

## ***“My Soul is a Poem in Bloom”*** **(Presentation of Douglas Dawson)**

I met Christine Tarantino fairly late in life—I was 57 years old and starting my final year before retirement from my position as Director of Technology at the local high school. I soon noticed the very attractive woman, about my age, who had just started work as a classroom aide that year. My interest was heightened when I observed that she spent much of her free time in the library looking at art books rather than going to the faculty lounge for coffee and gossip. One of my co-workers was acquainted with her and informed me that, as far as she knew, Christine was not in a relationship at the moment. So I started chatting with her every chance I could get and was encouraged by her response. One day I found in my mailbox a card from Christine inviting me to participate in something called a “mail art” project—she called it “A Plea to Forsake”. I had never heard of mail art and didn’t consider myself much of an artist, but I wasn’t about to pass up such an opportunity. I was working hard on making something that would impress her when I realized that she had not been in to work for a few days. I learned that she had quit her job—no one really knew why.

Several days later, while driving home from work, I thought I spotted Christine walking with several children down a side street. I sent her an email and asked if that was indeed her. She replied that it was—that she had taken a child care position because it offered her more flexibility than the job at the school. I learned that she waited for the children’s bus each day on the very street that I took on my way home from work. More opportunity! All through the spring and early summer of 2006, I stopped each time I saw her waiting for the children. We sat together on a stone wall and got to know each other. She had usually just picked up her mail, and she showed me the beautiful pieces of art she received daily from her mail art friends. By that fall, she was spending a great deal of time at my home in Wendell, Massachusetts, and by winter she had moved in with me.

Christine was city-born and raised, but she spent all of her life after college in rural Massachusetts. She had become an elementary school teacher after graduating from college in 1970 and had been teaching for eleven years when she had a near-death experience from a coma brought on by an improper injection during a dental procedure. This experience changed her life forever. Although she continued to do occasional substitute teaching, she gave up her teaching career and devoted her life to art and poetry.

### ***The Artist***

***beauty  
transporter  
spirit  
elixir  
body  
pacifier  
reminder  
counsellor  
of the highest  
the brightest  
within***

Before moving to Wendell, Christine lived and worked on a beautiful pond (“Mill Pond”) in Phillipston, where she created art and poetry for many years. It was here that she founded and operated Words of Light Publishing. Christine believed strongly in the transformative power of words—

***when I move I jingle  
only soft sweet cooing  
or dreamy tones  
gently spew forth  
language is heart vibrations***

Christine not only wrote books and poetry, but also included words in most of the works of visual art that she created.

She was a highly spiritual person, studying the teachings of Paramahansa Yogananda and Roy Eugene Davis for many years. Although very spiritual, she was not interested in organized religion. She found spirit in nature

***Kneeling, stained glass leaves  
Forest is my cathedral  
Silence genuflects***

Christine found not only spirit in nature, but she also found many of the materials she used in her art there, including such items as feathers, acorns, flowers, butterflies, twigs, leaves, dragonflies, birds' nests, animal fur, wasps' nests, and moss.

***flying on ice crusted snow,  
wind driven, I look back  
at deep foot-prints.  
a black cat in snow.  
Art happens.***

Her use of natural materials reached a peak in 2010 when she discovered that withered daylily blossoms, when rubbed on paper, would leave streaks of color. This led to her remarkable "With the Blood of a Daylily" series of drawings. Each day she would visit our daylily patches for suitable blossoms and then work intensely on the drawings until the blossoms were exhausted. The "Daylily" series is among the very few of her works that do not include words as visual elements. Later that same year, Christine created her "A Nice Scream" series, returning to her usual practice of using words as the dominant elements in the works. Each of the works in the "Scream" series features a word or phrase, such as "anger", "not real pretty", "frustration", "all fucked up and nowhere to go", but the series ends on the positive note of "I feel better" and finally her Words of Light: "Truth, Peace, Love".

I learned early in our relationship that while cats were permitted to enter her space while she was working, humans were not. She worked very quickly, sometimes using her non-dominant hand, hoping to give expression to her subconscious self. In 2011, Christine created another remarkable series of visual works, the "Organic Matters" series. As is true of "Daylily" and "Scream", the "Organic Matters" works are intensely emotional and raw. In many of them, the paper was torn or bunched up by the forceful use of the various drawing instruments that she used.

***I wish a different color body  
it will be lavender today  
maybe pink tomorrow  
I think vibration at higher speeds  
will yield light filled people***

In making her decision to leave her established teaching career and pursue art, Christine sentenced herself to a lifetime of financial deprivation. Although she worked hard to support herself through substitute teaching, sale of her self-published books, and workshops at local museums, schools, and in the community, she was almost always on the edge of poverty. In spite of her difficulties, she never lost her sense of optimism, her joy in life, and, above all, her commitment to art-

***how does it feel to be an art prostitute  
to live with no food  
unless you agree to live by someone else's warped rules  
to live with frozen fingers  
huddled by the kitchen stove burners for warmth***

***unless you agree  
to have to beg for basic needs  
because art offers no biscuits  
to make excuses for your dwelling  
because you chose to follow your heart  
sometimes I blow it and feel free—totally—  
and say what I feel  
then I'm on the edge again  
wondering if I'll survive  
but Art is my home  
where the truth and  
beauty of those who sacrificed  
worse than I dwell.  
my tears taste the salt of Vincent  
my heart pumps the blood of Leonardo  
my soul feels the pain of Michelangelo  
but forever my spirit thrills.***

Christine loved all animals but had a special affinity for birds. One of the most important relationships she had in her life was with her bird “Little Spirit”, an abandoned fledgling blackbird that she rescued and lived with for ten years. She always intended to write a children’s book about her experiences with Little Spirit and had many notes and drawings gathered together for the project, but fate intervened, and it was never completed. She delighted in telling Little Spirit stories to the young children at the schools where she did substitute teaching, and the children were as delighted to listen to them. She told me of other extraordinary encounters she had over the years with various birds, and I witnessed one episode first hand. We were on the porch of a summit house on a high hill in western Massachusetts when we spotted a large hawk far above us. Christine raised her arms and began speaking to it. The hawk circled down and, because of the steady wind, was able to remain practically stationary, with only a few flicks of its wings, very close to us. As the great bird hovered only inches from her outstretched arms, Christine spoke to it calmly and softly. After several minutes, the hawk let the wind carry it up and away. Had I not seen the event with my own eyes, I would have had difficulty believing that it happened.

***I'm off the grid  
of human existence  
trees hearts beat  
cats turn to clouds  
birds pray for me  
I have nothing or  
is it everything?***

Christine’s mail art friends should know how important mail art was to her. It gave her great joy to receive art in the mail, and creating pieces to send to her friends almost always took precedence over any other activity she may have been involved in. Her “Green Seen” mail art show in 2010 was one of the biggest art events of the year in our very art-oriented little town. She kept her mail art well organized and would often sit and go through all the pieces she had received over the years. I believe that of all of the “communities” that Christine was a part of throughout her life, the international mail art community was one of those that she felt most comfortable in.

Christine was a woman of great courage, grace, dignity, and optimism—she never lost these qualities even in the face of the many difficulties that life threw at her, ending with the devastating diagnosis that she received in mid-September of 2012. What she had been told by her doctor to be severe heartburn turned out to be a deadly tumor that led to her death less than three months later. Her comportment in the face of her impending death greatly impressed her caregivers and loved ones. The staff at Hospice of the Fisher Home, where Christine spent her final month, still remember her with love.

By early December, 2012, Christine was in a greatly weakened condition, having been unable to eat anything at all for several weeks. She was slipping in and out of consciousness when, on her 64<sup>th</sup> birthday, December 3, 2012, she roused briefly and noticed that some of the flower bouquets in her room had withered blossoms. In a voice barely audible, she directed me to discard the withered blooms and rearrange what was left into a more presentable bouquet. She wasn't happy with my efforts and finally told me to get rid of everything except one potted plant in bloom. She then directed me to go outside into the beautiful garden visible from her window and fetch her some plumes of ornamental grasses there. I, of course, did as asked and returned with a handful of the plumes. She tried to push one into the soil of the potted plant but didn't have the strength. At her direction, I added the plumes to the potted plant, moving them around until she was satisfied with how it looked. It was the last work of art that Christine created. She died four days later, on December 7, 2012.

***Wind blow wild  
Shake the sky  
Make the moon and rainbows fly***

***Nothing can hold me contain me  
Control me  
Nothing can keep me back  
I run with the wind  
I fly with hawks  
I soar  
I go places no one's  
Heard of before  
I am free***

***My spirit is bright blinding light  
My heart is silk  
My mind is infinite  
I am bliss***

***I see only colors flickers  
Transparent  
I am fragile  
Too tender to live  
Too sensitive for life  
I retreat in peace  
A loving acceptance***

I have already mentioned Christine's bird Little Spirit. She also had a very close relationship with her greyhound Khensu. Both of these creatures had died before I met Christine, but she had them both cremated when they died and had kept their ashes. Among Christine's final requests was that the ashes of Little Spirit and Khensu be mixed with her own before I spread them at the designated spot. Many who have received art from Christine know how fond she was of glitter. Although she did not ask it, I took it upon myself to mix in a container of glitter I found in her studio to the ashes before they were spread. Even today, after so many months, early morning sunlight hitting the floorboards at my home will sometimes find a speck of glitter resting in a crack there and be reflected. When I see that sparkle, I think of Christine, and in my mind's eye I can see her moving through the heavenly realms, Khensu at her side, Little Spirit flying on ahead, all of them trailed by glorious clouds of multi-colored glitter.

Douglas Dawson