

The Sadness of Black Kittens / Geraldine Ann Marshall (H. Mention)

*I appreciated how one small moment, a tiny tragedy, resonates
within the speaker's mind until the story becomes a larger
reflection on loss and hope, on the ambivalence of not knowing.*

— John F. Buckley, Contest Judge

Driving your village road, you pass and then back up to observe all of the sadness in the world. You hope schoolchildren have already walked by—before sadness simply stopped by, waiting for witness in a driveway. The lifeless black kitten lies at the driveway's edge. Without evident blood, the injuries must have been internal. You guess when she was hit, the driver moved her from road to driveway. A kindness. But gazing at his dead companion, is a twin black kitten. Is the live kitten confused by still sadness, or do animals know long before people, "It is what it is."? All you know to respond to such comforting words is to wordlessly nod.

Would it be your own kindness to take the dead kitten, bury it in the shop's garden? But you imagine someone calling, calling for Blackie or Fluffy, never knowing. Which would be worse? The faces of the missing children that used to be on milk cartons still haunt you. When you make the mistake of turning the news on, there are nineteen, nine, or three faces of children killed in a school shooting, parents clutching a framed photo. Would it be better to hold onto that container of hope?

Or those survivors of war-torn areas? Do people really want to emerge from basements or borders to see fragmented remains of their lives, find a loved body waiting to be buried in the front yard?

How could you know? You know that at the shop, there will be, waiting in ten minutes, someone hoping for your wise-woman-flower wisdom passed down from all of your grandmothers to ensure a good outcome. If white roses are substituted, when their petals fall, angels are praying for you rather than unlucky falling petals of pink or red roses. Arriving at your shop toting a dead kitten would not be good for business.

So, you leave the kittens, arriving on time at that curlicue sign of petals and leaves, Language of Flowers, you painted with your niece when she was little, when she needed a home with cousins. All of these years, you have touched up the paint, still imagining the feel of her child hand under yours, still hearing those high giggles.

You walk past the sign. But the sadness of black kittens does not leave you. When you sell the pot of rainbow tulips you have forced into bloom, you wonder if you should tell

the woman buying them for her friend who has had a miscarriage that those petals will fold at night—to tell the friend that they will open again in the morning.

Sometimes, you tell how Eve was able to steal a thornless rosebush as she was driven from Eden, but when planted in her new world, all roses had thorns. Grandmother said the story symbolized life—we have to accept thorns with beauty. But today, when the young woman buys rosebushes for her first garden, you do not tell this story. There are so many sad rose stories. You tell how the first rosary was made from beads of rose petals for their fragrance of prayer.

Finally, you are ready to go home, where it is now too quiet. In the busy years, you longed for quiet. Now, you think again of adopting a pet. Maybe the black kittens were strays and you could take the surviving kitten home.

But when you pass that driveway, both the dead kitten and the living kitten are gone. You look for a little grave, then at the window of the small house, hoping to see the face of a living black kitten. Nothing but curtain and slant of late light, and you know whether the surviving kitten is safely curled into a home, is another thing you will likely never know.

Home, you stop at the mailbox, hoping for another postcard. You think the cards are from your niece, running always. She is in a world of trouble, not running from you. She surely sends the postcards, your name and address only, always written by a foreign hand. The last was from a tiny, Turkish village—a sketch of the only natural black rose in the world. Flower sites say this black rose is a myth, but you bookmark the site claiming it is truly black due to the special soil of one village. You want to believe there is one place she's found home, where the color of mourning has been resurrected into unbelievable joy.

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Geraldine Ann Marshall (also published under Geraldine Marshall Gutfreund) has had a number of books for both children and adults published, as well as poems, short stories, and articles in journals and anthologies. Her stories have been winners and finalists in The Robert Olen Short Fiction Award and in The New Southerner. She has a degree in zoology from the University of Kentucky. Her most recent published book is *Spider's Gift: a Christmas Story* (Pauline Books and Media) and she is currently marketing her book, *Learning the Language of Birds* (linked short stories).