

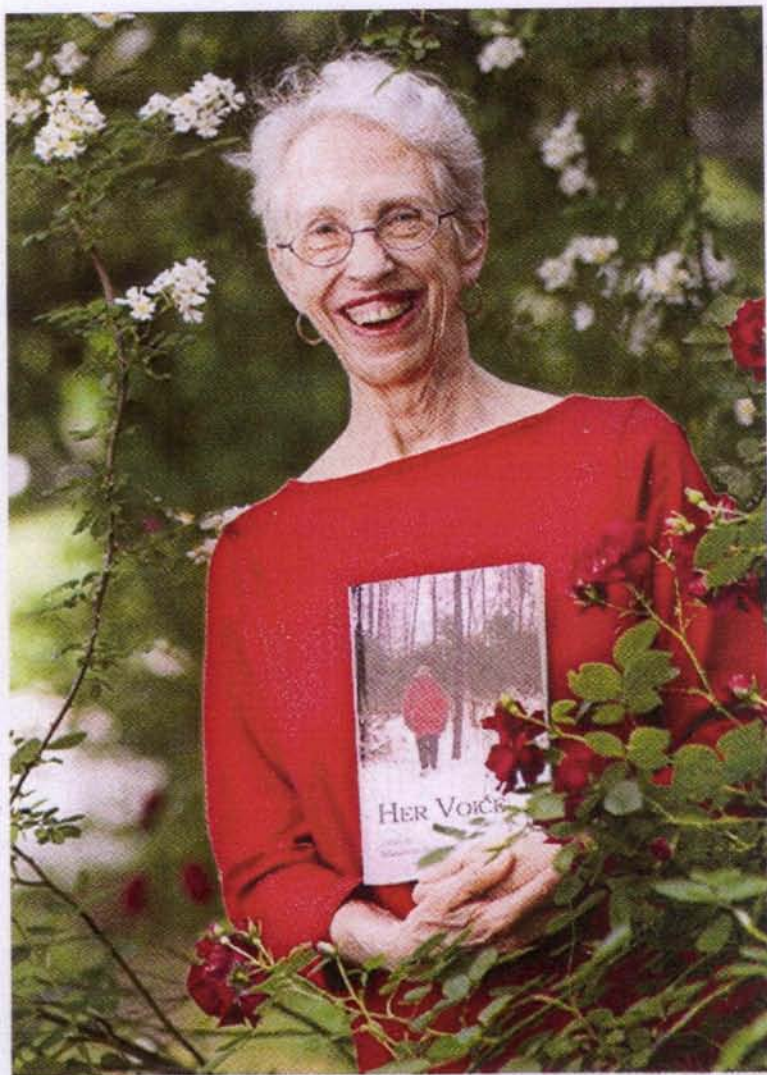
As she lay dying

Poems illuminate last days of a mother's vibrant life

It was no surprise that Elizabeth Schultz, professor emerita of English and one of the world's foremost Melville scholars, found comfort in words while enduring her mother's decline and death. But rather than look to the great works, Schultz made a book of her own.

Her Voice is a collection of poems Schultz wrote as she watched her mother, a lifelong lover of the outdoors, endure physical and mental deterioration that eventually landed her in a nursing home devoid of the natural delights—sun, wind, water, land—that she had devoured for very nearly a century.

"Literature did not come to my aid," Schultz says. "I am a Quaker, and religion did not come to my aid. What came to my aid were my friends, with their constant safe ports, and my brother, with his unstinting love for our mother. Also coming to my aid were my questions, and using words to answer my questions. Thus, the habit of writing poetry helped me."



Schultz

While the book is certainly a tribute to a remarkable woman, it is *not* the sort of tribute poetry that tends to slip into mawkish drama.

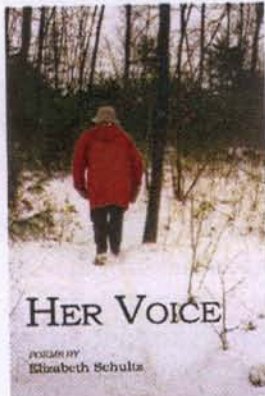
Schultz, who retired in 2001 as Chancellors Club teaching professor, says she wrote poetry only to fashion order out of the chaos of her mother's troubled days. As the poems began to accumulate, she found an order for those, too, presenting them within sections labeled for seasons

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of transition, including "Summer," with memories of the family's Michigan cabin, and "Winter," about assisted living.

As with all fine poetry, details tell: "Her Tools" tackles the transition from independence, as Schultz forces her mother to leave her Mix-Master behind. "I still might make," her mother pleads, "another little cake." While tending to the "sprouting bristles" on her mother's chin, Schultz writes in "Rare Bird," "she trusted me / to trim her feathers into a crown / ... while she grasped me / with the blue talons / of her eyes." In "A History of Swimming," Schultz recalls watching her mother gleefully dive into their summer lake: "She is liquid / gliding within liquid."

Schultz never falters in offering for inspection the most painful, intimate



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details. She shares the disorientation she felt when she found her mother, "a person of consummate dignity and correctness," smearing her face with chocolate icing; the sorrows of hair loss and wigs; and the melancholy of forcing her outdoorsy mother to live amid "beeps and buzzers" of an old-folks' home, where "plastic flowers were beauty's measure."

By giving so much honest consideration to the fatal plight, Schultz discovered that her mother had taught her a remarkable lesson: how to die.

"One of the things that literature has helped me understand is the reality of death," she says. "But death is not the same as dying, and I was not prepared in any way for my mother's dying.

"I think the dying days do provide us a legacy. Truly her last, great gift to me was the understanding that dying is liv-

ing, and that dying is about an intimacy that is more profound than anyone has known before." —

—Chris Lazzarin