When friends entered her hotel room after she died, they described to her daughter what they found: Her desk facing the warm China Sea where she swam every morning. Her laptop open. Next to it, a pad, a pen, pages filled with the latest translation of the great Chinese epic Monkey King worked on until late only the night before. The room, the sea facing desk, neat, orderly, ready for her return.

At least, that's the way I remember Diana Wolkstein's daughter, Rachel Zucker, describing it to me. A conversation between two broken hearted women may have blurred edges.

Diana returned in January of this year to Taiwan, one of her multiple trips, to learn Mandarin, to continue working on an English version of Monkey King. Over the years she'd gone to Haiti, China, Australia and other countries to bring us both epics and stories that forge cultural bonds of tensile strength capable of expanding and deepening our humanity. Only days into this journey, Diana was rushed into emergency surgery.

On the other side of the planet, we made frantic phone calls, sent urgent emails to each other. Those with doctors in the family, called them. There was hope. An operation. Possibly she'd survive. Then the early morning phone calls, emails. Her heart, more specifically, her aorta suffered a dissection; she did not survive.

No, she did ***not*** die of a broken heart. Possibly her heart had never been more whole.

Two months before, on November 10th, the day before Diana's 70th birthday, friends gathered to celebrate in her apartment, 10 Patchin Place in Greenwich Village. She was radiant, joyous, "I never expected to live until 70," she proclaimed to gathered family and friends. She understood, finally, about unconditional love. She felt it. She'd forgiven her mother and father. She understood, at last, how events like World War II and anti-Semitism took a terrible toll on them, and in turn on her brothers, on her. And now, the night before she turned 70, she felt blessed by family: her beautiful daughter Rachel now an accomplished poet, three grandsons, a writer son-in-law, her many friends, her own astonishing curiosity and desire to connect to the sacred in whatever culture she found it.

I am not going to tell you she was an easy mother, friend, teacher. She was not. A perfectionist in every way, Diana was blissfully unaware of boundaries; ***every*** friend tells of a line or lines she crossed, to impossibility. But I will tell you this: without her I, and many others, would not have crossed through the portal to the world of storytelling. I would not be here, with so many people I love, speaking to you. I would not have the storytelling path to pursue the passions and professions I've had. My children, Annabelle and Paul,

would not have had the blessing of being one of the generations of children brought up on Diana's stories at the Hans Christian Andersen Statue ---so many of their values as Paul wrote after her death, deeply rooted in her stories.

Diana helped set the standards high for professional storytellers and thereby raised the awareness of a story loving public, that even in this media saturated era, humans had not lost their love, passion, connection to stories told orally to an audience, a classrooms of children, a son, a daughter, a spouse, a friend.

Let me leave you with images from September 15, 2012~ Diana's last telling of Eleanor Farjeon's classic tale Elsie Piddock Skips in her Sleep. It is a story that explores and celebrates courage, the essential role of children and those, like all of you, who fight to protect the rights of all the world's children. The picture on your program is from that date. It was a glorious blue-skied day, the telling, the singing, the skip rope contest that always followed the story, joyous, boisterous, perfect. In the story's afterglow, we picnicked at the statue, my children, Diana, two dear friends/storytellers, Therese Folkes Plair and Ellen Shapiro. We told stories, argued passionately about this and that, walked altogether downtown in various combinations, arms around this person or that.

Learning to say “no” to Diana was an art best perfected over many years and one, after 37 years of friendship, I’d occasionally mastered. She phoned me last October, cheerfully announcing that the only gift she wanted from me was a poem. A poem, that’s all! Now let me tell you, I was sorely tempted with 620 report cards facing me, to say that carefully, but seldom practiced, “no.” I am eternally thankful I didn’t; I gave her the gift she desired. The poem I wrote for her birthday came from that last, wonderful, forever memorable day when, in the leafy shadowed sunlight, Diana skipped once again for the children~~~but never, ever, I believe, her last skip:

Here it is:

Through space and time
Story spirit travels ancient songlines, storylines
Searching, seeking
Trickster wisdom---
How to live with unbearable joy
How to endure unbearable sorrow
How to live in relation to all that is living and nonliving.

Remember this:
On Mt. Caburn, when the landlord greedily lays his first brick
    under the new moon,
An old woman will skip in her sleep to the end of time,
No brick will be laid &

through her fairy blessed skip rope
the world's tricksters skip so we will not forget:
All of us can be forgiven
All of us are blessed.

In Loving Memory of my friend, trickster, storyteller, flight instructor

Safe journeys beloved Diana
Your stories are carried in our hearts, &
On the earth's sweetest winds

Melissa Heckler