



# Canoe

TCU

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## Canoe

I had a canoe  
Colored the amethyst of iris throat.  
I paddled that canoe on nearby lakes  
And rivers, and once  
On the ocean along Maine's rocky cliffs.

With her beneath me  
I became a powerful great goddess,  
Muscles rippling in my back  
Like ocean waves.  
I was as enduring as waters  
My lungs huge with the winds in my face.

One day I ran aground on rocks.  
Empty, I dragged her home to the backyard  
Twisted, with a six foot laceration in her side.  
Every time I meant to repair her  
Something else passed my way.

Later you moved in next door.  
When I was pruning red roses, you asked why  
She lay torn beneath the mesquite tree.  
You begged to work on her.  
Finally, I agreed;  
I didn't expect to paddle her again –  
Somehow my heart leaked out that hole in her side.

You labored through spring and summer  
In the fall, you took her to your work shed.  
It didn't matter anymore;  
I'd decided to give her to you when you'd finished the work.  
At Christmas I asked, "How's it going?"  
Mumbling, "Fine," you were gone.  
In March, you grabbed me and towed me to the shed:

There she was,  
Healed  
Her wound no more than the joy lines  
Of a well-loved woman's face.  
I ran my hands about her hull.  
I smelled the waters of my past.

In celebration  
I gave her to you.  
Refusing the gift,  
You said, "Let's go paddle her as soon as spring is  
Warmer . . ."

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## The Poet's Reflection

This is a narrative poem about grief and how grief and the loss that precipitated it fundamentally alter our self-image and way of being in the world. In this poem the narrator abides with her grief, attending to the motions of daily living, but remaining broken. A new neighbor's random act begins to upset the balance. Time passes and the narrator intermittently observes the neighbor. Eventually the narrator decides to dwell in her grief, but also to give her neighbor the vessel that embodies the memories of both joy and sorrow. However, another unexpected act of the neighbor opens the possibility of new paths for both of them.

I wrote this poem many years ago when I was regularly paddling a canoe. It was a time when I could single handedly paddle eight campers out of danger on a stormy lake, portage the craft, and teach others how to maneuver on the water. A person can become very attached to a particular canoe, a particular paddle, and the synchrony of mind, body, water and nature. Thinking about the loss of any part of that system prompted me to reflect on the grief we experience when our bodies, our families, and our environments inevitably change.

As a nurse and human being, I am repeatedly reminded that time and ordinary acts of kindness and human connection have powerful effects on our grief journeys. As nurses we can help patients (and ourselves) find hope, rather than despair, in the midst of loss and grief. Creating environments in which patients can accomplish the cognitive and affective tasks necessary to foster hope is an important nursing action. Nurses use the esthetic and personal ways of knowing to engage in therapeutic relationships. Within those relationships nurses intentionally encounter patients through "ordinary" acts that help patients integrate loss and grief and discover new and different ways of being whole.

We do not know the end of the story in the poem, just as we rarely know the end of the story for our patients. We leave, though, with the sense of possibility, the possibility of healing and being whole again in a different way.