

Sunflowers Through Thin Ice



Strong Sunflowers | Marilynne Ellis | September 2021

Through the thin sliver of icy grief as it happens.

Through the broken glass, you can find a flower blooming.

You might slip and fall, maybe even with both knees on the ground, cracking the thin ice that lingers from winter. These words are a journey into my emotions as they happen. I hope these poems and short stories help you pick both knees back up, and stand tall through the thin ice, like a sunflower.

Yellow Cars

Whenever we saw a yellow car, we'd kiss. It was a thing we started shortly after our first, and it continued forever. I think about those kisses today, in a life such a blur.

She had her arm around my waist

My arm above her shoulder

The smile on her face

Engraved in me forever

We drifted through the trail

Our lives were anything but pale

We had just bought our first house

Talking below the thousands of stars

Kissing within the traffic of yellow cars

Which star can I give her

Can't choose

So let's go with everything in the sky

It's with her that I fly
A twin engine plane — one you can't pilot alone
The plane flying into our future now accident-prone
Malignant rain cells capped off the stars in the sky
I cry tears more than the London rain
I was able to give her 10 — one for each year of us
Our mapped out future getting washed away
I can't deal with this in any way
We're beating this, we said
Each and every day
Everything on hold as our life is in complete disarray
February makes me shiver
From the news that they deliver
The Love of my Life
Taken from me
From this world
Rain down my face
Under a rock I curled

As all the yellow cars disappear

To tell our story is the point of this world.

Plants of Hope

Letter to our House

This letter is a personal journey into my experience walking into our house without the Love of my Life for the first time. I hope these words can inspire you to find you home — your good place to grow. If you haven't yet, keep looking.

Dear Me,

Getting ready to leave for Hawkesbury and the whole ride I think of what to feel when I walk through that door — the house where crushed dreams become a reality, a life is obliterated and dust settles on the dead plants because nothing happens.

I don't know yet.

I am scared of my own emotions. It is a house where the answer is not a home.

I will sit down at our kitchen table and write more of this letter, and place a copy underneath the house.

Okay, let's get on the road Gordie and Pepper.

On the way to the house, I pass over a bridge, where the North Raisin River is a home for seagulls and other wildlife of Eastern Ontario. In the distance, a sign that says *A good place to grow*.

Dear House,

In front of me are roses withering away. The roses dry, not my eyes. With how advanced the cancer was, when we left for the clinical trial, my biggest fear was walking through these doors alone — without the Love of my Life.

We left quickly.

There is a glass of water sitting on the table beside her crutches, half-full. Spring coats hanging by the door, ready for us to return. There were even some dishes still in the sink, hard to wash because they'd been lingering for quite some time.

Like those dishes, my sadness can't be washed away.

Everything was waiting for a return to normalcy.

My biggest nightmare a reality in plain sight.

Snow layers the patio, and shines a shade of cajun under the evening sun.

There are no footprints.

There are no paw prints.

The shovel is barely visible under the heavy white paste. I look around the house. I see morphine, and similar pain killer drugs. I see the tiny bottles of chemo drugs.

Ondansetron. Lapelga. Doxorubicin. Ifosfamide. Soft tissue sarcoma. MPNST.

Words like this not at all a distant memory in my vocabulary. I see the letter we got from Princess Margaret inviting us to the clinical trial to save her life.

I see the stairs that we walked down every morning, telling each other, *we're beating this* — the stairs that we walked up after a long day fighting the cancer, again telling each other *we're beating this*.

A life full of opportunity, blackened by a malignancy more aggressive than anything else I have seen.

I yearned for the day we said to each other *we beat this*, surrounded by our children. This is the life that never happened. The glass is going to remain half-full.

I scream, stirring the dust that was settling in the stillness.

I sense fear.

There is mail overflowing — cards of friends and family sending their condolences. I know people mean well. I can smell what would've been. The aroma of coffee after a long sleepy morning waking up next to each other. Kids running downstairs for pancakes. The smell of the batter mingling with maple syrup. That is what a house is. That is what would've been. This is what we talked about while still in school.

I walk upstairs, and turn right towards our bedroom. The room feels cold, and there's a thermometer on the bedside, because we had to check her temperature every day to make sure there was no infection from the chemo. I see her beautiful dresses hanging, and the silence terrifies me. I remember when we bought them all. Some in markets in Toronto or Québec City. Her colourful dress-

es paint streaks of pink and blue back to our first river. I remember the first time I saw Marilyne. She was wearing a purple dress that weaved so gracefully through the school hallways. Her hair bounced just above her shoulders. The dress dancing with every step she took. I tried to pretend I wasn't looking.

We met in the school play and it was by a river we had our first kiss. My first kiss with anyone. But when you know, you just know. And we both knew.

Before going back downstairs, I turn towards my home office, and I see two empty rooms. They were supposed to be the kids' rooms. The white walls ready to be coloured in. We used to visualize the room full, but now I can't stay here long. It feels suffocating.

I walk around the house, slowly and deliberately taking photos off the walls.

I see a leaf on our Bonsai tree standing taller and greener than the others. I think of hope. I think of what Marilyne and I would want for this house.

My hope is one day a family will colour in these white walls.

My hope is the smell of coffee and pancakes mingling with maple syrup will fill the kitchen.

My hope is new plants will grow tall, just like a family.

Life will live here again.

Home for Marilyne and I was in our apartment back in Québec City with just an air mattress and our school bags.

Home was our first kiss. We walked for hours talking about it, then finally sat by the river in a life of bliss.

Home was at Chocolat Favoris in Lévis, on the other side of the river from Québec City, where every moment felt perfect, and our hearts danced because everything just clicked.

Home was on the bus together, coming back after a long day at school.

Home was when we got lost biking and a person with a pickup truck took us and our bikes back to Oma's house. Being lost with Marilyne was the definition of being found for me. Today, I feel lost in the bad way.

Home was Oma's basement in the summer between school.

Home was on our bikes in the middle of nowhere.

Home was with our dogs in our basement apartment. It was making holiday ornaments out of crafts that became a constant.

Home was kissing each other good night and good morning, every single day. My light each day was hearing her sing.

Home was when I proposed at our cabin in the woods. Home was July 7th, 2018 when I said *yes* to my wife — that we'd stand tall through everything together. In many ways, we already married each other back in July 2011.

Home was up in North Bay and Lake Nipissing during our Maple Syrup Moon, where we spent the days with animals at the sanctuary and the evenings planning our future, using the stars above us to create a roadmap.

Home was taking long walks together in the city, exploring the little shops that dot the street corners.

Home was when we painted in her parents basement together. I remember being nervous her Dad wouldn't like me. Today, I am grateful he is an important part of my life.

Home was on the Kissing Bridge Trail, where a tiny lake appeared under the trees, shading us from the breeze. We stopped biking, and both jumped into the lake together. We held each other for warmth as the water cooled our skin. I remember her gorgeous smile as we splashed around. We were soaked in the most powerful love around, and left a trail of water as we biked onwards.

Home was the daily grind of life together — the simple days where not much happened, but that just being together was our anchor.

Today, as I try and bike alone, I want to leave behind a trail of hope for others. I hope that the North Raisin River continues to flow gracefully and that life doesn't shrivel up into nothing.

Home was fighting the cancer, because we did everything together.

Home can be anywhere. If you haven't found it yet, don't give up. You'll find your good place to grow.

House, I wish you the best.

Wrinkles are Beautiful

Let's all be seenagers of life, letting the wrinkles be lines into who we've become.

It's a privilege to grow old — Marilynne

It was an early evening before the sun descended over the roof of our new house, and the coffee had been sitting too long. I made another pot instead of finishing what was left. It was late January but time had no meaning. If you would've asked me what day it was, I would've given you some vague answer like September 2021, when our life stopped, or that I had no idea. The only clue February was coming was how the snow layered every corner around our house, suffocating our lives. Last year in February, we were snowshoeing, fat-biking on the trail close to Montreal, and had just closed on our house. It was one of the best February's ever. And it didn't make me shiver, because we held each other tight, every day.

Marilynne was sitting with Gordie + Pepper, watching a documentary. Sam was relaxing by the window, his dark and wrinkly coat tinted by the evening sun. I was in the kitchen. The HomePod played some light music in the background, which joined ever so slightly into the bubbling of the boiling pasta water.

Today, I feel like taking that entire pot of boiling water and pouring it over my head. I know that wouldn't hurt as much as I do.

“Are you okay my Love?”, I said.

Marilyne was crying, because of something she heard in the documentary.

“Oh yes, mon Amour, just a nice moment on TV”, her voice confident and soft as always, but stained with sadness.

We knew each other so well, and she knew if I saw it, I’d cry too. She promised to show me one day.

I finished cooking dinner — edamame pasta with veggies and plant parm. This was a constant for weekdays. It’s simplicity was enough complexity for us. Gordie hung tightly to the edge of the table, requesting even the tiniest mushroom from the plate. His relaxed demeanour erupted as he jumped in the air to catch the mushroom. Moments like that made us both laugh.

We ate slow, because the cancer was progressing and pain was prominent. Anxiety lingered in the air like the smell of bad coffee sitting too long, that burns because you accidentally left the machine on *keep warm*.

Eating was hard, and still is for me. There are days I can barely finish a piece of toast. It makes me feel nauseous.

We knew the clinical trial was our best hope. After dinner, I continued my research into MPNST. I had a call with an expert from MD Anderson Cancer Center, who also said the trial was the best option, but even then it was a very difficult disease to treat successfully. The trial could give us a few more months, as hopes for a more permanent fix became essential. I was creating contacts from around the world, all who specialized in sarcoma. My iPad,

just like my life, smothered with MPNST and sarcoma-related articles, clinical trials, doctor contacts and case studies.

I spent my life from September 2021 to mid-February, trying to find a fucking cure. Now I ask myself if I tried hard enough. I spend hours screaming, my sadness boiling like the pasta water, telling her how sorry I am we didn't beat this.

A few weeks after that dinner at home, which was one of our last, we were at St. Joseph's in Hamilton.

A malignant pleural effusion. I remember reading about this. It means *end stage* or *terminal pathway*. More of my horror words. Still, I tried to focus on the trial, because I wasn't going to give up. Marilyne's friend came to visit and I left the room a few minutes to go speak to a nurse. I only ever left the room when someone else, like Audrey or Alain, came. I never wanted Marilyne to be alone. Even then, I was terrified something would happen when I wasn't in the room. Marilyne wanted her friend to know that she had no regrets. In that documentary, there was a line in it that went:

"Today, I have no regrets."

That is what made her cry weeks earlier, at the time we were still saying to each other everyday *we're beating this* — to recognize she had no regrets. Marilyne never got a chance to share with me what had made her cry — so her friend told me.

Marilyne and I — we knew weeks before, and then days before. She knew she was going to die. We knew.

That is the probably the highest point in strength one can reach.

“I love you. You’re the man of my dreams. The one I waited for a long 19 years”, Marilyne said to me a few days before she died.

My Love,

I still remember every moment of the first time we hung out together — the way the Québec City spring air cuts through the cobblestone streets felt perfect with you. The breeze tasted better with you there. The way we held hands as if we’d been together for 60 years. We walked through the streets, and every step our feet took made us closer. I remember how every day forward was the best day of my life.

From our first few months exploring everything, to proposing, to the blue and pink sand mixing together at our wedding, I remember.

Today, the sand cannot be separated, like us.

Today, I am broken into a million pieces and when you died, I died too.

You are the only one on this planet that understood me. Fully and completely.

You knew every line, every dent, every happy moment, and every sad moment.

You are my Everything.

I see you dance so gorgeously and elegantly, and as I join in, every cell in my body beats to the same tune. I hear your soft yet powerful voice whisper our story in my ear.

Your smile — the first thing I see when we'd wake up together — makes the breakfast sun beam brighter.

Your smile before we fall asleep at night makes the moon flash more than the brightest light.

Nothing helps, but being with you again.

I miss you so much my Love.

You and I were supposed to bike with a million wrinkles all over our bodies, and sit in the sun together as “seenagers”. A *seenager* is a teenager that is a senior — we vowed that would be us at 91 years old. I see you — the 19 year old beautiful girl I fell in love with, and I also see the wrinkles of our future, like little lines of our history — the more the better. They form a shape into who we are. I take Gordie to the dog park, because that's what we'd do together. He loves it and teaches everyone how to truly be in that moment. I see him sniff the little flowers that start growing because spring is coming — the time of year when things grow and light is longer.

The pain is unbearable.

10 years is a lifetime. As you say my Love, *it is a privilege to grow old*, so enjoy and cherish those wrinkles.

Just like the flowers at Gordie's park, or the wrinkles coating Sam, they are beautiful.

Behind the Clouds

On April 21, 2022, I wrote a second letter to the house. These words explore my journey of how I feel and the transforming emotions that go along with that.

Dear Me,

Just like how I analyzed the cancer, I sit and analyze everything. With the sun hiding behind the clouds, I ask myself, *Am I running, or facing my fears?*

I drove to Québec City late because the day was painful. The radio was on, but I could only hear one question in my mind.

Do I go back to our house now?

The highway lights along the 401 flickered between *Yes* and *No*.

Dear House,

The answer was *Yes*. The moon visible only slightly over the roof. This is our house. We worked so hard to make it a reality. And we did have beautiful moments in it.

Before turning into the driveway, *Fight Song* came on the radio. We'd listen to its words during chemo. Hearing the song made the vents in the car whip out cold air, even though the heat was on.

This time when I walk upstairs and turn right, I embrace the stillness. I look at her dresses.

No dust is settling on them — they're too beautiful on you my Love. I take them with me, because I want to be close to you.

There's an odd sense of sadness in the house that battles with hope. I don't know yet which one will win.

The floor is cold. I feel fear travel from the threads in my socks all the way up into the hair on my head. The most intense fear a human can live. I think I need to get out of here.

So I run, again.

My lungs scream. Both my knees fall, and I hurt my kneecaps on the hardwood floor. I am now level with all the medical equipment starring right at me. I look over at the crutches. They did not define you. They radiate with sadness and I fucking hate them.

Most of the snow has melted, and I can see threads of the green grass pull from the ground. I hope that they can reach high enough into the sky so that a new family can call this place a home.

I look back at the first letter I wrote. I remember my searing pain. I remember how it radiated off walls, and how the floor felt like a volcano. I sit here starring at all our stuff, and I can't help but notice the boxes of palliative care equipment they sent us.

I drive at night because being under the covers is unbearable without her. After realizing that I need to spend a good deal of

time in our house this spring, I continue on the road. I promise to come back in a few weeks. I need to sleep here. I know I need to deal with the house in a way that will make us proud.

As the morning paints the sky in a lighter shade of blue, I can see the trees pencil dark lines into the sky. They still don't have leaves. The sun hides behind the clouds in what is a life of opportunity.

Is it really blackened by malignancy in its entirety?, I think.

Through the clouds, I notice orange leaking through. *That must be the sun of hope*, I think.

I only wonder though, *am I hiding behind the clouds?*

The Rock and a Rabbit

*I hope these few words help you let non-humans into your life,
and appreciate that it is their space first.*

*Thanks to Gordie + Pepper for being there to lick my tears
when I fall on the ground.*

I walk aimlessly. One of my thinking ones. I call them *grief walks*.

Light shades of green because of St. Patrick's Day contrasted against the blackness of the night sky. My heart sunk deep below the layers of concrete on the sidewalk. My pain so great I barely notice people complaining about the mundane, stupid stuff as I walk past. I feel like the concrete is engraving into my shoes, anchoring me in agony beyond what a human can feel. I think maybe I should walk barefoot, leave the shoes stuck in the concrete, but that doesn't work either.

My entire being is stuck and life stopped. Putting one foot in front of the other is the hardest thing I've ever done.

Elora is beautiful at night. I look through the windows of the sleeping shops. The window steams with sadness because I only see myself in the reflection. There's something magical about looking in a store that's closed. If you use your imagination, you can feel the people. The streets are empty but if you listen careful-

ly, you hear the families mingling on a Saturday afternoon — getting ice cream, finding a coffee shop, and trying on a new dress.

For me, the stores paint sadness into the already black night. I think just how much I want to explore these places with Marilynne. I think of how much fun we had looking at random shops, dreaming of the time we had our house and those cute objects would fit so nicely in our decor. We would bike up to Elora from Guelph. I see a dress in a window and think of how beautiful it would look on Marilynne.

The streetlights sketch an outline to a life that never happened.

I think of that half-full glass of water at home. I decide to start heading back to the safe house, a space I am so grateful to have available to me during a time I don't even know how to fully comprehend anything.

I turned onto the residential street, and the darkness became more prevalent as the city lights faded away. I saw a tiny animal moving in the distance — a rabbit. I stopped walking and we connected for a split second. It was rabbit and human.

Animals don't speak our language, but they understand all our damage. This was one of those moments.

The rabbit dashed up a tree. The lights from the town reflected onto the puddles from the melting snow, creating reflections.

Spring was in the air, which signifies hope, promise, longer days and growth.

None of which I can feel.

I was reminded of the many times we sat on a rock in the middle of the night in Guelph, kissing for hours and talking about our future together, completing each others' sentences. Our connection was like that rock — nothing could break it. The rock also had multiple crevices and tiny dents. It was unique and no other rock was like it.

Just like us.

"Hey look, there's another one!", we'd say to each other as rabbits joined us. They would congregate at a corner, where a tree stretched into the sky.

After dinner with Oma, we'd go for a walk on the trail. It was to go sit at our rock, look up at the tree of life and see the rabbits.

And more.

The entire world doesn't make sense anymore. And I feel like the rock met its match. I wonder if the rabbit in Elora is actually from Guelph, and if the tree still stretches into the sky.

A few days later, in the stillness of the night, I drove to 39 Periwinkle Way in Guelph — my Oma's old house, where she built a life after her husband died. I have trouble sitting still, so walks and drives give me something else to focus on.

The day prior to that night drive was terrifying. I cried most of the day. I sat in the shower, letting the water run cold because 2 hours crying in a shower will do just that. The cold water makes me need to focus on my breathing. I reflect back on that moment and others, and wonder how I'm still here after the intensity of those emotions.

I'm scared of how much worse they will get.

When I got to Oma's old house, I slowed to a crawl. There were two rabbits outside — one on the street and the other on the sidewalk. The rock we used to sit on wasn't far, and the tree still stretched high, almost touching the stars. I stopped. When I opened the window, the rabbit on the street came within feet of the car door. We stared at each other for a few moments and I felt a calm sadness blanket me like how the night sky was coated in stars — only each star blinked with excruciating pain.

The rabbit joined its friend close by, and I looked onwards. As I drove carefully back to my other safe house, I knew the rabbits were going back to that rock and probably to huddle around that tree of hope. I think of taking Gordie to the dog park in the morning, and how that connection with the rabbit saved me in that moment.

Thank you, rabbit, for sharing what is first your space, with me.

Flowers Growing in Broken Glass

*If you look closely, you might see the beginnings of a flower.
Go to the park, jump over rivers and take lots of pictures.*

Under the bridge between Québec and Ontario, the grass dances in a glittery green world of opportunity, and the sun slants over the river, sprinkling parts of it in an orange dust. Standing tall, the Franco-Ontarien flag rolls gently to the rhythm of the wind.

I look over at Marilyne and notice strands of her hair flick up into the air. They point upwards, just like our lives. I run my hands on her cheeks, remove the hair from her eyes and give her a kiss.

My Love, our flower grows taller, I think.

Gordie found another stick and was trying to catch the waves of the river. It is at this moment that our life has so much colour.

April delivers that unpredictable spring you know if you live in Canada, but that didn't matter because we were together. Later that year, we'd learn the true meaning of unpredictability. With the paperwork done on our new house, we enjoyed the sweet taste of togetherness, from star to sun.

This is what it feels like to catch and hold onto a million stars.

In our apartment sat cardboard boxes full of plates, bowls and our wedding glasses with little bikes on them. We were a couple months away from moving into our new house and just like the overflowing boxes, our excitement can't be contained.

At the park, Gordie takes the lead. We hear families enjoying campfires and crickets chirping. Within the forest, deer jumped over the fallen branches with enough precision that not a leaf was stirred. We were guests in their habitat.

I capture memories. One is of Marilynne jumping over a river — her body sprawling into magnificence as she flung herself into the spring air. Walking down to the water, we took pictures of the sunset together. Anytime I saw her, I'd light up brighter than a true noon sun. In April, the park contained mostly bare branches, but if you looked closely, you could see the tiny seeds of a flower.



Strength. In every wavelength.

We were preparing to go take photos in front of our new house with a *Sold* sign in front. Our real estate agent took us on a cold, but clear Saturday. We brought our dogs — Gordie, Pepper and Monroe.

We looked up at the bricks of our house and whispering *See you soon.*

Spring 2021 saw a lot bloom. Marilynne was reading ardently into how best to prepare her baby house — that space where we'd build our family. It was now time for the sweetness to prevail.

I just got a promotion at work, and we both found a way to live within the new normal of the world. We figured it out because no matter what the world threw at us, we could handle it, together.

A year later and it's that same cold but clear day. The trees and plants still leafless.

I feel as exposed as that bare branch.

I scream into the sky. I scream so loud that the plates and glasses packed in the boxes break. I cry into the sun that still sets. I paint over the sunrise with sadness, not waking up next to her. I think, *what if this part of the story was different?*

Under the bridge, the grass now dry and dead. Even the overpass can't shade me from the intensity of my emotions. I ask myself *how I am still here.*

The sky is covered in a thin film of blue and the Sunday stars more brilliant than ever. Through my tears, I talk to the love of

my life. A star shines brighter than the others. I know that one is for Marilyn.

The family and friends that surround me make walking in the fire possible. I thank them by giving them each a star from the sky.

Look closely, and you might see the beginnings of a seed on the exposed branch. Within the grass, you might find a flower growing in the broken glass.

Raging River

It rolls to the rhythm of times

Its anger shows off at day and night

With reminders we can't be together for mealtimes

Or all times

Our river

With its love birds ready to take on the world

All I can see is me under the spring twigs with no leaves I curled

Our river

Aging with sadness

Reborn with hope

It's with my own raging river

I can barely cope

Now being here again

My shoes melt in the wet ground

Emotions pour into the river like the melting snow

I think of how wrong they were with the ultrasound
When my emotions are too much
I turn East
Now the sadness is way too much of a beast
I feel my socks getting wet
My shoes not strong enough for the late spring
I think
Am I even strong enough with a heart so aching
I have to be
Because it's to tell our story in this life of abnormality.

Dear Reader,

Just like that rabbit, I thank *you* for sharing your time with my words. You're more than a reader. Now go pick up a thin piece of ice from the spring streets, and look through it. These words are what you see through that — a journey into some of my grief as it happens. The streets are slippery, especially in Québec City.

Life is full of ice with lots of sharp corners, but I hope we can all find time to jump in puddles of promise.

Who knows, sunflowers might even grow and brush the blue sky.

