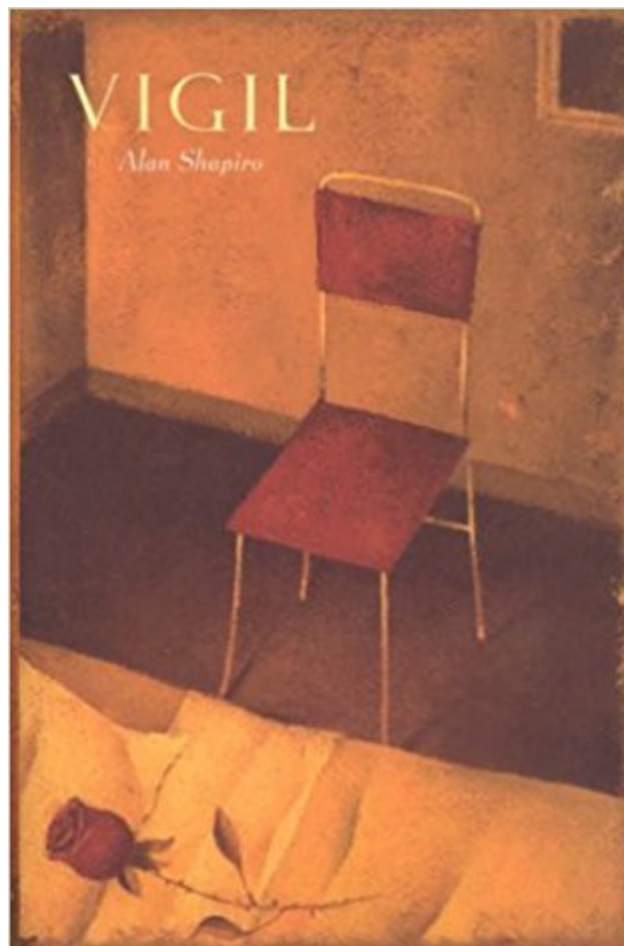


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# Vigil



## Synopsis

The New York Times Book Review praised Alan Shapiro's *The Last Happy Occasion* as a "touching and intelligent, emotionally satisfying and elegant testimony to the power of poetry to instruct, heal and inspire." *Vigil* emerges from the final chapter of that book, "Sittin' in a Funeral Place," a powerful essay about Shapiro's sister Beth, her struggle with breast cancer, and the limitations of poetry in confronting the untransformable pain of loss. In *Vigil*, Shapiro chronicles with heart-wrenching lyricism the final four weeks of Beth's life in a hospice, attended by her parents, brothers, husband, daughter and friends. One by one, as loved ones arrive to visit Beth, Shapiro reveals fragments of their personal history, bringing to life a troubled and poignant past. A visit from their brother David triggers the memory of a searing betrayal--the parents disowned Beth after learning from David that she was secretly dating a black man; a visit from the parents recalls their bitter quarrels over Beth's radical politics; a visit from Beth's black husband brings the painful memory of their wedding and her parents' refusal to attend. These recollections and feelings that surface with each visit evoke the unresolved, deeply disturbing issues that kept the Shapiro family estranged for so long, making the reconciliation that Beth's death brings to her family all the more extraordinary. Shapiro gives an unconventionally honest account of our responses--horror, relief, impatience, exhaustion, exhilaration, projection, fear, self-criticism, and a sense of fulfillment--in the presence of the dying. Concluding with a selection of moving poems, Shapiro affirms the astonishing link between creativity and healing, and provides a coda to the whole experience. The price of human connection may be great, but human connection, in the end, has the power to redeem even the most painful of human experiences.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Shapiro's sister Beth is dying of cancer, and he and his family spend her last four weeks at her bedside in a hospice. Within this short work, Shapiro (*The Last Happy Occasion*, LJ 10/1/96) reveals the history of a family torn apart by rebellion and reunited by tragedy. Beth's involvement in left-wing causes and her marriage to a black man estranged her parents. As they watch her decline, with the O.J. Simpson trial on TV in the background, they are forced to question their values and, through a philosophical meandering about death and doctors, suffering and sympathy, and culture and art, develop a clearer understanding of their reactions to life's events. "The Afterwards," a series of Shapiro's poems written about the vigil, demonstrate how creativity can provide healing. While the subject is disturbing, it is handled with an unreserved elegance and an emotional honesty that makes reading it worth the challenge. Recommended for most collections. ?Joshua Cohen, Mid-Hudson Lib. System, Poughkeepsie, N.Y. Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Award-winning poet Shapiro, whose first memoir, *The Last Happy Occasion* (not reviewed) was highly acclaimed, wrenches all he can from this chronicle of his sister's death from breast cancer. As his mother, father, and brother join him at Beth's bedside in a Houston hospice, Shapiro (English/Univ. of North Carolina, Chapel Hill) recalls the rebelliousness of his oft-estranged sister. He notes the joy "we all felt for the first time as a family; joy . . . in an intimacy whose very rarity added sadness to the joy." A founder of Students for a Democratic Society while at Michigan State University, Beth would further alienate her parents by marrying an African-American. As Shapiro reflects on these events, he does so as a loving younger brother who admired but did not share her feistiness. His sometimes critical observation of other family members' behavior during her last days is juxtaposed with his own deeply felt emotions: Russ, Beth's husband, "was a peripheral figure" during those final days, in part because of his own battle with heart disease, but also because of his intense sorrow and discomfort with the family. Shapiro's father dealt with it "the way he dealt with everything--by thinking there was nothing he or anyone could do about it." His mother, doting and sad, showed her frustration by constantly kvetching about medical incompetence. Younger brother David, an actor, entertained with jokes and impressions. In the last hours before Beth died, David and the author stood at her bedside, each holding a hand: "All I could do was look on in amazement at the mystery as it unfolded." He closes the volume with a few rather heavy-handed

poems and a jarringly corny recollection of dancing to Motown records at Beth's wedding. Has its moments, both sad and profound, but as a memoir of a sister's life and death, it's far outclassed by Richard Stern's 1995 *A Sistermonym*. -- Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

Shapiro's poetry is haunting and evocative.

A wonderful journey into the emotions of an author and his family as they all start out exposing their many weaknesses and in the end prevail as everyday heroes. I strongly recommend this book.

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