

INTRODUCTION

Sing me a song to make death tolerable, a song
of a man and a woman: the riddle of a man
and a woman.

What language could allay our thirsts,
What winds lift us, what floods bear us
past defeats
but song but deathless song ?

William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*

I bought a new bike rack for Kirsten during the summer of 2013. She needed a carrier that would fit on the back of her car because her cancer had progressed and she could no longer lift her bicycle to and from the roof. The bike shop owner talked with me about Kirsten. She was one of his favorite cyclists. He had visited her at MDI Hospital earlier in the spring when she was recovering from an infection following her last New York City surgery. When I stopped at his store to purchase the bike rack, we both knew that she was dying.

"You're a lucky man, Tom," he said. "You had twenty-five years with the strongest, sweetest woman in the state of Maine."

Kirsten was diagnosed with cancer on December 13, 2011, two years to the day before she died. Her colon cancer showed up first as a tumor attached to one of her ovaries. Recovery from her first major operation was slow and painful. Yet, in late January, not too many weeks after the surgery, she called me on her cell phone. I was at her parents' house. She said, "Guess where I am?" When I said, "Where are you?" she replied, "On top of Cadillac Mountain. Don't tell my mother!"

She was in training for skate skiing, but there was no snow. So she biked the Cadillac Mountain Road instead.

She described skate skiing as “the closest a person can come to flying while remaining attached to the earth.” She told me, “Sometimes I can’t tell if I am going uphill or down.”

Before her last year at College of the Atlantic, Kirsten worked for the Grain Exchange in Kansas. She spent her high school summers working on a New Jersey truck farm, where growing vegetables surrounded by intense suburban development was a truly heroic act. I don’t know, but Kirsten may have imported a bit of New Jersey agriculture to her Kansas setting.

Her story has a connection to the Vietnam War that is not really evident or obvious. My brother John was a Ranger with the 25th Infantry Division in Hậu Nghĩa Province, northwest of Saigon near the Cambodian border. He was killed on August 6, 1969 while on a long-range reconnaissance patrol along a river known as the Vàm Cỏ Đông. Kirsten never knew my brother John. But she read the letters that I exchanged with members of his Ranger team.

When I wrote to three of his fellow Rangers back in 2005, I included this postscript:

I have something else I will send you one of these days that will do a better job of lifting your spirits than this letter. My wife Kirsten wrote a novel about farming in Kansas. It is a funny thing, because it has nothing to do with you or me or Vietnam or my brother or my family. But in a way, you are in it and so is my brother. I know that this is true, because when I told Kirsten that I wanted to send it to you she started to cry. You will see what I mean when you read it. It may take a while, because she needs to finish editing it and she is too busy right now taking care of our little girls.

A reference to the World Trade Center shows how long ago Kirsten wrote her story. The towers were still standing. Why has it taken so long to finally get it into print? Kirsten’s literary agent, Nina Ryan, had a willing New York City publisher. But the publisher wanted changes to the plot, and Kirsten didn’t make them.

My late friend Ray McGill read the manuscript and his reaction was, I suspect, similar to the publisher’s. He told me, but he wouldn’t say it to Kirsten. He loved the writing, but he wanted the girl to move on. The story made him very uncomfortable. Ray grew up in Iowa Falls, Iowa and he lived his adult life in the Washington, DC suburbs. He didn’t particularly like where he ended up, yet he felt there was no

future for the girl in her middle-of-the-country small town.

At the time, I thought Kirsten stopped working on the book mostly because of our young children. I did childcare three days a week, but she did not work on *Remembered Earth*. Instead, she started doing research for a second novel.

As I look back, I can see that the people trying to help her with her book were like Aunt Bea. They wanted the girl to go off into the world. Was it reasonable for Anna to pass up a scholarship to Yale? I guess it depends on what you are trying to accomplish in this life. Kirsten might have said, "Your ambition is reasonable, but will it take you to where you need to be?"

Anna Garland's resistance to an Ivy League future reminds me of Kirsten Stockman's refusal to try downhill skis. "Why would I join that world of fancy equipment and high-priced lift tickets, when I am perfectly happy on my cross-country skis?"

Kirsten's decision to leave the plot unchanged also reminds me of lines from a Rumi poetry book that she left behind in her writing studio. You will need to find a copy of the book, *This Longing*, to read the opening four pages of this poem.

So the death of the horse and the mule and the slave
Bring round the death of the man. He kept looking
For personal profit from his spiritual gift,
And so neglected his devotional work.

The One who acts without regard to getting anything back
is God. Or a friend of God.

In this marketplace world
People sit on benches waiting to be paid.

The child won't give up
the onion in his hand until it has the apple tightly
in the other. Nobody says, "The Peace of God be with you,"
without some ulterior motive about making money.

Very seldom

do you hear a true *Salaam*, one that means it. I listen
to hear God saying, *God's Peace be with you*,
but it's rare.

Elsewhere in this book, Rumi says

Disputational knowing wants customers.
It has no soul.

Robust and energetic
before a responsive crowd, it slumps when no one is there.
The only real customer is God.

I think it best to end this introduction by letting you read what Kirsten herself said about her book. Here, with his permission, is the text of a letter she sent to Ron Beard back in 2003.

Dear Ron,

I'm so sorry to have taken so long in replying. I am a horrible procrastinator when it comes to answering letters and phone calls! But you and your wonderful letter have been on my mind all summer long.

It is always a little bit hard for me to give my manuscript to friends, though not because I don't wish them to read it. Primarily because I don't want them to feel obligated to like the book, or rather, to say that they like the book when they do not. It's a little bit like being a rich man and, because of the money, not knowing who your true friends are. Another reason why I don't give it out much is because writing, the act of writing, is a way for me to better understand my life, a way to digest things, a way to reach beneath the busy surface of the day and touch and draw closer to what is truly important. Having readers — or even publication — doesn't necessarily help with that process. It doesn't bring me closer to what I need to know — only the work of writing itself can do that. And so sometimes passing out the book seems distracting and beside the point.

With that as a preface, now I must say that there is nothing more satisfying than having someone like you as a reader. You seem to have understood completely what it was I was reaching for — and you articulated it in your letter even better than I could have myself. Four years and thousands of pages later, I still have a difficult time explaining it when someone asks me what my book is about.

I'm too close to it I guess. It makes me cross-eyed when I try to think about it. The book came to me over many long and difficult hours. I wrestled with it and fought with it and prayed to God that I could be strong (and humble and honest) enough to get through it. And now that it is complete it is so great to have another

mind grasp it and draw the meaning from it that I had sought, hoped for and intended. I am in a phase now that when I look at it, like an amateur carpenter, I see only its flaws, limitations, and imperfections. I see where the angles are off and where the joints don't quite fit. But that's all right. I can live with that. Human beings are imperfect and so are their works — I aimed very high with this book, it was an ambitious task for an inexperienced writer, and I believe it is an accurate reflection of that. I believe that the work has its own integrity and if nothing else, it at least shows my good intentions, which, to my mind, is enough. There will be other books (I hope!) and more opportunities to improve, perfect, and grow.

You have honored me with the greatest compliment of anyone yet who has read it, Ron, inadvertently I think, by saying that you would like to pass it on to your daughter. Nothing could have touched me more.

I'm so happy to know you, so happy to have you in our family of friends. Thanks so much for your thoughtful reading and response, it meant a lot to me.

With fondness and respect,

Kirsten

Tom Crikelair, Bar Harbor, Maine, December 19, 2015