

Here's My Heart  
Timberline Review, issue 11  
Kay Snow Winner

Say "I do" on a sticky August day. With seersucker blue sky and lemon sun. With apple blossom clouds so puffy you could eat them. With family and friends. By a lake with peacocks preening and a trumpeting swan that will spread its wings when your husband says, "I do," that will spread its wings when he wraps you in a hug, bends you back and kisses you.

Say "I do" right after you say, "Here's my heart."

Your hummingbird heart that trilled so fast your dad asked if you wanted a valium when he hugged you in the bride's dressing room. You in your strapless watermark taffeta dress. Ankle length even though it's 1983 and bridal dresses are extra like all of fashion is extra. You felt lost in the poufy dresses at the bridal stores with their trains, with their endless layers of fabric and tulle. It was like playing dress-up and you are miles from being the girl who raced around the house in stick-out slips pretending they were tutus.

"No," you told your dad when he held you in his dad arms and asked that valium question. "No. I want to feel it all," you said.

"Half?" he said.

Before you step into the August sun, your arm laced in your dad's, you'll wish you mom and stepdad were here too. Your mom whose credo, "I'll never see or speak to your father again," is bigger than this moment.

These are the facts: who is with you and who isn't. Family and friends. Your beautiful sisters. You tell yourself the right people are with you. You turn your spotlight on love, on your husband, his electric blue eyes, his cleft chin. His words: Here's my heart. Later you'll dig around memory to remember who said it first and later you'll know it doesn't matter.

Love your husband with all five foot two inches of you.

Believe the Until death do we part part means when you're a brittle old lady.

Soak love on this memory. Ink it on your marrow. You'll need it.

You're 28.

Pregnant.

Your husband hugs you good-bye in the cool of end of day. Winter sky bruising up. The smell of mountain and skiing tucked in the fibers of his plaid Pendleton wool jacket—the one you'll keep searching for for months, the one your family will have to remind you was blood soaked and thrown away.

He pulls you close in the parking garage. You've just left your sixth month baby check-up where you listened to your baby's heartbeat, where Dr. H said, "What a good solid heart. I can already tell your baby has a good heart." Where you rolled baby names around in your mouth like watermelon Jolly Ranchers. Would you pick a soft sound like Joel or a hard sound like Carl?

This magnetic pulse between two bodies. The gravity between you that kept you in his orbit, that kept him in yours. The cosmology of Couple on the cusp of Family.

He pulls you close. Your ear to his chest to his boom, boom, swish heart. Your lunar baby belly firm against him. The baby knocks a tiny baby part between you.

“Ooh, felt that,” he says and rounds his hand, fingers splayed on your belly.

“I wish I were going,” you say. You skied with him three weeks before. Doctor approved. But tonight you have a double size stack of student papers to grade and you are baby bone tired. Plus you can’t zip your ski pants.

“I’ll see you late tonight,” he says.

“I’ll slip in beside you while you sleep your crazy deep sleep,” he says.

“You won’t even know I was gone.”

You want to stop right here. Pry open words and sentences. You want to anchor your feet on one sentence, your hands on the line above, turn your body into a wedge and open this space to the Before. You want to yell at younger you and your husband. Stop! Don’t go!

That’s not his story.

That’s not your story.

Your first husband. The one with Montana sky blue eyes and a dimple and a cleft chin. The one who wore a 44 jacket when he wore a jacket. The one who preferred jeans and short-sleeved khaki shirts from JC Penney. The one who sang fake opera and danced with you in the kitchen, dipping you until your shoulder length hair skimmed the linoleum. The one wicked smart who studied the stars, loved hard, laughed easy and always saw the best in people even when they weren’t their best.

You loved him bigger than the sky. The ocean. You loved him beyond the beyond. The part of you you always held back? You gave him that part too. You showed him your girl traumas: your parents' crazy divorce, Dad's drinking, Mom's depression. You showed him how you'd get stuck in being right, how your stubborn boots were sometimes your best boots. And still he loved you. You believed him when he said, "I love you times infinity. And I'll still be crazy in love with you when you're 90 and I'm 99." When you'd cross the street and he'd catch your hand and say, "I don't want anything to happen to you"? You believed that too.

Your first husband who Nana asked you, "How'd you pick such a good one?" because maybe she was a little proud and perplexed since you came from a family of drinkers and divorcers.

You wanted something different. This man with his Midwestern stable feet showed up and your heart said *Yes, that one*. Your first husband who grew up with the same two parents in the same home his dad built. Your first husband with his bass drum heart, thunder heart. Your first husband who said, "Let's have a baby!" and one month later you were—snap--pregnant.

Then.

You held him hard in the concrete parking lot.

Kissed him good-bye while winter day turned pewter.

You let him go.

He snaked the mountain road heading for a night of night skiing. Near Enumclaw on his way to Crystal Mountain, snow flooded the windshield.

When he hit black ice in a curve like a big C when his Honda Prelude slipped and spun when headlights sliced the snow-white dark night, lights from an oncoming car, a station wagon, heavy, heavier with four club-bouncer-sized men inside when he crashed, the scream of metal and glass, when his seat broke free when his head hit the steering wheel when he cracked his brain when his heart. Stopped. Dead before the man in the car behind could even open his door. You wondered if he floated over his mangled car and beat-up body and all that blood, his atoms turning, *swoosh*, to light. You wondered if his new self watched the wreck and wondered, *What Now*, wondered how he was going to hold you without a body.

You were home when he crashed, when his heart cooled. You were refilling your teacup with chamomile. Terror wrapped you—boom—and every atom of you quivered in a knowing you didn't want to know. Your body turned alabaster marble. You told yourself it was baby hormones. You told yourself it was going to be okay. You forced yourself to breath, to calm the fear that torched all your air as everything shrank to this single frame: a pregnant woman alone in her kitchen, heart trapped in collarbones, hands pressed on her belly as her baby kicked-turned in his private pond.

Oceans of tears. Rage split you. Tears cleaved you. Your first husband died and you walked around with your insides on your outside. Exposed to the bone to the marrow to your cells. You were a breathing version of the drawings in Grey's Anatomy: skin peeled, muscles and organs pulsing, bones stitching and unstitching. You bawled monsoon tears, left Kleenex pyramids in your wake, screamed at god and the heavens and everything bigger than you that you could think of.

Your parents and sisters held you up. Your friends. Eventually your widow squad: a circle of young widows, all under 40 with children. They all held you while you sobbed through the slurry of grief. They held you even when you said you didn't want to be held. They held you through your hurt and rage, through silences, through talking the same "Why me? Why Kent?" words in a loop. They held you with bags of party-sized M&Ms and too many cigarettes. They held you until "Why me?" turned to "Why not me?"

Eventually you saw the goodness. Your husband never really left. He'd swoop in and wrap around your collarbones, his non-kiss kiss on your earlobes. You saw him in your son. You oozed gratitude for what he left you with.

You stitched up the hole in your heart with threads of lightning. Well. Maybe not completely. That scar is always there. It throbs sometimes. Twitches. Your scar that reminds you of healing, of gratitude. Your scar that's the source of your superpowers.

You chose your son. You chose you. And life. And even love.

In time you said Yes to meeting a friend of a friend.

You changed clothes five, six times before he got there.

You smoked a handful of cigarettes, knowing he didn't want to date a smoker.

You changed your bar smelling scarf one more time before opening the door.

He was fun and gentle and oh so alive.

You went on that first date. An Italian dinner where you sipped chianti and nibbled spaghetti carbonara, where you laughed when he told you about a sailing trip in bad weather that put the period on a relationship ending, where you played the Whose Family is Crazier game.

You said good-night and double locked your front door. Then phoned your younger sister, Janis, the one you call Snow White with her black hair and fair skin and ruby lips. You told her, “That was fun but he’s a no.”

You twisted the curly phone cord around your index finger.

“Why?” she asked.

“Too short,” you said

“What?” She laughed. “Too short? You’re barely five feet two,” she said, and you laughed too.

“Come on,” she said. “Don’t shut it him out so fast.”

Guilt and fear held hands and circled you, taunting. Fear roared its roar so you welded copper around your heart because you knew copper bends easier than steel because you did and didn’t want to shut him out. Because you did and didn’t want to show him your heart.

He kept coming back.

You kept opening the door.

Next, love your second husband. This honey of a man who tasted like love and jazz music and the ocean. With his tender heart. With his kindness. With his Always Making Room at The Table-ness. With his own father loss that gave him a sensitivity to your ache, to your boy. Your second husband who slipped in your life who loved you up close who didn’t feel threatened by your first husband. You asked. Because people asked you. “How could I feel jealous?” he said. “He loved you like I do,” he said. “And he gave you your son,” he said. “I’ll always be grateful to him.”

Marry your second husband on a sun-soaked July day. Marry him after you say, “Here’s my heart.” After you say, “It’s a little bruised, and here it is.”

Marry him on your friend’s deck overlooking Puget Sound—a finger of water that points to the ocean. Deep blue water. Sky blue blue sky. Aquamarine. The in between of water and sky on the horizon. The flood of northwest green in their yard: emerald grass, maple trees dressed in summer lettuce green, hostas in the shade, that deep woods green with stripes of white.

Your adorable son, two and a half, with his dimple smile and handful of curls, with his hazel eyes, bouncing in his sailor suit and saddle shoes. He’s all toddler joy. He’ll laugh and squeal. He’ll play with an oversized beach ball while dipping in and out of family arms.

Forge a family. This second chance at happiness. Your first husband will zip in too, curling around your collarbones, tickling your earlobes, giving you goosebumps. Him checking on you, loving you through the veil in the best way he can. He’ll swoop in like a hummingbird dive bomb and you’ll feel a deeper blessing that getting married is right. It’s what he would want for you. It’s what you want for you. Your beautiful boy in one hand, stargazer lilies with their streaks of hot pink in the other. You’ll poke your head outside to where your almost second husband and his sister sing a love duet. There’s your family: sisters and parents. Your mom and stepdad (“I feel like I have a second chance,” your mom said when she told you, “Yes, I’ll be there this time.”) Your dad. Maybe with a valium in his pocket seam and he doesn’t offer it. Just before you step out, you’ll hear your first husband: I love you. Now go.



“How’d you pick such a good one?” Nana asked again. Again, maybe she was a little proud and perplexed. And you laughed. You’ve said it for years: how grateful you are to marry two sweet men. Two honey husbands.

“Let’s have a baby!” your second husband said and, lucky you, you were—  
snap—pregnant.

“Promise you’ll stay?” you said, your lunar belly pressed against him, worry leaking into your words.

“I’ll do my best,” he said.

“The million-dollar family!” a friend said when you called her to tell her you had a girl. Meaning, you guessed: a boy and a girl. Column A. Column B. First you thought, *I took the long way ‘round*. And then you grinned because Yes, you felt lucky. You were giddy to be a wisher on stars. A rubber of Buddha bellies. Lady luck. Lucky you. You were grateful to say that about yourself again.

While your second husband adopted your son and gave him everything but his genes, you kept your first husband in your family too. Through stories. Through his family being your family. Through celebrating his birthdays with German chocolate cake and cherry Coke. Through calling him Dad Kent because you wanted your son to know. This silent third parent. At the table. In the car. In the quiet of reading at bedtime.

“He was my dad too,” your then five-year-old daughter said one night at dinner and you nearly choked on a carrot. “But he died.”

Two husbands. Two kids. Grow your family like you grow your garden in countless nows. Watering with love. Plucking weeds. Making room for joy and laughter and tears and kitchen table talks. Add extended family, friends, cooking, travel, school, books, sports. Plant dreaming and doing. Fertilize with art, music, writing. Life's deliciousness.

Time jump to two kid-in-laws.

Stand and witness another July wedding. Your son this time. Your phenomenal boy who came through the stardust. All man in his grey linen suit. In his galaxy-wide heart with his dimple smile. In his choosing a partner who is fire to his water. Your son who carries his dad's wedding ring in his breast pocket. The ring you gave your first husband 35 years ago. The ring you gave your son last night.

Have the reception at your farm. No swans or salty Puget Sound water. This time a gorgeous hay field with a honey sun. Lights strung around the handmade dance floor. A tree full of family wedding pictures: grandparents, your daughter-in-law's parents, you with your first husband, you with your now husband. Love lights shining. The air lit with magic.

At Toast Time your husband stands behind the bride and groom, clears his throat, wipes a tear with his knuckle. He is all Thanks.

Then.

“And tonight I have a double toast,” he starts.

The well of tears that float between your top ribs perks up.

“Not all of you know, but Annie was married before I knew her,” he says.

You’re elbows on the table. Hands to your mouth.

“She was pregnant with Jake when her husband died tragically,” he says.

“Jake was two when Annie and I got married,” he says.

“When he made me a dad.”

Blink, blink tears. Breathe. Your daughter, Maria, sitting next to you slides her hand on your knee to anchor you.

“Then our family grew,” he says.

“And we had Maria,” he says.

“I’m a lucky guy,” he says.

“So, my first toast is to Kent,” he says and raises his glass. His upper lip quivers.

His voice too.

“To Kent Neuberger,” he says.

“Who gave you life.”

“We wish you were here.”

Let yourself be shot through with love. A love infusion. Skies of love. Oceans of love. Love tsunami. Grateful for it all. The hard parts. The beautiful parts. All the parts.

Here’s my heart.