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The Attic is Bare But My Heart is Full

Ellen B. Ryan

*The attic is bare
but my heart is full
of what has been.*

How these words touched my spirit as I listened! Naomi Wingfield read her new poems to our group as she wrote her way through the transition from her home into assisted living at age 96.

Naomi began writing poetry in her early 80s. She joined our new writing group in her early 90s.

Though relying on a walker and a hearing aid, Naomi participated actively in the writing group. Not wanting to miss anything, she asked us to repeat rather than miss any of our conversation or readings. She wrote with fresh images of times long past, of a prairie childhood - lying on grass in a cloud of wildflowers, of the family dog riding all the way cross country on the running board of the car.

I had just started writing poetry in my 50s. Naomi became my role model for writing in later life and for aging with spirit. Having started poetry late, she dived into the process with her whole heart – writing prolifically and expressing emotions I had hardly dared to feel. I was awed by her poem celebrating the 70th reunion of McMaster University’s class of ’38 – even as my class of ’68 was celebrating our 40th reunion. Naomi led me to imagine for the first time – my 70th reunion and my 100th birthday.

I was deeply engaged by her smiling interest in new people and her tending of longtime connections. How could I turn inward, turn toward the familiar at age 60 when she remained open as she neared the century mark?

*too much sun blinds us –
retreating to shady spots
we see more clearly*

*

*Ice, you are a white tiger,
crouching, waiting to pounce on me.*

Naomi paid attention to nature, grew plants indoors and outdoors, and followed the changing sky day and night through the skylights in her family room, part of the late-life extension of their home to accommodate first-floor living. One day our group wrote haiku while gazing through large windows onto her blooming backyard. After the silent writing period, she wondered aloud, “Am I still a gardener if I don’t go out anymore to the garden?”

I see her answer in the nature images blossoming in her poetry. Writing my way through the questions arising from the mystery of life stands me now in good stead as I wonder: Am I still a professor if I don't teach classes anymore, a researcher if I don't lead research teams anymore, an ice skater if my bones don't allow for skating anymore?

*When you died the pain was
a jack-hammer destroying me.
In time it became a small hammer,
the size to hang a picture...
If memories are fading blooms
I welcome pain to keep them fresh.*

In her early 90s, Naomi's second husband of 30 years lay ill in palliative care at home for 18 months. During this time, she took her one morning of weekly respite to come to our writing group. We felt honoured to be there for her. However, we often lost track of her difficult personal journey because she was so attentive to what was happening to each one of us: "How is your daughter doing?", "You must be so pleased to have your grandbaby visiting from Stockholm!"

Naomi took on death as she watched '*an earthquake-size gap swallow [her] husband and friends.*' She wrote of death '*you are big and dark*' but also '*Dying, that's another thing; you are gentler, and sometimes sweet.*' She grew toward '*Loving, the very best, goes on and on, past shadows, past Death.*' And more, '*What is heaven?... a rushing river, on my way to God.*'

*Bobby, what if you came home?
Would I know you?...
Could some echo of a boy, eighteen, last for fifty years?*

Naomi and I both had brothers named Bobby. We both lost our brothers.

Naomi wrote a poem about her brother who left home forever as a youth during the 1930s Depression. She wonders in her 90s whether she would recognize him, would he recognize her?

When I first heard and read Naomi's poem, I had recently lost my own brother Bobby at age 50. In his teens, my brother shifted his name to Robert, but he has always been Bobby to me.

My Bobby kept in touch with the family from his home across the continent. And so it was staggering to learn of his illness the night I phoned him from the emergency room. I was calling to discuss life support procedures for Dad, who had collapsed that evening while my husband and I were visiting him in his nearby home.

"Bob (my compromise term of address), I think you should get on a plane as fast as possible. Dad may not have long to live."

"But Ellen, neither do I. I don't think I am able to take the flight."

After a long moment for recovery, I heard Bobby continuing.

“I was not feeling well in the summer. When I returned to the city in September, I made an appointment with my doctor. He did a few tests, but tells me now he could tell with one look. I have liver disease, with only months to live. Not much chance for a transplant.”

“I have been talking with Don (note: our other sibling in New York). But Ellen, we agreed not to tell you yet. We did not want to worry Dad, with his heart condition and all.”

Bobby did come out for Dad’s funeral the next week. He looked tanned, still handsome. Despite his fatigue and the sad circumstances, he was his usual cheerful, engaged self.

Still in denial, I was shocked when the call came only five weeks later to fly out quickly. I had a short visit with him, just before he slipped into coma. At the hospice next day, Don and I gathered around Bobby’s bed with his partner, our spouses, and some of his friends. That evening he died.

When I learned of our shared grief for brothers lost too soon, my personal connection with Naomi grew stronger. Her words of grief helped me to identify my feelings, especially regret for missed opportunities to come closer together in adulthood. His absence is especially poignant as my late-life reminiscence pulls me back to the earliest years, during which Bobby and I (just one year apart) were constant companions. No doubt Naomi’s “Bobby poem” also emerged in her 90s from this life review process.

Naomi felt trapped in her house during her last year there. She was unable to manage the six porch steps without help. I felt similarly trapped during periods unable to drive due to vertigo and double vision.

Until she turned 95, Naomi still enjoyed driving her car. She was the driver for her friends, frequently taking younger friends to medical appointments and for joint lunches. During this time, she even gave me a few rides when my double vision was particularly troublesome.

Once Naomi was in ‘*gracious living*’, her vision continued to deteriorate. Even so, she agreed to read her poems on behalf of older care recipients at a banquet where 600 people working with seniors were honoured. I had printed her poems in bold size 28 font, but we had not anticipated poor lighting. A technician managed to lower a massive chandelier. It was touch and go whether she could stand up and sustain vision long enough. Pin-drop silence was her ovation.

One of Naomi’s latest poems emerged from her experience in painting class. Having been a lifelong visual artist attending to every detail, she could have avoided this class. Yet she still heard her calling. She decided to paint her feelings as abstracts – producing an admirable canvass every week. She rejoiced in giving these away – two grace my writing room. Her poem begins in joyful colour, glides toward negative feelings [*the red gets muted, muddied/as it nears the darkness/that defeats me*]. Her ending shifts to humour: ‘*I splash on yellow. Old age is funny. If you don't see it that way, you are in trouble.*’

*Youth is a flying horse.
Age slows to a walk on sand.
Now I notice sea shells.*

With Naomi's burst of poems after she had to move from her longtime home, our writing group encouraged Naomi to collect her poems to share with others.

When the booklet ***Light All Around Me*** was printed, Naomi phoned to thank me for editing her poems and guiding the production process.

"Ellen, you're a wonderful kid."

Everyone in their 60s should have an elder friend who thinks of them this way.