

JUDITH KALMAN

A year ago almost
my father died.
Odd—no?—not to remember
the date.

And when I think what I
don't do for my own kids.
How do we leave so much behind?

It's a lie, putting into so little
what went in a lifetime of gain and growth.
The easy-to-cast-off caterpillar's skin
that was a parent's love—
Mistook for the parent.

I didn't notice
when my father died.
There wasn't time for it.
There was a baby at breast and
a child to ferry
Manuscripts and meals.
Clamour. Something
always needed feeding.

In that time
when I had no thought
other than where I had
to go the next minute,
My father died from
neglect in a city
hours away.
Today I looked up the date.

Last year they buried my father.
My sister and mother and their
two conflicting rabbis.
People came who knew them—
My father had cultivated few attachments here—
His garden, his far-flung relations.

My mother chose a simple casket
Though not as plain as he would have liked
And the rabbi who'd never met him gave
a moving piece after what we'd recounted.

That was the way. My father at his
funeral moved all those who
hardly knew him. He was alone here.
He didn't attach strongly.
But at his funeral strangers were
moved.

My sister liked that
It was her event. My mother,
still broken-hipped and numb,
seemed removed
despite the tears and the talk and the
shaking hands.

My mother in black sweater and
slacks, the wheelchair and
black beret.

I spoke in that crowd of
people who knew them, who came to
see.

It was my father's funeral and
I had to say something that
would not offend but meant
something to me, my only part
in this event. Something of mine
as he was mine too, not just
theirs, though it was their affair.
Something he wouldn't have
minded.

They took over—the rabbis and my
sister's congregation, my mother's
new friends. Because he had observed like them.
Mere observances, but he would have
approved.

What was I in this ritual of
gestures and strangers?

The daughter well-dressed
who didn't know about rending
her shawl and dressing plain.

I was outside here at my father's
funeral with my weeping sister and
her friends and my mother's connections
Searching for some way to make it mine,
to find the father of my garden
in a grey knit cardigan, rake in hand
The father who had listened endlessly to
my four-year-old prattle
The observant father who had lived a secular
life and who had loved me
limitlessly.

I said something at his
funeral, for him, and for them,
and a little bit for me
But they buried him while
I merely attended.

My father is an engraving
etched in my flesh
Inexhumable
Untraceable

I will bury him when
I have taken that stencil
of skin and blood and
reversed it on this table.

Judith Kalman is a freelance editor and writer living in Toronto