From a Street I Was Summoned

by Patricia Heim

And it was at that age…poetry arrived in search of me…
abruptly from the others,
there I was without a face
and it touched me.
—Poetry' by Pablo Neruda

I'm a woman with an eye for detail that all but rules my life. Another way of saying this might be that I don't tolerate chaos well, that ordering practically anything on the material plane temporarily restores my semblance of wholeness.

The feeling of being "held by" and "in deep rapport with" an object in the environment is what psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas calls the "aesthetic moment": "a profound occasion" reminiscent of a time when our mothers' method of care made it possible for us to dwell together "in symmetry and solitude." Anything from a stirring passage of text to a sweeping view of the Grand Canyon might lend itself to such an encounter. Though less intense interactions, I think, can cast us under similar spells: a cardinal alighting on the bough of a sugar maple; an emerald-green clump of oregano huddled beneath the dead brush you've just snagged with your rake. For me, sometimes a well-organized closet will do. Even the sound of the word "composition" composes me.

You can imagine, then, I'm not a woman who hangs her coats and jackets on coat trees. But, because I've yet to purchase a plant for my entryway, I brought one in from my garage. Reluctant, at first, to use it practically, I hung only striking pieces of apparel on it: my Burberry trench coat, Nantucket straw hat, Mark Jacobs messenger bag, making it a statement of my artsy nature. Since I began writing about JFK, however, it's grown heavy beneath a jumble of coats, hats, handbags, and scarves. It looks homey, I tell myself, as if my alter ego has taken over the lease to my apartment, misrepresenting me as a well-adjusted woman who enjoys the coziness a bit of designer clutter has to offer.

Writing about Kennedy became an undertaking for which I wasn't prepared. All summer I'd been trying to write more directly about my mother's death from a brain tumor when I was thirteen. My mother, who's been dead for more than forty years, is both my muse and my nemesis—the hinge upon which all my writing turns. Whenever I try to flee her, she appears round every bend, whereupon we collide. It feels like she's stalking me, but I know it's the other way around, that I'm pursuing her and have been ever since she died, because I haven't been able to let her go. I've been struggling to make sense of her death

and the havoc wreaked on my mind upon seeing her dead, hoping to patch the soil where a clod slid from the mainland of my integrity.

Attempting to write a blow-by-blow account of my mother's death paralyzed me, and that it was summer, the same time of year she fell ill and died, didn't help matters. Because her loss was traumatic, some of my feelings remain unprocessed, the memories vague—a few (her funeral, for instance) entirely missing, making them difficult to put into words. Sometimes I re-experience the feelings in the here-and-now: When I feel hopeless, angry, confused, or bereft (any strong emotion, really)—in a way that feels disproportionate to the current situation—I try to link this *feeling* memory with a *cognitive* one. If the exercise brings about a shift in perspective, I know I've returned the feeling to its proper place, freeing the present to be exactly that.

Maybe I'd forgotten what another psychoanalyst, Marion Milner, who called herself a "Sunday painter," had to say in her book *On Not Being Able to Paint* about "a too direct approach" to something: that it ruins it. In art this direct approach doesn't so much destroy the "object of the artist's concern" but the art that should proceed from relating to that object—from the artist's ability to metabolize and, thus, "transfigure" it.

I decided to take a breather and enroll in a four-week-long essay-writing workshop guaranteeing the participants finish with a polished 2,000-word essay. Now I could write about something new and perhaps even humorous, a subject having absolutely nothing to do with my dead mother. And the word count, indeed, would hold me to my word. My short-lived writing success hadn't vanished into thin air; it only needed redirecting.

Our first week focused on writing within the social context, which appealed to me on several levels. Thus far I hadn't written anything embedded in the social-historical and felt excited at the prospect of researching the times in which my stories took place. Not only would this be interesting, it would provide me with more and better material to which I'd have easy access thanks to the Internet. Who was I to have thought all editors would take seriously my life's tales set beyond the backdrop of the human village? Like a groundhog, I'd emerge from the hole of my solipsistic universe and take a gander at the far-reaching one.

That introductory week we were given sets of prompts from which to write and encouraged to expound upon one of them for our 2,000-word, ready-to-submit-to-the- marketplace essay. I picked *Choose an event that has impacted your life and write yourself into that narrative, showing how you did or did not respond to it.* From the ashes of history, Kennedy's face rose up, and I felt confident I could pull off a 2,000-word essay on how, when I turned twelve that summer after he died, I began reading about and identifying with him.

It didn't occur to me at first that, once again, I was writing about death and, once again, doing so via the straightforward approach. Nor did it

faze me that my initial first sentence began, “By the summer of 1964, the year before my mother died, I’d already retired to my top bureau drawer my Paul McCartney pin…”

Beatle Paul’s mother died too—when he was fourteen—but I didn’t think about that either. Both facts would dawn on me later, just as it would that Kennedy’s death was a screen memory—one that, albeit disturbing or traumatic, stands in for an even more disturbing or traumatic one—for my mother’s death as well as an allegory for it. Mentioning my mother at the get-go didn’t trouble me because I knew I was writing about Kennedy. My mother, though once again rearing her irresistible head, would be relegated to a very minor role in the final few paragraphs. Or so I thought.

Like a voyeur I immersed myself in YouTube videos of Kennedy’s inaugural address, the motorcade ride through Dallas, the CBS news flash that he’d been shot and, shortly after, died, the three days of television coverage, including his body lying in state, and finally his funeral. I watched the Beatles’ US debut on *The Ed Sullivan Show* and listened to their most popular songs of that time, and I looked up the weather report in Philadelphia, where I grew up, for November 22, 1963, as well as the poets Kennedy liked to quote, the designer of Jackie’s infamous pink suit. I borrowed books about Kennedy from the library. I thought about him constantly, yet hardly at all about my mother or how my research was giving me vicarious access (in fantasy) to horrific images and memories of her death.

It was like time traveling. Plus the fact that I’d been alive so long ago and could vividly remember where I was when the news aired was, in itself, profound. Kennedy’s death drew together the entire country, shrinking our citizenry to the size of a family, just as it does when we remember it now. We were there; who can forget?

Although I was thrilled the instructor liked my essay, about 1,500 words into it I was taken aback by her comment—even more so by her enthusiasm—that the major theme surfacing was my relationship with my mother and that, by developing that theme, my essay would become “a powerful piece of writing about mother-daughter relationships.” How had it happened, I wondered, that I’d rounded a bend and, once again, bumped into my mother? That she’d trumped JFK? This couldn’t in any way have been intentional, could it?

I felt ruffled at the prospect yet equally excited; I’d find my mother after all and corner her death, get it down into a narrative and, finally, become whole. And the best part: Kennedy’s spirit would accompany me “one small step” at a time through the rubble of chaos into a kind of New Frontier because, as an eleven-year-old, I “felt safe in the authority and confidence he exuded.” He would understand because he possessed, as would I not long after his death, “the secret knowledge of mind-bending loss.” My trauma healed, I’d finally graduate from psychoanalysis, and my writing would be free to *seek new* landscapes

because, at last, I had *new eyes*.

Before long I'd exceeded the word limit, which was fine with the instructor and, in turn, fine with me. Maybe the finished work would end up being four or five thousand words. I'd still have an essay to send out, and even if it was growing into one about my relationship with my mother, it wasn't limited to that. I was writing about my relationship with Kennedy, my father, and my love of words as well.

Soon things got prickly because, now that my mother had equal billing with Kennedy, it was important to describe what she looked like. Ordinarily this would seem harmless, but I didn't want to depict her on the page so soon after my depressing summer writing experience. Portraying her in three dimensions side by side with JFK was going too far, meaning I was getting warm. Meaning hot wasn't far away: hot as in the hot stove I didn't want to touch, the searing pain of loss that all summer long, not to mention most of my life, I'd managed to avoid.

The ground began to sway when the workshop leader's red lines and typed words assailed me from the margins, suggesting I undo the sequential-type ordering I rely upon when anxious: a rigid, two-dimensional type structure that uses soothing language and a measured pace to support my thinking process as it nears potentially overwhelming feelings. To engage the reader and build suspense, my four themes, thus far presented like ducks in a row, would have to be integrated. Early on (meaning before page four of twelve), I needed to mix up some of the paragraphs, particularly those about my mother with those about Kennedy. When my skin, namely that on the underside of my arms, felt tickly, the muscles beneath my ribs recoiled, and I felt the urge to curl up under my desk, I had to ask myself: Does this person get what's at stake for me here?

Fiddling with the order of the essay was akin to rearranging the furniture in an autistic child's bedroom, making me irritable and, sometimes, angry. Dislodging even one of the paragraphs up for consideration would be like drawing a lone jack from a house of cards: the essay, along with my thus-far organized mind, might crumble. I needed to keep my mother paragraphs at arm's length from the Kennedy ones to prevent them from merging. In her book, Milner states that this "blurring of boundaries" is what makes a painting come alive—what could, potentially, make my mother come alive. I kept rereading the instructor's instructions, glaring at them for minutes on end, losing sight, continuously, of what I should do. She may as well have written in Arabic.

According to Milner, arranging objects in space opens up the realm of possibilities, including different ways for objects to be together, which can stir up intense feelings of "distance and separation," "having, and losing." The resulting anxiety leads to a narrow focus of attention as opposed to that wider one—whereupon we wander about in a relaxed sort of way—intrinsic to the creative process. In this particular essay the linear style I'd chosen steered me clear of such possibilities, from a

three-or even four-dimensional space that would make the story more compelling and, at the same time, threaten to perturb me; even toy with what might feel like my precarious hold on reality. I needed to see where one thing ended and the other began, for my right hand not to know what my left hand was doing. Weaving together such disparate threads wasn't my ken. Integrated was what I wasn't yet but only hoping to become. To become, however, I'd first have to abide feeling at loose ends: the polar opposite of Bollas' aesthetic moment.

At the end of the workshop, my 2,000-going-on-4,000-word essay not yet complete, I continued working, one-on-one, with the instructor. Before long, however, mired in frustration and confusion, beset by periods of dissociation where I sat on my sofa and stared into space, feeling only isolated, that my battery had died, and that nothing, especially writing, in any way mattered, I apologized profusely and withdrew from our contract.

The editor-in-chief of the magazine that had offered the class and subsequent one-on-one intervened, soliciting my thoughts as to how to see the project through. After discussing my preference, in terms of my mother, to portray *absence* rather than *presence*, and to employ less structure (dumping the requirement to adhere to a syllabus), the instructor and I resumed our collaboration. Interestingly, once I regained a sense of control, I wrote two sentences describing my mother, including what she looked like, and readily saw how it added to the piece.

The instructor even went so far as to show me how to shuffle the paragraphs. Still, there were transitions to deal with which, though in the end, simple, made me feel even more all-thumbs. At one point I felt so drowsy, I turned off my computer, flopped face down on my bed, and fell asleep, as I'd often done when I got home from school after my mother died. On waking up, however, my mind seemed to have moved to a higher level of coherence, and before long the essay was gaining momentum. The end was in sight.

The end is in the beginning, we've often heard it said, and in rereading the first paragraph of the final draft, I see how it served as a disguise for what the essay was really about—what I both wanted and feared to accomplish in the endeavor. The setting: my post-lunchtime, sixth-grade classroom smells of stale and rotting things. The desks "we'd crouched under" during a crisis (the Cuban Missile one) we hoped would protect us from annihilation—what I felt when my mother died. The "word problems and diagrammed sentences" sprawled across "the blackboards" are reminiscent not just of Jackie Kennedy and the Secret Service agent spread-eagle atop the presidential limousine but of my thirteen-year-old mind in disarray seeking refuge, as was my custom, via the methodical ordering of words. Finally, the sky dressed in "a mantle of blue as sunlight spilled through the casement windows…" reassures me that my *heavenly* mother is present, showering me with warmth and light throughout the arduous writing night. (In the end I deleted "mantle of blue," I suppose because my mother had done her

job.)

In the third paragraph I'm trying to comprehend "how the President could have gone from sitting upright, smiling, and waving to the crowd, to slouching like a sack of grain." Then Walter Cronkite appears, his voice "tripping" as he announces President Kennedy died. Immediately after, I notice my best friends crying while I am not, followed by the world looking the same "despite the fact it had drastically changed." In all these moments I'm longing to grasp something indiscernible: the President's experience of being shot, Walter Cronkite's of being overcome by grief, that of the world dumb to the fact it's been radically altered, and the inexplicable gap between my reaction and that of my friends.

By way of these indirect experiences, what I think I'm after, yet hoping to avoid, is what went on in *my* mind: the moment of collapse from a different kind of head injury, when I entered the hospital only to find my mother had died. As if it were simply a chip I could fit back into the place from where it fell, if I could crawl into the President's mind, Cronkite's voice, or my mother's body (when her head drooped "like a languishing tulip or that of a world leader slain by a sniper") and capture what, exactly, they felt and thought just before *slouching, tripping*, and *drooping*, I might finally understand—without having to feel it—what, precisely, had happened to me.

I keep forgetting that, although no event can be remembered verbatim, in trauma the mind's ability to process and record in memory is highjacked; only bits and pieces register. For meaning to be made, the partially experienced experience must be reconstructed. As stated earlier, we do this by enduring the memories and feeling states that, inevitably, reoccur, approaching them from various angles and imagining them back into where they belong. By acknowledging that what I'm seeking to capture, vicariously, through my characters, I'm actually reliving in the here-and-now process of writing, I can take back and own my subjectivity. By remaining present to myself in my dysphoria, reassuring myself that the mind, like life, is self-assembling, I can begin to let go of my two-dimensional writing style and maintain faith that, in time, order will prevail.

My account of the day of the assassination is markedly similar to that of my mother's death, elucidating how, in retrospect, the past is colored by the future as much as vice versa. Therefore a screen memory might either precede or follow a more traumatic one. The morning my mother dies, the hospital phones, relaying, like the media the afternoon the President was shot, the news her "condition is very grave." Not long after, we arrive at the hospital and learn she's dead, just as we learned of Kennedy's death shortly after his arrival at the hospital. In the wake of death, our teacher invites us "in a whisper to join her in prayer," and at my mother's deathbed, my uncle leads us in praying the rosary. In both, silence ensues, punctured by the cries of others, while I feel self-conscious or am locked in a daze.

When Kennedy dies, the leaves outside plummet to the ground, and after I see my mother dead, something like a bomb explodes in my stomach; then shoots straight up to the back of my head. We spend three days following the assassination watching television coverage of the President's body lying in state and "practically" attend his funeral. I remember parts of my mother's viewing and funeral Mass yet nothing at all of what happened at the cemetery.

I idealized my mother after she died, just as, after the assassination, the nation idealized Kennedy. But where do all the bad feelings go when we crown the dead "with a halo and place (them) eternally beyond our reach"? We disavow the devaluing feelings, displace them onto others, or identify with them and devalue ourselves. I felt connected to Kennedy after he died and in some ways, possibly, more connected to my mother after her death because, in rendering her all good, I preserved the love, defending against the ambivalence thirteen-year-old girls feel toward their mothers, especially when they get sick and die.

Though I also identified with Kennedy because finding heroes is what children that age are programmed to do. Feeling pulled toward the larger world by their budding sexual and aggressive drives, they begin to separate, causing their parents to "slide from their pedestals." I was also looking for a stronger father figure to "entice me from the snare of my mother's desperation" because, as is often the fate of last born children, my mother was clinging to me, using me as a buffer against aging and death as well as facing her own unlived life, while my father was too self-absorbed to notice.

Like any normal preadolescent girl, unaware that she's doing so, I was competing with my mother, not only for my father's love and affection but also to be reassured of her permission to surpass her. In the best of circumstances, who better than one's parent to test oneself against? Some of the things I admired about JFK were his authority, his beauty, and his vibrant personality, the very qualities I coveted in my mother. I suppose one reason I transferred these attributes onto Kennedy, aside from the fact they were already his, is because he was a stranger and also a man, assuaging the fear I might harm my mother, a fragile and, in many ways, unfulfilled woman, with what felt to me like the destructive edge of my competitiveness.

One afternoon, while writing the JFK essay, I was sitting on my sofa journaling when I felt my head turn, slowly, toward my kitchen. Gazing at the back door, for a split second I had the uncanny feeling I was in the kitchen of the house where I grew up, standing by the stove near the open screen door, the night air offering reprieve from the sweltering August heat. My mother was in the hospital at the time, and I was missing her to the point of despair. She was hospitalized twice during those four weeks and, even when home, was often incoherent. I remember that night, beside myself with longing, wondering if and when she'd ever come home. I believe the stove stuck to that memory because the pain, undoubtedly tinged with rage, felt strong enough to melt me to the floor, while the stove, even if hot, I'd be tempted to hold

onto.

In my essay I wrote that one of the main ways I identified with JFK was through my love of poetry, because I remembered him quoting poets like Robert Frost, who read "Stopping by Woods" at the inauguration, and George Bernard Shaw, whose words, *…I dream things that never were and say, "Why not?"* he quoted in his address to the Irish Parliament. Also I discovered in my fact-finding that Kennedy often jotted down—on napkins, if necessary—snippets of poems when he came across them, something I've been known to do. Toward the end, I wrote that, for a long time in my desire to mourn my mother's death, I hoped "my courage would eventually find me, as Kennedy's had found him and poetry had arrived *in search of* Neruda."

I mentioned some of my favorite poems from Catholic grade school, one of them "Trees" by Joyce Kilmer, which I fell in love with in third grade. In the beginning the narrator pays homage to the tree, exclaiming that no mere poem could be so lovely. The tree takes on a feminine appearance, *a nest of robins in her hair* as *she lifts her leafy arms to pray*. Like a first love, the poem holds a place of honor in my memory, this declaration of love for a tree. Ever since, trees of all kinds, apparently even coat trees, feel like mothers to me.

How do we write our traumatic stories without running the risk of re-traumatizing ourselves? Even though I'm a therapist myself and see one of the best analysts that money can buy, I'm unable to answer this question. I know the feelings will always be there and can be easily triggered, that sometimes they're accompanied by memories and, at other times, are memories themselves. The feeling of chaos, which threatened to derail my Kennedy essay, is one of them—a *feeling* memory I had to bear if I intended to connect the dots, to heal and grow through the process of narrative.

After my mother died, my older siblings already out of the house, my father was grief-stricken. Although he attended well to my physical needs, emotionally he was more or less unavailable before getting sick himself and dying of lung cancer four-and-a-half years later. I had to create a new order without my mother in it, and often I was confounded with fear, even terror, and sometimes excitement. The world, seen up close for the very first time, loomed more vast and confusing than I'd ever imagined; the gamut of possibilities, both wonderful and terrible, flown open like the curtain shielding the Wizard of Oz. How to decide "which way to go" to get back home without any ruby slippers or helpers? I resorted to my obsessional defenses, like the linear-style of arranging my themes, taking one sure step at a time, the least mistake giving rise to unthinkable anxieties, as if the earth would open and swallow me whole. And I parented myself in a way that left little room for error, lest I cruelly castigate myself.

Sometimes, while writing, that anxiety creeps up on me and I think *I can't concentrate: I'll never be able to write anything again*. Persevering through the challenges of writing about JFK, as well as reflecting on

why I opted to write about him, has taught me to take deep breaths, long breaks, and occasional naps, holding fast to the truth that light, if we stay still and wait, always issues from the darkness, honing our ability to penetrate reality.

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