

Those We've Lost and What Remains

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Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War ends in the middle of a sentence. We might want to think of the writer collapsing at his table with stylus in hand. Would that be the death a writer might want for himself or herself? To live the writing life to the very end? I wonder. What I do know is that as we close this year out, three writers dear to me are no more. They are gone. Their work remains. Each lived a kind of writer's life.

Erica Keiko Iseri took her own life in September. The news stunned me, but did not surprise. She had tried before and thanks to lucky interventions by friends, had failed. The record of her life is and must be incomplete. Among her words was her Pushcart Prize winning essay, "Overwintering in Fairbanks," a narrative of her first failed suicide attempt. It's a powerful essay, powerfully written, but full of the pain and bafflement of a person entangled in her own emotional web. When she died, Erica left behind friends, pets, material possessions for those close to her to gather and share in different ways. She also left a manuscript, an account of a long pilgrimage she had made in Japan. Like most pilgrimages, it was a journey to find herself as much as a recreation of a classic pilgrimage route. That manuscript was left undone, and the insights she gained from her long walk can only be lost to us now. We have lost a writer whose best work was still before her, who somehow could not sustain the internal peace writing often requires.

Earlier in the year just as we were entering full summer, poet Jerah Chadwick died of early onset Alzheimer's disease. In Jerah's case, we have collections of his work, and it is my hope that we might find uncollected poems as well. I just returned from Unalaska where Jerah had made his home. Though he had been gone from there these last few years, people spoke fondly of him. To many he was like family. To others, he was their English teacher who took a personal interest in their success. He was those things, and a wonderful poet as well. I had nagged him more than once, urging him to find more time for himself and for his writing. Like many dedicated teachers, he did what he felt called to do, I suppose. At this point, poet Peggy Shumaker, artist and writer Ray Hudson and I are pulling together the body of Jerah's work to make a final collection of his poetry. Jerah was a man of quick wit who used words cleverly, joyfully, and seriously. To lose words when he was a man of words was a cruel irony, an irony that in his last days he most likely was unable to appreciate.

In the dark days of winter, Eva Saulitis slipped away from life, slipped away in a way as much of her own choosing as a death might be these days. As the treatments for her recurrence of breast cancer became more grueling, she made the choice to discontinue them and went home to die. She regularly chronicled her physical and emotional reactions to the disease on a Caring Bridge site, but she also wrote a more considered account which she left us in Becoming Earth. Becoming Earth is perhaps

the most forthright book I have ever read by a person facing her death but still full of questions, ideas and observations. Eva may be a model of how a person chooses to live a full life despite the overwhelming fact of her impending death. Under what might seem to be terrible duress, Eva was able to write deeply and beautifully. I often wonder if the urgency of her failing health propelled her to write more and to write more intensely. She died having written all she could.

People write for different reasons. In my view ego would be the least of them. None of these writers wrote to advance themselves, but to better understand themselves. Now what these three have written is what we have left of them, what by accident or design they left us. Honest attempts to explain themselves to themselves and by extension to us. The words they used are fragile things, and the paper and computer disks and hard drives we save them on are just as fragile. It's up to us to hold onto these words, to ponder them, to preserve them so those who didn't know them might somehow approach them through their work. And for us to read and reread their words as a way of deepening our memories of them.