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WINTER 2012

Field Notes from Grief: The First Year

Judith Gold Stitzel *with artwork by Claudia Giannini*

Field Notes from Grief: The First Year is a unique collaboration of author Judith Gold Stitzel and artist Claudia Giannini, based on the private journals Judith kept during the year after her husband's death. They had been married for forty-seven years.

"It took a while before I fully accepted that my pages were valuable not only as a stimulus for my friend's compelling images, but for what they had to say to others," Judith said. When she moved from the private to the public realm, the resulting book maintained the spontaneity, contradictions and even confusion, of the original experiences as they were unfolding:

I told Bob we would not go to the hospital unless I couldn't handle things. In the end, I couldn't handle things.

Could we have done more? Something different? Before the ambulance carried him from our home, Bob asked that I bring a change of clothes for him to come home in. I took his favorite Lands' End shirt. Maybe he didn't think he was dying. But wasn't that a tear I saw in the emergency room? Rolling down his cheek behind the breathing apparatus?

The next morning you wake up. You didn't die. In the long in-betweens you woke again — and again — ashamed — astonished — alive.
You didn't die of grief.

The accompanying images of printmaker/photographer Claudia Giannini do not illustrate the journal, but rather translate grief and gratitude into the lexicon of color and design. Digital photographs taken during each month were printed on Japanese paper onto which prints of Judith's hand-written journal pages were transferred. Plants, animals, words in different alphabets and shapes relate to the time of year or Judith's writing in a kind of free association. As grief counselor Stephanie Savitch points out, the images help to focus on the passage of time, while the separate entries allow the reader to choose her or his own pace through the year.

According to poet Natasja Sajé, Judith Gold Stitzel "rejects the clichés customarily offered to and by the bereaved" and offers painful truths that cleanse even as they hurt. But there is humor as well as candor, and both make the book accessible to anyone who has suffered a loss. Ultimately *Fields Notes From Grief: The First Year* refreshes the reader and provides evidence — especially important to those who are grieving — that they will want to go on again.

Field Notes from Grief: The First Year

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ISBN: 978-1-59571-753-5

\$18.00

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