New Nonfiction by Carol Ann Wilson: “Live Oaks”

‘Tis a fearful thing
to love
What death can touch.
To love, to hope, to dream,
and oh, to lose . . .

by Judah Halevi
12th century philosopher and poet

June 1991. I’m half-way up a seventy-foot rock facing at Camp Hale, Colorado, my body pressed against the hard, cool granite. My fingers search for purchase on what feels like a polished surface. I’m ascending one of the rock towers the Tenth Mountain Division, a unit of 15,000 men, scaled when preparing for mountain and winter warfare during World War II. CIA secret operatives trained here, too, including Tibetan freedom fighters in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Inside me, my own war rages. I took the lead instructor, David’s, suggestion that I climb blindfolded, because I trust him. But under normal circumstances, even trusting an experienced instructor, I wouldn’t climb this giant slab for love or money.

These are not normal circumstances. Yet, a niggling bit of fear keeps me vigilant, which puzzles me, since I know nothing can possibly hurt me now. I’m invulnerable to pain or injury, my heart and soul already shredded. Why would my body matter? My greatest fear is trying to live life as usual when I see only a void in my present and future. Living at all these past few weeks since my sister’s death is hardly bearable. Caught, as I am, in limbo, between life and death. If Susan is dead,

how can I be alive? We were so close. Attached at the heart, we liked to say. Yet this little inkling of fear causes me to wonder if something in me wants to win this battle, this struggle for meaning in my life, something to live for.

The shock of the diagnosis, stomach cancer that had metastasized, was all the greater because we'd thought it a benign tumor. That "we" included the surgeon. Like thinking your feet are on solid ground, only to feel that ground fracturing into an infinite abyss, taking you with it. When the doctor told me, I could only stare at him as my whole body began shaking. My teeth chattered, top hitting hard against bottom, jarring my vision, making my words stutter. The shaking wouldn't stop. A nurse led me to a bed and piled hot blanket after blanket on me. Still I shook.

This hard, bare surface threatens to defeat me, but my fingers find a tiny crevice I can use to pull myself upward. I rest for a moment, surprised by the comfort this small indentation brings. My breath slows, and I begin searching for the next fingerhold.

Through a harness, I'm attached to a rope that's anchored at the top of this cliff. It will save me from crashing to the ground below, but it will not save me from a terrifying experience of dangling in space, far above the ground—my particular nightmare. Nor will it keep me from bashing against the rockface.

Suspended. That's how I felt in those early hours of the morning, alone in the deserted Spokane airport. No bustle, no aroma of coffee brewing, not even the airline desks were open. Only a gray emptiness occupied the space. My brother's call had come only a few hours earlier, fueling my need to get to the closest airport, find the first flight available, get back to my sister, because she was going downhill, and quickly.

A month ago, I was in Idaho as part of a team reviewing the

state's teacher preparation programs, a trip that had been scheduled for months. Susan and I had talked about whether I should go. Since we thought we had months ahead of us, given the doctor's prognosis of possibly a year, we agreed I should honor the commitment. I did so reluctantly, weeping all the way to the airport. Our brother, Bruce, was with her, our mother on her way from Florida, and I would be back in a week. We all thought it would work out for that short period.

My foot explores the available area up a notch, in synch with my fingers, to push and pull simultaneously. Actions that could be in opposition with each other, as they are deep within me. But here on the rock, they work in concert, and I've gained a few more inches.

Our team had been in Moscow, Idaho when Bruce called in the middle of that dark night. A colleague borrowed a car and drove me to the nearest airport, sixty-eight miles away. We arrived about 2:00. I found a phone booth and called Bruce to tell him I was getting the first flight out, at 6:30. In a voice low and contained, he said, "It doesn't look good."

We agreed I would call every hour to check on Susan's status. I stayed in the phone booth, close to the phone that was my link to Bruce—and to Susan.

My fingers find another tiny indentation and tug to test. The rock crumbles and I pull my hand back, then feel around for another. I hear voices above me, encouraging me on. "You're really close! Take your time but keep on coming!"

Finding a few more indentations, I hear a voice say, "We're here if you need us to pull you this last bit."

At 6:00, I phoned again, the last call before I was to board the flight. Bruce's voice sounded far away, as if it were coming from some foreign place. "Susan died, minutes ago," my brother told me. It was ten days, not even close to a year, after her surgery.

My fingers investigate the surface area within reach, find a place to grip, and with a final thrust from my feet and pull of my fingers, I feel someone's hand touching mine. Balancing against the rock, I take the hand and, with a grunt and a push, I plant my feet on solid ground.

Pulling off my blindfold, I greet my belayers, one of whom gives sweaty me a hug. "Congratulations! You did it!" she says. I smile and hug her back before she says, "Now you can rest until you're ready to rappel back down."

I look at the rope and the huge sturdy rock around which it is tied. The anchor. My anchor. It will help me make it back safely to the ground below, to thank the people who have been rooting for me, classmates, friends, and the trustworthy David. But will it help in my effort to climb out of this grief, or at least to accommodate its accumulation?

I hadn't been particularly excited about this week-long Outward Bound course, the culminating component of a year-long community leadership program. But I'd loved the rest of it, the seminars, the community projects, the other twenty-four people in the group, the coordinators and seminar leaders. Still, knowing some of the Outward Bound activities would include heights, I wasn't sure I could participate. But when the time came, just four weeks after Susan died, I figured, what the hell? What difference does height make now?

It makes no difference. As I prepare to rappel down, I listen to the belayer review my instructions. Holding the guide rope in my left hand, my right hand ready to work the rope and the carabiners to control the rate of my descent, I step off the cliff backwards. Strangely, it feels like the most natural thing in the world. I am descending and in a controlled way. I know how to do this. I walk myself down the sheer rockface, sans blindfold. It's exhilarating.

Back on the ground, I join a group of classmates and

instructors who cheer and pat me on the back. Then we turn our attention to others making their way up the rock.

We were surrounded by rock formations, some accumulations of dirt, dust particles and magma, some resulting from layers of sediment and sustained pressure. I remember thinking of my own pressure, my own accumulation of grief and heartache. Susan's death had ignited all that and more. The accumulation, I see now, had threatened to crush me. Would there be a metamorphosis for me, I wondered, as there had been for some of these formations?

While suspended on the rockface, I'd begun to think about what had brought me to that point of despair and hope. Then, with my feet finally on the ground, my mind settled on a particular day, fifty-five years ago, on a landscape populated not with rocks, but with trees.

1966. A November afternoon, outside a small cement-block house near a Florida bay. Wind rustled dead sycamore leaves across a sleeping lawn. It gusted through the trailing Spanish moss growing in the towering live oak’s branches, and soughed through places where songbirds sought refuge from storms. The tree’s limbs plunged to the ground before sweeping upward toward a low gray sky.

Ron and I drifted across the expanse of lawn and sand we called our yard. In our early twenties and married four months now, our hands entwined, we moved slowly, dreamlike. Ron

seemed pensive though, distant from his usual buoyant self.

He paused and I paused, too. Looking into my eyes, his own seemed pools of uncertainty, of puzzlement. My breath held itself while I waited for him to break the silence. He did so, slowly, as if he were considering every word.

“I’ve been having strange feelings lately,” he said. “They’re not like anything I’ve felt before, and I can’t seem to get rid of them.”

His tone sent a chill down my spine. “What kind of feelings?” I wanted to know.

“Disturbing ones. Like something bad is going to happen. I can’t think of a way to describe it other than that expression ‘like somebody’s walking over my grave.’”

He ran his hand over his military-short, sandy brown hair before continuing. “I’ve always thought that saying was ridiculous, but now I know what it means. Or worse, how it feels.”

A chill spread throughout my entire body. Fear darted through me like a small animal and, for moments, I couldn’t conjure words, only images—Ron in his flight suit, in his officer’s uniform, in planes—all part of his jet pilot training. There was such danger in all of that, and worse, danger lurking in his almost-certain posting to Vietnam.

Pushing these perils away was a constant in my life. Dislodging the fear with thoughts of his love of flying, the thrill he found in each stage of the training, his sense of duty, all were essential for restoring my peace of mind, so capricious those days. But this? Was this his own grave he was thinking of?

Ron’s voice slipped through my thoughts. “Why don’t you call your dad? To see if he’s alright. If he’s still planning to

come for Thanksgiving."

I was reluctant to leave him, even for a moment. But I turned to walk toward the house and, as if the wind had timed it, a blast hit my back just as my fear found a new target– Dad. My dad who was alone and lonely, with a difficult divorce from my mother only a couple of years behind him. My dad, whose health wasn't great after two heart attacks some seven years ago. My dad who meant the world to me, with whom I'd always felt a visceral bond.

Twenty-three years into a troubled marriage, my parents separated, then divorced. Wrenching for me, that parting, because it meant parting with Dad, who returned to his small business in the Florida panhandle, our family home during my early years. My mother stayed in Colorado, the place she loved, and where I was in college. But less than two years later, when Ron and I married and moved to Pensacola for the first phase of his flight training, we were only three hours from Dad.

Dialing my father's number, I tried to push every trace of panic from my mind, not wanting him to hear it my voice. When he answered on the second ring, he sounds strong, expectant. A surge of happiness buoyed me.

"Ron and I wanted to check to see if you're still planning to come for Thanksgiving," I said.

"You bet I am," he assured me. "Do you think I'd miss your first Thanksgiving dinner as the cook?"

I grinned at the phone as I told him Ron and I both had to work on Friday–me at my uninspiring receptionist job and Ron on aircraft carrier landing practice. Dad was fine with that since he could stay just the night.

"A couple others will be here," I told him. "You remember Steve, Ron's close friend from college?"

“Sure. Best man at your wedding,” he said.

“Yep. He’s in flight training, too, in helicopters, in the Army. Stationed in Texas. He’s coming over for the weekend to see us and some other friends.”

“That’s great! Who’s the other?”

“John, a newer friend in prop training here.” He and Ron met during the first phases of training and became instant friends. “You’ll like him, too,” I said.

I remember the relief of talking with Dad, how the light-hearted exchange cheered me. Even so, deep down, I knew it was only a momentary respite from the vague but ever-present unease, an abstraction of a war that could instantly come too close, too vivid, if I let it. War. Constantly in the news, often the topic with Ron and friends. Sure, I knew there was a slight chance Ron wouldn’t have to go, that John and Steve could be assigned elsewhere. But the odds were against it. Yet, I still clung to a slim hope.

That dinner was all I’d hoped it would be. I roasted a turkey, prepared mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, and green beans. The day before, I baked a pumpkin pie. So much work, but my anticipation of the day kept me at it. Excitement in preparing my first holiday meal in my own home interlaced itself with the anxiety of wanting everything to be just right for that singular gathering.

Sitting at the table before the spread I’d conjured, the fragrance of roasting turkey not yet a memory, with my father, husband, and two men whose friendship I treasured, I savored their compliments and light banter. Steve had been a part of my life almost as long as Ron had, since the two were virtually inseparable in their college years. My dad seemed happy getting to know Steve a little better, and he took to John, as well. Ron, he’d always loved.

Leaning forward, light dancing in his eyes, he said, “Seems like you three have us covered in the air. Jets, choppers and props.”

“Yes, sir, I think we do,” John said, raising his glass to Ron and Steve.

Dad was hooked, wanting to know all about flying helicopters and planes.

Flying. The war. We all knew the risks. Sometimes I thought the higher the risk, the heartier the humor in how these three military pilots found ways to make light of danger. In some odd way, I found that reassuring. Joking and laughing could turn a gale into a soothing breeze for me.

I watched my dad and my three pilots smiling and relaxing together. The winds that evening were all warmth and affection.

It was a leap from Thanksgiving dinner to work the next day. Since we had only one car, Ron dropped me off at the office on his way to the base.

At work, the huge office building seemed a ghost town with most people off for the holiday. But someone had to answer the phones, and that someone was low-ranking me. Being a receptionist for a large corporation that made chemical fertilizer wasn’t my idea of rewarding work, but it was all I could find for the short time before we moved for Ron’s next phase of training.

I tackled a stack of filing when the ringing phone broke the silence, surprising me. I was surprised even more when I heard my Aunt Rubye’s voice.

“Carol, I hate to tell you this,” she said in her soft, southern syllables. “Your daddy had a little accident on his

way home. He’s at the hospital in Crestview. He passed out driving home, and his truck went off the road,” she said. “Someone from the hospital called me since I’m still his emergency contact.”

“But is he okay?” I asked, desperate for a reassuring answer.

“They said nothing’s broken, but they’re keeping him for tests. Can you get away from work? Do you have some way to get over there?”

I thought for a moment. I could take the bus. Company phones be damned.

I remember staring out the window of the Greyhound, willing the bus to go faster. My eyes took in the passing lives oaks, welcoming the sight of those trees with their almost continuous gift of green. They shed for only a short time in the spring, when their leaves replace themselves. The oaks seemed a hopeful sight, contrasting blatantly with leafless sycamores, cypress and dogwood trees. Those bare branches reflected the starkness and anxiety I felt deep inside– moss clinging to those tree limbs like the worry hanging on my heart.

I inspected the other passengers reading, sleeping, or gazing out the window. They seemed remote, as if I were seeing them through the wrong end of binoculars.

At last we reached Crestview.

The details of how I found the hospital and Dad’s room have blurred, but the image of him in that hospital bed, pale and out of place has never dimmed.

He wore the ubiquitous faded green hospital gown; a blanket

covered all but his shoulders. An angry gash on his forehead, possibly from where it hit the steering wheel, accentuated his pallor. Despite that, his face lit up when he saw me, his smile a salve for my anxious self. But his vulnerability took my breath away.

Leaning over to give him a kiss, I felt his warm skin and noted his shallow breathing. He started to speak, but instead began coughing. When the cough subsided, I ask how he was feeling.

“Woozy, I guess. This cough takes over every now and then and saps the little strength I have.”

He told me that the doctor on duty said he had too much sugar in his system, which is what caused him to black out. He had late-onset diabetes. “I think I’ll be okay if I rest a while,” he says.

His pale, injured face, his unsteady voice punched holes in my heart. His vulnerability was mine, too.

That day brought another twist. Given the holiday, the small-town hospital was understaffed and had no one qualified to read the film. Someone in DeFuniak Springs, thirty miles away, could, but the hospital couldn’t spare anyone to take it, so the nurse asked me.

I did as she requested, but on those bus rides, the bewildering string of events pushed my thoughts in a direction I’d been trying to avoid. My mind latched on to old Mrs. Harper, my childhood friend’s grandmother. Mrs. Harper was the first person I knew to die.

As a nine-year old, I had no frame of reference for such a situation. Our family, and the community in general, didn’t discuss difficult matters. Perhaps that was why it made such

an impression on me.

I could easily call up the front parlor the day of Mrs. Harper's viewing. How strange it felt to walk into that dimmed room where my friend and I had spent so many happy hours playing with our tea sets and dolls. The casket rested in front of the bay window at the far wall, the dark, heavy draperies a backdrop to the somber scene. The room felt foreign, and I felt an intruder. I stayed close to the doorway; the thought of seeing Mrs. Harper's body filled me with dread, and I could not make myself look.

After that, I avoided funerals. Even the thought of going terrified me, made me feel as if I were sinking into the cold dark with the dead.

Ron arrived with the evening. His presence and firm hug reassured me in a way I'd been hungry for all day. Some of the day's strangeness dissipated as I watch Dad and Ron together.

"Are you feeling any better?" Ron asked.

Dad smiled. "Not enough to dance."

The warmth of their interaction comforted me until the nurse returned to say visiting hours were over. I kissed Dad goodnight and promised to be back first thing in the morning.

Drained, I slumped in the seat of our little Volkswagen bug as Ron drove us through the thick southern darkness. I saw a few stars through the clouds, but no moon. The cold outside was damp and pierced to the bone. I felt the darkness inside me and the cold settling around my heart. I tried to speak but my words turn to sobs.

"It's going to be alright." Ron said. "They're taking good care of him and you'll see him in the morning."

I nodded, but all I could do was cry. I knew I'd never felt that kind of gut-wrenching, uncontrollable weeping. Bending forward, my whole body shook as tears flooded my face. I felt I was drowning in them. Something dark and unfamiliar consumed me.

Finally in my warm bed, exhausted, I fell into a deep, dreamless slumber. I wanted that escape from the nightmarish day. I wanted my life to return to normal. I wanted my dad to be well.

From the depths of sleep, I heard the phone ring. Fighting my way back to consciousness, I looked at the clock, registered that it was midnight and knew immediately what was behind the ringing. Ron handed me the receiver and put his arms around me. I heard only fragments . . . a heart attack . . . sparked by pneumonia not detected.

For months after, fog shrouded my memory. In the midst of that devastating loss, some images stood out: my dad's funeral in the little church where, as a child, I attended Sunday School, the ride to the cemetery, the emptiness of his house, the endless details to attend to.

My anger seemed endless, too—anger at the world, at the fates, at luck, at whatever took my dad away. And anger at those who tried to tell me I would be okay, because I couldn't imagine how I would. Anger at those who told me it was part of God's plan. Anger because I wanted no part of their god.

Anger was an animating force, but I ran out of the energy to sustain it. I didn't know how to grieve, how to accept what had happened. I can now see I knew only how to push the hollowness away, not realizing how temporary that would be.

Bob Wilson, 1963, Golden, CO

In October, 1968, we'd been in Southern California several months, and Ron was set to go to Vietnam. Steve had been there a month, and John had left a couple of weeks ago. I remember the night before John shipped out. Ron and I were with him and others at El Toro's officers' club. A surprisingly festive atmosphere infected our group, and we danced, laughed, and drank as if there were no tomorrow.

Margaritas were favored. After John finished one, he'd slam the bottom of the glass on the tabletop in such a way that the cup would break cleanly from the stem.

“Maybe that’s not a good idea, John,” someone said. “You could cut yourself.”

“What the hell,” John shouted. “I’m going to war.”

Soon everyone was trying it, broken margarita glasses piling up on our table, the glitter of little glass shards sprinkled around like stardust. Caught between visions of stardust and thoughts of John leaving, I watched him break another. The moment the cup parted from the stem, something cracked inside me.

Ron’s departure was quieter, with the two of us spending the afternoon at the beach, then having dinner at home. We talked about the future, about when his commitment to the Marines would be over, and what we wanted to do with our lives.

I remember how Ron suggested I return to Colorado for the spring semester and work on that degree in English literature I longed to finish. He knew how much I needed my time to be productive; how working in the bank’s accounting department was interesting, but only held a space for something more important, something useful. And that without my feeling useful, the bare branches inside me would languish in waiting for their leaves to reappear.

When the time came for him to go, he gathered me into his arms. “I’m already looking forward to being back home with you,” he says. “It’s only thirteen months, and then we have the rest of our lives together.”

I knew I couldn’t trust myself to speak. He told me he wanted me to be happy. That if something happened to him, he hoped someday I could be with someone else. Maybe someone like Steve.

“But I don’t want someone like Steve,” I said. “I want you.”

He smiled, kissed me, and then he was gone.

Carol and Ron Meridian

Our letters sustained us. We planned for the future, chose a simple, elegantly shaped china pattern, and exchanged news of close friends. I wrote about Kimmy, our beloved Siamese cat, and my work in the bank’s accounting department.

What I didn’t tell was breaking the beautiful opal ring he’d sent, how the opal cracked when I slugged an overly friendly coworker when doing inventory in the bank’s vault or how the myth about opals bringing bad luck played out for that guy.

Ron’s letters brought news of his life there, how he sometimes sat around in the drab rainy weather, bored, waiting for the clouds to clear enough for him to fly. At one point he recounted a recent scramble in which his wingman scored a direct hit on a camouflaged truck. A huge secondary explosion indicated it had been loaded with ammunition.

But he also wrote that he hated working targets in that place, the Ashau Valley. “It’s right on the Laotian border and is surrounded by five-thousand- foot mountains. The NVA [North Vietnamese Army] holes up in the mountains and puts up a hail of fire when you fly near one of their hideouts—and you always pass near one when pulling off a target.”

This letter shook me, just as the one in which he told me about the big rocket attack on Chu Lai. His jet, which he’d named Jefferson Airplane, took a hundred-twenty-two-millimeter rocket and was blasted to smithereens. But when it happened, he was in Japan, part of a group flying new aircraft back to Chu Lai.

His letter reminded me that A-4 Skyhawks, those small, nimble jets that carried only the pilot, always flew in pairs. I’d heard more A-4s were shot down than any other jet. That wasn’t something I wanted to know.

I did want to know what his life was like, what he was experiencing, but knowing so much left me full of fear—my stomach in knots and my mind spinning out the worst scenarios. Trust his optimism, I told myself. I thought that would get me through his tour. Knowing that in a few months I would return to Colorado and to school also helped. Meanwhile, I distracted myself with work, my cat, and friends. And I counted the days.

Ron had been in Vietnam only two and a half months that November of 1968 when he wrote telling me to meet him in Hawaii for R&R, the rest and recuperation leave military

personnel usually got half-way through their tour. He'd been approved for an early one, hoping that meant he would get a second. Not common, but possible, and Ron loved trying to beat the odds.

I arrived in Honolulu before Ron. The soft, warm air greeted me, and so did a young Hawaiian woman, who placed a lei of lavender flowers around my neck, welcoming me to the island.

Standing at his gate and inhaling the flowers' fragrance, I felt the minutes doing a slow dance, out of time with my eager self. I'd had too much waiting those last months. I wanted to see Ron. I wanted to hear his voice, its warmth and wonder. I wanted to touch him, to remember he was real. And then, there he was.

We had candlelit dinners under the stars, walks along the beach, playful dunking in the waves, and we held each other tightly in the night.

Our visit to the USS Arizona Memorial at Pearl Harbor turned somber despite the sparklingly beautiful day. Lush foliage met deep blue water, blossoms asserted their splendor as we listened to the guide tell us about that December day when more than a thousand sailors and Marines died. When our small tour group entered the compact submarine on display, I felt I was entering a metal trap. The air close, the contrast to the outside complete. A sense of foreboding stirred in me, which I tried to push away.

Later, in our hotel room, Ron seemed pensive. When I asked what he was thinking, his reply took me aback. "I don't know if I should talk about this," he said.

My antenna started to rise. "Please tell me."

After a long moment, he said, "I guess being at that memorial today stirred it up again."

Taking a deep breath, he told me, “Most of the guys are great. They know the power of their aircraft, and they take great care with what they do.” He rubbed his forehead and continued. “But some of what I’ve seen troubles me. War itself is more than troubling, but some things make it even worse.”

He spoke of incidents, of bombs and napalm dropped by accident or carelessly, of attitudes, arrogance. Of how Al, a pilot who went through training with him, dropped napalm in error on a village, with horrible repercussions for the people, but little for himself. Of how Al tried to brush it off. Matters both vague and specific weighed on his mind.

“I didn’t know I was signing up for this, and I don’t know what to do about it.”

“I know you’ll do what you think is right,” I said. His words lay in a lump in my stomach. “Just take care of yourself. Be careful.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Will that be enough? I wondered. But I did not say it. Seeking reassurance, my thoughts turned to my brother, who had been a Marine and in Viet Nam. On the ground, he’d been in the midst of horrific action and had made it through. And three uncles had fought in World War II, in dangerous situations. All survived. But this war seemed different. Exactly why were we there? Yet, I wanted to believe there was a purpose.

The week flew by. On New Year’s Day we had to part. Ron’s flight left before mine, so we headed for his gate. I tried to be cheerful, to think about new beginnings, but it didn’t feel like a new beginning with our week at an end. Ron, who could read me well, saw through my efforts.

“Everything will be okay,” he told me. “We’ll have another

week together in a few months, and after that, it'll be no time before I'm home."

That encouragement made a smile possible as we said our goodbyes. But it lasted only until Ron boarded his flight. When I could no longer see him, I was overcome with a sense of despair. That strange, uncontrollable sobbing I knew in Florida, driving home from the hospital that night in our VW bug overtook me. Was this a premonition? The thought that it might be terrified me. I couldn't stop the racking sobs, yet I had to catch my flight. Knees weak, body trembling, I made my way to the gate, vaguely aware of people's stares. But I didn't care.

In January, 1969, only weeks after the Hawaii trip, I moved back to Colorado. Kimmy and I lived with my mom, the three of us settling into a comfortable routine. My classes stimulated and the professors encouraged, and I felt cheered knowing I was making good use of a difficult time. One blustery February day, I returned from class to the ringing phone. The surprise and delight of hearing Ron's voice were short-lived.

"I have some bad news."

"What is it?" I asked, my breath on hold.

His words tumbled out, "It's John. His plane was shot down south of Da Nang. He didn't make it."

Reeling, I thought of John, his mischievous grin, his blue eyes, the mountain of broken margarita glasses. Stardust.

I felt broken, too, as if someone had shattered my inner being and shards floated inside me, stabbing my heart. How to think of John dead? I tried to hold together for Ron, but once the receiver was back in its cradle, grief took over.

During that long month after Ron’s call, I found it difficult to focus on my studies. I welcomed new leaves clothing branches in tender green, the fragrance of early lilacs, and air teeming with bird song. Spring signals a new beginning, or so I thought at the time.

The last evening of spring break, my brother and I went to a club in Denver’s Larimar Square to hear a Dixieland jazz band. Revelers jammed the club that Friday evening, but we found a table and ordered drinks. Sound assaulted us—jovial patrons bantering in high decibels, glasses clinking, and strains of “Basin Street Blues” flavored the cacophony. Bruce and I joked and tried to talk above the noise.

A waiter approached, and I thought he was checking on our drinks but, instead, he looked at me and asked, “Are you Carol Layton?”

When I nodded, he told me I had a phone call. I was puzzled. Only our mother knew we were there. My insides knotted as I followed the waiter, but I told myself it couldn’t be anything serious.

The twenty-minute drive home seemed an eternity. My mind spun. My muscles tensed. I tried to breathe as I gripped the steering wheel.

In the living room, my mother sat across from two Marines in uniform. They stood when I entered, and I sank into a corner of the sofa. I knew.

“We’re very sorry Mrs. Layton,” one said, his eyes meeting mine.

My world had ended, yet the other man continued, “Your husband had been flying close air support, protecting his fellow Marines. His Skyhawk came under enemy fire and went down. It

all happened quickly. He wouldn’t have suffered.”

The first one again, “Your husband was a brave man,” he said. “A hero.”

No. This was just a script, I thought. My whole body rejected the very notion. A chasm opened and I was falling. But I was frozen and couldn’t feel, couldn’t think. But I knew. I didn’t want to know. But I knew.

Morning came. It took everything I had to drag myself from bed. The day dark, rain poured from the heavens, matching the leaden feeling in me. Scooping out cat food, I heard the phone ring. I was surprised to hear my sister’s voice. In college in Pensacola, she had no phone. Mom and I had wondered how to get in touch with her.

“Carol, are you alright?” Susan asked, concern flooding her words.

“Oh, Susan,” I answered. “No.” Forcing the words, I told her about Ron, about the Marines who were there last night.

I could almost feel her listening. In my mind’s eye, I could see her long, dark hair framing her face, a look of total focus signaling she was taking in every word.

“But are you okay?” I ask. “Why are you calling?”

“I dreamed about Dad last night,” she said. “He was worried about you. He said I should call.”

The days did pass but, too often, I had to force myself into them. Every movement felt as though I were pushing through molasses. My mother was distraught, the light and fire in her eyes had given way to a somber dullness. She loved Ron deeply.

His open-hearted, fun-loving nature and his caring for me won her over early in our dating days. He was drawn to her adventurous spirit, a reflection of his own. She felt her own grief, yet she tried to comfort me. Now I realize how shattered she was, both by his death and by my loss.

The military allowed me to request an escort for Ron's body home, and I chose Steve. With John, then Ron, dead, I wanted Steve out of Vietnam. Two long weeks elapsed before he arrived. But, finally, he did.

Steve called before he came to the apartment, and I could hardly wait to see him. When I opened the door, he opened his arms, and I stepped to fill them. Bound even more tightly through loss, we held each other for a long moment. For an instant, I told myself, when I open my eyes, it will be Ron holding me. Then I felt the disservice to Steve and held him for who he was, my cherished friend, and Ron's.

Steve's presence was a comfort. His steadiness steadied me, though he was hurting, too. But there was little he could do when we went to the funeral home and I saw the casket holding Ron's body. A flag arranged across its curved surface, it was not to be opened. The words of the telegram flashed before me. "Remains are not viewable." As if I were a feather pulled by gravity, I sank to the floor.

In the mortuary chapel, I sat beside Steve in a special curtained section with Ron's family and my mother and brother. Despite the somberness of the chapel, inexplicably I felt giddy. I wanted to say something outrageous, defy what was happening. But I suppressed those urges and glanced at Steve. Something in his eyes suggested he was battling the same impulses. Was this a symptom of denial? Or maybe an acknowledgement of Ron's own impish nature?

I was barely aware of the ride to the cemetery in the funeral

limousine that smelled, nauseatingly, of lilies, but I was glad for the clear day. Jets flew in formation overhead and guns fired three volleys. I was numbed by the ceremony, by seeing the casket again, by the jets and the guns. A lone bugler played “Taps” as two Marines removed the flag, folded it, and handed it to me. A confusion of feelings hit me. That flag represented Ron’s death, and I wondered if it was worth it. Yet, I knew I would keep it forever.

Finally home, my mother and I spotted several large boxes by the door. I open one to find the china Ron ordered while in Japan.

A letter from Ron came, too. His clear, bold handwriting told me, “Today is ‘over-the-hump’ day. My tour is exactly one-half over. Now everything is downhill.”

The emotionally fraught days brought a sense of relief when Steve’s orders sent him, not back to Vietnam, but to Monterey, California for his remaining months of service. We stayed close through phone calls and visits. He voiced concern for me and, looking back, I can see why. I’d lost my bearings, felt untethered. Lacking the ability to focus, I dropped my courses, determined to take them up again in the fall at the Boulder campus.

For the most part, my professors showed kindness and understanding. One took me under his wing and advised me on a course plan. He asked me to be his undergraduate assistant in the fall, which encouraged me in a way nothing else had. Another asked me to marry him. Repelled and disoriented, I thought he was untethered.

One day when Bruce and I were out, we saw a funny little car. “What’s that?” I asked.

“It’s a dune buggy,” Bruce said. “It has a Volkswagen engine and a fiberglass frame. I know a guy who makes them.”

“I want one,” I decided on the spot.

My dune buggy was a frosty purple with a yellow and white striped canvas top that folded down. I took it to a nearby area where people rode and jumped motorcycles. Speeding up and down the steep hills, I pressed to see how high off the ground I could get. Danger was nothing to me. What did it matter if I got hurt, or worse? Bruce told me, “I’m not riding with you if your main purpose is to catch air. That’s crazy.”

He was speaking of more than the dune buggy. He knew I was truly uncoupled. I respected his wishes, when he was with me. But when I was alone, I sailed through the air undaunted. It wasn’t a jet, but I welcomed the sense of danger. With each jump, I tried for more air.

Against Bruce’s advice, my neighbor Annie, a young teacher who’d become a good friend, and I decided to drive the dune buggy the thousand miles to California. At the time, I couldn’t understand Bruce’s concern. I’d driven across vast parts of the country alone during Ron’s various phases of flight training. And because Annie I planned to visit friends in my old neighborhood and then go north to Monterey to see Steve, I thought our plan reasonable.

On the way, we drove through Phoenix to visit John’s parents, with whom I’d been in touch. Bunny and Jim Meyer lived outside Phoenix in a modest home.

Annie and I stayed only a few hours, but they were tender, poignant hours. Bunny, Jim, and I shared stories about John and looked at photographs. A deep ache filled me, seeing these shattered parents, seeing myself reflected in them. But, unlike them, I ranged between shattered and defiant. I

couldn’t push away the reality of Ron’s death, but neither could I let myself give in to what it meant. I didn’t know how to make a place for the pain, how to let it in, how to accept it. It was too big, too horrible to fully acknowledge, and so I didn’t. I knew, though, I was trying to fool myself, for when I saw someone in a crowd who even remotely resembled Ron, for an instant, I believed it was him, that it wasn’t my husband in that closed casket. Then, crushed again, I’d come to my senses.

Annie and I drove across a desert that was searingly hot and empty. Sometimes it seemed as if we were the only humans for miles. Sagebrush, cacti, and small hills were our only companions, the sage infusing the air with its earthy-mint scent. The dryness and emptiness of that land was a metaphor I didn’t want to recognize, yet I felt as if I were looking in a mirror. A vast blue sky contained only a few small drifting clouds. I wondered, was I drifting toward something, or was I just drifting?

We shared the driving, Annie and I, stopping at the occasional gas station to change drivers and get cold drinks. At one stop, we saw a sign telling us there would be no services for thirty miles. Annie, the more practical of us two, asked the attendant if he would look at the engine given it hadn’t been running all that smoothly.

“Do you think we can make it to Palm Springs?” she asked.

“Probably, if you don’t push too hard,” he said. “Maybe stop every now and then and give it a rest.”

Knowing we were heading into a long stretch without services, Annie suggested we get a bucket of ice to put on the passenger side so it could cool the air coming through the vents. A kind of air-conditioning.”

“Great idea,” I agreed. “We can put some drinks in, too. What shall we get?”

We looked at each other, chuckled, and bought a couple of six-packs of beer. Then we were off again, floating down the highway on waves of heat our bucket of ice mitigated. Annie opened a can of Coors, handed it to me, and opened one for herself. We laughed and sang to the cacti, “We all live in a yellow submarine, yellow submarine . . .”

Before we were half-way through our beers, the buggy gasped to a stop, giving me just enough warning to pull to the side of the road. Since there was nothing to do but wait till someone came along, I raised my beer can to Annie, then to my mouth. The malty liquid slid down my throat, and I relaxed into our wait.

Waiting wasn’t a problem. Time stretched in all directions, as did the vast openness. Heat waves danced in the distance. But for Annie and the beer, I had nothing to respond to in that moment. I had nothing that mattered anyway, that could fill the untethered vastness, the emptiness inside me. Would I find my way out of my desert? I wondered if there were an oasis to be found. I wondered what an oasis would look like for me.

In the distance, I saw shapes moving toward us, and as they came closer, I realized it was a military convoy—eight huge trucks, with big brown canvases covering the back sections. My mind didn’t know whether to recoil from the military reminder or welcome the likelihood that soldiers would help us.

When they spotted us on the side of the road, tall, blond Annie and small, dark me leaning against the buggy, both of us in colorful sundresses, the whole convoy stopped. One of the soldiers jumped out and walked toward us.

“This is a heck of a place to break down,” he said, grinning and eyeing the beer cans in our hands. “Want me to take a look at the engine?”

“Yes, please,” I said. “Thank you!”

He walked back to his truck to tell the driver what was going on. The driver seemed to have radioed the other trucks, because several men climbed out of the vehicles and walked over to where we were standing.

While two soldiers conferred over the buggy's engine, several others chatted with Annie and me. They couldn't believe we'd driven the vehicle all the way from Denver, or that we'd wanted to. Just like my brother. In minutes the engine was running again, but they turned down our offer of beer. Not while on duty.

"You should be okay now," one of them told us. "But just in case something happens, we'll escort you to Palm Springs."

The image of our entourage—the little purple buggy chugging along behind two huge dirt-brown Army trucks and in front of six others, still makes me smile. In Palm Springs, saying our appreciative goodbyes to our unlikely rescuers, I understood the world could still offer surprise and kindness—its own kind of oasis.

The trip proved a welcomed adventure, a timely distraction, given the various places we went, from San Diego to Hollywood then me to Monterey, and despite the numerous times the dune buggy broke down. Looking back, I realize it also marked the beginning of the longer search for myself.

Carol with Dune Buggy

I decided to fly to Monterey to see Steve. Greeting me at the small airport, he seemed more relaxed than the last time I'd seen him. Over seafood lunches, he talked about how much he liked this part of California yet was thinking of what would be next. I wasn't surprised his mining engineering degree had nothing to do with it. "I'd like to keep flying," he told me. "Maybe cargo planes."

That evening, while he mixed gin and tonic, I turned the television to the news. War protesters filled the screen, some

carrying signs– “Give Peace a Chance.” Next President Nixon began speaking, and I moved to change the channel. But when I heard him say “Vietnam,” I froze, remembering his campaign promise to end the war.

He said, as he’d said before, that we wanted to end the war honorably. But then something shifted. I listened as the president told the world that from now on, the U.S. would begin handing over military defense efforts to the Asian nations themselves. He pledged to complete withdrawal of the first 25,000 troops by the end of August.

It took only a moment to register, “But it’s too late,” I cried. “Why now? Why not earlier?”

Steve hurried across the room and put his arms around me. Gasping from what felt like a gut punch, I moaned, “Why not sooner? Why couldn’t this have come sooner?” A seed I’d barely noticed took root. What did Ron die for? The question only magnified my loss.

I treasured my time with Steve, cherished our years of shared history and that we cared deeply for each other. We were united in our grief for Ron, and that was a powerful bond. Yet, when he embraced me, the unbidden thought returned: it was Ron holding me. And there was confusion in my mind that Ron wanted me to be, not just with someone like Steve, but with Steve himself.

Back in Colorado, I began searching for an apartment in Boulder, dumbfounded when one landlord said she refused to rent to widows. But eventually I found the perfect apartment, a one-bedroom full of light and within walking distance of campus. With each other for company, Kimmy and I settled into our new lives.

I threw myself into the coursework, relieved to be doing

something challenging, focusing my energy. And I was beginning to realize a need to make up in some way for Ron's absence in the world. Finishing my degree would be a start.

One class, Oral Interpretation of Literature, a requirement for English lit majors, involved performing prose and poetry as spoken word, vocally expressing the meaning of a piece, as classmates critiqued performances. The professor handed out short selections for the first readings.

My turn came, and I read Robert Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay." After I read, a student asked, "How do you feel about this poem?"

Puzzled by her question, I told her that I liked it, I liked Robert Frost.

"I ask because the feeling of the piece didn't come through to me," she said. "Could you read something with more emotion next time? Maybe Amy Lowell's 'Patterns.'"

"That's a good suggestion," the professor concurred.

I didn't know the poem but agreed to give it a try. I was stunned when I found it, this poem about a young woman waiting for her lover, her fiancé, only to learn he's been killed in battle. Though taken aback, I felt I had to read it—if I could.

The next week, as I read, I tried to evoke the scene—a noble-woman walking on a patterned garden path, observing patterns in her richly-figured dress and the garden, thinking of her lover to whom she was to be wed in a month, and the letter she has hidden in her bosom. She longs for him to free her from the stays that hold her in—to make love to her. I focused only on the words, I couldn't let myself dwell on their meaning. Entering the final stanzas, I intoned:

In Summer and in Winter I shall walk

Up and down

The patterned garden-paths

In my stiff, brocaded gown.

. . . . .

Gorgeously arrayed,

Boned and stayed.

. . . .

For the man who should loose me is dead,

. . . .

In a pattern called war.

Christ! What are patterns for?

The professor asked me to read it again, with more feeling. I looked at the poem, then at him. “I can’t.”

His puzzled look asked for an explanation. “My husband is dead,” I whispered, “in this pattern called war.”

In the stunned silence that followed, I realized I couldn’t loose the stays on my emotions. If I did, they would consume me. Instead, I pulled them tighter. I wondered if I would ever be able to loose them.

On May 4, 1970, during a demonstration at Kent State University, National Guard fatally shot four students. One a young woman on her way to class; another, a young man shot in the back. The shock and horror of it jettisoned any denial of my growing aversion to the war. I joined with students across

the nation boycotting classes. One professor dropped my semester grade to a B; I later learned her brother worked for the State Department. I joined every anti-war protest I could. To the bumper sticker, “America. Love It or Leave It,” I said loving it is not enough. Loving it will not prevent unnecessary war, unnecessary death. And I asked, why can’t we learn from what we’ve lost?

Later in the fall, Steve completed his commitment to the Army and took a job in Dallas. He was happy to be flying cargo planes, and he reconnected with a woman he’d dated before he went to Vietnam. Ron and I had met her before Steve shipped out. I liked her, and what I liked best was that Steve seemed happy.

With a full class load, I was home writing a paper for my Shakespeare class when the phone rang. It was Wayne, Steve’s older brother. I heard him say, “I wanted to tell you myself, knowing how close you and Steve were.”

Were? I thought. “What’s happened?” A too-familiar chill seeped through my body as I tried to take in Wayne’s stumbling words.

“His plane went down outside of Dallas,” he said. “Mechanical failure. Steve died.”

He told me he would call when he knew more. “I’m so sorry, but I thought you would want to know right away.”

But I didn’t want to know. I didn’t want to know that Steve, my dear, caring, friend, was gone. Steve, who loved Ron, who loved me and whom I loved, was dead. I wondered, how many times can a heart break?

I mumbled condolences and placed the receiver back in its cradle. Reaching for Kimmy, who was rarely far from my side, I stroked her soft fur. Holding her close, I felt her warm little body breathing in and out, her gentle purr like a small

engine. I closed my eyes and was in the Volkswagen again, driving through the cold Florida night and the darkness I could not name—and my father dies. Ron calls from Vietnam to tell me about John. Two Marines stand in my living room. Wayne calls . . . until I was the only one left from Thanksgiving dinner.

For years I avoided Thanksgiving. I made sukiyaki for family and friends, traveled to San Francisco where Susan and I ate Indian food in a lovely restaurant by the Bay. I went to the movies.

There were other men in my life, men I was attracted to and cared for, men who cared for me and I stayed with for years. But it seemed I could let myself care only so much. I didn't make the commitment needed for a truly close and lasting connection, I didn't allow myself to be vulnerable. And so, I kept leaving those relationships.

For the twenty years after my dad died—and then John, Ron, and Steve within the next three years— through therapy and reflection, I worked to chip through the barriers I'd erected. And like water that slowly carves new canyons, time, with its gentle assurances began to help me open.

Then, Susan died. Unimaginable, unthinkable, yet there it was. Two decades after that Thanksgiving dinner, her death broke my heart completely. Her death cratered me, broke me wide open to the grief of all those losses. I was completely defenseless and floundering.

That was when I found myself on the rockface searching for hand holds. It may have been there that I first realized my love for her and the joy I felt when she was alive were worth the heartbreak when she was gone. From there I believe I began to open enough to chance grief again. Open enough to let David, that trusting and trustworthy Outward Bound instructor

in, to eventually become my life partner.

In our early years together he and I went on week-long backpacking trips in southern Utah. We carried everything we needed on our backs and hiked deep into canyon country. When it rained, we found an overhang. On clear nights we slept under the stars. When we encountered a swift river, we found solid sticks to balance us as we crossed. On those outings, we took life as it came, and it was a lesson for me, one that took a near-lifetime to learn.

Carol and David-Ticaboo Canyon-2003

Fifty-four years after that Thanksgiving dinner, my first as the cook, I visit that small cement-block house near a Florida bay where Ron and I lived. It has changed slightly. It looks more weathered, a little worn, and the carport sags slightly. But the sky is as I remembered, the gray sky and the Spanish moss hanging from live oak branches.

Those live oaks are larger, fuller now. Rooted in salty soil where little else thrives, they do. They shed their leaves many times, only to replace them again and again. Their graceful branches bend toward the earth before turning skyward for the light.

I'm grateful for what they've taught me, the greatest lesson that Susan's death finally opened me to. Their ability to endure, through storms, through the years, always offering refuge to birds seeking it. The storms I've experienced, the many deaths of loved ones, have battered and tested me. But most importantly, what I finally learned was, like those strong, supple branches, rather than resist, to move with the force of the wind, to live more fully by opening myself to all of life's dimensions.

These many years on, my heart open and hopeful, I can see myself with Ron, walking across the expanse of lawn and sand we called our yard—and the house where once I made Thanksgiving dinner for four men I adored. I can, finally, welcome that memory.

How does loss shape our lives? Does it cause us to falter or to muster resolve to give the world at least some of what was lost to it? Does the absence of a dear one affect us in equal measure to their presence in our lives? Life after a death changes in countless ways, impossible to predict. Yet, for many of us, some things are inevitable. We flail. We search. We hope. And in our yearning, we turn toward the light.

Susan at Hastings School of the Law circa 1979