

She was laconic,
Parsimonious with words,
So she wrote haiku



My Cynthia

June 4, 1947 – October 29, 2016



Turkey 1994

To account for 40 years of friendship I must start at the beginning, on that singular day in 1977 in her classroom at Ohlone Community College in Fremont, California. I was 19 and she was 30. She was unlike anyone I had ever met. Her intelligence riveted me. Her wry humor made me laugh. By introducing me to the rhetorical modes, she made me realize that I had spent the last 19 years of my life asleep. She made me realize that my high school education had been wanting, that my imagination and curiosity had never been encouraged, and that my mind had never been acknowledged—or challenged. I was just one more ant in the ant farm that was expected to marry, have children and grandchildren—and die. Like my mother, like my grandmothers and great grandmothers. Like most women in history.

Professor Cynthia Lee Katona was not like most women in history.

Cynthia Lee Katona was a scholar. If she stumbled upon something she found fascinating — like Cuban cigars — she immersed herself in its history and culture and would track down the reigning premier torcedores (cigar roller) while vacationing in Miami. She studied falconry while teaching in England. She collected and created a book that celebrates the artistry of Netsuke. She developed and taught classes on The Gothic Novel, Women in the Western World, Shakespeare, Photography; Autobiography, Memoir and Journal; Censorship, Obscenity and Literature; the Literature of Laughter, and Literature and Psychology. And for countless years she introduced hundreds of students to magazine writing, graphic design and print production as the advisor of the campus magazine *Legend*. I was one of those students. I still have copies of that magazine in my portfolio to remind me of my entrance into the world of copywriting, graphic design and printing. Skills I have used every day since.

Cynthia Lee Katona was a teacher, Professor Emeritus.

She opened eyes. She unlocked minds. She reached into apathetic hearts. She lectured. She listened. She asked questions. She graded papers. She took aside a young woman who was the first in her family to attend college and who had no idea of the meaning of scholar and told her she belonged in college. She never pandered. She never condescended. She taught people to read, not just the words, not just the sentences. She taught people to become conjurers, thinkers, actors, questioners, active participants. She gave us permission to write in our books. She taught how to use imagination to see a fish getting tangled in a net, to feel the heat and humidity of a Chinese summer, to hear the deception in a narrator's words. She taught how to identify the plays of language that writer's employ, to be slain by the right words in the right order. To just love a good page-turning read. She taught people to write. But first she taught them to think—critically, logically, objectively. She taught how to describe with concrete language, to compare and contrast to see a topic in a new way, to illustrate with

examples, to look for patterns of classification, to define to make the abstract tangible, to show cause and effect, to use analysis to break down a subject for greater clarification, to identify and reveal logical fallacies. She also taught the structures of narrative and the masteries of point of view. I think the topic of my master's thesis had its germ from one of Professor Katona's exams: How would Nabokov's novel "Lolita" be different if it had been written from Lolita's point of view? This question blew my mind and made me think about literature and storytelling in an entirely new way. Twenty years later in my master's thesis "Point of View and the Art of Narrative in Susan Sontag's 'The Volcano Lover: A Romance'" I would reference this question.

Cynthia Lee Katona was a photographer.

Photographers are obsessed with getting the perfect shot, the perfect composition, the perfect light—to the point of losing awareness of their surroundings. I can proudly say I saved her life while she lost herself in the street scenes of Hong Kong. I'll never forget the speed and menace of the black BMW that threatened to end Cynthia's obsession. I remember screaming and thinking what if Cynthia dies on my watch, what will I say to her partner. After the crisis was averted, I said *No more pictures. My heart can't take it.* She was shaking as much as I was, and for the remainder of the walk to the hotel her camera stayed silent.

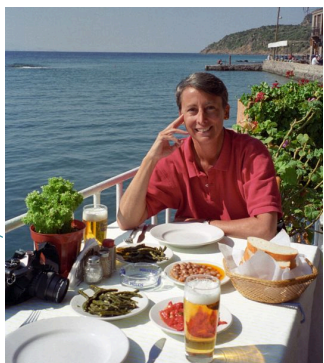
Cynthia Lee Katona was a writer, a haiku artist, which she came to later in life. When I read the first chapter of her first book “Book Savvy,” published in 2005, telling how she became a reader, I felt as if I were reading my own story. Like Cynthia, I did not come from a reading family. Unlike Cynthia, I was saved not by nuns but by a friend in eighth grade who encouraged me to read the book “Flowers for Algernon.” I have been an avid reader ever since. When she sent me a copy of “The Cocktail Chronicles” in 2014, I was overjoyed. Finally. Her wonderful stories. Her exacting prose. Her humor. Her unique sensibility. Her love of a good cocktail. I recently watched the movie “The Hunt for the Wilderpeople.” One of the tropes of the film is the use of Haiku to express the feelings of the protagonist, a young boy who grew up in the foster care system in New Zealand. I immediately wanted to call Cynthia. “You have to watch this movie.” But it was too late. Cynthia was a writer who strived for clarity and brevity. Less is more: The perfect qualities for her e-books of wry Haiku in juxtaposition with her witty photographs.

Cynthia Lee Katona was my intellectual soulmate, my Gloria Steinem. By teaching her deeply researched class “Women In the Western World,” she gave me and many, many women (and men) a new language. We would often talk about the moment when the women in the classroom would get angry. Cynthia would worry about how it affected the men in the class, if there were any. When I remember that moment of anger I also remember feeling sad, for my mother who wanted to be a dancer, for my grandmother who wanted so desperately to go to high school but who had to go to work to support her father and brother. How do we come to believe what we believe? This question is her gift to me and one Cynthia and I would reference until the day she died.

Cynthia Lee Katona was my master teacher and, with Dr. Sylvia Rogers, my thesis advisor. I was 36 when I first stood in front of a classroom of community college students. I was terrified. I was more terrified of disappointing Professor Katona. She was letting me teach her freshman composition class. Her method of being a master teacher was to sit and observe one week, provide her observations and suggestions for improvement, give me a week to address the issue then return the next week for more observation and guidance. Each time she would give me one issue to focus on and improve. I think she stopped coming about mid semester. After the semester was over she said I was the only person who had ever listened to her observations and made changes. When I read my student evaluations, I cried. I had become a teacher Professor Katona would be proud to call a colleague. Eventually I was hired part time at Ohlone Community College to not only teach composition but to take the reigns as advisor of the *Legend* magazine. The lead article was on gay marriage.

Cynthia Lee Katona was my Virgil, my favorite traveling companion. However, before she would accept me as a fellow traveler she asked if I snored. I don't think so, I said. No one has told me I do. So off we went to China in 1991 with a group organized by Ohlone Community College. We learned a lot about one another as we walked the market streets of Shanghai at night, visited the Forbidden City and Summer Palace in Beijing, toured Suzhuo, the Venice of the north, squatted in many hole-in-the-ground bathrooms and slept in the same room. I learned Cynthia snores and she learned I talk in my sleep. I learned she felt it courtesy to engage our band of travelers in conversation as we traveled by bus to the Great Wall of China or on a boat down the Li River. She learned I prefer quiet to small talk. I also learned Cynthia does not always follow the rules. At the Museum of Qin Terra-cotta Warriors and Horses in Xian, signs forbidding photography were clearly posted. So were unsmiling, uniformed guards. Cynthia was not to be deterred. She quickly hid her camera calling on me to lend her the shirt I was wearing over my sleeveless dress. I

gave her the look: “Are you crazy?” And then she told me where to stand when she took the forbidden photographs. I was sure the guard was going to see our ruse. We had already watched another visitor lose his film. But we walked past the guard and on to the bus and Cynthia kept her photographs. I, however, rule follower that I am, was sure we would get caught. Subterfuge is not in my DNA. And yet I would let her lead me to commit another forbidden act while traveling in Turkey. This time it required purchasing illegal



Assos, Turkey 1994

artifacts at the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul, the easy part. The more nerve-racking part was going through Customs and me praying the items would not be found in our luggage.

Cynthia, of course, forgot all about our illegal contraband. “Oh, I forgot all about it,” she said after I expressed my relief. And you snore too!

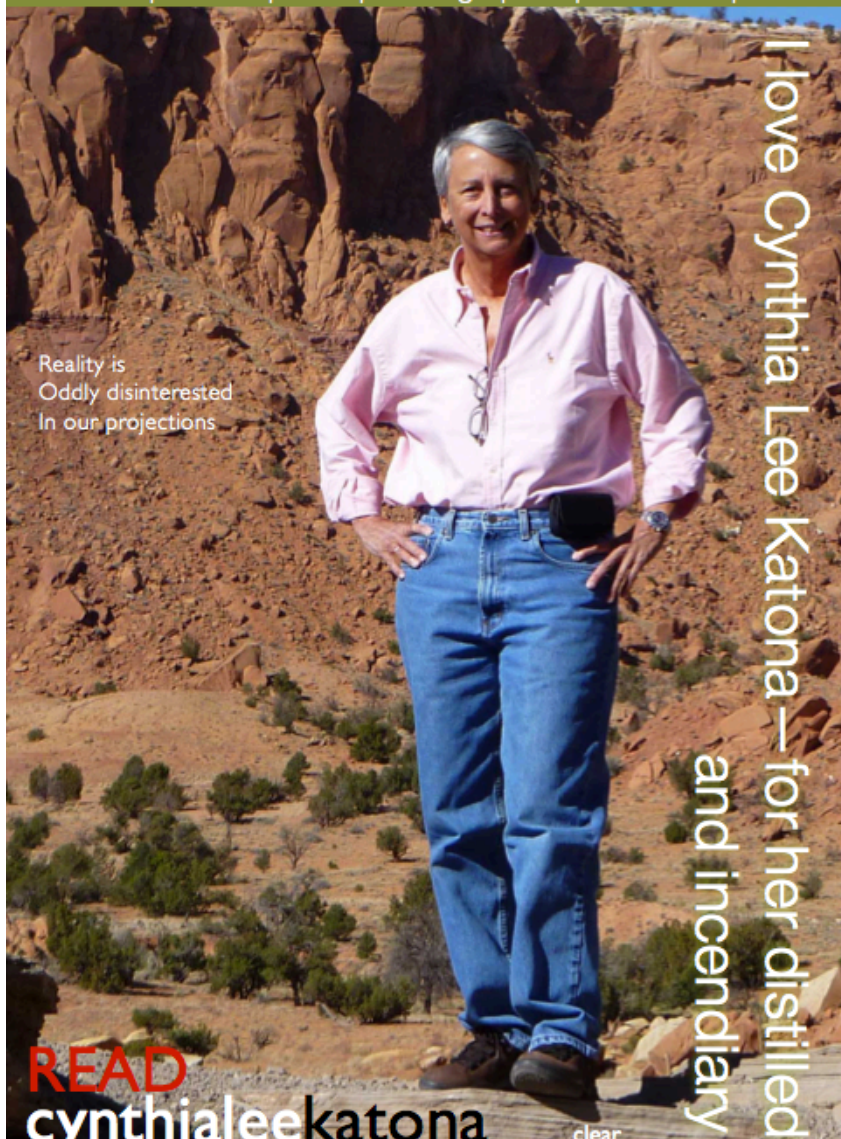
Cynthia Lee Katona was my cultural arbiter, my Pauline Kael. What are you reading? What movies do you recommend? What plays did you see? What exhibits made you pause? What places filled your soul? These were the themes of our conversations. Did you read the most recent Margaret Atwood? I'm in love with Rebecca Solnit, she's really onto something. You have to see the Korean movie "The Beauty Inside." You must read "The Elegance of a Hedgehog" and "A Tale for the Time Being." I've been reading all of Orhan Pamuk's work lately.

After my father died Cynthia and I took a weekend trip to Pacific Grove and Carmel, my father's favorite places. We stayed at Asilomar, a place Cynthia and I loved. The weather was spectacular. Bright sunshine, blue, blue sky, February warm. Leonard Cohen had just released "Old Ideas," which she wanted to share with me. We sat in her plush car with its exquisite sound system facing the expansive Pacific ocean with its waves crashing to shore. As we listened we remarked on the simplicity of Cohen's words and

images to express what it means to age, to be at the end of one's life. When "Going Home" played, tears fell down my face. I looked at Cynthia and told her that the night before my father died I laid next to him, kissed his bald head and told him it was time to go home.

Cynthia always said that Leonard Cohen wrote the soundtrack to her life. It seems fitting that he should die 8 days after her on November 7th, 2016.

Scholar | Writer | Poet | Photographer | Professor | Friend



Reality is
Oddly disinterested
In our projections

READ
cynthialeekatona

Non-Fiction Book Savvy | The Cocktail Chronicles
Haiku & Photography Too Soon to Tell | See for Yourself |
Just Showing Up | I Hate When that Happens | Maybe...and
that's Final | Was It Good for You? | A Book...How Quaint |
Imagine My Surprise | Relentless Sands

clear

concise
playful
reflective
astute
witty

I love Cynthia Lee Katona — for her distilled prose
and incendiary haiku

Last photo by Cynthia Lee Katona
Oct. 26, 2016



Cynthia Lee Katona was the love of my life, my William Boyd “sweet caress,” my most beloved friend. She was the one person who told me that she was proud of me, who encouraged me to “keep writing,” who endured “warts and all” for 40 years. If I could spend eternity with anyone, it would be with Cynthia Lee Katona.