

I am called upon to do an impossible thing.  
I am called to do what I cannot do.  
I am called upon to tell a truth I cannot adequately tell.  
To make with words what words cannot make.

Spasms. There are spasms. The heart shakes.

And if I should weep in the reading of these words, you will have to excuse me. I am in pain, Marjorie is dead, the shock of her absence is fresh (when, just a month ago, she told me stories at the table, I at her and my mother's feet, as they told me about myself), and we (our family, named and unnamed) grieve openly, as we must.

Our hearts, because we are alive and human, are open wounds. They break and mend themselves—piece by jagged piece—for everyone to see. It is for them I speak.

I speak, also, and perhaps a bit more urgently, for Marjorie, who feels no pain—except, of course, for my inadequacies as I try to honor her now. She will laugh at my pretensions—knowingly, honestly.

It is a privilege that sticks in the back of the throat, makes the nose burn, and sets the pulse racing.

I linger neither in love, nor lamentation nor longing, for this is neither eulogy nor elegy but what the spirit has decreed. We are not so cynical—are we?—that we have strayed too far away from talk of spirits to find ourselves trapped in our aloneness, wandering without aim or purpose, or anchor.

With broken hearts we ask questions that have no answer, we rush about in a frenzy to find answers that have no questions. Beset by the countless deep-hearted myths regarding life and death, of what is lost and what is gained, it is now incumbent upon us, the brokenhearted, to make of our pain a tangible thing.

Something we can see and touch.  
Something that will not break as we do.

And what are these myths? That we have time, time enough to prepare, to correct our mistakes, to fix the wrongs we have done, to undo the lies we have told. Time enough to change our course, like empty ships in a fog of our own arrogance and misunderstanding that manœuvre wildly, that twist and turn in panic when the lighthouse has ceased to guide. This is who she was, you know: a lighthouse and a refuge, a warning and a place of safety, a love and the harshest test of your love.

In the end, amid the pain, she longed to be where she was born, on the foothills of a green and half-quarried hill, strong and imperfect as the life she herself had lived, where she could look one more time across the expanse of San Fernando, where her father and mother had loved and struggled to raise their children in the house her father had built.

Home.

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Imitation, people will tell you, is the sincerest form of flattery. So I will say what I think my aunt would want me to say in the way she would want me to say it.

About 25 years ago, I told a spectacular lie. It was, as far as lies go, spectacular—with all the twists, intrigue, excitement, and redemption that one should expect from spectacular lies. A brief interrogation, and the lie that I had woven for myself (spectacular as it was) came easily apart at its seams, like the half-made garments of a negligent tailor.

She took delight in telling this story whenever I would come home, my embarrassment giving way through the years to her laughter and, eventually, to my understanding.

In the time since, I came to learn that she, my aunt, took joy in seeing people transform from who they thought they were into who they ought to be, grasping their potential with both hands—timid, at first—then with the self-assured poise that only courage, counsel, and prayer could provide. And who among us could know her and not change? Who could come away untouched and untaught? Who could ever visit and leave empty-handed?

It is, perhaps, an irony both cruel and kind that the one guilty of telling one his most spectacular lies is now called upon to deliver to you a truth—not a spectacular truth, but one that is more simple, one that is not boastful or loud, but understated almost to the point of silence, such that if you were to cast your eye elsewhere for a moment, you would have missed altogether what she would try to give you.

Those who have ears to hear and eyes to see have heard and seen—and come away better.

And now that she has made a transformation of her own—having passed through from this place to whatever home we imagine—we are left to consider what we know, what we have seen, and what we will miss. This is part of the

mystery— isn't it? —that when faced with a death, we forget that the dead did, in fact, live.

When asked about her, we will see the grander parts but miss the details. We will catch the accomplishments. But we will miss more than that, even as we compete to say who it was that loved her best, knowing full well that she loved each of us more than we could ever imagine, knowing that the bounds and boundaries of our love defy even our own comprehension. We will miss the details of her care, her sometimes tough and sometimes tender hand, her willingness to give of her heart and mind, to teach and to let those whose heads were too hard for teaching learn for themselves. She would be there, we know, always there to bind our wounds, and to treat us, to put a match to the methylated spirits and coconut oil so it could be warm enough—just warm enough—for our bodies wracked with fever.

We will, in time, miss the innumerable crossword puzzles and newspaper clippings that gather like an archive in the back room, the pictures filling drawers, the records of births and deaths.

But we will not miss the way the wrinkles that set in around her eyes and mouth would smoothen out when she laughed out loud at getting older, her skin growing thin like the crepe paper of children's kites, and we will never wonder if she ever lived at all. We can still remember her voice.

Marjorie, my aunt, first and second mother, lived. She was more than I have the power to imagine or skill to describe. But I will make the attempt. She danced. And when she could no longer dance, she sang and spoke of dancing and accepted the change with grace. Often, she has said, "I've lived a happy life, you know." There were ebbs and flows, even in the midst of that happiness. But there was always happiness. Because there was always love.

So what are we to say now? The realities of ebbs and flows to which all lives are subjected, as far as eulogies go, what praise should we give that we are not ourselves called upon to emulate? We know there is no amount of praise that she would accept that does not come with proof. But this is a lesson each of us will come to in our own way, and in our own time. As far as eulogies go, we are her greatest accomplishment, as we have transformed over time from strangers and friends to family—*her* family. She would have it no other way.

She was ours, and we will always, *always*, be hers.

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In a letter delivering the news of her brother's death to her sister, Marjorie made the following confession: "It took me quite a bit of courage to write this letter.

Hope I don't have to write a letter of this type again or in a hurry." I find myself in the same position today, knowing full well that it is more a privilege than a burden.

Our faith is not misplaced in those whom we love.