

Anya Silver's heart-wrenchingly beautiful last poems

***Saint Agnostica* is a chronicle of grief, love, and mystery.**

by [Jill Peláez Baumgaertner](#) in the [January 26, 2022](#) issue

In Review



Saint Agnostica

Poems

by Anya Krugovoy Silver
Louisiana State University Press
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This is Anya Silver's final book of poems, discovered on her computer by her husband on the day of her death in 2018 from metastatic breast cancer, which she had struggled against (sometimes in despair) and lived with (almost always triumphantly) for 14 years. *Saint Agnostica* chronicles her last months, explores her grief and her fierce attachments to her son and husband, expresses her doubts and her deepest longings, and rages against the mystery of a silent God. It is heart-wrenchingly beautiful.

The last time I saw Silver was at a Poetry by the Sea conference in 2017, where we spoke on a panel together. I will never forget what she said about the beauty of Ash Wednesday. The reminder that from ashes we have come and to ashes we will return is a welcoming one, she said, because everyone with a black cross on their forehead must admit that they, too, are dying. It felt to her like a real community, not like the experience she usually had sitting in a congregation where she felt like the only one with that visceral awareness.

In "Poetry Class, Ash Wednesday," Silver writes:

I want everyone to understand the grief.
There is no happy turn, no radiant *volta*.
I won't offer a lit lantern or fist of violets.
One of my students stays after class.
What do you mean by dust to dust?
She asks me—curious rabbit, owlet.
My smile's vulpine. *I mean you, girl. Us.*

In "Saint Agnostica," Silver longs for a saint of doubt. "She would understand my desire to love God, / but shrug when I say I'm not sure I do."

In another poem, Silver describes how easy it was to fall into unbelief. "It was a relief," she writes, "setting faith free." God pushes her to rage as she watches friends suffering from metastatic breast cancer die, and she writes:

If you push me off a building, I'll sing.
I'd jump in front of a bullet if I could.
I'd let someone wring my neck if only
I knew it would hurt God just one bit to watch me die.

And it is not just God she rails against. A remarkably insensitive doctor says that Silver's treatment is a "crapshoot" and then shrugs, "Six months is better than nothing."

In another poem, "An Outline (Possible)," Silver tallies up the time she has left if she is accepted into a trial: three months here, three to six months there. She is trying to reach her son's 15th birthday—which, by the way, she doesn't—by piecing together the possibilities that various drugs may offer her.

Desperation rings through many of these poems, along with the realization that death hunts her like an animal, extracting organs one by one. And through it all, as she says in one poem, Jesus does not seem to be paying attention.

Many days, I want to throw my fists against God's body.
But nothing, nothing.

Hold me, all you saints and angels.
Don't let life, like a child struggling in my arms,
climb out of my body.

Still, this is not a book without hope. Silver finds comfort in learning to look carefully at the autumn unfolding around her as she sits in her chair. At one point on All Souls' Day, she lies in bed weeping but senses the peace the gathering souls provide as she offers them the warmth of her living hands.

She also describes the costly love she has for her son and her husband, remarking how much she must pay in physical suffering for this love.

Without it, I could easily finger
each hydrocodone from its bottle,
count them like rosary beads
while swallowing them down,

a body consuming its prayer.

Love is not free, she insists; it costs her exhaustion, pain, and the poisons of chemo. She lies in her bed, but she is calmed by the sound of her son's voice in the next room, "narrating a Lego battle." She lies still and thinks, "*I have you, you, you,* though my son wasn't even aware that I listened."

Love is not happiness, Silver insists, remembering the time her infant son cried for hours and would not be consoled. But when she put him down, exhausted,

he held his arms out for what comfort
I could offer. Whoever thinks of love
as happiness hasn't really felt it.

Even though the spirit of her made-up Saint Agnostica broods over these poems, Silver endures the suffering for the sake of love.

I've been struck down too many times.
Struck, poisoned, drained, radiated fourteen years.
Truly, if not for love, I would choose oblivion.
Sweet love, a stone jammed in my jaw.

She wonders, as her doctor says, "*you have a few options remaining,*" when her last happy day will be—or if she has already experienced it. She lists what she wants to remember, including "blackberry tart with cream," "my husband and me side by side in the attached twins," "listening to my breath, / feeling summer summer summer." And she concludes:

Before me, there's something:: behind me,
Everything

The final poem of the collection is Silver's funeral wish. She wants a "crow's funeral," since crows shriek and cry when one of their own dies. She does not want a eulogy, hymns, candles, or the cross.

We find the shroud in my friend Anya's poems, but we also find a life intensely, intentionally, lovingly lived. She may not have wanted a eulogy, but her poems offer stunning evidence of witness and lament—and our spirits find solace. These poems

are, in their own way, every one of them, psalms.