

Red Ribbon Trail



Monhegan Island, August 6, 1992

Today is the thirtieth anniversary of my father's death. The date usually approaches and vanishes like headlights on a country road. Oh-my-god, tomorrow is August sixth ... damn-it, yesterday was August sixth.

I sit on a milk crate on our sloping lawn, drinking coffee. Morning sun glitters on the sea below. Gulls cry. Collapsed years balloon and contract like an accordion.

The summer after my father died, our first summer on the island, a postcard came from the Patchogue synagogue, announcing Cantor Rajeck's *yortsayt* and the service of unveiling. The observance meant nothing to Mama and me and his grave was far away, so his tombstone, which I designed, stood naked on the day marked for its blessing. The cards kept coming, year after year, date of death written in the blank. A command to light a candle and say *kadish*. A reproach.

I sit in a sunny patch, cradling the coffee cup. Dew-catchers dot the grass. Duff, my neighbor Clara's tawny cat, sleeps at my feet, his matted belly rising and falling.

Sunlit sea, sun-washed rocks. We exist for a nanosecond, they murmur. I shake off panic, watch Duff's belly rise and fall.

A painter trudges up the hill.

Organized religion is petty politics, my father used to say. Self-interest, he meant, power grabs, tribal pressures, conformity. He believed in social justice, in peace and freedom. He sang the Friday night liturgy with beauty and deep feeling, but ate chocolate bars on Yom Kippur to keep up his strength. His faith, held in secret, was a *nigun*, a melody without words, sent directly to God's ears.

He died at fifty-eight. I just turned fifty-eight.

A voice in my head says mourn him today. What is mourning? How should I do it? The voice says walk the Red Ribbon trail.

Over the years I've walked every trail in the wildlands and along the shore except Red Ribbon. People say it's dark, mysterious. I don't know. My father related to his past by secretly writing memoirs and hiding them in a drawer. Perhaps I relate to trails in a similar way, perhaps I need a trail I never visit to exist in my imagination and make the island larger.

I lace up my hiking boots.

The road is dusty, the grass parched. I cross the ball field, pass Clara's sunflowers, and step onto the Whitehead trail.

Monarchs and dragonflies flit in the sun. Barberry tangles with serviceberry, purple fringed orchis lurks among leggy asters. Solitude braces me—the feeling is fresh every time—as if I were drawn in black ink with broad strokes—a sense of ending at my skin and being fully contained within it, responsible for my feet and the direction they take—a solitary creature prowling a small forest that feels like wilderness.

What will happen to my father when I mourn? When I accept, when I embrace his death? Will he fade?

The sunny deciduous trail ends at a steep dip into a spacious spruce forest carpeted with needles. Beyond an overhanging branch a tiny red ribbon hangs on a knobby trunk. My breath slows.

The footpath is narrow and lumpy, the underbrush littered with silver twigs. Sunbeams glide across hummocks of pincushion moss, tapping tiny orange caps, yellow *Amanita*, and red bunchberries.

I hold my father—walk and carry him whole, lifted up from wherever I buried him.

He's in the hospital, cancer metastasizing. He obsesses over his catheter bag, clinging to life by measuring his fluid. August sixth he has pain for the first time; gets morphine. "It's my fault he has pain!" Mama wails. "This morning I gave him orange juice—I shouldn't

have—he didn't even want it—he drank it to make me happy. You know how he is."

The trail narrows and winds, boxed in by dense brush.

My father is comatose. His colleague Jerry, a young Hebrew teacher, sits in a chair, hunched over a bible. He rocks and prays, a deep complicity between him and my father, the old bond between Jewish men who conduct exclusive business with God.

Daddy breathes quietly, a little snore now and then. His face is gray, his nose thin and pinched, his eyes closed in iron-clad sleep. I stroke his hand. Mama strokes his forehead.

Your hand is cold, Daddy, it keeps to itself—it never keeps to itself. I lift his hand and kiss it.

"Max, Max," Mama cries softly.

Jerry gives us a look which means move, please. He sits on the bed and smooths cream on my father's cheeks. Tender as a son, he shaves the gray stubble, solemnly intoning prayers. Darkness washes up, the religion embracing my father. I feel embarrassed, excluded—incredible, how Mama and I allow ourselves to be excluded. While Jerry praises God and shaves Daddy's sunken cheeks, we huddle dumbly, passively, against the wall.

Superstition, Mama grumbles. We go to the lounge and mill aimlessly. The doctor finds us. "The cantor has passed away," he says, reducing my father to a leaf on the wind. I hold my screaming mother.

Jerry bows over the bed, wailing, beating his breast.

Mama shrieks, "It's my fault! I killed him with the orange juice!"

Daddy's face is granite, his breath gone. Unbearable.

The trail curves sharply. I stand in a dark, circular space, walled and roofed with dead spruce branches. It's silent, somber, surrounded by a lattice of sun-tipped dead branches weaving deep into the forest.

A chapel, a sacred grove.

Death and decay all around, but it's beautiful and oddly comforting. I look up along tapering trunks, past dead twigs, and there, against the sky, feathery green branches sway, the green of living trees.

This is the deep comfort of wildlands—life in death. A sunbeam strikes a curved mossy log and it glows emerald green, radiance flaring into me. I cry with grief, with joy, with an overwhelming sense of gratitude.

As I leave the chapel a steady panting rhythm echoes through the stillness. In a disc of clear blue sky, a large crow flies round and round, its wings solemnly beating. It caws once, then wheels away.

Something cracks beyond the visible. I cry at sparkling water jewels dangling off a shelf fungus. I cry at a decaying trunk feeding baby spruces.

So this is mourning—this collaboration. A solemn holding and letting go. I bring my father to the forest and the forest receives him. I didn't cry at the funeral. Mama did the crying, she sucked out all the grief from his grave, screaming, "I killed him with the orange juice." My turn, now; together, the forest and I fulfill a ceremony of mourning. He didn't like the outdoors, yet he is present.

I turn back. Beside the trail a perfect spider's web hangs between saplings, dewdrops sparkling on the intersections of iridescent threads. I sway like my father praying at the Ark, crying as the web appears and disappears, as dewdrops wink on the circles. I think of Red Paint pottery in burial sites circling the North Pole, etched with designs of connected dots. Red Paint Indians walked the island seven thousand years ago—their footprints rise from the earth, our feet joined sole to sole like reflections in water.

My friends' friends in the Ivory Coast would smile knowingly. Your ancestors walk with you, they would say; your ancestors send the mossy log and the crow, the water jewels and the spider's web.

August 7, 1992

Eagerly, I set out to photograph yesterday's totems. A cloudy morning. Near the turnoff a deer crashes through the underbrush.

Without sun, the chapel closes in on itself, shrouded in gloom. The mossy log sleeps on a bed of dry needles.

Chastened, I photograph the shelf fungus on a dead trunk, drops of water in its rubbery palm.

Today is its own day, without signs, a day for exploring. The trail winds upward, hemmed in by feathery young spruces, then opens into an amphitheater with dark fern glades on the downward slope.

Uphill the sun breaks through, illuminating the puppy-paw leaves of a young maple. Baby spruces gleam; patterns of light dance on boulders. The halves of a split dead maple arch to the ground, its humus-rich crotch home to moss and tiny saplings.

Dead tree, sunlight on live spruce. The forest comes alive, bringing my father. You wrote me into *An Eye for Dark Places*, he says. I am the glowing wells and men's names meaning light. I am the floating houses made of radiant flakes. I am the head singing in a phosphorescent cave.

The novel's heart. Secretly beating all the years I was writing it. As he sang *nigunim* to a God whose name cannot be spoken, so he sang to me.

Quickly I photograph the split maple with its illuminated offspring of moss and saplings, desperate to catch some approximation of meaning before the light goes.

My editor will still accept revisions. I rewrite the book's final paragraph.

"What does my name mean?" he asks.

"It means 'light,'" she says.

August 6, 1999

This year Daddy would have been ninety-five and Mama, who died two years ago, would have been ninety-two.

Ten o'clock on Red Ribbon, sun filtering through. In the chapel, the sun-tipped branches still weave into the forest, but the moss is gray from lack of rain, and time is dimming my totems. Dry needles blanket the curved log; the shelf fungus is gone, leaving a rubbery white scar. The bifurcated tree looks shabby, the crotch filled with debris. I walk slowly, meditating on Daddy, taking photographs. I don't want to imagine him ninety-five.

Spruces have fallen; the forest is lighter. Uphill, off the trail, a little glade beckons. Come here, it says, come on up. I climb to a bright circle of grass and moss, littered with cones.

Speak to me, I say to the spot. A little bird alights on a twig near the ground, a bird no bigger than a plum. It flits to a baby spruce, then disappears. Two branches quiver. I cock the shutter. The bird appears on a shaded branch. I snap; it flies away.

II

August 6, 2000

I head for Red Ribbon carrying a little red prayer book. I found it this winter in the drawer where Mama kept her song books, choral music, and programs. Surprising, how neat and orderly she kept her music. On top was the soft leather ring binder containing her performance repertoire, hundreds of folk song lyrics, some she'd written in Yiddish script, some transliterated, her spirit lingering in the torn, scuffed pages and worn black leather. Under folders of choral music was Leon's palm-size prayer book (Mama remarried), *kadish* transliterated on the last page. I took it to Champaign and on the morning of Mama's third *yortsayt* I said—sang—cried *kadish* to the urn on the mantel, to her ashes, the first time I've ever said *kadish* for—actually to—a parent.

Self-conscious about carrying a prayer book, I conjure up a shadowy image of Daddy, not sure if it's from

memory or photographs. He died when Michael was two and Yuri not born. Sadness comes on cue—an ache for the holes in their lives where their grandfather should have been.

Clara's sunflowers nod; petunias flourish in her window boxes. Clara has "stomach spells"; family is living with her. Duff, my breakfast companion, died over the winter.

Somewhere on the Red Ribbon trail I will sing *kadish* for Daddy. I remember Friday night services as a child, when the rabbi said, "Will all the mourners please rise," and a scattered few rose and murmured *kadish*, haloed by loss. I used to twist around to watch them in their suits and dark dresses, murmuring sadly, humbly—some reading, some praying with closed eyes—singled out and lifted into a state of penitence. An obligation for the secular mourners; a solace for the devout.

Prayer baffles me. This old Aramaic prayer in particular—a prayer for the dead which doesn't speak of death or ask for blessings. It works obliquely, bribing God with extravagant praises so the dead will receive mercy. A stern requirement, I think, to praise God from the depths of despair, like Job. I found the rules governing *kadish* in Daddy's *Hamadrikh*, a rabbi's guide to rituals and ceremonials. After a loved one's death we are commanded to say *kadish* every day for a week, then every week for eleven months. Dead souls suffer anxiety during their first year so we say *kadish* to redeem them, to send them to paradise. On certain holidays we give money in atonement and maintain good conduct to obtain divine grace for them.

On Friday nights my father sang *kadish* with the mourners. A mourner among mourners. I hear his voice—the haunting melody keening each verse of praise. I imagine him thinking of his mother and father, his sisters and brother.

May the name of the Holy One be blessed, praised, glorified, worshipped, extolled, magnified, honored, and adored, in words beyond all song and psalm, beyond all tributes and praises that can be expressed in the world. And let us say Amen.

I used to sing Ravel's *Kadish* for voice and piano, drawing meaning from the traditional melody, the hypnotic repetitions, and our lost family. Daddy's translation was penciled in the score.

I stopped performing it after he died.

An *Amanita* flaunts its deadly yellow. *Kadish* plays in my head. Perhaps because my mind is filled with the song, it isn't open to pagan epiphanies. No mossy logs or jeweled spider webs. No little birds.

In a glade off the trail a shaft of light strikes two conical white mushrooms, phallic and erect. Not a sacred spot, but it will do. I stand by the mushrooms. Open the prayer book. The space feels exposed. It's not just a matter of singing, but of bringing an ancient prayer into the forest and wrestling it to meaning in the presence of two mushrooms. I clear my throat and begin. I feel ridiculous singing—crying—*kadish* to a pair of mushrooms. Tiny brown ants scurry over a log.

I walk on and bushwhack into another glade. Take photos. Walk deeper into the woods and stop at a moss-covered fallen tree, its upturned roots worn into a star. This is the spot. A flat orange mushroom appears among ferns. I sing *kadish* again, in a higher key, with deep feeling but no tears, sing it to the orange mushroom. As I sing, dozens of tiny orange mushrooms materialize, orange buttons on white threads—a whole colony, like ants.

The colony's roots may have threaded the island for decades, for centuries, for millennia.

I frame the scene and try to cock the shutter.

August 6, 2001

Near the turn-off to Red Ribbon four monarchs wheel in a patch of sunlight. One lands on my thigh. It flies off and another one lands, or the same one. A monarch lands on my head. All four cling to me. The butterfly on my thigh pulses, its wings opening and closing.

On a sudden breeze they soar into a tree.

I sing *kadish* high off the trail at a cave formed by the towering roots of a fallen spruce. The mosquitoes are ferocious. I sing quickly and flee.

In the patch of light, larger now, monarchs and delicate yellow sulphurs wheel about, convening on flower stalks and rocks, skimming into trees.

August 6, 2002

Remembering my devout grandmother recently, I wondered, since a dying man gets shaved, what cleansing ritual is performed for a dying woman?

I opened the *Hamadrakh* to laws concerning a dying person. "A dying person is to be considered a living being in all respects. It is therefore forbidden to touch the body. The one who does touch the body is guilty of bloodshed (for it may accelerate the end)."

Stunned, I checked the web. If the limb of a dying person protrudes from the bed, you are forbidden to replace it. You may only touch a dying person if the house catches fire. The law creates ethical problems for doctors.

I asked the local rabbi. He laughed. Shaving ritual? I'd say the guy took it on himself to make your father look better.

I turn onto Red Ribbon, brushing cobwebs of confusion. Torrential rain last night, leaving a hobbit world of mushrooms. Mama used to ridicule Daddy for secretly believing in God—what do you need it for, she'd say—she would have hated knowing he read the Bible in bed his final summer, shoving it under his pillow the instant he heard footsteps. But when Jerry's look told us to move, her mouth twitched and, grudgingly, she surrendered Daddy's dying. We stepped aside so Jerry could summon Daddy's beloved forefathers, so he could enact what we believed was a solemn cleansing ritual.

It rankles.

Jerry exploited our ignorance, our grief. He interrupted the flow of time, prevented us from sustaining my father to the end. I don't know his motive; I do know its effect. We left the room briefly and Daddy died in his arms. We missed his last moments, his final breath, the sacred, enormous end of his life.

My mother died with love and music. Herbert and I sat by her bed, kissed her goodbye, said final words. I sang her favorite Yiddish songs, sang and sang, till her final breath.

Missing the moment of my father's death bored a hole in me. It bleeds less, but it doesn't close.

Changes, changes. The chapel is somewhat lighter, surrounded by blowdown. In the amphitheater stately columns sway and creak, developing into a cathedral forest. Crows sing in the distance.

I will sing *kadish* in the cathedral with the crow chorus—there, by that dead tree ringed with fierce black spikes. I sing to a decaying log, its shingled core becoming humus, and stop after the first line. Too much death.

The morning clouds over.

Around the amphitheater long logs lie in rows like bleachers. I sit on one—I think it's my old writing log—maybe not, it looks too fresh.

The sun comes out, casting leaf shadows on my notebook.

Green, green. Green lichen on wet bark, green moss and ferns, green leaves and needles. Roots like giant toes—will the tree walk at night? The floor is still dense with ferns, but maples sprout in the open spaces—one seems to be growing in the roots of a living spruce. The cathedral is beautiful, but the trail's spiritual home is still the chapel.

I bushwhack uphill into a gnarly glade dominated by a huge fan of rust-colored branches, their curling fronds bowing over a fallen evergreen. Tall roots twine upward into an abstract sculpture of dancers. On the ground, two weathered branches form an oval eye, an inward-turning eye

that never blinks. People pass below. I look into the eye and sing *kadish* softly.

A gentle rain falls as I head home. On the Whitehead trail, in the spot where butterflies congregated last year, a dragonfly flits onto my sack. Slowly, carefully, I raise the sack. It's a red dragonfly with black scallops along its abdomen. It flits to my arm and lingers there, its transparent, lace-veined wings suspended in stillness.

Yiddish spelling and transliteration follow rules formulated by the YIO Institute for Jewish Research and adopted by the Library of Congress.

Review

By Karen Wilson Baptist

I dip my paddle into the magenta waters at sun fall, disturbing the ashes of the dead. I know that they are here, I saw the words the loved ones wrote on flat dolomitic limestone and left on the beach where once he skipped stones. Ashes to ashes. I know that they are here, I was asked to leave the long pier over the silver lake so that family could gather at the platform and commit the remains of their loved one to the waters. Dust to dust. I know that they are here, I saw the roses float to shore after Emma's daughter gifted her to the great lake. Emma was gone too soon, but now she is here, she is everywhere, for she is in landscape.

Each year, on the day of her father's death, Norma Marder carries him to the forest. "I hold my father—walk and carry him whole, lifted up from wherever I buried him." The dead are heavy, they bear down on the living; they cling to our flesh, they shanghai our heart and leave in its stead a heavy, sharp, splinter of glass that stirs whenever we detect their presence. This is the burden of grief; indeed, the word grief is derived from the Latin verb *gravare*, meaning to burden and the Latin adjective for heavy—*gravis*. To permit the dead to dwell within for too long is to risk descending into darkness. This is why we bring the dead to landscape, why we bury them, pay tribute on the roadside where they died, pour their incinerated cremains into the rose garden, the river, the field; this is why we release their memory to water, to sky, to forest. Earth to earth. Landscape reminds us of the mutability of grief. In winter, there is stillness, in spring the awakening of the world is always astonishing. Each season hosts birth and life, death and decay; the landscape keeps faith with the dead and reminds us that we, the living, remain woven into the rhythm of the lifeworld.

In landscape, the dead are shape shifters—they are present and mutable—dispersed but in attendance. Landscape beckons us to reimagine the dead as the flicker of a butterfly wing, as the return of the geese in spring, as the harvest in the garden. Landscape shoulders the weight of the dead, releasing the tightness in the torso, soothing the sharpness of the splinter. And when the conditions are right, at the moment that the ice is melting just so, or the light filtering through the grove evokes a holy place, an evocation takes place and the dead stir restlessly within in us, bearing down upon us once more until the moment flees and the landscape takes up once more the burden of their caretaking.

I know this lake conveys the ashes of the dead. In the ebb and flow of the water, they are dust, astray and directionless. In November, when the water turns to mercury, they will thicken and remain still, frozen until the strong sunlight of spring on the vast frozen lake cleaves the dead into shards of ice and casts them adrift once more.

Biographies

Norma Marder is a writer based in Champaign, Illinois. Author of the futurist novel *An Eye for Dark Places* (Little, Brown), her stories and personal essays have appeared in *The Gettysburg Review*, *The Georgia Review*, and *Literal Latté*. Marder began writing after a distinguished career as a singer of avant-garde music, specializing in improvisation and extended vocal techniques. In New York, she performed with the Judson Dance Workshop, Fluxus, and Tone Roads, and in New York and Champaign–Urbana, she premiered and performed works by major contemporary composers such as Charles Ives, John Cage, Ben Johnston, Morton Feldman, and Lejaren Hiller. With her husband, Herbert, she founded the New Verbal Workshop, a verbal improvisation ensemble. For over forty years, Marder and her family spent summers on Monhegan Island, Maine.

Karen Wilson Baptist is Associate Dean of the Faculty of Architecture, Chair of the Environmental Design Program, and Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture at the University of Manitoba. After earning BFA (with honors) and MED degrees at the University of Manitoba, she completed a Ph.D. in Landscape Architecture at the Edinburgh College of Art, where her dissertation focused on the relationship between death, grief, and landscape in memorial settings, with special emphasis on roadside situations. Wilson Baptist's ongoing research focuses on an expansive range of contemporary memorial contexts—including cemeteries, (re)wilded topographies, and post-agrarian infrastructural and industrial landscapes—with an emphasis on the narrative character, poetic ecologies, and multiple transformations of the Canadian prairie. Her work has been published in a wide range of discipline-specific and interdisciplinary journals, such as *Landscape Journal*; *Landscape Research Record*; *Emotion, Space and Society*; and *Mortality*.