

The

Worst

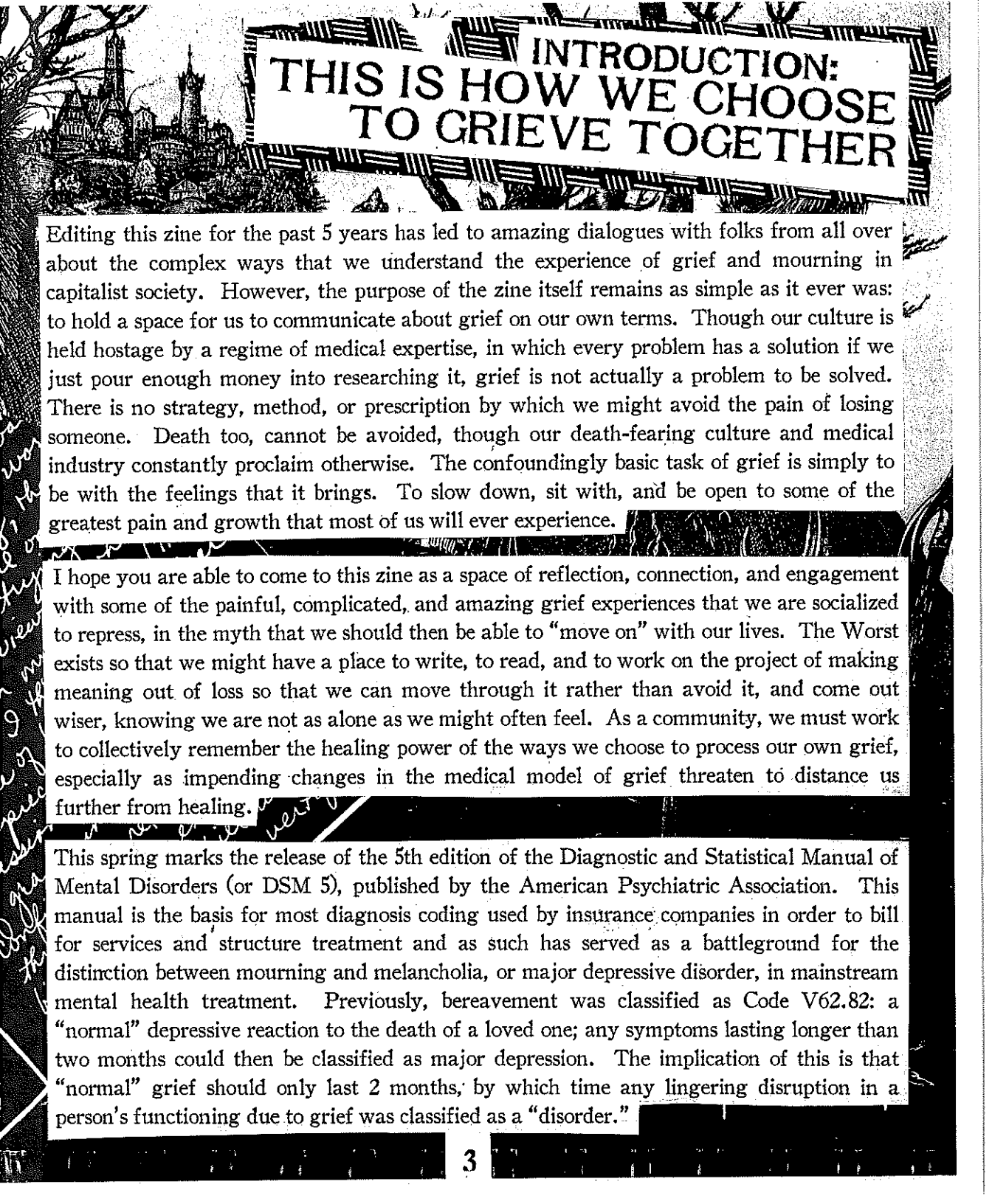
COMPILATION ZINE ON

GRIEF AND LOSS

issue 3

Contents

- {3} INTRODUCTION
- {6} CHEYENNE NECKMONSTER *Solitude and Solace*
- {10} MATT CARMAN *Dream Home*
- {12} ALEX BARROWS *Grief is Not a Door*
- {15} ANDRIA ALEFHI *When Your Mom is First to Go*
- {16} LILY PEPPER *More Things in Heaven and Earth*
- {18} PRUE HARRISON *Two People Died That Day*
- {22} SARAH H. *On Public Crying*
- {24} CHRISTINE SZYMANSKI *The Crinkled Memory in the Back of a Drawer
and the First Death that Ever Mattered*
- {26} FLO TOCH *Untitled*
- {28} MAGGIE SHELTON *Delayed*
- {30} PAIGE YOUNG *Untitled*
- {32} PAUL ELTON *Strangers in India*
- {34} LOUISA GRENQUIST *The Hanged Man*
- {38} LEAH DECESARE *Big Bandages Need More than Two Hands*
- {40} MEGAN HANKINS *Death and Destiney*
- {44} JACLYN MAY *Stream of Consciousness*
- {45} KAITLYN BOOTZ *When Your Heart Cries Out for What Was Once Yours:
The Struggle to Overcome the Loss of Liberty Plaza/Zuccotti Park*
- {47} RACHEL RUBINO *Untitled*
- {51} HILARY MOORE *Transformation and Potato Pancakes*
- {53} JAMIE VARRIALE VÉLEZ *Who Will Be Left, and What Will Be Left of Them?*
- {59} ANONYMOUS *To Remember and to Struggle: An Altar for Mourning,
Memory, and Resistance*
- {66} KATHLEEN MCINTYRE *Dear Everybody*
- {68} CYNTHIA SCHEMMER *Writing Exercises for Grief Processing*
- {69} AUTHOR BIOS & CONTACT
- {72} RESOURCE LIST
- {74} THANKS AND DEDICATIONS



INTRODUCTION: THIS IS HOW WE CHOOSE TO GRIEVE TOGETHER

Editing this zine for the past 5 years has led to amazing dialogues with folks from all over about the complex ways that we understand the experience of grief and mourning in capitalist society. However, the purpose of the zine itself remains as simple as it ever was: to hold a space for us to communicate about grief on our own terms. Though our culture is held hostage by a regime of medical expertise, in which every problem has a solution if we just pour enough money into researching it, grief is not actually a problem to be solved. There is no strategy, method, or prescription by which we might avoid the pain of losing someone. Death too, cannot be avoided, though our death-fearing culture and medical industry constantly proclaim otherwise. The confoundingly basic task of grief is simply to be with the feelings that it brings. To slow down, sit with, and be open to some of the greatest pain and growth that most of us will ever experience.

I hope you are able to come to this zine as a space of reflection, connection, and engagement with some of the painful, complicated, and amazing grief experiences that we are socialized to repress, in the myth that we should then be able to "move on" with our lives. The Worst exists so that we might have a place to write, to read, and to work on the project of making meaning out of loss so that we can move through it rather than avoid it, and come out wiser, knowing we are not as alone as we might often feel. As a community, we must work to collectively remember the healing power of the ways we choose to process our own grief, especially as impending changes in the medical model of grief threaten to distance us further from healing.

This spring marks the release of the 5th edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (or DSM 5), published by the American Psychiatric Association. This manual is the basis for most diagnosis coding used by insurance companies in order to bill for services and structure treatment and as such has served as a battleground for the distinction between mourning and melancholia, or major depressive disorder, in mainstream mental health treatment. Previously, bereavement was classified as Code V62.82: a "normal" depressive reaction to the death of a loved one; any symptoms lasting longer than two months could then be classified as major depression. The implication of this is that "normal" grief should only last 2 months; by which time any lingering disruption in a person's functioning due to grief was classified as a "disorder."

To be sure, grief and depression can often collide in our lives, and often work to trigger and magnify each other, creating a longer term syndrome that can be very difficult to get out of without the outside help of a therapist or other support system. Those of us with histories of depression must be especially careful of how we take care of ourselves after a loss, and those of us who find ourselves falling deeply into grief without even moments of relief from waves of painful emotions should consider that we may have entered into a clinical depression, perhaps requiring more help. However, most radical mental health practitioners agree that the 2 month specification is arbitrary at best, and at worst, oppressive to those seeking treatment whose grief process happens to be following a different length of time. The new version of the DSM has actually eliminated the Bereavement Code altogether, which may come with important consequences for those of us who seek to build a culture in which grief is validated as a normal challenge of living and NOT a state of disorder.

The best case scenario for griever seeking mental health treatment is that they be attended to by skilled and thoughtful clinicians who take the time to listen to patients' situations, and collaborate to make an informed decision about whether grief has become complicated by depression, anxiety, or trauma reactions, or whether it is proceeding as a reasonable adaptive response to loss and requires less intensive intervention. Skilled clinicians will ensure that patients in need of medication or more intensive treatment receive care, while those who would benefit from psychotherapy, bereavement groups, or simply watching and waiting over time would be connected to appropriate services and follow up, rather than prematurely medicated or ignored.

However, the reality of grief and depression treatment in America is that primary care physicians currently prescribe 80% of all antidepressant medications (Smith, 2012). The danger of the removal of the Bereavement Code, is that "normal grief" will not be explored and evaluated, but rather treated with a prescription; "the quickest way to get the griever out of the office" (Frances, 2013). Because individual and group therapy insurance coverage is non-existent or insufficient to most people in America, primary care remains the most accessible option for seeking help with grief, and PCPs are rarely equipped with the mental health training or time in a day that is required to help a patient process a loss.

It remains to be seen how these changes will impact the experience of grief, but I feel confident in my own prediction that outlets for us to write, speak, share, and explore our true feelings about our losses will only become all the more vital. These narratives of trauma and loss are part of who we are and must be shared if we are to know ourselves, and to build an alternative to mainstream prescriptions for what grief should look like, in which we scarcely dare to risk crying in public. To this end, The Worst also seeks to help us become more engaged helpers to those who are grieving; in friendship, partnership, given and chosen families, and amongst our larger community. Authentic dialogue that helps us to learn and grow around how to work through grief is crucial if we are to build sustainable movements where members truly feel cared for, even when "the worst" has happened.

The contributors to this issue of The Worst have worked to expand the zine's content to include many important topics not covered in previous issues: loss due to suicide and violence, complicated and disenfranchised grief, loss of a sibling, anticipation of loss during and after a prolonged illness. I am, as always, humbled and honored to assemble their words into a communal document, and I hope that you as reader will make sure to take care of yourself as you explore. Read when you're in a safe place, with support around you; take a break when you need to, and know that sometimes the most important part of grieving can just be giving yourself a break.

This issue also contains an updated resource list and suggestions for ways to begin the often challenging work of writing about your own grief. I've collaged the submissions with excerpts from my own grief journals and the journals of others, to illustrate the process of all of our words coming together in new ways to help us gain clarity and validation.

Keep loving, keep writing, and keep fighting to grieve authentically and in community.

kathleen april 2013

Frances, Allen. (January 7, 2013). Last Plea to DSM-5: Save Grief From the Drug Companies. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/allen-frances/saving-grief-from-dsm-5-a_b_2325108.html

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SOLITUDE AND SOLACE

by cheyenne neck monster

Life is this really impermanent state. I think of biological organisms as happy accidents of chemistry and electricity. I don't think we're put here by some intentional supernatural force, I think that we exist incidentally, and that all the meaning in our lives is assigned arbitrarily. In my opinion, there is no natural 'order.' We all blunder through the chaos together. Any semblance of an orderly world is designed to be in contrast with what exists naturally.

I try to be good with it, accept the fact that there's not much order except that which we've placed in our own lives. Part of that process for me is building chosen family. Losing someone, for me, tends to shake up the order in my life and make me question everything. I've lost a fair number of people in my life, and each time the confusion and pain is different, but it's always confusing and painful. My reactions have ranged from shock and numbness to despair to quiet relief. The quality of the reaction correlates with how close I was to the person, how well I knew them, how many hours of my life I spent with them, and how they passed. If it was sudden or slow, if there was warning.

Our culture is so very, very afraid of aging and death, and we try to shelter ourselves from it as much as possible, even down to embalming people, filling their bodies with fluids and putting makeup on them so they look alive. It seems to be a statement against closure, an attempt to prolong life (or the appearance of life). It seems illogical, given the finality of passing. Embalmed bodies just seem to prolong the illusion that a person can come back from the dead.

The fact of death is undeniable and also incomprehensible. We can't imagine not existing, so we develop theories about what happens when people pass away. I think that when one dies, they cease to exist - that which made them the wondrous human being they were has gone; and their body will go too. The energy coursing through their veins has stilled; their atoms will be re-arranged and re-configured into something else, eventually. To me, that's pretty beautiful, that life and death are just transformations we experience as a collection of molecules and tiny electrical zaps.

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Between the end of March and the middle of April 2012, three people in my circle passed away. One died of cancer in his early thirties in central Kentucky. One overdosed in Berlin. One I never got to meet, but I knew his parents - he was only eleven weeks old.

My friend with cancer was the first to go this year, and maybe the scariest. I'm not much younger than he is, and though I've lost friends my age in accidents, it seemed unlikely that I'd lose a friend my age to a terminal illness. He found out he had cancer less than a year before he passed away. When he was diagnosed and going to start chemotherapy for cancer in four places, I painted a picture to work through the despair and helplessness I felt, and the desire to do something to help, even though I felt it was futile.

I knew he would fight, but I also knew the odds weren't in his favor. I visited him in the hospital, brought him food. I cried when he was put into palliative care, and visited him at his mother's house as his health faded. I got a quiet, hoarse voicemail from a dear mutual friend on the morning of his passing.

Fortunately, mercifully, he made a peaceful exit. He had been in pain, and I was relieved for him and his family when he passed, because it had been a real trial for all of his caretakers and friends. When I went to his funeral visitation, he was in an open casket. He looked okay. The morticians did an alright job. But I hate open caskets.

His mom stood by him, talking to everyone as we came to the front of the line slowly, in single file. When it was my turn, we talked about his clothes, how he wanted that outfit: a lovingly worn-out and faded Rancid shirt, a pair of cutoff camouflage shorts-- and I couldn't agree more that it was authentic to him. If he had been buried in a suit and tie, it would have been completely out of character. After walking away from the casket, my grief quickly transformed to rage. If we had affordable or free health care in this country, I might still have my friend. That made me really, really angry. He was stubborn and didn't get his health issues checked out until they were debilitating, until it was too late. And when he did try, at first, he was turned away because he didn't have insurance or a job.

I didn't go to his funeral or burial; I knew they would be religious due to his family's spiritual preferences. I deeply dislike religious services; they seem like strange fictions to me, and do not provide comfort. I try to remember my friends how I knew them best. He was a scrappy punk kid, with an endearingly persistent sense of humor, who carved out a space for a punk scene in a small Kentucky town, which is itself a marvelous and valuable thing. I'm indebted to him for making awesome things happen. I am trying really hard to keep that at the forefront of my memories of him, that gratitude, because otherwise I get caught up in anger at things I can't control when I think about how he's gone. I listen to bands I saw at shows he set up, or hear phrases he used to say that have seeped into others' lexicons, and it doesn't make me sad anymore.

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7g. The second person I did not know very well, but her death caught me off guard. When I heard about her passing, I was with some work buddies after the AIDS walk. I had assembled a work team to raise money and awareness, and I made a donation in the honor of a guy who I considered a friend, whose memorial I missed, since I found out weeks after he was gone. He had HIV the whole time I knew him, and I knew it would take him out eventually, but he was so upbeat and hilarious that it never seemed imminent. It was a stab in the chest when I heard the news. He was such a badass, the first queer anarchist I met. He said that when he died, he wanted someone to take his patch from the AIDS Quilt, wrap it around a brick, and hurl it through the window of the local Republican Party Headquarters.

I was thinking about him and about how many people have been lost to this disease and suddenly I get a text message explaining that this woman I knew had just passed away. She was in drug recovery and relapsed, used too much, and didn't make it out of the coma she went into. I didn't know her very well - not well enough to suspect that she used injectable narcotics, anyway - and this news was pretty shocking.

I decided that it would be best to stay in town (the memorial was in another city) and take care of myself. I heard that I missed a pleasant gathering of friends in a park. Some folks sang songs they wrote, or spoke, or comforted one another. This lady was part of a group of friends, musicians, lovers, and artists, working weird jobs, living in collective houses, traveling constantly but somehow managing to scrap together and maintain a sense of family. I am on the fringes of that family, and everyone in it has inspired or influenced me in some way. I love them.

The day of her memorial, my friends' son didn't wake up. He was only 11 weeks old. The service was in a few days' time. I went to the memorial service, which was a mistake. There was too much religion jammed into the service for me to be comfortable. Why can't we just remember people, and be bummed out together about it, and not bring supernatural beings into it? One of the speakers gave a quote from Khalil Gibran, which calmed me down, because it wasn't terribly overtly religious, just rather philosophical.

"The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain...
When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.
When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight."

A friend and I had to leave during the excessively religious portion of the memorial. I was glad to have company outside to process with; we didn't want to be disrespectful but also couldn't take any more christianity. I think that being an atheist makes it really hard to swallow and be comforted by christian funerary rites. We both went to the burial later that day on the parents' farm! That funeral is indelibly seared into my memory. The perfect weather, the gentle water's flow alongside the path to the willow tree, the meadow procession and faraway bagpipe dirge, the broken wail of the child's mother as his tiny casket was lowered into the ground. The palpable despair everyone was feeling, and the strong sense of family and community I felt when I walked back into their home, full of food and people and support.

Pema Chodron said, "Nontheism is relaxing with the ambiguity and uncertainty of the moment without reaching for anything to protect ourselves." I think that being comfortable with uncertainty is part of how I approach my life, and thus how I see death as well. Death is, in a way, an ultimate consequence of that uncertainty, something you have to accept.

It's not that I don't find it terrifying - it is unknown, it is nothingness, it is unimaginable. But after years of dealing with deaths and ends and passing, I think it is also a profound release. I don't look forward to dying, but I've accepted it as part of my life. When I lose someone, I have learned to hang out with my grief, hold it to myself, and let it get smaller with time. I will sometimes write letters for someone who passed, or talk to them out loud when I'm alone and I see something they would have noticed or liked, thank them when I recognize their influence on my life playing out in some way, or smile to myself when I think of them. I mostly deal with death alone, and am struck with awe and gratitude for the person I've lost, for being themselves, for enriching my life, for stringing crystallized memories like pearls through my consciousness, my existence. At first it's confusing and painful, but it often transforms into something much richer and more complicated. I feel less like screaming and crying and more like living life in the moment, more like trying to embrace the strangeness and wonder of existence.

What do you wish
people knew about
losing a loved one?

I really don't want a traditional or religious funeral. Those who, like me, have chosen their own path of alternative or non-spiritual creed shouldn't feel obligated to come to a church to remember me. When I pass away, my friends and family should feel compelled to remember me in their own way. I wish that my end brought a sense of precious urgency and exuberance, without the pain and confusion.

But I know it's not that easy.

DREAM HOME *by matt carman*

There was evidence that my grandparents had, at some point, entertained people who weren't children. Like the one cabinet in the living room with bottles of whisky from 1982 whose levels never changed, next to an open can of Spanish peanuts which was never refreshed or replaced. Or the bar in the basement whose former life was only hinted at by the boxes of noisemakers and tins of sword-shaped toothpicks. This house in Queens had lived many lives over many decades. It raised my mother, it served as my grandparents' empty nest, it provided dusty rooms and drawers for a curious grandchild to poke around in. Every so often I'd discover a new closet or crawlspace with graduation photos of my mother or a quilt that smelled like age. The house's most intriguing quality – that it was small, but packed with secrets – may be why I keep ending up there in my dreams.

The house is never quite the same each time my subconscious draws it up. There are always new features, and it changes from dream to dream. Usually the kitchen and living room, where I spent the most time and had years to observe every single detail, are exactly as they were in real life. And if I happen to go outside, the bird bath and patio swing are always there. But new rooms frequently appear, walls fill with old photos of people I've never met, stairways rise and fall to altered attics and cellars. Sometimes my grandmother is there; other times I feel her absence, like the few times I visited the house after her death. One time the small back room gave way to what seemed like a beachfront cottage, and I walked laps through the house trying to make sense of this addition. In one dream, I had been living in the house with her; in another, I used it as a vacation home along with an odd collection of friends. One time I was stranded outside the house in the middle of the night, afraid to call or knock on the door because I didn't want to startle her. She was sleeping, and I was dreaming.

In real life, my grandmother made BLTs and served me juice in tiny glasses painted with state birds, tumblers that now sit on a shelf in my living room. She taught me to play card games like Kings in the Corner and Aces Take All. She showed me pictures clipped from magazines that she thought looked like me, or my mother, or one of my cousins, though they never really did. She had closets full of weird things, like the foot massager that uncomfortably vibrated everything up to your spine. When she showed me the secret spot where she hid the candy (in large glass jars behind a heavy curtain in the living room), she said I was allowed to know because I was her favorite grandchild. It took me years to realize this was an odd kind of thing

to tell one of your seven grandchildren, and anyway, she had apparently shown my older brother the same stash years earlier.

In the summers, my grandmother sent me outside to pick raspberries, which I enjoyed, and figs, which I didn't like to touch because they were fuzzy and strange. She would point to some of the many seashells kept in a glass vase and tell me where they had come from – faraway places, where I imagined my grandmother in an Indiana Jones hat. Until he passed away, my grandfather was also in the house, but frequently napping. There were few places as peaceful as their kitchen table. Even the rhythmic snores coming from the reclining chair in the living room had a soothing cadence. This home was miraculously safe and secluded from the outside world, at times filled with a quiet so thick I could wrap it around myself.

My mind travels back there when my body is at rest, possibly because there are still so many pieces of it in my life. There's my grandparents' coffee table in my living room, under which I used to crawl when I wanted to disappear for a while. The solid metal three-foot matador statue which sat creepily on the far end of their darkened basement, terrifying an entire generation of grandchildren who had to walk past its gaze; he now faces the corner, forever punished. The juice-glass birds perched on their shelf. The old souvenir metal wastebasket that made its way to my bedroom from hers, where I used to sit and admire its illustration of a church in Colonial Williamsburg.

At the foot of my bed are two trunks sent as care packages to my grandmother from my grandfather while he was at war overseas. They are hand painted with their old Brooklyn address, a house they moved out of before I was even born. They were sent around the world more than sixty years ago from a country I've never visited to a place I've never seen, eventually settling in the attic I explored so many times. Every morning, whether or not I've spent the night dreaming of my grandparents' house, these trunks are at my feet. Along with the other inherited items filling my apartment, they are a reminder that my grandmother's home, and her life, will always be a part of mine.

GRIEF IS NOT A DOOR

by alex barrows

This Friday night, I find myself wanting to call up my friends and ask them if I have changed since my mother died. Are the three new white hairs on my head the only testament to my recent brush with death/ghosts/otherworlds? Am I weirder? Less fun? More shy? Do I not go out anymore? Is my constant anxiety that obvious? Or, even worse--can you tell how angry I've become??

My mother passed away a year and a half ago after struggling with heart disease, alcoholism and a multitude of other health complications. She was my only blood family. Though her passing was sudden, she had been diagnosed with heart disease ten years earlier. The summer before her death, she had been in and out of ICUs (with me right alongside her), physical rehabs and bedridden in her own home. She was a single mother, Ph.D.-educated and relatively successful as an academic and teacher. As a tenured professor, she had a relatively high salary and the security of health insurance and a pension plan. Having been raised primarily by her town and country/posh/white/protestant father and stepmother, she was orphaned at age 18 and inherited a great deal of additional wealth. At her time of death, she owned two properties (including one abroad), in addition to many other assets. I believe the above-mentioned factors are significant as they have shaped my grief substantially. Her passing [however painful] was characterized by many markers of class privilege; these continue to distinguish and sometimes call into question my process of healing, sharing and moving forward.

I already more or less know the answers to those earlier questions. The fact that I am hunkering down for about my 4848485th week of another-Friday-night-alone to write this can tell me enough. The lack of phone calls I receive on a weekly basis (with the exception of those from my dreamy boo) might also be substantial evidence of my seclusion and "self-sufficiency."


I have read about the interconnectedness of isolation and grief. I understand this chronicled pattern: people flock to the bereaved during the sudden adrenaline rush of loss and then slowly drift away, give them space, tiptoe backwards, forget. I have felt this myself: after receiving a flux of condolence letters, calls, emails (which I never returned, OK), things have gotten increasingly quieter and quieter...until it's just silence. And when people do approach me nowadays, it is simply and almost always to ask me for something.

In the immediate aftermath after the death of my mother, I had the fortune of being surrounded by the support and company of community. Night after night, my favorite faces occupied my room, bed, my heart; they handed me warm pies, took me to pumpkin patches, parties, diners. In spite of my reckless behavior (drinking too much, lying to lovers, chain-smoking with bronchitis, seldom present for friends and choosing recklessness over vulnerability), I almost always had a sidekick by my side.


Old friends visited from near and far away to attend my mother's memorial service with me: I still remember with fondness the striking image of my incredibly dapper looking crowd of gay-ass friends as they walked with me into the room where it took place. The service was held in a beautiful albeit alienating academic library. It was so nice to look back and see my queer family amidst marble bookshelves. Some of them even wore bowties. I felt so safe and proud.

Later, a dear friend traveled with me to Virginia to scatter her ashes (in a confederate cemetery nonetheless, ugh). Another one came with me all the way to France to help me brave the bureaucracies involved in dealing with my mom's assets. For a long time, I was fortunate to have someone with me for every hard step. It is only a year and a half later that things seem to have quieted down, calls have become fewer with the unspoken understanding that it is time to move on.

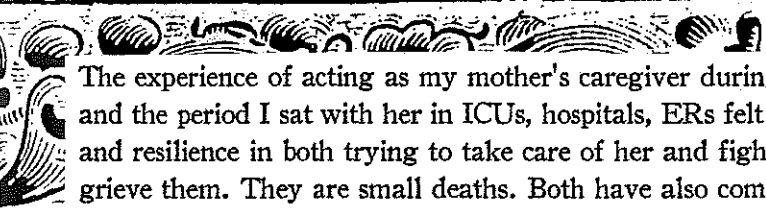
I recognize the problematic intersections of grief and money. Loss is inextricably tied to financial consequences. Death sometimes gives way to debts and sometimes to increased access, increased assets and responsibilities. This shift is both a privilege and an oppression. I think I read somewhere that many widows become suspicious after their partners die. I too have taken on this flaw. I've found myself second-guessing the intentions of all those who (seldom) approach me: peers, loved ones, family friends. Perhaps these suspicions have also contributed to my current aloneness.



The same society that has taught people to give grievors distance has also conditioned me to protect (hoard) my inheritance, however loaded it might be. Grief—and our capitalist treatment of this process—has made it difficult to find a solution in sharing and being supported. I am tired of both this distance and distrust.



With no blood lines, I feel I need to create and cultivate a loving chosen family. As someone fighting against class oppression and against the vested colonizing interests of big banks and money, what do I do with what my mother's left me? And how can these things be accomplished when more and more people move further away; when, as a grieving person, I am given so much "privacy"? How to proceed when we chose, as grieving people, to hide in our rooms to protect ourselves against the full impact of our losses and the shame of vulnerability? And finally, as a young person with grief-wealth, how do I share my resources (/challenge individualism/isolation and instead ask and give) in a radical, respectful, compassionate and healing way? I choose instead to get out of my room this Friday night. I will take the smell of my mother's perfume, that tight spot in my throat with me. Grief is not locked doors, it does not have to be fixed: it can move.



The experience of acting as my mother's caregiver during months of drinking and withdrawal and the period I sat with her in ICUs, hospitals, ERs felt like series of small losses. The trauma and resilience in both trying to take care of her and fighting for her are still palpable to me. I grieve them. They are small deaths. Both have also complicated my relationship to my friends and community now. How can I react to their needs, or share my support and resources without taking on a caregiver role? How can I ask for help or for a phone call when I am mourning someone who always refused to ask for help? My mother modeled fierceness and independence while drinking and cultivating secrets behind closed doors. I would like to find a way to challenge these muscle memories, genes, histories and patterns to instead create interdependence within my community. No more doors. If grief is change, we need to take advantage of its shifts to challenge the ways we are taught to experience the full impetus of loss (and well as its emotional and financial consequences), both as grievors and as allies.

WHEN YOUR MOM IS FIRST TO GO

by andria alephi

Dear Mom,

I don't write to you that often because you're dead. I thought I would start a relationship with 1-800-FAKE-MOM, but she's well, fictitious for one, and it feels stupid to write to myself and pretend there is someone out there. IF there really was a 1-800 number, it is possible I could have tried to get used to it, the methadone treatment for smack as it were, If there was a hotline to call with mothers to choose from and someone was the right match in accent, affect and attitude. Had the right laugh.

I can't lie and pretend we had a golden relationship, but we were very close. There were things I wanted to tell you, the truth about people, the real answers to your questions that I knew would bum you out, so I kept these to myself. But I remember thinking to myself many times, in the last few years we were together, that once you were gone, I would want to silently drop out and withdraw from family life. Stop calling anyone, stop visiting anyone, like the end of a performance run. No call backs, just goodbye. I knew it wasn't possible to pull off.

The holidays. You kept Christmas alive with your decorations starting before Thanksgiving and ending in late February. We chided you, Dad and Ron. The aunts only did it for you, too. No one else would have even put a tree up (also November-February), let alone lots of wrapped presents as though we were children. Holidays were at our house. The first Christmas after you were gone, we did it at your house, for you. For us, too, but it was a painful mockery of the real thing. Playing a game without the rules. The second year was at Ron's apartment. That was even more painful, because it was the penultimate of holding it at your house - holding it at the new seat of the family's house. The forced action, defying gravity of inclination. The shitty presents. Shitty because they were wrong. This was what I feared most, which sounds like it should be the least of my worries, right? Material goods. However, observe the rationale: presents say 'I know you'. I know Dad and Ron don't know me, don't ask don't tell. Presents are the truth or dare of showing what you know.

I got a paper shredder. It was hard not to cry. The year after that, I spent Christmas Eve in an empty bathtub in the dark, staring at a single Christmas card from The Aunts and a candle while Jon watched COPS on TV. We weren't invited anywhere, and I waited in the tub for Jon to notice and like, come love me. He never did, and eventually I climbed out and stared into a new kind of space for the first time.

I picked on you a lot mom, which was stupid, stupid, stupid. Everyone did. But you got me. It took you right up until the end, but you got me. I knew you were the missing link, the only link. As usual, I am not saying what I want to really say, which I suppose is what family is all about, at least, in this family.

MORE THINGS IN HEAVEN AND EARTH

by *lily pepper*

I know from grief. By weight, by volume, by duration, it constitutes a lot of who I am. My mother killed herself when I was nine years old. Since then, I did everything but grieve - I did myself a lot of damage, spent a lot of time getting high, getting angry, taking lots of long, aimless bus trips, trying to get away from myself.

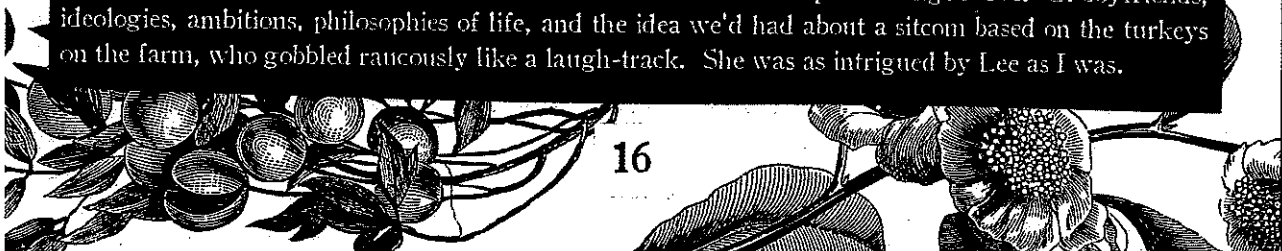
I was well into my twenties before I realized that time doesn't heal all wounds, doesn't actually do sweet fuck-all to help, and I'd have to do it all myself. So I've started therapy, and it's pretty rough going, but I have confidence it's gonna sort me out by and by.

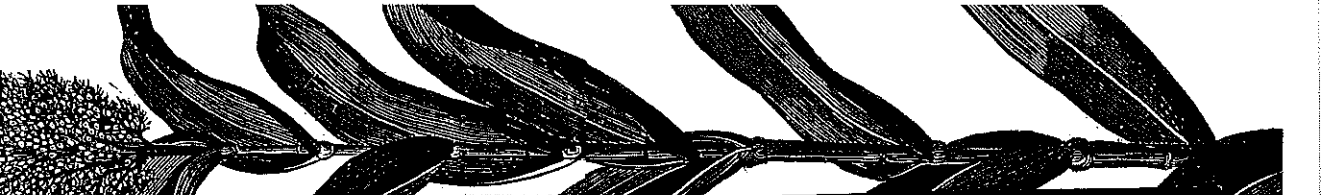
But that's not really what I wanted to write about. That's too big, there's too little of my life outside it. I wanted to write about a 'smaller' loss, the loss of someone I barely knew, and try to figure out why it still felt like the end of the world to me.

In the summer of 2008, I was working on an biodynamic farm in South-Central Kentucky. Though intensely isolated, it was as good as any salon for the variety of people I met there. I met a raw-food chef from Nashville whose husband toured as a drummer with country stars, and her two daughters Destiny and Journey. I met Junior Walker, an ancient, toothless man who described how shoelaces used to be made out of groundhog leather. And I met Lee James, an immensely tall woman with long dreadlocks and a huge, crooked smile.

She was describing to Robin, one of the farmers I was working for, how you didn't need to read tea leaves, anything would do. Lee described ascertaining a woman's marital situation from the configuration of a half-eaten tortilla chip. She had such charm and complete self-assurance about her mystical abilities, and I was completely fascinated by her.

Another woman around my age had arrived at the farm around the same time as I had. We hit it off right away, with the luxury of 9 hours a day working in the fields and talking as we picked parallel rows of vegetables. Our conversations in the bean patch ranged over ex-boyfriends, ideologies, ambitions, philosophies of life, and the idea we'd had about a sitcom based on the turkeys on the farm, who gobbled raucously like a laugh-track. She was as intrigued by Lee as I was.





We asked Robin to set us up on a date with Lee. We baked a peach pie and drove out in our best and cleanest sun-dresses, to her little white house under an enormous pecan tree. We sat in the sun and smoked pot and ate the pie and she walked us through our past lives, relayed cryptic, heartfelt messages from the dead people we'd known. She told us that we'd met before as sailors on a difficult passage, and that seemed to us as it should be.

She was married to and separated from a man who bred dogs with wolves, testing how much wolf you could have in the mix and still have them be domesticable. They could never leave the pack alone for more than a day because he'd lose his position as alpha, and would no longer be safe among his feral charges. She gave us rituals to perform, things to look out for, and we drove into town to get drunk, the strangest and fiercest people in that small-town bar.

Lee Ella James was born in Flint, Michigan, in 1956. On January 20th, 2009, she was in Washington celebrating Obama's inauguration as President. As a Black woman who'd grown up in the civil rights era, she was immensely happy and proud to see a Black man become President. She'd worked hard campaigning and canvassing on his behalf.

During that happy day, her heart failed, a result of complications from Marfan syndrome, though friends described it as her heart bursting with joy. She died in Washington that day.

I was back in Montreal when I heard about her death, and it tore me apart. I spent so long crying and cussing and drinking. Some people's importance in your life is obvious. But sometimes you meet someone where just knowing that they exist in the world is such a boon to your sense of the possibility and goodness and excitement available in the world. Lee is gone, but my sense of the richness and strangeness of this life remains, and I am so grateful to her.

TWO PEOPLE DIED THAT DAY

by prue harrison

It was the call everyone dreads. But it wasn't in the middle of the night, nor was anyone dead. Yet.

"Can you come home now? Dad is in hospital. Cancer. He probably won't live long."

Two days to arrange leaving work at short notice for an indefinite period and an 18-hour flight from Singapore later, I was home. I'd not been home for two years. Setting up a life and a new job had meant no chance for a long holiday home. Nor had I wanted one. There were so many new countries to explore around me. In the car from the airport, my sister brought me up to date.

"You can stay at his flat. He sold our house and moved there. He said it was too big for him alone. We'll go and visit later today. But you can't tell him why you're here. The doctors say he mustn't know he is dying or he will die quicker."

"Isn't that better? Is he in pain?"

"He went in for a kidney op and when they opened him up they found him riddled with cancer. He's heavily drugged. They say it's too late to stop. Gone from his lungs to all over."

"So what do you mean? I can't tell him why I am here. Hey Dad. I'm here to watch you die. Course I won't."

"I mean don't say things you wouldn't normally say that will let on we called you here to see him. Say you are on holiday with your husband. Don't say any sappy stuff. That's not you."

I sat by his bed, that afternoon, looking at him, wondering what he was really thinking. As always, I had no idea. I expected him to be sarcastic or caustic, but he didn't even reply when I said, "Hi Daddy. Hubby and I are here on hols and sis said you'd like a visitor. How're you feeling?"

What I wanted to say was so, so different. I love you. I really love you. Don't leave me. I'm not brave and strong and independent. I just pretend to be. All I wanted was your attention. Your admiration. Hubby and I aren't even talking to each other. I'm hurting here and I don't want to talk to him about it. Get up Dad! I need a hug.

"Here, have some yoghurt. Smells good. No, don't try to sit up. I'll spoon it onto your tongue."

He spoke about six words while I was there. Something about how was life in the Far East for me? He had an accent that wasn't his. He sounded just like his sister. Broad Mancunian. He had always been a clipped BBC. What was going on? I left in a rush, tears threatening to give the game away, a lump constricting my throat and making my voice thin and squeaky. I hadn't said I loved him. I hoped I didn't need to. I would have liked to hear him say he loved me, though. My sister was waiting outside the room and told me to go home, she'd call me later. I wanted to stay. I couldn't, she said. He would know something was up. Why would I be crying if it was just a kidney op? She was right. He was better kept in blissful ignorance.

His flat was alien. I found some things that were ours. Family things from home. Furniture, books, plates, ornaments. But the rest was unfamiliar. I snooped around for clues as to who he was. Suspicions I had harboured were proven by things I found. But they didn't mean anything, because I already knew everything in my heart. I looked around for signs that he had been thinking of me. A photo. A letter. Nothing. Although my sister said he had lived here for over a year, the flat felt empty. Anonymous. I wondered if he had been suffering great pain for long without letting on. I knew he had. We all did it too. His kitchen was full of food things that I had never known him to eat. But his drinks cabinet was reassuringly well stocked. So not everything had changed. His bathrobe was slung over his unmade bed. I put it on. Wrapped it tight. Climbed into his bed, covered myself up with weird satin sheets, buried my nose into his pillow, smelling Daddy. And cried myself to sleep.

"Morning. How did you sleep?"

"Is he ok? Can I come again today?"

"No, you'd better not. He was asking all kinds of questions about you being here. He was very suspicious. Just wait a few days."

"For what?"

"Come on. Don't be silly."

Looking back, I wonder now why I played along. Because the doctor made it sound like it would be my fault he died, if I let on I was there to say goodbye? I guess so. How silly was that? How weak. How typical. Avoiding conflict. For the first few days I sat around waiting for a chance to visit again. Then I thought I may as well make like I was on holiday. So I went out and visited all my favourite old haunts. Did some shopping. Visited friends. Each week I called back and told my employer that Dad wasn't dead yet. That it would be soon. That I would come back as soon as it was all over. My boss was kind enough to allow it. Even though neither of us knew how long 'soon' would be. It could be a long time. After close to three weeks, we agreed that I would come back to work at the end of a month, either way. That seemed fair. And I was resolving to leave my husband when I returned, not having missed him one bit, or

turned to him for comfort once, all the time I had been home. I was seeing how short life could be. So I knew I had to be happy. And I itched to see Daddy every day. Hearing nightly updates wasn't enough.

I saw him one last time. My sister asked me to go with her to see him on July 1st. It was his birthday. By then my brother was also in London. Waiting. He and his girlfriend were at the flat with me. Staying in the spare bedroom. He'd been to see Dad several times. Apparently his appearance wouldn't give the game away like mine would.

I understood right away why I was now allowed in. He was barely conscious. Couldn't talk. Didn't move. Lips dry. Tongue white and withered. Vacant eyes staring. I watched as my sister wet his lips with a sponge and poured water into his mouth. It came right out of the other side. I saw his watch and ring in the drawer of the side table. That had always been my favourite watch. My sister brought a cake out of a paper bag. "Happy 57th birthday, Daddy." He barely blinked. Tears formed in his eyes. I watched my sister cut the cake. She and he were so alike. And so close. I felt jealous of the years they had spent together. I looked at my brother, sitting aside. He and I look like my mother. But where my character is all hers, his is more Dad's. Only his temper is like my mother's.

A nurse came in and looked at the cake. "He can't eat that of course, dears. Can't swallow. He knows you're all here, celebrating his birthday."

I knew he knew. Everything. We never had been able to hide things from him. I made some silly excuse, touched his waxy, wrinkled, freckled hand, stared into his glazed eyes, smiled weakly and hurried out of the silent room.

The same nurse saw me sitting in a heap down the corridor.

"He's so full of morphine dear. He likely hears but can't respond. He's feeling no pain. His organs have all but stopped. He's drifting. He's not himself now. He made us all laugh when he first came in. We hope it will be quick."

Was that meant to reassure me or prepare me? It just made me angry. He always made everyone laugh. He also made me cry. With frustration. Fear. Ineptitude. He'd been away most of my young childhood, leaving me alone with my mother. I blamed him then for all that she did to me. Blamed him for not being there. For staying away. But when he was home, he was funny, caring, wonderful. We'd read Winnie the Pooh on the sofa, each playing a role, voices and actions. Later, after my mother left, I began to see him more for what he was. A bully. Brilliant. Scheming. Devious. Funny. Charming. Someone for whom I never felt good

enough. My sister took over running the house. My brother was the brain. And I was nothing. But I loved him fiercely. I hope he knew that.

"He's gone. The hospital just called. I was with him 'til about one am. He died around 3.30am. We're to go and arrange the funeral and things."

I knew my sister had been crying before she called me. Her voice was thick with grief. I woke up my brother and told him what she had said. He buried his head under the pillow and cried. So it was going to be me who wouldn't cry. Who would stoically get us through all this.

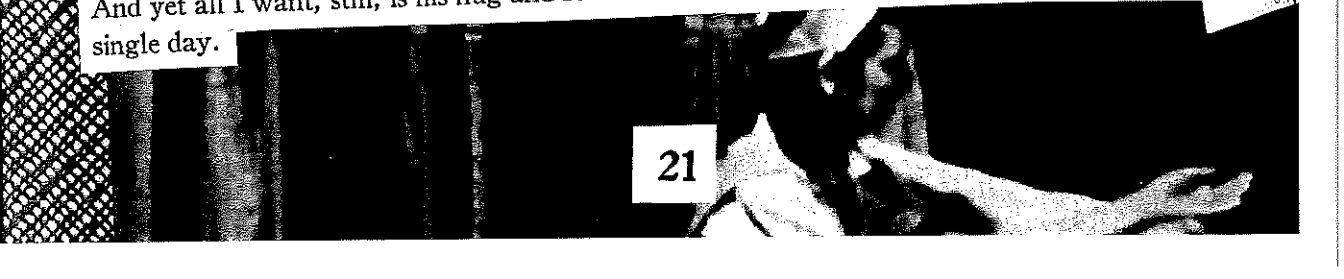
I nearly lost it at the hospital when we took back his belongings. All in a ziplock bag. But no watch. The nurse told me that sometimes that happened. So many people handled effects, so it happened sometimes. Things got lost. After first trying to tell me that there had been no watch. But I kept it together. My sister was good. She organized the funeral and cremation and burial (all three in different places.) And cried only in private. We all de-stressed with giggles in the train up North when I forgot to take the urn with his ashes inside to the buffet car. "Wait, I left Daddy behind. I'll just go and get him." And later, at the burial service, we all got the giggles again, for no reason. Then my sister and brother cried. I hugged them and wiped their tears.

I didn't cry until long after I had left England again and got back to my normal life. One night, after many sleepless nights where I felt lost, orphaned, adrift, I went to the window and cried until I was dehydrated. But it felt empty. I didn't know what I was crying for. To be sad that I felt left alone was selfish. Daddy wasn't going to benefit from my tears. I was sad that I wouldn't see him anymore. Selfish again. Sad that I couldn't ask for his help. Well that was silly: I never had before, why want to now? Sad that he had died so young. That I lived half way round the world and didn't even know he was sick? If he'd wanted me to know he could have told me. So I knew crying was silly, but was incapable of stopping. Especially as so long had passed since he had died. Been buried beside his family. What was I crying for?

It is now 26 years since he died. And it feels like yesterday. Something in me feels like I stopped living then too. Which is silly really. I went on to leave my husband, divorce, marry again, have 2 lovely kids and a successful career and am only now wanting to go home, alone, with my 2 kids who are now almost adults themselves. I tell them I love them as often as I can. And try to show it and praise their efforts. In a few years I will be as old as Daddy was when he died. And yet all I want, still, is his hug and for him to tell me he loves me. Because I love him every single day.

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ON PUBLIC CRYING

by sarah k summer of twenty eleven

* This piece was read at "Who'd Ya Lose and How Ya Dealin'," a benefit show and reading held for The Worst on September 3rd, 2011 in Brooklyn, NY at Death by Audio.*

When I was about 6 years old I decided I didn't want to go to school. My mom managed to get me into her car but I cried the entire way. I was brooding in the passenger seat when my mother left me with the parting words "You are very unattractive when you cry. You really shouldn't cry in front of people you like. Especially boys." This was obviously not her strongest parenting moment. Note she used the word 'boys'...

As an uber-sensitive female, I became very self aware of my hulk-like crying transformation and developed a number of strategies to stop the floodgates.

I have not consciously gone to a theater to see a sad movie since I was a tween. If ambushed by the salty fluid of doom I learned to duck out of the dark theater early. I found it was always better to confront the bright hallway lights solo when making a bee-line for the bathroom.

When I'm listening to someone speak and I think I might burst, I pull what can now be called a Michelle Bachman. You look ever so slightly to the left of whoever is speaking, numb yourself, and drift into a self-imposed sensory deprivation. I always go with trying to position my feet like a ballerina and singing "Ice Ice Baby" to myself. Imagine simultaneous humming white noise and "Yo, stop collaborate and listen. Ice is back with a brand new invention..." No doubt some of you will see me this evening with perpendicular feet and bobbing my head ever so slightly...

-When all else fails, I have perfected the art of faking allergies. The key is massaging your face and keeping tons of kleenex on hand.



HISTONE: TOPAZ
NOVEMBER
FLOWER: CHRYSANTHEMUM

A few years ago I was in an absolutely terrible relationship. I cried in the Grad Center cafeteria, on the Surreal Estate dance floor, and in the POM dumpster. I wept under the otherwise beautifying fluorescent lights of the A, C, 2, 3, 5, B, F, G, N and L trains. I sobbed in a box, with a fox, in a house, with a mouse, on a train, in the rain, on a boat, with a goat. I would cry here and there, I would cry everywhere!

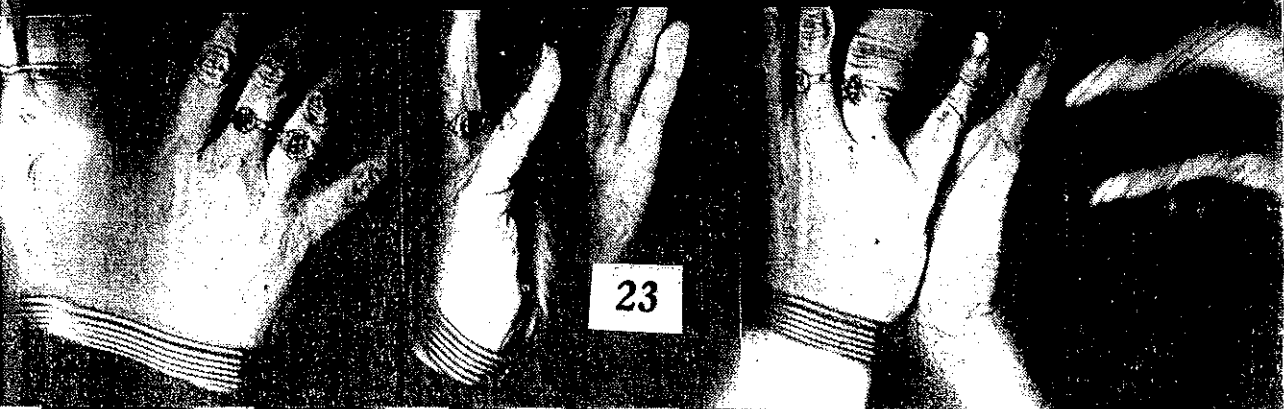
My tears were strewn up and down Bedford Avenue. In fact, most of the people I know in this room probably met me with my strawberry birthmark between my eyes in full flame. When all was said and done, my mom redeemed her parental status by pointing out that I was in fact not sad about the relationship ending. She said "You're mourning the relationship you thought you had. It never really existed." This has stuck with me. I particularly found comfort in the word "mourning."

Then an ex-partner of mine died by choice. My response did not drown Brooklyn. I became more introspective and had to think about "mourning" yet again.

I still don't like crying in public. But I have come to realize whether unattractive or not, there is no one better to cry with than those DO I like, because they are all rad feminists. They ate lunch with me in that cafeteria, danced with me on the dance floor, and helped me carry crates of Berry Boost over the brick wall. They not only didn't judge me, but they also made me feel better about what I was crying about and better about myself in their comfort and strength.

If I am crying by the end of this it is not because I am 'mourning' but because I'm fortunate to have the support of a feminist community.

Now the 'boy' issue is a whole different thing...but to answer the title of this wonderful event that is "how I'm dealin."



skinned

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go to the hospital to see my grandmother. I forced my way into the hospital room where she was and I held her foot at the hospital when they pronounced her dead. She was still warm. A few weeks after losing my Maria, I told my mother that I didn't believe in god because no god would take a good person away. My mother grabbed my face and forced my body to the ground and made me say hail marys. (I would tell my mother about the sexual abuse I went through at the hand of my uncle 17 years later and her first words in response would be "Christine, you have to pray"...actually this was her response to any issue I ever had). My mother gave away all of my grandmother's things to other people or she threw them away --- her shirts, her jewelry, those soft sheets, everything. I managed to sneak a shirt under my mattress. It used to smell like her, but now it smells like me.

At the funeral, I cried. I didn't want to leave the grave. Somehow I zombie walked to the car. Before it pulled away, my parents' friend opened the door, told me to stop crying, and slammed the door. I never told anyone how I felt about her death after that. At night, I would sob and stifle my cries with pillows so no one would know. I would attempt suicide three times that year.

I'm 29 now, and I have never openly grieved for her or shared my grief with anyone in my family.

we are all braided together..

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to stretch his belief

For the first time since my dad died 3 and a half years ago, today I was able to put some of my pain into words. I identified that anxious sinking feeling in my stomach that made my heart beat faster – the feeling of oh god I can't remember his laugh, when did we last hug, when did he last kiss me, what did his voice sound like, the feeling of forgetting.

The word “forgetting” seems almost laughable as I look at it now, hiding itself amongst the other words on my computer screen. How could I possibly forget?

But forgetting is something that terrifies me. I focus on remembering & panic as his face recedes, his voice gets increasingly quieter, he walks too far away for me to see how his body moves.

But never really forgetting. He walks by my side in dreams, chuckles clearly at my jokes, answers my questions in that same tired, patient tone of voice he always did.

My dad was diagnosed with a terminal form of lung cancer in January 2009, after a bad cold and chesty cough that wouldn't go away over Christmas. He died in August. The intervening eight months are clear in my memory; I'm glad we had that time to spend together, sitting in the dialysis lounge, playing with the hospital bed, decorating the hospice room.

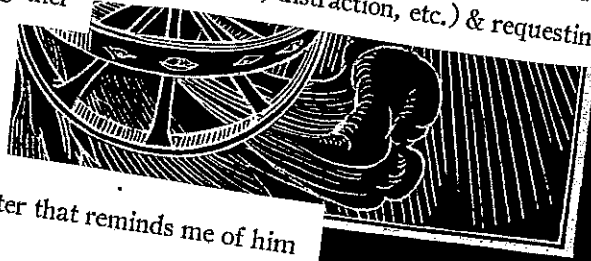
Since he died, I've had to work hard not to focus on my regrets; how I could have cared for him better, been more understanding, said this, done that. I write these notes down under “things I will do better next time” column of the self-assessment form in my head, and call it quits.

Grieving for me involves a lot more assertion than I would have thought. I find it hard to demand of someone's time or energy, or sometimes even to take it when offered. But grieving doesn't wait, it doesn't sit quietly waiting for the appropriate moment to talk. I'm learning to talk about my dad when I need to, whether it's what's expected of me or not. I think of silly questions I could ask him, and formulate his answers. Sometimes I make up responses I know he'd hate, and then imagine his reaction as I put someone else's words in his mouth. He pulls some great faces.

After the rigmarole of the medical system, the first thing that struck me about our/my culture's response to death was the silence. Friends disappeared, acquaintances became edgy and nervous, some family members refused to talk about my father's illness and impending death. I came across the first issue of The Worst online a few months after his death, and the relief was overwhelming. I found a feeling of community, support, comfort. It made me realize the importance of talking & sharing experiences & resources.

Ways of grieving that I have found useful:

- Reading zines/articles online of people with similar experiences
- Listening to music he liked
- Learning a language he could speak
- Identifying what I need from others (acknowledgement, distraction, etc.) & requesting it
- Doing activities we used to do together
- Writing letters to him
- Sharing anecdotes with others
- Crying
- Creating something tangible
- Reading his handwriting
- Watching clips of a cartoon character that reminds me of him
- Commemorative tattoos
- Cooking dishes he used to cook
- Telling the same kind of bad jokes he used to



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DELAYED by *maggie shelton*

THREE DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS

So dad, you fucking bastard. You finally did it. Took you long enough. It's been near twenty years since you held me on your knee, me at an age when I barely understood life, let alone death, and told me that when us kids were all grown you'd probably kill yourself. Great incentive to grow up, btw.

And what do you know, you did. Held your Colt 45 to your head and KA - POW! There it all was - splattered on the walls, crimson thick blood on the plank floor, just waiting for me to clean it up.

That one-sixty-five IQ all scraped up and put in a garbage bag and set out for trash pick-up.

Oh, yeah, guess it could have been worse if you hadn't wrapped your old army jacket around your head first. Thanks for THINKING OF US, just can't get over how CONSIDERATE THAT WAS. Asshole.

Uncle George got drunk and told me if mom had been more attentive to you none of this would have happened. Like, when she was in the closet with the door blockaded while you threatened her during one of your crazies? There was no point telling him about all the times we tried to get you get help and -
Whatever. You just wouldn't.

You know what I think? I think you're a coward. Life's hard for everyone - and right now my niece is dying of a brain tumor and SHE'S YOUR GRANDDAUGHTER YOU SELFISH, INCONSIDERATE, FUCKING BASTARD. Thanks for adding this to everyone's plate.

I haven't cried. Those tears are history now. Tears from a girl all those years ago whose dad was going to off himself. Thanks for that too.

I did go out to the woods yesterday, to your cabin where the deed was done, and screamed my lungs out. Screamed with rage, not grief, until my voice was gone. Oh, and we'll be paying someone to take down the cabin, mom doesn't want that memory there. Thanks for that, too.

LOSS

New interests, skills; New or Renewed...

TWO DAYS AFTER THANKSGIVING

Hey dad. You have a new grandson. He's three months old today, and while I was changing his diapers he peed all over the dog. I laughed out loud and startled myself. Do you know, that's the first time in a year I've laughed out loud?

Your granddaughter passed away quietly, in her sleep. I felt better knowing you'd be there when she arrived. I talked to her a little about that, who would be waiting and how it would probably all go down. She couldn't talk but she squeezed my hand. She understood. I think about the two of you together, sometimes I see her bouncing behind your saddle, her hair flying and hooves thundering. Like I did when I was her age. We did have those good times, didn't we?

ALMOST VALENTINES DAY

Hi dad. I was working today and this old guy came in. He was about the same age you would have been, well, maybe older, but in great shape and even though his face didn't look like yours, he was built like you. He had on jeans and cowboy boots and a western cut shirt that snapped down the front with this snappy string tie, just like how you used to wear. He was talking to me, telling me what he needed, but all I could do was focus on his belt buckle. It was awesome, you would have loved it, an oval disk with a glazed painted bucking bronco and a cowboy with a setting sun in the background.

I started thinking about how your grandson will never know you and how unfair that was to all of us and why it was some people got to keep their parents and some didn't and the next thing I knew I was sobbing right there on the counter, just howling my heart out dripping all over the place and I couldn't stop.

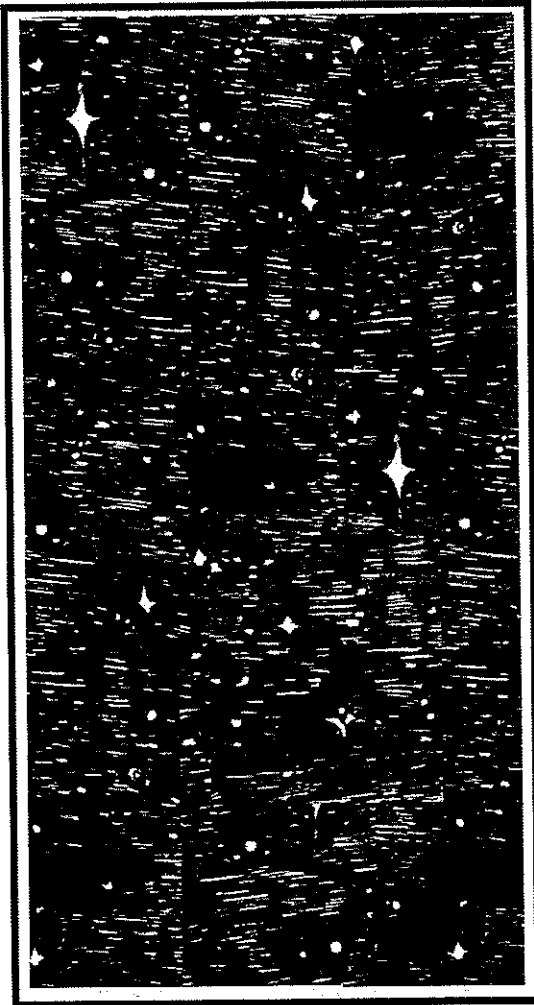
I couldn't stop. I just couldn't.

I had to go home early.

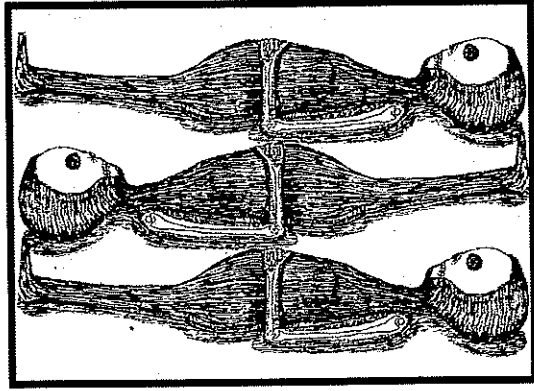
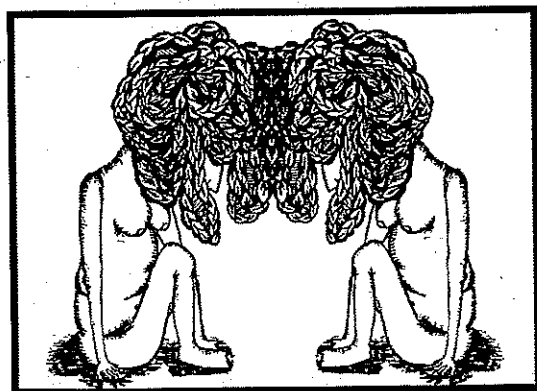
I thought I'd write you, to let you know how it's going.

I miss you dad. I really miss you.

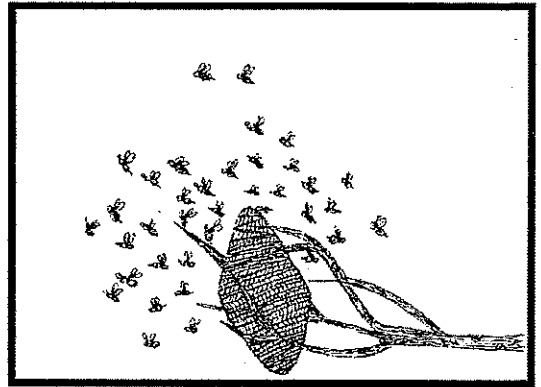
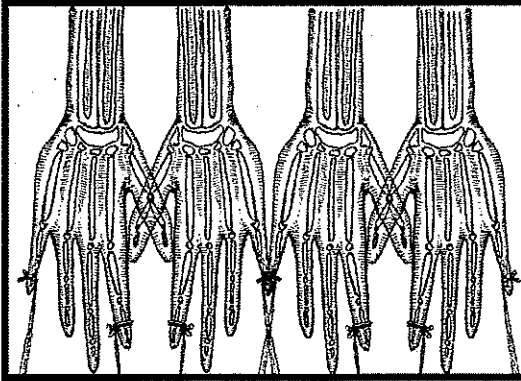
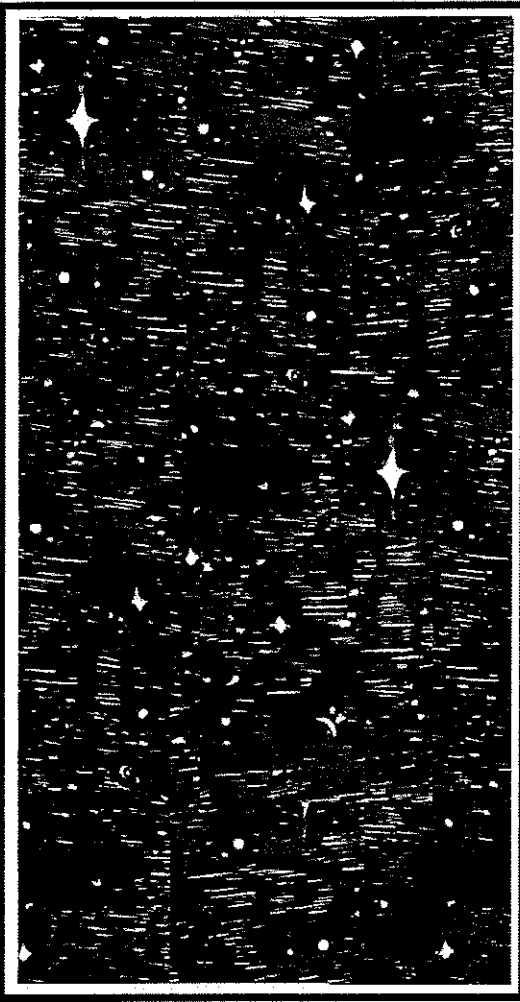
Handwritten note: I miss you dad 29
I miss you dad 29
I miss you dad 29



I think about the past and future of our particles. If I think that your corpse is re-purposing into beautiful natural things, I feel a bit peaceful. For Ashley b. Dec 17, 1981 d. Oct 28 2011 Everything is different now.



I put
my
hair
with
you in
your
casket
so you
would
n't
have
to de-
com-
pose
alone,
even
then I
almost
didn't
be-
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it
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some
kind of
jinx I
hadn't
heard
of.



STRANGERS IN INDIA

by paul elton

"I know we too, are made of all the things we've lost here." -Tom Waits

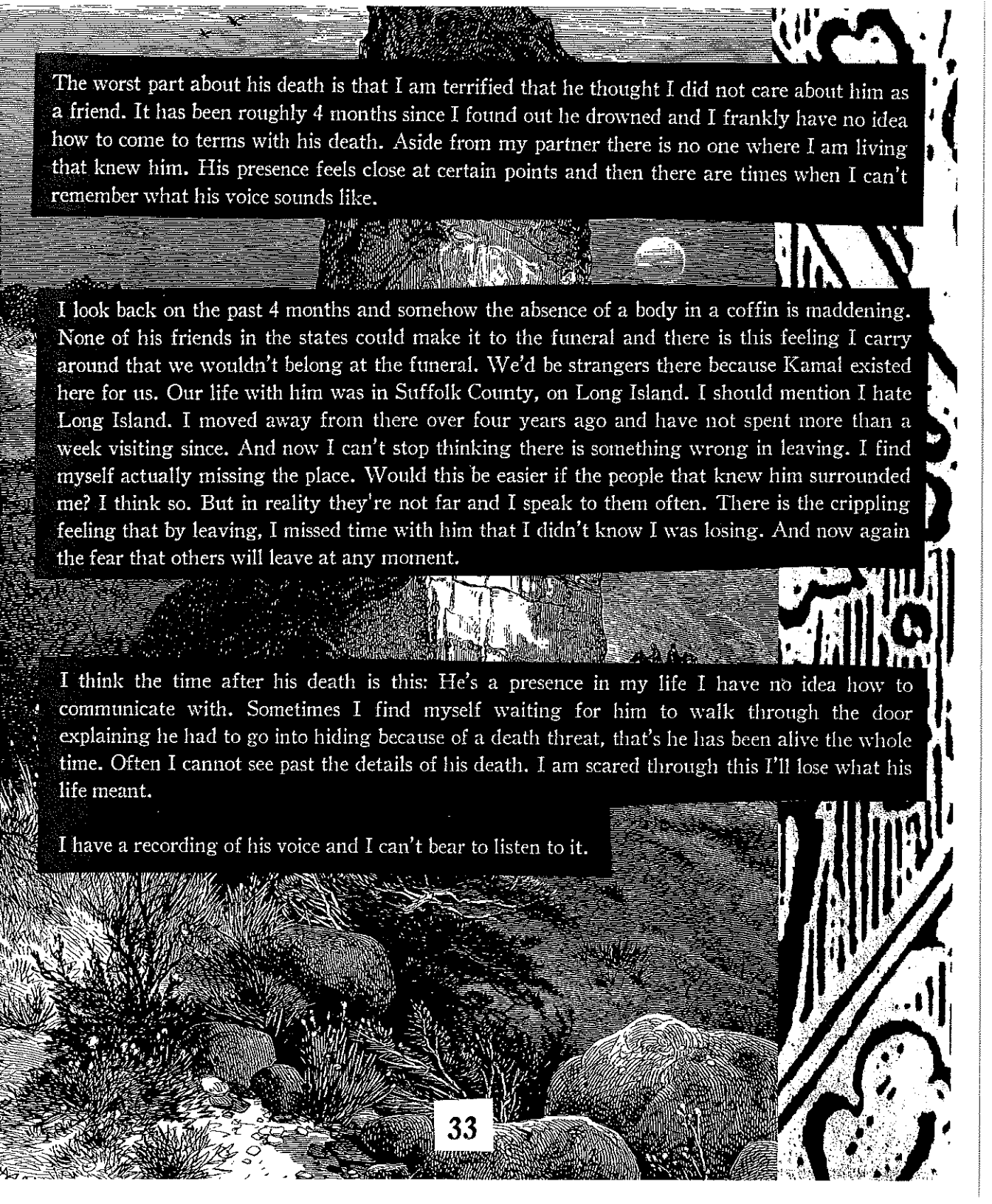
I find a perverse comfort in thinking he was murdered.

Somehow his death arising from his position as an Indian atheist and a scientist gives it meaning. At least temporarily. I knew Ajita Kamal as a friend but after his death I've found a young man who feared the influence of fundamentalism in his home. Kamal spoke about shame killings, what the U.S. still calls honor killings, and it pained him. He believed all things human beings needed existed here on earth, what we need to flourish would not come from a deity. I am not Indian and I have never traveled there so my thoughts on his views don't matter. He was a temporary expatriate and his return to India after years of undocumented status in Long Island was another beginning.

I think his decision to return home was important to him and he was good spirits. Roughly 4 months ago he drowned. Friends of his here in the U.S. have not received any concrete details on how he died. Out of respect for his family we haven't pursued them.

To describe Ajita Kamal briefly is impossible but here goes.

He was a short, underweight, and often obnoxious person who emigrated from India to Stony Brook NY for graduate work. He was a secular humanist and atheist. He expressed his fears about the dangers of fundamentalist thinking in his home. He grew up in Coimbatore, India. He was a frequent contributor to a number of websites and journals organized by Indian Atheists and people associated with the Free thought movements. I think he possessed a compassion and commitment to the betterment of human society that comes along rarely. On more than one occasion he nearly got the shit kicked out him in Suffolk County bars for talking loudly about how terrible a president George W. Bush was. As I understand it the threats didn't dissuade him, just made him talk louder.



The worst part about his death is that I am terrified that he thought I did not care about him as a friend. It has been roughly 4 months since I found out he drowned and I frankly have no idea how to come to terms with his death. Aside from my partner there is no one where I am living that knew him. His presence feels close at certain points and then there are times when I can't remember what his voice sounds like.

I look back on the past 4 months and somehow the absence of a body in a coffin is maddening. None of his friends in the states could make it to the funeral and there is this feeling I carry around that we wouldn't belong at the funeral. We'd be strangers there because Kamal existed here for us. Our life with him was in Suffolk County, on Long Island. I should mention I hate Long Island. I moved away from there over four years ago and have not spent more than a week visiting since. And now I can't stop thinking there is something wrong in leaving. I find myself actually missing the place. Would this be easier if the people that knew him surrounded me? I think so. But in reality they're not far and I speak to them often. There is the crippling feeling that by leaving, I missed time with him that I didn't know I was losing. And now again the fear that others will leave at any moment.

I think the time after his death is this: He's a presence in my life I have no idea how to communicate with. Sometimes I find myself waiting for him to walk through the door explaining he had to go into hiding because of a death threat, that's he has been alive the whole time. Often I cannot see past the details of his death. I am scared through this I'll lose what his life meant.

I have a recording of his voice and I can't bear to listen to it.

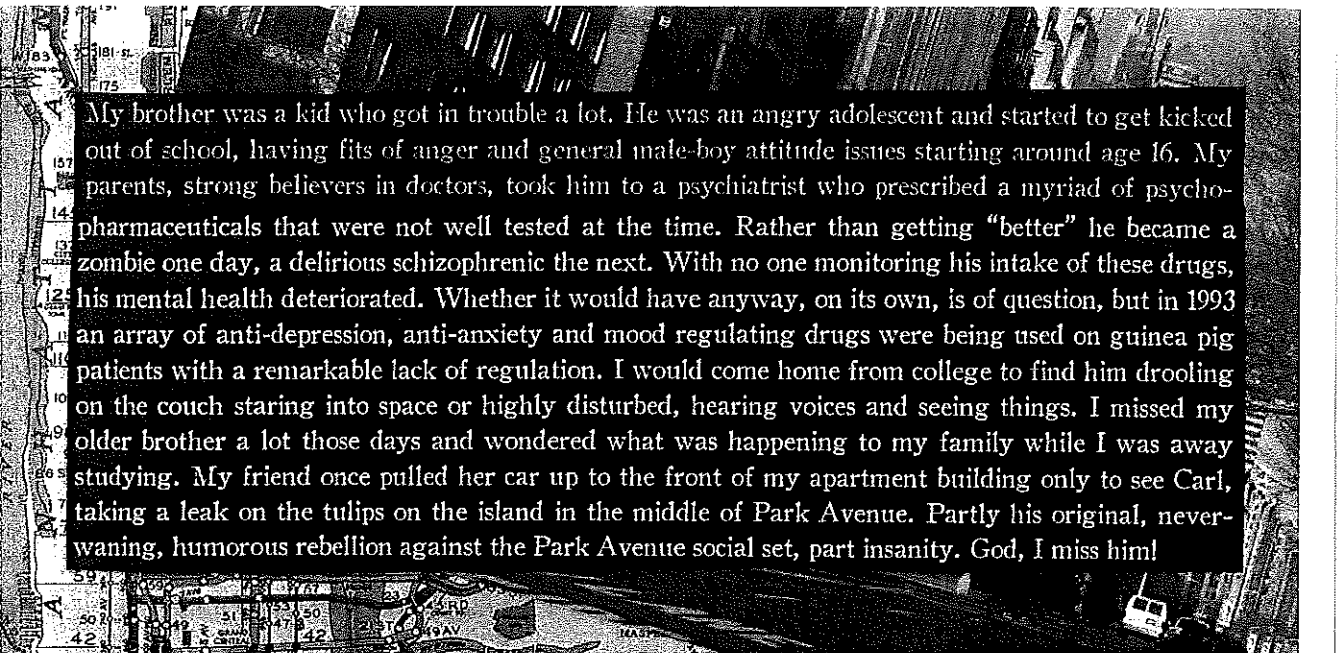
THE HANGED MAN

by Louisa Grenquist

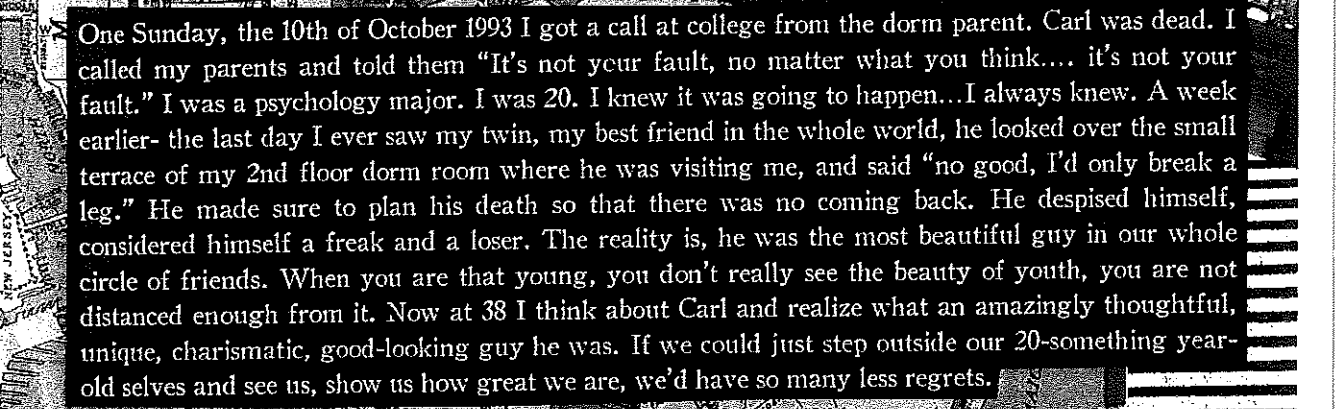
I can't tell you how many people have said to me that suicide is cowardly and selfish. That is before they know that my older brother killed himself at the age of 20. I'd like to see them jump 8 flights to their death. I'd like to see them put a shotgun in their mouth and pull the trigger, I'd like to see them be "cowardly" enough to take a razor and split their veins open. And to the people who say, "how selfish". Are you kidding? People who kill themselves HATE themselves, HATE their lives and assume that everyone else feels the same. So, they end it- thinking that it is what everyone else wants them to do. They are not selfish, they are sick. And they are certainly not cowardly. Think of the pain and physical suffering they brave at the time they are ready to kill themselves...and when they are sure, they plan it, and do it right the first time, once and for all.

I have dated many men since my brother's death and what bothers me most is when I finally come around to telling them about him, the majority of them ask, "what, was he crazy?" or "what was wrong with him?". I long for the day when someone says, "I understand, who doesn't feel that way sometimes?" Or, "That must have really been painful for you." Or, "You must miss him a lot." The general grieving process for suicide is an isolated one. Everyone else gets a popular funeral, days commemorating when their loved one died a hero, for example, in a war or a disaster. Survivors can come together and bond mutually having lost their loved ones at the same fatal time and place or by the same fatal disease. Suicide mourners are alone. Even gathering for "suicide groups" is difficult because people commit suicide for so many reasons and it doesn't evoke your particular loved one's presence or history the way a gathering would, say, among veterans or cancer victims.

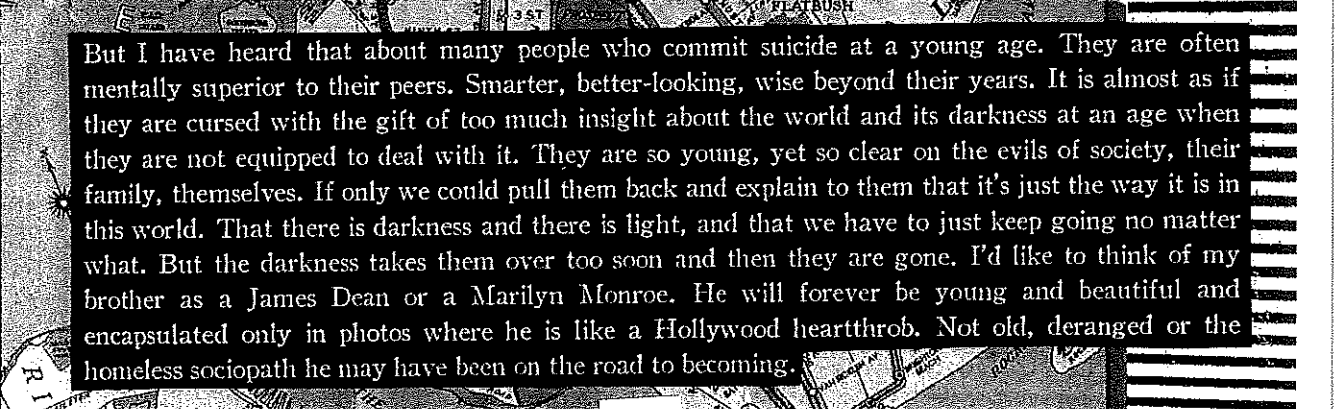
The minister at our Presbyterian church on Park Avenue where Carl and I went to Sunday school and sang in the choir agreed to do his memorial service because my mother was a deacon there. Her first words before anything else were about how the church does not recognize suicide. So, my brother, a saint among the living, is supposedly not allowed through the Pearly Gates. This highly regarded minister did not think about me, the family, the pain we were suffering so deeply. She essentially gave herself a big pat on the back for being so "open" while also providing herself with a disclaimer in case the Presbyterian police cracked down on her. Even at the age of 20 I saw through her and was disgusted.



My brother was a kid who got in trouble a lot. He was an angry adolescent and started to get kicked out of school, having fits of anger and general male-boy attitude issues starting around age 16. My parents, strong believers in doctors, took him to a psychiatrist who prescribed a myriad of psychopharmaceuticals that were not well tested at the time. Rather than getting "better" he became a zombie one day, a delirious schizophrenic the next. With no one monitoring his intake of these drugs, his mental health deteriorated. Whether it would have anyway, on its own, is of question, but in 1993 an array of anti-depression, anti-anxiety and mood regulating drugs were being used on guinea pig patients with a remarkable lack of regulation. I would come home from college to find him drooling on the couch staring into space or highly disturbed, hearing voices and seeing things. I missed my older brother a lot those days and wondered what was happening to my family while I was away studying. My friend once pulled her car up to the front of my apartment building only to see Carl, taking a leak on the tulips on the island in the middle of Park Avenue. Partly his original, never-waning, humorous rebellion against the Park Avenue social set, part insanity. God, I miss him!



One Sunday, the 10th of October 1993 I got a call at college from the dorm parent. Carl was dead. I called my parents and told them "It's not your fault, no matter what you think... it's not your fault." I was a psychology major. I was 20. I knew it was going to happen...I always knew. A week earlier- the last day I ever saw my twin, my best friend in the whole world, he looked over the small terrace of my 2nd floor dorm room where he was visiting me, and said "no good, I'd only break a leg." He made sure to plan his death so that there was no coming back. He despised himself, considered himself a freak and a loser. The reality is, he was the most beautiful guy in our whole circle of friends. When you are that young, you don't really see the beauty of youth, you are not distanced enough from it. Now at 38 I think about Carl and realize what an amazingly thoughtful, unique, charismatic, good-looking guy he was. If we could just step outside our 20-something year-old selves and see us, show us how great we are, we'd have so many less regrets.



But I have heard that about many people who commit suicide at a young age. They are often mentally superior to their peers. Smarter, better-looking, wise beyond their years. It is almost as if they are cursed with the gift of too much insight about the world and its darkness at an age when they are not equipped to deal with it. They are so young, yet so clear on the evils of society, their family, themselves. If only we could pull them back and explain to them that it's just the way it is in this world. That there is darkness and there is light, and that we have to just keep going no matter what. But the darkness takes them over too soon and then they are gone. I'd like to think of my brother as a James Dean or a Marilyn Monroe. He will forever be young and beautiful and encapsulated only in photos where he is like a Hollywood heartthrob. Not old, deranged or the homeless sociopath he may have been on the road to becoming.

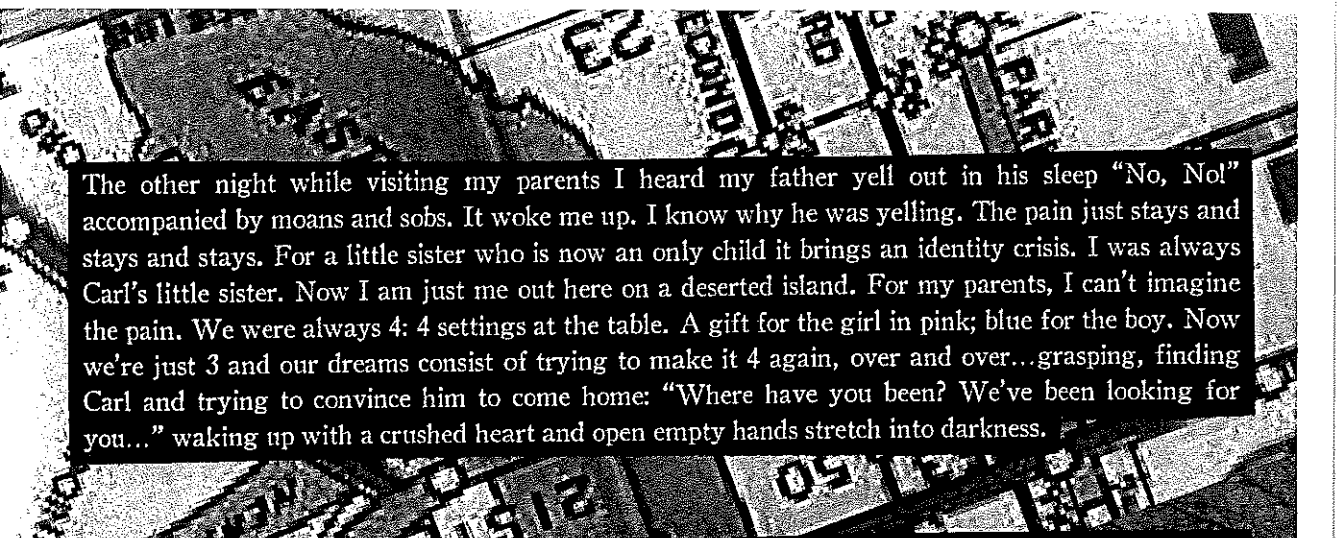
A friend drove me back to New York from college that night of October 10, 1993- a drive I will never forget. When I came home the doorman looked at me warily as I entered the building. I had visions of Carl hanging from the pull-up bar we used to play on that bridged his closet door. Or a bloody bathtub death. Either way, I thought my parents had found him. I came into the apartment and found them. My mother curled up in the fetal position, my father lying prostrate beside her on their bed. "I'm, here." What else to say? I finally asked, "How did you find him?" They said, "you don't know?" Their story breaks my heart every time I think of it. I guess because it is a story of two people who found each other after a deep history of loss and grief themselves. My father was orphaned when he was nine after his father died and his mother mysteriously "fell" out of the bathroom window after his father's death. My mother suffered through the long painful deterioration of her mother at the hands of breast cancer in the 1950's when there was no medical help, losing her at the age of 14 and losing her father at 27 to cirrhosis of the liver. Two people already crippled by grief and death at very a young age had tried to overcome it all by making a family of their own... and now this.

My parents went to the country that weekend leaving my brother at home in the apartment. When they arrived back, going about their usual routine they got out of the car in front of the 1192 awning, placed their bags next to the car and waited for the doorman to attend them. He looked afraid and held back; they said, "Ephraim? Could you help us?" A neighbor came up saying, "they don't know do they?" She told them: "Carl jumped out of the window, he's dead." My father immediately jumped back in the car, saying "I have to take the car to the garage." My mom stood there watching him drive off and in a split second, knew: "He can't be alone right now" and ran down Park Avenue after my father and the car. She was 53 years old but in good shape and she soon caught up with him at a light around 86th street. They went to the garage, parked the car and walked 10 long city blocks together back to the their pain and an endless sorrow unlike anything they had experience before. Detectives were still in the apartment investigating the death when they got there. They questioned my parents to ensure the death had not been "foul play."

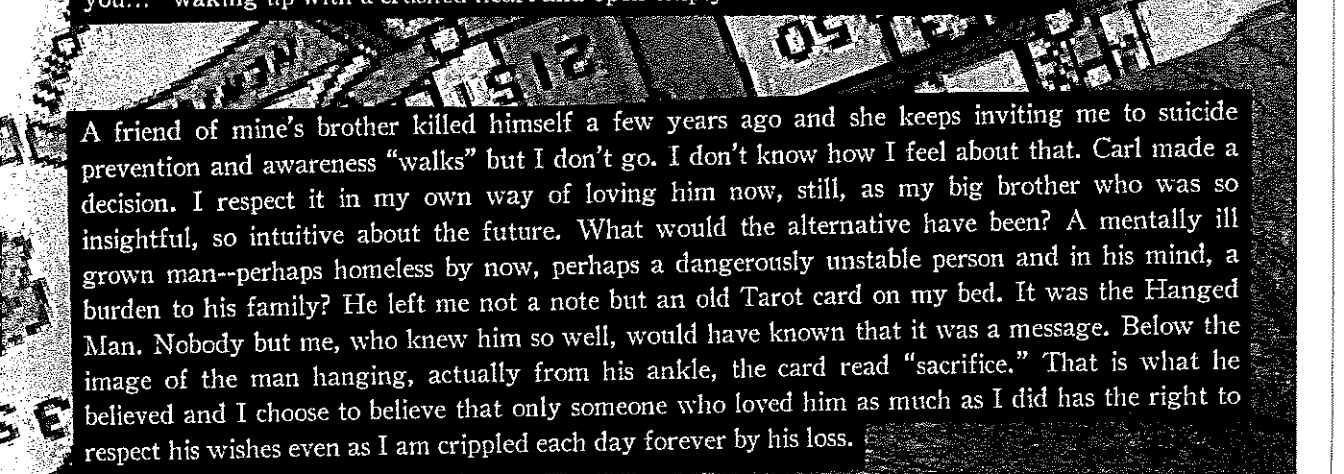
At some point my Mom and Papa went down to the morgue to identify their only son in all his youth and prime, dead. I know what shirt he was wearing because it was a wool black and white check "flannel" of my fathers that we both used to borrow all the time. He was cremated in it, I supposed. A few years after his death I sifted through the canister of his ashes and found a fragment of one of his beautiful teeth. He had the most amazingly strong, white teeth. Sometimes at parties he would bite through a glass to show how strong they were. I found his toe tag in the ashes. "Greenwood Cemetery" in New Jersey. It's a round flat, black metal tag with a number on it. I wore it around my neck for about a year - maybe 1995, I can't remember. Sometimes I pull it out and invoke it for good luck: "Help me Carl, what have I become...would you recognize me now like this after all these years?"

36

Greenwood Cemetery
New Jersey
Toe Tag



The other night while visiting my parents I heard my father yell out in his sleep "No, No!" accompanied by moans and sobs. It woke me up. I know why he was yelling. The pain just stays and stays and stays. For a little sister who is now an only child it brings an identity crisis. I was always Carl's little sister. Now I am just me out here on a deserted island. For my parents, I can't imagine the pain. We were always 4: 4 settings at the table. A gift for the girl in pink; blue for the boy. Now we're just 3 and our dreams consist of trying to make it 4 again, over and over...grasping, finding Carl and trying to convince him to come home: "Where have you been? We've been looking for you..." waking up with a crushed heart and open empty hands stretch into darkness.



A friend of mine's brother killed himself a few years ago and she keeps inviting me to suicide prevention and awareness "walks" but I don't go. I don't know how I feel about that. Carl made a decision. I respect it in my own way of loving him now, still, as my big brother who was so insightful, so intuitive about the future. What would the alternative have been? A mentally ill grown man--perhaps homeless by now, perhaps a dangerously unstable person and in his mind, a burden to his family? He left me not a note but an old Tarot card on my bed. It was the Hanged Man. Nobody but me, who knew him so well, would have known that it was a message. Below the image of the man hanging, actually from his ankle, the card read "sacrifice." That is what he believed and I choose to believe that only someone who loved him as much as I did has the right to respect his wishes even as I am crippled each day forever by his loss.





BIG BANDAGES NEED MORE THAN TWO HANDS

by Leah Decesare

When you lose someone you love to sudden death, it is the most incomprehensible thing in the world. You're totally unprepared, you might have spoken to them just the other day, you may have had plans and projects with them in mind, but you definitely had near future with them in mind, and all of a sudden you can't call them, you can't say anything to them, you can't think of them without crying, or wanting to, or feeling some awful pain that never should be associated with them, but now their memory is plagued with THE memory of learning of their death, with the image of what their death looked like.

When people ask you "how are you?" you can't say you're fine because you know you're lying and you feel disrespectful to the dead to even answer that way, but then you feel you have to explain yourself and you just don't want to because you're just going to fucking cry in public again. You also know that it might make the inquirer feel super awkward and then you feel like the bad guy.

I know that most of my friends who are my age (early 20s) have only lost people whose deaths were more timely. For those of you who do not have a closer relationship with death, being a supportive force for someone who does may be really daunting, it may feel like a job you don't feel prepared to take on, so you don't. I don't think you have bad intentions, but I wish you would swallow your insecurities of me being mad at you for saying the wrong thing, or of me showing some sort of extreme emotion. I AM mad. I'm mad at everything. I'm mad and I'm sad and I'm nostalgic and that nostalgia sometimes makes me really happy. But please, don't make me feel like the plague because I might cry in front of you. I'm feeling everything, and it is going to take time, but a few other things can help. Unless I explicitly state that I want to be left alone (and even then, I can change my mind), you can think about the following:

1) Just like with any sort of grievance, don't make it about you. Even if you have lost someone in the past, you can share what has helped you heal, but don't expect it will work for everyone. I'm not trying to suggest your loss was less significant, I absolutely know it is not, but right now this is a very fresh and vivid and real thing for me that I am still learning how to deal with, and if you are a little further along down the path of learning how to deal with it, it's good to know I will get there, but I do not feel that way right now, so please, don't make it about you.

2) Call me. Not anything less personal, sometimes I need to hear in your voice that you truly care about my well being, and I cannot hear that in an instant message over Facebook, Gmail, AIM, etc.

3) Invite me over for dinner, not to just go to a restaurant, I don't want to have to shout about my feelings over the sound of multiple other conversations, clanking dishes, etc. I also might cry if I talk about it and I don't necessarily want to do that in front of a bunch of strangers and make the waiter/tress feel awkward.

4) Invite me to do anything else. Board games, hang out with multiple people, making music, drinking tea/coffee, etc. The idea is to get me out of the house so that I am not reading the news articles over and over again, looking at every picture, listening to music that reminds me of them and just sitting inside crying.

5) Saying "let me know if I can do anything for you" is a kind gesture, but I probably don't really know what's good for me right now, and I am very unlikely to actually ask you if you wouldn't mind helping me tackle some small house chores so that the small things don't add to the big things and life doesn't seem as overwhelming (that is just an example — when I'm depressed, my apartment falls apart.) Maybe you could suggest specific things you can do to help, even insist on them, it might make you feel better, too.

The outpour of love that I have seen for my most recent loved one that has passed away has been absolutely unfathomable and inspiring, but there are so many of us who are alive and trying to live through it who need help. Supporting each other doesn't just mean coming out to see our bands play, and it doesn't mean shit to me if it's only about your fun. We gotta put our big kid boots on and support each other, even when it's rough.

DEATH AND DESTINEY

by *megan hankins*

"So my question is, like, why do our farts smell different if we all ate the same thing for lunch?" Javante was asking the tough questions in Science, & it was a pretty typical day for me & the fifth graders in Room 235. Before I could tackle Javante's observant inquiry, the phone rang. My "receptionist" student didn't know who it was, only that they sounded really upset & passed it to me. At first I couldn't decipher the voice on the other end, either—just broken sobs into the receiver. The crying subsided & a voice (plus a pit in my stomach) emerged. "Hi Ms. Hankins, it's Destiney. I just...I just called to apologize for not being in school today. My mom died last night." I sank into my chair as the sobs quickened. Slumping forward, I stammered through cliché condolences, trying to maintain composure as the rest of the class looked on. "Destiney I'm so so sorry—you didn't need to call, we were worried about you, though. Take as much time as you need, don't worry about anything; I'll take care of it."

As the phone dropped back into place, kids asked what had happened. "Destiney just has some things to deal with, but she'll be back soon," I responded to their questioning eyes. As a teacher, I couldn't reveal personal information about a student; as a human being who'd spent the last 7 months with these kids that now felt much more like a family than a class, it was difficult to not just let everything spill out. How do I NOT tell them their sister is hurting? We'd all known her mom, too. She volunteered, brought supplies, was always seeking new ways to support me & her kids. She was a beautiful person raising 4 kids on her own & was about to be a grandmother. Then it all just....stopped.

I wasn't sure what to do next. Death exposes the vulnerability in all it touches—not just its victims. I cared so much for this little girl & her family, but as a teacher, wasn't sure what my role would be in the process. Still a bit in shock, I called my mom. I needed to hear her voice, know that she was still there. My mom's also a teacher, & like a helpless kid again, I needed her advice as to what to do next. "Oh no. I'm so sorry, Meg. Contact the school social worker, be there for her as much as you can, & you know they'll be in my thoughts," my mom answered quietly, "God, it just reminds you of how precious our time is, doesn't it?"

The vulnerability that follows death was omnipresent in the upcoming weeks. I contacted the social worker & principal immediately after talking with my mom. Infuriatingly, it took them almost 2 weeks to get back to me. During those 2 weeks, much had changed for Destiney. She & her siblings had been raised solely by her mom – their entire family structure had its heart ripped out. She & her 2 brothers (in middle & high school) moved in with their older sister, Daniela, who was a year younger than me (22 yrs) & expecting her 1st child. This new living situation only made the pain of their loss more acute. In addition, their father –practically a stranger-- suddenly came in wanting to claim custody.

In the midst of this emotional mess, Destiney's family was struggling to tread water financially. Bills had begun to pile up, & the cost of funeral services was too great to bear. I proposed a fundraiser to my school administration who denied my request on grounds that I "lacked the authority to manage finances." A few days later, an e-mail blast went out asking for donations. Only 4 of 72 staff members donated. I was frustrated & disillusioned. Where the fuck was the supportive community we always boasted about in grant proposals & student recruitment pamphlets? What about the adage that it takes a village to raise a child? You can't pick & choose which students matter based on grade or room number—their loss is also OUR collective loss. How could you be so fucking callous?

To make matters worse, the administration continued to pull rank, emphasizing control over compassion. They refused to give donations directly to Destiney's family; they chose instead to filter funds through gift cards, citing the need to enforce "fiscal responsibility." The assumption that her family couldn't allocate funds properly was racist, classist, & oppressive. Full disclosure: I teach at a school in downtown Detroit. 96% of students' families receive some type of government-based aid, & 98% of the student population is African American. Destiney's family is Latino. I don't believe that this situation would've unfolded the same way at a school in a wealthy suburb with different demographics. Unfortunately, Kroger gift cards aren't accepted by the landlord, electric company, or funeral home to cover services. The school – in its assumption of fucking moral superiority—completely disregarded the needs of the family, oppressing them even when offering "aid."

Fortunately, friends of the family were able to pitch in enough other donations so that the funeral was able to take place. Destiney hadn't returned to school, but called to invite me. I didn't know what to expect since I'd been lucky enough in my life to never have to attend a funeral up to that point, & was a bit nervous, so my roommate Emma offered to come along. We showed up in all black only to find everyone else wearing white. Not only that, but it was so crowded that people were spilling into the street. It felt more like the celebration of a life than

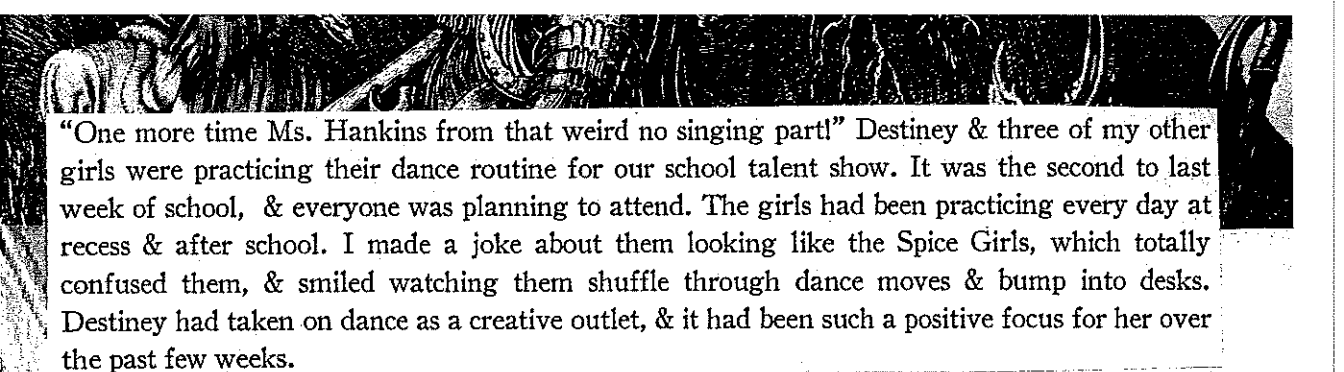
the mourning of a death. Maybe my own perspective had been off all along. We walked inside & Destiney ran up, greeting me with a big hug. "Hi Ms. Hankins! Is this your sister? No? Okay well you got here just in time for the service. Here, say hi to Daniela." I hugged her sister, forgot about how awkward I felt in my mourning attire, & took my place toward the back of the packed memorial space.

Before the service started, Mary J. Blige & Drake's "Mr. Wrong" was playing. I'd never heard it before, but afterward I'd be biking somewhere & a car would pass by blasting it, or I'd hear it in the distance from my front porch & I'd be right back there in the funeral home with Destiney. The room was quieting down, as attention was becoming more focused on the woman in the center of the room. Destiney's mom, Vanessa, lay lifeless before us. Seeing her body in the casket felt surreal—it all became painfully real, though, when her family & friends began to share stories about her life, & her effect on them.


I became a teacher because I believe it can be a radical act—to transform children into critical thinkers, teach them how history really happened, the importance of self-advocacy, fractions, etc. Listening to everyone share the history of this woman's life, I realized I'd forgotten the importance of chronicling a personal history, not just a collective one. When Destiney returned to school, I gave her a journal to record her own thoughts & feelings without censorship. Self-reflection is such a valuable tool, & when so much of her life had been exposed to the public, it was important for her to have a private place to think, not share.

I'd studied child grief cycles as much as I could, looked into resources to help her transition back into school, but every individual is different. It seems problematic to simply take one or two behaviors & just plug someone in as a data point on a grief map. We ended up taking it day by day. Some days that meant Destiney would get upset & need to take a walk with her brother. Other days that meant she'd eat lunch with me in the classroom, or sit with me before & after school. At times she'd get angry with me or her classmates, test the limits of how much we cared. She was learning how to manage a huge loss, & I thought the best role for me as her teacher was to support her in this process every step of the way (especially when administration wouldn't). Life is unpredictable, emotions & behaviors can therefore also be unpredictable; but my support for her was unwavering.

As Daniela's due date for her baby approached, Destiney & her brothers moved out of their sister's house & into their dad's house. He'd never been in the picture before. It meant a new neighborhood, new stepsiblings, new routine. This was definitely a struggle for Destiney at first, but she had already come through so much. She was writing in her journal, her classmates & I were always there to listen, & through our own supportive community, she adjusted.



“One more time Ms. Hankins from that weird no singing part!” Destiney & three of my other girls were practicing their dance routine for our school talent show. It was the second to last week of school, & everyone was planning to attend. The girls had been practicing every day at recess & after school. I made a joke about them looking like the Spice Girls, which totally confused them, & smiled watching them shuffle through dance moves & bump into desks. Destiney had taken on dance as a creative outlet, & it had been such a positive focus for her over the past few weeks.



The next evening, squished between two of my students & a ton of nachos on cafeteria plates, I watched proudly as the girls performed. After they finished, I looked over to see almost all of our class jumping up & down clapping. Behind the kids, I also saw Destiney's dad, family, & friends applauding them. As the next act started, I felt a tap on my shoulder. Turning around, I was greeted with a huge hug from Destiney. “Hey little superstar, you looked amazing up there! Our class was freaking out!” I exclaimed. “Haha yeah, I was really scared. But I knew you guys were out there. It made it a lot easier. Did you see my sister's belly?” Destiney tugged my hand in the direction of her family. Thinking about what she'd said as we walked over, I realized that I hadn't always known the best thing to do except create a safe, supportive space for her in a journal, our classroom, & permanently in my heart.

STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

by *jaclyn may*

Though I believe that living, truly living may only happen for good people, I know dying touches all and waits for nobody.

Annie told us when we were en route to Nahant beach.

"Luke VK died."

Oh, Louis CK, the comedian...wow, that's too bad, he was really hil-- OH MY GOD. LUKE VOSS-KERNAN.

Noise with no sounnnnnnndd, the fat moment in a car crash where you moving so fast that your stunned still, the bumpers of my psyche collide, nonsense is logic, yet WAAAIT-no.

I couldn't hear the story. It doesn't really matter, does it?

Screams dangle from bodies and only reel back in once the initial shock fades. We regain our breath, and I await Andrea's voice to break the silence. She continues driving and just for a moment I think we may crash. Are we next?

"He was my first kiss," Andrea cautiously, finally reminds. A reminder to herself and to us that his LIFE was important to her. How his LIFE intertwined with her own identity.

Most importantly, how she has a right to be sad.

But she wasn't sad yet, because this wasn't real life yet. This was news. A notice of forthcoming grief to affect someone somewhere anywhere, but not us.

At least not here. Not when we're being interrupted. Not when we are going to the beach.

RIGHT? because we can wait to deal with death, RIGHT, but DEATH DIDNT WAIT FOR- FOR ITS-

... for its luke.

I didn't think about Luke for the rest of the day till I got home from the beach. It was as if he didn't exist, which is like it is on every other day until today. He barely existed until he died.

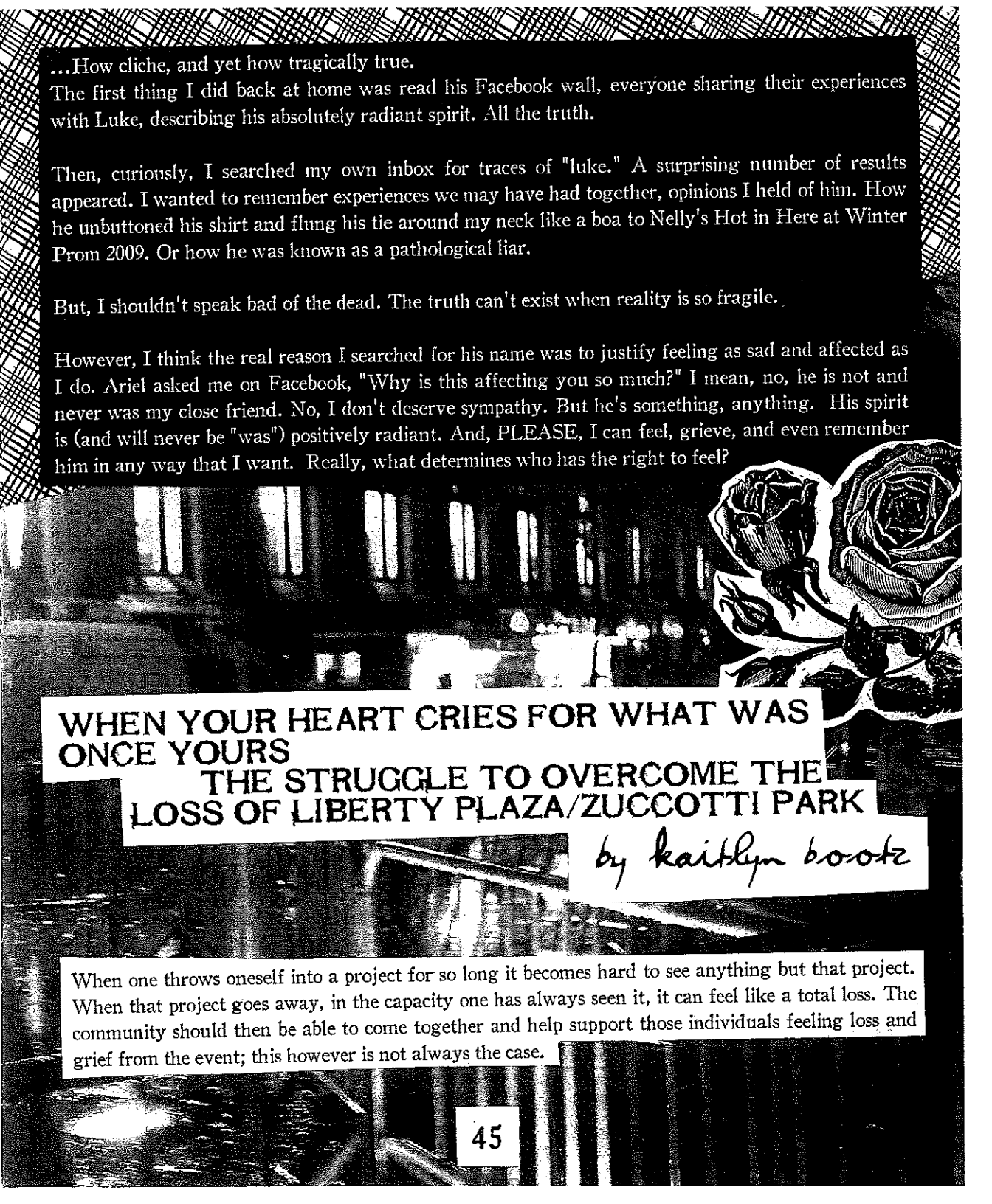
...How cliché, and yet how tragically true.

The first thing I did back at home was read his Facebook wall, everyone sharing their experiences with Luke, describing his absolutely radiant spirit. All the truth.

Then, curiously, I searched my own inbox for traces of "luke." A surprising number of results appeared. I wanted to remember experiences we may have had together, opinions I held of him. How he unbuttoned his shirt and flung his tie around my neck like a boa to Nelly's Hot in Here at Winter Prom 2009. Or how he was known as a pathological liar.

But, I shouldn't speak bad of the dead. The truth can't exist when reality is so fragile.

However, I think the real reason I searched for his name was to justify feeling as sad and affected as I do. Ariel asked me on Facebook, "Why is this affecting you so much?" I mean, no, he is not and never was my close friend. No, I don't deserve sympathy. But he's something, anything. His spirit is (and will never be "was") positively radiant. And, PLEASE, I can feel, grieve, and even remember him in any way that I want. Really, what determines who has the right to feel?



**WHEN YOUR HEART CRIES FOR WHAT WAS
ONCE YOURS
THE STRUGGLE TO OVERCOME THE
LOSS OF LIBERTY PLAZA/ZUCCOTTI PARK**

by kaitlyn bootz

When one throws oneself into a project for so long it becomes hard to see anything but that project. When that project goes away, in the capacity one has always seen it, it can feel like a total loss. The community should then be able to come together and help support those individuals feeling loss and grief from the event; this however is not always the case.

There were many things that led to the raid of Zuccotti park (aka Liberty Plaza) being a traumatic experience for many who stayed there. For some it was the loss of a space where everyone was accepted. For others it was the loss of what they viewed to be their home and family, and for others still it was the way in which we as a community were violently evicted from the park, with out warning, that was the most traumatizing aspect of the eviction.

When Liberty Plaza was violently evicted on November 15th 2011, It was a very strategic day, the same day that we were going to try to take the space on 6th and Canal for the first time and 2 days before a very large scale day of action, now known as N17. The police choosing November 15th was significant because many people were making many plans for the upcoming days of action that made grieving, or setting up a grief space for loss of the park near to impossible. In fact many people who were arrested in the raid, were held and when released went off to participate in N17 actions, many of them to be arrested again.

Even after N17 there were more "important" things to think about then a space to grieve the loss of Liberty Plaza. Things such as where all these displaced Occupiers were going to go, were on the forefront of peoples minds. Many had come to NYC to be a part of Occupy and many more still were homeless in NYC before Occupy and found refuge in the park. There was also many squabbles over how and what the money Occupy had should be spent on weather that be housing or working group projects that needed funding. All of this fighting seemed to be fueled by the fact people were tired and bitter about what happened to the park, and not having a space to deal with it, they took it out on each other.

Even now over 6 months after the raid on Liberty Plaza there are many people who have a hard time being in the park. I have sat in the park with many who will talk about what has happened here or there and reminisce about the way the park was and cried. There is no way we can now go back and change the mistakes that we as Occupy have made, but going forward people are trying to make an effort to put in place support mechanisms to help people going through crisis, so going forward something like what happened after the raid doesn't happen again. Occupy isn't perfect we have made mistakes but we can only learn from our mistakes and move forward.

UNTITLED

by rachel rubino

I am on a bike ride. A long, contemplative, flat hundred miles around wherever I choose on Long Island. I weave in and out of towns along the south shore, but my main route always takes me back to East Islip, where I spent the first 23 years of my life. I loop around the marina that is one mile from my former home. I watch the boats. I smell fried food and salt water and feel the wind blowing sand against my calves. I inhale deep and feel at peace. Then I ride past the house where I grew up. 12 Deer Run.

I roll by slow, assessing what has changed, what remains the same. The globe lights in the berms in the front yard. Most of the gorgeous landscaping my father originally created. A Japanese maple tree. The shitty mailbox, the door of it still missing from when I knocked it off with a soccer ball. The curb in front still blackened with wax from my teenage skateboarding years. I secretly hope I see someone. I desperately want to tell them "I used to live here, I grew up here! I spent all day in that pool every summer! Oh, sorry the rugs smell like piss, Oreo wasn't housebroken for years!" but I only see cars in the driveway.

I continue on, riding to Heckshire Park where I like to do some fast laps, sprint a little to shake off my "feelings." This is how my primal self can work through them. A few blocks away I notice a garage sale and now I can't stop thinking about cleaning my own former garage. Well, my Mom's, I should say. Piles of junk lined the whole 2-car garage. I never thought we'd find the floor. Old tools and several inches of concrete dust, cobwebs, old cleaning fluids and paint, spare parts, and of course, a giant section of literal "junk" I collected for found object art I had been making my senior year in college. Repurposed shit waiting to turn into useless art. I know, it sounds impressive. I got a dumpster delivered to my driveway to fill with all of our excess.

A year after my mom passed away, I was getting the house I grew up in ready for sale. Hiring strange men to clean and remove the contents of my attic. The contents and keepsakes of my family. of my mother and father, from before I was born. After I was born. Baby seats and cribs and toys. Clothes and furniture and art. Old bicycles... which of course I kept. Records and photobooks, which of course I kept. Christmas trains. Artificial Christmas tree. Decorations for holidays and seasons. Fine china. Glasses. Teapots. Family heirlooms. Most of which I kept, selling the furniture of our family home to strangers. Strangers who were getting a good deal. Some who were deserving, starting their new life. Some who were seemingly deceptive, reselling my misfortunes for profit. And in this process I'm dealing with it. Dealing with all of this. Dealing my family's possessions to momentarily dissipate mounting debts.

All of this, while trying to bury deep the memories of the year before, when I felt my mother die in the same room I was in. while I was sleeping. I think she waited until I was sleeping. I think she could never leave me if I was awake. And it's no surprise why 6 years later, I still have trouble sleeping. Her death came only about 3 months since she went into hospice care. However, they told me hospice didn't mean she was going to die, that they were just there to help, since I couldn't handle all the care-taking myself. This was a blatant fucking lie. I still wish someone would have sat me down and told me what hospice really meant, or at least what a slow death actually looks like. I was not prepared for what lay ahead. On Thursday, December 14th, 2006 I spent the day with her brother, Uncle John and her mother, Grandma Lee, trying to take care of her. She slept most of the day...and by slept I mean she spent most of the day in a medicine induced coma. Her brain marinating in a pool of sedatives and supplements. None of which were a cure for anything, just some ever failing attempt at treating symptoms. Q: and how do you treat the symptoms of death? A - with as much chemicals as legally possible. She always hated chemicals and western medicine. She hated chemo and swore it off after august. On Thursday in the late afternoon she awoke from her daze for a bit when her sweet yet mysterious friend from North Carolina Pat Rice came over. My dad tried to cook her steak...I think...I barely remember. He had a knack for wanting to be helpful by doing something completely useless. If he wasn't MIA, working late or drinking, (sometimes they were actually the same thing) he usually got in the way, or upset us all with wild statements about money. He and my Mom had been legally separated for eight years. His verbal cues and physical absence proved to be an awful foreshadow for the legal battles he and I would find ourselves in over her soon to be contested will. I do remember making soup with the hand blender and she ate some for me. She couldn't really handle solids at this point. She always wanted watermelon or pastina.

This day we noticed she had a particularly difficult time getting up with the walker and getting to the bathroom, even with help from Uncle John and I. We wheeled the borrowed hospital bed in from her bedroom to the living room, where she preferred to sleep. We had to put a diaper on her since she had almost no ability to walk to the bathroom. A part of me secretly thinks that she hated this the most, and somehow herself, decided that this stupid diaper was the last straw. She wore a turtleneck and the same Stowe, Vermont sweatshirt for days. She wore what she felt comfortable in. What she felt comforted by. I rubbed cream on her swollen leg, which was hard as a rock. She had been dealt a side order of lymphedema, to accompany her recurrence of breast cancer, which mutated into bone metastasis, and spread to her liver, and well.. everywhere we could imagine. Her body was nothing like it used to be. Her arms were weak and frail. Her face drawn, yellowed, her cheeks sunk in, where they were once round and rosy and cheerful. We cut her nails shorter; they weren't painted. her hair wasn't curly and bouncy. She used to put rollers in every day. She used to use a lot of hairspray and sometimes I could taste it if I walked in her bathroom too soon. Others came to visit that day but she didn't wake for them. Maybe she smelled bullshit and didn't want to bother with it. I don't remember who it was anymore.

8/11/03

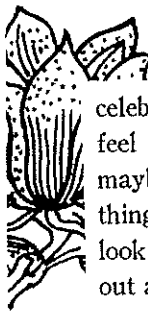
So her I am, a walk

We got her into that awful hydraulic hospital bed for the last time. It made all the adjustment noises that sound like a city bus. She moaned a bit, her breath was heavy. She would respond to me...but only if I really needed her to. Unsure of what tonight would bring, with the last few weeks full of night terrors, painful spells followed by shouting and cursing, or downright hallucination, I approached sleep slowly, lightly, as I had learned to do. I lay down on the couch in the living room...Grandma Gil's awful uncomfortable green couch. I never liked that couch. Uncle John went to sleep in the guest room. Grandma Lee was in my mom's room. My dad slept on the upstairs couch. I watched some bullshit on the living room t.v. for a while because I could never just lay down and fall asleep.

I noticed how heavy she was breathing and checked her pulse against mine. It was around one twenty-something....double mine. I thought this was weird and scary for someone who was asleep. I watched her sleep heavy, with a loud breath, and got used to it as another "new normal." I fell asleep sometime between 3:30 and 4:30...probably before 4. Sometime after 5am I woke up because I heard a weird gurgling noise. Fuck. That noise. Jesus. I called to her...asked if she was ok. All I heard was that gurgle noise. I jumped off the couch and over to her. In the pale dawn light I saw dark black stuff around her mouth and on her chest. This was blood. And whatever other fluid spills out of your mouth when you die. Her lips were tighter and flat against her teeth. I put my hand on her chest and felt nothing. I no longer heard the noise. I called out "Mom" several times even though I knew I would only hear my echo in the hallway. It was just the two of us for this moment. She was dead and there was absolutely nothing I could do. My immediate thought was that if I woke up a minute earlier I could've called an ambulance and the paramedics could have given her CPR or something, even though that's not really true. I started yelling or crying or some frantic combination of both. I ran to grandma lee first. "I think Mommy's dead." I ran to Uncle John in the guest room. My father upstairs last. This was the natural order of things. Everyone repeated her name and choked on it along with a few tears and uncontrollable gasps. I screamed and cried for a minute or so, but it felt like an hour. Uncle John made the necessary calls. I called Aunt Donna, who was over in ten minutes, helping me float through this nightmare. I called Allison, who was always my most calming and comforting friend, around 6am. She said she'd be right over. However long it takes to drive from Yonkers to East Islip at 6am. There were no questions asked. When she answered the phone I barely needed to say anything to her. A woman came to write a death report. Yes, that's really what it's called. I made coffee. Two men came to remove my mother's body from the house. They wrapped her in the sheets she was laying on. We threw out all the blankets. I let Allison and a few others be in charge of telling all my friends.

December 15, 2006. The worst goddamn day in the history of my life. I had to go to the funeral home with Uncle John and Aunt Donna and my Dad. We had to make all these funeral arrangements and pick out a casket and flowers and trust me...no matter how aware you are that your loved one is dying, you are never ready to pick out their fucking casket. Or make a fucking collage to display at their funeral, like it's some big happy memorial? FUCK THAT. This was not a

ROOTS GROW



celebration. It was a subsequent wake in a weird warm room where people cry and freak out and feel totally uncomfortable for however long they have to be there, because someone they knew, maybe loved unconditionally, is dead and on display. Their body is like a soft manikin and the whole thing feels like a dull horror movie. The undertakers and make-up artists...they never make them look the way they did when they were alive. not even close. They preserve all their guts and draw out all their blood, sew the eyelids shut and stuff cotton balls in their cheeks. They put on layers of powder like cake. Like dried mud. The lips have no fullness left to them they are flat and drawn across the teeth. They are glued shut. Nevertheless, I had to personally write them all a check for \$12,000 to cover the expenses, including a spot in the family plot...somewhere in south Brooklyn, where my family is from. What 22 year old has to write that kind of fucking check? That year all I could wish for was normal problems. "Oh boy, I better make my car payment on time, better set aside a few hundred for my student loan. I thought our date went well, why aren't they returning my calls? Oh dear I better pay off that credit card for all the gas and clothes and that time I left an open tab at the bar..." Instead it was "here's to cover the tab for every stupid assistant aiding in the burial of my dead Mom." My dead best friend. My whole life. Dead. And I would spend the next few years paying people, selling things, and inheriting a life's worth of mementos. All of which is hard and confusing and the last thing you want to fill your time and space with at 22.

I am 28 now. This winter will mark 6 years since my Mom passed. I will then be closer to 29. I will still behave like a kid at times, wide eyed and looking for anything enjoyable to occupy my mind and body. Riding my bike, playing music, dancing like I don't care who can see me. I will be just a few years shy of the age my Mother was when I was born, and a few more years behind her first diagnosis with breast cancer in 1987.

I'd like to tell you I've learned a lot. That I am stronger now. That I possess an interesting and unique skillset that most 28-year-olds do not. How to mortgage and sell a house. How to transfer stocks and IRA's. How to avoid throwing up every time you have to look at a death certificate with your Mom's name on it. How to hire lawyers to argue with your father's lawyers over your dead Mother's will. And how to swallow it all and pretend like your life is normal and perhaps even "good." I can teach you how to fool your family and friends into believing you're stronger than you are. But maybe this all just means, you really are stronger than you think. That inner strength no one sees when they look at you in the bank, or while you order a coffee. The fact that you haven't shut down and turned into a pile of goo from crying so hard you shake the floor, this must be the proof, you're a tough one. I'm still trying to figure it all out. Because to me, sometimes that evidence feels like "weak" moments. I guess I believe that through our weakness we are building, if we keep trying. I'm still baffled that I've somehow transformed my life in those 6 years to be an abbreviated version of where I'd like my 28-year-old self to be. And I know I can never feel whole again. I know that there's just a giant hole in my chest forever, but I'll keep going anyway. With her in my mind and heart every minute of every day. I'll keep going, until I'm also a good memory for someone to miss.

TRANSFORMATION AND POTATO PANCAKES

by hilary moore

Across her bones and weakening muscles, her skin glides back and forth, cold and moist, while I touch her hand. I sit for a while observing the way it buoys back from contact. The hospice book said that this comes when her blood leaves her limbs to help shut down her major organs. Her left hand is swollen with fluids brought on by the stroke, taugth to the brim and she cannot feel it. I brush her hair. I tell her that I love her, that I wish I could have known more of her. She smiles when I repeat over and over again the address of her apartment where she lived with her mother and four siblings in the 1930's. I try to remember everything, fervently. I write it all in my journal: what she smells like and the way her smell changes so slightly while she nears her end; how much I felt her when she said my name for the last time, with wide eyes in a moment of consciousness, like a small child remembering that they know you; how much pain there is in knowing someone in your bones, but not in life. Ninety years of decisions and choices, a few of which created me. Ninety years of life: a slew of cancers; strategies of food and family to survive the Depression in Chicago; a risk with a train to California and a commitment to breath air that comes with salt water; and heedlessly handing down the ravenous wounds of intergenerational violence. Ninety years of life and I knew only one. Mildred Dorothea Quetler is my Grandmother, my last connection to the lives that came before me, and she passed away in June of 2012.

In the same month that Mildred passed, I lost another Grandmother, Caroline Dier. I lost connection with my life partner and best friend because fear was more familiar than vulnerability. I lost a friend in the punk/hardcore community from an overdose. I lost my health insurance. I lost my job.

I practice Somatics with an organization called generative somatics and I have an intention to become a practitioner. In the nine months prior to Mildred passing, I used my work with Somatics to build a substantial support system with structures and people that would end up holding me in these life-carving measures. I am certain that without my choices to build this support, prior to this kind of urgency, I would not have felt as much as I did. I was not consumed by all I lost and this is a new skill. Instead, I witnessed and felt my process at the same time. I felt the old impulse to create distance and sever relationships with people whom are seemingly causing the pain. I have a lot of practice in feeling what is hard alone, and only when I am alone can I feel anything. Instead, I shared the intensity of pain I felt: how profoundly unfair these losses are, especially all at once, and how graceless my rage is when I'm fighting so hard to protect the fear that lives beneath it. I shared too my grand glimpse of life, the kind that reveals briefly and vastly what it means to be human. I watched myself go numb. I literally, physically could not feel sensation; it was simply too much. I

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laughed out loud and cried often because what was coming at me was simply too big. I felt more, deeper, and wider than I was previously ever able to feel and I trusted it. I know in my bones that I am more alive because of what I have lost.

A friend held me with her hands and her words and said, "Sweetheart, you are in it. You are grieving." I asked her what grief was because I honestly did not understand. I could not match a feeling to that foreign word. No one ever told me what it was. I come from generations of people that fought like hell not to feel grief. I asked her again and again, then again. I asked with the hope her words would somehow land inside me. She said gently, again and again: "It is when something peels back the veil and a lifetime's worth of sadness emerges. You can feel the histories of things to mourn." It took months for me to feel into this. I also realized that grief felt distant because I had previously thought it was this contained thing people did alone and usually within a small, socially allotted timeframe. My experience never matched that. I did not know what grief was because I have been grieving my entire life, but had never once given it title.

I know that I am feeling only as much as I can handle. I will never feel more than I can tolerate and I cannot choose what comes up or what needs to be processed. Mildred is what I have needed to feel the most; not the partner, not the job, not even Caroline. I am mourning a woman I came from, but barely knew. I am mourning the loss of relationships, culture, and language: all that my family buried to become white—momentous sacrifices made in their life for the sake of mine. I am mourning the lack of choices capitalism presented the women in my family: that the smartest choice my Great Grandmother, Mildred, and my mother could have made was to stay with violence for financial security. I am mourning the stories and scars that are not mine, but that I am healing: how we must keep our head down, sink or swim, and if anyone hurts you, cut them out of your life at all costs, even if that means destroying the pieces of yourself that still love them. I am mourning the fact Mildred will not know my children. They will not hear her very distinct Old-Woman-Voice telling them to eat all the food on their plate because she ate potatoes and only potatoes for months at a time. They will never see her Old-World-German-Ankles and wonder how those fuzzy, glittery purple socks aren't splitting beyond their capacity.

In August, I invited five of my closest friends to join me in a grieving ceremony. I asked them to bring food significant to their family past, present or future. I shared recordings I made of conversations with Mildred from a year ago. I shared pictures of her and her life, and the lessons I have learned directly or indirectly from her choices. We then all shared stories and pictures of people we have lost. We talked about what grief means to us, how our families have or have not held grief, and how we want to create collective grieving processes in our lives, for the people we will raise and influence. That full night, while eating Streuselkuchen, potato pancakes and salad, I could feel Mildred in the room. She got to meet my friends, and my friends her. I am learning from Mildred the ways in which I can hold my past with love; I am learning from my friends and community the ways in which I am transforming my future.

WHO WILL BE LEFT, AND

WHAT WILL BE LEFT OF THEM?

ON LOSS, GRIEF, AND BUILDING A SUPPORT
SYSTEM FROM WHAT FEELS LIKE SCRATCH

by jamie variiale vélez

I.

I spent most of December of 2011 trying to decide if I should go back to school for the spring 2012 term, or extend the leave of absence I'd applied for that August, which seemed like a huge deal at the time. Was I 'ready' to go back? Or did I 'need more time'? But what does 'ready' even mean? More time for what? I'd never had to make this kind of major professional decision, and I didn't know how to gauge my feelings about any of it.

I'd applied for the leave because my adviser had recommended it, after gently pointing out that I hadn't made very much progress with my work that year, and didn't seem to be focused on what I was supposed to be doing. She was right. I wasn't focused, because in July of 2010, which was a little over five years after my mother's unexpected death and three months before my 27th birthday, my stepfather died. He'd left our house to me in his will, and I didn't have much choice but to claim my inheritance and the responsibilities that came with it. So I went home for his funeral, and then I wound up staying for good.

I had been 'living' in Albany at the time, a bleak, sunless city that made me feel numb, confused, and like the graduate program I'd moved there for was just not worth the agony of feeling trapped there. As such, I didn't have any real objection to going home. But my life had still been effectively upended. I wasn't prepared for homeownership, or for how empty and quiet and strange the house felt. I'd never considered that the house had only felt like home because my stepfather was there, or that it wouldn't feel that way without him. I became preoccupied with attorney meetings and taxes and all the paperwork that came after my stepfather's death, and when I wasn't doing that I was either trying to go through this things or sleep-crying on my living room couch. School wasn't a priority. So after a year of being in denial about this, I finally applied for leave.

By the end of 2011, I started to kind of miss school. It felt like I'd managed to stop my life from disintegrating any further, and I needed something to do, to make me feel productive. Maybe, I thought to myself one day, I should just go back now, so I can graduate already, and get on

with my life, or what's left of it. I imagined my graduation ceremony. And then I realized that there wasn't anyone left to watch me graduate. My parents were dead. I didn't have any siblings. My stepfather didn't have any family, and my mother's extended family had distanced themselves after the funeral. I didn't have many friends, and I didn't expect any of them to give up a weekend and travel over a hundred miles just to see me get a piece of paper.

The ceremony isn't important, I tried to convince myself. But I couldn't stop thinking about it. What was the point in doing all this work and then skipping the ceremony? And how I was going to do all this work, this massive amount of reading and thinking and then writing and defending my dissertation without any support? For the first time since my stepfather's death, I realized how alone I was, and how awful it felt. The next day, I called school, and extended my leave of absence until August of 2012.

II.

That January, I decided that I would devote the better part of 2012 to working on the house and 'personal relationships'. I technically wasn't allowed to do any school work or even visit campus, so I split my time between sorting through my parents' things and seeing the few friends who somehow still enjoyed spending time with me. I occasionally went to shows, readings, and gallery openings and talked to acquaintances about their work, which was relevant to my research on 'd.i.y. and community', but I avoided thinking about it too much. I tried to get the hang of just existing.

I made a point of avoiding my family, and breaking the habit of asking them for help, which wasn't exactly hard. After the funeral, my grandmother asked me to move in with her so that she wouldn't have to be alone, and I refused because she never would have let me go out again, except to go to church. A few weeks later, my mom's sister had called me to explain to me that she 'wasn't going to check on me' because she felt it was important to 'respect' my 'privacy'. I might have appreciated this if it didn't seem so convenient for her, or so typical of her distinctly 'hands off' approach to dealing with our family's issues. I didn't argue with her, and didn't think she would check on me if I asked her to. I tried to just accept all of it, and found myself left with a lot of time to do what I actually wanted to do.

I wasn't overwhelmed by the house anymore, and I was also ready to have a bedroom again after a year of sleeping on the couch. I donated and threw out a lot of things, and that June I was able to move out of my room in Albany, and into my house's master bedroom. One of my friends from college helped me bring everything downstate, and a friend in Queens came over to help me reassemble my bed.

I didn't feel so preoccupied, or like crying and/or screaming all the time anymore, so I visited my local friends in Brooklyn and Long Island as often as I could. We made food, listened to records, and watched television, or we went out to eat and see our friends' bands. It was all very relaxed, and really normal, which was what I needed. Between school and some unfortunate abuse, neglect, and estrangement issues with my father and his family that are beyond the scope of this piece and zine, I'd never really had a functional social life. I was more comfortable with books and archival materials than with people, and I didn't have a lot of experience with what English-speakers call 'fun'. So doing stuff with people who liked to be around me, for the sake of nothing more complicated than entertainment, was nice. 'Fun', as it turned out, helps.

But it could only do so much. By the summer, I was ready to start doing school stuff again, but I still hadn't resolved anything. There still wasn't anyone who would go to my graduation. Which felt like a stupid thing to worry about, but, it wasn't really about that. It wasn't as if I needed any of my friends to prove their devotion to me by promising to watch me graduate. But I didn't feel like I could be honest with them about how scared I was. We kept having 'fun' and hanging out, but my stepdad's death also kept having a huge effect on my life, which no one noticed or asked about it unless I brought it up, and then I had to explain it, and sometimes even justify my grief, and how it didn't disappear, even if it changed. My friends forgot about it, but I couldn't for even a second, because remembering still hurt like being told for the first time that my stepdad was gone.

In the fall I re-enrolled at school, and I stopped 'hanging out'. A hurricane, or rather the hurricane, Sandy, blew through the area at the end of October, and I stopped going out altogether, because I couldn't figure out if the highways were safe, and didn't really care anyway. I was grateful that my house was intact, but the isolation and the stress and a random call from my aunt after the storm rather than before to make sure I was ready for it destroyed what was left of my patience for other people's shortcomings. It felt like I had done nothing but accommodate everyone, and their hesitance and anxiety about dealing with my grief and grown up problems. I was tired of it. I was tired of feeling like there was no one to accommodate me.

The coming holidays made me feel worse, though I hadn't thought it possible. I stayed at home and did work, but my friends called. I wanted to talk to them, but I did not want to hear about their holiday plans. I did not want to hear about how annoying their parents were and how much they didn't want to go home for Thanksgiving or Christmas, and I was even less interested in hearing from anyone who was happy to go home or buy their parents and siblings gifts. I felt so sad for my friends who didn't feel good or safe around their blood relatives. But

I also really wanted them to shut the fuck up. Or I at least wanted them to take a second to ask where I was going for the holidays. I didn't have anywhere to go, or any real outlet for my rage, and my friends seemed to be surprised by this. This did not assuage my anger.

After a brief and unpleasant visit to my grandmother's house on Thanksgiving, I went home, and turned on the tv so I could watch a documentary about the making of Michael Jackson's Bad album. Watching engineers and producers and songwriters talk about the record was more interesting to me than anything about the holidays, so no regrets. But after the documentary was over, I felt lonely, which I hadn't really expected. I thought this would be easier this year, I thought to myself, thinking about how sad all of my holidays had been without my stepfather. I thought to myself, I thought I would have friends by now. I felt embarrassed as soon as the words had formed in my mind. I felt like an ingrate, like a spoiled little girl who wanted more toys. But all I really wanted was to feel like there were people who cared about my well-being, and to not feel bad or guilty or weak for it.

It had been over two years since my stepfather's funeral, but in December of 2012, it felt like it had just started to sink in. Comprehending loss is a long and difficult process. I tried to do my schoolwork, stop being upset with my friends, and accept that I didn't have any family at that moment, and that it wasn't anyone's responsibility but mine. I went to miserable hardcore shows, and I told myself that because of the Mayan calendar starting over again that 2013 would be better. I spent Christmas at home, by myself, because my grandmother canceled at the last minute, and I didn't want to fake my way through Christmas with a friend's relatives. I made polenta and watched one of my stepfather's favorite movies, and decided that I would never do this to myself ever again.

III.

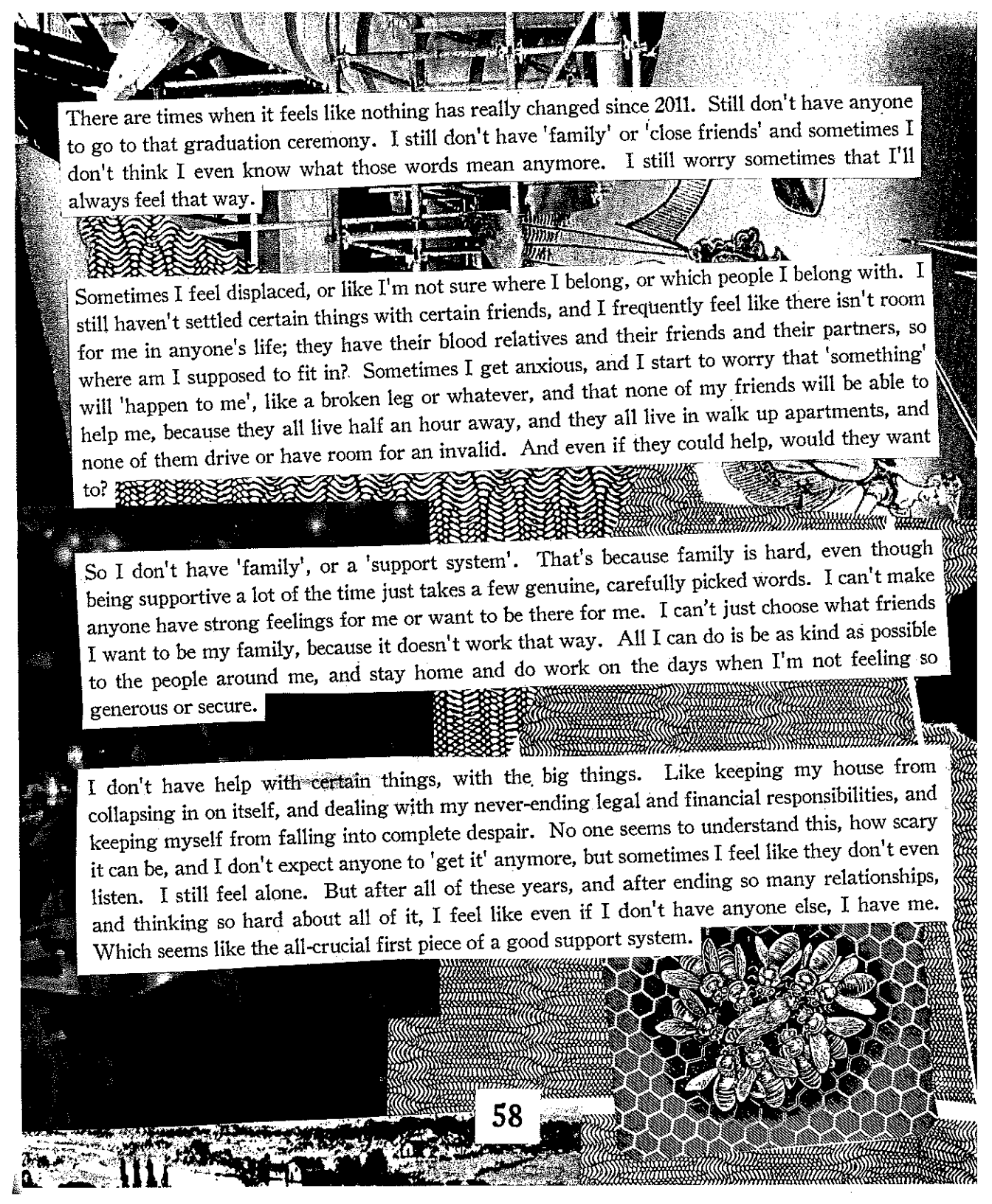
I felt different at the end of December, though not much better, and for a week I wondered if this was the 'change in consciousness' that the new Mayan calendar cycle was supposed to bring. I still felt frustrated by almost everyone around me, but I had somehow recovered my senses of compassion and perspective. I stopped being so obsessed with my own situation, and started to understand my relatives, friends, and myself as products of a much larger, and incredibly intricate system that is designed to churn out human beings who are either afraid of or oblivious to affection, and who either way are maybe not quite as sensitive as they could be to other people. I decided to respond by being extra sensitive, which is how I am anyway, so it wasn't much of a challenge.

There were certain friends, who I had really tried to open up to, whose limited sensitivity I'd felt especially hurt by. I tried to talk to them about it, but it didn't go very well. I spent more time by myself, at home, trying to do my research for school. During the day I would try to figure out what to do next, and at night when I couldn't sleep, I started re-reading the Harry Potter books. All of them. In order. I thought that it would distract me from everything going on in my brain, but, they're books about a kid whose parents are dead, and whose living relatives don't really care for him. It wasn't possible for me to read them without paying extra attention to how all of the characters respond to Harry's family situation.

Toward the end of the first book in the series, a character who knew Harry's parents tells him that his parents loved him, and that that kind of love provides you with 'some protection', even after the person who loved you dies. I knew this already, everyone knows that, right? Or, I guess we know that the opposite is also true: that when someone isn't loved or taken proper care of, it damages them, and sometimes it turns them into psychopaths who become serial killers or Wall Street executives and other terrible things. But, I knew that my parents had loved me and that they wanted me to be happy, and that I'm incredibly lucky because of this.

I stopped trying to force my friendships to get better, and I stopped trying to convince my friends to fill in for my family. I stopped trying to 'fix' my life or be 'normal', and I tried to learn what I needed to do to make myself feel taken care of. I went from hiding behind my work to doing it because it's what makes me happy, and after that, things with my friends didn't seem so bad.

I pointedly continue/d to not talk much to my grandmother or my aunt. But I think that I understand them both, and also my mom, a lot better. It seems like my aunt moved her family two hours south so that she wouldn't have to actually be involved with us, but I think she really did it so that she wouldn't have to deal with my grandmother, who is a legitimately screwed up, manipulative, and sometimes cruel person. My grandmother was emotionally abusive toward my mom, and my mom, who is still one of the warmest, most sociable, most affectionate people I've ever known, managed to just let it go. I'm pretty sure that this set us both up to be manipulated by my birth father. But I survived, and my mom eventually met and married my stepdad and got to be happy for a while, so I don't have any hard feelings. I just get that I need more than my aunt or grandmother are able to give, and that I don't have to feel guilty for it.



There are times when it feels like nothing has really changed since 2011. Still don't have anyone to go to that graduation ceremony. I still don't have 'family' or 'close friends' and sometimes I don't think I even know what those words mean anymore. I still worry sometimes that I'll always feel that way.

Sometimes I feel displaced, or like I'm not sure where I belong, or which people I belong with. I still haven't settled certain things with certain friends, and I frequently feel like there isn't room for me in anyone's life; they have their blood relatives and their friends and their partners, so where am I supposed to fit in? Sometimes I get anxious, and I start to worry that 'something' will 'happen to me', like a broken leg or whatever, and that none of my friends will be able to help me, because they all live half an hour away, and they all live in walk up apartments, and none of them drive or have room for an invalid. And even if they could help, would they want to?

So I don't have 'family', or a 'support system'. That's because family is hard, even though being supportive a lot of the time just takes a few genuine, carefully picked words. I can't make anyone have strong feelings for me or want to be there for me. I can't just choose what friends I want to be my family, because it doesn't work that way. All I can do is be as kind as possible to the people around me, and stay home and do work on the days when I'm not feeling so generous or secure.

I don't have help with certain things, with the big things. Like keeping my house from collapsing in on itself, and dealing with my never-ending legal and financial responsibilities, and keeping myself from falling into complete despair. No one seems to understand this, how scary it can be, and I don't expect anyone to 'get it' anymore, but sometimes I feel like they don't even listen. I still feel alone. But after all of these years, and after ending so many relationships, and thinking so hard about all of it, I feel like even if I don't have anyone else, I have me. Which seems like the all-crucial first piece of a good support system.

TO REMEMBER AND TO STRUGGLE: AN ALTAR FOR MOURNING, MEMORY, AND RESISTANCE

by anonymous

The Holdout is a social center that opened in early 2012 in Oakland, California. It consists of a number of collectives that all share a two-story building; it includes a bookstore, a bike and silk screening workshop, an indymedia office and soon a street-medic clinic and garden/children's play yard; the center also hosts weekly skill-shares, movie screenings and various events. Its mission is to create an anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist space where people from various communities can come together to organize, participate in mutual aid, and make personal connections for the purpose of creating social relations free of oppression. This interview was conducted with one of the Holdout's collective members who was involved in creating a memorial altar inside the center to remember people in the struggle who have died or who's life has otherwise been taken. It was conducted on June 26, 2012.

Q: How did the altar come into being at the Holdout, and what was the intention or the idea behind it?

The altar was created on the very same day we had our grand opening. It was about a month after Trayvon Martin had been gunned down and Shaima Alawadi was brutally beaten in her home in San Diego. Myself and other comrades in the Holdout were really impacted by their deaths and felt it would be appreciated if we had a space in the Holdout where we can come together to honor and grieve these and other comrades whose lives have been taken due to racism, sexism, homophobia, or simply due to resisting the system.

We decided to have an open "altar" – "altar" in quotes because we don't advocate any religious practice in this space, nor are the individuals who created the altar religious. The intention behind the altar was for it to be a living altar, and okay for items to be brought down and others put up from time to time, all while respecting the idea for the altar. People are invited to bring images or symbols of people who have impacted them, especially those who were a part of social justice movements that many of us participate in.

Personally, the largest effect I hope the altar has is to encourage and embolden those who come into the Holdout. Many of us in the center are engaged in projects that go against the system and it can be very draining; it's really important to have special spaces where we reflect on those who've come before us and have also participated in similar struggles. Their example increases our desire to continue caring and continue fighting. I also hope the altar helps people connect with other areas of struggle outside of the largely anarchist circles that the Holdout is predominantly focused in.



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Q: How have people responded to the memorial altar?

It's hard to tell what sort of responses people have; maybe we should create a better way for people to get in touch with us near the altar, like a comments box. A couple folks have mentioned they feel the altar makes this space more open to people in different social groups that may come into this space. The Holdout is a mostly anarchist centered space, and for folks who may not have much experience in anarchist circles, they might at least identify with the lives of people or with the history of Oakland and other parts of the world reflected in the altar.

Also, in case folks don't already know, the Oakland city government and its police force have an incredibly racist and corrupt history, and as long as cops continue to get away with murder, there will likely be more cases of cops killing black and brown men. It's good to ground ourselves in the history of this city and hopefully that will help shape our concerns and our actions, more rage against the state and its police and more love for the people and our comrades.

Q: How have grief and mourning played into social struggles here in the Bay Area?

Well, as a person who grew up in the South Bay in a mostly Mexican immigrant community, I noticed altars in homes, churches and community centers from a very early age. I've seen how altars dedicated to the memory of loved ones have comforted and strengthened folks. I've also witnessed public altars created for victims of police violence, white supremacy, patriarchy and homophobia. It's hard to really take into account how grief and mourning have played into movements. What I have noticed is a higher level of concern, anger and indignation displayed during public vigils and protests. Perhaps it's a glimpse of the grief and rage of people who have gone through repeated acts of violence and discrimination against them, which often transforms into collective action, at times as powerful as riots.

I've also seen, for instance, in the case of Brandy – the transgender person who was murdered April 29 – a demonstration took place on Telegraph Ave during "First Fridays," a gentrifying art gathering that takes place in downtown Oakland. That march was an attempt to disrupt First Friday and call to attention that violence against queer people is a very real thing and a lot more needs to be done about it. So there was a banner drop, and there were fliers uniting liberation struggles of various oppressed groups including people of color, transgender people, and people who engage in direct actions and tactics like the black block, who are increasingly targeted for unlawful persecution and police terrorism. It was styled as a wake and a dance party in honor of Brandy, and towards the end of it, it drew out homophobic individuals from the First Fridays gathering, who attempted to fight visibly queer folks in the wake, but got their asses handed to them instead.

Q: How has the altar affected the Holdout itself?

The Holdout Social Center is still in its early stages and hasn't the capacity to remain open to the public all days of the week, although there are often meetings or skill shares taking place. Hopefully when we are more open we will be able to notice more interaction with the altar. I have been told that people really do appreciate it and that it helps people stay conscious of the world we live in and the struggles that take place.

Q: As far as the larger social network around the Holdout goes, how much space do people create to hold each other's grief and mourning? Is it swept under the rug after a couple weeks, with people encouraged to get over it and get back to being productive, or do people create more room for everyone to mourn?

The larger social network that meets up at the Holdout often practices various forms of mutual aid and solidarity with one another. Individuals quickly become friends, strong bonds are developed when working on projects or joining collectives. There have been people who have gone through personal loss and who have also been very emotionally hurt or wounded by the loss of someone, whether it is someone they know personally or someone who was killed because of racism, patriarchy, homophobia or transphobia. There have been organized responses to attempt to support people who have dealt with situations like sexual violence, for instance. But as far as whether we have seen intentional responses to loss – particularly death, there hasn't been a response on an organizational level, but definitely on a personal level. However, whenever there are instances of individuals falling ill, or being incarcerated, then we do respond in collective ways, like having benefits to support that individual. But as of yet we haven't done so in terms of losing people.

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friends, comrades
folks who's story may
have affected us

Recently there was a large gathering at the Holdout around the loss of Native American sacred spaces. It was an event where mourning was very present; there were several songs and spiritual rituals shared that reflected grief and also collective resistance. I believe that so far that has been the only public gathering where we shared grief and mourning at the center, but I'm sure it won't be the last.

Whenever we have larger gatherings in our main room where the altar is located, there have been attempts to make the altar visible and available. For example, if we host speakers, they would be directly in front of the altar; there wouldn't be any furniture in front of the altar to cover it. We do try to make it available and present.

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But it's definitely an issue that the center has lots of room to further address in the future. I believe the center will soon have more capacity; as we continue to have more folks of other backgrounds interested in participating, the altar will start taking on different forms and different uses. Specifically because we are a social center that encourages anarchist principles and practice, many individuals who participate in this center are very critical of organized religion and religion in general; although there are more and more individuals who are participating who are of Muslim, Catholic or indigenous faiths. So it's probably just a matter of time when folks will feel more comfortable in sharing spiritual beliefs around mourning and loss. As long as there aren't attempts to make the altar a billboard for a particular religion, we are welcoming of folks honoring their loved ones or comrades who've been killed or incarcerated, however they want to.

Q: Is there anything else you want to say related to any of what we've talked about?

Yes. We're really open; we're a group of collectives that are very interested and open to providing a radical space for individuals and groups to bring proposals and ideas for utilizing the space in ways that are beneficial to the groups that they are coming from, and if that includes that people want to do more with that altar, we would be very encouraging of that.

Q: Could you tell me about the images and the people on the altar?

The first two people that we attempted to honor with the altar are Shaima Alawadi and Trayvon Martin. Shaima Alawadi was living in a refugee community in San Diego for a number of years before she began to receive threatening, racist messages at her home. She was brutally beaten in her home on the night of March 24th, leaving behind five children and her husband. I believe when she was left for dead in her home, a message was also left behind that was racist against Muslims.

Trayvon Martin's case is much better known. He was murdered on the 26th of February. He was 17 years old, I believe visiting his grandparents in Stanford, Florida. A neighborhood watch vigilante, George Zimmerman, followed him and ended up shooting him and used the pretext that he was defending himself. It was pretty obvious that due to racism, the law in that county decided to not prosecute at first. It sparked enormous amounts of rage in the community, and across the country, and even outside the country in terms of that level of racist response from the authorities. More than anything, it was listening to a news program on the radio and hearing Trayvon begging for his life. I'm assuming that's what enraged thousands of people who heard about Trayvon Martin over radio or T.V.

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The third individual who was murdered who we honor on the altar is Brandy Martell. On the night of April 29th, an individual who was likely transphobic murdered her, and when the police arrived on the scene they didn't provide any medical care. A member of Occupy Oakland who goes by the name Teardrop stayed with her for a long period of time and tried to keep her alive until the ambulance came.

The next person up is Lambros Foundas, a Greek individual who was a member of a Greek urban guerilla group called Revolutionary Struggle. Police murdered him on March 10, 2010 in a suburb of Athens. He and a comrade were caught up in a shootout with police while they were stealing a car as preparation for one of Revolutionary Struggle's actions. Because Lambros stayed behind to fight the police, even though the police ultimately murdered him, he allowed his comrade to escape.

The next individual who is honored on the altar goes by the name Kali. He's a member of the Occupy Oakland kitchen committee. He was arrested on the 16th of December on misdemeanor charges. Because he had a probation violation, the DA [District Attorney] held him in custody, and he is still denied release because he was unable to provide an address due to being without a home. So he was moved to the Santa Rita jail.

Marcel Johnson (Kali) BBI186
Santa Rita Jail
5325 Broder Blvd.
Dublin, CA 94568

Include the inmate's full legal name and PFN number as well as your name and return address on the envelope.

And of course there's Oscar Grant. He was killed by a police officer on New Year's Eve, January 2009 on the Fruitvale BART platform, which sparked an outcry in Oakland after numerous incidents of police harassment, violence and murder on other individuals especially black and Latino youth. [BART stands for Bay Area Rapid Transit, the Bay Area's commuter train system.] His death led to numerous protests including a couple of rebellions that took place in Oakland after the police officer who murdered him -- Johannes Mehserle -- was not incarcerated, and again after he was only convicted of involuntary manslaughter and given the minimum possible sentence. There continues to be a lot of organization stemming from all of these racist cop killings.

Trino de la Cruz Crisóstomo, a 73 year-old community leader, from Ostula, Michoacan in western Mexico, was the town's representative in talks with the government. On December 6th, a dozen members of the Movement for Peace and Justice with Dignity traveled to Ostula to observe a community consultation to petition the government for security forces. Four men in ski masks stopped the delegation, kidnapped Trino and he was found dead the following day-- his body bearing signs of torture.

OSCAR GRANT

DEAR EVERYBODY

by kathleen mcintyre

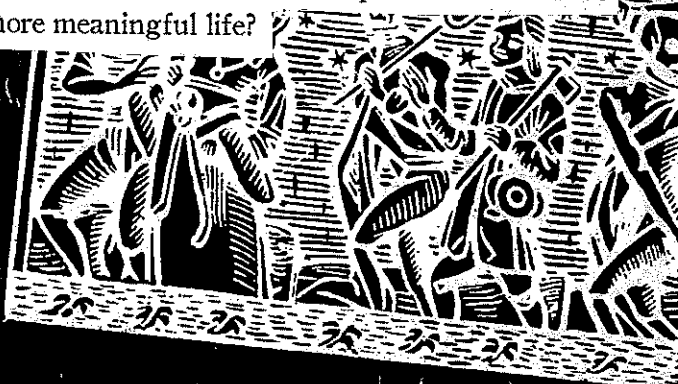
To live in this world
you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it
against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.
--Mary Oliver, "In Blackwater Woods"

You know, I understand. I get it. It was grueling, it's lasted years, and it wasn't really your pain to deal with. You somehow hung in through the awkward funeral lunch, made small talk, dodged the circle of loud drunk uncles crying around the keg. You sat while I cried over the photo album, said you'd "rather be anywhere but there with me" when the sadness comes. (Me too, by the way). And I know it was hard when I drank half a bottle of vodka and spent several hours in the hallways crying, and even harder when that scenario became an almost weekly occurrence for those few years in the beginning. (I've become much more proficient with feeling my feelings now, you'll be glad to hear). You tried to understand why, even a decade later, I do still need you to know what he looked like, what he would have thought or said about things, and all of his stupid jokes. It was weird for you that time I did that woo woo transformational breathing thing and came back full of tales of ghosts and visions, and even weirder when I took seriously the words of a spiritual medium named Sher who told me he chose to die that night, because other than her, nobody actually has any idea what happened. And when you sat with me at the bar on my 30th birthday as, through quite noticeable public tears, I catalogued again how many parts of my life he would never know or see. I know that it was hard, and that it sucked, and that you tried.

I've certainly done my part to keep the Yahrzeit candle makers and the sage growers and the tissue factories of the world in business. But I don't know how else we do this. This living until we die thing; connecting with and needing people knowing we will lose them. Because we are, all of us, going to die. And in some ways I am sorry to have been one of the first ones to force the issue into your awareness, but I am also not sorry at all.

On my stronger days, knowing loss is now a joyful gift. This has been how I learned that we are finite, we have ends, and how with each breath the task of being and ending well waits patiently for us to choose to engage with it. Of course we can't control the hospitals and the violence of the state; the money and the sickness of the machine that ignores death, refuses it space, and kills us, slowly or quickly, in the first place. And all the deaths that should never have happened, not like that, not with such wasteful brutality. And still, we only get to do this life once, you know? One time. So do you fight, flight, or freeze when death comes up?

Someone will be there, around your hospital bed, too; someone will also clink the glasses at your wake and fret over the fear that they'll forget the sound of your voice, your smell, your laugh. Someone is going to have to sort through all the amazing crap I'll have in my apartment, muttering about "why she kept all this stuff." But, is there a way that the gravity of this reality can propel us into living rather than immobilizing us? Are we, in short, building lives that matter, as we each define mattering, not in spite of our mortality, but because of it? Can there be a way that getting close to death helps us become brave enough to keep trying every day to live a more meaningful life?



PUTTING THE PAIN TO PAPER: EXERCISES FOR WRITING ABOUT THE TUFF STUFF

by *cynthia schemmer*

Keep a Private Journal

While blogs can be very useful, a writer may often find herself modifying or censoring her words when there's an audience in mind. A private journal removes self-consciousness and any restrictions a writer may come across in public writing. Do not let anyone read this journal!

Stream Write Three Pages Every Morning

Have this be the first thing you do when you wake. In her book, "The Artist's Way," Julia Cameron suggests these 'morning pages' as a means to clear your head of any lurking thoughts so that you may fully focus on the written task at hand. It will be nothing incredible; it could just be a list of annoying things you have to get done that day or the dream you had last night. You're just making room in your mind for more important things.

Write a List of Feelings

Then write just one sentence for each feeling. From there, create a paragraph out of each sentence. This gradual growth of words will help you organize your feelings, which may be abounding and confusing, and help you to visualize the structure of the piece.

Create a Timeline of the Experience

Write your linear experience: life before, the experience itself (what actually happened and any events surrounding it), life following and how it changed/impacted your life, your response, a summary of your healing process or the steps you need to take towards healing.

About the Contributors

ANDRIA ALEFHI is the creator and designer of the tiny literary journal of nonfiction, *We'll Never Have Paris*. An anthology of the best of this zine, *We'll Never Have Paris Greatest Hits*, is available on Microcosm. A collection of Andria's own memoirs comes out in March, 2013 on iLOAN books.

ALEX BARROWS is a queer white femme writer, translator and library science student living in Berkeley, California with her boo and a tiny grey puppy named tiny petite. She likes to draw, edits a compilation comic perzine on jealousy called *jealouzine* and is interested in the intersections of class-privilege, grief and community healing.

MATT CARMAN is an editor of the zine *I Love Bad Movies*, author of *Taken for a Ride: My Night in the Cash Cab*, and editor of the compilation *Come on Down: True Game Show Tales*. He is an organizer of the Brooklyn Zine Fest and co-host of various film screenings and live variety shows in Brooklyn and beyond.

LOUISA GRENQUIST is a professional copywriter working in New York City. For more stories and samples of her work she can be reached at grenquilst@yahoo.com.

SARAH H. is a feminist activist with a growing collection of handkerchiefs.

PRUE HARRISON, English, living in Singapore, has a passion for words. She has completed her first women's commercial fiction novel and is published in e-books and a museum magazine.

MEGAN HANKINS is a radical educator currently living in Detroit. Teaching 5th grade by day & sippin' sodies by night, she has an affinity for artichokes, her students, & feedback. meggiehankins@gmail.com.

THE HOLDOUT is a non-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian space in Oakland, CA where people from various communities can come together to organize, participate in mutual aid, and make personal connections for the purpose of creating social relations free of oppression. <http://theholdout.org/about/>

JACLYN MAY, based in Boston but finding myself somewhere to get lost. Aspiring activist computer programmer. Get curious with me at thesidewalkcircus.com, or tell me your secrets at jaclyn@thesidewalkcircus.com.

KATHLEEN MCINTYRE lives in Queens, does social work, and edits this zine. She is interested in exploring the ways we can help each other heal from loss and trauma as a way to strengthen our alternative communities. For fun and survival, she is a member of the For the Birds feminist collective and she dances whenever she can.

HILARY MOORE is a teacher, non-violent direct action trainer, writer, and nanny. She lives in Oakland, California and studies reproductive labor and white, working-class organizing strategies. Big dogs and writing saved her life. Go to organizingcooltheplanet.org for more info on Hilary's work.

CHEYENNE NECKMONSTER encourages folks to get in touch, and can be reached at neckmonster@gmail.com.

LILY PEPPER lives in Ottawa, Canada, and writes zine reviews at ravenswing-zines.tumblr.com.

CYNTHIA ANN SCHEMMER is a writer currently living in Philadelphia. She has an MFA in creative nonfiction from Sarah Lawrence College and a wandering book in the works. www.cynthiaschemmer.com

MAGGIE SHELTON - I am a journalist and an author, with homes, sometimes just couches, in China, Mexico, Arizona, California, Colorado, and wherever else there might be a story and good company! Blessed with an acute sense of nosiness, I have trouble settling into niche writing, and enjoy the opportunity to write for such diverse publications as The Worst. On the quiet, I play and sing Bluegrass.

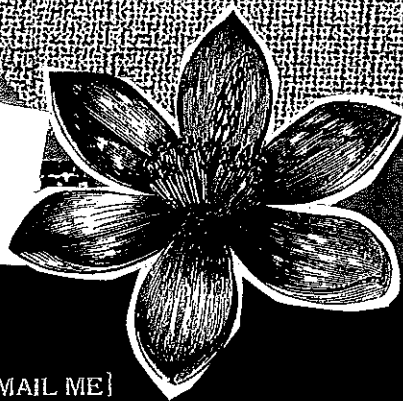
CHRISTINE SZYMANSKI is a survivor living in Virginia and has spent most of the past two years stepping out of silence and regaining her voice as a writer, Bontoc woman, and human being. She enjoys singing to her dogs, discussing semiotics, and saving dying plants. She can be reached at zoo.music.growl@gmail.com.

FLO TOCH lives in the north of England. They like meeting new people and sharing experiences, although only really over the internet. They're also planning a workbook zine to help deal with death & grief. If you want to get involved/get in touch, you can find them at ipsum@risetp.net

JAMIE VARRIALE VELEZ is supposed to be working on her dissertation readings, but she's probably listening to records or watching Buffy instead. She sporadically writes about music at rockandthesinglegirl.blogspot.com and sometimes reviews records for her friends' magazines.

PAIGE YOUNG - Contact Paige at contactpaige@gmail.com.

OF UNCLE TOM'S CABIN
AND THE HISTORY OF
THE AMERICAN WEST



Connect

theworstzine@gmail.com {EMAIL ME}

theworstcompzine.blogspot.com {UPDATES, INTERVIEWS, EVENTS,
PRINTABLE .PDF FILES OF EARLIER ISSUES, & DISTROS THAT CARRY THE ZINE}

RESOURCES

compiled by Kathleen McIntyre and Cynthia Schemmer

Zines

Doris by Cindy Crabb

Secret Bully by Cynthia Schemmer

When Language Runs Dry: A Zine for People with Chronic Pain and Their Allies

Habits of Being: The Way We Live Through This (audio zine)

<http://soundcloud.com/habitsofbeing/the-way-we-live-through-this>

SICK: A Compilation Zine on Physical Illness

<http://bereavementzine.tumblr.com/>

Creative Non-Fiction

A Grief Observed by C.S. Lewis

Blue Nights by Joan Didion

The Mercy Papers: A Memoir of Three Weeks by Robin Romm

Patrimony by Philip Roth

Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss by Hope Edelman

The Fourth State of Matter (essay) by Jo Ann Beard

The Long Goodbye: A memoir by Meghan O'Rourke

Torch; Wild by Cheryl Strayed

On Trauma

The Body Remembers by Judith Herman

Aftershock: Confronting Trauma in a Violent World: A Guide for Activists and Their Allies by Patrice Jones

Narrative Psychiatry: How Stories Can Shape Clinical Practice by Bradley Lewis

Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends by Michael White and David Epston

Emotion, Disclosure, and Health by James Pennebaker

On Writing

Bird by Bird by Anne Lamott

The Writing Life by Annie Dillard

Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work by bell hooks

Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives
by Louise Desalvo

Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering from Trauma & Emotional
Upheaval by James Pennebaker

The Artist's Way by Julia Cameron

Other Books

"Parental Caregiving and Loss: Ideas for Caregivers and their Allies," chapter co-written by Cynthia Schemmer and Kathleen McIntyre in Don't Leave Your Friends Behind: Concrete Ways To Support Families in Social Justice Movements and Communities, edited by Victoria Law and China Martens

She's Come Undone by Wally Lamb (Trigger warning for themes of sexual assault)

Inbetweenland by Jacks McNamara

The Moon Divas Guidebook: Spirited Self-Care for Women in Transition by Laura Vesta and Deva Minay

The Mindful Way Through Depression: Freeing Yourself from Chronic

Unhappiness by Mark Williams, John Teasdale, Zindel Segal, and Jon Kabat-Zinn

thank you

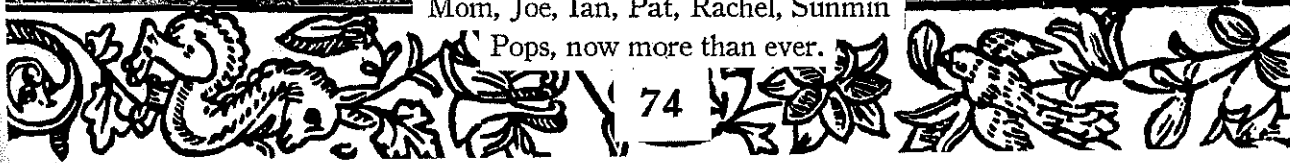
Dedicated to all the members of the D.P.C. (dead parent club), who know without me needing to explain. To Cynthia for asking how I *really* felt, Bryan for a lifetime of patch-ins, and to Jeff, for following me in.



One of the first thoughts I had upon hearing my father had died was "how the hell am I gonna do this?" Thank you, so deeply, to everyone who took my hand and said calmly, "this is how":

AEH :: Lauren Denitzio :: Sarah Hanks :: Roz Hunter :: Kate Wadkins:: Sally Davies
Annie Shields :: Jaklyn Van Manen :: Aria Pierce :: Jordan Wishner :: Joe Carroll
Ben Holtzman :: John Stehlin :: Rachel Rubino :: Jared Santiago :: Erica Dunkle
Jon Corbin :: Jessy LaHood :: Tahirah Powell :: Dave Garwacke :: Katie Pallatto
Aleda Gagarin :: Dominic Mathurin :: Beyonce Knowles :: Marzipan

Mom, Joe, Ian, Pat, Rachel, Sunmin
Pops, now more than ever.



Notes

Thoughts

Who I Lost and How I'm Dealing:



**WHAT IS THERE
POSSIBLY LEFT FOR
US TO BE AFRAID OF
AFTER WE HAVE
DEALT FACE TO FACE
WITH DEATH AND NOT
EMBRACED IT?**

**ONCE I ACCEPT THE
EXISTENCE OF DYING
AS A LIFE PROCESS,
WHO CAN EVER HAVE
POWER OVER ME
AGAIN?**

--AUDRE LORDE