

HOW WE SAID GOODBYE

How do we set someone free?
How do we say goodbye and
send someone on their path?

In April i went to see him;
it had been three years
since the doctors gave him six months to live.
i had not thought we'd meet again,
but we laughed and swam and drank;
we walked to the volcano
where the lava met the sea.
We drove to the Place of Refuge;
there was no refuge there for him.

We were sitting on the beach at South Point
watching the waves come in.
i asked how he was, how long he had.
He said that he used to be indifferent
that nothing truly engaged his attention
but since the doctors told him
to go home and die
he was always finding something interesting
birds, plants, bugs, a pregnant daughter,
and that maybe he had two more months.

We talked of meeting in Alaska in July.
He wanted to go fishing on the Copper River,
to go hunting once again
before he said goodbye.



We spoke in June and for the first time
he sounded withdrawn; he was too weak
to hunt or fish and even though
baby ducklings were swimming
outside the cabin window, tumors
were "making his skin too small for his body".
Living in Chitina was too much, too hard
and he went back to Hawaii.

Mid-August he sent a drawing;
a week later, he phoned and talked
about the birds living in the tree
outside his Honolulu hospital window.
After the third round of radiation,
he flew to the Cancer Center in Seattle;
he went into a coma and onto life support,
but he was their Christmas miracle
and he walked out of the hospital,
went back to the Big Island.
When it got warm enough, he went to Chitina
for the spring salmon run
and then his spleen exploded and he died.

* * *

We gathered by the fish wheel
set on the Copper River; the sun shining
and a breeze blowing the mosquitoes away.
We formed a circle and people said words.
Michael Moody spoke of John's love of birds;
he brought feathers and wings and bones;
each item was named and referenced
to some lesson he had learned.
John's spirit was acknowledged and honored;
there was ritual. Those who wanted could take
a spoonful of ashes and put them in the river.
None of the Natives
would touch the ashes or speak of death.
Some prayed; the fish wheel spun.



The ceremony ended; Michael said
“Enough of that female nurturing shit”
and we drank scotch and wine.
We ate home-canned salmon and black bear sausage;
we ate moose meat and pickled salmon;
some smoked home-grown, others drank home brew.
His granddaughter nursed and gurgled;
little children played and Catherine cried.
Salmon swam into the wheel and were caught;
his ashes went into the river, were carried away.

Later, people started drifting off,
the Elders first,
then families with youngsters.
Michael went over to the makeshift altar,
picked up the feathers,
the wings, the bones and slowly
walked down to the fish wheel.
He stood on one of the floats,
considered sky and water,
and threw them into the current,
watched them swept away.

They asked me,
to most the stranger,
if i wanted some salmon,
living fish, trapped by the wheel.
i said “i'd rather let them go.”

We put them back into the river
along with John.
We sent them on their path.

