

Transition

Now it is time to commemorate a friend of mine, Mary Jane. I will also remember her fiance, Ron.

What was Mary Jane like? When I knew her, she was sad, friendly, outgoing, in a way upbeat, very sick at times, needy, loud, perhaps a bit rude, goodhearted, disciplined in how she asked for help, tough, resilient, affectionate, suffering, alone. I don't have a lot of photographs, but I wanted one to remember her by. She lived in many different places in the 10 months I knew her, and in October, she lived with friends in a house up in Escondido, a city about 30 miles north of San Diego. Out on the neighbors' lawn, there was a Halloween display, with gravestones. One of them read "Mary Jane, 1950 - 1971, Stoned to death" (Someone once questioned me as to whether Mary Jane's name is real, and it is. I didn't make it up as a pseudonym, although it could seem too appropriate.) In the picture, she is crouched behind the gravestone with a pose of a fierce look on her face. She is playful, perhaps even a bit ironic, childish or childlike, and yet if you look at her face, it's a pose, a duty, on top of a look in her eyes of "Just getting by." I printed up this photo and keep it in my room.

Before she died, I was working on a book, and one of the chapters was about her and her fiance Ron. She didn't like how much she was in it, she wanted it to be all about Ron. And the main focus is on Ron, but I explained to her that in order to see who Ron was, you had to see how he treated her. The book is about awakening to love, and so it's about the different ways in which people love each other, and Ron exemplified a certain kind of love. And I don't know if she fully understood where I was coming from as a writer, but she let me do her thing and I published the little book, with the chapter about them, entitled,

The Musician

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I wrote all of that in July 2014. For a while things seemed to be going okay with Mary Jane, at least, not really worse. In the first few months after Ron's death, Mary Jane was sick and had to go to court and had to move. But things became a little more stable. She talked about going to rehab for her alcohol addiction. I thought that if she could just pull through, just find a good place to live, with good roommates, just get over her grief a little bit, just go to the right church (she wanted to go to church), just hold on, then she could pull through and become a person with a unique way to help other people. I told her her purpose in living was to help others, and on her own she expressed that she wanted to start a needle exchange in San Diego, a non-judgmental way to reach out to addicts. She had had experience helping to run one in Los Angeles when she was younger.

Outwardly, she seemed to be holding it together, but one day on or near the 17th of November, 2014, I was with her in her room at the house she was staying in, and she told me how hard things really were. I had lent her my copy of *Machina*, by Smashing Pumpkins, and she was playing it on her stereo while she talked about how hard things were. I remember a particular song coming on, "Try, Try, Try", which has a refrain of "Try to hold on". She broke into tears and I realized I hadn't understood what she was going through. And after that conversation, I had to write a poem. But the poem wasn't only about her. It was about me too, because I felt similarly to her in many ways. I wasn't experiencing the alienation from God expressed in the poem, but I was experiencing something on the inside, a kind of frozen horror, and my solution to that was to slow my breathing. And I intuited that it was the same for her. I didn't think about how an overdose of heroin could kill you by slowing your breathing. Or perhaps I did. But in either case, I didn't think of it as a prophecy.

"17 November 2014"

(for Mary Jane)

Held out over the abyss
Which is still, flowing
Which never ends

The endlessness
No -- it has an end
But I cannot see it
And I never move closer to the end
Held out over the abyss



I am falling
My guts are unsettled
But I am frozen over the abyss



In my head, a song is stuck
A tune consisting of a crescendo which
Never ends
But
Never overwhelms
But is always overwhelming



Oh, I long to reach out,
To grab someone
Where are the people?
I see their shades
They're shades
They're pale colored patterns
They're projections--
On what surface?
Who knows...
They have their pity-and-shame curtains
Their veils of looking down
When I just want to make sure that
Their hearts are veiled in modesty
And their ears are unveiled
At the moment I'm brave
And the demon crawls out of my mouth
Leaving the other 99
But that was the demon
For today.



I want to listen to horrors
Projected by my stereo
The fakeness and realness of art
O God, why?
What did I do to you?
Do you hate me?
Or are you a fantasy, a shade,
Are you as fake as my friends,
The phantoms who were never present
To me?



Sometimes I have thought

Of death,
Of giving up.
Of the end of
Weariness, of
The peace of
Nothing.



Here I am, Lord, I
Am your humble servant
I will stay still,
Held out over the abyss,
And I will slow my breathing
That is how I will kill myself,
I will fade, and my image
Will shift (the light comes from
Somewhere--
Where?)
I will slow, and slow
And then I will be dead.



And then what will you do,
you Life-giver?

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A month after writing that poem, I saw on Facebook a message to the effect that Mary Jane had died. I didn't believe it. I called her son, who had posted it, and he confirmed.

She had gone up to Los Angeles to see friends.

She was relatively upbeat as she left.

She wasn't going there to die.

In San Diego she didn't have anyone to really connect with, but she had some friends in L.A. with whom she could. Maybe have some fun.

There was something lacking in me, and while we went out together to music events, I knew that I wasn't providing that certain kind of fun and she needed it. I remember letting her off at the Greyhound station in downtown San Diego, and then going on with my life, and then seeing the next day what her son wrote.

She died in L.A.

It turns out that she overdosed on heroin at a friend's house.

(I don't know how good a friend he was.)

For the next two days, I felt physically stunned and with a feeling in my head like there had been an amputation there, and on the day that I learned of her death, I wrote this poem.

"17 December 2014"

I was under so many anesthetics
That I didn't know it when you died
And now I'm spinning
From inside to out
I'm all made of wounds



I don't know where you are
But I will follow you there
And pick up the litter you left
As you walked through the woods
By your favorite river



When they plant you,
Something will come out of the ground
I don't know what
And when they water you
You will taste the earth



I will put a stone on your grave
And after 50 years, the grave will
 swallow the stone with its grass
And I hope by then we have the answers
You needed

“Peace Be Still”

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I have a tendency to move on. I'm not all cut up emotionally about Mary Jane or Ron. But I think about Mary Jane almost every day, as a matter of course, as a matter of fact. Perhaps if I were the kind of person to not move on, to become deeply and viscerally attached to other people, I could have been a better friend to Mary Jane. I could have done something heroic, like helped pay for better housing for her, moved out and given her my room with my family. Maybe I could have been more fun. I couldn't provide what Ron did, and maybe, as Mary Jane thought, Ron was the only person who could provide shelter, companionship and affirmation the way he did. The day he died, she wrote on Facebook that she was going to die soon and be with him. I only saw this after her death, as I went through Facebook to learn as much as I could about her. But in my own way, I do keep her memory alive, and try to learn or even learn again whatever lessons she was meant to teach me.

Rest in peace, Ron, and rest in peace, Mary Jane. May you be brought back to life in bodies that are healed, and may you be reunited.