

VALERIE ALIA

Two Poems for Judith Merrill

I

It came, this dawn
The tilted sunrise

Coasting into town,
leaning into the runway,
I thought I was
on my way
to meet you for
food and dancing
forgetting for a
moment
my loss of leg
and yours of life.

Our conversation's
inward turn
The tilted sunrise
angling over
sleeping streets....

"What I like is getting
my head turned
around"
you wrote
You were a turner of
heads.

You were always the
most interesting person
in the room,
I said,
But there has to be room
for others.
Sometimes there wasn't.
Friends were sorely
tested

and often failed.
Sometimes you were a
one-woman crowd.

And then, suddenly
would come
some (small or large)
but deeply human
gesture

You showed us
new universes and
old dreams....

Spell-weaver
and dreamer
lover of good food
and men
child and mother
grandmother and
friend

We pause
this moment
thinking spells
weaving dreams
lingering and
letting go
watching you
sail off to
new galaxies,
and love.

II

The red ribbon
from the airborne

silver and red
mylar balloon
hangs down
touches
circles
then settles
in a halo
on top of the
elegant dreadlocked head
of one of Judy's friends
who sits
listening,
absorbed,
not seeing
the ribbon
linking him
to the ceiling—

He is focused
on Judy,
sitting fatly at
stage centre,
in her multicoloured urn
amidst coloured candles
against a backdrop
of galaxies and suns

Outside, we watch
her namesake daughter
Merril's balloons
sail
over the city
flashing
red and silver hearts

Let them go free,
Merril said,
And they flew free.

Valerie Alia helped edit Judith Merrill's memoirs (to be completed and published by her family). Part I of this poem was read at Judy's memorial celebration at the Performing Arts Lodge in Toronto on September 20th, 1997. Valerie Alia is Distinguished Professor of Canadian Culture at Western Washington University. She has published poetry, photography, and articles in previous issues of Canadian Woman Studies.