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Writers of Calendars

Christine Stewart-Nunez

South Dakota State University, christine.stewart@sdstate.edu

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Writer of Calendars

“Please, Grandma, record your stories.” I placed a plain-lined notebook in her hands. She looked as if ready to speak but put the notebook on the table. In three days I would leave to work in Turkey, and I sensed the opportunity to clarify how I—the poet and adventurer—fit into my family was slipping away. The oldest in her family married to the oldest in my grandfather’s, Grandma was the brightest star in the Lenan/Grafton constellation. And somehow I knew she would die before I completed my two-year teaching contract. Lunch-time naps, a clutch of pill bottles, and doctor appointments inked onto her calendar spoke over her silence.

She was barely five feet tall. Once, weight had gathered at her waist. Now cancer loosened her blue-knit pants and muddled the tenderness in her hazel eyes. I picture her leaning against the kitchen counter, beige twin-set fancied up with a beaded necklace and rhinestone clip-ons. She wears her black hair, heavily streaked with silver, short and permed. Tapping a pen in a calendar’s margin, she checks on the week’s events and considers yesterday’s weather. In these grids she connects clusters of light—family in California, Missouri, Arkansas, and Colorado—by birth, anniversary, and death dates. She pockets the pen, and she heads out for church. A faint blend of Aqua Net and scented talcum powder hangs in the air.

Without me to coax the sentences onto the page, Grandma never filled the notebook. Between treatments she pressed sentences in correspondence and squeezed words into her daily calendar. While she was dying on another continent, I composed alliterative phrases about the Turkish landscape and pieced together images from our lives.

June 2008

With the afternoon sun to her back, my mother walked into my house in South Dakota with an overnight bag in one hand and a Wal-Mart sack stuffed to a breaking point in the other.

“I’d thrown these into the trash,” Mom said, setting the sack near me with a soft thud. “Then I took them out in case you wanted them.” She

wrapped her arm around the base and pushed it to me. Through the transparent film I saw faint, compressed cursive: round Os, Ds, and Bs slimmed to ovals; lowercase Ls thinned to uncrossed Ts.

“I’d forgotten about these,” I said, running my finger along a calendar’s spiraled edge. For more than two decades, minus an occasional week, Grandma wrote about each day’s events in a two-by-two inch box. “Why do you think she wrote in calendars?”

“Perhaps she was a writer like you,” Mom replied. A subtle, intangible connection. I noticed our similar script, messy and cramped within lines as if written between tree rings. I sensed her hand gravitating to paper as mine does, the urgent note scrawled next to a full moon symbol as if written to unveil words. I felt the pressure of a pen, the hardened callous bump under the tissue of skin.

“Why didn’t she keep a diary—something more expansive?”

Mom looked up from the sink where she was washing her hands. “Maybe this was the best she could do.”

September 1996

I traveled to Mount Nemrut in the Adiyaman province on Grandma’s birthday, September 22, to see the tomb of Antiochus I. As I loaded my backpack into a minivan at dusk and sandwiched myself between colleagues for an eight-hour ride east from Tarsus, Grandma was probably enjoying a lunch of egg salad with Grandpa. We traveled along pistachio groves—a long stretch of landscape without street lights or towns. The air cooled and became drier. Grandma’s calendar doesn’t reveal details, but I imagine she celebrated her birthday at the Golden Corral Buffet. That night as I slept, swaying with the moving minivan, she sliced through spice cake and sipped a mug of decaf.

We arrived at Mount Nemrut, the resting place of the king who had ruled Commagene from 70 B.C.E. to 38 B.C.E., at dawn. Stiff and groggy, we stumbled out of the van and gathered outside a tea shack. A man placed warm glasses in our hands, and we waited for the sky to turn gray on the eastern horizon. I seemed to shrink under the star-studded sky. I pulled the sleeve of my wool sweater over my hand against the cold still air, wishing I had brought my journal. Moonlight illuminated the gravel-topped tomb. Here, Antiochus may have celebrated Pompey’s confirmation of him as king; here, he may have scoffed at Mark Antony’s attempt to fine him for neglecting to aid a Roman ally. Here, he existed beyond the fragments of Roman record keeping at the center of his own royal cult. Future generations would hike to this mountain with offerings.

In the zone between sleep and wakefulness, I gazed at the multitude of stars. Had I ever seen a night so thick with light? My mind swung from

stars to memories of stars: sitting on porch steps one August midnight and penciling in my diary; walking through an autumn field of papery cornstalks, the moon heavy overhead. Wrapped in the humidity of a Midwest summer and cooled by the arid mountain air, the scent of tea brought me firmly into the present. The mountain stretched up ahead, the tea warm in my hands.

July 2008

I didn't look at the calendars carefully until two weeks later. Alone in my kitchen, laptop screen glowing and tea steeping, I paused. What would I find in these windows to the past? My hands peeled back the plastic as if the contents, exposed to direct light, could evaporate. I stuck my nose in the sack. Mildew. One calendar was bolted to cardboard, gray spores on one side, faded gold writing on the other: "Modern Optical. 206 Euclid, Des Moines, Iowa." Underneath, in red: "March 1974. The sure sign of the little man is the big head."

I held the calendar in my hand; Grandma must have touched the calendar like this when she moved it from underneath the green rotary telephone. This month Grandma recorded birthdays in her typical shorthand: On Tuesday, March 12: "Thomas Wayne (Tony) G. 22," indicating that Grandpa's brother, Tony Grafton, was born in 1922. I lifted the damp page. March 21: "Bake pie for dinner at church." April 5: "Theresa and Sharon, 1:30." This was somewhat unusual because my mother and sister's visit was recorded in my mother's handwriting. I imagine Grandma standing back from a month to connect all the visits, birthdays, and bake sales, the line-shaping story.

I flipped through other calendars. What did she want to remember when she wrote "Chris back from Europe" on June 28, 1993? Did these fragments help her access memories as they did for me? Recording names and bits of detail—the quality of sunshine, the kind of baked deliciousness she made for church—became evidence of important events. And she also created opportunities to make memories. Perhaps writing down the day I was due back from Europe reminded her to keep the afternoon free to accompany my parents to the airport.

I recall the two of us pouring over photos of Belgium, ticket stubs from Paris museums, a map of my favorite Vienna neighborhood, and an unsent postcard of Florence. She had always wished to go to Italy where my grandfather spent time in World War II, but family responsibilities kept her home. I read bits from my journal aloud: "Tried to find the Piazza de Michelangelo. Ate pasta with pesto at a café with flower-stenciled mirrors, peeling white paint, exposed red bricks." I omitted a kiss and the description of Rosario, the uniform-clad Sicilian stubborn enough

to pursue a three-hour conversation by working through an English-Italian phrasebook. Toward the end of my photograph pile, Grandma brought out a few photos of Grandpa in Italy and a gift box. Out of the wrinkled “Made in Italy” cardboard, she lifted a shell ring: Grandma’s image in a tiny cameo on its face.

September 1996

With more light, we hiked the short but steep path. Pulverized rock crunched under our boots. On the east-facing terrace we watched the sun paint a gold veneer on miles and miles of pocked earth. Antiochus must have seen a lush landscape where the blue sky poured itself into the Upper Euphrates, a shimmering thread of prosperity. The breadbasket of the ancient world. I thought of Grandma in the new breadbasket, the American Midwest. That month, when I opened her letter—three pages of thin, almost translucent paper—I expected the script stretched across the guiding lines to dissolve before I read it: “Hi honey! I haven’t forgotten you, but, so many things happened. We went to Branson for a week—didn’t see any shows, but did a *little* shopping. Your grandpa caught lots of fish. We will be eating fish all winter.”

Her letters dulled my home sickness yet disappointed me. I wanted engaging remembrances of her family’s life on the farm; I longed for details of my grandfather’s latest carpentry project, probably a stepstool crafted to look like a turtle. Still, hand-written in blue ink, the same color as my teapot and the salt shaker on my kitchen counter, her letters felt intimate. In slices of the quotidian she gave me the events that inspired concern or joy. I looked at the moonscape, the ashen crust of earth, and gathered the images to describe in a letter. So much was unspoken between us—her dreams for me, my desire to see more clearly the silences implied in the bits of anecdotes she shared.

July 2008

I skimmed over a few calendars before I realized I was looking for a specific date: 1984. Snippets filled that fall: “Went to Penney [JCPenney] & R.G. [Richman Gordman] with Ruth.” “Theresa here between classes” on two Wednesdays in September, the start of her third year of college. In October, my uncle ate breakfast with them almost every day. November eighth: “Theresa here.” I realized, with tenderness, how often my sister visited them. The following weekend, Grandma shopped both days. And the twelfth, the day before Theresa dies: “20° 6 a.m.” My eyes began to sting. When I saw what she wrote on November 13, a “T” followed by a line through every day until the twenty-second of November, I broke into tears.

During one of those silent days, I tiptoed to Theresa's casket. I tucked letters between her suede skirt and the satin coffin lining. The funeral home was cold, so cold. With each breath, the scent of chrysanthemums, lilies, and roses nauseated me. A rosary draped across Theresa's hands. Her opal ring, catching the light from the dimmed spotlights above her, sparkled. I caressed the mini carnations on a satin heart-shaped pillow, and I smoothed out the ribbon inscribed with "Beloved Sister."

During one of those silent days, I wrote a poem about a dying rose. A clichéd metaphor of life cut down. In my poem, I planted the rose's seeds. Somehow, at eleven years old, I believed I'd find meaning in her death. From this point, I'd write to record and to think through emotions with metaphors and images. Words comforted me. They connected ideas, created space and light to walk by.

Grandma drew a line through nine days. A flat-line of death, a slice through our lives. A crack creating fragments. Did she see her line as a metaphor? Or was she drawn to the calendar, pen in hand, only to find she couldn't write the words? Why, even after the week of guests and the Friday funeral, did Grandma not write? Perhaps grief disrupted her routines; perhaps, suddenly, the temperature seemed inconsequential; perhaps she didn't want to remember these days of unyielding sorrow. She tended to her daughter and grandchildren. Eventually, life resumed. And she continued her calendars.

Maybe Mom was right. Calendars were Grandma's form, her genre, because that was all she knew. She was a keeper of stories who never had the opportunity to learn the nuances of telling them. Her father forbid her to go to nursing school because he believed education wasn't appropriate for women; she married at an age much later than her peers and soon birthed two children. When my mom and uncle became school-aged, Grandma worked to earn money to send them to Catholic school, which she deemed the better educational choice. As writers both of us compressed stories into phrases, but as I practiced, I added to my repertoire: scene, reflection, figurative language. Proud of my accomplishments, she posted my poems on her refrigerator but complicating that pride was another emotion. Was it wistfulness? Frustrated desire transformed, over several decades, to acceptance?

September 1996

I wandered alone amid the larger-than-life stone sculptures on the terraces of Mount Nemrut. Once these statues flanked the tumulus standing nearly ten meters high, but earthquakes toppled them. More light revealed details of Antiochus's religious lineage: his own statue, clean-shaved and crowned with a royal headdress; Zeus with a massive curly beard and a

warrior's helmet; Mithraic Apollo, the god of light and darkness and the most important to Antiochus.

One stone block depicted an astrological calendar, a lion with a crescent over his mane, the stars on his body representing Mars, Venus, and Jupiter. It bears Antiochus's coronation date: 62 B.C.E. Antiochus commissioned calendars depicting constellations—his own esoteric astrology—because he envisioned a religious legacy for his kingdom, slivers of which survive. One scholar argues that Christians refined the Mithraic initiation ceremony—practiced by Antiochus—as baptism. I imagine the cosmic nod to Antiochus that occurred when the priest sprinkled Grandma, Theresa, and me with water to mark the moments we were cleansed, linked by religion and blood.

Walking amid the colossal heads, I maneuvered over the fragments of stones, the pedestals of crumbled sculptures. I stroked the broad-nosed lions meant to protect the gods and give them strength. Like the other tourists, I turned to the sun when the pinkening sky changed the eagle's curved beak from gray to gold.

October 2008

I sat at my kitchen table describing the “shimmering surface” of Antiochus's calendars and studying a torn piece of paper—a poem I wrote for Grandma about Mount Nemrut. Shifting my chair to the proper angle, I gazed out at the green-turning-yellow leaves of a birch and into the beige buildings of Tarsus crowding out a wider view of the town: the bazaar next to an excavated Roman road, the two-thousand-year-old public baths, cement houses connected by trellises of jasmine and vines of morning glory. Phrases for a new poem flowed between the remembered shouts of students as they poured out of the campus gates. As I held the fragments of Grandma's days and the images of Antiochus's tomb up to the light, studying their textures, edges, and compressions of time, I saw how necessary it feels to find meaning in the events of our lives and record this for the future. By the time I had finished the poem, the buses in my memory started up and sputtered away, and the wind began to shake a few leaves off the trees. Soon it would be November.