

Afterword — Immortality of the Unfinished

Rishma died in my arms at home on Sunday, April 17th, 2016, at 7:44 p.m., leaving the bulk of her promising work unfinished. Talented as she was, there's no way around the cancer that brought her to the idea of "the immortality of the unfinished," as she called it.

Matinée Girl, her second novel, — unfinished; *Chasing Beauty*, her collected essays, — unfinished; *Dangerous Words: the Poetry of Witness*, an investigation of poetics as pedagogy, — unfinished; *City of Madness and Love*, the new poems she was working on, — unfinished.

Six years earlier, we had fallen in love deeply, quickly. We met on a rainy Monday in October at a literary supper held in honor of a Quebec novelist we both liked to read, Marie-Claire Blais. Neither of us was looking for love, but tenderness, laughter, and astonishing conversations left us inseparable within a week. Three weeks into our encounter, she told me I was her destiny, her homecoming, her *Bashert*. From that day on I asked her, every morning, to marry me.

My beloved wife was a luminous, arresting beauty, a vivifying, sensual poet, and a much-loved professor at York University. In life, as in love, timing is everything. She had just been awarded a one-year research grant to work on *Dangerous Words: The Poetry of Witness*, and I had just been contracted to write a feature docudrama on the painter William Kurelek. But then, just like that, the diagnosis arrived...

A small, sore lump on her left side, just below her ribcage....

In the next four years we would have to learn how to cope with the cellular madness of metastatic cancer. She'd endure three radical surgeries, survive the last one against the odds and suffer through thirty-nine chemo infusions. And, if that weren't enough, to alleviate more pain, she went through ten

radiation sessions to the brain.

Looking back, I see how she helped me face her forthcoming end. She became a *Divine Whisperer*, calling me with her bright-dark eyes to come closer, so she could whisper her thoughts and last wishes to me. It was her unique way of expressing her pain, tenderly, softly, and making it her own.

One night in the winter of 2015, we were watching *Only Lovers Left Alive*, Jim Jarmusch's highly symbolic vampire film. Its premise is that we live in toxic times. To survive, even vampires have to search for and find pure, uncontaminated blood.

Rishma loved that movie, we had seen it twice before. Its opening scene put a smile on her face, as a needle drops on an old 45" vinyl single and we hear Wanda Jackson belt out her rockabilly hit, "*Funnel of Love*."

*"Here I go,
Falling down, down, down,
My mind is a blank,
My head is spinning around and around."*

She recognized the corollary between her own oncological search for pure, non-metastasized blood and the vampire's hunger for pure uncontaminated blood. But that night was an epiphany of sorts for her, a kind of acceptance of the inevitable, when she turned to me and said, "No more endings. From now on, I only want beginnings and middles, let the rest be part of the immortality of my unfinished life."

We stopped paying attention to endings, to clock time, and started living in infinitude.

I even began to tell her stories about a world in which our bodies survive in eternity. She liked those stories, because they had no endings, and she said they took her back to childhood.

Three months later, the last words she spoke to me were, "David, I'm falling, falling into another world."

I took my darling in my arms and said, "Don't worry, my love, I'll be there to catch you."

That was a Friday, and by Sunday evening she was gone, at peace, having left me behind, alive.

Alive here behind, alive with her pain, still dreaming her, still hearing her rehearse and sing "Rock Me," the last poem Rishma worked on, her final *cri de coeur* for the immortality of a life unfinished.

—David Sobelman, Oakville, July 26, 2017