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Flinders University

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From The Mother Workshops, a mixed genre project

This piece is part of a section that includes excerpts from letters that my mother wrote to me in 1987.

RIP Mark Twain,
reports of whose death at one time were greatly exaggerated.

Every letter from that year written on aerogrammes that have a bright colour inset of Mark Twain and this quotation:

"I came in with Halley's Comet in 1835. It is coming again next year, and I expect to go out with it. It will be the greatest disappointment of my life if I don't go out with Halley's Comet."

Now there was a man who knew his own mind, how he wanted to be remembered. A grand exit for someone with a sense of symmetry. How many of us think about planning our exit, our testimonials?

By the time my mother died, all her brothers and sisters, brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law, were dead. A few nodding acquaintances in Florida were left. My sister and I stood in the funeral home's back room, painted a washed-out green like an old cafeteria's kitchen. In neat blue and grey suits, the gay funeral director and his assistant stood with hands by their sides. We were waiting for them to leave, but we didn't have the presence of mind to ask. They had no ritual prepared for this; they weren't used to our request, since apparently no one wanted to stay for the cremation. Looking around the room, I could understand why.

The doors of the crematorium opened. The heat pulsed out but it wasn't threatening. The flames were as expected - carmine, saffron, vermilion. Check your Thesaurus. We watched her slide into them, being watched ourselves by these men.

I remember the sound of the flames more than their colour. It was as if she were being rolled onto a freeway, the traffic swishing around and past. She was being dissolved by noise, not heat. Her forehead was already slick, the skin browning off. In anticipation of this? In a few minutes, she had slipped from view, the doors clicked shut, insulating us perfectly from the heat and roar. Most poems do not achieve such a sense of closure.

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