

a woman, alone

Michelle Dent

Abstract

This essay, a metafictional account, arose from the grief and trauma of losing my mother in March of 2019, one year prior to the 2020 Pandemic shutdown. One of the formal challenges was in exploring how best to represent the soundscape of city and household she might have heard in her final hours. At the same time, it also imagines her interior soundscape, the moment of death and the transition to the afterlife she had hoped for.

March is the worst. A month of raw, wet, uneven spring. A month of death, car crashes, and letting go. March, a season of tax prep, pandemics, ambulances, gurneys wheeled out shortly before midnight, a season of ashes and grief. What is its sound? Chickadees and mourning doves and trees on the cusp of new life the ground cold and hard, this isn't your springtime of daffodils and tulips, of Easter bunnies and chocolate eggs, this is the season of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* – violent, tumultuous, the earth quaking threatening to tear it all down.

A woman, alone, in her bathroom, dying on Wednesday afternoon as the rupture in her lung bleeds out on the bathroom floor. She had awakened from a nap, dreaming of her long departed mother, and the sweet smell of Dove soap, and as she sits up on the couch, unbeknownst to her, one drop of blood falls off the tip of her nose landing at her feet as she gingerly stands to make her way to the toilet. She has always been noise sensitive, preferring quiet to anything other than a little Mozart or Bach, Duke Ellington or Gilbert and Sullivan. The collapse begins like an excruciating crash of opera and showtunes and rock and roll. Like a jangled radio frequency sputtering with snippets of Gotterdammerung, Madame Butterfly, Bennie and the Jets, and the woman's childhood favorite The Bluebird of Happiness. But the music and volume quickly recede. Then there is only the light, the tunnel, the others there to greet her, leading her on. How long? Minutes? Hours? She has since quieted into a holding pattern, ready to be with the others, certain, as she always claims, of God's perfect love, but still holding on here in the NYC apartment.

And then, the daughter, who just moments ago, was ruminating at the corner of Lafayette and Spring about it being Ash Wednesday, about all these devout urbanites walking around with the mark of ashes on their foreheads, the daughter returns home. The daughter who has mused over the years, while watching the nightly news of hostage situations, of active shooters, of common heroes rushing into the fire, "I'm not *that* person. Don't count on me for that, I'm afraid I will be the one climbing over the theater seats, rushing for the exit, ashamed after the fact by my cowardice," *that* daughter, returns home from work, unsuspecting, only noticing the light on in the bathroom, but here is the dog, the happy jingling sound of his tags waiting, greeting her, like usual.

The dying woman, with the faintest pulse, hears the sounds of the daughter returning, she is waiting, holding on, but she worries that the daughter will be mad about the blood, she hopes she isn't going to have to go to the hospital, because she is moving, moving, moving, rushing the light, ready to be in that perfect place. And now, the daughter is with her in the bathroom, panicking, on the phone, talking and pleading with 911, answering questions, lifting the woman off the toilet where she is slouched, semi-comatose, lying her on the floor, checking for breath, crying into the phone "I don't know. I don't think so. Please tell them to hurry. I'm hanging up now." And then the lone paramedic arrives.

The dying woman is relieved this paramedic isn't panic stricken like the daughter is now or like in the past when the whole NYFD team of frantic Staten Island white dudes stormed the apartment, crashing around with their big dumb male energy, the woman, tiny and frail, but ready to take them on, demanding they calm down in her presence. That was a tachycardia battle of radio transmissions, of EKGs and beeping machines, of the eventual ambulance ride where the guys had agreed to not blast the sirens. Now, today, there is only this one paramedic, a calm, competent, African American woman whose voice is friendly and not afraid. Working to revive the woman, sweet talking her while the daughter is a flurry of energy in the background.

The dying woman's mind is quiet, she is aware there's chaos happening, but it's an outside noise, she is rising above it, already hovering. *Hello beautiful!* The daughter hears the paramedic exclaim to the woman, and there are many hopeful moments when the daughter thinks, maybe they *will* be going to the hospital, maybe her mom is not going to die. But the chaos erupts again when the back-up crew of NYFD and police arrive, and then the dying woman is just so tired of all the commotion. She's happy to have opened her eyes one last time, to have looked into the bright warm face of the paramedic who had called her beautiful – two strangers sharing that most sacred moment, her very last, staring each of them into the face of God.

The daughter has slowed in her frantic effort, no longer barking out critical information to each new person that enters the apartment, no longer searching, searching, searching, for that thing the dying woman was willing her to find, that beloved prayer, the one the woman had shared over and over. Finally, the daughter asks for a moment to read the prayer, and the paramedics, the cops, the room stops. The daughter is doing what she knows she must, her duty. But as she begins to read, she

has still not yet begun to understand these are the last rites. The dying woman lets go, takes flight, and she is on her way, leaving, leaving, leaving. And the stillness she leaves behind? The syncopating wildness of the daughter's beating heart, the stillness in her mind, the sounds of shock, of sorrow, of disbelief – shipwreck, radio silence.

Note: I developed this piece as part of the year-long Writing Salon that I initiated, where eight of us, all graduates of the Department of Performance Studies at New York University, met weekly and experienced the intimate yet quarantined zoom community of longstanding friendships and shared intellectual vision.

About the author

Michelle Dent is a Clinical Associate Professor in the Expository Writing Program and Faculty Fellow in Residence at the Broome Residential College. She holds a PhD in Performance Studies (NYU), and her research interests are typically located at the intersections of the Arts & Humanities and the Social Sciences. She is currently working on a book about women in Alaska during the early 1900s. Her work has been published in *The Drama Review*, *Women & Performance*, *Cambridge Scholars*, *Routledge*, *Streetnotes*, and *MIT Press*. Email: mld203@nyu.edu.