



Grace Notes

Remembering Grace Paley (1922-2007)

The news, in late August, that Grace Paley had passed away came as a blow not because it was unexpected, but because it was difficult for many of us to imagine a world absent her remarkable presence. Here at Teachers & Writers Collaborative Paley has been a guiding spirit for the forty years we have been in existence. From the very beginning she put her stamp on the organization, contributing a rare blend of passion and common sense to the raucous early meetings where T&W was created. “Every time Grace stood up to speak,” recalled Paley’s friend, the poet Jane Cooper, in an interview, “she would say something quite short and sensible, and it would be like, ‘I think we should start in our own neighborhoods. My school is next to my apartment building. That’s where I’ve been working.’” Later, Paley helped draft a statement—which served as a founding credo for T&W—criticizing the “milky texts and toneless curriculum” used in too many schools, and urging that kids be given the freedom “to invent the language by which they manage the world.” [from an interview by Christian McEwen in “Four Women,” Teachers & Writers, vol. 24, no. 4]



Grace Paley in Thetford Hill, Vermont. Photo ©2000 by Christopher Felver/CORBIS.

“Our idea,” Paley said in her address at T&W’s 1996 Educating the Imagination event, “was that children—by writing, by putting down words, by reading, by beginning to love literature, by the inventiveness of listening to one another—could begin to understand the world better and to make a better world for themselves. That always seemed to me such a natural idea that I’ve never understood why it took so much aggressiveness and so much time to get it started!”

In a tribute to Paley, writer and PEN American Center President Francine Prose called her “a revolutionary American writer” because Paley wrote about “a world I knew about but hadn’t seen in literature: New York, mothers and children, playgrounds, subways, and old age homes.” Paley’s writing and her life were of a piece. Her passion for the world she knew came across not only in her wonderful fiction and poetry, but also in her tireless work against injustice, and her unfailing generosity to her students. We at T&W are grateful for the many gifts she gave us, not least of which is a model of the writer as teacher and activist that will not soon be forgotten. — Editor

JAN HELLER LEVI

A Little Grace

I was sitting in Washington Square Park, under the tall breezy trees, and re-reading her.

I saw my ex-husband on the street. I was sitting on the steps of the new library.

Hello, my life, I said. We had once been married for twenty-seven years, so I felt justified.

He said, *What? What life? No life of mine.*

I said, *O.K.* I don't argue when there's real disagreement. I got up and went into the library to see how much I owed them.

The librarian said *\$32 even and you've owed it for eighteen years.*

— from "Wants," in *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*

* * *

"Women," said Grandma in appreciation, "have been the pleasure and consolation of my entire life. From the beginning I cherished all the little girls with their clean faces and their listening ears. . . ."

— from "A Woman, Young and Old," in *The Little Disturbances of Man*

* * *

My husband gave me a broom one Christmas. This wasn't right. No one can tell me it was meant kindly.

— from "An Interest in Life," in *The Little Disturbances of Man*

So there I was sitting in the park, re-reading wonderful her, under the breezy trees, and a pretty, happy sun. And I suddenly heard a crazy man at the west entrance to the park ranting at passersby, and the children in the nearby playground started screeching, and one of those park jeeps pulled up right in front of the bench where I was reading, and two young parks employees started chatting one another up while the one who was in the driver's seat kept the motor idling. I wanted to scream out, "Hey, can't everybody shut up! I'm reading Grace Paley and I can't concentrate!" And then I started to laugh, because I knew all this noise, all these voices, all these "interruptions"—they're what Grace made her stories out of. I thought of something that great naturalist John Burroughs said: "To know is not all, it is only half. To love is the other half." Grace truly loved this city, she loved its people. She loved things and people, and even countries, with all their mess-ups and messiness. Her art, and her life, included the crazy man ranting, and the children screeching, and the two young, bored park workers making the small talk that connected them to one another, to the park, to the city, to the breezy trees, to the pretty, happy sun on this particular day.

* * *

Elaine: Well, you know, grace is a tough one. I like to think I have a little grace. . . .

Job Interviewer: You can't have a little grace. You either have grace or you don't.

Elaine: Okay, fine. I have no grace.

Job Interviewer: And you can't acquire grace.

Elaine: Well, I have no intention of getting grace.

Job Interviewer: Grace isn't something you can pick up at the market.

— from a *Seinfeld* episode

* * *

Well, you know, I like to think I had a little Grace. For thirty-three years: that's how lucky I am.

* * *

I was twenty, and a brand new sophomore at Sarah Lawrence College when I first saw her from afar. She was walking toward the writing classrooms building called Andrews. I think she was wearing a wide skirt, and a peasant-style blouse (it's 1974, remember) and her hair was kind of piled, kind of arranged, kind of rational, kind of wonderfully anarchic, on top of an all-purposeful, wide-awake face. She looked like the future and the past all bundled up in good common sense and silly flamboyance, with no make-up. *Who is that?* I asked someone. *That's Grace*, she said. *Grace Paley*. *Oh*, I thought (because I had just read her stories that past summer), *that's what a great writer can look like*.

I never took a class with Grace, but she was my advisor at Sarah Lawrence (we called our advisors our Dons there), and she hugged me and she read my poems, and she cheered me on, and she worried about me.

Me, one day: I'm not writing.

Grace: Oh. Why not?

Me: I don't feel like I have anything to say.

Grace: Of course you do. You just think you don't have anyone to say it to. Say it to *me*.

Ladies and gentlemen, and all human beings along the gender spectrum, I am here today to tell you that a line like that, from Grace Paley, will keep you writing for at least thirty-three years.

* * *

And don't think I don't know that she likely said that same thing, or something like it, to dozens, maybe hundreds, of us over the years. I'm not claiming I was special. I'm claiming she was—to extend that offer to so many of us who needed it, and need-

ed her, so much. And even if we didn't write, never wrote again, she gave us her love anyway.

* * *

I like to think I had a little Grace. I know we all had a little Grace (and some really lucky and worthy ones had a lot). Take any year in any decade, when you were despairing over something real and demented that was happening in the world, and you were feeling helpless. You could follow Grace's example—though she never insisted that you do—and do something like step over a low chain link fence surrounding the lawn at the White House in 1978, and with a group of other decent human beings, unfurl a banner that read “No Nuclear Power, No Nuclear Weapons.” Or you could join her in a march for peace, or a civil disobedience action for social justice, or hand out pamphlets on the street for women's rights or prisoners' rights—and you could feel like you were doing something, and you could feel a little more hopeful.

Or if you were despairing about yourself, before there was Xanax, or Prozac, or Zoloft, there was Grace. Find out where she was giving a reading—and she was always giving a reading for some worthy organization or another—and get yourself to it. She'd be up on that stage, too short to reach the mike, and always having to have it adjusted for her. She'd be cracking her gum, and reading her brilliant stories (later her wonderful poems), and making you happy and making you laugh because you lived on the same planet as her.

* * *

Back to Washington Square Park. I turned the page and began to read again:

There is a certain place where dumb-waiters boom, doors slam, dishes
crash; every window is a mother's mouth bidding the street shut up,
go skate somewhere else, come home. My voice is the loudest.

— from “The Loudest Voice,” in *The Little Disturbances of Man*

God, how I will miss her voice. God, how I will miss everything of Grace. We must all work harder now, be stronger, be dearer, be funnier, be more clear, more loving. We must all crack more gum and be louder, to make her proud of us.

Jan Heller Levi's most recent collection of poems is *Skyspeak*. She is also the editor of *A Muriel Rukeyser Reader*, and co-editor, with Sara Miles, of *Directed by Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan*. She lives in New York City and Saint Gallen, Switzerland, and teaches in the Hunter College MFA program.

HERBERT KOHL

Remembering Grace Paley

REMEMBERING Grace, one event sticks out in my mind. It happened at the Writers' Congress convened by the *Nation* magazine in 1981. I was a member of a delegation representing PEN American Center, which included Executive Secretary Karen Kennerly (the first Executive Secretary of the Teachers & Writers Collaborative), Kurt Vonnegut, Grace Paley, and myself. The last session of the two-day meeting was devoted to the presentation and adoption of resolutions that would be presented to the media and the public. PEN planned to introduce a number of resolutions, one of which was to affirm a commitment to free all writers imprisoned for their work. On the surface this may not seem controversial but for a number of the delegates this was considered a dangerous position for the Congress to adopt. The main opposition to the resolution came from small, vocal groups of Marxist-Leninists who didn't want the Soviet Union and its satellites to be condemned for jailing writers considered subversive. It was clear that these people were willing to shout down the PEN resolution and disrupt the Congress in order to prevent it from being adopted.

Kurt Vonnegut was chosen to present the resolution to the assembled group. I was sitting next to him and noticed that he seemed very uneasy about being on the firing line. He turned to Karen and suggested she get someone else to make the presentation and she asked me to do it. I agreed but didn't feel very comfortable about it. On the way down the aisle I passed Grace who said, as she always did to me, "Hi, honey."

Grace's words reminded me of the power and strength of my grandmother, who is the only person other than Grace who called me honey. On an impulse I told Grace what my task was and asked her if she would stand behind me and defend the resolution after I read it. Of course, she agreed.

After I read the resolution there were boos and shouts and general disruption from people planted throughout the hall. Then Grace stepped up to the mike and waited. I seriously doubt whether any other writer in the room could have mobilized the crowd to silence the protestors. However, Grace's very presence seemed to work magic. Even the most rabid protestor was told to shut up and let Grace speak. She introduced herself, which wasn't necessary, as someone who had the credentials to speak on behalf of imprisoned writers as a writer who, herself, had acted politically and in other circumstances and societies might also be incarcerated. I believe, though I may have made this up, that she also said that almost every writer in the room might also find themselves imprisoned for their writing somewhere in the world. She spoke directly and eloquently about the right to write and be published, and asked the Congress to approve the resolution as a way of showing solidarity with every writer imprisoned for her or his work.

Then she asked me to read the resolution again. A vote was taken and it was passed without objection.

The role Grace played at the Writers' Congress was similar to the role she played throughout her life. She was a writer's writer who was also the conscience of us all. Her humor, dignity, intelligence, voice, and yes, grace shall be missed by all of us who have had the privilege of knowing her.

Herbert Kohl has been teaching and writing for over forty-five years. He was founder and first director of Teachers & Writers Collaborative, and is the acclaimed author of more than thirty books on education, including *36 Children*, *The Discipline of Hope*, *A Grain of Poetry*, *Stupidity and Tears*, and most recently *Painting Chinese*. He is currently Director of the Coastal Ridge Research and Education Center in Point Arena, California.

VERA B. WILLIAMS

Ah, Grace. You just can't be very far away...

When I was working with Grace, illustrating her writings for the 1990 *War Resisters League Calendar*, which later became The Feminist Press' *Long Walks And Intimate Talks*, we spent a lot of time together backing into our project.

I took a house near Thetford, Vermont for the summer. Talking all the way we sat on the lake shore, swam, drove to local vegetable stands, made soup, hung out with family and friends. Yet by September very little had made it either on to her typing or my watercolor paper. Then it went fast. She would call me with a new poem or even to scope out a piece that was working its way along. I would draw and paint. Occasionally we got together at her apartment on Eleventh Street to put the parts together. As Grace wrote in her introduction to our little book (in its first appearance as a calendar it was named *365 Ways Not To Have Another War*):

So we worked that year sometimes together, more often alone. We thought this would be OK because of all our walks and rallies and arrests. Our minds, having taken hold in the Bronx of the thirties and forties, were on the same things. We hoped that our work would, by its happiness and sadness, demonstrate against militarists, racists, earth poisoners, women haters, all those destroyers of days. One common purpose would be to celebrate the day, which is its own reason for peace, to praise and offer to its inherent beauty and reality our work as daily movement people and artists.

Ah, Grace! She was a dear friend of mine and more than anything right now, I wish I could talk about her in the present tense. She was always so vividly present even as her attentions swooped and alighted like humming birds. When you were seated with her at a table for two you came to realize how the whole restaurant was actually her table. She was a marvelous and accurate busybody with eyes and ears everywhere as we readers know from her stories.

Grace loved the kitchen, as a place of bread and soup and family. In her New York City kitchen, there hung a painting of an earlier kitchen by her father (a physician of whom she has written much). In her Vermont kitchen her loving interest touched, in recent years, often on her grandchildren, but also on a bird's song, her thriving Russian Olive tree, her ailing rubber plant, a radio or newspaper item right along with the poem in progress there on the dining table, and the soup boiling on the stove. Grace loved cooking in ordinary enameled pots which luckily could be bought at the local hardware store which Grace also favored. All those pots came to have somewhat scorched bot-

toms, a side effect of her excitement with everything around her and her impulse to help parent the wide world.

It was an impulse that took her from family and typewriter and friends to Vietnam and to Chile and to Nicaragua as well the board meetings of PEN; the community and school board meetings of both Greenwich Village and Thetford Vermont; a cot in a New York City women's prison (then on Ninth Street); a sleeping bag on the ground at Seabrook, New Hampshire, projected site of a nuclear power plant; and so many other sites of protest and vigil in New York state, Washington, D.C., and Red Square in Moscow. But it was always back again, always and always to family, typewriter, and friends.

I, who lose things a lot, felt for her as she lost keys and mixed up her papers, alarmingly juggled stuff till the last joking minute. But she made it all work so that her devotion to this world and every living part of it could triumph.

It is amazing how she paid attention to so so much and most particularly to each and every word, comma, and space (but not one extra) needed to tell, to warn, and to praise. This attention to the necessity and the pleasure of the just-right word, phrasing, and rhythm too, went into leaflets as well as poems and stories.

A real masterpiece of political writing is Grace's *Unity Statement for the Women's Pentagon Action*. It was also a feat of patience rooted in her faith in a democratic process that invited suggestion and comment from women up and down the East Coast. Most of us would have despaired but Grace worked all the contributions into a piece that has both power and beauty and could make you cry. Grace and I and many other women were arrested reciting our Unity Statement while blocking entrances to the Pentagon.

Ah, Grace... Dear friend... in case your spirit is still worried about not getting to everything that needed fixing, don't be. You stuck with it all through sickness as long as you possibly could. I will remember you in your flannel nightgown doing some last-minute changes on a poem for me to read at OWN (Older Women's Network) to which we both belonged.

Even

Even at pain's deafening intrusion
 my friend could not forget the pleasant blasphemous joking
 of our daily conversations
 she said grace don't take me out
 of the telephone book of your heart and I
 have not there she is under S for Syb and
 Claiborne still under C

Ah, Grace... You will be like that in my heart now.

Vera B. Williams. Among the thirteen books for children she's written and illustrated, *Chair For My Mother* and *More More More Said The Baby* are Caldecott Honor winners. Her paintings and drawings are also in *Long Walks and Intimate Talks by Grace Paley* (Feminist Press). She's lived lots of places but is a New York City kid. Childhood first and foremost has been her wellspring; parenting also, outdoor adventuring, activism for peace and justice, teaching. At a recent school visit, a child still learning English shyly told her she thought she would look "more new". She turns 80 this year.

GARY LENHART

I met Grace at Teachers & Writers, when she and Ron Padgett were the featured poets at an event for high school teachers. Though Grace was characteristically inspiring, the officer in attendance from the sponsoring foundation complained that she was “not a poet.” She most definitely was. She studied with Auden, who advised her to rid her poems of his vocabulary and use her own. If you understand that her attention to words was that of a poet, you begin to understand something about the distinctive voices in her stories.

As Montgomery Fellows at Dartmouth, Grace and her husband Bob Nichols gave a reading in the auditorium of the new psychology building. Bob read first, quickly and sweetly, a story about their honeymoon in Chile more than thirty years ago, then eagerly retired to a place in the audience. Grace, much more at home on a public platform, was clearly disappointed that Bob only read for fifteen minutes, and began by reading several of his poems that she had suggested he read and which he didn't. Then she identified and spoke to various friends in attendance. Then she read several of her own poems. Then a long story. Two of her grandchildren were restlessly climbing over the seats in the back row. Grace held the podium for more than an hour. Time flew by.

What are the qualities that distinguish Grace's stories and poems? If you read the obituaries, it's not easy to understand why so many people love her work. How do you describe the elusive spark of vitality? Is it in her magic ear, her generous approach to human difference, her wit and outrage, her domestic embrace? Criticism fails us at times like these, because we're embarrassed to use the word genius for people we like to hug.

Several years ago I mentioned to Grace that I was reading her *Collected Stories* with my first-year composition students.

“Don't do that,” she said. “They don't want to read them.”

Her modesty was as remarkable as her wisdom. I haven't even mentioned the political commitment that was central to her daily existence.

Gary Lenhart is the author of five collections of poems (including *Father and Son Night*, Hanging Loose, 1999) and *The Stamp of Class: Reflections on Poetry & Social Class* (Univ. of Michigan, 2006). He was associate director of Teachers & Writers from 1984–1994 and edited *The T&W Guide to William Carlos Williams* and (with Christopher Edgar) *The T&W Guide to Classic American Literature*. He now lives in Vermont and teaches as an adjunct instructor at Dartmouth College.

NANCY LARSON SHAPIRO

Grace & Luis

WHEN I discovered Teachers & Writers in 1976 and felt incredibly lucky to land a job here, I devoured T&W's history, ecstatic with the discovery of the many writers who were part of the organization's past and present. One of our "foremothers" was Grace Paley—renowned at the time for her exquisite short stories, for her vigilance in opposing the Vietnam War, for her roles as teacher of writing and mentor to students, and for being present at T&W's founding and writing the manifesto that shaped T&W's work. Over my (continuing) years at T&W, Grace remained the sweetest, most accessible model and supporter: she responded whenever we called her for readings, workshops, help; her stories and poems kept coming—moving and astounding us; her feistiness never ceased, including her opposition this year to the Iraq War, even as she struggled with cancer.

One particular memory of Grace's presence at T&W stands out in my mind because I've always loved the way it vividly portrays our philosophy of "inviting students to the literary table," as well as the uncanny way a well-wrought story can resonate and present an illusive truth.

In the spring of 1995 Teachers & Writers honored Grace in one of our "Educating the Imagination" events. At this time, we had a group of students called the Drama PM Saturday Workshop that met in our offices to write and perform. As happens in T&W workshops often, these kids were reading literature that adults read; they were exploring worlds outside their own ethnicities and places in history; they were hobnobbing with writers, as writers themselves; and they were being given the opportunity to go on stage as readers with an audience of other readers and writers. We asked several of those young people—including Luis Rodriguez—to take part in the event with Grace by introducing speakers and by reading some of Grace's work. The kids poured over the recently published *Collected Stories* and Grace's poetry and picked out work that spoke to them.

Grace talked that evening about what it means to have an imagination. It was a particularly festive evening because earlier that day the *New York Times* had published a review of Robert McNamara's new memoir under the headline "McNamara Admits He Made a Mistake," giving Grace an opportunity to free-associate in her inimitable fashion.

A few years later, in April of 1998, Luis was tapped again when then Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky asked T&W to provide students to participate in a "Favorite Poem" reading at New York City's Town Hall to kick off National Poetry Month. Though "Mother" had been published in *Collected Stories*, like so many of Grace's concise, precise stories, it could pass as a prose poem, and this is the piece Luis chose to read at Town Hall. In a brief introduction, Luis said that he was reading the poem for his friend, who had just lost his mother to AIDS. Reading this story poem, I'd always heard Grace's distinct voice and responded to the compact portrait of her own family history growing up with politically leftist Jewish immigrant parents in the Bronx, but the work took on all kinds of new possibilities as Luis read. He got laughs on some lines,

but mostly what came through were the generational scuffles and the longing for a relationship that death had ended. A few weeks later, Grace called our office. She'd been driving in Vermont and listening to that Town Hall reading on National Public Radio. She hadn't known about Luis and his choice of her work, and when he announced his poem and began reading, she said she had to pull off the road. She wanted Luis's address so that she could send him a note. When I gave her the address, she gave a deep sigh, "He lives on the same street I did in the Bronx."

Nancy Larson Shapiro has been with T&W since 1976. She directed the organization for many of those years, and she is now co-chair of the Board with Steve Schrader. She's also been a teacher and editor.

SUSAN KARWOSKA

A Classroom Memory of Grace

TEN years ago I had the good fortune to be a student in a master class that Paley gave at Teachers & Writers Collaborative. There were about fifteen of us in the class and Grace led a lively discussion over dinner about what it means to be a writer in the world. She'd begun writing, she said, when the Beats were all the rage, but as a young mother at the time, she found their writing was rarely about things that concerned her. "I was only moderately interested in their lives," she said, "and they were not at all interested in mine." So she wrote, she said, to give voice to the pressures she felt in her own life, and urged us to do the same. At a pause in the discussion I asked her if she had any advice for finding time to work when you had young kids. I had an infant and a toddler at the time and often felt, I told her, that so many ideas were passing through me with no time for me to write about them. At that point the woman next to me, a poet who, as I recall, was tormented by writer's block, turned to me and said, "That's terrible! If you don't write those things down they're gone for good!" There was a moment of stunned silence in the room while we all contemplated this damning pronouncement, then Grace leaned forward at the other end of the table and spoke. "Well," she said in her wonderful Bronx lilt, cracking her gum, "I was talking to Tillie Olsen about this once, and we agreed that when your kids are really young, sometimes all you can do is just jot down notes. You jot down notes and keep them for later. But you also have to remember," she continued, smiling at us, "that human beings are like wells. We're really quite artesian, you know! There's always more to come. And so if a little water spills on the ground, well, *it's no goddamn tragedy.*"

Susan Karwoska is the editor of *Teachers & Writers* magazine. She has taught creative writing in the classroom in a variety of settings throughout New York City, and is currently at work on a novel. She lives in Brooklyn.

MARK STATMAN

Listening to the Music

GRACE Paley's memorial service took place on Sunday August 26, 2007, at the Rothman Center for Jewish Life in Hanover, New Hampshire. It was a service that, in so many ways, was emblematic of Grace's life.

The mourners represented the world in which Grace lived and worked: Jews, non-Jews, intellectuals, artists, people from her years as an anti-war, anti-nuclear, anti-racist, pro-organic, family farm activist.

The evening began with the traditional Jewish *Kaddish*, and was followed by readings from some of Grace's as-yet-unpublished poetry. Although Grace's work has always displayed great emotional range, the poems this evening, not unexpectedly, were sad. Robert Nichols, her partner of forty years, began with a poem in which Grace writes of close friends who have died (unusual in the sense that Grace rarely wrote of death). At a certain point, early in the poem, Robert had to stop, to pause and collect himself; the realization that Grace was now, like their friends in the poem, gone, moved everyone in the room.

As other readers followed, the sadness became more and more palpable, observed Grace's stepdaughter, Eliza Nichols. Grace's close friend Marianne Hirsch, a literature professor at Columbia University, prefaced her reading by noting that "Grace never talked about her death, but she's been preparing us for it through her recent work." After the poems, a friend played guitar and sang Dylan's "You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go."

By now, according to Eliza, the atmosphere had developed an odd intensity: with sadness, grief, and the realization of the loss of Grace, everyone present seemed to withdraw into themselves and there was a kind of collapsing-in, away from the moment and into private memories of Grace.

At this point, the Rabbi asked all those present to join him in a very special song and explained that the song had been chosen by Grace's six year old granddaughter, Sienna. Grace's daughter, Nora, had asked Sienna what she thought they should sing at her grandmother's funeral. Sienna's answer was thoughtful and reasonable. "Downtown." The Petula Clark hit. The one everyone knows:

When you're alone and life is making you lonely
You can always go
Downtown

When you've got troubles all the noise and the hurry
Seems to help I know
Downtown.

Song sheets were distributed and the singing began. Most people, thinking they knew all the words, didn't pay too close attention at first, but then, slightly embarrassed, realized they needed to read and sing.

And you will find somebody there to help and understand you

They needed to pay attention except, of course, for when it came to singing *Downtown*. Because that they all knew. That part came out loud, clear, strong, with everyone smiling, laughing. It was, Eliza noted, pure Grace—a witty and joyous moment in which a group of individuals suddenly became a celebratory community.

Mark Statman's writing has appeared in numerous publications, including *Tin House*, *Subtropics*, *Hanging Loose*, *The Hat*, *upstreet*, *Bayou*, and *conduit*, with work forthcoming in *Florida Quarterly* and *APR*. He is the author of *Listener in the Snow*, and, with Christian McEwen, edited *The Alphabet of the Trees: A Guide to Nature Writing*; and his essays and translations have appeared in eight other collections. His translation with Pablo Medina of Federico Garcia Lorca's *Poet in New York* is forthcoming from Grove Press in 2008. A recipient of awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Writers Project, Statman is an Associate Professor of Writing at Eugene Lang College of The New School.

CHRISTIAN McEWEN

Grace Notes

SHE was sitting on a green slope in the Berkeley sunshine, with all her students gathered around her.

"Come sit with us!" she called.

"I can't," I said. "I've got to go to the bank."

"Oh, the bank, the bank." Grace fumbled in her bag and pulled out a crumpled five-dollar bill. "Money? You want money? Here's some money, Christian."

That warmth, that easy welcome, marked all my dealings with Grace Paley, from the summer of 1980 to a last reading at the University of Massachusetts exactly twenty-seven years later. Our paths crossed in London, in Santa Cruz, in New York City, in Vermont. I taught at the public school she had attended as a child, and visited the two-story house (1538 Hoe Street) where she was born and grew up. I interviewed her, twice, for *Teachers & Writers*, talking late over bread and cheese and homemade soup.

I had grown up in Scotland, in the country. My America was Mark Twain and Louisa May Alcott, Gene Stratton Porter and Laura Ingalls Wilder. Grace's stories were a revelation: sexy, urban, lyrical, infused with politics and wit. I read them like a magical elixir, savoring each phrase. There was an immense amount of information packed in there, about work and friendship, courage and generosity, literature and life. In the weeks since her death, I have been reading them again, one, sometimes two stories a day: "A Subject of Childhood," "Ruthy and Edie," "Friends," "A Conversation with My Father." Always, there is more to be discovered.

Grace wrote only poems till she was almost thirty. "I really was not all that interested in stories when I was a kid writing. I just went on writing poems all the time. I used to have a notebook stuck in the back of my skirt, like that. I'd just go around writing things down." At seventeen, she studied briefly with W.H. Auden. He took her out to lunch to discuss her work. "You really use words like this?" he asked her. "And this, and this, and this? *Subaltern*?" There she was in the South Bronx, writing poems with a

cut-glass British accent. “So I got from him that I’d better learn my own language.”

Years later that advice bore fruit in her own teaching. “Try to get closer in your work to what is true,” she would tell her students, “Even when you’re telling the big lie of fiction.” And, while recognizing that they were still young, with all the self-absorption that implies, she urged them to pay attention to other people too. “I wanted them to learn how to listen to stories, to listen to people talk, to listen.”

Between her first and second books of stories, Grace worked on a novel, completing some 120 pages. “I could see that it was going to be an extremely dumb, derivative, stupid novel,” she said. Around 1964, she threw it away. There are times, she said, “When you seem to be outside the home of your life. You just keep knocking on the door, and ‘Sorry, not yet! Come back in two years!’”

Grace’s third book of stories appeared in 1985, her essays and articles in 1998, her *Collected Poems* in 2001. It’s a small output, but a lavish one. Most people write from just one voice inside themselves: the scholar, the aesthete, the unhappy, brooding child. But in Grace’s case, all the selves are there at once: a happy, talky chorus around her busy kitchen table. And there are other people’s voices too, other sounds and rhythms, other lives.

I last saw Grace in Amherst, in June 2007. I came up, full of joy, and kissed her hand. She wore a pretty turquoise necklace, and a top of cloudy gray with creamy swirls. But she seemed tired and distracted, and her voice had changed, perhaps as the result of chemo; it was a quirky, scratchy, chirpy, small bird voice. It was an effort for her just to climb the steps to the podium. But she read valiantly, poem after poem, as well as some new prose pieces, and the audience roared their applause. I watched her for a long time, remembering the luscious tomboy in the photographs, the stalwart woman, and came out afterward to a clear sky, with half a moon shining in a blur of cloud.

This is what time does to a person, I thought. *Grief, grief.*


But Grace would not be grieving. She knew her work was done. I turn the pages of my battered paperbacks, stumbling, by chance, upon her long ago inscriptions. “Dear Christian—hello for now—more hellos later, Grace.” “Dear Christian, Work and Happiness.”

I will always miss Grace Paley. But now the diminished one, crouched in the shell of old age, laboring up the stairs, peering from behind the reading stand, is gone, and for the first time perhaps we see her whole: her words like fireworks filling up our sky. In her poem “At the Battery,” she saw herself standing on the prow of old Manhattan, and dreamed of being “. . . imposed forever / on the maps of this city”.

Not on the city maps, perhaps. But certainly in its gorgeous talking heart.

Christian McEwen teaches poetry for Lesley University. She is currently working on a book called *World Enough & Time*. The quotes from Grace Paley are taken from interviews conducted in April 1992 and May 2001.

GALWAY KINNELL

I'd like to give my tribute to Grace less in my own words than in hers, the words from a poem that I particularly admire called "Here." It evokes the person she wanted to be, and was, far better than I could. Whenever I gave a reading at which Grace was present (and many at which she wasn't) I included this poem. As I read I almost wallowed in the pleasure the poem gave me, especially the last couple of lines. Lover of her stories that I am, I am happy that in the last ten years or so Grace came back to poetry, which was her first love. In the six months before she died, I was lucky enough to be asked by Grace to go over with her the poems which form her forthcoming collection, *Fidelity*. Working on the poems together made us closer, something I will always treasure. 

Galway Kinnell's many volumes of poetry include *Strong Is Your Hold* (2006); *A New Selected Poems* (Houghton Mifflin, 2000), a finalist for the National Book Award; *Imperfect Thirst* (1996); *When One Has Lived a Long Time Alone* (1990); and *Selected Poems* (1980), for which he received both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award.

Here

GRACE PALEY

Here I am in the garden laughing
an old woman with heavy breasts
and a nicely mapped face

how did this happen
well that's who I wanted to be

at last a woman
in the old style sitting
stout thighs apart under
a big skirt grandchild sliding
on off my lap a pleasant
summer perspiration

that's my old man across the yard
he's talking to the meter reader
he's telling him the world's sad story
how electricity is oil or uranium
and so forth I tell my grandson
run over to your grandpa ask him
to sit beside me for a minute I
am suddenly exhausted by my desire
to kiss his sweet explaining lips.

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