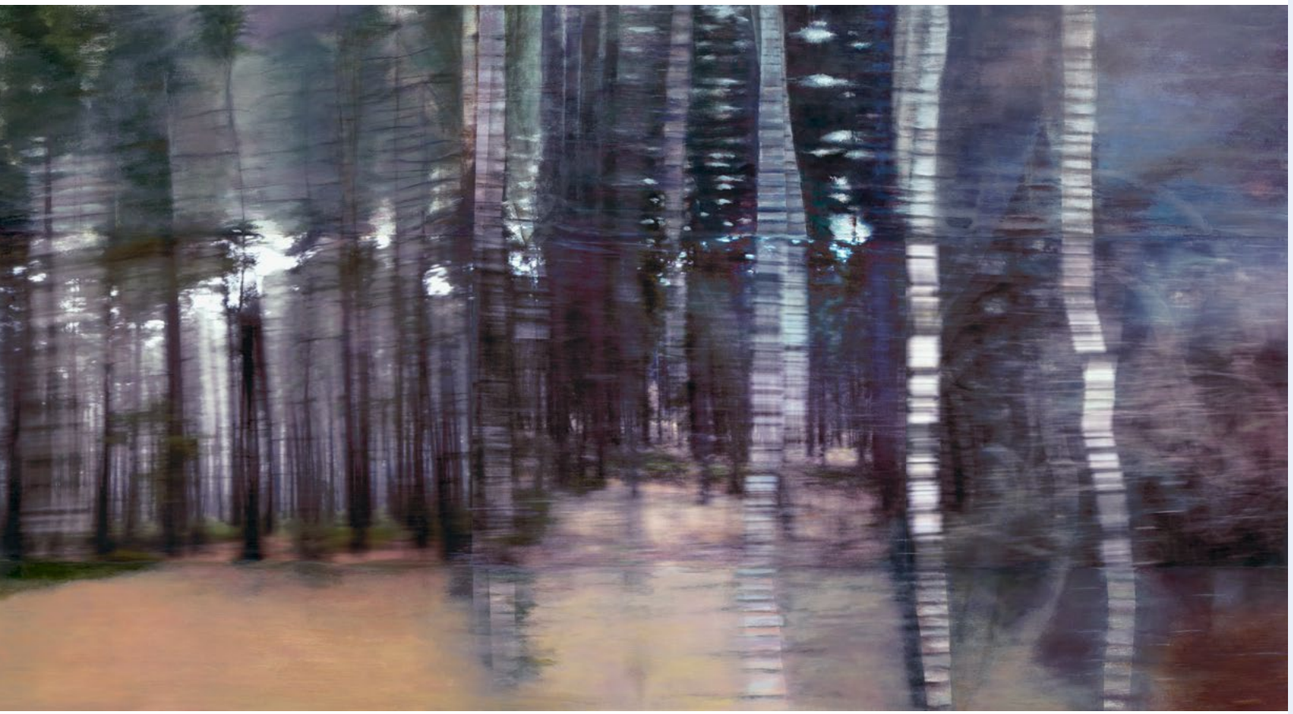
SARA FRIEDLANDER

Blurred Landscapes — Czech Woods, 2009
Original photos and paint on wooden panel
26 x 48 x 2 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

SUSAN HEEGER

I Let You Go

Lessons from my Monther's Death

When my mother died, I didn't know what to do with myself, but I had to do something. After clearing my house of all her medicines and equipment, I set up a kind of memorial in my office. Along the bookshelves, I propped pictures of her—as a toddler hugging a cat, as a three-year-old being cuddled by *her* mom, who would die within months. I tried to represent the eras of her youth, from the early terriers and pet chickens to the grim reign of a stepmother, to sorority sisters and fellow Navy WAVES, who, arm in arm, giggled with her at the camera. Later, on her wedding day, she poses in a blue suit, looking grave, as if she knows she's making a mistake.

I tucked battery-operated candles among the photos, with bowls of water ("The dead get thirsty," said a Buddhist friend of my sister's) and chocolate, her favorite food. Next came shells she'd gathered on beaches, china dogs from her childhood, and the amber beads she was wearing when she died. And though they'd been divorced forever and he'd married again, twice, my dad's picture joined the rest on the three-year anniversary of his death, which fell a week after hers. Once he was there, of course, I had to add my brother, John, who died before both of them.

* * *

In her final days, Mom assured my sister and me: *I'll never leave you. I'll always be here.* Touching first Laura's heart, then mine.

I was used to her exaggerated comforts, which tended to skip past the realities of suffering.

Oh, sweetheart, darling! Tomorrow's another day! When I'm sad, I clean out a drawer! You'll see, you'll look back on this and laugh!

This time, as her body failed, I sensed her trying to console herself, hating the thought of our grieving.

After she died, her promise stuck in my head. *Would* she somehow hang around? Shouldn't I consider the possibility?

I began to do things to show my openness.

I went to a yoga studio for a ritual called "Finding Your Spirit Guide," described as out-of-body "journeying," led by visions of "power animals."

While I'd read Carlos Castaneda in my teens, and experimented with acid, I didn't actually expect a visionary

trip to Mom. But once I arrived, I thought, why not? She loved animals. She believed in their powers.

It was October, a windy fall tipping into winter, a time, said the shaman/facilitator for the group, when veils between worlds (other planes of consciousness, the realms of the dead) grow porous, making it easier to communicate with spirits.

Before admitting us to the studio, she smudged us with purifying sage. As instructed, we'd brought rattles, to summon the spirits and shake loose our inhibitions, and symbolic objects for an altar at the center of the room. My rattle was a pellet drum that had been my son's, my offering the amber beads from Mom's shrine.

The shaman directed us to make noise, facing the earth's four directions, then lie on mats around the altar, radiating out from it like spokes on a wheel. She asked us to imagine a "power place" near a hole in the earth or pool of water through which we could descend to "lower realms." (Mine was a wooded lakeside in New Hampshire where I'd gone for a writer's retreat.)

While she beat rhythms on a drum, we set off, armed with questions for any animals who showed up.

Are you my spirit guide? Where am I going? What is your message?

During the first of several "journeys," I felt the drum's vibrations as waves in the lake and pictured animals that lived around it. Turtles, red foxes, loons.

I was breathless but alert, ready with my prompts. *Where is my mother? How can I reach her?*

Fleetingly, I caught the flash of a striped cat, then wondered if I'd imagined it.

During a break, we gathered in a sharing circle.

"I was swallowed by a giant eel," one woman said.

Another: "I was body-slammed by a sea lion."

"I saw a hawk," said a third. "Then I *was* the hawk." She added, "I was hoping for something less . . . carnivorous?"

Of course I know how this sounds. Ditto on some of the other roads I took off on, somewhat indiscriminately, after she died.

I floated in a sensory deprivation tank laced with Epsom salts, hoping my body consciousness would melt, leaving my spirit receptive. Bored by my own company, I moved on to "sound baths," held in the yoga studio, where crystal bowls, gongs, and drums were played to produce vibrations meant to "open doorways to the soul." While these *were* deeply, mysteriously moving, my mother did not attend. Nor did she show, in any recognizable form, as I sat with Korean and Tibetan Zen masters, hearing that suffering is inescapable and no one avoids death.

"Don't overthink this," our shaman advised. "Let your *guides* do the work—and your intuition."

After a second journey to the lower realms—uneventful, again, for me—she was preparing us to "go high."

"This time, you may see certain of your ancestors. You can ask them how they are and if they need your help."

I closed my eyes and pictured myself back beside the lake, looking up through pine boughs and broken sunlight. As the drum grew loud, I imagined my body lifted and carried, traveling up into airy blueness. My throat closed. My eyes filled. Abruptly, I seemed to feel my mother's presence. A chilly wind. A humid sorrow.

I choked up, confused. *Was this my grief, or hers? Her tears, or mine?*

What "help" did I possibly have to offer?

The next moment, I froze. *Was it wrong of me to even try to call her back? Couldn't my longing trap her, keep her from going where she was meant to go?*

At the break, when I managed to voice these fears, our leader said, "You need to know that your mother came to you voluntarily. Grief is a form of love. Yours *and* hers." Sweeping her hair aside she eyed me mournfully.

"The Mayans had a saying: 'The dead must travel on a river of tears.'"

* * *

When my mother talked about death as she lay in a railed bed provided by hospice, she assured us she wasn't sad or afraid. "I just worry about you girls."

Laura and me, both in our sixties.

But one night, as we stood on either side of her, awakened by a cry, she begged us to let her go. "Say it. 'I let you go.'"

We said it.

She lay back gratefully. Then her eyes popped open. "What are you two still doing here?"

The room was stuffy and hot, antiseptic and fruity smelling from the creams, wipes, soaps, and pads cluttering shelves and tables. A wheeled device swept oxygen from the air and tubed it up her nose with a mechanical clack.

A commode sat beside a wheelchair, near nebulizing and suctioning machines. There were stacks of towels, sheets, books Laura and I read to her, cds we played, pictures we propped where she could see them: of her eternally young mother; of ourselves and John, little.

I slept in the twin bed that had belonged to my now-grown son, Simon; Laura, during visits from Germany where she lives, camped on floor cushions. We never turned out the light, which glowed like a fuzzy moon in its paper globe.

Mom catnapped during the day. At night, we got up with her the way you do with your baby, rocking on your feet, startled by shadows.

One particularly haunted hour, Mom announced, "I'm going to die tonight. In my little red chair."

We looked at each other. I said, "You mean your *white* chair? Your recliner?"

Until recently, Mom had slept in this, in her room in a retirement home. At age ninety, in an accident caused, I was sure, by the shock of my brother's death, she'd broken her back. Lying flat hurt. (The hospice bed was adjustable.)

The white chair. Yes. Calmly she said, "I'm going to die in that, tonight."

The next morning, she looked sheepish.

* * *

No mother should outlive her child.

I heard my mother say this many times. When a friend's daughter got leukemia. When a neighbor's son died in a car crash at twenty-one.

Nevertheless. Four years ago, on a busy workday, I picked up the phone to hear a stranger stumble through the news that my brother had "passed away."

None of us had seen it coming. We hadn't seen *him* in ages, since he'd married and had a baby in his fifties. With his new family, he seemed finished with ours, especially Dad, unrelentingly critical and depressed, a bully and a drinker John could never please. What had Mom done? Stayed mute. (John told his wife both were dead.)

He was, sporadically, in touch with me, because, I think, I had a child and he wanted to talk about his.

Only two days earlier, he'd called as he was shopping with this boy, whistling and cheerful, about to leave for vacation after some quick business in New York.

I heard the two chattering in the background about fishing poles, lures, bait. John kept putting me aside to ask a salesman questions.

How could he be gone?

In a panic of disbelief, I began to hunt down testimonials from people who'd had communication with the dead. One book I found, called (ironically?) *Hello from Heaven*, emphasized that contacts usually happened when death was fresh, while the dead were still transitioning out of life.

In John's Chicago apartment, where I stayed a few days before his funeral, I lay awake in a storm, listening, waiting for him.

The next morning, breathing the hothouse funk of lilies, I was gripped by the flower-decked portrait in his living room. Larger than life, his face swollen by undetected heart disease, he caught my eye.

Can you believe this shit?

A month later, in Munich, where I went to grieve with my sister, I sat in a church under painted saints and heard his voice. A little raw, but clear. *I'm safe, Sooz. I'm in a good place. Don't worry.*

I never did hear from Dad, who died a year after John, from Parkinson's disease aggravated by drinking. Having failed his son and lost his third wife, he was bitter and afraid, alone, though I was there with him.

* * *

I knew I was lucky. I'd always known. Not to be the boy in my family. Not to lose my mother when I was small, leaving me at the mercy of a stepmom. Not to lose her later, when Dad moved out. Like a sailor in gale-force winds, she shouldered us through our teens alone. I was awful to her, as if daring her to leave too. But she didn't.

She lived to ninety-four, long enough for us to bury a lot of hatchets.

As she aged, along with dumping most of her possessions, she shrugged off layers of herself, becoming brighter, more concentrated, less shy with her affections.

"What *is* she living on?" my sister and I wondered when she stopped eating much of anything but ice cream, in tiny spoonfuls.

She claimed not to be in pain. But it clearly hurt to move her even a little. Hospice gave us "comfort meds," intimidating at first, less so as she grew sicker.

"Oh, my sweethearts, my girls," she often crooned while she still had breath enough. "It means so much, to be together."

Her dying took forever, almost three months from the day we moved her to my house, though the staff at her retirement home believed she was already "actively dying."

Here, she rallied, reminisced, sang old sorority songs (*When at the door a boy makes passes, I simply slip on my glasses* . . .). She fretted (*Did John ever feel loved?*). While she could still sit up, she wanted to be rolled to the window to watch the birds (*See the yellow ones? What are they? What kind of tree is that?*). She insisted on playing cards, even when she couldn't hold them or keep the suits straight.

Once, picking nervously at her amber beads, she forgot who I was and told me a story about myself (*I have a daughter your age* . . .).

Another day, I walked in on a caregiver telling her she'd soon be "in the arms of Jesus."

I had a word with this lady. "Can we leave Jesus out of it? She's mad at God."

She'd reported this matter-of-factly, when asked if she wanted to see a hospice chaplain.

God took my mother! *People would say, He needed her, to be an angel.* I *needed her!*

Sometimes, it was John she thought of. *No mother should outlive her child.*

These moments, though, were rare. Mostly, she focused on her gratitude to be with us, her beautiful, blessed life.

I remembered how, when I was younger, her tendency to blow past darkness on a raft of cheer struck me as maddeningly superficial—evidence of a flawed, inferior (to mine) intelligence.

Now I wondered if it wasn't her secret weapon.

She basked in Laura's visits. She loved having her grandson pop in, loved the daily presence of her "granddog," Bunny, who hung out watchfully by her bed. She had a stack of mail from retirement-home pals and made friends with all her caregivers.

The day she died, in bed, as it turned out, she was finished talking. Just once, when my husband, Rob, came home from work, did she open her eyes.

I told her I was going for a walk. As I headed back, she left, slipping away almost imperceptibly, with the ghost of a smile.

For several hours, until the mortuary van arrived, the back of her neck stayed warm, as if right there, in that one spot, she was still alive.

I couldn't stop touching it, struck with terror that she would disappear as fast and utterly as John and then my father had.

I tried to hold on, to hear her voice, to *feel* her without pulling too hard.

After all, I'd promised. I had let her go.

Her vision of death: *All this,* she'd say, lifting bony fingers, *is going to pass. I'll see my mother, John. My dogs. Everyone I've ever loved. They'll come for me. They'll be here.*

She believed this.

Was it what happened? Had they?

Are these even the right questions?

In my latest attempt to find out, I went for a Reiki "healing." I knew almost nothing about the practice, except that it involved touch, or possibly *near* touch, someone's hands hovering in the air above you.

As I lay on a white table in a dusky room, the healer worked her hands beneath my head. I felt tense, confused as to what I wanted, why, really, I was there.

Her hands conveyed heat—to my brain, my neck, my throat, where, even then, tears had begun to press.

After a few minutes of quiet, I felt a sudden, almost seismic forcefulness, around me and inside. Abruptly, my family seemed to be there, my mother gathering everyone around—John, Dad, my sister, all in some younger version of themselves. Radiant, innocent. *Trusting.*

I was smacked with sadness, as if I were seeing, what? Something like my family's birth, back before we came apart. Before what was going to happen happened.

My mother, the quiet power in the room, invited me to witness. *No one starts out wanting to be cruel. Assigning blame misses the point.*

This is what she offered.

An opening for forgiveness.

Recently, I read that Houdini, master of self-imposed shackles, threw himself on his mother's grave, talking to her through his sobs, for months after she died.

I get it. I talk to mine every day. Like Houdini, who, absent when she died, was reportedly desperate to learn his mother's last words, I have questions, some small, some enormous.

Were Mom and Dad (whose proposal began, *I have no right to ask* . . .) married civilly or in a church? What was life like when they loved each other? Have she and John and Dad and the other wives achieved some afterlife détente?

Are the dead the ones who move on, or are we?

A psychic friend recommended that I get a candle and scratch my questions into it with a pin. When I burn it, I'll have answers.

I have the candle. I just can't decide, given limited space, which questions to ask.

Or maybe I think it's time I left her in peace.

She's already given me plenty.

I hear her in my head when I visit her pictures.

Keep busy. Listen. Be kind. Forget yourself.

The words mean more to me than they used to, since there won't be any more. So do the pictures, which I change out sometimes so I don't stop seeing her.

The last one I added is my favorite. Instead of my young mother, she's old in it, every year carved in her face, every tragedy and trial. But there's also happiness.

It's Christmas. She wears a red sweater with a bear on it and her Winnie-the-Pooh watch. She holds a deck of cards and smiles beatifically. Directly at me.

Hello.

She loved her life. She slipped out when it was time.

In between, like a goldfinch hopping in a sycamore, she wore her being lightly.

Susan Heeger is a Los Angeles fiction and features writer and her work has appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, *McSweeney's*, the *Virginia Quarterly Review* and other publications. This piece and another upcoming in *O Magazine* are part of a book in progress about her mother.