



IN THOSE TEN DAYS

20 POEMS PORTRAYING
MY MOTHER'S FINAL DAYS

“She is a tsunami of
the Caribbean sea;
let no disease deny her
her pride and dignity.”

written by
ROBIN GITTENS

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Epigraph

“The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.”

—Robert Frost

Disclaimer

The poems in this chapbook explore themes related to—but not limited to—grief, terminal illness, caregiving, family conflict, faith, bodily decline, death, and emotional trauma.

There is a probability that some pieces may be unsettling. Reader discretion is advised.

Please continue to be mindful and kind to yourself as you accept my offerings in your reader's journey. If a particular word, phrase, line or stanza triggers an uncomfortable memory, I invite you to pause, take a breath, and gently process at your own pace.

Some poems may unsettle readers. Please move through these pages with care, pause when needed, and honour your own pace.

The well-being of my readers comes first.

I share with you my sincerest gratitude for allowing time and space to explore these memories with tenderness.

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The Phone Call

IN THOSE TEN DAYS

A hushed tremor
disturbs my dreams.

Atop a burnished night table
my iPhone—
encased in teal
polycarbonate—
ignites the condo's
dim ceiling;

Someone calls at 4:15.

I wipe crusts of crumbling rheum
from my dazed, sunflower eyes;
a stuttering swipe
unlocks the smudged screen,

“Hello?”

Someone answers:
my mother's voice—
the heft of hardwood;
its faint, solemn timbre
snakes my skin.

In a whisper, she pleads,
“Son, come home.”

Towards The Tarmac

IN THOSE TEN DAYS

My reaction is rapid—
the lash of lightning;

wrinkled clothes
clump and crowd
a sturdy suitcase:
Samsonite.

A path procured:
Toronto to Barbados;
faux leather jackets
cold sweats and
a syncopated heart.

Aboard a mid-afternoon flight
shapeless clouds
mirror my thoughts,

“Like a vulture,
cancer continues
to feast
on mother’s bones.”

In an attempt to rise
from the vessel’s aisle seat
anxiety strokes me—
I succumb to sleep.

Homeward Bound

IN THOSE TEN DAYS

Braving the concrete bleakness
of the airport's weathered walls,
my father greets me
with a damp, sunken brow;

we retreat to the lot
harbouring his beige SUV;
as he utters shaky words
and a harrowing tale,
I sheath a silent agony.

Amid a twist of brass,
the engine rumbles;
I reserve salted tears
behind a paper-thin wall.

Fifteen minutes after seven—
wheeled over slanted asphalt,
the car halts behind the rusted
gates of my childhood home.

Akin to a mahogany casket,
my father opens our garage door;

nothing escapes but the echo
of a guttural moan.

An Unsettling Silence

IN THOSE TEN DAYS

Where are the chirps
of grasshoppers
and croaks
of garden frogs?

nothing
but the squelching sound
of my exposed soles;

sweaty steps
through a cemetery
of chiselled ceramic.

White, straight-edged tiles
guide my timid trek
through a maze
of cemented halls—

the bricks that bind
these torrid, castle-walls.

A company of lights
—mounted and dimmed—
greet me from on high;
gobs of sweat
balm my frowning head;

beyond an open door,
lies a familiar silhouette;
the end of a silence,
most unsettling.

My Room, Her Chasm

IN THOSE TEN DAYS

Only eight months ago
I stared at these walls
of baby blue—
my childhood room;

what once served as refuge
now shelters a
penultimate doom.

Curled like an unborn babe,
a sweat-soaked blanket
stretches between her
gaunt arms and legs.

Dressed in an airy,
cotton nightgown
lies my mother—

a face I no longer
recognize.

Portrait

IN THOSE TEN DAYS

If words
were watercolours
their palette
would be bleak.

Such is her face;
strained eyes
—like sinkholes—
sunk deep.

I recount the moles
plotted on her weak,
cinnamon-coated
cheeks;

creases collect
as I feather my fingers
atop the curled crop
of her aging skin.

From the gaping crevice
between her cracked lips,
she murmurs my
middle name,
then stops:

“André’...?”

My heartstrings
tighten like knots.

Onto Thee I Pray

IN THOSE TEN DAYS

I spent an eternity
lying beside her
as tears of anguish
and adulation
moistened the dry
tear ducts beneath
mother's tired eyes.

An overwhelming weight
draws shallow breaths—
I slid from the cool surface
of rumpled sheets
to the smooth ceramic
kitchen floor.

I imagine myself,
transported to an
empty church pew;
clasping my clammy
palms, kneeling
on a textured
tile surface.

A practice uncommon—
yet, somehow,
I feel summoned;

“God, can you hear me?
I come to you, humbled
and defeated.
Save her from suffering
for her spirit is depleted.”

What Father Endured

IN THOSE TEN DAYS

Some burdens
should not
be shouldered;

some bonds
are best
not made.

Blood may bind
kin, yet be drawn
by unkind ways.

So too,
the shades of skin;
some shoulder disdain
the more they drift
from a lighter tinge.

To honour one's
desire for secrecy,
some shoulder
slights and storms;

rather than shelter
father's burdens,
mother's siblings
spat words,
stony, sour
and wrong.

A Moment of Clarity

IN THOSE TEN DAYS

A scarlet sunrise climbs
our bedroom window;
the Atlantic's salty kiss
seeps between a net's
small, square-shaped gaps—
barring uninvited guests.

A moment of clarity
cupped with awe,
greeted us when
mother rose from
her unkempt bed
and braved three
steps to the slanted
glass panes.

Confusion coats
my countenance—
as she clenches the
steep wrought iron
bars behind the net
with frail fingers, pivoting
her gowned frame
back and forth
akin to standing
push-ups.

She retreats to the
bed's edge—coupled
with exhaustion, she
dons a bloated face;
dangling wrists point
to a crumpled item
nested in a corner—
with rabbit's legs,
I rush to retrieve it.

From her gaping mouth,
a stream of bile barreled
into the procured plastic bag;
its discoloured design dims,
the molten green tinge.

After her wobbly arms
fell to her skeletal sides,
I tied and tossed her
emission, braving a deep
phobia with quick decisions.

As father readied her
for a planned hospital trip,
from a distance, I wondered:

“Did she mimic the bird
beaking upon her bones?”

The Doctor's Office

IN THOSE TEN DAYS

I remember the laurels—
not scents,
colours
or textures;

only office walls: washed
with accolades
and achievements.

Printed paper or
parchment:
proof of medical
appointments.

One more wheat-skinned,
West Indian.

Mother teeters
in her steel-spoked seat;
a raking pain sweeps
from her lower back
to sandaled feet.

The doctor's words
become a whisper,
an annoyance.

His impertinence
becomes my impatience;

“How much longer
does she have?”

I inquire about
the inevitable.

Akin to foundation,
he dons a demeanour
of displeasure;

to my question,
he provides no answer.

Just another prescription,
delaying impending death
and domestic depression.

Morphine: the pillager of
spirit; invoking possession.

The Foreboding Slab

IN THOSE TEN DAYS

My calfskin sneakers
squeak on vinyl
as I wheel my mother
to the room
of recommended
radiology.

A quiet nurse directs
our journey towards
a floating table
smooth, lifeless
and cold—

mother's pain pierces,
plasters
her fearful face.

She shares tired tears
like spring showers
upon the remnants
of winter's end;

I press her head
upon my cotton-clad chest
soothing her sadness
with a calming breath.

As gentle as any mother,
who cradles a child upon
their warming breasts—
from the steel chair's
stitched seat,

I placed her frail frame
onto the table's
carbon crest.

Ceasing her salted sobs,
mother bawls to the
nearby nurse,

“Never mistreat your
children, hear?”

This cancer in her bones
is nothing more,
than a curse.

Delusion or Grandeur?

IN THOSE TEN DAYS

I sat beside my father
in a narrow-walled
waiting room.

Pencil-stripes on white,
folded hands hover
over olive, dress pants—

an ever-familiar fashion
a firm, disciplined man.

Accustomed to vaulting
his thoughts,
he severed the silence
between us
with choice words
unlocked,

"She always bounces back."
a fact mother's reality
did not flaunt

What Still Remains

IN THOSE TEN DAYS

To weather the electric
storm whirling through
her wobbly legs,
father wrangled a
wheeled walker stocked
with a local store's wares.

Eager to assemble
and adjust its aluminum
shell, I sat beside my mother
who donned a fresh,
lavender smell.

Therein returned a
recognizable expression—
gripping its rubber padding,
she guides its wheels
across the cold, tiled floor
she stops and mutters,
“I don't care much for it.”
then turns away from
the bedroom's
mahogany door.

She is a tsunami of
the Caribbean Sea;
let no disease deny her
her pride and dignity.

Chikungunya

IN THOSE TEN DAYS

A tireless swarm—
transformed;
stretched between
neighbouring islands
and beyond.

A lone, long-legged
menace, trading
physical plight for its
lecherous kiss;
leaving my father with
a fierce fever,
swollen feet, fingers
and wrists.

Following his mallet-like
muscle aches
and jousting joints
—akin to a fallen knight—
He collapsed on
an embroidered couch;
cooled by a ceiling fan's
dusty cycle.

And in my eyes' periphery,
an oval-shaped mouth
greeted a gowned figure,
guiding her shunned
walker down a
narrow, ceramic-clad
river—the ever
loyal wife, poised

to preserve her
best friend's life.

Father's pain became
my mother's; she
dismissed the devil
in the name of honour.

Time Capsule

IN THOSE TEN DAYS

Beside her preferred,
porcelain cup,

capsules linger:
a psychedelic
set of six.

Coated with corporate
symbols and tricks;

pebbled onto a stream
of distilled water
down a deeper well.

Promises given
yet forsaken.

All that remains—
a downpour
of debt, anemia
and mother's
shuffling shadow.

Altercations With Anemia

IN THOSE TEN DAYS

Like a vice,
frail fingers
clench cubes
of ice;

with a sluggish
slide, she
caresses her
cracked lips

and crushes,
with tired
teeth.

An altered appetite
no strength in sight—

I stand over her
bent brows;
brown eyes rise
to meet mine.

Once a mighty tree,
now her timber tumbles
upon a blue, bedded sheet
in surrender to sleep.
Much like the one
my father felled
in twenty-o-three
once ripened with mangoes
until rot removed
their soft, succulent glee.

Sisterhood

IN THOSE TEN DAYS

Though father still endured
the rancour of kin,
Sisters, not of our blood,
embraced my mother's
bedside, where soul
and sacrifice, wore thin.

Did God chariot my prayers,
dispatching friends from afar?
two dark-skinned angels
—with grey, nappy hair—
hiding servitude's scars?

Once copious caregivers
to those young, old and meek;
now we welcome them
as they caress mother's
discoloured arms
and swollen feet.

Expunge: For Dear Life

IN THOSE TEN DAYS

Those early December days
hinged from sultry to murky;
morphine gripped my mother
with bowel-bound uncertainty.

To turn the tide towards smoother
shores, I lifted her limp body onto a
bedside commode of cerulean blue
(which father perceptively procured);

her ghastly grimace ushered in tales
of strain and shame—joined by one
of our angels, an intestinal force
summoned sweat and internal pain.

To my hair-raising horror, one of
the commode's legs broke loose—
like a feral cat, I lowered my torso,
securing the fragile frame's truce;

unable to dismiss eruptions of disgust,
inhaling the brown liquid's fetid odour,
as it whorled in the circular bowl;
I stood strong—for mother's honour.

By Grace's seasoned commands, we
carted the semi-collapsed commode
to the closest bathroom; she, holding
my mother with latex-covered hands.

When, at rest, mother thrust her sodden
face into Grace's corn-coloured blouse;
yielding to exhaustion, she broke into
a much-deserved, lamentable howl,

“Oh God, Grace, I can't take any more.”

The Day of Departure

IN THOSE TEN DAYS

The day of my departure—
a taste most bitter;
filled with sorrow.

With planned actions:
slow and steady—
like a sea-turtle
I nest my curved clothes
in a black, battered shell.

Prior to pursuing the path
from Barbados to Toronto,
I kneeled on jeaned knees
to cradle my head upon
my mother's lap.

With a brightened spirit,
she combed my hair
with a calm, open palm;
tickling my sunburnt
ear with a quiet,
cooing sound.

Towards the tarmac:
Grantley Adams
International—with a
cotton-ball kiss,
I left her side knowing,
those ten days were
indispensable.

I Am Betrayed

IN THOSE TEN DAYS

Reflection ravished me
amid the aluminum-alloyed
wings of a cloud-charting eagle.

Like my father, I battled with
the belief, mother would
bounce back from her
onerous ordeal.

For all that I witnessed
through the years as she's
helped others thread
their own seasonal storms;
sacrificing her soul,
time's cumbrous chains
seizing her tired arms.

For twenty years, her spirit
sharpened my sword
as I sojourned with stigma—
an albino child, who braved
the belly of bigotry, a
pale, golden-haired enigma.

I still believed, and yet,
I am betrayed—

for at noon, on a bright
January day,
despite the carrion bird
chipping her bones,
a blood-bursting vessel
flew her spirit home.

Biography

Born in the West Indian island of Barbados, Robin Gittens immigrated to Canada at the tender age of twenty (20) to pursue a Bachelor's Degree in Information Technology Management. After successfully completing his 4-year tenure at Toronto Metropolitan University (then Ryerson), he dedicated 18+ years to a career in Product Management and UX Design, partnering with global teams to build desirable, albeit usable, digital experiences.

In his early 40s, Robin grew detached from his career and developed a deep hunger to express thoughts often misaligned and dismissed in the fast-paced, ever-changing tech industry. After encountering a series of life-changing events, Robin reconnected with his love for writing poetry—an art he had practiced in secret since adolescence; an art he had suppressed due to experiences with shame and rejection.

Since enrolling in the University of Toronto's 'Creative Writing' program in late 2022, Robin's will to weave words into poetic stories continues to help him find his true voice, reclaim his spirit, and stand in his integrity.

Though the forest is lovely, dark and deep, he has promises to keep; and many miles to go before he sleeps...



IN THOSE TEN DAYS

written by
ROBIN GITTENS

When an early-morning phone call beckoned him back to his homeland, Robin never expected to witness his mother's final days with tenderness, fear, and devotion. Through vulnerable free verse, this chapbook explores the rigorous rituals of caregiving, the frailty of family silence, and the spiritual betrayal of losing someone believed too firm to fall. A lyrical elegy of love, memory, and grief, this collection questions what truly remains when the body abates, but the spirit refuses to abandon.



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Website coming soon!