
You reached over and turned it off angrily:  
"I hate that. Can't we just sit quietly."

I said nothing.  
Silence.  
My foot got heavier on the accelerator.  
I escaped from a jam of three Mondayslowpokes  
and got the car up to 75 miles per hour.  
Silence.

"Can you slow down! I want to have a nice, quiet, relaxed day...."

Anger.  
I stopped accelerating to allow the car to slip back to 74 miles per hour.  
Silence.

That voice again: *You abandoned your daughter in her time of need...  
selfish as always.*  
I talk back: *Look, it's her responsibility.*  
*She can take care of it herself.*  
*She should take care of it herself.*  
*We have our needs, too,*

*and anyway, how in the world were we going to find her disk?*

“She'll be fine,” I propose.  
“Yes, she'll be fine,” you say back.

Remember?

It took two hours of fighting  
for us to realize that we  
were staring ahead  
not at the highway,  
but at many years  
of life without our Cassie.  
She finally was torn from you  
for good,  
and you would be alone...  
well not alone...  
you had me.

Anyway,  
so here we are again, together,  
alone inside the cabin,  
talking the way we always do.

Sitting at the table with my notebook and my pen.  
I have two glasses of wine in front of me,  
and I intend to drink both of them.  
The robin and the mourning dove are taking turns  
singing to me again from the dead branch  
on the dead top of the redwood tree.  
The silence on this hilltop frames their voices.  
It has never been so peaceful.

You tried to leave me  
just as Cassie left you,  
but you can't.  
See, not even dying parts us.

Like it or not  
you are right here with me  
sitting by the fire.

When I take my ax into the woods  
you'll be right there beside me  
clipping branches and pulling sticks,  
(you noticing the flowers,  
me looking up at the trees.)

Tomorrow, driving back to the city  
You'll be right there beside me  
in the truck

telling me  
to turn the music off,  
and slow down,  
and going on about your feelings,  
and I'll be listening.

But tonight  
I want you  
here beside me  
in our bed.

"Li'l Warmer Upper Hon?"

The wild wind blowing down from Saskatoon  
trying to be as scary as it can  
doesn't scare the little crescent moon  
slinging like a hammock in the west,

and I am face to face with Venus now  
as always telling me there is at least  
one constant in my life on which I can  
depend no matter the catastrophe.

But between now and then the road stretches  
out before me like the devil's challenge  
straight as a surveyor's tape and all  
that I can hope for is an allnight diner

and an allnight waitress gliding, coffee pot  
in hand, refraining: "Li'l warmer upper Hon?"



The Coffee Genius Connection  
genius n. 1. *The tutelary spirit of a person, place or institution.*  
—Oxford English Dictionary

Every morning the first thing I see out my window is Richardson Bay.  
Next, depending on the clouds, is Tamalpais Mountain.  
This morning the water is glass, and because of the fog, all else is trees.  
As the sky begins to lighten, I get up, make coffee,  
get banana bread, sit with my laptop and begin to write,  
hoping that I'll be joined by my genius.

As the sky gets lighter, I can feel my genius  
coming, guided by the monochromatic bay  
and sky: a perfect canvas for writing:  
grey sky, grey water, grey mountain  
the only colors: a green mug of coffee  
and the harmonizing greengreen trees.

It's entirely appropriate that the foreground for all this is trees,  
because since my childhood trees have fed my genius.  
And after sixty years of sipping coffee  
in the morning, it's so nice to be gazing at this bay  
knowing that the mountain  
they call the princess will witness what I write.

And now, as I write,  
I feel the trees  
Coming closer and the mountain  
Breaking through the fog to join my genius  
keeping my ego at bay  
while I sip my coffee.

For coffee  
is only a part of the ritual that helps me write,  
and the bay  
surrounded by trees  
is the perfect draw for my genius  
to come down from the mountain.

Leaving the mountain,  
joining my left hand, making my right put down the coffee  
my genius  
tells my fingers to write  
about the things I love: trees  
sky, clouds and this bay.

Thank you, genius, for guiding me to write  
This morning, and for joining the mountain, the coffee  
The trees and the bay.