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# Farewell to Joan Malory Webber

By Nancy Nowik

Joan Malory Webber died last year on October 14 in a climbing accident near Mt. Rainier. She was a Professor of English at the University of Washington and a respected Renaissance scholar, whose death calls to mind the deaths (in the same month) of the two women on the American Women's Annapurna Expedition and the recent death of another great scholar, Jane English, also in a climbing accident. Each of these four deaths sends those of us who do not climb back to Adrienne Rich's poem "Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev," the leader of a women's expedition that perished in a storm in August 1974.

In recent years Joan had taken the name Malory, in honor of Thomas Malory, the fifteenth-century author of the *Morte d'Arthur*, a groundbreaker and a rebel in his time. But because I always knew her as Joan, I'll call her that here. I was her student at the University of Washington in the summer of 1967 and later at the Ohio State University where I became a family friend. I think I am representative of most of her students—we were fascinated and inspired by her, and we were better for having known her because in everything she did there was an implicit demand for excellence.

At her funeral service, people spoke of Joan's two great passions—her students and her climbing. I'd like to mention both and add a third—her poetry. But first the climbing, because it was first in her life. In recent years she'd suffered badly from arthritic-like pain in her elbows, knees, and back, pain so severe she was told by doctors that she would probably never climb again or that she had only a few more years to climb. But she said to more people than one that if she couldn't climb, her life wouldn't be worth living, and somehow she made a psychic adjustment to her pain.

People will wonder whether she courted death. Certainly she knew she was statistically increasing her chances for accident or death by climbing as frequently as she did of late. We know that she'd witnessed other people's accidents and, in one case, another climber's death. Yet for all her awareness of what had happened to others and what might happen to her, I don't think that she was haunted or that she had a death wish. As John Coldewey said in the eulogy he wrote for her funeral service: "For Joan, climbing informed and was informed by the rest of her life. I think I can suggest that endurance, effort, risk, a need for balance, a summit, nature as adversary and friend, are all elements familiar in our own lives; in climbing they take on a larger-than-life form, a purity and a clean intensity which she understood. It was not a game, or a hobby, or a sport for Joan. She climbed passionately to discover truths and mysteries about herself and about the world she was part of. That is, she climbed to live, not to die."

As for her second great passion, students—yes, she cared greatly about the quality of our work; she had high expectations for us; she was the most uncondescending teacher I've ever known. She gave us rich and elegant lectures, delivered as she watched some fixed point in space. She gave us thorough and encouraging responses to our papers. She was



Joan Malory Webber. Ingall's Peak, Cascades, June 1978. Photograph, courtesy of John C. Coldewey.

a person who didn't believe in amenities, hated small talk, burned us with her intensity, touched us with her shyness. She always felt that the scholarly community needed to come closer to students; she always believed they had something important to say.

Regarding her third great passion, her poetry, what most surprised us was that as a person who came to the writing of poetry in her maturity, she developed very quickly and had a firm touch from the beginning. When she died, she left behind many new poems, and her will names Joseph Wittreich of the University of Maryland as her literary executor. In addition, she died as the third of her books was going to press, a feminist reading entitled *Milton and His Epic Tradition*, to be published by the University of Washington Press with a eulogy by Madeleine Doran, emeritus professor at the University of Wisconsin.

Joan knew some restless and unhappy years, times of great personal risk and experimentation; but the months she spent on sabbatical in South America with her daughter Rachel, as she perfected her Spanish and tracked her beloved Neruda, brought her a new peace. A recent picture published in the Autumn 1978 issue of the *Ohio Journal* shows Joan in climbing clothes, facing the camera with her tremulous smile and with something that looks like joy—as if she had found the "center" she wrote about in a poem of that name:

We lay all night last night in each other's arms,  
But that's not it.  
On the mountain's slabby face, still raw  
After a million years, I reach  
For a crumbling hold. That's it.  
That motion in that place.

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