COLETTE BROOKS

Seattle and Vicinity

The Map

Mukilteo, Suquamish, Puyallup, Pt. Defiance, Driftwood Key, Shilshole, Bothell, Commencement Bay: the map of the city of Seattle and its surroundings, like the maps of other territories to which travelers have laid claim, is studded with thousands of names, thousands of tenuous links in a cartographer's network, each insistently etched, all locked in enduring relation. Seen up close, at 0.68 miles to the inch, the city seems a delicate, ordered abstraction, its areas laced with an infinity of lettered and numbered lines, its names pinned onto those lines precariously, as though the whole would float away were it not for the encompassing red grid that restrains it, latitude and longitude employed to hold both water and land in place. Seen from farther out, at a scale of 3:1, the city becomes a small white block ringed by bands of blue, these now tiny areas themselves dwarfed by the yellows and greens of larger areas seeping yet farther out. The county lines, newly visible from this vantage point, are drawn with dashes that sometimes bisect the waters circumjacent to the city, as though to suggest that any entity can be bounded, once named, and constraint imposed upon fluidity. At this distance, however, what distinguishes the city from its environs is less apparent than in the first view; it seems as if the city, though marked off in myriad ways, still cannot truly be separated from what surrounds it.

I believe that lives are like cities in this regard.

Phyllis, Miss, Phil, Doll, Mom, Lady, Maam, Sis, Dear: I once knew a woman who spent most of her life in one city, who spoke often of "taking off" but never did, who reacted to the tumult of that life by screaming, in what became an incantation, "I could write a book about it," but never did, who until the moment of her death was restive and unsettled and, I think, still screaming, still trying to take off. The woman was my mother, and the city she lived in was the one

that I left, long ago. I can no longer summon up the sound of her voice, though it once seemed as if I would never forget it, but I sense her vividly *in situ*, framed against the city and spaces we shared. *Pioneer Square, Jacobsen Road, Roosevelt Way, Wallingford, Sea-Tac, Northgate, the floating bridge, Lake Washington, The Door, The Alley, Alki:* This is the story of places and experiences that will be for me forever interwoven, as maps and lives are forever linked.

The Scale

She was born in the Midwest, moved out to and up the Pacific Coast as a child, and came of age in Seattle as the world erupted in war. By the time she was thirty, she'd built bombers in a Boeing plant, lost boyfriends in the Pacific, married, become a mother, divorced, received her B.A. and stopped "just two credits short of a Master's," and had married again; by forty, she'd borne three more children and been widowed, married and divorced once again; by fifty, she'd gone through more relationships, jobs, and fresh resolves, refused to be known as "Grandma," and seemed to be slowing down; at fifty-four, she died of lung cancer, a disease that had just begun to claim the women, like her, who had started to smoke openly during the war years in the forties. In these facts, on the face of it, lies her life, and I am sure that there is more than enough here to write a book about. But that book, given the demographics, would soon blend, indistinguishably, into other books that might be written about other women of that generation, and that time, and though we are accustomed now to seeing one another as composites, as summed entities constructed, *ex post facto*, out of those bits of experience and behavior we regard as representative, it seems to me false to do so in this instance. From my vantage point, these large facts do not tell the story; the life viewed in its entirety is not the one that I knew, nor could know, even were my witness constant. For I believe that when looked at from a distance (distance defined as that gulf, of whatever dimension, which separates one from another) each person seems to possess less than one life, whole and entire. What we see are glimpses, our knowledge gained at a glance, and there are no privileged perspectives from which to gather up and stitch together that

which remains insistently provisional. And so, close as I am to my subject, I tell this story, in one sense, as a stranger.

Pioneer Square

In 1889 the town of Seattle—then a fledgling frontier outpost of storefronts, shacks, and wooden sidewalks—suffered the Great Fire, a conflagration that began in a cabinetmaker's shop and ended only after levelling the fifty square blocks that surrounded it. As the historical accounts have it, it seemed early on that the fire might be confined to the area of the first outbreak; but the winds shifted, without warning, and the flames veered in defiance of efforts to douse them. The firefighters attempted to force the fire's path, tearing down or dynamiting buildings or whole blocks that might otherwise feed and enflame it, but these fire breaks were ineffective; the fire simply took its course. The town would have to be rebuilt from the ruins. Seeing this as a terrible but providential *tabula rasa*, the city fathers seized the chance to alter the town's topography by scaling down the hills that had been so difficult to negotiate in the old district. New streets were raised high and relain atop the old ones, and the scarred face of the old city disappeared from view. In the area of present-day Seattle known as Pioneer Square visitors can take an Underground Tour, descending below the streets to walk along the nineteenth-century sidewalks and storefronts that survive, in ghostly outline, remnants of that earlier life, abandoned by fiat but visible to the eye that would seek it out.

I was a schoolgirl when I first heard of this fire, and saw it only as a vivid local incident; lately, when I think of it, I see it in larger focus—volatile, unassuageable, abiding; awash with a recklessness both riveting and wearying at once.

Jacobsen Road

To some, the extremes in the lives of certain troubled persons can be traced to fateful happenings "beyond their control"; to others, such things befall "plenty of people" who still pull through. To her

parents, who had little use for explanations of any kind and who put their faith instead in a practiced vigilance, my mother's problems seemed to center upon men; they were the scattered points around which her willfulness flared. On the eve of her third marriage, the first an elopement to a wild young man having ended in divorce, the second, to my father, ending in widowhood, they made a cautionary trip to the courthouse to see what the city records might reveal about this new man. There they discovered—in confirmation of that vague premonition—an alarming number of previous marriages, ominous indices of traits too unsettling to abide. They promptly attempted to dissuade their daughter, but she would not be deterred; she married the man anyway. A few years later, in an action commended by most, she divorced him. For years after that, every so often, when the spirit struck, he would call the house, asking for her, inviting rebuff, avowing his unhappiness with number six, or number seven, his expectant appeals ending always on a note of chastened surprise. "*You know,*" he would say, as though wounded, "*I was married to your mother longer than to any of the others.*"

There are few men in the pictures I have of my mother; generally, she is alone or, after marriage, surrounded by children—first one, two, three, then (in a kind of acceleration that occurs in the mid-1950s) seven, nine, or more—her own four plus as many of the neighborhood kids as can crowd in front of the camera. With the exception of rare pictures taken on trips, in which she stands in jaunty assurance beside cars or next to signs at roadside pulloffs, the albums are filled with domestic friezes—groups posed, upright, in the back yard, on the front porch, in the kitchen—the years marked in passing not by changes in hemlines or collars or haircuts but by incremental alterations in the spaces themselves: in this shot, a new kind of curtain or cake pan in the kitchen, in that shot, a few slats fallen from a once-sturdy fence. Sound and motion are suspended in these images, the clamor of occasion stilled, and as one looks, the longer one looks, the more the specifics of circumstance seem to slip away, and designations like "that year" or "that moment" slip away also, and the bright figures, freed, blend into their backdrops like silver crystals drawn into shadow, beyond the reach of the eye.

In these moments, when I feel as though I have failed as archivist, I summon up the one image that arrests my wavering gaze: the house

on Jacobsen Road, my grandparents' house, the house overlooking the ocean at Alki Point. Here, I spent many hours in the tiny room with the picture window, watching toy-sized ships crawl across the horizon, miles and worlds distant. Volition, desire, demand, nothing of human note could alter or impede that steady passage. It was a picture, though I could not know this then, of time itself passing; time as experienced by those (like the archivist) who surrender completely to its sway.

Roosevelt Way

For a year or so in my teens we were alone in the house, she and I, her other children gone off somewhere else, and there were moments during this quieter interlude when her wary bearing receded and she almost seemed to relax. Usually, it was on weekends, the five nettlesome days at a desk taking orders from others over; she would rise on Saturday, renewed, and have her coffee in the kitchen while surveying her house and her yard, carefully puzzling over whatever seemingly intractable problem had most recently arisen for resolution in this modest sphere. She would thumb through ads and mail order catalogues, gathering information about newly developed methods and technologies that might augment her mastery over her domain; finally, as though decrees were already forming in the air about us, deliberation would cease, she would jump up, grab the keys, ask me if I wanted to come along, and be off before I could answer to pick up a new tool or further investigate an untested procedure. Usually, we would end up at the Sears store on Roosevelt Way. I'd leave her to interrogate sales clerks while I wandered off among the mounds of peat moss and fixtures and glittering alloys displayed in the House and Garden section of the store. In all these trips, over the years, I cannot recall having spent more than a few perfunctory minutes looking at clothes, and shoes, and such; like my mother, I was drawn only to those wondrous mechanisms whose rites and practices, properly observed, promised transformation not of myself but of the resistant world around me.

Hollywood and Vine

On Saturday night, if I wasn't with friends, I would watch television, and she would usually join me late in the evening, too late, I'd point out, ever to grasp the intricacies of the show or movie or special she had already missed half of, but she didn't seem to care; she would hardly watch, her state of distracted engagement a foil for my comparatively rapt absorption. We would sit on the couch, eyes front, and after some minutes of listening to the tinny sounds coming from the blurred figures in the box she would either drift off to sleep or start to speak of something else, often of what had to be done the next day. Sometimes, we would talk; more often, I would whisper *"Just a minute,"* and she would pause, and after a further failed attempt to involve herself in the screen's spectacle would get up and move off to another part of the house, where our erratic conversations would continue, she making intermittent remarks, me calling back *"Wait till this is over"* with ever-greater urgency. Most of the time she gave up after a bit and went to bed. It occurs to me now that I have never known anyone less drawn to conventional imaginative release than she; she almost never went to movies or plays and read many more newspapers than books, though she had once written short stories in college and had also once collected, avidly, scores of sepia-tinted photos of film stars of the thirties and forties. That box remained in our basement for years, as did the stories, hidden away; whatever these items had meant to the girl, they had been drained of their power for the woman. Or, perhaps, that power had transmuted into a force she could not tap, just as the complicated fairy kingdom she had once created for us as children had disappeared, its denizens never to be seen in our house again, once she had ceased to summon them. It was radio, finally, that seemed to provoke her strongest response. She listened intently to talk shows, praising or challenging hosts and callers, sometimes, even, calling in herself, offering intemperate opinions on issues or follies of which she was a sworn witness. When I was thirteen she gave me a clock radio, then a new marvel, and I too fell under its spell, and have often since drifted off myself to the din of voices out there, somewhere, joined in ethereal joust.

"Wait till this is over." I have little recollection, now of what "this" ever was, those imagined lives all vanished, their tangled relations

ameliorated as if by miracle. I do not worry, however, about the long-term effects of such absorption in the evanescent. I have, willingly, spent much of my life caught up in a world of wraiths, conjurer and witness at once, like Scheherezade, who told her stories, I believe, not finally to please or trick her sultan, but to sustain herself.

Wallingford

My grandparents, over the years, lived in two houses, one on the water and one in Wallingford, a neighborhood where schools and shops and services abounded, and where they chose to raise their children. They would acquire, as time went on, other pieces of property, modest houses and lots that had suddenly come on the market and seemed a prudent investment, but the Wallingford house remained, always, the center and very focus of the family. It was where my mother grew up, and it was where she would often return, as an adult, to find it unchanged, its rooms arranged as they had been when she was a child, its furnishings virtual artifacts, passed down to and older than my grandparents themselves. We celebrated "the folks"' fiftieth wedding anniversary in that house, and we fully expected to watch them mark off another fifty years together, as though they would live forever, all laws of nature suspended within those walls. My mother's house, in contrast, stood as though exposed, precariously, to the elements; with each rise in the wind its only slightly worn façades and interiors would seem to be swept away, to be replaced by new decors and landscapes, these in turn uprooted and supplanted by something else. Over the years, in what seemed to be fantastically accelerated cycles, turquoise color schemes would turn to beige, and beige to lavender, and lavender to yet another shade; linoleum gave way to wood, and paint to wallpaper, and three windows to one, and rugs to carpeting, and open cabinets to enclosed; and wooden shingles to aluminum siding, and on. She called the house her "Ponderosa." I got used to the changes and enjoyed repainting and redecorating alongside her. As I grew older, I began to suspect that the house was sturdy enough, despite appearances, to withstand all manner of gales and such from without; it was, however, no match whatsoever for the rising storm within.

Sea-Tac

For years, I thought there was only one road out of town, the road that ran south through Seattle to Tacoma and beyond. To the west of the city, I knew, there was only ocean; to the north, another country altogether, inconceivable terminus; to the east, thin, wandering ribbons of blacktop that weren't yet bona fide freeways, thus not true routes of access or escape. But the road that ran south ran on forever, a corridor cut straight through the most engrossing countryside I had ever seen—industrial parks, vast, flat blocks of decrepit warehouses, offices and plants with names like IGA and BOEING and RALSTON-PURINA emblazoned in huge letters on the roofs and sides of buildings that seemed to run on forever themselves. It was a landscape best seen from a car moving quickly, as the concrete and corrugated aluminum structures, in recession, lost all substance and seemed to float up into the grayish sheen of the sky. Up close, it seemed to me a wild area, deserted, its cracked windows and rusted wire fences and oil-stained streets *memento mori*, tokens left by that lost race of sign-painters whose boldest works, fashioned long ago, loomed above us, awaiting the advance of disrepair and its natural corollary, decay.

I was entranced by these desolate sights, and welcomed our infrequent travels south of the city, but in the long spells between them I found similar diversion in the local landfill, or "dump," as it was always known to us. There, massive mounds of castoffs were continually moved about by bulldozers as seagulls hovered above the pit; drivers were allowed to back right up to the edge, and whenever we made the trip I would jump out of the car as we neared the precipice, having insisted that we stop, for there was always the chance that the car might tip, slip, into the chasm, there to be buried with only the seagulls to see, and I was always a little worried with my mother at the wheel. She was hardly tolerant of such timidity, but she would let me out and continue, and soon enough, the car having stopped short of catastrophe, I would heave our boxes out into the abyss as she supervised. Like other institutions, the dump had its rules, and these would sometimes conflict with her anarchic sense of procedure. She was distressed at its practice of closing at nightfall for lack of light; she felt that the headlights of her car should provide illumination

enough, and was irked that the city should infringe on her right to act at will. One night, when I was twelve, she determined to dispose of a month's accumulation of newspapers that instant, dump or no dump, and near midnight we drove off, bundles in the back, supposedly to cruise until we found an isolated stretch of road. As it happened, she chose a residential street in a neighborhood far away from ours, and I threw the bundles out as ordered, mortified to see the strings break and the sheets waft up like oversized bits of confetti, littering those most unfestive lawns. She, however, was triumphant. Days later, I found our exploit reported in a neighborhood newspaper: "VANDALS DUMP TRASH IN NORTH END." I was mortified, again, and then irked myself, the utter injustice of the charge overwhelming me. "*Vandals.*" It was absurd, I decided, once I had looked the word up; we were no more "vandals" than "hooligans," or any of the other condemnatory synonyms I also found listed. "Wanton" perhaps, "destructive" possibly, but not as a rule, and certainly not to the extent that we should be so labelled for life, if not longer. They had gotten it all wrong, I thought, all of it, and they would probably put us in jail or, worse yet, write others articles, using our real names, once they had found us.

And I had a vision, at that moment, of us taking off, driving south, in the station wagon, with the back end open: I would toss out all the judgments, and opinions, and labels, and the car would get lighter, and we would go faster, and faster, until we were a blur, all excess jettisoned, and they would never catch up to us, for we would have vanished, leaving the heavy world behind.

Northgate

For several years, on and off, my mother had one boyfriend, a widower from the north end who had a home and children of his own but spent much of his time at our house. He was a quiet, steady man, in many ways her opposite, and as the years passed I got used to his calming presence. They talked, off and on, about marriage; she was willing, but he was hesitant, and in that limbo any tangible plans they may once have made slowly eroded, the decision deferred, until

only the faintest impression of that early impulse remained. But they were indisputably a couple, and our extended group some kind of constituted entity, if nothing like the conventional families I saw around me. I was happy with this makeshift arrangement; I knew it was not lawful, but it seemed to have a solidity of its own, and I began to regard it as an enduring reality. One day, however, he was gone, having slipped away as quietly as he had come, so many years earlier, with no goodbyes, or none that I was to witness. She was distraught, her devastation taking wild turns; she spent days in bed, cursing, sobbing, cursing again, while I tried to make both of us feel better. We had each lost something, I knew, though I could not put a name to it; he had been neither "husband" nor "father," and there were no official ceremonies of separation or consolation to perform, just the raw fact of disappearance itself to reflect upon. We never saw him again. Later, I would remember having discerned "signs of trouble" between them, and would recognize, in knowing retrospection, that such things "happen," but a part of me would always wonder why. I would remember what he had advised when I first got my license and was worried about driving the freeway alone. It was simple, he explained. "*Just get in one lane,*" he said, "*and stay there.*" It was the only advice he had ever given me, and it popped out, unsolicited, as though it were something he had more than once repeated to himself. "*Just get in one lane and stay there.*"

And it did seem simple, then.

the floating bridge

One day, when I was fourteen, my mother took my grandparents and me out for a Sunday drive, our destination the wilderness terrain due east of us. To get there we had to get past a lake, a lake that stretched the length of the city, as though to buffer in its watery body all shocks from without which might threaten that thin strip of land. The lake was too long to drive around, but it was spanned by a bridge that floated on the water's surface, the water itself seeming to slap up against the cars as they too floated, suddenly amphibious. On days when the weather was good, the sun out and sky clear, crossing the bridge was like gliding through space, neither air nor water resist-

ing; on bad days, when the rain washed down and the waves rose, it was of a different order altogether, the once effortless passage now not simply difficult but sometimes treacherous, the bridge tossing as though to shake off the tiny vehicles that had suddenly become so burdensome. I was drawn to this bridge, though wary of it, its changeable nature seeming to me to bespeak an almost willfull instability. And in that, of course, lay much of its attraction. "The floating bridge structure is the most interesting feature of the bridge," a local guidebook declared, as if to affirm and sanction such thrill-seeking. "Each floating unit is securely anchored and weighs 4,558 tons." And so we were said to be safe, regardless of appearances, the bridge engineered to resist disturbance, its quicksilver temper only an illusion.

On the day of our drive it was beautiful out, the air clear and calm. We could see the two chains of mountains that encircled the city, whitened, remote, suspended in the distance, as if to suggest that drive as we might we would never reach them, our progress infinitesimal by cosmic measure. We had been riding along, silently, for some minutes when I realized that something was amiss; we didn't seem to be slowing for stoplights, and my mother was paying less than her usually-minimal attention to other drivers. We were, in fact, on a roller coaster ride, gathering speed with each loop and dip in the road, skimming its surface, the whole city suddenly our private amusement park. And we were headed for the bridge. My grandparents began to clear their throats, quietly, hoping perhaps that this odd turn of events might prove the result of lapsed attention rather than caprice; I could only chime in with a "hey," knowing that soon, panic impending, I might not be able to speak at all. She responded to our imprecations by stepping on the gas, handling the car with the exaggerated grace that comes to those who cross over the line, from impulse to action, believing their resolve to be irrevocable and themselves freer than ever before. Soon, we all fell silent, for we had moved onto the bridge, beyond recall, and were weaving through traffic, the metallic river parting before us as if by divine intercession. I thought we would never reach the other side, but we did. My grandfather insisted that she pull over, and she did, and he and I got out while my grandmother, in steely self-possession, stayed put. Grandpa and I flagged down a bus going in the opposite direction and rode back to the city. When we got to the house they were already there,

safe and sound, as though nothing had happened, but I knew better; for the look in her eyes I had seen in the car persisted, and it warned me away.

Years later, when she was working in an east side suburb, she had to drive that bridge twice a day and it spooked her, especially when the weather was bad. On those days she took extra time and arrived home very late, still shaken. I never knew whether she had forgotten the crazed ease of that earlier ride or remembered it all too clearly. By that time, however, my own fear of the bridge had diminished, for I had realized that the narrow strip of land that supported the city was also a bridge, and was also floating, and that nothing in either realm could ever be said to be securely anchored. And the thought did not much disturb me, anymore.

Lake Washington

Each year, during the summer Seafair festival, the city held a hydroplane race on Lake Washington, and boats with names like "Miss Budweiser" and "Old Oly" swept around the lengthy course at speeds of 180 miles per hour or more. The Gold Cup, as it was called, took a whole day to run, and those who could not get to the lake themselves could watch it on television, all national programming preempted for this beloved local event. We lived several miles from the race site, but I could hear the roar of the hydros from our house, and I followed the race with intense interest. Some years, I made mock-ups of the event, using construction paper and cardboard to stimulate, crudely, the topographical conditions of the course. I would cannibalize other games to find the dice and spinning arrows that would enable me to move my markers forward in orderly but competitive sequence. Lastly, I would fashion the tiny boats themselves, taking care to recreate the fins and other oddly shaped elements that distinguished hydroplanes from conventional craft. When I finished with this reconstruction, I would run my race, keeping an eye on the actual event as it unfolded; if the real Miss Budweiser capsized or lost her engine, I would ruthlessly retire my Miss Bud, mimicking the swift irruptions of fate that befell those in that larger world, deserv-

ing or not. At times, the development of this scale-model scenario would begin to diverge from that of its life-sized source, and I would have to make minute adjustments of pace or position among the markers. Too free a field, and my race would lose all relation to the events that were playing out in actuality; too faithful a recreation, and I would not really be playing by any rules at all, merely replicating the happenstance and immediacy of fact, and that wasn't much fun. So I worked away until I found a method of counterpoising these parallel worlds, a principle of play through which I proposed and disposed as I pleased, while remaining faithful to the spirit and essence of the event.

Then, I was playing; now, I see that I was also learning, learning of the power of containment, of the beauty of the minutely delineated, of the clarity of vision that comes from rendering experience on a scale that offers in compressed force what it lacks in lived amplitude.

The Door

Throughout her life my mother was essentially a night owl, a nocturnal wanderer who went through the motions of daylight living in the half-conscious way that others are said to sleepwalk. She only truly awoke, as it were, very late in the evening, when she would begin to roam the house, talking, torrents of talk directed at auditors both present and sometimes, it seemed, half-imagined. Or perhaps it is truer to say that she would see in us surrogates for all those, through the years, who had never heard her out or credited her side of the story, in its complex and inexhaustible permutations; in these nighttime sessions she could speak out, unchallenged, and place on record her version of events and disputes that had long since ceased to matter to anyone else. I found these intricate, winding monologues oppressive but singular, on some level; though worn down myself by this wave of talk, which seemed to pass freely through the whole of the house and into sleep itself, I could only marvel at the sheer oratorical stamina such a performance required of her. And there was something touching in the very evanescence of these spoken words; no matter how many times she repeated the stories, and ex-

planations, and rationales, they would still drift off, once released, into a realm where even the most practiced memory could not reach out and rein them in, and she would have to start over, the next night, as though no one had ever heard her before. As I grew older, and this nighttime behavior became habitual, I began to close my door, trying to sleep and hoping to deprive her of the provocation an audience afforded, but to no avail. She would stand in the hallway, shouting, as though to declare that no mere door or wall or barrier could ever shut her out.

The Alley

As a girl, I used to watch Nightmare Theatre on late night television, every weekend, with a friend and fellow horror film fan who lived down the block. On Friday night one of us would sleep over at the other's house, sleeping bags, potato chips, and soda pop carefully arrayed in front of the set, our object to scare ourselves as fully as possible during the film and then intensify our dread in whispered discussion after it had ended. The quickest way to get from one house to the other was up the alley that ran through the middle of the block, bordering garages and back yards. We would always escort one another, in the evening's ritualistic prelude, claiming that it took two to carry the sleepover stuff, knowing in fact that we were each already frightened, well in advance of the film's start, and half expected Frankenstein or Dracula to step out of the alley's shadows and sweep us away, with no one the wiser until it was too late for rescue. Alone, we were vulnerable; together, we could fend off any creature, at least long enough to scream for help from adults who were sitting in the well-lit kitchens and living rooms lining the route. Our precautions were effective, it seems, for in the many trips we made up the alley no monster ever once dared to detain us. Years later, when I was sixteen or so and far too sophisticated to remember those childish fears, I would walk up that alley all the time, without a thought about it. One evening at twilight, as I was approaching my house, the bogeyman appeared, unbidden, in human form. He was shorter than Frankenstein, less verbal than a vampire, but just as determined to sweep me up and carry me off. I screamed, and struggled, and the adults poured

out of their houses, as I had imagined they might, years earlier, and I escaped unharmed. My attacker flew off, never to be found.

And what I remember most about that night is the sensation of surprise. I had always considered it "my" alley, though I held no proper title, years of use and familiarity had made it mine, as distinct from the hundreds of other alleys in the city towards which I took no proprietary stance. And in "my alley" nothing could happen that I didn't countenance. But now a stranger had proved that it was his, too, and had shown just how insubstantial my claims of dominion actually were.

I learned, then, that the boundaries of lives, like those of places, are permeable, and that the truly fearsome inheres not in the exotic, but in the utterly familiar.

Alki

During the last weeks of my mother's life we visited her every day, gathering from distant points to keep vigil in the city we had all grown up in. She slipped in and out of consciousness, and in lucid moments would ask the kinds of questions we had never heard from her before. "What will you guys do after I'm gone?" she asked me, and I could not answer except to say that I thought we would be "okay," that thin word fending off the host of uncertainties I felt hanging about us. She asked her eldest child whether she thought there was something beyond this life, and my sister said yes, she did, there was. I was relieved she hadn't asked me the question, for I wouldn't have known what to say, and would not have wished to answer only with silence. But if I were able to talk to her today, I would tell her that those who die, if they have lived in places among others, persist; that one life, spent, passes into another, and that memory is both beacon and bridge.

We had no official funeral service. My mother's ashes were scattered over the Pacific Ocean, as she had wished, and her name was inscribed on the family stone next to those of her parents.