

Poetry Porch: Prose

Death and Euphemisms

By Marge Piercy

I say I died last year, but I notice other people avoid the plain word. They will say, she passed, passed away, passed on, passed over. Eternal sleep. Went to heaven. Went to her rest. Met her Maker. They were called home. They joined the angels. She expired. Went the way of all flesh. They went to their reward. The dear departed. Gone over Jordan. Gave up the ghost. Her final sleep. Or semi-humorous: kicked the bucket, bought the farm, popped off, sleeps with the fishes. They will say, you mean you almost died. No, I say, I died and the rescue squad was able to revive me. That seems to pretty much end the conversation, except some people ask, “Did you see a white light?” No, nothing but blackness enveloping me. I drowned in my own body.

Why this fear? I think a lot of it is that many people have never seen anyone die or had any contact with a body. I’m so old, I remember when people died at home. I was with the woman next door who died of cancer while my mother held her hand and I waited in a straight chair across the room. I remember my Aunt Georgene dying in her home in Pennsylvania, bladder cancer and very painful. It was not a quiet death. I remember the woman down the street who died in a fire, and they carried her out while her little dog who had somehow escaped the fire tried to follow her body.

Death is very real to me, more so now that I have experienced it. I wonder how I will finally die, a not-infrequent ponder. I think dying in one’s sleep is the best way to go, but the

body doesn't give you a choice. I have lost so many friends that I should be used to it by now, but I never am. Each death makes a singular hole in my life. Someone I'll never chat with again, never get an email or a call from, never share a meal or share work. Nobody can replace a friend. They have a unique attachment.

I imagine the world for Woody and our cats after I die, and I worry about them. I want them to have a good life, comfortable. I don't fantasize living forever. That our lives are finite gives them meaning and a shape in my mind. I want to make my remaining time useful to others and interesting/pleasant/meaningful to me. As good for Woody as I can make it. I am weaker and more fragile than I was even three years ago. I worry about being a burden. The longer I live, the more likely that is. All these things go through my mind often. A worst fear is that Woody might die before me. I can't imagine life without him. We are joined in our roots.

My first two husbands were rather cold and apt to be distant emotionally. I recognized that pattern and sought to escape it finally. Woody is an emotional man and warmhearted. He worries a lot. My first husband, a French physicist named Michel, thought my writing was a hobby I would put aside as soon as we returned to France. I'd get pregnant and work in a store to support us both while he would go into the army for two years. My second husband Robert said at one point, "I thought you'd get published some, but I never thought people would make such a fuss." I flew off on gigs two or three times a month. Friends would say, "Oh, what did you do in Miami?" I worked. "Didn't you go to the beach?" No, when I'm being paid, I belong to the sponsors and do what they want. No sightseeing, unless I'm doing a short residency. Otherwise my time is theirs and it's crammed every waking hour.

Woody and I find each other's success a mutual benefit and support each other however we can. He respects my writing and has always given me space I need. That's part of why he has an office out of the house as well as downstairs. I get more writing done when I don't have distractions or company. Robert didn't interfere with my gigs—after all, they brought in money—but also seldom helped get me to them. He often objected fiercely to publicity I was offered. He would say it wasn't correct politically to persuade me to decline. Woody always feels we're a unit and everything that helps me, helps him. We also did a number of well-paying gigs together, usually dealing with personal narrative, a genre in which we both have published. Money that we didn't need to live on, he invested. Woody in all ways made my life better, more secure economically, easier, more pleasant.

I don't know how to get stronger. All the exercise advice just doesn't work. My strength is limited. I know I try to do too much. Woody keeps saying I'm trying to live the way I could ten years ago. I try to carry out a diminished version of what I've always done. The one activity in which I seem to find at least as much of an output as ever is my writing. I work six days a week on this book. I write two poems just about every week and send them out. I am still productive in that one way. I have few illusions left about my work lasting a long time after I'm dead as fewer and fewer people read and I am not too optimistic about humans surviving much longer as we destroy as much of the planet for billionaires' greed as possible.

Cats and Me Now

Willow is quite protective of me. She has sensed since I returned from the hospital that something is wrong. She is careful how she gets on me while I'm lying in bed—instead of lying on my chest, she lies on my legs or beside me. Schwartzie is much more affectionate with me than he has been in a long time. He never stopped being affectionate, but now he is more so. Gradually Shaman has come to know and trust me again, but it took a while. Of course, he's an adolescent, and adolescent male cats tend to retreat somewhat—it varies from cat to cat. It's the time a male would leave the colony if he was feral and go off on his own.

It was selfish to get Shaman as old as I am—but he is even more Woody's cat than mine. Shaman has enriched the lives of Woody and me and enlivened the lives of Schwartzie and Willow. They are both far more active and play with him. They curl up with him, one at a time. His purr and his little head butts, his snuggling, and his pleasure as he falls asleep on me are gifts. Now Schwartzie has begun to spend more time with me and cuddle more during the afternoons, evenings and in mornings, when I wake and do my eye exercises. (I have glaucoma and am nearsighted.)

With cats you get out of them what you put into them. People who consider cats aloof get little in return. I've always interacted strongly and often with my cats, and they reward me by being true and amusing and loving companions, loyal and hard working to keep our house in the woods free of varmints.

We were tormented with mice here when I had only two elderly cats. Now I try to have an age mix so that never happens again. When I left my first husband, Michel, I stayed in a cheap

rooming house that was overrun with mice. They got into every bit of food that wasn't refrigerated. I do not enjoy taking out a package of breakfast cereal and finding it riddled with mouse turds.

Willow is a fine hunter and so is Schwartzie. I think it is he who is teaching Shaman to hunt mice, but so far, he's more in the way than useful. But he will learn. I remember when my soulmate cat Xena taught Willow how to catch mice. She was quite patient but firm, always. She taught her not to play with them but to catch a mouse and break its neck at once.

Woody thinks I worry about the cats too much, but that is a part of me since I was twelve. I had lost my adored Buttons a few months before. A kitten was wandering in the alley. I picked her up and brought her in, a calico kitten. She clung to me and purred and purred. We fed her. Mother let her sleep with me because she was a kitten and even my parents wouldn't put a kitten out at night. She slept with me, pressed to my side or on me, saying with her body and purr, "I love you, big warm Mama." I named her Alice. *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* were my two favorite books, and I reread them several times.

That weekend, as on many, we went out to the primitive cabin on a lake about an hour out of Detroit. Alice was a good traveler and just sat on my lap. We never owned a cat carrier, and I don't even know if they existed then. My father was always working on the cottage and would do so for the next forty years. He had put in plumbing (it had had an outhouse and a well that had to be pumped outside). After lunch, I picked up Alice and walked up the dirt road toward the cottage where my friend from the neighborhood lived. Gladys's parents were the reason my parents knew about the cabin. I was two thirds of the way to Gladys's when two large dogs came bounding out of the woods, knocked me down, and tore Alice to bloody pieces in

front of me. I tried to save her but just got knocked around and snapped at. I was hysterical, weeping, and trying to take her remains away from the dogs, but they bit me and ate her. Two men in a house down toward the lake heard me and came. They laughed at me, petted their dogs, saying they were great hunting dogs and what was the fuss about. It was just a cat. Nothing was ever done about the dogs. All that was left of my kitten was a patch of blood, a few tufts of fur, and the end of her tail.

I have no idea how I got to the cottage. I was blinded by tears, so sore I could hardly walk, covered with blood, mostly Alice's but also from a bite on my arm. I spent the next day in bed, glad when we could go back to our house in Detroit. I was not only traumatized but felt guilty for taking Alice up the road.

Since that horrible day, I try very hard to protect cats. All my cats are shelter cats and I wish I could adopt more, but I'm eighty-eight and three is all we can handle. I wrote a somewhat different version of this incident in my memoir *Sleeping with Cats*. However, going through very old papers to send to my archive at the University of Michigan, I found what I wrote a year afterward was different from my memory. There were two dogs, not one. I had named the kitten. That makes me wonder about my older memories. But in many ways, it doesn't matter much unless I was blaming someone else for something that was my fault.