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True Stories of Love, Loss, Longing and what it takes to get through the hard times

■ IT'S CALLED "BEATING THE DARKNESS": the Haitian custom of brazenly clanging pots and pans to keep terror at bay. Behind this urgent domestic defense ("an act of protest, a cry for peace") that **Edwidge Danticat** (*Breath, Eyes, Memory*) evokes in a just-published family memoir is a persistent longing—for intimacy, rescue, love. The task of memoir is to probe such longing without necessarily assuaging it, ransoming the future by laying claim to the past.



It's a delicate mission. In **Brother, I'm Dying** (Knopf), Danticat pieces together the dreams of her father and uncle, devoted brothers living worlds apart, in politically volatile Haiti and in America, the promised land. With the subtlest understanding of how families can splinter but still cohere, she relives the shock of separation, first when her mother and father emigrated to New York, leaving 4-year-old Edwidge and her brother behind, and again, eight years later, when they took the children back from the aunt and uncle who had become second parents. With a storyteller's magnetic force, Danticat draws the reader to the streets of Haiti, where cutthroat gangs and looters destroyed her uncle's church; to the hellish holding pen where this intensely moral refugee was shamed—like countless others—by U.S. immigration officials; to the hospital room where the brothers acknowledged their mutual heartbreak with resolute grace. "I am writing this...because they can't," Danticat tells us, giving voice to an attachment too deep for words.

■ **PATRICIA HAMPL'S** MEMOIR, *The Florist's Daughter* (Harcourt), is set in St. Paul, Minnesota, a place where ordinary people live "faultlessly ordinary lives." It is this ingrained modesty of ambition that troubles the writer as she tries, at her mother's deathbed, to pierce the deep freeze of her own emotions. A relentlessly middle-class enclave can be, as Hampl wryly notes, "a cozy setting for heartlessness." Her optimistic father, the purveyor of beautiful flowers who trusted that life was not only good but intrinsically elegant, and her judgmental, charismatic mother produced a daughter who kept longing to bolt from "Nowheresville," even as the sweet "sin of memory" called her home. "In its cloudy wistfulness," she writes, "nostalgia fuels the spark of significance. My place. My people."



■ **IN THE ORTHODOX** Jewish community of Monsey, New York, **Shalom Auslander**—"theologically abused" as a child, "touched inappropriately by an angel"—came

of age protesting the tyranny of God. Now an angst-ridden, married father-to-be, he remains "painfully, cripplingly, incurably, miserably religious." In the biting comic **Foreskin's Lament** (Riverhead), Auslander tells how he flubbed his grade school "blessing-bee" (like a spelling bee, but with blessings for food); how he shoplifted, binged on non-kosher beef jerky, obsessed about sex, and haggled with a God who bore no slight resemblance to his own abusive dad. "Maybe," speculated the prodigal son, "when God got pissed off, He made his way downstairs to Earth...and threatened to break your goddamn arms. Or your goddamn heart."

■ There's something to be said for a lousy attitude. **Amy Silverstein**, who became a heart patient at 24, lambasted her doctor when he said she needed a transplant, agreeing only when her father begged her—on his knees. In the years following surgery, as she struggled through activities that should have been as easy as breathing, Silverstein taught her patient-as-a-saint husband "some things...about unrelenting illness and what it can do to the gentle



manners of those afflicted by it." Her un-sentimental humor and spitfire response to mortality help the author of **Sick Girl** (Grove) deal with a "time-bomb heart" that has kept on ticking for 19 years. With apologies to Adlai Stevenson, it's not always better to light a candle; sometimes you need to curse the darkness, too. —CATHLEEN MEDWICK



The Witness

His friend Picasso called him Ishmael. David Douglas Duncan roamed the planet for more than 70 years and "listened" with his camera in the once peaceful deserts of Afghanistan, the skies over Okinawa, the killing fields of Vietnam. "War is in the eyes," this deeply humane photographer notes in his visual memoir, **Photo Nomad** (National Geographic), a magnificent, heartbreaking act of witness. *Left*, an iconic *Life* magazine photo: Korean War machine gunner Leonard Hayworth, after the death of his friend. —C.M.