

Still Life

Marpessa Dawn Outlaw

Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death. If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present.

*Ludwig Wittgenstein
Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

From the moment my friend George stepped from his loft in New York's photo district to his death at the bottom of the building's elevator shaft, there has always been one thing I can say I've known for sure – that love is dangerously overrated, if not downright toxic. Before that, I'd thought of love as I did Zen – a pleasant but curious thing that other people did better than me. I mastered love no better than I did the habit of meditation. While the rest astral-projected or found peace heretofore unknown in the act of ripping lettuce, I grew restless after sixty seconds on my Zen pillow, certain that if the spirits did grace someone with enlightenment tonight, it would never be a fraud like me. I knew this, but craved the attention that being part of something fashionable can bring. With Zen, it was the sense of being above the fray that intrigued me, and in love's case, the store of gestures I'd gleaned from magazines, movies, and friends, and which bought one affection, and passed the time.

You could say it was my father's fault. For what else is left for a girl whose early schooling was a sweetly-masked betrayal learned at the knee of her parents? Eddie "Cheeks" Ponder seduced my mother, already engaged to a well-meaning man named Arthur, with a potent combination of daftness and daring, and the promise that they would build an empire together. When she met my father, he would say he was a hospital worker. There would be some question much later about whether he had ever even set foot in a hospital. But by then, the question would be irrelevant. There would be three children to care for, and fissures in the empire through which rivers of whiskey flowed. There would be knock-down drag-outs with dishes flying. When my uncle Raynard, as agent for my mother's family, gave him money to leave us, he took it and moved 3,000 miles to Oakland, where he went into the ice cream business.

But even that is only part of the story. Because in one real sense, it was me who killed George, as surely as if I had pushed him myself.

George was a master of love, having loved and been loved many times in his thirty years – at least that’s what he said. He’d had affairs to remember and spilled out the details to me, his favorite confidante, over tall glasses of Barbados Cockspur rum on ice. The sweet spot at the base of the tailbone on this one, like the hidden succulent on a game bird, he’d remember forever. Or the way that one gave herself to him so completely, he had to weep in awe. I’d seen it with my own eyes, too, women ready to undress for him hours after being introduced. Even men, avowedly heterosexual, burly Brooklyn types, would have to give him his due for having that “something.”

What it was about George nobody could quite put their finger on. I always could see through the come-on, which is probably why we became such good friends. In return for a willing ear, I secretly hoped that – with enough time in his company – that ineffable something might be mine too. Usually, he would call and I would come over, with take-out coffee and the paper. It was a ritual we learn to perfect with seasons of practice, as if in perpetual rehearsal for our version of the classic New York moment: I walk, from Stuyvesant Town up past Union Square to Park Avenue or splurge on a taxi if it is bitterly cold. The coffees are made to order: his light and sweet; mine dark, no sugar. The newspaper I choose on the strength of its cover; having no allegiances, I guiltlessly let myself be swayed by melodrama – the more outrageous the better – while he, I know, makes a cursory pass at sweeping away telltale evidence of the previous evening. He knows I would not comment anyway. Wherever we have been the night before, however we have debauched ourselves, like this we would restake our claim in the world of the living. And, like this, we always would.

After George’s death, I vowed to return to my senses. Love did nothing more than arrest you where you stood while the world moved on, caused regret that could not be un-lived, and pain you could have lived well without.

I do have an old photo album I keep on the top shelf of my bedroom closet in which are Polaroids of my old boyfriends, set out in chronological order, from my days in New York. My friend Louise used to say, “Why keep pictures of men who’ve hurt you? Of relationships that didn’t work out?” I’d say, “Why not? What hurt?” Besides, it’s far more important to remember what happened – that is, the passages of one’s life, than to subscribe to a notion of ever after that would have you tearing things up and throwing them in the fire. If I threw every picture away because things ended badly, I’d have nothing at all to remember my life by, would I?

No, Louise. It's I who've hurt them.

There is one of me and Vincent, a film student from Trinidad, along with a parrot, at the Lucky Strike in New York in 1985. I manage to look both arrogant and innocent, lips apart, my chin lifted in defiance. Vincent, elbow resting on the bar, face tilted against fist, glances sidelong at me. The parrot is courtesy of the "Photo with the Parrot" man, a retired vet who made his living off of fools like us seeking to recreate our fantasies of our parents' 1950s night club soirees, those big warehouse affairs of a Saturday night in which the strife of their lives outside those formidable walls melted before the newly pressing matter of the evening's cocktail menu.

That picture of us, if not our actual being together, was more about style than anything else, at an elusive moment in time: Vincent's impeccable hat and white handkerchief and thrift shop pinstripe suit; my blasé regard and caramel skin and the full-breasted curve I still flaunted beneath a cashmere sweater.

Next is a photo of George, as black and shiny as an espresso, staring boldly back at all who stumble upon him. I tell people he's the only one I *haven't* slept with. Better that than telling them that I did – once. They'd only press me, convinced of stumbling on some secret about my nature that until then had eluded them. 'Just a friend,' I tell them. Nothing more. If that doesn't work, I say he is no longer living, and then I'll shut the book and offer to play some music, or fix some coffee. What I don't say is that I willed his fall. I know the look they'll get. I've seen it. And I just don't need the scrutiny.

There is another parrot photo, from a time after George's death, in which I am looking slightly more Germanic, if that's possible for a black college girl from Montclair, New Jersey, in a tunic and belt and Grace Jones hair. Henning (who really is German) and a Turkish man are looking with mock surprise at the parrot, which has positioned itself, with an eye for the camera, with its best side forward. Henning was my lover at the time. Back then, I'd thought it was the contrast in our skins that enthralled me – like butterscotch topped with whipped cream. Later I recognized it as that north-country malaise that spoke to me of rain, and the casual cruelty that always seemed to me the Germans' strong suit, and therefore a perfect match for one so in need of punishment.

"You know what your problem is, Gwen," my mother used to say about my foreign lovers, "you think you're another person." And then she'd go on, stupidly, musing about what might have been different had she kept up with her high school French. Even so, it was a trait most likely learned from her, who rejected her simple but proud middle-class upbringing in a close-knit family, to marry a man with no people, no family she could meet over supper. More than once, at different times, it was said we must have both lost our minds.

Perhaps *toxic* is describing love too harshly. *Perilously unwise* – maybe that’s a more palatable phrase for what has us losing fifteen pounds over a man, slashing wrists, downing aspirin, and the other hysteria women bring upon themselves for the sake of a compatible neurosis to fill the rest of the coverlet. If it came to that, I would much rather have a drink, a noncommittal screw, and a picture with the parrot. Perhaps you think me immoral, or misguided, but at least I’m honest.

Before I left New York, there was David, a social worker from Queens I’d met at a hospital cafeteria. David loved to cook, and our two-month romance was launched with a stunning lobster dinner that came with homemade mayonnaise and a good bottle of wine that we drank from chipped water glasses. Afterwards, we took off our clothes and climbed the iron ladder to the roof of his East Village roof to cavort naked in the rain. This was one of those roofs with very little lip on it and a clear drop to nowhere. There we were, dancing, dancing, laughing, parting, and falling against each other again, our limbs slippery with rain water. I did not see the edge of the roof come, but I stopped just short of it nevertheless, leg aloft, suspended precariously on the lip like Shiva. This, when I look at it now, is a picture that reminds me of a time when I was not yet ready to die.

Last year, back East for the holidays, I ran into David as we both waited inside Grand Central Terminal for an unoccupied public phone. There are some old lovers who will do it on purpose – catch you on the street unawares, demanding to know what you’ve been doing with your life so as to judge which end of the stick they got for not being with you. I try to see them first if I can, and I’d have done so with David, except a woman dropped her toddler on the stairs. Of course I went to assist, and when I looked up from the commotion, there he was, kneading two quarters in his left hand.

At his insistence, we moved to the side and chatted for a minute. Two people got off the telephone, but I was rooted helplessly to my spot. His mother had been back in the hospital two times since we parted, and he had moved her in with him to save on home nursing. I wove a picture of a demanding but satisfying new job, trips to Big Sur, a charming boyfriend.

“I should have held onto you when I had the chance,” David blurted out, in a kind of wolfish cry. It was excruciating. What was he talking about? What chance? My mind reassembled the images I retained from those days, looking for what I might have missed. To me, it was always clear that there was a point beyond which neither of us was willing to go, but that never meant we weren’t able to enjoy each other. Food was a passion with us. I learned the secret doorways to Chinatown restaurants through him. Time gave us what it had to give. What more did he want?

My mind found nothing in the short film that was our story, yet here was David suggesting that we have lunch. I insisted he take the next free booth, that I would wait for him. When he turned to pick up the phone, I ran for the 42nd Street entrance, grateful for the passing crowd that took me up, spiriting me from view.

My own near end on the East Village rooftop brings up another thing I've always known: I believe there's a lesson for us in our own deaths. A kind of justice. George knew the elevator didn't work properly. How could he not? The elevator was always missing the goddamn floor. Whenever you asked him about it, he'd laugh it off. *Heh heh heh*. Just as he would have laughed at – without actually denying – the idea that he loved me.

Sometimes it is a justice hidden from the ones for whom it is meant, and the stuff for a lifetime of argument for the rest of us. In my father's case, only those who knew him best – my brothers and I – saw the irony in how he died. Of course this didn't stop us from dissecting for years the man's peccadilloes: his diet of sandwiches – typically, cheese and mayonnaise, his repudiation of watermelon as too “niggerish,” his love of red Kool-Aid, his incapacity to be on time for anything, not even the birth of his child. He too was forever dreaming, evolving into a minor Atlas who managed to keep his corner of the globe aloft with the most speculative of enterprises: to convince a butcher to lease him a sawdust swept corner for a wholesale frozen cod sideline; to brow-beat a Persian couple who wearily agreed to consider Tae Kwon Do lessons for local youth at their hair salon. (His wisdom: “A man ain't nothing but a suit of clothes, but with the right suit of clothes, he can change the world.”) He also spent his whole life trying to escape the blackness that raised him – first with my mother's bourgeois Montclair family and then with his second wife, a former Iowan of Swedish stock, in a middle-class section of Encino, California – only to die exiled to South Central, as black a neighborhood as God ever made.

Perhaps, my brothers and I mused aloud when we gathered together some Sundays, it was the ease of it all that had gotten to him. Or even the impossibility of it all, of sustaining it forever. Perhaps he lost too much, or made too much, and couldn't face himself. Perhaps that was the reason he had started drinking again, one of them would say, while another brother would nod in agreement, and perhaps was drinking the night he choked on that watermelon seed. *'Cause he was out of his mind, see.*

In choice lie the seeds of destiny.

The women at the Wednesday night support group disagree with me on a basic principle: how can there be a lesson in your death when you're dead, Gwendolyn? Where are you to get the lesson? I guess what I meant is justice,

I'll say, correcting myself. What justice would there be in your father dying any particular way, they'll retort, poking greedily for holes in my argument. Are you saying everything is our fault, Gwendolyn? What are your unresolved feelings here? Who exactly is George? At this point, of course, it is useless to continue, and I just shut my mouth.

Lately, too, my friend Roberta has been challenging me more than usual. A big-boned Venus, redheaded, pale, and thin-skinned, she has always felt it her duty to offer her observations on the state of my spirit, proffering these like the bright, useless baubles she sells at a Venice furniture shop. Am I eating right? Do I need a facial? Most important, am I getting laid? But her twenty-something wisdom is now heavy with concern, ever since the truth came out about Arlin Matthews. I'd told her, out of pure defensive strategy, that I'd stayed in touch with the handsome young New York doctor, and on a recent conference trip of his to Los Angeles, he'd asked me out.

Roberta lowered her lids to half-mast – a look I'd seen on her before when the subject even hinted at sex – and dropped the book of fabric swatches she had been holding. “You actually *fucked* him?”

“Well...”

“Well what?” said Roberta.

“We haven't exactly...,” I heard myself concede.

Flaring nostrils always meant she smelled a secret. “You haven't fucked him at all, have you? You probably haven't even talked to him in years.”

She was deflated now. My “scoring” Arlin Matthews would have been her personal victory in the war for my spirit; I hated to disappoint her. Everything was spinning out of control now and I did my best to rein it in. “We talk all the time. I talked to him yesterday.” Roberta lit another cigarette and stirred her tea. Why should she believe me?

“I don't even know why you said that,” I went on. “But *you* certainly would know when one would need laying. You fuck anything that walks.”

Roberta's perfect plume of smoke sputtered like tail pipe exhaust. She made some business of shuffling the papers on the desk. Then, before the silence occupied too permanent a place, she asked lightly, as if we were having one of our girlie talks: “Was your hair always this dark?” and answered herself in the same breath. “No. No, it can't have been.” The chill swept out in Roberta's relentless good spirit. I made some apology about being out of line, but Roberta waved it away. “So. We'll go out on Monday night,” she said. “There's someone I want you to meet.”

Of course, what she really meant was, “Were you always this lost?”

These are the things that are on my mind this evening, in part because I received this afternoon yet another one of those despicable invitations from the hospital association, inviting me to attend a series of spring lectures on cancer. I flipped open the airbrushed pink-and-green brochure because I was curious about what these idiots will have us delving into next. *Loving through our Cancer: Intimacy and the Breast* encourages us to bring a bag lunch. *The Road Beyond: How We Can Learn to Welcome Change* promises a moving slide presentation with music. *Bone Marrow, Stem Cells, and You*, blasé, blasé, blip.

Tchok! Right into the wastebasket. I am anti-pity. I don't believe anything is exorcised by dredging it up week after week, examining misfortune from all angles. Isn't it enough that I've made my peace with George?

In the bathroom, I put on my lipstick and wrap a scarf around my hair for the rain before heading out. I am due to meet Roberta at 9:00 and it is already a quarter past.

I have been telling them for months to take me off their list, but out of some perversity, they've refused to listen. I have come to the conclusion that the Wednesday night support group is in on this, as we are always at opposite sides of the "Disease Manual" that instructs us cancer survivors in proper survivor etiquette. Though shalt not, for example, elect to miss out on news of the latest research, especially when it could change your life. Though shalt regard every opportunity to "share" as a chance to be your own best friend. Community, community, community. The world, I know, is full of *us*. Others young, maybe even from New Jersey, single, maybe even working as museum registrars in California. No doubt, too, some of them are black. But unless they, too, have wondered at a divine retribution, a logic in all things, it's still precious little to bind me to another.

This rebellious attitude has earned me a reputation for being a live wire in the group, most of them housewives turned champions for the cause, ferretting out every far-flung study and herbal remedy.

I announced myself on my very first visit to the cancer police, showing my scars right in the middle of Abby Esherman's ratings report on plastic surgeons. I lifted my shirt in the middle of the sharing circle, little WonderBra and all, and shook my tits for the ladies. I have been their mission ever since then.

Below said tits, of course, is evidence of my flaying. A scar runs the length of each, and, at the center of these, a smaller one like the locus of a divining rod that points north to the reworked breasts. It was the right one that housed a cancerous tumor, the size of a small marble, abutting the nipple at 6 o'clock. What is left is a brown obelisk pointing obstinately downward. What delicacy of feeling there was I left that night at George's, a sweaty imprint on soiled sheets, just one month before he fell.

I can't get started without you, he says.
I should know better.

When the party to celebrate his first cover shoot is planned, George asks me to play hostess. Outside, the taste of mercury and ice on the air would shock you out of your reverie. But up in here, intoxicants cloud the windows, the deejay lays down the very song you were thinking about, and even the fashion types feel in the grips of something. Me, I seek fortification in three and a half glasses of Merlot, as I have a speech to make, a proposal, proposition, a wine-drunk declaration of undying devotion to George, and cross the cavernous room in search of him.

He is, it turns out, in the kitchen, his damp hands searching out the dampness up some girl's dress. "Gwen," he says, as nice as you please. "You know Lauren." I think the bitch even smiles at me. But I can't say for sure.

Because I'm halfway across the loft by then. I've already punched the elevator button.

That ghastly, lumbering, relic with flesh-colored walls, that's been laboring all night, spitting people out. Wouldn't you know it's ready and waiting for me to step in? Earlier in the evening, George has taped a sheet of paper to the left of the button panel that's still there: "THIS LIFT KNOWN TO HAVE AN ATTITUDE. RIDE AT YOUR OWN RISK – OR TAKE STAIRS." Without thinking, I rip a corner off and scribble on it not only "Lauren," as I had intended, but George's name too. By the time the doors open into the lobby, I've figured out what I mean to do with that ball of paper. I consign it to the whistling cables, shoving it down into the dark space beyond the doors along with a mumbled prayer.

In a matter of hours, I will run into an acquaintance on Sixth. *Have you heard?* And when he sees my confused look he will put a hand on my arm to hold me there on the freezing avenue, and recount word for word what he heard from someone else. The superintendent, a guy from the Dominican Republic, found him, alone, shoulders pinned back like broken beetle wings, and his legs boomeranged out. But even before the horrific news is a rumor whipping through the city, the certainty of my error creeps upon me, as I stand at dawn in the kitchen with my plate of toast, and I shake uncontrollably and I wonder: what have I done?

It is six months after this that I first palpate that little marbly thing with my own fingers, while free-falling in my bed in the dark and – my notion of justice being what it is – a month after that before I do anything about it.

For my mother, her brother and two sisters, my going to California is worse than getting sick: it is giving myself up for dead. Nobody they knew, they said, ever came back the way they went. West Coast blacks had undergone a strange mutation, couldn't be trusted, couldn't be known.

If truth be told, I am different now. For three years, I have lived in the former army housing development located behind a 24-hour supermarket and discount clothing store. It's true they are only anonymous, standard-issue four-plexes, a dozen or so, spread over several acres, trying valiantly to disguise their origins with coats of yellow, bright orange, flesh, and blue paint, tight little gardens, and clutches of palm. An Ecuadorian family lives just below me, and an Asian couple, always on their bicycles at dawn, lives next door. Lacking the charm of the Venice craftsman houses and bungalows of the neighborhood, ours would never be mistaken for the homes of those with money, but here the middle-class can, at least, have reasonable proximity to the ocean for a fair price.

I've dated here, though the men I meet through the job have generally been unremarkable. There were one or two evenings with a former director of a well-known city agency, a tall African-American man who captured my attention with Antaeus cologne and the intimation of a passionate nature. His singular passion was confined, I learned, to uncovering a Jewish conspiracy behind the famous syphilis experiments. And there was the sitcom producer who took out his thing in my living room while I readied myself for our first date. Since then, I have limited myself to the part-time affections of a Mexican leisure studies student with big hands whom I met at the library. We see each other, Carlos and I, once a month or so. Lithe and tidy, he is a fastidious lover who is crushed if he does not manage to please. Our time together is always just squeezed in, so there isn't much time for talking. The little he does say is peppered with cryptic phrases like, "I'm gonna do it to you until your chest caves in, my little suffragette," or "Have you read that book on meditation, the one by Goethe?" In four months I have still not been able to tell whether Carlos has wisdom beyond his years, or is simply dim-witted.

These days, I work at the Museum of Jurassic Technology as a registrar. It's a peculiar institution, where you are more likely to find an exhibition on the suicidal tendencies of the Cameroonian stink ant than one on Cameroonian masks. The oddities of life, then, its stranger curiosities – and, the curators insist, some of its mysteries – are revealed. Did you know that just this morning, on your drive to the office, you had to make use of the bones of dinosaurs? Have you contemplated the Central Magnet of the Universe? What does the common woman see when she looks at the stars? In 1928, Alice May Williams confides in spidery blue script on a brittle sheaf of onionskin that

“no one may ever have the same knowledge again.” These are questions that ordinarily, I would not even think twice about, but I have become fascinated with Alice May and the others, whose urgent secret-bearing missives to the astronomers at the Mt. Wilson Observatory hint at something larger at work, and will soon be on display for the world to see. Because lately something strange has been happening.

It started last Saturday, as my friend Edward and I wait in the carport for the car to warm up. It was chugging along happily. Edward is smoking a cigarette. From around the corner comes a mourning dove, one of those brownish-gray pigeon cousins, careening past the evergreen hedge to crash-land not twenty feet from where I stand. Suddenly, it is up again – in jagged, sputtering locomotion – hitting my kitchen window, and spiraling, helicopter-like back to earth, where it makes a miraculous touchdown in the grass. Edward, who cannot hold a steady job but is fearless when it comes to bugs and blood, tries immediately to pick it up despite my plea to wait until we can at least get a sheet of newspaper.

He insists we bring it to his place. We drive with it in a cardboard box, salvaged from the trash, to Edward’s cluttered apartment in Koreatown where Edward puts the box, face inward, on the terrace, like a television set. We spend most of the morning drinking tea, watching the dying bird flip flop and shiver on its tiny stage, and saying things like “I never” and “Nobody will believe...”

Two days after the incident, Edward leaves a message on my machine saying the bird had flown away, leaving in its wake a tiny egg. Knowing that this is surely a sign of something, he announces that he’s taken it to heart. He too, will “fly away free,” he insists, and is opting out of the carrot-and-stick agreement with his parents which sees that his rent gets paid as long as he goes to counseling. The egg he has placed in a tiny eggcup, purchased just for this purpose, and set on the bookshelf to ossify as a reminder.

For me, the whole incident unleashes a private, niggling fear. After all, didn’t the dove land in front of me, and in its last flight attempt, touch base at my very window? Can a sign be a sign for more than one thing, for more than one person, or is there an absolute? If two people see the same thing, I wonder, can it mean two different things? And if so, who would it be, other than George, telling me it’s all okay?

I might have let the episode go had something else not happened a few days later in the cavernous quiet of Ralph’s Supermarket, 11 p.m. Two bare-chested teens are measuring the perfect orbs of a bin of mangoes. The store clerk in his green uniform and cap, is stacking cans of Comet. I have paused to read the label on a can of sweet potatoes when it settles over me like a caul, the

certainty that something big is about to happen. *This is a can of sweet potatoes you're holding in this Ralph's here, someone says. It's 11 pm, for chrissakes. Go home and get ready, because very soon, something big is going to happen.* The teenagers do not turn from their vaguely sexual exploration. The clerk's stack of Comet rises. Only my own hands tremble. This certainty has no shape, no comfort in it, but swings into view like the turns in an unknown tunnel. Beyond the tunnel is surely something – but a sheer drop to nowhere, or a seaside village?

Which is to say that I have more or less made up my mind tonight to accept Roberta's invitation, though I would never tell her the line of reasoning lest she take on that arrogant, know-it-all look I detest. Because I know now that it's time to move on.

Besides, after my visit to her on Saturday, it soon became clear that things would never be the same between Arlin and me. They start out well, deceptively. I am alone in the peach-colored receiving room, reading an Italian fashion magazine, *Io Donna*. I am, as usual, atop the white upholstered throne. He walks in and I notice immediately the fine-boned hands, the translucent skin and the air of gentility suggested by the highly polished spectators, and the tie (a tie!) beneath the white coat. The fact that I am naked but for a short-sleeved chemise informs our every word and gesture, though we try to pretend otherwise, drawing out the introductions as long as possible. He pulls up a stool. Do I enjoy my work at the museum? I do, I reply. You'll have to come and see our newest exhibition.

Delicately, but with purpose, he unwraps the chemise, exposing me, and I feel something stirring between my legs. He takes my breasts, one at a time, and considers them, dispassionately. The left one, though lined with hairline fractures of advancing age, is still ripe; its mate, however, has atrophied into the angry grin of an old man. Somewhere, someone is knocking on a door, but we ignore it. *We'll give you a perky B cup, he says finally, like they have in Europe,* and taps the Italian magazine still in my hands. This is the beginning of the adoration. I draw the chemise back across my chest and stumble to my feet.

Again, the knocking.

No one may ever have the same knowledge again, I say.

The door bursts open. It's Roberta. She looks me dead in the face, blowing smoke rings, and flailing a book of Waverly patterns. *I knew you didn't fuck him, she says. I knew it, I knew it, I knew it.*

This is what cancer does to one's friends. Not only do they give advice where none is sought, they invade your dreams.

You know what else? I wasn't ready that day on the roof, but I am now. ☯