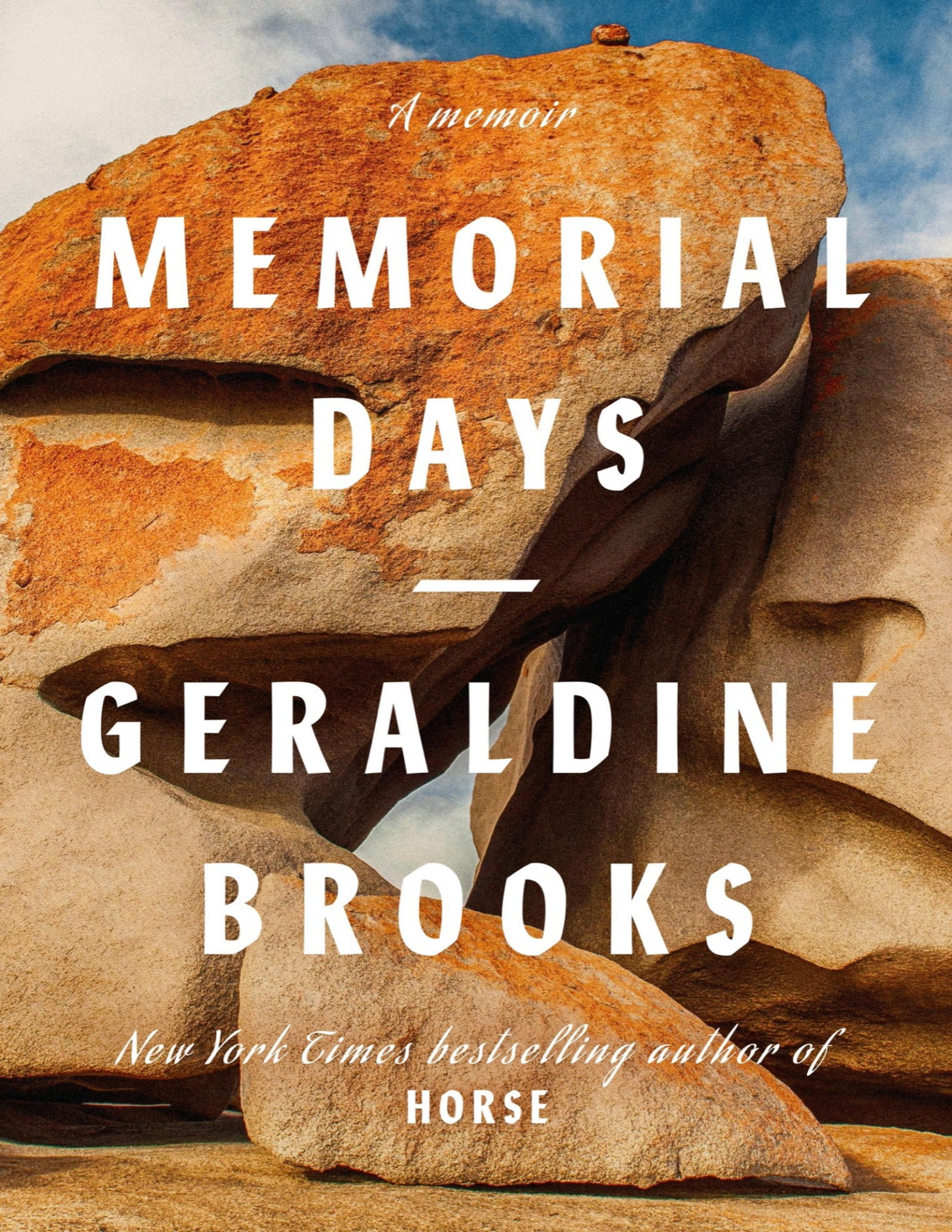
A memoir
MEMORIAL DAYS
GERALDINE BROOKS
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MEMORIAL DAYS

Geraldine Brooks

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Contents

For Natty and Bizu

The only end some things have is the end you give them.

TIM WINTON, *THE RIDERS*

May 27, 2019

West Tisbury

"Is this the home of Tony Horwitz?"

Yes

"Who am I speaking to?"

This is his wife

That is exact. The rest is a blur.

"Collapsed in the street…tried to resuscitate at the scene…brought to the hospital…couldn't revive him…."

And, so, now he's in the OR. And, so, now we've admitted him for a procedure. And, so, now we're keeping him for observation.

So many things that logically should have followed.

But she says none of these things. Instead, the illogical thing:

He's dead.

No.

Not Tony. Not him. Not my husband out on the road energetically promoting his new book. My husband with the toned body of a six-day-a-week gym rat. The sixty-year-old who still wears clothes the same size as the day I met him in his twenties. My husband, younger than I am—hilarious, bursting with vitality. He's way too busy living. He cannot possibly be dead.

The resident's voice is flat, exhausted. She is impatient with me as I ask her to repeat what she has just said. It is, she tells me, the end of her shift. She gives me a number for the doctor who is coming on duty in this ER, five hundred miles away in Washington, D.C. She can't get me off the phone fast enough.

But Tony—I need to see him. Where will he be when I get there?

"We can't keep a body in the ER. It will be moved to the hospital morgue to be picked up by the DC medical examiner."

It. A body. She means Tony.

So how will I see him? I'm in Massachusetts, on an island. It's going to take me hours to get there—

She cuts me off.

"The DC police will need to talk to you. Make sure they can reach you."

And then she is gone.

At some moment in this call, I stood up from my desk. When the phone rang, at eighteen minutes past one, I'd only just sat down to work after a morning of distractions. I'd had a happy conversation on the phone with my older son, a recent college graduate, adventuring around the world and about to board a plane in Manila

for the eight-hour flight to Sydney, where he would stay with my sister. A friend, Susanna, had come to borrow or return a book—I can't recall which. We'd gone down to the paddock to throw hay to the horses and hung around there, draped on the split rails, chatting.

I'd read a long email from Tony about the visit he'd made the day before to the Virginia village where we lived for ten years. It was mostly unpunctuated, gossipy, catching me up on the doings of our former neighbors—their tribulations with dry wells and divorces ("she refers to him as her was-band"). The email concluded:

"didn't wish self back there (if for no other reason, 90 degrees and 100 percent humidity, and still May) but heartened that it seems to have gently evolved while keeping history and quirk. tomorrow back to the grind and am now 2-3 episodes behind on Billions so you'll have to rewatch upon return. love and hugs"

I'd hit send on my reply and finally opened the file titled Horse, the novel I was supposed to be writing.

Then, the phone.

Another distraction. I considered letting it go to voicemail.

But maybe there was a question my older son had forgotten to ask. My younger son was away at boarding school, sitting his end-of-year exams. Perhaps he needed something. I had to pick up.

The caller ID was hard to read in the bright sunlight. Only as I brought the handset close could I make out GW HSP on the display. Don't tell me I picked up a darn fundraising call….

Now the dial tone burred. I stared at the handset. My legs started to shake. But I couldn't sit down. I paced across the room, feeling the

howl forming in my chest. I needed to scream, weep, throw myself on the floor, rend my garments, tear my hair.

But I couldn't allow myself to do any of those things.

Because I had to do so many other things.

I stood there and suppressed that howl. Because I was alone, and no one could help me. And if I let go, if I fell, I might not be able to get back up.

In books and movies no one gets this news alone. Someone comes to the door. Someone makes sure you're sitting down, offers you water, asks whom you'd like them to call.

But no one had done me this kindness. A tired young doctor had picked up my husband's cell phone, on which he had never set up a passcode, and hit the speed dial for HOME.

The first brutality in what I would learn is a brutal, broken system.

February 2023

Essendon

The small prop plane takes off from Melbourne's Essendon Airport. Suburban rooftops, container terminals, the industrialized mouth of the Yarra River. And then we pierce a flat layer of cloud and the view I'd hoped for, the glittering, island-studded Bass Strait, is obscured. All I can do is watch the mesmerizing blur of the propeller. A smear of concentric circles. The unlikely physics of flight.

I am headed to a shack on the farthest end of Flinders Island to do the unfinished work of grieving. I have come to realize that what I did that day in late May 2019 and what I was obliged to do in the days and months that followed has exacted an invisible price. I am going to this remote island to pay it.

In the confines of the small plane I overhear snatches of conversation from my fellow travelers:

"I've got a hundred acres, it's quite a big bit of dirt."

"No one's prolly fished that spot since we were there last year."

"You can have the views, or you can have the bars, but you gotta consider the cell tower if you're building a place."

"All the pines are gone."

“What d’ya mean, gone?”

“I mean gone, mate. Not there.”

Tony died on Memorial Day, the American holiday that falls on the last Monday in May and honors the war dead.

When I get to Flinders Island, I will begin my own memorial days. I am taking something that our culture has stopped freely giving: the right to grieve. To shut out the world and its demands. To remember my love and to feel the immensity of his loss. “Grief is praise,” writes Martín Prechtel in his book *The Smell of Rain on Dust*, “because it is the natural way love honors what it misses.”

I haven’t honored Tony enough, because I have not permitted myself the time and space for a grief deep enough to reflect our love.

This will be, finally, the time when I will not have to prepare a face for the faces that I meet. The place where I will not have to pretend that things are normal and that I am okay. Because it has been more than three years and, contrary to appearances, I am not at all okay. I have come to realize that my life since Tony’s death has been one endless, exhausting performance. I have cast myself in a role: *woman being normal*. I’ve moved around in public acting out a series of convincing scenes: PTO mum, conservation commissioner, author on tour. But nothing has been normal. Here, finally, the long-running show goes on hiatus.

I have been trapped in the *maytzar*, the narrow place of the Hebrew scriptures. In the Psalms, the singer cries out to God from the narrow place and is answered from the “wideness” of God. Our English word “anguish” means the same thing as the Hebrew *maytzar*. It is from the Latin for narrowness, strait, restriction. I have

not allowed myself the wild wideness of an elaborate, florid, demonstrative grief. Instead, it has been this long feeling of constriction, of holding it in and tamping it down and not letting it show.

I am not a deist. No god will answer my cries. The wideness I seek is in nature, in quiet, in time.

And I have chosen this place, this island, deliberately. Before I met Tony, my life had begun directing me here. Falling in love with him derailed that life, set me on an entirely different course. Now I might glimpse what I have been missing, walk that untraveled road, consider the person I might have become.

Alone on this island at the ends of the earth, maybe, I will finally be able to break out of the *maytzar*. But first I will need to get back to that moment in my sunlit study when I refused to allow myself to howl.

That howl has become the beast in the basement of my heart. I need to find a way to set it free.

May 27, 2019

West Tisbury

"The DC police will need to talk to you. Make sure they can reach you."

But she hadn't asked for, and I hadn't given her, my cell phone, so that meant I had to stay by the landline and wait for that call. In between, I searched for my mobile—in those days I barely ever used it—and began to do what needed to be done.

My first call was to the airport. It's a small rural airport, and I know the people who work the desks by name. Could they get me off the island? Was there any chance, any seat at all?

Not on Memorial Day weekend. That long weekend is the unofficial beginning of summer. Every flight off Martha's Vineyard that afternoon had been booked for months.

I would have to take the ferry to the mainland and a car to Boston—three hours—and hope I could get on a flight from there to DC. The next ferry was at two thirty p.m. I could make it if I dumped the car in an illegal parking spot.

Then the home phone rang. Detective Evelyn from the DC police. He was gentle, considerate. I was thankful for this unexpected kindness

after the brusque doctor. He was able to tell me exactly where Tony had been walking when he collapsed, and that the first to see him lying on the ground was a former Vietnam medic who yelled for someone to call 911 as he checked for vital signs. The detective described how women from the yoga studio across the road ran out with a defibrillator and in minutes two ambulances arrived—one from DC and one from Chevy Chase, because Tony had collapsed right on the line between the District of Columbia and the Maryland suburbs. Both teams of EMTs had worked on him—the detective was not sure for how long—before they rushed him to the downtown emergency room.

He asked me some questions about Tony's health, about why he was in DC. He explained that because there were no witnesses to his collapse, there would need to be an autopsy to rule out foul play. I asked if I could speak with the man who found Tony. He said he would try to put me in touch. I told him I was leaving for the ferry and gave him my cell phone number.

Then I looked for the number for Tony's brother, Josh. He and the rest of the Horwitz clan had gone to Maine for his daughter's college graduation. Small mercies: Ellie, Tony's mum, was with them. She would be surrounded by loving support when she heard this unspeakable news.

Tony had been staying in Josh's empty house in Chevy Chase. The Memorial Day holiday weekend had given him a welcome break in the relentless schedule he had been following since his book's publication. He'd done eight events in seven days, crossing the entire country. All his emails mentioned how exhausted he was after getting up early for flights, staying late at book signings, then heading out for drinks with the old friends who inevitably turned up at those events.

When he finally reached his brother's house, he slept for hours and called me to say how good it felt to have had some rest. By Sunday afternoon, feeling revived, he'd gone to visit our onetime neighbors in Waterford, the tiny village of eighty or so families in the foothills of the Blue Ridge, where we'd lived for a decade. That leisurely Memorial Day Monday, all he had to do was show up for a dinner in his honor with Washington friends. The next day he would be back on tour. He had a slew of interviews lined up starting early in the morning, then a book event that evening at the famed DC bookstore, Politics and Prose.

But there was no next day.

"Northampton Street?" Josh, stunned, whispered, when I told him where Tony had collapsed. "That's just a block from my house."

Josh, Tony's older brother, had matured from an unruly youth into the mensch of the family, the man you needed in a crisis. He said he would find a flight from Maine, leave right away. His sister, Erica, and her husband, David, would bring Ellie to DC by car. His wife, Ericka, would take their daughters to their various planes: the two young women had their jobs and school to get back to. He said he would likely reach his house before I would. He sensed the panic in my voice. "Take a minute, think what you should pack. You might be there awhile."

Despite his advice I left the house in what I was wearing, and would be wearing, for the next three days. Some underwear, a toothbrush —I couldn't think further than that. I had to make the two thirty ferry to get the last seat on the flight I had booked to DC. I called my neighbors, Fred and Jeanne, told them what had happened, and asked if they would look after our dogs and the horses. They will, of course they will. They will come right over.

On the boat I called the number for the resident that the first doctor had given me, the doctor who had relieved her for the evening shift. This young man had no idea who I was or what I was talking about. He was clearly up to his eyeballs in other people's emergencies.

When I asked if Tony's body would still be at the hospital when I got there, he snapped at me: "How should I know?"

I don't know why I expected better than this, but I did.

First, do no harm.