

# Seeing Stars

A book of poems

by

Carolyn Wing Greenlee

“Seeing Stars”  
a book of Poems  
by  
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## INTRODUCTION

If you read these poems in order, start to end, you will feel the rhythms of the last fifteen years of my life. They have been the hardest so far, with many losses including my mother, my husband, my father, and my sight. You'd think that could make a dismal bunch, but as I revised and revised, the truth came out in meanings I had not seen when I was in the moment, furiously writing poetry to keep from going under.

A friend of mine said she didn't want happiness; she wanted fullness with all of life's heights and depths. There is wisdom in that attitude, and shocking strength in that brave embracing. I didn't do mine perfectly, but I realize I'm satisfied with what I learned and who I have become because of, not in spite of, those hard times.

I call this book "Seeing Stars" because not everything is loss, even as we grow older. Sometimes we get something back. Sometimes we see something in a new way, and it's brighter and more cherished than when we had everything in abundance and the future was still a long way off.

Carolyn Wing Greenlee  
Lake County Poet Laureate Emeritus  
Kelseyville, CA  
October, 2015



## DEDICATION

To JoAnn Levy, my hero,  
who knows all about life, loss, and writing a book





## I REMEMBER WHEN POETRY FIRST ROLLED OVER MY SOUL

I had never been  
in so many minds  
not mine  
yet finding my Self  
inside  
without having  
to knock  
I was surprised  
drowned by  
sound  
rolling over my soul  
as if I were a whisper  
and only It  
was real

## PAST HAUNTS

There are holes in my history  
where solid should be

Who knows what happened  
in the first 12 years?

Insubstantial,  
I drifted into junior high  
where I lodged in  
incompletion to this day

They say  
you can never  
heal those places  
fill those spaces  
I don't agree:  
We can grieve  
release  
resolve  
redeem.  
We can say  
This wound does not define me  
drive me own me  
We are flutes  
not sticks  
We are lace  
that lets our faces touch  
through the curtains  
of our pain

## PAST HAUNTS 2

How I have hated  
rejected, ignored, despised  
the pathetic little girl  
dripping with need  
I have tried for years  
to disassociate  
from her mewling  
but from the ragged past  
she stumbles after me.  
I rush on  
afraid to glance back.

Now You tell me  
I must  
accept her  
love her  
forgive her  
embrace her  
for I am still her  
and she is still  
me

## CHANGE OF TERRAIN

Love feels like  
a power person never there  
except to demand  
demean  
or lavish riches that take my breath away  
enslaving me with wonder—

It never lasts,  
this sporadic gush.  
Dry winds  
fling me far—  
few grains clinging together  
enough to be considered  
a soul

Why do I continue to crave  
that inconsistent rain?  
strain to spy a far off cloud  
that ends up dropping only promises

Friends who have wandered  
the same desiccated ground  
beckon to a full cool place  
splash me from streams  
surging from the Throne  
where True Love gives  
unstintingly  
consistently  
unfailingly each day  
and no dead thing  
can ever suck dry  
this newly supple clay.

## PAPER

paper—  
thin  
accepting  
accommodating  
easily torn  
flexible  
bland  
blank  
mute—  
can turn a sudden edge  
and slice you  
red

UPON THE PASSING OF A FAVORITE UNCLE  
A POEM FOR UNCLE WOGGIE

Uncle Walter's  
no longer of Earth  
decades of telling others  
what to expect  
witnessing now  
Eternity  
first hand

Mom sat hours by the speakerphone  
feeding him stories  
between treatment and treatment  
he devoured  
the mundane long gone past  
the markets, the laundry, clockweeds in the grass  
now more delicious  
than physics or theories of thought.  
She will miss him  
but she will have no regrets.

On his wedding day,  
my sister kicked the bride.  
What else was there to do?  
She was taking him away.

He would be different. He already was.  
No more Uncle Woggie. Too silly a name  
for one who'd become so large.

Dear Uncle Woggie,  
for years we could not play  
as we did when you were young.

You had become  
too grave.  
You would have played,  
I think,  
if there had not been  
so many mantles weighing you down.  
Are you larking now  
where Auntie Katie danced?  
Mom saw her there, twirling  
free from so much gravity.  
Having passed from terminal to Everlasting  
are you also going to give my mom a peek?

I do not expect to see you.  
I am relieved for you  
for whom life kept reducing  
to its lowest common denominator.  
All your words have been spoken.  
Your thoughts now occupy  
a different space.

I do not need you to appear to me.  
I know you are where I expect to be.  
For now  
in many ways  
you can never leave.  
Playful and young  
you live your Uncle Woggie life  
in books of stories you urged me to write—  
the plain mundane of now distant past  
of markets  
of laundry  
and clockweeds in the grass.

## WHEN MOTHER WEEPS

It's awful when your mother weeps,  
years of words  
too massive to pass,  
blocking each other  
like comics crowding the door

She emits some smallsqueak sounds  
flees to her room to sob alone  
embarrassed to be unable  
to articulate  
the whole of it  
or at least  
retreat  
to the dignity of silence

I can hear her through the door.

I sit  
eyes filling  
wondering what to do,  
myself a grandma  
back to being six  
or two

Sobs swell  
breaking  
surface tension  
waves cresting  
loud enough  
for even him to hear



I warned him.  
She can't keep up.  
She doesn't want them here.  
It's a woman thing.

He didn't hear  
or didn't care.  
Said the house didn't matter,  
then mocked her clutter—  
desk piled papers  
she was doing for him.  
I cringed.  
She took off stumbling,  
squeaking.

I go to my room.  
I always go to my room.

Later she finds me  
writing poetry  
tells me  
it's time for dinner.  
I hug her.  
She trembles,  
resists her tears,  
tells me  
Go eat  
says  
You can't cry too  
it didn't happen to you.  
I tell her she's wrong.  
I hold her.  
She stands without fleeing.  
Doesn't hug back.

At dinner  
we talk about  
something else,  
Afterwards  
he washes dishes.  
She sits on the swing.  
I take a seat beside her,  
say it's been a strange, hard day  
hoping she'll notice  
she is not alone.

It doesn't bring us closer.  
Nothing ever has.  
Nothing ever does.

## DECEMBER

September  
We wonder  
will she make 81?

November  
she wants to see me  
talk on the phone  
I don't know what to say

December  
She could make Christmas  
anniversary 59

At year's end  
with life counted in months  
weeks days  
how carefully I listen to the reedy voice  
disappearing insufficient air

She knows me so strongly  
long before memory  
she has kept me  
tells me  
things I simply could not know  
retrieves the deepest realities  
if I care to ask  
I pray  
not to trespass  
any closely-guarded ground

I listen  
fearing fog will close her in  
out of view  
or hearing—  
beyond her knowing  
who I am,  
who knew me from beginning  
before I knew myself

## FORTUNE COOKIES

Mine: People are attracted by your delicate features.  
I, who get too much attention from  
veterans fantasizing exotic Asian girls...

His: You will become more and more wealthy.  
He, who invented at age 60 a machine  
that has made him at age 85  
richer than he's ever been...

Hers: You love life very much.  
She, who is slipping away...

## FEAST DAY

They sit down to eat  
feast on treats:

*Ha Ga*

*Shew Mai*

*Char Shew*

*Bao*

Roast Duck

Roast Pork

*Chow Fun\**

*Wu Tao*

They call.

I rise from your side.

You begin to cough.

You begin to choke.

I sigh

    sit back down

    a little too hard

Do you do this on purpose?

It seems like you do this on purpose.

I've been here a week.

You always choke when it's time for me to eat.

Everyone else is feasting

Do you do this on purpose?

It feels like you do this on purpose.

I watch the pump dripping

    slowly

    tastelessly.

I pick up the rod.

You still watch cooking shows  
sniff kitchen smells  
    trying to taste with your nose

I lean toward you gently.  
“Could you use some suction?”  
Your face is strained.  
I’m ashamed.  
    There is no *fun* for you.

---

\**chow fun*: rice noodles stir fried with vegetables and meat

## 22 MONTHS

22 months ago  
she could  
still run  
sign her name  
sit up  
eat  
talk  
slam doors  
and had the lungs to  
sob  
loud enough to sound through the  
quiteshut  
solidcore  
custommade  
hardwood door  
from the bed  
where she'd flung herself  
when she could still  
fling

Reading the words  
I wrote back then  
to immobilize the pain,  
I am in shock  
of what's been lost  
and gained  
in the strained weeks  
between



Wherever we place her now  
she stays  
a sack of potatoes  
looking up at us

She giggles  
when she piddles  
on my wiping hand  
or passes gas  
when I reach to pull her  
diaper up

She is helpless  
as a newborn  
but not as loud  
or selfish  
She thanks my father  
calls him her Sunshine  
says he's the best  
pleased that  
at last  
she's first

My father says  
What's different?  
We'll go on like before.  
You just can't move, that's all.  
There's nothing wrong with your brain  
Nothing's changed.  
We're the same.

He's wrong.  
Nothing's the same.

She calls me her angel.  
She never called me her angel.  
I climb in beside her  
daring to match my grown-up frame to hers.  
She doesn't complain.  
I hold her like the cherished child  
she never got to be  
ask if she's afraid to die  
surprised to be so close  
we've never been this close  
She sighs  
closes her eyes  
holds me like the cherished child  
I never got to be

HOW TREES SURVIVE WINTER  
WHAT I LEARNED FROM MY MOTHER  
MOTHER'S DAY, 2000

Do trees weep  
lost leaves  
when they stand stripped  
casting less than  
half the shadow  
do they mourn  
their former  
glory?  
Or when the first frost  
snaps at their  
proud array  
do they say  
Come quickly, Sap.  
No regrets.  
Abandon all vulnerabilities.  
Concentrate  
all green  
centered  
grow down  
deeply  
endure  
in this  
still safe place  
await  
the time  
of blossoms

## FAREWELL

I suppose it's a good sign  
when you leave behind  
a hole where you have been,  
a place  
no one can fill,  
a space  
your size  
your shape  
your depth

I suppose  
if it closed  
as wounds  
scabbing over  
fast and hard—  
you could pass  
to pleasant memory  
and that would be that—

but it remains  
a space  
your size  
your shape  
your depth  
a hole in my heart  
that only you can fill,  
an open place  
that longs,  
belongs  
to you

## BONNALYNN

The last step tripped you up  
Landed you  
on your head  
Landed you  
on your way  
to the End.

You were the alto  
with the smiling face  
welcoming me  
to the pew  
next to you  
Meds and age  
had run you frail  
but not your heart.

Your last step caught your foot  
but your life went straight to Him  
Who stumbled plenty on His last steps  
to the Cross that has now made you whole.

## HOW LONG?

### UPON HEARING OF THE CHARLES BONNET SYNDROME

It wasn't bad before

twenty

thirty

forty years

snapping pictures

catching light

gathering words

shelves of works I said I'd read someday

I don't remember when I stopped seeing stars

It's not all black

Sometimes it's gold

but mostly

it just

isn't

I see patterns now—

neon curls

comet swirls

They say my brain

wants to

entertain itself

making up

what it doesn't get

Last night I saw my cat

They say I'll see

visions

scenes

stored up vivid memories

Days go by  
and every day  
I feel I haven't done it right.  
I haven't stopped to look or paint  
or sorted everything I saved

Under mylar  
all pictures feel the same

if I could keep this much  
it wouldn't be so bad  
Now every dusking  
says

How long?  
How long?  
every night  
declines into black  
and  
more black  
a rehearsal  
harbinger  
decree

People lose much more than I  
and still I whine.

Why can't I do this better?

How long  
horsetail clouds  
flicked white across high blue?  
How long  
beloved faces  
cavorting cat

movies  
zoos  
How long till cones and colors go  
and all that is swift  
shades to sound

Oh fill, eyes!  
Fill and fill and fill  
not with tears  
no  
with all that noiseless flies on silhouetted wings

I am alone  
in this  
unpredictable  
patterned  
made-up stuff  
cats not there  
and gold that does not make me rich  
and colors I knew  
are no longer true  
F8 F16 F22

How long?



## GRATITUDE

Be present.

Do not devour.

Savor flavors.

Feel flowers.

Notice the breeze

    easy on the skin

    gently lifting hair

    bringing fragrance in

Chew.

Do not act as if

nothing smells

and everything tastes

    the same

**LUNAR CALL  
FOR JIM LYLE**

The moon rolls around  
and the seeds go Yes!  
the bulbs go Yes!  
the trees go Yes!  
The moon rolls around  
and the earth says Yes!  
at least  
in my part of the world

The moon rolls around  
and the seeds wake up  
the trees wake up  
the bulbs start to push  
The moon rolls around  
and the grass pricks up  
at least  
in my part of the world

The blossoms start  
and the buds nub out  
even if the winds lash the branches bare  
"It's time" they say  
"and we must obey  
the stir  
the urge  
the Grow"

The Call comes deep  
The Call comes soft  
The Call comes strong  
in the secret place

The Call comes sure  
The Call comes true  
The Call goes forth from the moon

and the seeds pop up  
the blossoms roll  
the green shows up  
everywhere  
and the flowers come  
wild flowers come  
at least  
in my part of the world

## SEEING STARS

### A VALENTINE FROM MY FATHER

I saw stars last night.  
They flickered in and out of the Nothing Place  
    like names on the tip of my tongue  
    like words I can almost remember  
After years of not looking up  
I was content to gaze at day  
admiring clouds too big to miss

I have learned the paradox of loss  
that treasures what's left  
more than all I had before  
    final grains of rice  
    final whispered words...  
Every day I hope  
to hold onto what I have  
but I don't.  
That's the way it goes:  
with this  
you never get anything back.

But last night I forgot  
I had stopped looking up  
and there they were  
bright & dim & many  
flickering in and out of the Nothing Place  
    like names on the tip of my tongue  
    like words I could almost remember

## DONNER POEM

They say there's no way  
you can know what you'll do  
when snow piles high  
and you can't get through.  
But I'd rather fade  
with my belly aquiver  
than fight for a bite  
of somebody's liver.

**IF I HAVE SEEN  
CHARLES BONNET SYNDROME**

If I have seen  
I can keep  
this blue  
lake under summer sky  
lupine  
collectively asserting their  
upright buds  
primly purpling over  
drop-off cliffs  
red dirt  
violent under  
sword blade grass  
pale  
new  
promised  
spring

If I have seen  
this green  
deeper than sleep  
fragrant as morning  
before dry noon  
bleaches peach and lavender  
to pristine egret white  
I can keep dark detail  
sketched in fractals  
same  
and not the same

Do not neglect  
the blacks  
the grays  
thin fog  
young dawn  
subtle mottled  
sea-smoothed stones  
whispered shades  
settling day  
in silence

In my time  
I have thrilled to  
yellow dusted contoured hills  
so common after miles  
that I forget to say  
oh look  
oh look  
oh soak  
my eyes  
in butter color  
It doesn't last for long.

But even if I cease to see  
I will know you  
by your scent  
by your sound  
I will know you  
by your song  
And never  
see you  
fade

## CAT/DOG/FOG/DOOR

cat & dog  
    in & out  
        of doors  
        of fog  
    I let them out  
    let them in  
        and on  
            and on

cat marauds  
    proudly dragging home  
    mauled trophies for others to admire  
dog is old  
    poops wherever  
    forgetting her manners

Lord,  
am I just like them?  
wanting out  
wanting in  
marauding  
dragging ragged trophies home  
pooping wherever  
forgetting my manners



## PASSOVER

They would have eaten.

He would have broken  
the bread unleavened,  
striped and pierced.

He would have given  
the Cup of Redemption.

They would have sung  
and after, gone out:

*This is the day the Lord has made.*

*I will rejoice and be glad in it.*

He would have led them  
into a garden.

They would have slept.

He would have prayed.

He chose to be broken  
like matzo unleavened  
accepting the Cup  
of the Consummation.

He would be beaten

He would be hidden

He would be brought out

Lamb of Redemption.

Blood on the doorposts

Death passing over

matzo now broken

striped and pierced

Perfect Redemption

Cup of the Kingdom

I will rejoice

and be glad in it

**SPRING HAPPENING WITH HEDY  
IN OUR FIFTEENTH WEEK TOGETHER**

She watches me now  
and sometimes lies close  
on her own.

They said this would happen.  
I thought it would not.  
She's too stubborn:  
I'm too strained.

But I don't get to be  
the only one  
not lovable enough—  
exception to the tried and true  
sixty-some years of proof:  
You do the work.  
You take your place—steady at the helm.  
You be the Source.  
Insist.  
Persist.  
Correct-reward-and praise.

It happens  
like little buds pushing  
bare sticks to blossom.  
It happens  
like lilies  
from cold dumb globes  
spearing through spring soft soil  
gallantly green and white.  
It happens  
like leaves.

It happens  
because  
it happens.

It happens  
because I want to  
want her to  
want to  
so much

And she does  
now  
because  
she does  
like blossoms  
like lilies  
like leaves

## LEASH RELIEVE

Every day  
four times a day  
every early morning  
to night after dark  
I take you  
out.

You  
sniff the morning  
sniff the evening  
sniff the noon  
and afternoon  
stare down the distance  
where scent of deer has passed.

Ten minutes they say  
but you're not even trying—  
you're greeting the morning  
regarding it  
a new delicacy,  
offered promise of  
pleasures yet untasted.

Four months  
I have watched you  
four times a day  
savor the air  
in all its complexities  
overtones  
and meanings.

I take you out  
so you can  
Do Your Business.  
I tell you  
it's for you  
but  
I stand  
feeling evening on my skin  
and sometimes  
even  
see  
a star

**THE NOBILITY AND EQUALITY OF COMMON PURPOSE  
A POLITICAL AND SOCIAL OBSERVATION**

Plastic bags are needed now.  
Large or small, they're treasures now.  
Clear, opaque or in-between—  
Valued, all, in my esteem.  
White or blue, red, yellow, black,  
Safeway, K-Mart, Nordstrom Rack,  
Produce, bread bag, merchandise,  
Not too thin is really nice.  
Twice a day they do their work  
Picking poop up off the dirt  
Showing in all matters fecal  
plastic bags are proven equal.

## CONNECTION

Nearly two years  
I've waited  
looking in your  
small brown canine eyes—  
do you see me  
as more than  
the food lady  
who takes you  
good-smelling places  
where you don't get to eat?

I kept it strict:  
no pet, no talk, no play,  
no interaction of any kind  
except with me  
so I would be your everything  
and you'd want only me  
Black stallion on the desert isle

You do your job.  
In the long run,  
isn't that enough?  
It has to be.  
I said yes to you  
for better  
or at least  
for good.

But Monday night  
as I sat trying to  
settle my soul with  
the gorgeous wild horse,

elegant ebony  
grand piano legs  
churning blue lagoon  
following the boy  
snuffing to fill  
his huge heavy head  
with more of  
whom he loved,  
you came  
snuffing,  
rubbing your face in my lap,  
butt up,  
churning upside-down,  
still snuffing,  
then plopping,  
still touching...

Did you know?  
Did you know it would be tomorrow,  
the call before dawn  
when it can't be good?  
When you sniffed the bed and  
wagged your tail  
didn't you know  
he wasn't really there?

Do you know what it means to die?  
Do you understand beyond the  
vacancy of chair  
comprehend within  
the wracking  
wordless wait  
as friends empty the room  
honoring the airless



unspeakable  
twist of  
fundamental  
universal  
nothing unnatural  
consequence of birth  
while I try to ignore the  
outrageous  
unreal disconnect  
from what has been for better  
and worst  
and worse

but in the blue of our own room  
night of drizzle and no stars  
no more thick cable of worry  
stretching unbearably three hours north,  
you come  
sit before me  
looking up  
I kneel  
You put your  
black as grand piano legs  
on my arms  
small round canine eyes  
brown  
and sad  
as mine

## THE TRUTH OF RAINSOAKED PINE MESS

This morning  
when I went out  
I saw rain had pounded  
parts of pine  
to the ground  
redbrown limp  
and everywhere

I'm thinking  
what's next  
plan the service  
pick the music  
write the life  
choose what to say to  
sliver it into  
words charged by the  
column inch

For years I've thought  
always elsewhere  
bracing for the next ill wind  
Now  
walking the dog  
thinking what's next  
I hear the multiple callings  
of Vees flying south  
my mother's only  
really happy memory  
and I'm past  
and I'm thinking next week  
but underfoot  
the redbrown litter lies

sticking to my shoes  
tracking in my house  
truth of today  
unrelenting:  
I'm pounded to the ground  
with no way to fly south

## ON CRYING

You think you'll never stop crying.  
You think that  
when you're young,  
wondering how you'll be  
when you get the call.  
You think you'll sit howling, rocking,  
horror coursing  
But you don't.  
You sit unblinking.  
You wish you'd not just erased  
his voice from the answering machine.  
You think of the last words,  
the last hug, the last call.  
You think of the worry  
and how  
now you don't have to.  
You sound calm when you talk  
most of the time  
it isn't like you thought  
You don't cry continuously  
and sometimes  
you feel normal  
sometimes

RECONFIGURING WITH WINGS  
THREE DAYS AFTER MY FATHER'S DEATH

They say you're always a child  
in your father's house.  
Will I become a grown-up now?  
Fast melt within the chrysalis of pain

You don't see it, I suppose,  
eyes gone runny with all the rest—  
Not till after  
when you've fought free  
struggled from the transparent shell  
do you understand  
it took all that  
for this  
to begin

**WRITING A BOOK**

**AFTER COMPLETING "ETERNAL RIVER, VOLUME III,  
THE NEXT THIRTY YEARS"**

Writing a book is not as hard  
as digging a ditch  
or fighting a war.  
but writing a book  
can take your eyes  
steal your sleep  
pillage your past  
Writing a book  
can keep alive  
things that were  
that might have been  
forgotten

Writing a book requires time  
the sacrifice  
of what is now  
Writing a book  
means sitting inside  
hands on the keys  
eyes on the screen  
while evening breeze  
speaks sweets unrepeated  
but time  
requires  
writing a book

Writing a book  
can keep alive  
things that were  
that might have been  
forgotten  
things that ought not be  
forgotten  
or  
remembered

Some things of mine  
ought not be forgotten  
though they're harder than dirt  
or fighting a war  
things worth  
the digging  
the fighting  
the grind of  
past eclipsing  
sweet-smelling evening  
for some things of mine  
ought not be forgotten  
and there's no other way  
save  
writing a book  
harder than dirt  
or fighting a war

TO MY FATHER IN VIEW OF THE COMMA  
FOR CASEY CARNEY  
IN HONOR OF OUR FATHERS' DEATHS II-9

I saw you last night,  
all of you—  
Mom cooking  
you tinkering  
Dennis watching  
all of you talking and  
walking  
though you couldn't  
I'm certain you couldn't  
I'm certain  
you  
couldn't

I thought you were dead.  
said  
Aren't you dead?

How could you be  
here  
and me so near  
as if years  
have no holes  
where you used to be



Perhaps  
as they say  
it's not what I thought—  
not a stop  
but a pause  
nothing more  
nothing less  
nothing else  
not a sob  
but a breath  
just a breath  
just a  
breath  
or a sweet  
soft  
sigh

## HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Wind shifts

Change sails

Pay attention

No more nonchalance

Keep going

Give thanks

Hope stays close

to sweeten the

unknown



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