the



BEAUTIFUL AGONIES

ADRIE KUSSEROW

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For my mother
Suzanne Margaret Kienholz Kusserow
1932–2024

and for Robert Lair, Ana, and Willem

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PREFACE

In response to the epic beauty, animism, and intensity of rural Vermont where I grew up and now live, my mother raised me on a love of deep description, mostly metaphor and simile. We called it *metaphoring*, the strong and almost obsessive urge to describe the meadows, hills, foxes, flowers, mountains, maple trees, snowflakes, and salamanders that nearly crippled us with awe on a daily basis. Like my mother, for me, writing was about unfurling this deep, perhaps unconscious longing to praise and capture the beauty of the natural world through description and poetic observation.

In spring especially, we'd experience *verbal fevers*, a frenetic urge to describe the Vermont landscape, for, as Mark Doty says, "What is description, after all, but encoded desire?" This is the wellspring my mother and I shared, a kind of restless and excited fizzing in the body that reached for metaphor and simile as it prickled us with awe and a kind of urgency, gratitude, and need to share. My family and I now refer to this state of intoxication as *beautagony*, the feeling of being so strongly ignited by the beauty of rural Vermont, it's almost painful.

Beautagony is not always easy to access given the technological saturation and manic pace many of us live in, but the anthropologist in me believes that our hunter-gatherer bodies are still designed to reverberate, hum, and vibrate in response to the wild animism of the natural and human landscapes we inhabit.

For my mother and me, poetic creative writing gave us an outlet for the kind of feverish awe and fascination we felt as we inhabited Vermont's

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rugged and bold seasons. It made us feel sane by bringing to light all of the subtleties, complexities, and nuances of our daily worlds that don't get talked about in the media, pop psychology, generic descriptions, or conventional chatter. Creative writing is how we fully inhabited the world, how we sniffed around and got to know it and worship it with every tentacle of our being. We never wanted to keep our writing to ourselves; we shared liberally through local papers, publications, emails to friends, letters, books, family readings. For Rilke, the work of the artist is "to imprint this temporary, perishable earth into ourselves so deeply, so painfully and passionately, that its essence can rise again invisibly, inside us. We are the bees of the invisible. We wildly collect the honey of the visible, to store it in the great golden hive of the invisible."

I have interspersed my mother's writing among these pieces to give a sense of our shared writing connection, and her grace and tenacity as a gifted poetic and philosophical writer who has inspired me all my life. This book is mostly a poetic chronicle of my mother's last year of life, of the tender, joyous, painful, and challenging ways we continued to inhabit and animate each other amid all of Vermont's shifting seasonal beautagony, until her death. It ends with my struggle to remake the world when she was no longer physically in it.

As a cultural anthropologist who has worked mostly with refugees locally and globally, I stopped traveling internationally during the COVID-19 pandemic, two cancers, and my mother's decline. During this time working in America, I noted patterns, tendencies, accents, and palettes of my local worlds since I could not travel. From my current perch, I look out to see so much of America's landscape filled with isolated, lonely elderly as they face the end of their lives and transition into death. In Vermont, currently almost a third of the population is over the age of sixty. Equally as lonely, confused, and discouraged are often the elderly's familial caretakers, their children, their sisters and brothers. What seems needed are more accounts of the raw subtlety, tenderness, and sacrality of these often isolated experiences, so that we may better start building the cultural scaffolding needed to support the aging and those who nurture them as they move closer to death.

As a Buddhist who views the world as profoundly interdependent, with no fixed single independent entities, I focus on the ways my mother and I partook in each other's animisms and affects, how we sloughed off, smeared, nudged, and inhabited each other's energies. Few people have

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inhabited me so completely as my mother, even after her death. Over the years, the landscapes of our bodies, our seasons, ruts, tectonic shifts, and emotional weather systems influenced and shared in the other's. For me, every inch of this Vermont land is now almost painfully stitched and saturated with memories of viscerally sharing it with my mother. The first pink lady's slipper (*Cypripedium acaule*) in the woods recalls her tone of voice as she knelt down to admire it; her Latin flower lessons as we combed the woods; the stories about her father, a forester; her sense of awe and beaming radiance as she returned with a pileated woodpecker found dead, for the kids to see up close. It was not uncommon for my children to open the freezer and find among the ice cubes and Scotch a carefully wrapped dead bird that my mother had found on the property. She wanted them to be able to hold it, touch its feathers and claws, and marvel at its beak.

The first part of a poem from my second collection of poetry recalls our hunt for red efts, trout lily, trillium—my first spotting of pink lady's slipper and how, in response to its agonizing beauty, what bubbled up in my body were raw, unschooled descriptions she never tried to domesticate so they, or I, could fit into a more conventional world. Rather, she joined in. We just stayed there, stunned, pinned by awe, trying to describe its impossible contradictions:

Lady's Slipper, Red Eft

As a child I awoke
to the furiousness of bees.
All morning my mother and I combed the woods
for red efts, trout lily, trillium.
I learned young
the smell of God and soil.
The first time I saw a pink lady's slipper
I felt embarrassed, the purple-veined pouches,
simultaneously ephemeral and genital,
floating toad-balloons,
half scrotum, half fairy,
half pale birth sac, half death pouch.
Without the formalities of church and school
lust and spirit first came to me
as one—
through the potent hips of spring.

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Except during college and graduate school, I have always lived quite close to my mother, either with her or just up the hill from her. She helped raise my children, living with me during brutal postpartum struggles, traveling with us to South Sudan, Uganda, and northern India, but mostly she was woven into our daily life for meals, errands, end-of-ski-day pickups, gardening, wood walks, birthdays, tantrums, chores, violin and horseback-riding lessons, sick days, and snow days.

Perhaps it was silly to try to braid my own Buddhist sensibilities and practices into my mother's last year of life, but it was honestly the best tool I felt I had to give her a good final year. It was also part of my obsession as a cultural anthropologist with the failure of American individualistic paradigms to support the elderly and the hope that Buddhist practices might be somewhat liberating and comforting for her. I have always felt yoga asanas and meditation can generate a certain dignity, grace, and expansiveness in the cells and energies of the body/mind. It was this ability to watch her thoughts, let them go, and come back to the present of the Vermont land she was living in that I wanted to foster in my mother's mind. My mother felt ashamed of her confusion, memory loss, forgetfulness, and cognitive overwhelm, her hungry and imaginative intellect a lifelong source of deep pride as she excelled in creative writing, teaching, botany, nursing. Her body also felt useless, broken, and irrelevant, a hobbling Quasimodo compared with her former glory as a tomboy forager of the woods, daughter of a forester, and avid hiker. Unfortunately, even her days of chair yoga were far and few, given the botched hip replacement that spread chromium and cobalt through her body. So I focused more on meditation and a general mindfulness of thought patterns and habits.

In the last year of her life, in response to my mother's suffering, I possessed a fierce doggedness to give her a good end of life, to ease her into death by braiding little bits of Buddhism into her last days, hoping a more interdependent conception of reality would ease her loneliness, help her approach death as less terrifying and more of a liberation, a releasing into what she had always loved. I hoped through mindfulness she might develop some space from the repetitive worry stories and overwhelming somatic sensations of panic. She also possessed an intense desire to get over her fear of death, which was quite pronounced, despite her work as a hospice nurse and her closeness to the natural world, which we all thought would better prepare her for her own death.

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Especially in winter, I often felt deeply lonely and isolated in this process of caring for my mother, mostly in a sociocultural sense, with not much cultural scaffolding to support me. America has a long ways to go to weave the elderly into the very fabric of its being (schools, media, daycare centers, places of worship, libraries, kitchens, hospitals) in a way that is truly dignified and meaningful. For many, to care for the elderly is to also relegate ourselves to the periphery of this culture where death, mortality, lack of productivity, inefficiency, slowness, the nonlinear are given no street cred. In the last years of her life, nearly all of her conventional husks that gave her life meaning had to be shed. She moved from a purposeful and tender giver to a passive receiver of what I imagine was sometimes stale, forced, harried care while I was teaching anthropology classes, raising kids, and traveling locally and globally to work with refugees as well as working on my own writing.

I have always felt it takes bravery to live in rural Vermont. There is no place to hide, no malls to distract, no restaurants to skitter off to, or often not even general stores you can walk to. The intensity of its often stark and restless beauty, its *beautagony*, is always there, if you're willing to be outside much of the time. I have always been fascinated by the relationship between seasons and emotions/affect in humans. Vermont seasons are rugged, hearty, dense. They don't kid around. Seasons pass intensely through you, not around you. They play with you, inhabit you with their violent snow squalls, dappled streams, bald, cold bolts of sunlight, roving dark clouds, and fire-red maple leaves. The seasons morph you into shapes, rhythms, moods, births and bruises, existential quandaries, and insights. Sometimes a day in Vermont can lead to so much awe, sorrow, restlessness, or glee, it's almost exhausting. Land also has a way of absorbing experiences and memories of humans, such that when winter rolls around again and your mother is not there, it's exquisitely painful to witness the mountain's hot pink alpenglow without her.

It takes doggedness to care for the dying *and* to navigate one's own end of life. It is not for the faint of heart. These pieces are filled with a great deal of metaphoring raw honesty about the love, absurdity, joy, tenderness, and suffering we shared during our time together, as well as my struggle to make meaning of my world after her death.

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WHILE TEACHING ANTHROPOLOGY CLASS I THINK OF MY MOTHER

On campus, the cold begins to doubt, contemplates pulling up stakes, the earth shifting its weight. In March, we are all a bit antsy, grumpy, giddy, mad with sun hunger, the bully of one season not quite giving in to the other. I walk around untethered, beneath the moody clouds, the cracked sheets of ice with their contagion of trapped bubbles, water swelling everywhere, borders broken, green shoots raw with envy for more. So much of us not solid, or linear, a stormy alchemy, it's a miracle we fool ourselves into solidity each day. Today, guilt helps solidify me, a strong stalk of it through my core, fresh and green.

Guilty for leaving my mother alone today, home alone and lonely in the setting sun. Sometimes, no one can swallow a sunset like my mother, every cell sopping with a deep deep sinking sad nostalgia. Each cell drunk with a kind of noble drama. She will sit next to her bedroom window, waiting for my return. I am the other sun around which she orbits; I am her helio, she heliotropic.

Through the class window I watch three wild turkeys poke their way through the campus lawns, pecking at the milky white grubs. My mind darts with ten thousand minnows. I want to tell my students this is perhaps my mother's last spring. As I teach I am holding the weight of antici-

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pated grief in a teacup so I don't shock anyone, just as I am lecturing on death rituals, while trying to focus on the present, an outdated term. The present. The present no longer comes in bulk form but is speckled now, fractured, fickle. While showing them a *National Geographic* film on death rituals, I watch it mingle and refract with all the other realities in the vast nets of their being.

I do not tell them that during the film, my own multitudes wrestle in my body, how fiercely, but furtively I am practicing, rehearsing for my own mother's death as I play the faithful daughter. How at night I sneak up the stairs, crawl in beside her warm curled body as she sleeps, following the clotted flow of the breath that still gurgles faithfully in and out of her, caught by the wet uvula that hangs like a gummy Venus flytrap from the ceiling of her mouth.

I do not tell them how I join my breath with hers and we cycle the night together, two sweeping owls, an act of solidarity, of simple union. I do not tell them of my predicted madness, the savage rattling of my body's rickety cage when her breath finally stops. How I will try and let the grief pass through me, how it will be fought, how it will torment and annihilate, soothe and disperse nonetheless. How it will be laced with culture, capitalism, and the truths Google sends me based on its read of who I am.

It has been happening more and more. Supposedly separate orbits mingle and collide in my mind. Time and space morph within my body. In midsentence, midlecture, I envision my mother's ninety-one-year-old body draped across the forest floor. Writing their assignment on the board, I am obsessing on how she should be laid out, what I will sprinkle over her, how I will gently caress her puffed cheeks, what she will sprout up as after she is taken by the soil's mycelial webs. I try to assure myself whatever else her death is, it will be beautiful, and I will see it as beautiful as much as I am destroyed by it, because everything is everything at once.

Back to class. The sun pours in a window while the oily ripping of a military jet tears above so loud I can't be heard. I pause. All of us gently simmer. Russia invades another bit of Ukraine. Hamas bombs Israel. Somewhere, a new strand of COVID squirms into an unassuming cell. Serotonin slips past a synapse.

I tell my class that in Mongolia, the words *god* and *sky* are both held by the name Tengri. At death, wind spirits usher the soul back to the timeless and infinite sky god. I do not tell them about my own sky, my mother, the pale green-eyed sky above me, the now cloudy-eyed ceiling under which

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my entire world still revolves. I simultaneously think and question whether every mother is nothing less than the sky the child plays under, giving them a shelter from the infinite. My Tengri, the face of my mother, I do not know how to make her anything less epic, less final, less solid. Do you?

Time to wrap up the lecture. Though the students sit politely, already their bodies are humming with leaving. After they go, I stand at the podium, wallowing in the vibrations left behind. I contemplate what I crave for lunch, and underneath, the teacup quietly shatters—what will I do, will any of us do, when that sky is gone, the universe itself cracks open, and there is nothing left to keep me from slipping from this world?

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