

ALEXANDRA MARSHALL

*The Ultimate Alchemy*

In the Boston of inherited wealth, the five fetching Rotch daughters were raised in a Commonwealth Avenue mansion in the same Back Bay neighborhood as the Crosby and Bigelow families. The eldest daughter, Josephine, was engaged to marry Albert Bigelow the day after Bert's graduation from Harvard. But when Josie and her mother sailed to Venice to shop for her trousseau, she met Harry Crosby, who lived with his wife in Paris in a deluxe, frenzied version of bohemian exile, in willful violation of Boston etiquette. In Venice, she entered into an obsessive affair with Harry that ended, less than six months after Josie and Bert's picture-perfect wedding, in June of 1929, in Josie and Harry's murder/suicide.

Harry was a half-generation older than Josie and Bert. Having impulsively joined the Army Ambulance Corps out of St. Mark's School, deferring Harvard in order to fight in France, he was nearly killed, on what he ever after called his "first death day," in an explosion during the Second Battle of Verdun. He was just nineteen then—"Won Oh Boy!!!!!! THE CROIX DE GUERRE. Thank God," he wrote home—but that permanent trauma defined him. Today we would understand Harry's reliance on alcohol and drugs as self-medicating the terror of his war experience, but with his return to the decorous world of Boston, only his mother excused his habitually eccentric attire and rebellious behavior. Several semesters at Harvard were condensed into a "War Degree" that left him unsuited for employment, and his college record was such an embarrassment to his father that they sank into a mutual disdain from which they never recovered. Harry pursued and married the former Mary Phelps Jacob Peabody, nicknamed Polly, who submitted to his demand that she use the excuse of her first husband's drinking (which wasn't considered a good enough reason) to divorce Richard Peabody, the father of her two children.

In their escape to Paris, Polly and Harry became locomotive partiers, their drugs and alcohol paralleling the prominent French writers—the "morbid poets" Baudelaire and Rimbaud—who were engaged in their own darkly ecstatic preoccupations with death. The Crosby couple

founded a press in order to publish their own poetry and diaries, and Polly was renamed Caresse to mark the publication of her first book of sonnets. The Black Sun Press soon featured artful work by the literary expatriate circle in Paris including James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Hart Crane, Oscar Wilde, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Kay Boyle, whom Harry deemed the greatest woman writer since Jane Austen. They published Proust too.

When Harry first encountered Josephine in Venice, he was reading Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and was so enthralled by the message "die at the right time" that he wrote in his journal, "Die at the right time, so teacheth Zarathustra and again the direct 31-10-42. Clickety-click clickety-click the express train into Sun." This date represented the projected shortest distance between the orbits of the earth and the sun, so October 31, 1942, was the day, at Harry's urging, that he and Caresse had already selected for their own elaborately imagined double suicide. Upon meeting Josephine—"Enter the Youngest Princess of the Sun!"—Harry claimed her as his newest recruit, introducing her to the "black idol" opium that he and Caresse had discovered a few years earlier on their travels to North Africa.

When their bodies were found, the news was suppressed in the Boston papers. The New York tabloids freely speculated, but because Harry was the nephew and godson of J. P. Morgan Jr., the kindly "Uncle Jack" whose generosity Harry often sought and always abused, *The Times* gave the story fourteen cautious paragraphs under the headline "COUPLE SHOT DEAD IN ARTISTS' HOTEL" with the restrained subheads "Suicide Compact Is Indicated Between Henry Grew Crosby and Harvard Man's Wife" "BUT MOTIVE IS UNKNOWN."

I first saw Josephine's gravestone in 1965 with her nephew, Tim Buxton—the boy I was soon to marry—on a tour of the Duck Creek Cemetery in Old Lyme, Connecticut. It was a short walk down the road from the family's stately house next door to the Congregational church where, six months apart, Josie's wedding and funeral had both taken place.

Although her death generated aftershocks that reverberate to this day, the story of the murder/suicide was so untold that her four younger sisters didn't know it. Tim's mother, Helen, was only ten at the time

and would later claim to "barely remember" the big sister she called Dodie. All Tim had been given to know about Josephine was written on this pink marble tombstone that lay flat like a blanket. I noticed that the slab bearing the inscription "In Loving Memory of Josephine Noyes Rotch, Wife of Albert Smith Bigelow" was several times as large as the other more conventional upright markers. But I also remember finding the exhortation "In Death Is Victory" a forlorn choice for a girl of twenty-one, my age.

Who could have imagined that only five summers later the next gravestone to be placed in that plot would bear my young husband's own name and telescoped dates?

Tim and I were barely into our Operation Crossroads Africa program as co-leaders of a group of student volunteers in Ghana when an unspecified fever initiated a rapid decline that dead-ended seven days later with him cutting his own throat. Although his mother never asked to learn more than what I reported to our gathered families—when I know I mentioned the breadknife, because my own mother definitely heard it!—on several subsequent occasions Helen ruefully admitted to me her reflexive need to redefine the cause of Tim's death as a tropical disease. By her consistently brave example, I gradually became alert to the function of denial as a constructive force. Yet without understanding its origins in her buried family history, I didn't know how or why to penetrate the destructive aspects of that denial. I felt so relieved by her lack of blame, of me, that I willingly honored her preference for a modified version once I understood that this was what she could live with. She didn't seem to realize that, by her firm resolve not to speak of the trauma, and because I loved her, neither could I.

But then six summers later, while I was leading another group of Crossroads volunteers, this time to a project in the Netherlands Antilles, I received a letter from Helen where her usual happy chronicle of family news was interrupted by her acute distress at a just-published excerpt appearing in the *Atlantic Monthly* from a forthcoming biography called *Black Sun*. The book by Geoffrey Wolff told the story of Harry Crosby and the flamboyantly reckless life that ended with his shooting his lover and then himself in a laboriously chronicled murder/suicide pact. His lover's name was there revealed to have been Josephine Rotch Bigelow.

That the scandal had been so successfully concealed that nearly fifty years later this came as *news* to the dead girl's four younger sisters was instantly translated into their collective outrage against the biographer.

At the time of Josephine's death, her sister Lydia was nineteen and had been her maid of honor. I'd seen the formal engagement photograph of Josie displayed on the grand piano but understood neither the facts nor this utter rejection of them. In their view, Wolff had grievously slandered their dear Dodie. It seemed that the family had long ago made its peace, so to speak, by not speaking of it.

Helen wrote to me a second time about the *Black Sun* excerpt—"a gossipy scandal"—and in a third letter to say that its publication had prompted the sisters to invite their former brother-in-law, Bert Bigelow, for an afternoon visit to the Rotch family's Hill Top Farm in Lakeville, Massachusetts. Bert went, bringing along his second wife, Sylvia Weld Bigelow, to whom he'd been happily married for forty-five years. From Helen's upbeat report I could picture them sitting together in the semicircle of Adirondack chairs overlooking the riding ring and the fields beyond, sipping iced tea with mint from the bed by the back porch of what had once been the cook's farmhouse.

In more prosperous times, the Rotch girls had enjoyed Hill Top's all-day recreational opportunities including horseback riding, tennis, and a nine-hole golf course. Their Stone House with its gracious veranda overlooked the large lake, and their many guests were accommodated in several other noteworthy houses on the property, including the diamond-paned Colonial homestead trucked up from coastal New Bedford, where their paternal ancestors—"the Royal Family of New Bedford" from whose merchant ships the tea was famously dumped overboard into Boston Harbor—were whale-oil profiteers who had introduced lamplight to two continents, the Old World and the New.

Although *Black Sun* became a bestseller when it was released later that summer, I doubt that any of its grisly particulars came into their conversation that afternoon, since the purpose of the visit was to share their common fury—kill the messenger—at the biographer.

But I felt pressed to know more, so first thing after returning from my Crossroads project on the tiny Dutch island of Sint Eustatius I bought *Black Sun* to find out why Helen and her sisters were so agitated. Because

I knew from seeing Josephine's gravestone the day Tim brought me to the Old Lyme cemetery that she was twenty-one when she died, I noted the early error when Wolff wrote, on page 4, "Harry was thirty-one; Josephine twenty-two." Although I've read *Black Sun* numerous times by now and have no reason to doubt Wolff's otherwise careful research, the mistake helped me see why Josephine's sisters felt entitled to protest his scarce effort to portray her.

On the night of Harry's death, Caresse called upon Archibald MacLeish, the Boston lawyer turned poet and another *Black Sun* author during his Paris sojourn, to sit with Harry's body at the Bellevue Morgue. Forty-four years later, MacLeish reported to Geoffrey Wolff in an interview, "As I sat there looking at the corpse, seating myself where I wouldn't have to see the horrible hole in the back of his ear, I kept saying to him: you poor, damned, dumb bastard." Harry's "phony mysticism" fueled his inferior poetry, according to MacLeish, whose own poems Harry revered only second to T. S. Eliot, ahead of e e cummings. MacLeish defined Harry as "the most literary man I ever met, despite the fact that he'd not yet become what you'd call a Writer." He had tried unsuccessfully to persuade Harry to follow Rimbaud's example: relentless excess lived at the service of his art, not the other way around. He found Harry's poems "too long and too diffuse and too careless." "The manuscripts seemed to me unmade beds."

After Harry's death, MacLeish wrote a poem about Harry called "Cinema of a Man," a quietly enigmatic series of images. But e e cummings came in for the kill, with this:

2 boston  
Dolls;found  
with  
Holes in each other  
  
's lullaby and  
other lulla wise by UnBroken  
LULLAlullabyBY  
  
the She-in-him with  
the He-in-her (&

both all hopped  
up)prettily  
then which did  
lie  
Down,honestly  
now who go(BANG(BANG

If *Black Sun* is a record of the inevitability of Harry's suicide, in the privately published counterpoint *Josephine Rotch Bigelow* memorial book created for family and friends, Josie was portrayed by her mother as "an unusually lively and vigorous baby" who had "an extraordinarily definite and marked personality from the day of her birth, difficult to handle, but never uninteresting." "She had a way of stiffening all over, from the top of her head to her toes, and squealing with joy and excitement." "I think no one who saw Josephine dance when she was about eleven years old will ever forget her—she was so full of the joy of life, so naturally graceful, and had such a vivid, dramatic way of throwing herself into it."

One of her teachers wrote to Mrs. Rotch, "I have always loved and admired your Josephine. Hers was the leading mind of her class, whose mature judgment was always the standard that challenged my very best endeavor. To me she seems a spirit of fire made of substance none may presume to comprehend."

Mrs. Rotch's sister, Katharine Ludington, described her niece in the graveyard at Old Lyme. "She never seemed to have any thought of the cemetery as a melancholy spot, perhaps because she had been brought up on the old traditions and anecdotes of the place and the humor of the earlier stones with their astonishing cherubs and epitaphs." Indeed, in a remark with an eerie resonance for me, she added, "Her husband says that on his first visit there she took him to the old cemetery to see where the members of the family were buried, and there was never a question where she would want to be laid herself."

Each of the candid photos of Josephine as a child reveals this high energy, and there is an echo of it, and more, in the studio portraits from her adolescence. Her mother's muted grief is most evident in her reminiscence, "Constantly in trouble through her contrariness and her power of inventing mischief, she was always ready to admit that she

was in the wrong. She would storm and weep, but before night she had either come to make up, or had left a note on my pillow saying she was sorry and would 'try to be good.' When she was about twelve, she gave me a framed motto, 'Lead thy Mother gently down life's steep decline...'"

It would be a distortion to imagine Harry meeting his match when he encountered Josephine, but his friends had observed to Harry how in the portrait of "the Fire Princess" that he displayed on his desk in a silver frame, and which was in his wallet when he died, Josephine's striking features so closely resemble his own that they look like brother and sister.

His one sibling, a sister nicknamed Kitsa, married and later divorced one of his friends, Robert Choate, whose influence as managing editor at the *Boston Herald* was why the news of the scandal went almost entirely unreported in Boston, other than to note that the bodies were found clothed. But Choate also became Harry's chief enabler in the pursuit of Josephine, by offering them his house near Josie and Bert's Beacon Hill apartment and, in the week preceding the murder/suicide, by accompanying them from New York to Detroit, by train, on an impromptu escapade.

In his diary Harry described how, on the return trip, "she cries many opium pills and all night we catapult through space J and I in each other's arms vision security happiness." In his entry for December 6, back in New York, he wrote, "J sick as a cat from the opium," with the notation "1 West 67," the address of his friend Stanley Mortimer's frequently borrowed studio at the Hotel des Artistes, where four days later they would meet again for the final time.

According to another of Harry's lovers in Paris, who had refused Harry's invitations to die with him, "the principal reason he loved Josephine was that she loved him, and that she passed his tests of devotion." Other friends merely condemned his Youngest Princess, blaming the victim for calling Harry's bluff by demanding that they die together. The assessment provided to Wolff by Archibald MacLeish is that "This whole thing caught up with Harry; he'd built it up, the black sun, a philosophy with edges of demonology in it; he peddled it to an awful lot of girls. This one, apparently, took it seriously. Then he was faced with a situation from which there was no escape whatsoever. He couldn't walk out of that place alive."

The New York tabloid details included Harry's red-varnished toenails and the tattooed soles of his feet, one with a cross and the other a sun symbol. Josephine wore her orchid corsage and he his black carnation, and her look was characterized by the deputy medical examiner, in recording her death as a homicide, as "the expression of smiling expectancy on the dead face of the beautiful young wife, indicating that she had gone to her rendezvous expecting a caress, not deadly bullets."

In Josephine's final love letter to Harry she wrote, "Death is *our* marriage." But this rambling prose poem reads to me like a sadly girlish inventory of what they loved in common: orchids, caviar, champagne, the number 13, and the color black. It has a "Sound of Music" banality to suggest, tragically, that they were no match for each other.

An empty quart of scotch was found with their bodies, and while there are conflicting interpretations of the medical evidence and no mention of the opium we can suppose, in revealing the alcohol content of the dead couple's brains—hers twice his—the *New York Daily Mirror* declared "Jo-Jo Bigelow" almost literally "dead drunk." The medical findings also concluded that Harry had shot Josephine first and then himself, but not until several hours later.

After their reunion in 1976 I never heard Helen mention Bert Bigelow again. Nor in the "Minor Lives" Afterword to an edition of *Black Sun* published twenty-seven years later, in 2003, did Geoffrey Wolff display any increased interest in either Josephine or the husband she had so grievously betrayed. Instead, Wolff defended himself, defensively, with a rambling statement seemingly directed against those critics among the mostly deferential reviewers of *Black Sun* who had faulted him for choosing to write about such a minor writer as Harry Crosby rather than the more significant literary figures of the day. To the accusation by *Time* magazine's reviewer that the excuse for the book was its "gossip," Wolff justified his research methods by answering, "The gossip in *Black Sun* is substantiated hearsay," a claim that may have been addressed to Josephine's angry sisters—two of whom had since died—but which would not have satisfied them.

I dearly wish that my own persistent effort to comprehend and absorb the trauma of Tim's suicide had required me to seek out Bert,

instead of only discovering his heroic story seventeen years later by way of the prominent *New York Times* obituary marking his death at age eighty-seven. I can't claim that Bert would have confided in me—his close friend reported that Bert never talked about his first wife—but he might have listened.

Seven years after Tim's death, upon meeting James Carroll—we were introduced by our mutual literary agent—I, too, was given, and together we created, the security of a good marriage. We settled on a narrow side street in Boston's Beacon Hill in a brick townhouse that, as I would discover years later when a Rotch cousin gave me a copy of the *Josephine Rotch Bigelow* book, was located directly across the street—we were at 128 Myrtle and they were at 127—from the newlywed apartment where Josie and Bert had lived for the brief months of their marriage. Inexplicably, if poignantly, the memorial book that is illustrated with a lively gallery of family photos concluded with a half-dozen static formal pictures of the empty rooms that Josephine had reportedly taken pleasure and pride in furnishing. This was the home to which she hadn't returned, and I could look into its windows from my own. Wasn't this an irresistible coincidence? If only I'd known, wouldn't Bert and his second wife have agreed to a meeting with me and my second husband?

In any case, I wanted the opportunity to have admired at closer hand, and to have celebrated, the dedicated life Bert had gone on to lead, a series of brave choices that Helen and her sisters seemingly had no knowledge of either, and about which, sadly, the author of *Black Sun* seemed not to be the least bit curious.

To correct for my own regrettable ignorance about Bert, I've learned that in the sixty-four years that he lived on beyond that December day in 1929 when his wife lied about the purpose of her visit to New York—Harry died with Josie's telegram in his pocket, saying only "YES"—Bert charted his exemplary life with a stunning modesty. In the volumes of crimson-bound *Harvard Class Reports* for the Class of 1929 there is a single mention of his first marriage (noted in the chronology for his twenty-fifth reunion entry) in Bert's detailed chronicles that tell of a life, post-Josephine, of great public courage and deep personal fulfillment.

In 1959, Doubleday published *The Voyage of the Golden Rule: An Experiment with Truth*, which is Bert's account of his nonviolent civil disobedience. "Nonviolence is the noncreation of antagonism," he wrote, defining the Quaker creed he'd embraced several years earlier when he and his wife, Sylvia, hosted two "Hiroshima Maidens" for the year of their multiple plastic surgeries to correct for the disfiguring injuries caused, at age seven and thirteen, by the bombing of Hiroshima. "What response can one make to this," Bert wrote of these Japanese survivors, "other than to give oneself utterly to destroying the evil, war, that dealt so shamefully with them, and try to live in the spirit of sensitivity and reconciliation which they displayed?"

Bert's own experience of that war had been dramatically circular, beginning with his enlistment in the Navy the day after Pearl Harbor was attacked and concluding as Captain of a destroyer escort approaching Pearl Harbor on August 6, 1945, when the first news was released of the atomic bomb exploding over Hiroshima. "Although I had no way of understanding what an atom bomb was, I was absolutely awestruck," he wrote, "as I suppose all men were for a moment. Intuitively, it was then that I realized for the first time that morally war is impossible."

Bert Bigelow's 1945 realization prompted him in 1958 to set out, with a crew of three, on the 30-foot sailing vessel *Golden Rule*. This was a peace action to protest the US government's planned nuclear test explosions announced for that April at Eniwetok. In his letter addressed to President Eisenhower, Bert explained that, by sailing from Hawaii into that prohibited area two thousand miles away, he and his crew intended, "come what may, to remain there during the test period, in an effort to halt what we feel is the monstrous delinquency of our government in continuing actions which threaten the well-being of all men."

With nationwide press, "a most embarrassing philosophic quandary" was presented in an editorial from the *Boston Herald* where the question was posed, "Do they have the right of self-sacrifice which, we are told in time of emergency, is the duty of the citizen? In their view, this is a time of emergency."

In his book Bert wrote, "We were willing to face death—sure. But, like thousands of men, and in other countries women and children, I repeatedly faced death during the war." In one television appearance the Hollywood host introduced him by saying, "A man who is going

to commit suicide is beside me in the studio tonight!" Bert described the experience of being referred to as a potential suicide this way: "He said he knew I would not like it, which I did not; but that it would keep all the viewers from switching dials to see what was on other channels. Somewhat helplessly, I consented to this means to an end. However, after this startling and sensational opening, which had little relation to the truth, the program developed a depth of feeling and sensitivity. All of us that night, in the studio, were carried beyond ourselves, to realize that a spirit was moving in us....Apparently this experience was not limited to the studio and reached out through the television sets into the homes and hearts of thousands."

Bert and his crew outfitted and provisioned the *Golden Rule* under the scrutiny of the US Coast Guard and, after a series of judicial maneuvers and countermoves, the vessel set off. As the *New York Times* reported, "Government lawyers were trying to find a law to keep the pacifists out of the Atomic proving grounds. Justice Department officials said they knew of no law that would specifically bar a person from entering the danger area. A similar response came from the Atomic Energy Commission lawyers."

It would ultimately fall to the Coast Guard to forcibly intercept the *Golden Rule* on the high seas, charging criminal conspiracy for violating a nautical technicality: "the registration numbers on the bow were three-eighths of an inch too short and not parallel with the water line." For this fabricated infraction Bert and his crew were sentenced to sixty days in the Honolulu City and County Jail, by which time the nuclear tests were scheduled to be completed.

In a front-page box this notice soon ran in the *Honolulu Advertiser*: "Too Late to Classify: FOR SALE One 30-foot pacifist ketch, scarcely used. Asking price: \$16,000. Registry letters 'Golden Rule' canted one sixteenth inch, but otherwise fully approved by U.S. Coast Guard for sailing anywhere (except Eniwetok area). Contact owner, Albert S. Bigelow, Honolulu City Jail...any time, day or night, within next 48 days."

The boat was sold for \$14,600, and more than fifty years later, in 2011, was found derelict in a California boatyard. Since restored by the national organization called Veterans for Peace, the *Golden Rule* has been rededicated as a means of instruction against the manufacture and use of nuclear weapons. The *Golden Rule* set sail for Hawaii on a fifteen-month voyage projected to reach the Marshall Islands,

Bert's original destination. Then proceeding via US military bases at Guam, Saipan, and Okinawa, the crew aimed to reach Hiroshima for the seventy-fifth anniversary, on August 6, 2020, of the US atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Dedicated to the Veterans for Peace goal of "a nuclear-free world and a peaceful, sustainable future," Bert Bigelow's *Golden Rule* has been returned, as a floating classroom, to its original mission.

In his book Bert wrote that his teachers in the practice of nonviolence were William Penn, the Quaker founder of Pennsylvania who went to jail six times "for deliberately being in kindly disobedience to government"; the Quakers who had given up slave-owning a hundred years before the Civil War and conscientiously violated the Fugitive Slave Act in assisting runaways; the lesson of Gandhi's political revolution that "nonviolence creates the climate and atmosphere for freedom of the spirit"; and the revolutionary example of nonviolent resistance in the Montgomery, Alabama, bus protest led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

As Bert defined Dr. King's rationale for nonviolent resistance, "This method permits a struggle to go on with dignity and without the need to retreat. It is a method that can absorb the violence that is inevitable in social change whenever deep-seated prejudices are challenged." In the presidential election of 1956, when Eisenhower was reelected in a landslide, Bert wrote in Dr. King's name as his candidate for president.

Four years later, a young John Lewis, the beloved longtime Congressman, described his seat mate on the bus as "a big rugged-looking guy from New England who looked as if he belonged on a sailing ship a century ago," an impression that could have described the whaling forebears of the wife of Bert Bigelow's youth. This bus ride was in May 1960, and the then middle-aged Bert was one of the original thirteen Freedom Riders with Lewis, a twenty-year-old college student, when they set out from Washington to New Orleans to test a Supreme Court ruling banning discrimination in interstate public facilities.

Lewis wrote in his 1999 book *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* that when the bus made a rest stop in Rock Hill, South Carolina, Bert put himself between Lewis and the group of white

teenagers who went after him. "It had to look strange to these guys to see a big, strong white man putting himself in the middle of a fistfight like this, not looking at all as if he was ready to throw a punch, but not looking frightened either."

As Lewis described it, "They hesitated for an instant. Then they attacked Bigelow, who did not raise a finger as these young men began punching him. It took several blows to drop him to one knee." A white policeman finally intervened, but Lewis and Bigelow refused to press charges, invoking the governing principle of nonviolence that defined the Freedom Ride's sponsoring organization, the Congress of Racial Equality. Before moving on, though, Lewis got his cup of coffee in that "whites only" waiting room.

From there the bus passed through Georgia without incident, but farther along in Anniston, Alabama, it was attacked by a mob of Klansmen, many still in their church clothes. They firebombed the bus and held the doors shut to prevent the Freedom Riders from escaping.

The excuse offered by Birmingham's Police Commissioner, Eugene "Bull" Connor, for the lack of police presence was that it was Mother's Day, but when the fuel tank exploded, dispersing the mob and allowing the riders to evacuate the bus, the fiery explosion captured by a photographer for the *Anniston Star* was a transformative image. This alarming picture of the Greyhound bus in flames finally succeeded in bringing the country's attention back to earth after the more prominent—dominant—competing story of astronaut Alan Shepard's travel in space.

Five years after the Freedom Riders, in the spring of 1965, my soon-to-be husband, Tim, coaxed a friend and fellow teacher to ride the "freedom train" south to Alabama for the fifty-four-mile march from Selma to Montgomery, the state capitol, where Governor George Wallace refused protection to Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and his legion of supporters. Since this nonviolent demonstration for voting rights inspired, and later came to define, Tim's own foreshortened ministry dedicated to the Civil Rights and Antiwar movements—as personified, and mentored, by Tim's New Haven neighbor Rev. William Sloane Coffin Jr.—Tim's knowing of Bert Bigelow's courageous commitments surely would have motivated and sustained him.

Instead, it was just a few months after Selma that Tim brought me to stroll among the grave markers in the family cemetery, the summer when he had a job as a tennis pro in Old Lyme and I was studying dance with Martha Graham—herself—in a program up the highway at Connecticut College. As we were beginning to imagine what would turn out to be our own abbreviated marriage, it didn't occur to either of us to wonder about that dead bride or her widower-bridegroom, or to ask Tim's mother or her sisters about them.

That is, if Tim had known to investigate the man whose own identity was lost to the family of the impetuous bride who gave up her life so inexplicably, he would have honored, and been instructed by, Bert's dedicated work for peace and justice. I can also imagine that if I had been given the story of Josie and Bert and come to know Bert in my own life as a young widow, I might not have felt so uniquely unaccompanied. More, in my own emergent political life, I, too, would have had the chance to follow Bert's lead. With the profound example of the rest of his life, Bert Bigelow had performed the ultimate alchemy: turning violence into nonviolence.

If the Rotch sisters seemed unburdened by the horror of their sister's violent death, I myself have felt oppressed by the persistently unanswerable question of what pushes—or pulls—a person to suicide. The acclaimed work by A. Alvarez, *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* was published soon after Tim's, and although nothing could have been more shocking for me to read, I read it immediately, twice. Alvarez wrote about the famous suicide of his friend, the poet Sylvia Plath, about whom he said in a recent radio interview that he rebukes himself to this day for not recognizing that she was ready to kill herself. "I failed her. I was thirty years old and stupid," he said, and while I know what he means—I was twenty-six and stupid—I still wonder what it takes to be smart enough.

This mystery has repeatedly been my subject as a writer, but my sequential attempts to write the novel I always called *Child Widow* failed one after the other, inhibited by my persistent wish to make suicide seem less deliberate. I finally collapsed my unrequited energy into an urgent short story called "Child Widow" and believed with its publication that I could finally consider that awful ambition fulfilled.

But then came Tim's mother's obituary notice in the *Boston Globe* following her peaceful death several years ago at age ninety-three. The four sisters by whom she was predeceased are named—Josephine, Lydia, Katharine, Phoebe—and her survivors are listed as a daughter and two sons, eight grandchildren and a great-granddaughter. With no mention of Tim.

Of course, I wanted to know which of Tim's siblings—or whether Helen herself—had excluded him from her obituary, but my deeper discovery was that the permanent shadow of Tim's story cannot be erased, which means that by default it now belongs—as it has always belonged!—to me. This commissioning represents a challenge for me, but it's primarily a liberation. Having reimagined Tim's suicide through the distorting lens of his mother's enforced denial, I am now both permitted and obliged to remember it the way it happened.

My new personal narrative begins in Ghana with my husband's bleeding to death at the age of twenty-eight. It tells how, thirty years later, when Tim was dead longer than he'd been alive, I returned to Wenchu and, unannounced, was welcomed by the same Chief and Queenmother as had received us just three days before Tim ended his life. At last able to reconnect with those whose own lives had been haunted ever since by the mysterious, unresolved death of their foreign guest, I was given full access to the depth of my shame at not having come sooner.

By the example of Bert Bigelow's long life of remarkable service to the unrelenting values he acquired the hard way, I have come to see that his turning violence into nonviolence is another way of saying that by embracing sorrow, and in refusing the easier option of denial, a greater opportunity is created: the transformation of grief into love.