Passing Reflections: Meditations on Grief (Vols. 1 and 2)
by: Kristen Spexarth (Big Think Media, Inc., 2010)
Reviewed by: Jennifer Bakalar

Passing Reflections is a two-volume collection of poetry composed by Kristen Spexarth that spans the two-year period following her son, Colby's suicide on New Year's Eve in 2000. Spexarth wrote the first poem in early January 2001, only days after Colby's death; she presents the subsequent poems in chronological order, taking readers step-by-step on her journey as she grieves her son.

Spexarth’s poems are often raw, deeply personal, and specific to her lived experience, which illustrates immense courage as she invites readers into some of the most private corners of her world. While some readers may not be able to relate directly to the overt content, the underlying emotions and messages that she is communicating evoke one's own unique memories and highlight commonalities that provide survivors with a distinct sense of knowing, which might otherwise be difficult to articulate. In doing so, Spexarth provides validation to those who may question the acceptability or “normality” of their grief reactions. Further, she penetrates the often crippling isolation that survivors can grapple with in the wake of a loved one's suicide, which are often accompanied by feelings such as the fear and/or sense that others won’t be able to understand or might cast judgment. For example, in a poem entitled, “Void,” Spexarth writes, “This new character is hard to be with/ prone to silent staring and crying./ ‘It’s harder on us, we don’t know what to do!’/ lamented one who hasn’t called back/ maybe thinking it easier to just leave me alone/ than to climb in the space I’m in.”

In addition to isolation, Spexarth candidly develops many other themes that span an entire spectrum of suicide grief from grappling with heavy emotions such as guilt and anger to lighter experiences such as reconnecting with the world around her. Rather than simply telling her readers her story, she captures multiple senses in her poetry and illustrates her experience such that readers feel as though they are walking beside her as her story evolves, rather than observing her journey as a series of snapshots from a distance.

Passing Reflections is an especially unique contribution to the survivor literature that is distinguished both in style and content from prose. Spexarth's poetry has the potential to help survivors access and identify emotions and experiences in a visceral way that is distinctly different from what one might expect when reading a narrative memoir. While Spexarth outlines a comprehensive list of specific resources that would be useful for postvention in both volumes, this collection as a whole may not be as strong of a fit for readers who are looking for explicit guidance and recommendations for coping with a loved one's suicide. However, readers with an appreciation for an abstract or artistic style are likely to find this collection particularly compelling.