

# THE CITIZEN

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## Vigil: The Poetry of Presence

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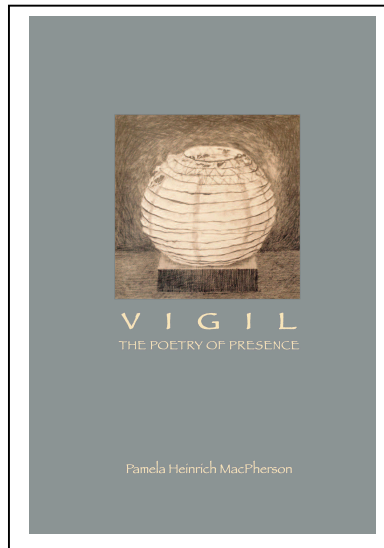
Only birth and death are certain, one anticipated and celebrated, the other often feared and generally mourned. Few, if any other experiences are as profound.

Death will remain largely a mystery. Is there an afterlife? Will we see our loved ones again? Might we reincarnate into a bird or a peasant in 18<sup>th</sup> century France?

South Burlington's resident Pamela MacPherson's recent book, *Vigil: The Poetry of Presence*, consists of 65 poems inspired by deaths she has witnessed over more than three decades, primarily deaths of strangers: the old, not so old, rich, homeless, mentally ill.

MacPherson, a retired RN, has been a volunteer for the Visiting Nurse Association's Hospice program for more than 30 years, and is a volunteer for the No One Dies Alone program at the University of Vermont Medical Center. Most of her sitting is at the hospital, but she also volunteers in nursing homes, at Vermont Respite House and in private homes. Many of her assignments are for three or four hours. She is an advocate for the compassionate treatment and recognition that each dying person deserves as they exit this realm.

The poems that emerge during these experiences are inspirational in their apparent simplicity. She first wrote words and phrases in



journal, often when she was sitting vigil, then brought them (as more complete poems) out later to share with friends who encouraged her to publish them. MacPherson writes, "The poems flow from the sacred moments of sitting vigil."

Poetry is often written during a time of grief or loss, emerging into the light later, when the poet is able to reflect on and grasp the entirety of her initial feelings. Getting a few words down when death happens is important;

sharing immediately is generally not. Poetry needs time and revisions, and poetry about such potent topics is often too abstract, too rambling, for readers to understand right away.

When she is sitting vigil, MacPherson may touch an arm or hand, perhaps sing or hum lightly, perhaps read poems, perhaps have abbreviated discussions. She will learn their name, and then something personal by noticing clues in the room, like well-worn work boots, pictures of grandchildren, a cat purring or a pink nightgown.

Sometimes no clues exist. Many of these people are in a hospital setting, sometimes in a sterile room with little color, no photographs, no music or visitors. MacPherson writes of good care and of less-good care in a poem titled "Mediocre." "On paper, everything would appear fine/ In person, compassion and soul were absent."

And in the poem "Birth Love," she speaks of our human commonality. "I witness her final hours and moments/ In this universe that is all we know."

The poet feels privileged to sit vigil. Here's a small poem that speaks volumes to all who dread pain. In the poem "Drugs" she writes, "Damn that we need them/ Bless that we have them."

Another favorite is about a devout Catholic man. "Even in his dying days his glowing spirit and courage are clear evidence of the sound foundation of his earthly existence."

*Vigil*, published by Red Barn Books, an imprint of Wind Ridge Books of Shelburne, is a visually lovely book, its cover graced by a drawing of a Chinese lantern by Colchester artist Carol MacDonald. Poems are in sections, introduced by short quotes by famous people who have also tackled the formidable topic of death, such as Emily Dickinson, Elisabeth Kubler\_Ross and Ram Dass.

*Vigil* will almost certainly help some of us face our own deaths and those of others more peacefully and less fearfully. The book's overall message is that we are all unique. We all deserve to be treated well as death approaches. No one should die alone.

*Review by Deborah Straw*