

Her Light: At a Memorial Service

by Evelyn Hooven (December 2017)



At Eternity's Gate, Vincent Van Gogh, 1890

The last time I saw her
Shira came to supervision, saying,
*"There's a man alone in his car
Right near—a kind of shoulder."*

I said, "That's part of the lot next door,
It's been sold but people still park there."

"I saw his face—such despair,"

She continued.

I stopped myself from saying

"What's that to you?"

Before our session was over

We saw what seemed to be fire.

Shira raced to where

It was starting, used her phone,

Then kept on packing and tossing snow.

The window seemed to come down

Without shattering, then

An ambulance's wail,

Glimpse of a stretcher,

Doors about to close

Not without her.

There was time left

To our session.

I remember wanting

To say to her,

"Why should you go

Where they don't know you?

And where was *your*

Professional distance?

Every day in bedrooms,

Bathrooms, cars, garages

Someone chooses disaster.

For this man, it may be suicide—

The choice is his.

Why should you

Phone for an ambulance,

Be a stranger's keeper?

I had thought of you

As protégée, apprentice—

Not any more. . . .

That you're almost poor

Hasn't made you practical;

I'll write an extra-adequate letter."

I got very busy—

In swift succession.

Clusters of meetings,

Conferences, seminars.

If there was a common undertone

Among the candidates—

A non-vocal presence—

It went something like this:

“History’s boring,

Ideas take time—a real luxury

As costs of study

Mount out of reach.”

“Don’t bother us much.

There must be, for success,

Simple apparatus

(A key or a code)—

Just deliver it.

To thank you

We’ll do anything it takes.”

Not appearing quite professional,

Rescuing a stranger

Began, for me, to seem

Weightless complaints.

I tried to locate her, no luck.

Might she come back
Even to retrieve
Her winter jacket, her backpack?
I kept them in the garage
And, though it wasn't my custom,
Left those doors open.
Over-scheduled again—
Hectic: the more we confer
The more we hear of the same
Well-defended systems—
Thoughts like uniforms:
This makes me comfortable,
That's not a good fit.
And of course:
Target people who pay well
And are not very ill.
They want up the ladder
Further and faster
And for displeasure
To disappear.
We could get on retainer
For Malady Prevention

Or Maintenance Lightly.

And what shall we call them—

Subsidizers?

Customers?

Now what comes to mind

Is a conference Shira attended

(Not so long ago)

That included the question

Of whether we see

Patients or clients.

Shira tended not to speak much

But had this to say:

“I’m not sure how this translates

To a name for the ones

Who come to us,

But I think the ancient Greeks

Were on to something

When they called the honor

Of being trusted

With healing of this order,

When they called it sacred.”

A total really dense silence.

The word *sacred*

Acted like a stun-gun.

It was as though they'd fainted

And had to be revived.

Then: "*Sacred's* for clerics,

Sacred's for saints"—

Nothing, of course, to do with us.

Soon business-as-usual

Went something like this:

I'm repelled by suffering

But, as a trained and documenting perceiver,

I expect substantial reward.

The week I qualified

I dreamed of wheelbarrows

And little red wagons

At all my doors

Each one filled

Beyond the brim

With dollars

And radiant coins—

Of course clients fill them.

More seminars

Brief and smaller,
Nearly personal
Or were they pseudo-naive?
Opinions differ,
Though we did hear:
“Why can’t love be painless?
Some lives may go through
A vale of tears—not mine.”
“I try never to become
Bewildered or lost—
Where would that lead?
What would it yield?”
Though we want much more
We’ll start, as a prime good,
With painless.
Seminars,
Conferences
Seemed to merge.
Where did we convene?
It’s hard to be precise.
Each resonance or shadow
Assumes its vehemence.

I can't always be precise
About who said what
But, as we know, voices
And impressions take hold
Or take their toll:
Someone said,
"I turned away
When I shouldn't have,
Didn't want to bother,
Thought I was being professional
When I merely left things out;
Love and work both suffered
As I tried not to."
I might be the one
Who said that.
Then, from someone
Unmistakably in pain, came this:
"All around us
Self-promotion,
Ambition
Without a sense of calling.
(Pseudo-compassion pays just as well.)

Could there be a force
That tries to manage us
Into a game for the heartless
Or callous—
A chilling game
With a power-point format
And nobody's blessing?
That may be Reality—
It's only that I can't stand it.”
She wept uncontrollably.
We waited for the anguish
To be over
But had nothing to offer.
Shira would have known what to do.
There was a pall
Where there should have been light—
Her light.
She didn't seem to know many people,
The ones she did know
Remembered her well.
No one knew why
News came uneven

In fragments we shared:

Tension, chill, underdiagnosed

Condition,

Blood clot—no more.

Did she contract something unusual?

Was it the hospital?

Someone transformative,

Someone irreplaceable—

Our eulogies are true. . . .

And perhaps we move towards

What she'd call

The poetics of death—

A name like that is nonsense

I once said, but it isn't.

I jotted something so quickly,

Say that I speed-wrote:

Our shock and grief are

Measureless as she becomes

Still more wonderful.

No more now

Except for these notes:

"So long as patients feel

Merely means to our ends
They cannot get well. . . .
I want to feel dedicated,
Not for dedicated to describe
What I'm expected to discard,
Or someone I used to be."

This, written in her hand,
Was found in her jacket pocket
After she left
And became
What I called—then—
Her stranger's keeper.

Evelyn Hooven graduated from Mount Holyoke College and received her M.A. from Yale University, where she also studied at The Yale School of Drama. A member of the Dramatists' Guild, she has had presentations of her verse dramas at several theatrical venues, including *The Maxwell Anderson Playwrights Series* in Greenwich, CT (after a state-wide competition) and *The Poet's Theatre* in Cambridge, MA (result of a national competition). Her poems and translations from the French have appeared in *ART TIMES*, *Chelsea*, *The Literary Review*, *THE SHOp: A Magazine of Poetry* (in Ireland), *The Tribeca Poetry Review*, *Vallum* (in Montreal), and other journals, and her literary criticism in Oxford University's *Essays in Criticism*.

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