Nothing on My Tongue but Hallelujah

DAVID DENNY

Love is not a victory march.
—Leonard Cohen

If I were capable of human emotions, my response to the death of Margaret and Stanley would be overwhelming sadness. How I yearn to feel as they felt. *Alas and alack.* Mortals in the not so distant past used to utter that phrase to express sorrow, regret, dismay. I can feel none of those things, yet somehow when I consider their fate, this small package of human verbiage seems to convey the appropriate response. *Alas and alack.* We angels might also just as well exclaim *hosanna and hallelujah*, a verbal package we are known for in some human circles.

Stanley was the name of my initial charge during that period of time humans call the early twenty-first century. But Stanley's fate had become so intermingled with Margaret's that I also took Margaret under my watch. The mechanics of the assignment are less germane to my testimony than the circumstances. I bear witness to the final morning of their lives as an emblem of the manner in which the innocent are so often called to suffer.

Margaret had passed another restless night of dreams and fitful awakenings. She was used to it by now and endured it with such equanimity that few besides her husband knew of her nightly travails. This morning she scooped the coffee beans into the grinder and pushed the button. When Stanley heard the machine's loud whine above the sound of Chopin's Nocturnes, he shuffled into the kitchen, getting the mugs down from the shelf and the milk from the refrigerator. His hip was aching today but not as bad as some days. As the coffee percolated, he stood next to Margaret at the kitchen window that looked out at the creek and the mountain beyond.

They had seen that sky before, twenty years earlier, during the Jensen Fire in September of 1998. But the rain had come to the rescue then, allowing the Cal Fire teams to gain the upper hand. This fire now was coming fast and hot out of the northwest, fueled by high winds and preceded by a five-year drought. Today there was no rain in the forecast, even though it was November and rain was overdue. The soupy blend of dark gray was tinged by a reddish underglow. Darkness loomed over the mountaintop, while heavy smoke made breathing more difficult with each passing hour.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Margaret said.

"It is, sort of."

"If you can detach yourself from what it means for us. If you can just hover like an angel and gaze upon it dispassionately. If you can view it with God's eyes."

Stanley put his arm around his wife's shoulders. "I can't pretend to be God. Even so, I can appreciate it for its own strangeness."

"Think of it as a painting," Margaret said. "Like a mad sort of Hudson River piece."

"Like maybe Thomas Cole in an apocalyptic mood," Stanley added.

Margaret slid her arm around her husband's waist. "There's nobody I'd rather look upon this with but you."

"We've had an enormous run of luck, haven't we?"

"Grace upon grace." She let her hand take hold of his left buttock. "How's that damned prostate gland treating you this morning?"

"If I believed as you do in the supernatural, I'd say it's nearly time to call in the exorcist."

When the coffee pot announced its readiness with a series of electronic beeps, they took their places at the kitchen table. Stanley tucked his long legs beneath the table and adjusted in his seat to remove the pressure from his bad hip. Despite an intense round of initial treatment, the cancer had spread from his prostate to his bones. His head of wild Einstein hair had thinned out in response to chemotherapy; still, it looked like a nest of sprung silver wires, no matter if he ran a brush through it or not. Were I capable of pure endearment, this trait alone would yield my affection.

"You must've had another of your prophetic dreams this morning," Stanley said, filling their mugs. "You were up early again."

"Did I wake you?" she asked.

"Not fully. I felt a disturbance in the Force is all. Even we mere mortals can sense it when a Jedi leaves the room."

Margaret stirred some milk and sweetener into her coffee. A short, heavy woman, she had a long mane of salt and pepper hair, which she twisted and clipped atop her head, emphasizing the roundness of her cheeks and the startling green of her eyes, the cheeks and once jet-black hair a trait inherited from her Wintu mother, and the eyes so many had described as soulful from her Scotch-Irish father.

"You know it's weird we still have power," she remarked. "The radio said power was out in the whole county. Yet here we are with our lights and coffee, our music and running water."

"The perks of living with a Jedi," Stanley said, toasting her with his mug. He took a long, slow draw of coffee. He held the mug beneath his nose and breathed in its steam. "I'm going to miss the smell of coffee," he said. "I'm going to miss this morning ritual with you, my love. Forty-four years of this. I've grown accustomed."

"Whatever heaven is like, there must be an eternal equivalent to this," Margaret mused.

Previously published in *Sometimes Only the Sad Songs Will Do* (Shanti Arts, 2020)

image info

"'More than we could ask or imagine,' scripture says. That's what God has in store for us."

"I'll settle for the memory, whatever form I take next. If ashes remember, I'll remember. If by some miracle we do retain consciousness, or whatever the ashy equivalent of consciousness, I'll settle for the sweetness of memory."

"Listen to that," Margaret said, cocking her head to the music. "This is my favorite one. In this one Chopin achieves a perfect mixture of joy and melancholy."

There was no way for Margaret to know that Frederic Chopin had also been in my charge. Mortals often remark on the world's seeming smallness; if they only knew the intricate complexity of the temporal and spatial web in which they exist. From the angelic perspective, Margaret might have reached out her hand and laid it upon the tousled head of Chopin seated at his instrument. I have full recall of the stormy morning Chopin composed that piece. Like Margaret, he had slept fitfully the night before. The storm's ionic charge invigorated his spirit, and the melody flowed through his fingers like fresh water through a spring.

Margaret continued, "It's all about the balance between the left hand and the right hand. Can you hear it?"

"I wish you still played for me," Stanley said.

"I cannot compete with Madame Engerer," Margaret said. "And it's no fun when your fingers no longer respond to the signals your brain is sending them."

They listened together. After Margaret's favorite nocturne ended and the next one began, Stanley said, "I'm ready for my morning dream report."

"All right. This one was disturbing but also curiously comforting. We were young again," Margaret began, "as we are in so many of these dreams. And we lived somewhere else, in another time and place. We had children, a boy and a girl. The boy was about ten, and the girl was younger, maybe three, and nothing like our Catherine. She was a tiny thing, with a ponytail atop her head and a frilly little dress. Not at all our gangly tomboy Catherine. She was holding your hand."

"As I recall," she continued, "we were walking in a procession toward a glass temple. Our little boy had run ahead to join some of his friends. And the three of us—you and the girl and me—were walking together in a large procession. I was carrying a tray of some sort. An offering. Don't ask me how I know that. You know how you know things in dreams sometimes? We were to participate in some sort of ritual instituted by a relatively new government. There was a history there, though I can't say what it was exactly. There had been a long tradition of a republic, I believe, and now this place, in this time, had chosen a dictator, or an emperor. And this procession was a part of a new rite. Isn't it strange how thorough a dream world can seem?"

"I know that feeling. Some dreams come complete with their own backstory."

"Yes, and the backstory is just taken for granted, the way some people in our dreams are definitely people from our waking lives, even though they may look or act nothing like them. Anyway, we were all a community of shared values. We were all wearing the same kind of clothing. Something like robes or togas. Yes, we were all in white togas, and we were walking in procession toward this glass temple. And the women were balancing these trays. I myself held a tray with four small animal sacrifices. They must have been doves. For some reason I think they were doves." Margaret reached across the table. "Take my hand," she said to Stanley.

"You're shaking," he said.

"It's because I'm still clinging to that dream. It still seems a little more real than just a dream. Some of them feel like alternate lives. Like I've lived another life in that other world, and then reawakened into this life. But that other life keeps hold for a while. The feeling wears off with time, but for a little while it stays vivid, until it's replaced with activity in this life, the waking life. I need to feel your grip to reinforce the reality of this life."

He took her hand between both of his hands.

"So we were all in this procession, walking. Everybody knew one another. These were our neighbors. The women were all carrying trays like mine. On the trays we carried our sacrifices. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw this young man emerge from the woods. He was a monk—you know, wearing a brown frock like certain monks wear. And he was carrying a pitcher. In the church we call it a flagon. You know the flagon that holds the communion wine? Like that. And the fluid inside the flagon was sloshing out, spilling on his robe and on the path. He made his way into the center of the processional, and people had to maneuver around him, the way water in the creek creates an eddy as it flows around a boulder."

"The flames engulfed him. They burned the whiskers off his face, making him appear even younger. The frock just exploded in flames. He didn't cry out. He looked totally calm. But I could see the anguish in his eyes as he burned. And then he toppled over. And still he burned."

"Ho-ly shit."

"I don't remember ever having the sense of smell in a dream before. But my nostrils filled with the stench of burning flesh. The people just walked around him. They watched him. They avoided the flames, like they were an

"And then the monk sat down, right in the middle of the crowd. He sat and crossed his legs, the way they do when monks meditate. And he made eye contact with me. He was a young man, like all of us in the dream; we were all so young. Everybody in the processional was young and beautiful. No one was old or crippled or poor. So anyway, he sat down and, looking right at me, he emptied the flagon over his head. The liquid poured down his face, saturating his beard and darkening his frock. Then he struck a match. And he went up in flames."

"Holy shit."

inconvenience. They obviously saw all that we saw. Yet their reaction didn't fit the situation. They were not horrified. They went on with the processional. They continued carrying their sacrifices to the temple."

Alas and alack, just a few moments later Margaret and Stanley heard the thumpity-thump of a vehicle crossing the creek on the old wooden bridge. They exchanged a puzzled look. The public evacuation order had been given twenty-four hours earlier. For the first twelve hours they had heard the distant

image info

hum of traffic out on the main road. But this morning had been silent, save the present whine of what sounded now like a truck downshifting as it made its way up their driveway.

Margaret stood and peeked out the corner of the kitchen window. "Fire truck," she said.

"Duck down," Stanley said.

"Too late. He saw me." Margaret squinted. "I believe that's Charlie."

"Shit."

"Yes. It's Charlie. He's got that big walrus mustache. Very distinctive. We should've moved the car around back. He must've seen it sitting in the driveway."

"Yes, ma'am."

"You look tired, Charlie. Come on in . . . " She left the front door standing open and walked back into the kitchen. She glanced at Stanley with a look that said, *Let's not lose our resolve*.

"I can't stay . . . and neither can you," Charles said, stepping inside and closing the door behind him.

"I'll pour you a cup," Margaret said. She filled a mug for him and pulled out a third chair at the kitchen table.

"Mr. Reynolds," Charles said.

"Charles," Stanley said, nodding.

"You still have power?" Charles asked.

"I guess the jig is up," said Stanley. "Shitty-shit-shit."

Margaret turned to face Stanley. "You're my Clyde Barrow," she said.

"And you're my Bonnie Parker."

"Are you ready for that hail of bullets?"

"I doubt if we'll feel much beyond the first dozen or so."

"I just hope he shoots straight."

The doorbell rang. Margaret answered. "Good morning, Charlie," she said, holding open the door. "I'll bet you've been busy."

"Yes, how about that?" Margaret said.

"Hmm. You on a generator?" he asked.

"We have a Generac unit out back, but it hasn't kicked in since that big snowstorm last February," Stanley replied. "I believe it's out of fuel."

"I don't understand it. There is no power. The plant closed last night. They're all evacuated. But I guess you're right—I don't hear the motor."

"I imagine you worked all through the night," Margaret said.

"Yes, ma'am. This is my final sweep. The fire's just on the other side of the ridge. Once it tops the ridgeline, it'll be too late. Now is the time to leave. Actually, yesterday was the time to leave."

"Charlie, how's your sister doing?" Margaret asked.

"She's just fine, Mrs. Reynolds. The second round of chemo seems to have knocked the tumors back. Her last scan showed them to be just itty-bitty things. Thanks for asking."

"I'm so glad to hear that. Father Tim has included her in the prayers ever since the diagnosis. You might just call the church office and let Jenny know so she can update the bulletin."

"You do realize that the church won't survive."

"Oh . . . of course. I hadn't stopped to consider that. And I suppose the elementary school is also in the path of destruction."

"Frankly, nothing is expected to survive. This time tomorrow it'll all be gone. This town will look like the surface of the moon." He turned to Stanley. "Mr. Reynolds, are you having trouble getting your car started?"

"No."

"Because if your car's not working, you can ride out in my truck. I'm going all the way down to the evacuation center. We can even fit some of your paintings in the back. I'll cover them with a tarp."

Stanley was a painter and sculptor. Much of his late work was indeed destroyed in the fire; however, his reputation among mortals steadily rose in the decades following his death. Emile Bernard, one of his artistic role models, had also been in my charge—another "coincidence," as some choose to call them, of the elaborate web of interconnectivity. I do not have the verbal skill to even begin to explain the cosmic mingling of all creation. Is it enough to call it mind-boggling, another favorite expression of mortals in bygone days? It simply boggles the mind, many of the best minds have said. Hallelujah is what we angels say.

"And I can call Cathy for you when we get there . . . "

"No, thank you, Charles," Stanley said. "We'll be just fine on our own."

"Mrs. Reynolds," Charles said, turning to Margaret, "you have to leave now. Do you understand? Nobody's seen winds like these. The fire is generating its own weather system. Once the flames top that ridge—"

"I'm so proud of you, Charlie," Margaret said. "So many of my students have become such accomplished men and women. You can't know how gratifying that is for me. Especially now that the world's grown so sour, so selfish and mean-spirited. To know that for forty years my first-graders were launched into their lives with kindness and with dignity, well, that's everything, you see. You can't imagine how proud I am of you all."

"We had a great teacher," Charles responded.

"I was there to give you a good start, that's all. You did the rest."

"Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds, you have to get into my truck now. You don't want to stay any longer. This fire is a new kind of monster. We've never seen the likes of this. Please. I'm begging you. Let me call Cathy. I'll have her meet us down at the shelter."

"Catherine's got a lot on her plate right now. We'll be fine on our own, Charles," Stanley said firmly. "Don't you give us another thought."

"Please, Mr. Reynolds. Mrs. Reynolds. You don't want to stay. It's not a good way to go. It's really not what you want. I know it's not what Cathy wants. For God's sake, please just get in your car now and follow me down. Or I can fit you into my truck. The cab is plenty big for all three of us. We can put some small bags in your lap, if you like, essentials . . . "

"It's so kind of you to stop, Charlie. Thank you for that. But this world that you're going down into, it's like foreign and hostile territory to us. The world simply isn't the one we ever imagined living in. It's not at all the world we wanted to help create when we were young. It's turned so cold, you see. It's not at all hospitable to people like us. You're young enough to endure it. Maybe you even have enough energy to see some changes come. But this world as it is . . . with the trajectory it's on . . . " Margaret shrugged her shoulders and gently shook her head.

"Charles, do you remember the Wintu family that lived in the farmhouse just down the creek from us?" Stanley asked. "Big family. A dozen kids or more."

image info

"No, sir."

"I guess you wouldn't. I'm going way back in memory now. But maybe you remember that old boarded up house that stood down there where the Shell station is now? Back when you were in Margie's class you would've walked past it on your way to school."

"I think so. That's going back a ways . . . "

"Well, the Wintu tribe once lived all over these mountains. They were forest people. Probably you learned something about them in Margie's class. And the old grandfather in that house used to tell a story about a great fire that swept through here ages ago, like Noah's flood, only fire not water. The Wintu saw fire as purgation, you see, as a way for the earth to cleanse herself. He said his ancestors alone survived it because their dwelling was covered in pine sap that had been drawn for them by a sympathetic woodpecker. The great fire burned everything in its path but passed over their little mud house. They alone survived, huddled together inside this mud hut covered with this special sap."

Margaret and Stanley had already, in their imaginations, begun to shuffle off this mortal coil, you see. Even before the fire's first spark, they had begun to anticipate the end of their pilgrimage. Charles, however, found such imaginings unthinkable. For him the sin of despair was an unacceptable flaw. Alas, he was not quite as smart as these two elders; he only half-listened to Stanley's story because he was trying, in his sleepy, overworked brain, to devise a plan to manipulate them into his truck. Mentioning their only daughter, Catherine, a childhood friend and schoolmate, was his trump card. He had already played it, and now he felt stumped by its failure.

Stanley continued: "When the fire had passed, and it was safe for the Wintu family to come outside, a red-tailed hawk lit on the roof and cried out that it was time to live again. They were to repopulate the forest. But before he flew away, the hawk warned that if they didn't care for the land properly, the fire would return for them. And he had a little trick he would do, this old granddad, whenever he would tell this story. He would stick a pine branch into the fireplace and light it up like a torch. And he would hold the branch up, like this, and right when he said that someday the fire would return, the flame on the torch would flare up—he had put some kerosene on the wood, you see, and just at the right moment it would go *whoosh!* like that," Stanley said, smiling. "That branch would flare up. 'So be good to the earth, children,' he would say, 'or the mother who nurtures you will become an angry grizzly and devour us all.' You can imagine how big the eyes of the children in the room would grow."

"Mr. Reynolds. Your house will not be spared."

"Oh, Charles. I believe you may have missed my meaning. No matter. Your mug is nearly empty, son. I imagine you've got a schedule to keep."

Charles took a bandanna from around his neck and went to the sink. He soaked the bandanna in cold water and wiped his forehead and face with it. He cocked his head, listening to the music. "I remember this," he said.

"Chopin," Margaret said.

He nodded and wrapped the bandanna around his neck again. "I never could get this piece right," he said. "I could play the right hand but not the left. You were so patient with me. But I was a lousy piano student."

"It was not your gift," she said.

"No, ma'am. It was yours though. You played it for me, played it all the way through one afternoon to show me how it should sound. I remember thinking as I was listening that it was the most beautiful music I had ever heard. But that I would never play it like that, no matter how long I practiced."

"You sell yourself short, Charlie. For a fire chief and a former mayor, you're far too modest. But I like that about you. Modesty is a fine virtue. A dying virtue, I fear, like all the other dying virtues." She placed a hand on his shoulder. "Drive safe now," she said, guiding him to the door. "Give our best to your sister, and give that lovely shepherd dog of yours a treat from me."

"Please come with me."

"Thank you for stopping, Charles," Stanley said. "You're a good neighbor. Drive carefully now. There's liable to be a lot of traffic once you get down to the highway."

"What will I say to Cathy?"

"Catherine has everything she needs. You can tell her that," said Margaret. "Tell her we said she has everything she needs. She knows that, but now and then we all need to be reminded."

Charles stood in the doorway for a moment, looking up at the mountain, now mostly obscured. The sunlight, which had filtered through the smoky air all morning, had now grown dim. How long before the flames topped the ridge and raced down the mountainside? *Alas and alack*, not long at all now. I might have found a way to tell them, if I wished. Such insight is within my purview. But they seemed to already know. My invisible presence brought Margaret and Stanley the peace they needed. And now I passed a bit of it on to Charles.

"Mrs. Reynolds," he said, "surely a world with something so beautiful as Chopin's Nocturnes in it has some virtue, some beauty that yet remains."

"I like the way your mind works, Charlie. It's a noble mind. The beauty in this world is indeed sublime. I and people like Father Tim would say it's a divine gift. You and Stan, you might disagree with that, but we see it, we sense the beauty, don't we? And what makes it beautiful, Charlie, is that it's fleeting. When the flower blooms, we admire it all the more because it will soon fade. Part of the pleasure we take in it comes from our knowledge of that. And therefore we can't separate the joy from the sadness: they are one in the same. We savor the beauty even as we grieve its loss."

"Mrs. Reynolds . . . "

"We'll meet again, Charlie. You needn't worry. You take care, young man."

He stepped out on the porch and took a moment to compose himself. He climbed into his truck, jotted something into a notebook, and drove slowly down the driveway, over the bridge, and made the turn out onto the main road.

A few hours later, Margaret and Stanley sat at the kitchen table. Through the window they could now see tall flames visible up at the ridgeline, glowing red-orange and spitting energy into the dark sky. And the wind was now roaring as it

swept down the mountainside, filled with swirling ash and heat and righteous anger. The window shook in its casement. The wind chimes beat against the siding. The rain gutter broke off and dangled from the edge of the roof.

The table was set: two rows of Valium pills had been lined up, a bottle of Prosecco and two flutes, a lit pair of tapered candles in their silver holders, a small jar of extra virgin olive oil. I had blown out the power, and the house was dark save the flicker from the candlelight.

Margaret opened her *Book of Common Prayer* and read aloud: "In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend ourselves to Almighty God, and we commit our bodies to the elements; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The Lord bless us and keep us, the Lord make his face to shine upon us and be gracious to us, the Lord lift up his countenance upon us and grant us eternal peace. Amen."

Hallelujah was the word I whispered, my only vocalization during this charge. But the word was covered by the sound of the wind—a fierce, swirling, whip of a wind that shattered the kitchen window as I uttered it.

Margaret dabbed her finger in the olive oil and made the sign of the cross upon Stanley's forehead. He did the same for her.

Breathing was difficult for them now. Coughing, Stanley opened the Prosecco and filled their glasses. As they talked, they lay pills upon their tongues and sipped the wine.

"This reminds me of the sixties—washing down narcotics with bubbly," Stanley said. "Almost like we're back on the commune."

"Too bad there's no power," Margaret replied, "we could put Hendrix on the hi-fi and burn some incense."

"The burning herbs we've got," Stanley said, pointing through the broken window, "only it doesn't smell as good."

"I would never have guessed we'd end up like this," Margaret said. "When we were young the whole world was a bud about to blossom. Or so it seemed."

"Were we wrong to dream it?"

"You mean were we self-indulgent fools . . . blinded by youthful idealism and naiveté? Yes. Wrong to dream we could make a difference? No."

"Somehow now it all feels . . . I don't know, a little pointless."

Margaret frowned.

"Go ahead and say it," Stanley said.

"What?" Margaret asked.

"'O ye of little faith.' Isn't that your line now, now that we've come round once again to the subject of meaning and the nature of ultimate reality?"

"It's been almost fifty years that we've been having this argument," she said.

"Discussion," he said. "We're not arguing."

"I'll tell you what—I'll just admit defeat, how's that? I'll concede to you that it feels pointless or that it seems pointless. But I still cling to the hope that it's not. That behind it all—"

"That's not defeat, that's compromise," he said.

"So it is. But here at the bitter end, I think you might give it to me."

"Can we call it bittersweet?"

"It is sweet that you and I still love each other after all."

The roaring wind grew louder and the air thicker. Stan opened the front door again and a gust of heat entered the house, blowing out the candles. He returned to the table. He filled their glasses with the last of the wine.

"Is it possible that the force behind this fire is love?" he asked.

"Are you mocking me?" she said.

"No. I'm just thinking out loud. I'm just wondering if maybe you've been right all along. Nothing else makes sense right now."

They each swallowed another Valium and washed it down with the wine.

Stanley asked, "Do you remember Hendrix at the Monterey Pop Festival?"

"I was sitting right next to you."

"When he lit his guitar on fire and conjured the flames. Do you remember that? It was a silly old parlor trick, but do you remember how thrilling that felt? The other kids around us thought he was some kind of a god, like he was channeling Zoroaster or something."

image info

"Probably that was the acid."

"Of course it was the acid. But I felt then like I do now. I feel like if we go through that fire, right on into it, we'll know something we can't otherwise know."

"How ironic that it's the skeptic who ends with a beatific vision and me, the old church lady, who's left with a bitter taste in my mouth and a certain numbness in my spirit."

"I think maybe that burning monk was your vision."

She took his hand. They drank the last of the wine and sat together in the dark. "I guess the monk was the real sacrifice, not that silly plate of doves I was balancing so carefully. The glass temple and the procession—all a grand distraction. There was something the monk knew that the rest of us couldn't be bothered with. Even self-immolation wasn't enough to break us of our delusion."

"Can I make a final musical request?" he asked.

"Satie?"

He nodded. She went to the piano. He stood beside her as she played *Gymnopedies* until her fingers and her memory gave out. The song could barely be heard, but I granted them that final shared pleasure. It was within my purview.

Then they walked to the door and stepped out onto the porch. The roar filled their ears. The hot wind began to singe their faces. Flames leapt from the wooden bridge. It hurt terribly to breathe now as they began to suffocate.

Through the din and through the murky swirling air, a buck made its way down through the thicket on the other side of the creek. His flanks were blackened. He stepped into the creek. He lowered his head to drink and then raised it, turning from side to side to observe the chaos that had overcome the forest. His eyes fell upon Stanley and Margaret. He lowered his head again and drank.

The time for words had passed. The moment of purgation had arrived. A huge ember sailed down the mountain and landed on the roof. It smoldered there for a moment, then sparked up and became flame. The monk toppled. Hendrix conjured fiery tongues. *Alas and alack.* The house was ablaze. Chopin's fingers danced across the keys. *Hosanna and hallelujah.*

Their final thoughts were focused as prayers on behalf of their daughter, Catherine, whom I drew out into the backyard of her home in the valley many miles below. She felt a shudder; a burning sensation began in her abdomen, rose to her chest and throat; it flushed her cheeks as she watched the distant smoke. In a flash she glimpsed the light and the beauty and the love that had been freely given. For an instant, she was filled with gratitude and wonder. It was within my purview to grant this.

Then like a knife came the grief. Oh, to feel as humans feel—the ecstasy and the terror, the laughter and the emptiness! Through the kitchen window, Catherine's husband and son saw her fall to her knees in the grass, and they ran to comfort her.

image info