Oranges

Michele Arduengo

I felt honor-bound to eat every one of those oranges—
to savor each one as long as possible.
They were a gift from my mother,
mail-ordered for my 41st birthday,
and they would be the last gift that I ever received from her.

The oranges arrived while my husband, daughter, and I
were visiting my family after Mom’s death.

I ate the first of those “premium” oranges immediately.
A couple of the oranges were already beginning to show
the signs of their trip from some distant tropical clime to Wisconsin,
where they had sat on my kitchen table for a week—
a few soft spots on the otherwise firm fruit.

I cried when I reached the last of the birthday oranges.
I’m not sure if I was crying at the loss of my mother
or at the juiceless taste of an orange that had succumbed
to a fuzzy white fungus. Still, I did not want to waste
anything as precious as a gift from my mom.
I can almost see her smiling eyes and hear her laughter as I sigh,
cut the last orange in half, and eat it, fungus and all.

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Editor’s Note: With Arduengo’s final approval, I culled and reconstituted these poetic lines from a succulent essay submitted by her, also titled “Oranges”, which was published in the November 2007 issue of Wisconsin Woman. That essay, unfortunately too long for this space, goes into lyrical detail about the larger gift that the oranges invoked, namely, her mother’s wise insistence on sending thoughtful thank-you notes—an early lesson in the importance of well-crafted writing.