

Standing in the Light of Death's Door

by Catherine Joan Hart

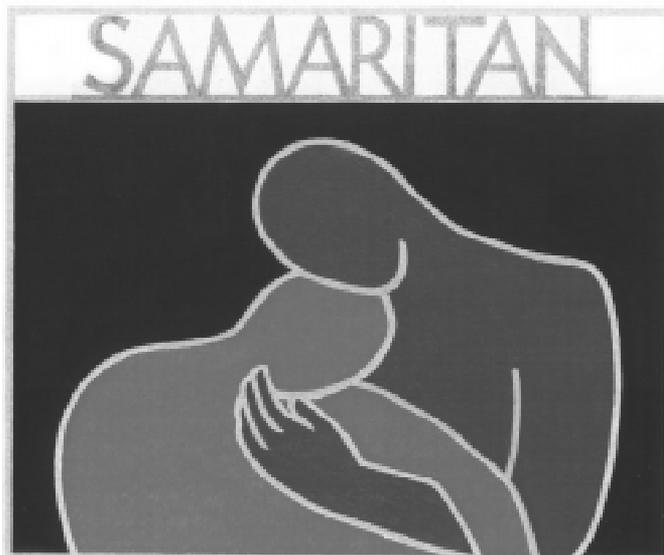
Being with Ethel at the time of her death was one of the grandest things that ever happened to me. We were two women in a moment of time, sharing our humanity in the sweetest, gutsiest way. We were real, honest and true with each other. Being there together mattered to both of us. We hardly knew each other. I was her hospice volunteer and she my very first client, but we shared these last days and finally, the last moments of her life with fierce devotion to a sacred cause. We were both very much alive in her dying. Our eyes glowed. We weren't exactly friends, but at that pregnant time we loved each other. In a way, we were both being born—she to new life beyond portals of mortal flesh and I, to more determined living in mortal flesh. I had never been certain I wanted to be here. She was now being forced by cancer to leave.

The first time I saw Ethel, she was sitting in her living room, looking rather small and neat upon the crisp rectangular cushions of her green 1960s-style sofa. Her slim body was bundled in a dark, fuzzy cardigan sweater above her beige polyester slacks. Her hair was a puff of downy white-white like my own grandma's, and she beckoned me in with a smile and her liquid blue eyes. I could feel her warmth and the delicate nature of her soul from the start. "You've come," she said, "Welcome," not moving to greet me, but waiting.

Ethel was waiting for a lot of things in those days of her life, and this was the beginning for me of waiting with her. We had time at this point to learn to explore this waiting together. After all, for now she was still up and about. Both of us knew this stage would not last forever.

I sat across from her and searched her face sympathetically as we began knowing each other. I would come several days a week at first, and later more. We would play it by ear, improvising as we went together, adjusting as she eventually would go on alone. I would fix her tea, get her pills, buff her nails, and some days maybe help her to wash her hair in the shower.

Ethel's right arm had gotten stiff and painful, a preview of things to come. She laughed and sighed as she showed me how far she couldn't lift it anymore. I held her hand that day—it was cold, the skin smooth and white-translucent—as I polished the tips of her too-long nails with an emery board. She said they'd been getting in her way and she was glad to have it done. To me, the atmosphere felt like church. The wonder and the intimacy of this human connection was thick in the room. . . . ~



Samaritan. Gouache painting
Beva Farmer, Sea Ranch

At The Gateway

Slowly, step by step, we depart this continuum of matter and energy we call our bodies. So unobtrusively do our cells age that we do not notice exactly when it is that we leave the ranks of the young. The images of the young, glistening selves once reflected in our mirrors are forever captured behind our retinas. We do not see the slow attrition of age, the graying hair and fine wrinkles about the eyes and mouth. One by one our cells die, leaving our stubbornly youthful spirits stranded high and dry in a body wearing out before our startled gaze.

Does this mysterious essence we call spirit dissolve also, or do we perhaps spiral together in clusters of radiant particles, spinning and dancing in a space and time leading we know not where?

Depending on the durability of our given bodies, we must, all of us, arrive at this period at different chronological ages. But it doesn't matter. Sooner or later we must, all of us, come to this parting, this separation from all we know.

And now I find myself at this gateway, and I wonder—what next? At this juncture, I remember what our physicists have learned—that matter and energy are never destroyed—only changed. And, like Alice going through the looking glass, I feel “curiouser and curiouser.”

Leah Leopold