

# BLACK UMBRELLA FIVE POEMS

by Susan Musgrave

## A CONDITION INCOMPATIBLE WITH LIFE

You've been gone five years and now your socks  
are starting to wear out. I say gone as if you had slipped  
down to the local and never returned. The barkeep remembers  
you came late, after the lunch crowd had left. You had your own  
table, sat in the same chair and ordered a vodka tonic, always  
a double. She must have seen the question on my face.  
*You weren't supposed to know, she said.*

At first I would joke, I lost a husband but gained  
a hodgepodge of socks. You liked socks that made  
statements, that said gone are the days  
of matchy matchy classic argyle, polka dots  
or white tube socks: why be boring when you can wear  
a pair that peeks out from your pant leg, nervy  
skateboarding gorilla socks, bacon and egg  
socks, an odd sock missing its counterpart: DON'T  
FOLLOW ME, I'M LOST, TOO. *I cut a swath*, you said,  
describing how you had dressed for a friend's funeral—  
a silk scarf, cashmere coat, brushed leather kicks  
and infinity sign socks, those irrefutable 8's.

That last week I watched you struggle—I didn't  
offer to help, because it would have hurt your pride  
if I had said here, let me pull up your socks because you can't  
reach your feet. *They have discovered I am diabetic*, you said,  
the day before you died, but *that should change once I stop  
pounding back the tonic water.*

At the fire ceremony we held for you I placed a mickey  
of vodka, a six-pack of Fever Tree Lite and a pint-sized  
bottle of mouthwash on the table beneath your photograph.  
I told everyone I had created a new cocktail in your memory:  
vodka tonic with a chaser of Listerine. I'd found scores  
of empties, in the shed where you stacked firewood,  
and the mouthwash—because I wasn't supposed to know.  
*At least they were mickeys, he was trying to cut down*, I said,  
as everything you possessed was consumed by flames.  
Except for your socks. I couldn't bear to see them burn.  
And your slippers, too; I set them beside your bed where  
you will be able to swing your legs over the side and bury  
your feet deep in the plush black sheepskin, the way

you always did. You cut a swath through our lives, but—  
you can come back now. Any time. No questions asked.

## YOU PASSED FROM MY BODY

into this world, your brown eyes a shock  
 of wisdom and mischief, your fingers  
 curled into fists as if you were ready to break  
 what stood in your way. I knew, even then, you  
 were not mine to hold, not for long. You passed  
 from my body, and the missing is wild within me.

How can we endure, knowing our memories  
 will be obliterated, along with everything we love?  
 You said we could only pray, you knew a place,  
 and led the way down a road bright with fuchsia  
 blossoms—Tears of God, you called them—strewn  
 by the wind; I parked our car by a roadside grotto  
 commemorating the souls of the vehicular dead.

The carpark was empty, and you fed our fee  
 into the honesty box, which had been plundered,  
 before we began our climb up that sacred mountain  
 in the footsteps of devout penitents. The last picture  
 I took of you, our last evening in Ireland, is where you  
 stopped to kneel at the blue and white painted shrine  
 for the Virgin Mother, her hands, her eyes, lifted towards  
 heaven. Your holiness enveloped me then, and held me  
 with the hunger of other worldliness. How do I make it  
 back across the dark if you are not there beside me?

My loneliness is all of my own making but it is  
 immense; I feel you moving further away from me  
 as the night falls in rain. When will I see you again?  
 Feel the touch of you. The beauty of you that evening  
 as we climbed through crushed heather and sheep-dung  
 mingled with the herby scent of the joint you'd smoked  
 outside a ruined church in Cahersiveen. I wanted to believe

you'd left your habit behind; you told me, until you use  
 heroin you don't know how much pain you hold in your body.  
 The pain of wanting to leave your body, to reside across  
 the divide of death; with heroin you needed nothing  
 but your own woundedness. For nine months I had carried you,  
 bearing the weight of a second beating heart, and I think  
 of that heaviness now, your body making its own pact  
 with death even before you were delivered from my womb,  
 a body that had thrived wholly within mine, and is now ash.

## THE WEIGHT

How long I have carried you,  
through the wearying, stooping hours.  
It puts the time by, keeping you alive.

I carry you from where I abide,  
on the dark side of every passing  
moment, into the unforgiving light.

I carry you through the night  
and sing to help you sleep,  
but the heartbeat of a mother

who lies down beside her fretish child,  
is the sound a burthened spirit makes  
when it is sundering. I carry you through

those invisible irregularities of air.  
I carry you when you ask nothing  
from me, but to be carried, like a child

I never bore, who can never grow old, never  
die. I carry you because there is no  
harder sorrow than to carry the weight

of one who has stopped wanting  
to live, who was always able to love,  
but unable to carry on, so I carry you.

I carry you because to release you  
would render us both weightless.  
I keep you alive, because I carry you.

I carry you because you were once  
suspended inside me. I could sense  
you, hesitant, impatient, preparing

to descend, to be delivered headlong  
into the world that welcomes you  
like a wrecking ball.

## AFTER THE FUNERAL

I drive to the river, sit in the truck  
and listen to the rain, a black umbrella,  
half-closed, on the seat beside me.  
At the river's edge, a horse with blind eyes  
reminds me of when you would lead  
your wild mare to the water, and wait  
for her to drink, to grow peaceful  
in your shining. I look for you there,  
and find you, sometimes, such  
little that you wanted.

## THE SLAUGHTERING COUNTDOWN TOWARDS THE UNKNOWN

This, my third Christmas without you, the wind  
picks up rain, slings it against my windows, and my fear  
of losing you is great again, until I remember—you  
*are gone, now I am supposed to live without you.*

When I saw you last, in late fall, we visited your father's  
grave: you asked if I thought he could feel the weight  
of the flowers lingering over him, and it reminded me  
of the summer we buried my own father. You were barely  
three when I took you to see his grave, too young, still,  
to conceive of death; you told me if we dug deep enough,  
moved all the earth, he might come up again, in spring,  
like the bleeding heart I'd planted to cheer up the family  
plot, the forget-me-nots and pearly everlasting.

The treetops bend and strain in the wind, inviolate  
against the rain. The bravest thing I ever did  
was bring you into this world. The cruellest, the same.