



Vigil

Alan Shapiro

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The *New York Times Book Review* praised Alan Shapiro's *The Last Happy Occasion* as a "touching and intelligent, emotionally satisfying and elegant testimony to the power of poetry to instruct, heal and inspire." *Vigi* emerges from the final chapter of that book, "*Sittin' in a Funeral Place*," a powerful essay about Shapiro's sister Beth, her struggle with breast cancer, and the limitations of poetry in confronting the untransformable pain of loss.

In *Vigil*, Shapiro chronicles with heart-wrenching lyricism the final four weeks of Beth's life in a hospice, attended by her parents, brothers, husband, daughter and friends. One by one, as loved ones arrive to visit Beth, Shapiro reveals fragments of their personal history, bringing to life a troubled and poignant past. A visit from their brother David triggers the memory of a searing betrayal—the parents disowned Beth after learning from David that she was secretly dating a black man; a visit from the parents recalls their bitter quarrels over Beth's radical politics; a visit from Beth's black husband brings the painful memory of their wedding and her parents' refusal to attend. These recollections and feelings that surface with each visit evoke the unresolved, deeply disturbing issues that kept the Shapiro family estranged for so long, making the reconciliation that Beth's death brings to her family all the more extraordinary.

Shapiro gives an unconventionally honest account of our responses—horror, relief, impatience, exhaustion, exhilaration, projection, fear, self-criticism, and a sense of fulfillment—in the presence of the dying. Concluding with a selection of moving poems, Shapiro affirms the astonishing link between creativity and healing, and provides a coda to the whole experience. The price of human connection may be great, but human connection, in the end, has the power to redeem even the most painful of human experiences.

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