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Theme Essay by Jo Scott-Coe

Defying Time and Space to Tell a Lost Story

TW's annual "Writing and Faith" issue launches next week. Here, Jo Scott-Coe kicks it off with a moving meditation on extreme violence and redemption.



By the time I met Kathy Leissner, she had been dead nearly half a century. More accurately, she'd been murdered—brutally stabbed and then abandoned in bed by her husband, Charles Whitman, the night he also killed his mother. Just before noon, on August 1, 1966, Whitman began his tower rampage at the University of Texas.

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From the clock tower 300-plus feet above the campus mall in the heart of Austin, Whitman shot and killed fifteen and wounded nearly thirty others, committing what was, at the time, the first televised mass shooting in America. *Tower*, a new documentary based in large part on Pamela Colloff's 2006 oral history "96 Minutes," captures the disorientation, fear, and bravery of those who survived.

As we now know too well, Whitman's act was only a harbinger of terrors that have continued to confound and haunt us, replaying the deadly ritual and transforming too many community names forever into markers of collective graves: Columbine, Virginia Tech, Tucson, Aurora, Newtown, San Bernardino, Orlando.

But behind the shock of mass murder, there are the forgotten lives of victims, particularly those killed in private prior to a public rampage. It's a subject I felt compelled to address in my 2016 article "Listening to Kathy." Kathy Leissner's life was cut short three years before I was born, and yet the privilege of writing about her five decades later has since opened, for me, a mysterious portal that connects the living with the dead. It's a rare gift when we can step into the shadow of a story that, by its very unveiling, enlightens and transforms an existing narrative, recovers lost voices, and bonds people who otherwise would never have met.

As a writer, I experience this moment as akin to the communion of saints. You might call it the collective unconscious or the hive mind or alternative universes intersecting or simply the ongoing literary conversation. But this doctrine, as metaphor more than theology, continues to confront and comfort me in my work. Stray Catholic though I am, I've always loved the idea that we can communicate with mutual allies who defy time and space, biology, geography, or technical standards of worthiness—all in order to lobby for each other's survival, safe passage, even redemption.



In the beginning, all I knew was the Kathy whose life had been buried under the television spectacle, reduced by her husband to a body left unattended for more than ten hours in the morning darkness and then the rising heat of the next terrifying day. Reduced further into a pretty-teacher portrait and gravestone snapshot juxtaposed with a "true crime" photograph, her head sunk into the pillow, one limp, bare arm across sheets soaked in her own blood. Her humanity was virtually erased by accounts that rendered her death with a false delicacy, as if she had, like a fairy-tale princess, died in her sleep without feeling any pain or recognizing her attacker.

Kathy's eldest brother Nelson, just nineteen when she was killed, understood that all this was false, incomplete, unjust. Yet, he also waited, guardian of her memory, unsure of how to intercede and with whom. The story was treated as a finished thing, and he didn't know if anyone would make the room for a different version.

The years came and went, fifty times: birthdays, death days, Christmases and Easters. Nelson saved his sister's photographs, her childhood scrapbook, her wedding gown, the precious letters that preserved her voice. He left yellow roses at her grave. Both his parents died. When people—writers—approached him to talk about his sister, nothing ever

felt quite right.

Then something happened nearly two years ago, when I sent him a letter because I was working on a related but distinct story about Whitman's Catholic upbringing and the lost priest who had been his friend. I wrote Nelson to ask whether he had any memories of this clergyman, who had performed his sister's wedding ceremony. Raised in a long line of Methodists, Nelson had wondered as a kid where the priest had come from. He was curious, too. We had several brief and straightforward exchanges by letter, email, and phone. He sent me printed scans of wedding pictures that had not yet been published.

We didn't meet in person until many months later. When I arrived at his home, Nelson was already outside, and he saw me before I saw him, waving my rental car into a parking space he'd saved at the curb. He was handsome, dressed in a fitted polo shirt, and tan even in January. His welcoming smile was unambiguous, betrayed only by the cautious crinkle at the corner of his eyes.

After a golf-cart tour of the neighborhood and lunch at a favorite diner, we sat almost knee-to-knee in Nelson's living room. As I listened to him long into the Texas evening, it seemed that his very life depended on sharing stories he had held back for longer than I had been alive. I understood then that this profound need for connection and expression was more than informative or intellectual. His openness was visceral, existential, even sacred. For hours then as well as afterward, we remained off the record, and I knew whether I wrote about Kathy or not, I was witness to a soul-deep silence being broken. That was already a miracle.

It was late when I left, and Nelson insisted I promise to call when I arrived safely. Before I collapsed into bed at the hotel that night, I kept my pledge. A trust was already evolving—between me, the stray Catholic writer who'd gone looking for a lost priest, and Nelson, the not-so-practicing Methodist who wanted his sister to be recognized and remembered in three dimensions.



I don't delude myself that writing an essay can somehow undo an act of violence, and it haunts me that our encounter would not have been likely without Kathy's horrible death and the public carnage that followed. But given what I cannot change, I believe, as Nelson has told me he does, that he and I were supposed to meet. I also know that Kathy's presence has become real to me in a way I never could have predicted or imagined.

At one point, in passing, he said, "Sometimes you remind me a little bit of her." I wasn't sure what he meant, and I didn't think about it again until much later, when I was fully immersed in the labor of gathering together Kathy's life from the intimate pieces that remained.

One afternoon, a box of primary documents arrived in the mail. Inside was a reproduction of a faded portrait taken not long before Kathy's nineteenth birthday, just weeks before she married and the path of her life changed forever. I

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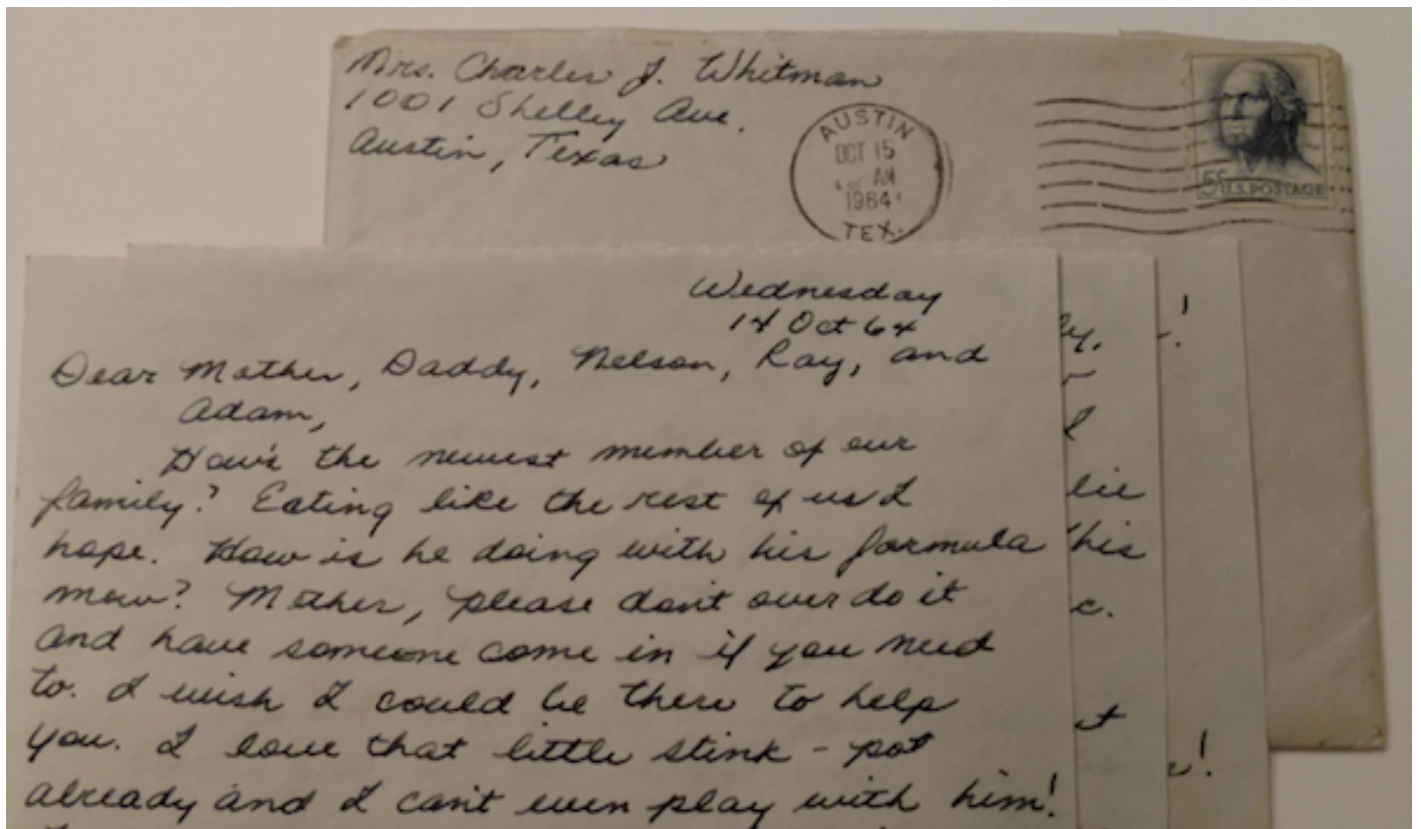
couldn't quite grasp what I was looking at—or rather, into. Something in the eyes, the relaxed pose, the honeyed tones of the photo seemed to mirror the sepia-looking author portrait my webmaster had snapped spontaneously of me in a coffee shop five years earlier. A picture Nelson must have found online after he'd received my letter and asked himself: *Who is this woman?*

I felt that vibration again, a strange zing of electric current as my hands touched the corners of the glossy cardstock.

In a letter to her husband, sent in 1964 after a brief and long-craved reunion during his military leave, Kathy described her fear of being placed on a pedestal: “You seemed a little dissatisfied with me in some ways and I really am the same girl you married,” she wrote. “Don't let me become over-special while we are separated and then find me not quite that special when we get back together.”

Long before her murder, Kathy recognized and eloquently expressed the dehumanizing effects of being treated like a possession rather than a person. She wasn't then, and isn't now, a doll or a plaster statue to be venerated, not an angel or a ghost or a martyred princess. There are so many things Kathy said, wrote, wondered, felt, and worried about. She has become a whisper in my ear. A sister traveler, with a story I'll carry forward, like a votive flame, as long as I live—because Nelson imagined that a place for her might still be possible, because his love held on.

When I look up now at her portrait near my desk, Kathy's eyes never waver, as if she knew we'd find each other all along.



Publishing Information

- [Tower](#) [5], a documentary directed by Keith Maitland (2016).
- “[96 Minutes](#) [6]” by Pamela Colloff, *Texas Monthly*, August 2006.
- “[Listening to Kathy](#) [7]” by Jo Scott-Coe, *Catapult*, March 2016.

Art Information

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- Leissner family photos courtesy of Nelson Leissner; used by permission:
 - Kathy and Charlie (February 27, 1962).
 - Kathy's Wedding (with her mother, Frances Leissner, and bridesmaids).
 - Kathy Leissner (1962).
 - Letter to Kathy's Family.



Jo Scott-Coe is the author of *Teacher at Point Blank* (Aunt Lute) and *MASS: A Sniper, a Father, and a Priest* (forthcoming from Writ Large Press). A print version of *Listening to Kathy*, including more historical context and additional photographs, is now available on Amazon. Scott-Coe works as a professor of English at Riverside City College in Southern California, where she also teaches community writing workshops for the Inlandia Institute. Find her on Twitter [@joscottcoe](https://twitter.com/joscottcoe) [8] as well as on Facebook [@teacheratpointblank](https://www.facebook.com/teacheratpointblank) [9].

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