

Jeanne's Song, 2010

by Gary Percesepe

They tell me that humpback whales are born knowing the ancient song of their species—no one teaches it to them. Each mating season a new musical phrase is added to the song, and the females wait to hear the song, and respond to the most beautiful singer.

I used to wish my writing could mimic such a song, in human terms, but I cannot escape the truth that my writing is more often (especially this time of year) a kind of bearing witness, bearing the body of this death.

I think that I write toward death and to stave off death and to remember the dead and to address what is dead in me.

Sometimes when I am reading on Fictionaut or elsewhere I will come across a writer who is writing from the place of the dead.

It is a place that I recognize. It is as if they are calling to me, then. I feel them, and I am somehow able to trace a finger across the abyss that separates us in modern life, the chasm of individual self-expression and lunatic self-promotion and feinting and posturing and avoidance of all things soulful that marks the present age. And I will read this person and involuntarily say yes, I know.

I read and I write in order to feel less alone.

It is dangerous to seek human connection with writers we admire. Often it is the work that we admire and not the person, though logic tells us that there is some essential connection. But writing is not logical and most writers fail, often miserably. I count myself among this number.

There are days when I try to understand who I am or why I write or how it is that I am drawn to the writing of some writers and not others. I generally have these thoughts in August, around this time. My sister Jeanne died two years ago today (August 10).

I always believed that Jeanne was the writer in the family. She did too (smile). We did not have close enough contact to be competitive, and to my knowledge she did not write fiction or poetry or memoir (three forms I dabble in) but she did write professionally, and worked for a spell as a journalist.

She always meant to write a family history, and was cross with me when I dragged home from Miami the journals and poetry of our paternal grandfather, John Percesepe. She thought that these documents should go to her, the family scribe and keeper of lore. I did not disagree. I had made the trip to Miami because I had the time and the money to take such a trip, and I think she resented it. I told her she could look through the writings any time she wanted, when she was visiting my house in Ohio, or I would bring them to her in New York, but somehow we never got around to either.

The poems and the journals sit in a trunk upstairs in this old house. They haven't been touched in years, and not since Jeanne's death.

Jeanne told me that one member of our small clan in Italia was a court poet, who had lived and served in the king's castle. Whenever I struggle as a writer (which is to say, every day), I smile to think that I am descended from a noble line of poets. I was quite pleased with myself, taking consolation in this story, until I mentioned it to my Italian-American friend Gabrielle Belfiglio (south Philly) one day at the *Antioch Review*, and Gabrielle said Oh! And I said what? And she said, we have that same story in my family!

I read through my grandfather's papers many years ago. His handwriting was graceful and strong, the Italian lyrical, and his

English translations idiosyncratic and funny. There was also a ledger from the old Italian Methodist Church where he had served as treasurer, during the darkest days of the Great Depression. I saw the entries for members of the Percesepe clan, each Sunday, week after week: \$1.00, : \$1.00, \$1.00, and on the high holy days, \$2.00. A small fortune in those days.

If Jeanne were here she would be able to explain our people's place in the great progressive struggle for human liberation, of our direct connection to the Italian Renaissance, the meaning of our name, and a thousand things besides.

But I was a poor student, and a worse listener, and now she is gone, and I know so little and have forgotten so much. I cannot bring myself to walk up the steps to the room where grandfather's poems and journals lie buried in a chest covered with dust.

What I think I am trying to say here is that there are some stories that lie so buried we cannot even tell them to ourselves.

I was always going to talk to Jeanne about all of this. When she was alive and when I thought of her, I always seemed to be saying to her, involuntarily, "I was coming to that." But I never did.

So I speak now.

When my sister died I struggled to know what to say at her funeral. I scribbled notes in bed for two days. My friend Frederick Barthelme was a great comfort to me during this time. I asked him what he had said, how he had borne the loss of his brother Don to cancer. And Rick shared what he could, the pain still fresh after twenty years, and then he said simply, "Take it easy."

Each year on this day I post a new addition to Jeanne's song—

What follows is what I wrote last year (2009), and at her funeral (2008).

WHAT DO WE OWE THE DEAD?

We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead.
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?
... A terrible beauty is born.
--W.B. Yeats

How do we write the dead?

What claim do they have on us?

These questions still haunt me, one year till the day that my sister died.

A terrific writer and editor with a biting sense of humor, Jeanne was an opera singer who had studied with prominent New York voice teachers. The last time I saw her alive she had stopped going online, and was barely eating. Her laptop lay dusty on the floor beside her sick bed, from where she reached her hand out to me from time to time, to touch me, to know that I was there.

For many years, we had not been close. I fictionalized an account of our turbulent life as siblings in a short story I published in *Mississippi Review* online years ago, a story called “Moratorium.” In a sense, this is a companion piece.

We had an older brother who died in Yonkers, New York on the street outside our apartment building one snowy day in February, a few days past my fourth birthday. Jeanne was six. I remember the terrible shrieking, the wailing of the inconsolable. Someone had sent me to stay with a neighbor in the apartment upstairs during the tumultuous death scene. I don't know where they sent my sister. Decades later, long into the night one Thanksgiving weekend we tried to piece together what had happened. After the adults reclaimed us from the neighbors (who were these neighbors?) why did they split us up? How long had we been separated? Which uncle did I stay with, which uncle had taken Jeanne? Where was our mother? We didn't know, and no one was saying. It was a dark period in our family's history and it remains mysterious and impenetrable. (I think this may help account for my congenital skepticism about the big things—I'm a big believer in nobody knows anything.)

For months before she died (of ovarian cancer) I had found myself saying over and over, sometimes audibly, “I'm sorry Jeanne. I am so sorry.” Just the other day, as this one year anniversary of her death was imminent, I found myself unconsciously saying it again.

I don't know what I am so sorry about. What do we owe the dead?

Once, I was writing a novel that I set aside for a long time. There was a character in it named Anna. Anyway, for months, and then years, while this novel was stalled I would think that I heard Anna's voice calling to me. "Yo, over here. You coming back for me? You gonna leave me here like this, unfinished? I've got some more things to say to you, pal, believe me." Anna was insistent. I finished the first draft of the novel, finally, this June. But Anna has not stopped speaking to me, as I go about the work of revision. Neither has Jeanne. And all I can come up with by way of response is, "I'm so sorry."

I'm sorry that she died, sure. I'm sorry that she suffered so, there at the end and all the way through her tumultuous life. I'm sorry we didn't spend more time together, that I didn't make more of an effort to learn her brand of magic, sorry that we let the silly and the stupid interfere with what was, after all, a blood relationship, deeper than friendship, and outlasting mere death. I'm sorry that this is all I can come up with, after these many years.

A year ago today I spoke these words from the pulpit of an Episcopal church in the Catskill Mountains of New York.

I miss her like crazy. I understand that you didn't know her. I just want you to know there was something about her. She was something.

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My sister Jeanne was a giver of good gifts, a rough prophet, and a beautiful singer.

At Christmas, or on my birthday, Jeanne selected gifts for me that perfectly captured my essence—or at least the better self I aspired

to be. Her gifts were always imaginative, often excessive, and sometimes completely useless. This was not because her gifts were dumb or because they bore no relationship to who I was as a person, but because they were so outlandish and exotic. Her gifts were intended to stretch me, to educate and reform me, or if necessary to *remake* me.

My sister was a native New Yorker, that peculiar species for whom being a person involves a perpetual quest for self improvement. Scratch the surface of any New Yorker and underneath you will find a dutiful museum-goer, concert-attender, gallery opening fundraiser-planning organizer who would like the world to be a little bit better every day and is consequently outraged when the world refuses to yield even an inch.

I used to wear a button on my jacket lapel when I was a philosophy professor, because it reminded me of Jeanne. The button said, "Ignorance is curable but stupidity is forever." Jeanne constantly encountered stupidity in the land, and not all of it emanated from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue or Capitol Hill. Some of it was closer to home. Jeanne tried her best to straighten us out. Recalcitrant and hopeless as we were, she never gave up on us. I've often wondered if she thought of us as slow learners, or underachievers, or kitsch collectors helplessly mired in a world of dreck. She hated stupidity, and did daily battle against it. Her life mission appeared to be like that of Nietzsche: To do harm to stupidity.

Perhaps this helps explain Jeanne's telephone habits. I never knew a person who could get as exasperated on the phone as Jeanne. Her furious telephone hang-ups were the stuff of legend in our family. How many of our conversations began quietly enough, *sotto voce*, and gradually escalated, tension mounting, until that sudden final crashing crescendo, BAM! (And the recapitulation, if you were unseasoned enough to call her back, to protest your

innocence.) I heard Jeanne slam the phone down on me in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut-- the whole tri-state area, basically-- as well as Colorado, Missouri, Illinois, and Ohio. After a few decades I learned not to interrupt her when she really got going, and I finally figured out that my role was not as a participant in the conversation, but rather as an actor with a bit part in a dramatic stage production. It was Jeanne's stage, and this was a form of performance art all her own.

As she entered the cyberspace era, she found a new outlet for her screeds against stupidity: E-mail! After a year spent doing battle with the stupidity of America's health care system, which in her view put profits before people, withheld medicine and treatment from patients, excluded 48 million people, denied benefits because of "mysterious and ill-defined pre-existing conditions," touted the "invisible hand" of the private marketplace as a cure all for what is obviously a broken system and generally reduced the lot of us to supplicants before the throne of the almighty HMO, Jeanne had had enough. She fired off a memorable e-mail, a real scorcher, flaming and white hot, excoriating the stupidity of the current health care system and the imbecilic politicians who resisted reforming it, vowing to cut off any one who was stupid enough to EVER in their lives vote Republican again, *ever!* I still have this subversive email, saved in its own special folder, password protected. It was an angry, funny, vulgar, passionate, petulant, one-sided polemic, completely lacking in nuance and totally Jeanne. I loved it! I forwarded it to all my friends, proudly, with an accompanying note saying, "This is my sis!" It was like Chris Rock or George Carlin on steroids. I was going to read it to you today in church but I don't think they allow the *mf* word to be said aloud in church.

She was thunder and lightning! In fact, on Monday, the day after her death, my mother and I were crossing the Hudson River over the Newburgh Beacon Bridge in a terrible driving rain. The sky was dark and threatening, and then suddenly the heavens flashed with

streaked lightning hitting Newburgh, right in front of us, and then we heard an enormous clap of thunder, and I immediately thought, "Jeanne!" It's you!"

Jeanne was an athlete in high school, and you may be surprised to learn, a Lakeland High School cheerleader. She was an incongruous cheerleader, this petite olive skinned teen with the flashing dark eyes, tiny waist, big chest and bigger voice, reading the French existentialists and Frankfurt School theorists and Italian anarchists, decrying the war in Vietnam while cheering those poor boys of Lakeland, perpetual losers, some of whom would go on to lose their lives in southeast Asia. In time she came to see the stupidity of the war, its senseless waste and cruelty, and grew disillusioned with being a cheerleader for football or for war. Even though she loved and worshiped her father, a World War II hero, Jeanne instinctively sensed that there was something that was not right in Vietnam, some basic lack of truth telling, of moral reasoning gone amok. Soon enough the war came into our living room, and the conflict between my sister and my father became unbearable. And then one day Jeanne just packed up some things and left home. She stayed for a time with a woman who was her high school history teacher, and waited for college. She broke our hearts, but somehow, I understood. Watching all of this from what I thought was a safe distance, I began to see for the first time that ideas have consequences and that when you play the role of a prophet it will always cost you something, and you end up out in the wilderness. For Jeanne was like an Old Testament prophet, a rough rider and an outlier for justice and fairness. She saw things that were wrong and tried to stop them. This often put her crossways with people that she loved.

Thinking back, I wonder: Weren't her tempestuous fits really grounded in her profound disappointment with the way things are in our world? Like Fanny Lou Hamer, Jeanne was sick and tired of being sick and tired. Like Catholic activist Dorothy Day she'd had it

with the deception and lies and the violence and the domination practices of what Dorothy called this dirty, filthy, rotten system.

Jeanne stood next to me in this church several months back, her last Sunday in worship. She was weak, but she wanted to go to church. We stood for the opening hymn. I remember so well the way our voices blended together, older sister and younger brother. I was overcome with emotion. Ever the professional, Jeanne sang on, while I dropped out for a stanza, so in love was I with the sound of her elegant soprano voice. I had been singing my natural tenor, but as we moved into the middle verses I switched to the bass line, trying for something low and supportive. Singing here today in the same place, I know that she has never—can never—leave this sacred place, that she has now taken on the ability to meet me everywhere, in the joy of the robin in the morning, the beauty of a Hudson Valley sunset, the faces of her mother and brothers, or the sigh of one of her oppressed sisters or brothers.

Jeanne learned in time to lend her powerful voice for things she believed in: great ideas and progressive politics and beautiful music and love of family and friends. Her love for music and art was one she tried to pass on to her family, to her cousins and nieces and nephews. Like Dostoevsky she believed that only through beauty will the world be saved. That is why she gave us all those good gifts, and tried to kick us into gear. But now, at her passing, we come to see that Jeanne herself was the greatest gift of all, and all those gifts that she gave paled in comparison to the luminous beauty of her presence.

In our family, she was the keeper of the lore, the bearer of our family history. She is my only sister. There is no one to replace her. There is a Jeanne-sized hole in our hearts, and it is terrible. Our mother has lost her second child, and Jeanne's mortal remains will be lowered into the ground where she will rejoin at last her beloved

brother Tommy. Our loss is incalculable. I feel today like W. H. Auden when he lamented,

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone/ Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone/ Silence the pianos and with muffled drum bring out the coffin/ let the mourners come.

The stars are not wanted now; put out every one/ Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun/ Pour away the ocean and sweep up the woods/ For nothing now can ever come to any good.

I hardly know how to tell you how much I loved her, though loving her, as in all things Jeanne, was often difficult. I loved her for who she was, while she loved us for ourselves and also for what she felt we were called to become. She saw potential in each one of us. She'd want us to stop fussing and get on with it, to take up the causes she believed in, and to make sure to stop along the way and spontaneously break out into an aria for the beauty and goodness and mystery of life. She was a prophet and a singer, and a giver of good gifts. She was a gift that was incalculable, extravagant, excessive. *What in the world will we do with her now, this gift that wants to keep on giving?* The only possible answer is to keep our hearts open to receive what she still wants to give us, for loving someone means not only giving love but also receiving it in return. For myself, I do not worry about losing her because nothing that you truly love can ever be lost. But sometimes I think we didn't know how to receive all the love that Jeanne wanted to give, because her heart and her voice and her courage and her passion were so large that they overwhelmed our little cups. But we can still experience her love overflowing our hearts, not worrying about capturing it, or losing it, just letting it wash over us. There is enough.

In the months that she battled her illness I saw in Jeanne a growing maturity, not uncommon for cancer patients--a willingness to accept, to receive what was coming, what could not be stopped. There is a common truth in all the world's great religions: that we must learn to let go, to accept, to simply trust. And so it was that

Jeanne finally came to be at rest. She made a good death, one that came to match the goodness of her life. I drove 1,500 miles through five states to be with her, arriving two hours before she crossed over, and she was waiting for me. Off the meds now, her face had thinned out, and she looked for all the world like the girl I knew in high school. She was at peace. And she would have all of us make the peace among ourselves, and in the world. Let us make a vow to do this, or Jeanne will be thunder and lightning before us and behind us, beneath us and above us.

Jeanne struggled to understand her illness. More than once she asked me, "What is my life's work now?" And I would say to her, Go on, your life's work is what you are doing, who you are, you are already there, go on. And now she has gone on, ahead of us, this rough prophet, this giver of good gifts, and she is still singing. And I hear her saying, "Don't be deceived, all of us go down to the dust, take my hand-- no death, no fear!-- yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.

