

“To Rise So High”: In remembrance of Yvedt Lové Matory,

M.D.

by James Lorand Matory

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In the last month of her life, my sister and her dear friend Tina Poussaint shared a hearty laugh. Her friend joked, “With a sister like you, no wonder Randy’s leading the charge against Larry Summers!”

When, in January, the president of Harvard suggested strongly that the gender gap in math and science is innate, I wasn’t the only one to step forward and cry out, but I was the only one too certain to step back. There is a human dimension to all such struggles.

Perhaps Mr. Summers would have thought twice if he had known my mother, and he obviously didn’t know my sister well enough either. Both were passionately loving mothers

with minds and professional ambitions bested by no man's, women at the *razor* edge of *any* undertaking they pursued.

They were two women alike, who relished both pleasure and precision. They loved Herman Miller and Bauhaus, Mercedes and Saks, Maui and Kyoto. They loved knowledge and words, but they also loved real estate that towered and sprawled. They loved guests who dressed. They loved repartée. They loved men who were almost as smart as they. They draped themselves in mink and silk, Hermès and Louis Vuitton. They dripped gold, diamonds, rubies and pearls. And they honeyed their children with love, leaving memories of signature birthday parties, at least two masterpiece Christmas trees two per season, and such minutely designed Easter eggs that Fabergé would have blushed in shame.

Yvedt loved Romaine Bearden, Congolese masks, and Benin bronzes, Chinese ceramics and all things Japanese. And she adorned the world with her own Pentax photography and

photo-collages, pottery coiled or thrown, and lithographs of geometrical mental galaxies.

Yet she was a woman of both art and science—
indefatigably.

When Yvedt detailed her triumphs over the sexism of the surgical profession, she would sometimes credit Earle and me (Randy #1). She claimed she had to battle both of us to make her contralto heard above the noisy bass section.

But I beg to differ with her version of history. She didn't need us to teach her gumption. The way I see it, she taught me the gumption that not even bass boys are born with. I remember the sister who broke athletic and intellectual barriers long before I knew those barriers *existed*. For example, she broke the *boys'* track records at Sidwell—but, then again, they were just Sidwell boys. But Yvedt also majored in Art History while simultaneously completing her pre-med requirements at Yale and still graduated Magna Cum Laude.

Five years younger than Yvedt, I could never hold her down. Rather, I looked up and wondered whether I could rise so high.

As if she'd read my mind, she always told me--and more often showed me--that I could. As Scholar of the House at Yale's Morse College, Yvedt traveled Nigeria, Ghana and Senegal. She wrote me numerous aerogrammes from West Africa about the powerful people, rituals and monuments she'd seen. She always returned bearing danshikis and gris-gris bracelets that I could wear and embroider with imaginations of the Mother Continent and of the power that I too could possess.

At Yale, she took me along to organic chemistry class and to Robert Farris Thompson's lectures on the artistry of Black Gods and Kings. When I was 15 and the editor of my high school newspaper, she invited me to deliver my first university lecture, which I addressed to the Book and Snake Society at Yale. It was an abysmal talk, but she told me it was great.

Yvedt's African journeys led in turn to my own/ and have now brought to mind thoughts that I once thought unthinkable:

The Yoruba people of Nigeria celebrate upon the death of the old and accomplished. On the other hand, the death of the young and unaccomplished is considered ghastly and vile. But what, I must now ask, about the death of the young and accomplished? Dead at 48—little more than half the lifespan that she and we had every right to expect.

However brief, her life was an act of grace—a grace note that saved scores of lives through surgery, enriched hundreds of others through her artistry, and buoyed us all through her love, challenge and encouragement. Above all, the brief flash of her life created three bright and beautiful stars named Henry, Rachel and Thaddeus.

Though her illness gave warning, her death was no product of life's inevitable decay. Instead, she died the heroic death of the firefighter or the soldier—felled by the enemy

from which she had defended us. Yet the enemy proved too small and crafty—a scampering crab that crept beneath her light and into her very own heart.

Alas, that crab has laid her low and brought her back to this place where she was reared—Washington, DC; on the date, as fate would have it, of our own mother’s birth--April 20th; and to this sanctuary where, 20 years ago, her heart was permanently joined to that of her dear husband--Randall Kennedy.

Over the past two years, their evergreen love enabled Randall to bear Yvedt’s unbearable pain with equanimity. Here in this nave was born a legendary love--oak-steady and willowy-resilient—a love that no mere crab could crush and no mere shovel inter.

On Friday morning, my wife Bunmi and I went to the hospital where the paramedics had taken Yvedt’s body. The breath had gone from her lungs, but her limbs were soft, her

hands supple but steady, as if at the ready to heal someone else's ravaged body.

However, one thing struck Bunmi as unusual about Yvedt's hands. Her nails--normally clean of any encumbrance to her healing powers--glowed with crimson nail polish, as though on the eve of a Hawaiian vacation. They were hands washed clean of the day's toil and poised to caress her husband and children. Hands ready to paint an Easter egg with the emblems of Ghanaian royalty, or to stroke the ivories of her Steinway. They were hands too relaxed to wave goodbye/ but just attentive enough [slow] to open a slow and gentle second movement.

That Friday morning, I held her hands, and wet her face with my tears. Through the blur of my vision and of our 43 years of overlapping memories, they could have been my tears or hers. But, eventually, both of our eyes dried. Perhaps she knows, as I do, that our memories and the ambitions that I learned from her are immortal. They live on in me, in our

children, and in the many girls and boys who will look up and know that they *too* can rise so high.