

THE WORST

a compilation zine on grief and loss

issue one



- ★ **Live Through This: The Art of Self Destruction** edited by Sabrina Chapadjiev, with contributions from Nan Goldin, bell hooks, Bonfire Madigan, Inga Muscio and many others.
- ★ **Refusing to Be A Man: Essays on Sex and Justice** by John Stoltenberg
- ★ **Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation** by Silvia Federici
- ★ **Support** (a zine about supporting people who have been sexually abused) by Cindy Crabb (www.microcosmpublishing.com)

On Antiracist Struggles:

- ★ **Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self Recovery** by bell hooks
- ★ **White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son** by Tim Wise
- ★ **Race Matters** by Cornel West
- ★ **Assata: An Autobiography** by Assata Shakur and Angela Davis

On Struggles Against Environmental Loss:

- ★ **Silent Spring** by Rachel Carson (details devastation of the environment because of use of human-made chemicals and pesticides, and how this loops back to create health problems in humans).
- ★ **Aftershock: Confronting Trauma in a Violent World. A Guide for Activists and Their Allies** by Patrice Jones
- ★ **Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability and Peace** by Vandana Shiva
- ★ **Gone Tomorrow: The Hidden Life of Garbage** by Heather Rogers

THANKS TO :

ALL THE CONTRIBUTORS WHO DUG DEEP TO CREATE THIS.
 BILLIE FOR HOLDING MY HEART AND FEEDING MY BRAIN.
 BREEB FOR SEEMING STILL BUT RUNNING DEEP.
 NUKEWALD FOR ALWAYS LISTENING.
 FARES FOR REMINDING ME OF MY BACKBONE
 AND TO BEN FOR NEVER GIVING UP.

Issue 2 is in the works! Send submissions here:
theworstzine@gmail.com
<http://www.myspace.com/TheWorstCompilationZine>

Loose themes for the next issue are the reclamation or rituals for our own use, and our lack of control of the death process.

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INTRODUCTION

Death is a touchy subject. I have found firsthand that there are very few people for whom discussing or thinking about grief and loss is easy or enjoyable. My father died in 2001, and I suddenly found myself speaking words and feeling feelings that nobody else understood, or wanted to engage with. I was especially frustrated when I would enter what had previously been safe spaces for me: D.I.Y. punk shows, community spaces, activist groups and social gatherings, and found that bringing up my father's death in conversations often caused discomfort and silence. I learned the expression "you can't buy oranges from a hardware store" from a well-meaning therapist. She meant that some people will be good to talk to about loss, and some people won't, so choose wisely depending on how you feel and what you need. But she did not understand the strength of this community, or the way that the D.I.Y. ethic allows us to practice at reworking systems and social interactions in ways that are healthier for us.

Because the topic of grief and loss is so large and multifaceted, the fear of hurting others by opening old wounds has loomed large over the project since my first attempt to make this zine in 2006. What if someone goes to the zine for comfort and is only unsettled by what they find on the pages? Engaging in dialogue with others also affected by loss has helped me to overcome the paralysis that I believe society has implanted in us surrounding these issues. To speak honestly about loss through many mediums feels good to me. To learn that there are people all over the country who are trying to articulate their grief process through tears and anger and wisdom has allowed me to work for a life in which my losses are validated, acknowledged and supported. I want to share this support with everyone else who thinks they need this kind of space. I want anyone who reads this zine to take responsibility for their ability to engage with it in a way that feels safe for them.

The process of creating the zine has also been very painful. While these pages contain much strength and hope for the success of our many struggles, each piece also symbolizes a tremendous loss, trauma, or life-changing experience. I named the zine "The Worst" because I am tired of delicate Hallmark Card statements about death which dictate the reactions I am "supposed to have" when someone I love is gone. I am tired of needing honesty and getting containment in return. The authors of these pieces have held nothing back—they have discussed some of the most painful events in their lives. It is this willingness to confront our emotional needs that ultimately challenges the repression by which capitalist power structures maintain their chokehold on our lives and our imaginations.

RESOURCE LIST

- ★ **1-800-SUICIDE** National Suicide Prevention Hotline
- ★ **<http://psychologytoday.org>** allows you to search for therapists in your area and sort by insurance, no- or low-cost, therapeutic approach and issues you want to discuss. Clarifying the therapists' political orientations requires a phonecall (!)
- ★ **www.icarusproject.org** Radical mental health resource; amazing forums and places to engage in dialogue with others about coping with the mental health industry.
- ★ **N'Drea: One Woman's Fight to Die Her Own Way** by Andrea Dorea, (available at www.eberhardtpress.org/pdf/ndrea.pdf)
- ★ **Part of Me Died, Too: Stories of Creative Survival Among Bereaved Children and Teenagers** by Virginia Lynn Fry (very mainstream, yet good if you want information about how art can help young children process loss).
- ★ **Friends Make the Best Medicine** by the Icarus Project
- ★ **A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius** by Dave Eggers (amazing honest account of parental loss; beware of blatant "white dude" narrative voice).
- ★ **The American Way of Death** by Jessica Mitford
- ★ **The Year of Magical Thinking** by Joan Didion (Ruthlessly honest account of an experience with sudden loss, although the author fails to examine her position of privilege in society and this can be frustrating).
- ★ **Another Country** by James Baldwin (touches on a suicide within a tight-knit group of friends.)
- ★ **Life is Hello, Life is Goodbye** by Alla Renee Bozarth
- ★ **Swimming in a Sea of Death** by David Reiff (Susan Sontag's son)
- ★ **Bridge to Terabithia** by Katherine Patterson
- ★ **The Cancer Journals** by Audre Lorde
- ★ **On Death and Dying** by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross
- ★ **The Mourner's Dance: What we do when people die** by Katherine Ashenburg

On Gender Liberation:

- ★ **Gender Outlaw** by Kate Bornstein (exposes gender performance as a social construction, and is a good starting place for thinking through how our emotional expressions are also limited by our gender socialization).

Support Quilt Project-Have each person make a quilt square representing their loss (some people may need to make more than one square). Construct a quilt from the squares that can travel from member to member each meeting, or can be used in the meeting space as a decoration or comforter.

Talk about what you do when you get sad. What help have you sought? Do you go to a certain place, or call a certain friend or try to ignore it?

Bring in a picture of the person and talk about them as a group. Introduce them to the group so their memory can be strong in the group setting. Group: give your thoughts and feedback. Family resemblance? Interesting clothes? Warm smile? Where was the picture taken?

Bring in 1-3 objects that symbolize the dead person to you. Could be things they owned or gave you, or symbolic objects. Talk about the person. Group: Support with questions when curious.

If you have dealt with the long or terminal illness of someone you loved, how did you cope? What did you fear? What couldn't you say then that you want to say now? Did you feel that you were able to say goodbye?

Read your letters to the person you have lost as a group or have someone else read yours for you. Talk about how many different types of relationships can be complicated or ended by grief. Allow these differences to coexist.

Saying goodbye vs. not getting to say goodbye. What did you say? What would you add now? What would you have said if you had had the chance? Why can this sometimes be difficult to engage with while we are in the moment?

The norms enforced by the ruling elite of our society ensure that time and effort are structured by competition for resources, rather than by our own autonomous quests for fulfillment. Amidst this competition, human differences in race, gender, sexuality, and class are transformed into tools of control and oppression with respect to grief and loss. In order to survive, we end up internalizing and reproducing these dynamics of control, which becomes evident as we make inquiries into structural racism, socially codified sexism and violent heteronormativity, violence against the earth and its resources, the enforcement of borders and nation-states, and many other facets of mainstream society that are simply taken for granted as permanent. This is a society in which everyday death is normalized, and yet we are met with extreme repression from the state if we challenge these conditions. It is assumed that functioning members of this society will react quietly to trauma in ways that ensure the perpetuation of the values of the system. Because grieving outside of this framework represents a challenge to the commodity-based value system, it is pathologized and delegitimized. This is an insidious form of social control that has detrimental effects on our mental health and on our ability to connect with and work through loss. Our internalization of grief containment is a threat to our own survival.

Likewise, grief expression challenges the de-valuing of human life in the current system by insisting that the body-which-can-no-longer-produce must nonetheless be honored and remembered through a process of authentic emotional engagement. Even if memories of who or what has been lost are complex and full of anger, or simply ambivalent, the acknowledgement that the emotions exist and require time and space to process insists that our connections to each other transcend the commodification of our productive power.

Most of us have grown up in a culture where the emotions accompanying loss are rarely processed authentically, but we have to try and learn. This zine does not seek to gather knowledge and shape it into a medicalized program that mimics the so-called "expertise" of professional mainstream healers in the psychological industry. Rather, it is a collection space—blank pages for us to fill and share through our own networks, in our own safe spaces. The speaking of experiences and the sharing of emotions is what brings comfort and validation to so many who have been shut out or subdued by friends and family, bosses, therapists, teachers and other instruments of social control who offer little more than trite expressions of sympathy and cold silence. Because these emotions can be powerful when they are ultimately addressed, here is a list of things to do if reading this zine becomes overwhelming:

Premature atrial complex

Stop and take a break
Call a friend you can trust
Go find your pet or a good stuffed animal
Take a bath or a shower
Go for a walk, run or bike ride
Light a candle
Look at pictures of the person you lost
Do some writing
Build something with your hands
Make space to cry
Watch a movie
Make something crafty
Have a cup of tea
Listen to music

The title "The Worst" is a play on colloquial medical definitions of health and life-status—the worst case scenario, the worst diagnosis, the worst outcome. And yet this stigma should not carry over into our grief processes: our experiences with grief and loss should not become the worst topic of conversation, or the worst emotional need to fulfill. It's my hope that by exposing this terrible narrative—naming our worsts—we can realize our capacity to begin a fearless dialogue; to overcome the emotional paralysis surrounding loss to bring more fluidity to our communities.

Zine contributors can be reached by emailing theworstzine@gmail.com.

KATHLEEN

JANUARY 2008

FOR KRISTINA AND JODI, IN THE SISTERHOOD I PROMISE I WILL LEARN.
FOR NAN, BECAUSE OF THE TOMATO SANDWICHES ON THE BEACH.
FOR POPS (HOW'S THIS FOR FLYING?)

ACTIVITIES & ART PROJECTS

Illustrate and/or Discuss:

- the moment you found out about the loss
- your family or set of friends before, and then after the loss occurred. Are your connections stronger, or weaker, or more complex?
- what are obstacles to your grief?
- portrait of the person you lost, or of what they meant to you
- what do we get from our group?
- Tell the story of a time when you reacted differently to the loss than those around you, and might have felt isolated, out of place, or validated and more honest.

What "comforting advice" are you sick of hearing? What do people usually say to you that does not help, or fit your experiences? Have you tried to talk to friends and family about the types of support they could give that would help?

Make and decorate a notebook for your thoughts and writings about the person. How do you experience the person you lost now? Are you able to have any communication with them? Do you feel anger towards them?

Do you have any rituals that help you to stay in touch with the memory of the person you have lost? Have you adapted any rituals that are commonly used by mainstream culture/religions to suit your own needs and memory purposes?

Dreams: Have you had a dream about the person you lost? What was the storyline? Who was there? How did you feel in the dream? Do you have a new understanding of it or new feelings about it now that you are awake? Note that not everyone has dreams about the people they have lost, and not everyone can remember their dreams—this is OK.

LISTENING should be patient, conscientious, and open-minded. Sometimes it is important not to respond or ask questions until a person who is sharing lets the group know they are ready for feedback.

FACILITATION can be done on a rotating basis and can be a shared task. It is important the facilitator also participate and that they provide periodic check-ins about how people are doing and if they would like to re-focus discussion, or take a break.

AVOID FIXING what a group member is feeling by changing the subject or presenting a solution for something that you cannot solve. Remember, this group may be the first time a person is really able to sit and cry, or yell or silently visit their loss. Even if it is uncomfortable for you to witness, respect all emotions as necessary for healing.

DIFFERENCES can arise in religious beliefs, theories of afterlife, and use of grief rituals. Members should challenge themselves to value the beliefs of others.

GRIEF CAN CHANGE OVER TIME A recent loss may not always produce the same feelings or needs as a loss from years ago and vice versa. A group member may not even feel the same way from meeting to meeting. Take care not to formulate expectations or roles for griever in the group.

Many of these guidelines are informed by and intersect with ideas put forth by the Icarus Project in the new publication "Friends Make the Best Medicine," and also in the "Support" zine by Cindy Crabb (see resources section). The book "On Conflict and Consensus" can also serve as scaffolding for healthy group dynamics (www.consensus.net).

DEAD FATHER

by maple

I wrote this story a couple of months after my father died. It was really sudden and intense. Afterward I read it over and over and was forced to really confront my emotions about the situation. I hadn't even realized that I needed to deal with it. So many people don't realize that putting emotions into tangible form can really help with the "grieving process". It just helps to be able to pour out all this shit, put it in front of you and realize that maybe it isn't so very big, at least not too big to overcome. But I always wanted for someone else to read this story. Not because I thought that it would be beneficial for them, there was just a part of me that wanted them to see my emotions and reactions as a real human being and maybe they could relate, but maybe it's better if they can't, that they don't have to. But anyway, it is very wonderful that you are putting this zine together. I think that it will help a lot of people, not only the ones who read it but the ones who write for it as well.

The death of my father was slow and painful for all who watched it. I didn't watch it though. I stayed as far away as possible, nearly a two hour drive, and when he called me, made excuses to get off the phone and wouldn't tell him what I was thinking. The last real conversation I had with him, he asked me if I smoked pot. I told him I wasn't really into that any more- I had grown out of it. He said that he never had. I told him that he reaps what he sows. I'm not sure if he understood what I was getting at. You're not supposed to talk of your impending death with your bastard daughter. You, as a father, are only supposed to take her over to your best friend's house. Boast about how wasted you were last night. Cough up bits of your liver and fall down in the snow for hours until your mother's toy chihuahua licks the blood off of your skull. His last days in the hospital were the most quality time I had spent with him in years, maybe ever. All he did was lay and gasp for breath. We all looked up and held ours when this happened, thinking that maybe we shouldn't hog it all for ourselves. There are other people who need it more. There weren't any machines attached to his body. There was a tube and jar for the secretions and a small IV for the pain medication. I watched his body filling up with pneumonia. At first I was afraid to be left alone with him. I imagined what would happen if I were the only one there when it happened. I pictured myself screaming into the hallway, sirens blaring, nurses running in to resuscitate him. But in reality I probably would have silently stared and then walked into the waiting room with my family as if I didn't notice anything. I didn't want the burden of being the only one there to capture his soul when it left.

After the first day he was moved into a larger corner room next to the waiting area. It was much nicer here. I could look down the hall and see the other patients being wheeled in and out of their rooms. I could sit in the waiting room and still hear the gurgling of his lungs. The whole thing seemed very detached and intimate. I was no longer scared of being alone with him. It was the first time in my life that that had been the case. Sometimes when I was there by myself I thought of putting the pillow over his face until his eyes opened and he saw me taking him down prematurely. I hated all of the waiting. We saw it coming but it, it being death, was tripped up somewhere along the way. But I never brought myself to hurry it along. The nurses' station was right across the hall and my grandfather would probably come in right in the middle of it and tell me that I probably shouldn't be doing that. And really, I guess it isn't my place to take his life. He gave me mine though. How else could I repay him?

Mostly I knit. I knit gluttonously. When someone asked me what I was doing I told them that I was knitting leg warmers for my friend. Then when they asked me the difference between knitting and crocheting I would tell them that knitting is with two needles and crocheting is just with a hook. My grandmother used to crochet but ever since her arthritis got so bad, she hasn't been able to. I can feel my own premature arthritis setting in. I knit two leg warmers and then stopped because the circular repetition were starting to make me feel dizzy and sick. So I tried going outside to smoke a cigarette but that did the same thing. So I sat in the room and made hospital death mixes and listened to happy music and wrote about my dying father like I had never even met him, even though I had once or twice.

Everyone kept crying and holding each other's hands and making jokes as if my father wasn't dying in the next room. But I guess in that instant he wasn't my father. He was their father, uncle, son, brother, friend, or patient. My grandfather tried to hook up my brother with a sexy nurse. Had they met elsewhere perhaps it would have been different, but they didn't. She couldn't help but think that he would grow up to be just like his father.

Finally my mother came. She has been divorced from my father since before I can remember. She spent most of her time yelling at him for being drunk, late, and generally irresponsible when he came to pick us up every other weekend. My brother and I would play outside until he got there and then some while he went inside for his berating. For hours on Friday evenings we would sit on the side walk, every time we heard a car we would strain our necks in it's direction, hoping it was his truck. We were always so eager

D.I.Y. GRIEF GROUPS !

I was lucky to have the chance to attend a weekly grief group run by a therapist at my school for almost two years. It was one of the first spaces where I felt comfortable talking about everything I was feeling, and was able to learn new ways to express my anger and sadness, as well as ask for help. The most powerful aspect of the group was not any specific expertise provided by the therapist, but the connections I felt with the other members there as we shared our stories and created a safe space for each other. I believe that this type of group is possible to recreate without the oversight of a therapist, and in fact, that doing so would help participants realize their potential to create healing and support in the cracks of a society that represses authentic emotional expression.

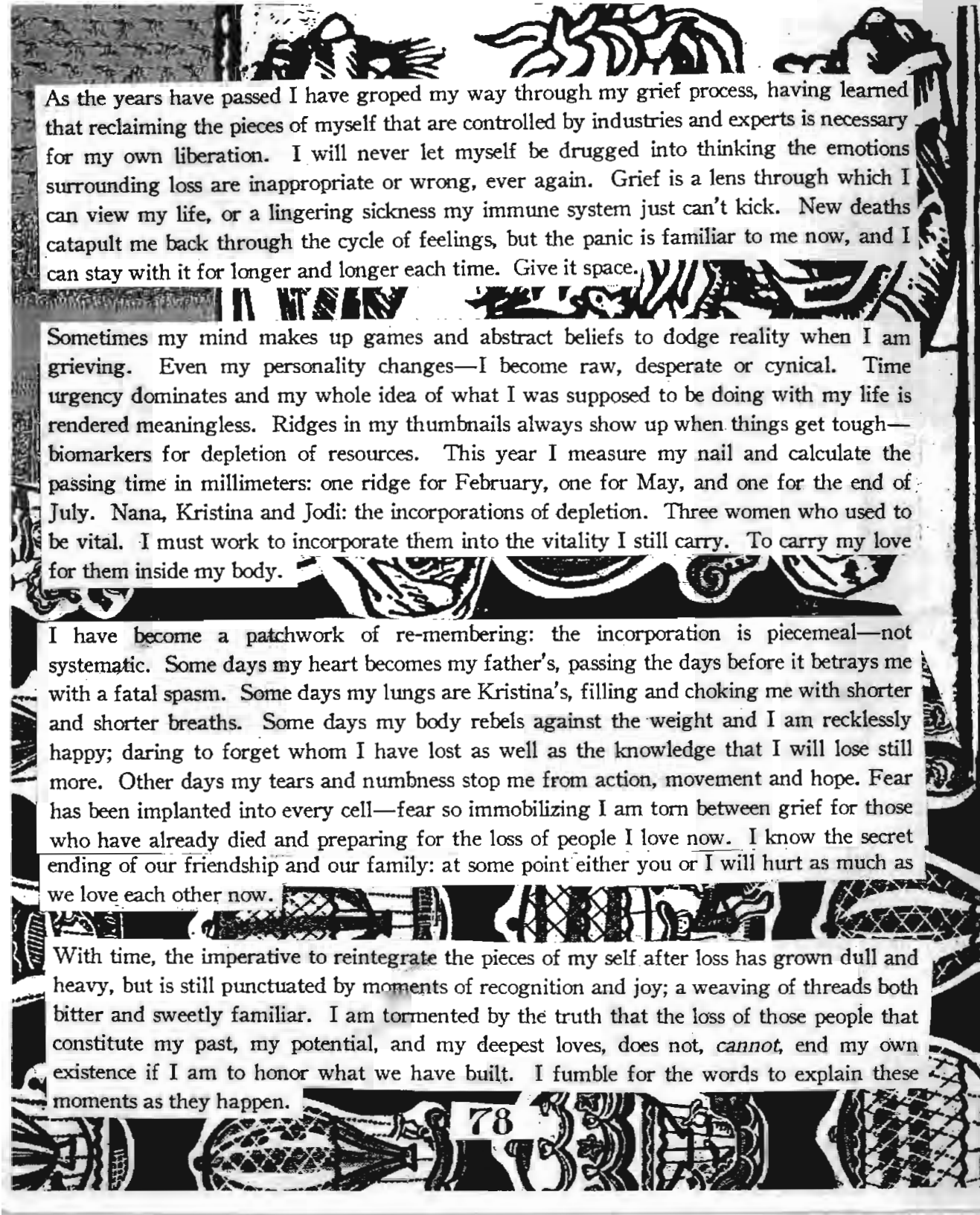
This short list is meant to spark discussion and thought rather than provide a cohesive guide for action. It can be very powerful to feel the support created by a griefspace; it is just as important to approach group organization in a way that is safe for everyone involved.

GUIDELINES FOR SAFE GROUPS

AWARENESS In challenging the oppression of authentic grief in society, a group should also be aware of other forms of oppression, and work to keep the group safe from sexism, racism, homophobia, ageism, and other constructs of social division. Members should never judge each other based on how they respond to their loss and experiences should NEVER be quantified.

BEGIN & END with a check-in for each member of the group, so that contributions are centered within ourselves and members feel respected.

SPEAK using "I" statements and own your own reality. Let others own their realities as well.



As the years have passed I have groped my way through my grief process, having learned that reclaiming the pieces of myself that are controlled by industries and experts is necessary for my own liberation. I will never let myself be drugged into thinking the emotions surrounding loss are inappropriate or wrong, ever again. Grief is a lens through which I can view my life, or a lingering sickness my immune system just can't kick. New deaths catapult me back through the cycle of feelings, but the panic is familiar to me now, and I can stay with it for longer and longer each time. Give it space.

Sometimes my mind makes up games and abstract beliefs to dodge reality when I am grieving. Even my personality changes—I become raw, desperate or cynical. Time urgency dominates and my whole idea of what I was supposed to be doing with my life is rendered meaningless. Ridges in my thumbnails always show up when things get tough—biomarkers for depletion of resources. This year I measure my nail and calculate the passing time in millimeters: one ridge for February, one for May, and one for the end of July. Nana, Kristina and Jodi: the incorporations of depletion. Three women who used to be vital. I must work to incorporate them into the vitality I still carry. To carry my love for them inside my body.

I have become a patchwork of re-membling: the incorporation is piecemeal—not systematic. Some days my heart becomes my father's, passing the days before it betrays me with a fatal spasm. Some days my lungs are Kristina's, filling and choking me with shorter and shorter breaths. Some days my body rebels against the weight and I am recklessly happy; daring to forget whom I have lost as well as the knowledge that I will lose still more. Other days my tears and numbness stop me from action, movement and hope. Fear has been implanted into every cell—fear so immobilizing I am torn between grief for those who have already died and preparing for the loss of people I love now. I know the secret ending of our friendship and our family: at some point either you or I will hurt as much as we love each other now.

With time, the imperative to reintegrate the pieces of my self after loss has grown dull and heavy, but is still punctuated by moments of recognition and joy; a weaving of threads both bitter and sweetly familiar. I am tormented by the truth that the loss of those people that constitute my past, my potential, and my deepest loves, does not, *cannot*, end my own existence if I am to honor what we have built. I fumble for the words to explain these moments as they happen.

for him to get there but when he did, something like dread always fell through my stomach and I wished that he was still living with my ex-stepmother who kept the house clean and took me shopping for new clothes at K-Mart. But she left and took my ex-stepbrother and ex-stepsister with her. We weren't allowed to see them again. Until the funeral that is.

My mother came from across the state smiling like she owned the place, the place being the hospital, and carrying a box of Christmas candy for the family that she was never really a part of, but always thinks she is. She hugged my grandmother and they both cried. It was probably something like my parents' wedding day but I really can't say. I think maybe things have changed a bit. I really didn't want her there. I never want her there. She came from across the state, minivan filled with trinkets to save me from my sorrow. She only made it worse. Every time she talked to me she had this concern in her voice as if we were about to have a meaningful conversation. As if that had ever happened even once in all of history.

So I started making movies. I ran through the hospital halls with my computer capturing people crying and eating and joking. I ran up the stairs until the top door to the roof. It was locked so I sat up there for a long time wondering what to do with myself. It seemed as though all of the mourning had been taken care of and I was just creating a ruckus. No one wants a rowdy teenager in the hospital. I tried to remain sly though. I found myself in the chapel. It was empty and dark, decorated for Christmas still. This was the third day of waiting. Perhaps soon something would be resurrected. I played the organ until the cleaning lady came in and told me to shut it off. I didn't want to. There were flashing lights and it helped me not hear the wheezing. I stayed away for hours from the room.

I couldn't take it any more. People always talk about the waiting. Waiting for the spirit to pull out its flag, attach it as wings and fly to the moon of its home planet. I couldn't see that happening. The pathetic green monster that lived inside my father could probably do no better than tripping over the threshold and scraping its knee on the pavement to lay in waiting to rot. So I went home. I waited in an empty dark hospital room looking over the lights of the city. The city where I was born, the city where I was conceived, the city I got the hell out of and never wanted to visit again. But I have obligations to it. I sat in that room until my ride was ten minutes away. Then I walked down the hall, grabbed my backpack and told my grandmother and aunt, whose name I am unsure of, that I was leaving. I could come back if I need to but I can't stay waiting. School starts again in a few

days, I need to prepare. I need to get the hell out of this situation. I hope he dies soon. I hugged them and went home.

On the ride back I tried really hard not to cry. But just like at the hospital when I had to run to the balcony and puke my tears onto a statue, I couldn't hold them in. I had been holding them for the past four days. So I listen to Tom Waits and looked out the window. It was dark and only my subdued hysterics were heard. Just like my father. Always just like my father. Just like my mother would say when she got angry with me. I never wanted to be in this position. Ditching out on my family to drink wine for six days straight didn't help anything. I kissed him on the head before I left and tried not to feel his warmth. It wouldn't be there much longer. I can still remember what his skin feels like. Like warm oily leather. But they didn't make a handbag or boots out of him when he died. There were probably too many holes in the surface.

On my mother's way back home from his death bed she stopped by to go to coffee before she left. We went to the coffee shop and when we got there she got the call from my grandmother. He was dead. Just as suspected. My mother asked if I wanted to go home. I told her no. I had homework to do and I want to drink my coffee. So we sat there and talked small talk about when the funeral would be and if I had any clothes that were nice enough. Until finally we ran out of things to talk about and I was just turning pages arbitrarily. So she took me home, I hugged her and we went our separate ways.

Nathan's humongous family was swarming all over my house when I got back. I didn't know what to do. This seemed like a situation to run into the room crying and screaming but it seemed silly to interrupt their video games. So I went on a walk with Josh. It was overcast and foggy and almost January. I talked to him like it was okay. He was awkward and didn't know what to say. No one ever does. So I just pretended like I didn't notice and didn't care. But I did. I stood in my bedroom crying silently after we got home from the walk. I could hear the Fairbanks' in the other room screaming and laughing. I just stood in the closet until Kayla came home. Then I left. I didn't know where to go. I wanted to talk to someone but the only one I could think of was a long lost stranger. He, who was the only one around three years ago when it was going to happen that night. He who was the only one around all those other times when it was going to happen any minute. But when it actually did happen I didn't know his number and he never called me back.

Although it wracked my body with pain and confusion, although I became a shell full of silence who sought only quick gratifications, no matter the risk, although the grief followed me everywhere like a thunderstorm from which I was only one step away, I could not grant it the right to exist. I could not exist if I was grieving.

In therapy I was told my goal should be incorporation of the loss into my life. I had to put the loss into my body to continue living. Like the lithium, it was just another bitter pill. Incorporate this loss? A body, a life, a place and a memory, bitter with alcohol stench and sick with fear, full of pride and sickening crushed hopes. My father's life.

No. I did not want this loss close to my self. I could not even comprehend it. As simple as the pain was, it was too great a feat to think through how I might still want to live in the face of it. What does grief do to your body? Why would I be afraid to incorporate it? *Incorporate*—integrate with my body the memory of someone who is no longer here. The loss caused confusion, cloudiness, forgetfulness, crying, lack of appetite, loss of sleep, deep lines in my face and weariness in my days. I began to grind my teeth at night.

Maintenance of relationships in life is comprised of acts of care, words, routines, and interdependency. In death, rituals provide space for the relentless feelings to take shape in routines, tasks, words, and memories. A physical re-memberment of the body and person which has now lost its physical form. My body resisted the adoption of these rituals for years by resisting grief and denying incorporation so that I could keep functioning as I had before.

Finally when I realized my latest shrink was not even testing my blood to make sure the lithium levels were safe, like he was supposed to, I weaned myself down to only antidepressants. The feelings flooded through like crashing waves. In my manic grief I felt my father everywhere. I felt a crushing love for who and what remained. All moments, talks, pains, fears, and joys hit with sharp relief against the empty space in my heart. I grew to understand that I did not need to work for or create this mythical incorporation of which the therapists spoke. Indeed both his genetic material and his soul were always with me—during the times I had the patience and strength to feel them.

Suddenly, I couldn't feel my hands anymore and my legs were frozen.

"No," I said.

"No. no. no! No. No. No," I repeated until I was out of breath. Then the tears came, but felt hollow and confused. I held onto my bookshelf for support. It was so simple: he was gone. No more late night talks, no more fights about too much drinking, no more car rides or projects or analysis of the symbolism contained within "Cool Hand Luke." Only now a slow spiral away from the deepest parts of myself, into numb escape and total confusion. I had been shattered.

They put me on lithium because I couldn't stop crying. I needed to stabilize, they said. I was acting irrational. I had spent the previous year rotating through cocktails of mood stabilizers, antipsychotics, and ADD meds I had been prescribed after my parents' divorce. For a long time I still picked up the phone to give him a call, and swore I saw him in public places. I read the coroner's report to make sure he was really dead. If he hadn't been already, the things they had to do to him to investigate the cause of death would certainly have killed him.

I went to a Freudian psychiatrist who diagnosed me as having a weak ego and continued to ply me with lithium and risperdal. She said I needed to grieve so that I could move on but the lithium made all tears and laughter stop.

Month after month I pushed the feelings down and took my cocktails.

I was not grieving, they said, I was simply bipolar.

As I traveled and became frustrated with doctor after doctor, I was labeled many things: ADHD, "pre-schizophrenic," manic, cyclothymic. It was my job to manage my creativity, self-destructive sexual habits, and what were now quite evident cycles through mania and deep depressions. I was told to speed through school so I could get my degree before some disastrous psychotic break hit and I could no longer function. One doctor estimated that this would happen in my early 30s. It was not deemed particularly important or relevant during all these conversations that I had just lost my father.

In my family and in countless doctor's offices, with my closest friends, and as I tried to make new friends, grief was silenced and turned away.

On New Years Eve I went back to a house of an old friend and old life. Everyone sang loudly and danced. No one of those people who used to be my best friends said anything until they were well and wasted. Then they hugged me and told me how much it sucks. I guess I can't blame them for being pitiful. What are you supposed to say when a long lost friend's dad dies? Get her wasted and hope she doesn't ruin your night by crying.

I went back to school and walked through the halls thinking about it. My boss asked me how my break was. I told him that it was okay- nice and relaxing, not much to tell. I wanted to tell him, but I didn't want to draw attention to myself. My advisor had saw it in the paper. He was the only person to ever say anything. I wanted to tell everyone but I'm not the only one with a dead father. It seemed so vain to try and talk about it. There was nothing to say but he's dead and I'm alive and maybe one day that will change but for now it seems to be working out.

The funeral was the first Saturday after school started. I used it as an excuse for skipping one of my classes, even though the class was on a Wednesday. The teacher understood. That's probably the only reason I even passed the class. I guess we talked a lot about death on the day that I missed. I wanted so badly to have been there.

I drove to the funeral with Nathan. I didn't want him to come. I didn't want him to see my family and my father and see me crying in front of a bunch of strangers but I would have fallen into the casket myself if he hadn't been there to catch me. They showed a slide show of his life. I was in it. My mother and step-father came. They sat in the empty pews to the right of the family section. She just can't get over the fact that he probably wouldn't have wanted her there. Though, who am I to say? When I was sixteen years old he told me that it has taken him sixteen years to get over a woman. After the service I had to stand next to the casket and hug everyone as they walked past. Some of them thought I was his wife. Most of them told me how grown up I looked. They all told me what a good man he was and to hang in there. I knew that they were just being polite. He looked like a bird in the casket. All of his features stuck out in points and his nose looked surprisingly similar to a beak. Most people said he looked like an angel. I can see how they could get the two confused. My brother never cried at all. He is a lot like me. Just kind of angry and hidden. I hope he cried by himself in the bathroom after everyone left. I've never talked to him about the fact that our dad is dead. He's the only one who really knows what it's like, but I am naught but his baby sister with brain nor guts to feel with, so what does it matter?

The rest was just socializing. My father's family all sat together. There was no chair for Nathan and I so we sat by ourselves. My stepfather came and sat with us for a while. We talked about how good the desserts looked. I've always been shoved in the corner by both of my families. There's never been a chair for me at either table. So my mother and stepfather left. I didn't know what to do with myself or Nathan. I felt like everyone was glaring at me. So I went to hug my family goodbye. I told them that I would be back soon to help them clean his house.

I've only been back once since. I stayed for a day and as I got into town I turned into the cemetery. There was a funeral going on near the grave site, so I tried to act like I belonged. I looked up and down the isles but couldn't find his grave and thought for a second that maybe it never really happened. Maybe he was still lying on my grandparents' couch drinking Mountain Dew and watching action films. But then I found it. About the size of a playing card it had nothing but his name inscribed. The rectangle of grass above him was appropriately brown and dying. Across the path was my brother and great grandfather. I didn't have anything to say so in order to avoid awkward conversation with the ground I just drove away and never told anyone where I had been. The Carnation I got at his funeral stayed in the cubby hole of Nathan's car for months. His funeral pamphlet was left in my jacket pocket for a similar length of time. I would unexpectedly stick my hand in that pocket and open it up to see his face that looks kind of like mine. We have the same yellowish skin tone. I wondered if Kayla ever found it all those times that she borrowed my coat. She didn't throw it away or mention it. I saved the obituary. My brother is fixing up his house to move into. Someday I hope to live there with him. Kind of like when we were kids only this time we're adults and things won't be so dreary and disgusting. I went to the Social Security office to meet with someone about bereavement benefits. The next week I got a check for two-hundred and fifty-two dollars. It is supposed to help me pay for the funeral expenses.

Some years ago I wrote to Jodi after a particularly intense and romantic few days, saying "I didn't want to give you up to the day." This, as with the process of mourning described here, is an act of refusal: a refusal to forget the illustrious Jodi Tilton, a refusal to block the flow of her life into my own, a refusal to have my mourning overcoded or imposed upon, a refusal to cease my productive capacity as it intersects with others. In this refusal I am fleeing through 'the moment I cannot escape,' "and in fleeing we pick up a weapon."

Jodi Tilton: *A Life* and the full version of *The Moment I Cannot Escape* are available, and the author contacted, at www.warmchines.info.

PIECES OF MY SELF

by kathleen

I woke up at 8am to my phone ringing over and over and over again. I was so tired I thought it was my alarm clock, so I repeatedly pressed snooze to stop the noise. Finally I heard my mom's voice over the answering machine, begging me to pick up. The phone was cold and heavy in my hand.

"Something bad happened last night, to dad" she said.

"ok" I said, steeling myself for whatever news was to come. Maybe the cancer came back, maybe a car accident, whatever the case I was ready.

"honey he had a heart attack"

"OK" I said, exhaling, "which hospital is he in? I'm coming home right now, tell him I'll be there"

"No," she said, "he's not in the hospital. He. . . he died."

process of mourning, I propose understanding grief through measuring its contours, magnitude and structure.

How one addresses their grief is by engaging with mourning as a social process. Which as its own process, and as a process that intersects with the emotional and corporeal experiences of particular expressions of grief, it seeks to address the devastating aftermath of someone you love passing into the unknown; and it is to this point that I return.

Some months later the core group that had been present that week in the hospital and beside Jodi throughout her illness came together at a gathering at Ben's apartment to discuss these three periods that frame The Moment I Cannot Escape. The purpose of this gathering was to discuss our thoughts, feelings, reflections, and critiques about caring for her, that week in the hospital, and how each of us has been fairing since her passing. Those in attendance expressed how deeply they missed her, some of the critiques I have provided here (and only when they reflected my own), and how social events with mutual friends are important personally. Social events allow them to feel Jodi's presence, whereas they don't necessarily feel this during their everyday lives. Here I am certainly not attempting to represent the event or the opinions and thoughts of those in attendance, but rather providing a line of thought that I want to counter with my own experience. Since Jodi's passing her death has generalized itself over the entirety of my daily life, as I said to mutual friends "her death has become my life." Along with this I find social events impossible to attend because it is there that I notice not her presence, but rather her absence; and this is too much for me to bear. This gathering was important for me because it provided a collective and social space to mourn Jodi's passing and participate fully in the social process of mourning against grief.

Seeing mourning as a collective endeavor, as a social and political process allows for the production of collective memories and refusals, and the intensification of corresponding personal memories and refusals in the act of their multiplication. Here the ever-moving westward horizon, especially as we approach it, becomes 'a common': as an active depository of memories, as a desiring-machine, as our collective productive and reproductive capacities, as an act of refusal, as the mountains where guerillas have always kept their arms. I suggested this political project now nearly six months ago, on a Thursday evening, five days following that terrible Saturday, as I spoke of Jodi's life, mine, and ours together to a gathering of her friends in the park. I outlined this project in "A Life" and stated that we all should wield "a weapon against forgetting."

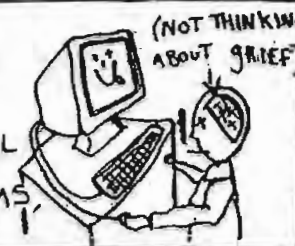
HOW DOES A RADICAL GRIEVE?

THE SAME WAY AS ANY OTHER PERSON.



SOME CRY THEIR EYES OUT FOREVER,

SOME IGNORE THEIR PERSONAL PROBLEMS,



SOME GET REALLY MAD,



SOME GET REALLY SCARED,

SOME DROWN THEIR

GRIEF IN SUBSTANCES.

... OR MAKE DUMB LIGHTEARTED JOKES,

LIKE THIS 'DEAD DAD CLUB' I HAVE WITH A FEW FOLKS.

SUPPORTING EACH OTHER IN HOW WE GRIEVE



SERIOUSLY, I FIND TALKING ABOUT GRIEF IN ANY FORMAT IS QUITE HELPFUL ~ !!

Tell people what you need ~

ASK WHAT YOU CAN DO TO SUPPORT YOUR FRIENDS, FAMILY, COMMUNITY ~

LISTEN ~ RESPECT ~ BREATH ~

IF, YOUR FRIEND'S PARENT DIED

by cindy crabb

Things that helped me after my mom died.

There was the crisis time, the time when she was dieing, and then dead. That part I will talk about later. What I want to talk about here is the later time. People forget that it is not a quick recovery. What I am talking about here is 6 months later, a year later, two years later, now.

One of the saddest suckiest things was that no one wanted to talk about it. I don't know what it is that makes people so afraid. Actually, I do kind of know because one of my friends had a parent die recently, and I feel some of the things other people must have felt around me. Like I'll say the wrong thing, or maybe it is not a good time to talk about it, I don't want to pry, I don't want to make her think about it if she doesn't want to.

but the thing I remember is I was always thinking about it. I was afraid to talk about it would be burdening people. I didn't know what to say, where to begin, what was important, what was too much for someone else to hear. I didn't want to talk if someone didn't want to know and I felt like no one really wanted to know.

If you are the friend of someone whos parent has died, try and think of how you can get yourself to a place inside your self where you want to know. try and figure out how to hear about it without it being a burden. Your parents will die someday too. It is part of our existance that is pushed away but so real. It needs space to be seen. It need space to be heard and experienced not just in our isolation.

If it is mothers day or fathers day, aknowledge it. If it is the anniversary of the parents death, remember and say something. If you are hanging out with your friend with a bunch of people and everyone's talking about parents and your friend is quiet, talk with her, later or then. at least tell her that you felt it too, the loss, the uncomfortableness, the empty space, the bitterness.

Make time to ask questions. For me, the first year was so uncomprehendable, and after the year came the time when I was really ready to talk, when I really needed to talk and the

removal of life support. While this conceptualization is personal, allowing me to understand these moments, it intersects with a larger imposition of power that surrounds the management of life and death.

The entirety of end of life decisions are facilitated through a set of medical, religious, and legal pathways, which exclude direct decision making by the 'dying person' as well as those collected around them. Under the regime of biopower, life is managed and fostered by the state, to challenge this is to go to war with the state-form. Here I return to my earlier point that the act of forcing one's body to 'stay alive' when the mind has passed on is an act of violence, as an intrusion of the state into our lives. Even with EEG after MRI showing "no brain activity" the community that surrounded Jodi, her family and friends, were not permitted to allow her body to cease functioning. The regulations, limitations on, and time period for terminating her life support were imposed externally and maintained with the threat of continued violence by the state itself.

For me, the period between Jodi's passing and when her body ceased functioning was marked not by my productive capacity, but its alternate pole; and not by its lines of flight and its flows, but by its blockages and the catatonic state I found myself in. While 'the moment I cannot escape' is the pivot between the active and productive periods of care and mourning, it is immediately encircled by its opposite - that is death, bordered by the trauma of watching her pass into the unknown and the inability to act on her behalf in terminating her life support. As someone who engaged with life as Jodi did, I believe as soon as she was unable to continue in it (I gather this from endless conversations with her on the subject), she would have wanted to simply pass on into the unknown, completely.

mourning

Grief and mourning function differently, and in important ways: grief is a set of symptoms of emotional and corporeal reactions while mourning describes a set of productive, both affective and corporeal, activities. In addition, the experience of both is further complicated by the relationships of power they intersect with. Some forms of mourning are qualitatively and quantitatively more substantive than others; some forms of mourning function by overcoding, repressing and simplifying "a life" in the process while others utilize it as a process to further and expand its complexity and the flow through "a life" and into the lives of others; some are rich in the content of "a life," others are devoid of even a hint of it. This is simply a way of measuring the composition, social relationships and value contained in these activities. These never take place in a vacuum, as these are part of larger struggles taking place on the social field.

Grief when described as an abstraction eliminates the differences between how we all grieve differently. Here rather than using content, substance and function as we have with the

again, at the time seemingly endless that causes the circular nature of this, seemingly inescapable moment. Additionally, these moments had a psycho-physical component: in heading to the hospital every morning, as I would find myself getting off the elevator on the 7th floor, walking past her room to where our friends had collected themselves – I found myself unable to move, as if all my limbs ballooned with weight and I entered a state where time had slowed. By that Monday morning I would require taking a friend's arm as they led me into her room to sit by her bedside; the desire to be present with her was no longer able to propel my body forward. This period of slowed or stopped time generalized over the entirety of my daily life, but there were a scarce number of moments that I would have to briefly become productive. In these her mother, who was serving as her medical proxy, required information that I had gathered from countless conversations between Jodi and I in regards to organ donation and end of life issues.

Between Monday and Thursday nearly two hundred friends and acquaintances cycled through Jodi's hospital room in an enormous show of solidarity: most standing in silent observance of her and her life. It is rare in everyday life to find a moment where this intensity of self-activity develops, with a corresponding level of composition, of affective and corporeal processes, of flows and breaks. Here normal life activities are broken in the immediacy of the moment and this defines its content, substance and function rather than socio-historical patterns and external impositions.

This level of activity is too often relegated to addressing a crisis, here to "say goodbye," and dissipates after the immediacy of the moment is no longer apparent. During this period provisions were not made to effectively continue this activity; and this collected group, while it intersected with other communities and social networks – of friends and other activists – didn't properly communicate its activities as to effect these neighboring communities. The political question that arises in this is: how can we construct moments of collectivity, not in crisis but in everyday life, whose mechanics I have partially sketched and theorized here. In answering this question organizationally we confront the state-apparatus, its' discipline, and the imposition of certain relations of power; in this confrontation war develops.

Throughout The Moment I Cannot Escape I have used 'passing' rather than die, dying, death, dead. The choice is a conscious one, as passing refers to a general process rather than a final moment or specific physical process. As Italian Philosopher Giorgio Agamben has stated "life and death are not properly scientific concepts but rather political concepts, which acquire a political meaning precisely only through a decision." I feel quite strongly that I held Jodi's hand as she passed into the unknown on that terrible Saturday; and on the following Thursday, I set my eyes on her, pushed on her nose with my right pointer finger, as I would often do when she was feeling ill, and left her side for the last time – her body ceasing to function with the

truth was, no one remembered. For everyone else, they were glad the crisis was over and they could finally get a break. It was over for them. For me, I needed to start peeling back the sadness and anger. I needed to remember the good things and say them outloud. I needed witness to our history. I needed friends.

Once a roommate out of the blue made breakfast, cleaned the house, got everyone else outside and quiet. He said "I was thinking about your mom when I woke up and I wanted to do something for you."

Once someone said, "I was too afraid to ask you about your mom when you were having such a hard time, and I'm sorry. But I do have so many things I wonder about your relationship with her. I realized I don't know anything about it really. but I'm afraid to ask you questions because I'm afraid it'll be prying." I said it wasn't prying. I said, "what do you want to know?"

There is relief that comes from talking. There is relief that comes from finding out that what may seem like the hugest burden in the world doesn't turn in to a burden for someone else if I say it outloud. Like the details of my moms disintegration. When I got back from the hospital, I tried to tell my one friend, and he said shhh. He was not able to hear. But later, I told someone else and they heard it fine. They let me cry. They were not crushed by it at all.

Around anniversary time, I like it when someone else figures out something for me to do. Not anything too elaborate. It's just that left to myself, I will get angry or disassociated and I will "forget" and try and push it away, and then I'll remember and get sad and angry at myself. I like to be taken to the woods, may be just for an hour or two. Swimming maybe, or where there is something special and beautiful. I like it when someone cooks for me. comes into my room if I am not leaving it. leaves a little note saying something - I am here for you. I will be here all day if you need me. I will be back at 7, I will be in the garden. I am baking you cake, I am thinking about you, I am sad for you I am angry for you I am wishing and thinking and amazed at your survival. I wish I had known her, I wish I had been able to be there to help you. I wish you didn't have to do so much of all of that and all of this alone. I want to figure out how to be a better friend to you, and I am going to figure it out. I am loving you.

Leave me a note if it's ok if I come in.

Circle what you think you might need:

for me to come and hold you
for me to stay outside your door but play you some music
for me to play music to you inside your room
dancing
for me to ask you questions
for me to just be near and silent
for me to hold your hand while you call your other family
to talk about the rest of the family
to go outside and scream
to go outside and talk about anything but this death
to get away from here
go to a movie
distraction
acknowledgement
some kind of ceremony
to get the rest of the roommates out of the house
to get the rest of the roommates to stop giving you uncomfortable
looks
to get people to stop trying to cheer you up
to tell everyone else that this is the anniversary day
to tell you that all the mixed things you feel are ok
to tell you the things I love about you
to tell you that this is the worst thing you'll ever know
to tell you that I want to know everything. it is not a burden.

circle what you think you might need. or write more. I want to be here for you. I want to be your friend.

to compose herself and participate in life activities she enjoyed. Within a few hours after completing the treatment she was exhausted and I ushered her home to rest. Over the next day she would find herself wandering the city streets, lost, and when I returned late the following night it was clear something was wrong and that she needed to go to the emergency room. From this moment, until the evening of that terrible Saturday the 21st of July, she would become a resident of Room 510 at New York Methodist Hospital, not far from either of our residences, as they struggled to determine what condition her condition was in.

All these moments and memories that come before 'the moment I cannot escape' are seen through its lens, as it is impossible for me to understand the dynamics of the situation without it being tainted by what followed. Even with over a decade of community organizing experience I was unable to construct a collaborative effort of care, and collectivize the process and activities Jodi and I were engaged in. I carry an incredible guilt for the nights I didn't travel up to Jodi's apartment, for not discussing the entirety of the situation with her, for the times that I lacked patience, and for the now irritable headache I cannot acknowledge nor apologize for that I caused her during the course of our partnership. Any relationship of care, regardless of its affective and physical components, is composed of activities - its content, substance, and function - that are productive. [These activities are acts of struggle; of those against the imposition of care work, gendered and capitalist social relations. It is these that we need to investigate, further, expand upon, and where necessary construct.]

death

What I had realized on Sunday evening was apparent to all by Monday morning; that Jodi was never coming back to me, to us, and this world we all inhabit. With EEG after MRI showing "no brain activity" and the discovery that the seizure was in fact total brain failure, the neurological team provided not even the slimmest of hopes that she would ever awaken.

For the next four days, as continuing tests showed the same results, as nurses and doctors filed through, as visitors came to pay their respects, and we resigned ourselves to the inevitability of the situation - all these characters found themselves waiting for her life support to be terminated. The activity of keeping ones body alive when their mind has passed on is an act of violence; from the respirator forcing air into ones lungs, the constant maintenance of fluid and nutrient levels, the surveillance of the body's entire functioning, all of this requiring constant imposition against the known or perceived will of the 'person.'

Every blip on the monitor or drop in blood pressure would cause me to shake or a friend to call upon us to return to the hospital; numerous times over these days I would race back to the hospital to say my final goodbyes. It was this act of having to say goodbye over and over

I entered her room, walked up to her bedside, and took her hand as she violently seized. Standing there alone with her, doctors just outside the door, the nurses running in and out, unable to speak besides to say "its me," periodically covering her naked body as she pulled at her hospital gown, her eyes closed – I held her hand and watched as she passed into the unknown. Every morning since this moment, as soon as I realize that I am awakening into the day, I have the most uncontrollable terrors; but as I shake and cry I am able to find other memories of her that allow me to escape from this.

Five days after that terrible Saturday in July, on the night that her body was finally at rest, I gave a panegyric at a gathering in Prospect Park of nearly seventy of her friends. I described her as "a character," continuing, "Her raspy voice and personality carried on far beyond her small body. Argumentative, sharp, punchy, and quick would all describe her conversational style and how she interacted with the world; yet within this she was unrelenting in her support and love for her friends. Her social conscience intersected with her love of craft and old typewriters, which in turn intersected with her unique sense of humor and her obsession with bulldogs (she just couldn't walk past one without grabbing it in her arms)." The lines that immediately followed these were read by a Conor, a close mutual friend, as I was temporarily unable to continue.

I began the piece, titled "Jodi Tilton: A Life," which this paragraph is drawn from, quite late on Sunday evening, after that terrible Saturday: after watching her pass into the unknown, after walking from her bedside to consult with the doctors and to call her parents to let them know they needed to return to the hospital, after she seized for nearly five hours as I held her hand, after her move to the Intensive Care Unit, after a number of friends arrived, after emergency brain surgery, after hoping that the swelling would go down, after scan after scan reported "no brain activity," after we maintained a constant vigil in the waiting room and at her bedside for two days. After I returned home, to my room, alone; after I caught myself as I thought I was losing my mind – I realized that she was never coming back to me, to us, and this world we all inhabit.

This is 'the moment I cannot escape': because in this moment, with this realization, a productive capacity – a machine (really a set of tiny machines) – began to turn inside of me. I began to walk along a number of "lines of flight," one produced "A Life"; others are far more dangerous.

On July 9th I accompanied Jodi for her second, and what would be her final, Remicade treatment; which is a particularly insidious, genetically modified, option for autoimmune disorders. This became her last resort, as the steroids were not controlling her flair ups, and while she could deal with being ill, she would not accept the steroids interfering with her ability

KEEP YOU WARM

constantine koutsoutis

[Note to Readers: The intent of this story is to record a very personal journey though coping with the death of a loved one. It contains language that may be disempowering for woman-identified readers. However, after a productive dialogue between author and editor, we have decided to retain this language because it illustrates the potential experience of grief expression as gendered and emasculating. While a deeper discussion of this theme is beyond the scope of this piece, we invite readers to think and talk about how gender functions both here and in our communities in ways that might restrict our healing. The value of this discussion is as important as the emotional honesty offered by the author of this piece.]

The thing about it is, it takes a long time. It lives up to its name, festering and slowly eating away at tissue and nerves and skin, at cells and memories and soul. I really don't think anything's been more aptly named throughout history. Though if you think about it, that's a sort of cyclical logic. After all, we gave it that name. So it's like I think that it acts like the name we gave to it, though it didn't really have a name before we named it. Thus, we defined such a thing. We gave it identity and in some small way, a fraction of power. Which in a way is more power than it deserved, because it made it more dangerous and more hurtful than before. There's a shred of comfort in the unknown, in being able to admit that you are ignorant. It takes things out of your hands in a way. But knowing what it is, knowing what could be done or what could have been done, it makes you doubt yourself, makes you hate the world and temporarily forget about what's needed. Love and support and simply being there to hold a withered hand, and squeeze it with every ounce of goddamn strength you've got, to make up for it on that other end.

Hold fast.

care

15

70

After a while, it started to stop hurting. Not completely, but enough. Enough so that I could get up in the morning and have a few cups of coffee, get in my car and go to work and get through the day without throwing up into the toilet in a stall or staring at the computer screen until my vision blurred, unaware of the tears that had been streaming down my face, oblivious to my coworkers staring, afraid and silent. I hadn't said a word at home. Sarah would just look at me wide-eyed as I'd watch TV or eat, always on the verge of saying something. We'd gone together, in the car at the crack of dawn to make the two-hour trip there, beating traffic, just for me and her to smoke afterwards with my sister and and cousins in the parking lot afterward, silent. My cousins passed a flask back and forth.

"It'll be hard to accept..." my dad had said, staring straight ahead. "It'll be hard to accept but one day, you'll feel ok and the truth won't seem so bad." I don't know if he was trying to convince me or himself. Probably a bit of both. All I really remember is that his shoulders had never seemed so low, he'd never seemed so small. Against all those memories of him, taller than me, setting up basketball hoops and barbecues in the yard, grinning mischievously whenever he said something obnoxious to make my mother mad at the dinner table...it made me sad, to see him so small.

"Hey man, how are you doing?" My coworkers all ask. They can't help it. I'm fan-fucking-tastic Greg, just on top of the world. For a second every muscle is screaming to jump up like a spring-loaded toy and snap out, a hard fist against a soft and sycophantic jawbone, and feel it shatter under my knuckles like candied glass.

I tried to summon a weak smile, the kind where you're trying to fake it and you can't pull it off, but that's not a problem because people know you're trying, and the effort's enough. "I'm okay, I guess." I turned back to my computer. "I mean, at least it's over."

"Yeah, I guess." He went back to his desk across the office, and I felt another presence behind me.

"She's in a better place, you know." I felt it on my shoulder, an unwanted fat and heavy hand. For a minute old me slips through the boarded up windows, and "heavy with righteousness" comes to mind, but only for a second.

EXCERPT FROM: THE MOMENT I CANNOT ESCAPE: CARE, DEATH, MOURNING, AND THE STRUGGLE AGAINST IT ALL

by Kevin Van Meter

JANUARY 2008

What follows is an excerpt from a very rich and detailed piece, in which the author discusses the intersection between care work, death, mourning and radical politics utilizing a narrative from his own life. It is highly recommended that interested readers seek out the complete text, which can be found at www.warmachines.info.

At the time of this writing, it is nearly six months from that terrible Saturday, since I held Jodi's hand as she passed into the unknown.

Just two hours earlier I had left her bedside, hugged her, kissed her forehead, stated that "I'll see you later when you wake up from your nap" as I looked back on my way out the door; looked back at her outstretched arm and how it slowly dropped to her side. She reached for me as she said goodbye, unable at this point to really speak more than a few words, but I knew every 'look' and I understood what she was saying to me. I see this image every time I close my eyes, no matter how much I try to drink it away. But this is not the moment I am referring too.

As I left the hospital I spoke with her parents, letting them know she wanted to try and get some sleep before a group of us came back later in the evening. They mentioned that the doctors didn't see a change in her condition, as the past four days she was losing her ability to speak, walk, and collect herself. While I was worried, I was yet to be distraught, as she was on a lot of medication and at twenty-three years of age I thought 'brain plasticity' would allow for a full recovery. When this new set of symptoms began to set in, I remember a moment quite clearly as she sat on her bedside, with me standing before her. Her arms around my waist, mine intertwined with hers and resting on her shoulders. She was concerned that the lesions that had developed in her brain, and that were causing this trouble, were permanent and that she would never be the same. To her "I'll never be smart again," I said in response "you're gonna be ok," and promised that I would be there throughout her recovery. I squeezed her to confirm this; it was always that way with us, words were secondary to what we would say with our eyes, arms, and 'looks.'

I was called back to the hospital by Ben, a good friend of us both, who said she wasn't doing well. As I raced up to the hospital on my bike, I called on others to join me. But in getting off the elevator, seeing the expression on Ben's face, and the seriousness of the doctors huddled just outside her door, caused me to break from all the moments before and after.

GOING HOME

by ali b.

my grandmother passed away back in 2003, according to the gravestone. that time of my life was blur- i was living at the hobo house, trying to make rent and not drop out of school, maintain some semblance of sanity. my dog died, then grandmother passed away. it was definitely a sucker punch to my insanely emotionally fragile heart. i hadn't visited her grave since she was buried- not because i didnt want to, time just sort of slips by, i guess.

im back on long island for a few days- mostly just to hang out with my folks, maybe clean out my room a little more. today my mom's coworkers took her out for lunch for her birthday, and she invited me along. across the street was the cemetery where my grandparents are buried, so after i dropped mom off at work, i went back to the cemetery and strolled around, trying to find their graves. lots and lots of dead people there- humans are funny animals, what with the burying of remains in quiet places (well, not so quiet- right off searingtown road and next to the traintracks.) anyway, i stepped inside a building, thinking it might be the office- nope. definitely a mausoleum. it smelled like a wake, lots of flowers and carpeting and benches... but the acoustics were totally killer, given the high ceilings and the completely granite walls.

so, in my grandmother's memory, i belted out a totally stellar rendition of Cabaret for all the dead folks. see, grandmother loved playing the piano and performing. she was never a grumpy old lady- in fact, she made fun of those kinds of old ladies- the crabby kind i have to deal with at work- anyway, if any of them were complaining that her insane granddaughter was disturbing their eternal rest, im sure she was there backing me up and teasing them into enjoying probably the only performance they would hear in a very long time. i sang as loud as i could, and danced on the benches reserved for weeping, and joked with the crowd about the irony of singing a song about how short and sweet life is ("start by admitting from cradle to tomb, it isnt that a long a stay- ha, you know!") when i finished, there was (stunned?) silence, but i imagined applause echoing around the room.

"I suppose so," I said without turning around, still working on something. I shifted out of the grip, reaching to the other side of the cubicle to get something. "At least it's over" I repeated. After a few seconds of silence, I could feel the hand lift off my shoulder and then leave. I hadn't even bothered to turn around.

It seemed like a good thing to keep thinking. "She's in a better place". Or at least say to avoid having actual conversations with people. I'm not sure, I couldn't really be bothered to try and respond in any sort of coherent way. Just being able to function on autopilot without having something fail within me at a mental level seemed like a monumental step for me to have taken, and to get beyond that and attempt another shade of semblance of normalcy was too much to ask.

No one was at home when I got back. There was a note by the phone from Sarah, she'd gone out with some friends to a play and then dinner and drinks, and to call her cell if I needed anything. I crumpled the note up, planted myself on the floor in front of the TV. I didn't turn it on right away, I just sat there for a second, feeling the day slowly catch up to me. Sarah'd been trying to keep me busy. She knew how my brain worked, she'd go get us coffee as we'd sit around the foot of the bed, unwilling to leave for even a second for fear of missing anything.

She would always said to try and make something out of every day, a small way to fight the grind. I thought for a second that I'd welcome that grind, something daylong that I could keep my mind on and not have seconds, minutes, hours to spare. Someone in a shirt and tie, the sleeves rolled up and the tie slightly askew like he'd been working hard all day, tried to talk to me. There are five stages and it's normal for you to feel the way you do, he'd said. But soon, she'll be in a better place and then you'll be able to face each step one at a time until everything's OK again, until you can feel normal.

I didn't deny it. I didn't get angry at anyone or at myself. I didn't think I was depressed or had someone to bargain with, whatever that meant. And I mean, how are you gonna accept it? I thought I was doing well. That heavy feeling, that keeps you numb and feels like poison ivy slowly creeping up your arms from ignorant childhood fingers? That's normal, right? It's just a part of you reminding your brain that something is different, something you need to just accept. Nothing I can do about it.

The regiment's harsh. A barrage against your body and mind, withering you down to a shallow husk, a shadow of self in the name of cures. After a point I told myself I couldn't do it anymore, couldn't bring myself to sit there and look at her without crying and bawling like a fucking bitch, biting my knuckles hard until I bled, sending the nurse alarmed for antiseptic, and wishing there was something I could do, someone I could hurt to make this all go away.

But I didn't go away, I sat there. Because that's what I had to do. I couldn't explain it, not to anyone who asked, not to Sarah, not to Cathy, not to any of my friends who held me as I stared wordlessly whenever I stole moments to try and see them to try and distract myself, buried in beer. I got to know tiled walls and sterile floors well, pacing back and forth, drinking so much shitty coffee I didn't sleep for three days straight at one point. We'd all fall asleep in the chairs or at the foot of starch-white sheets of the bed, a sad pathetic united mess of family. We slept and woke up and they was yelling and pushing us out of the way as alarms went off and nurses and doctors ran around.

Two nights later I drank so much I had to be carried out to someone's couch, still reeking of a bottle of Maker's Mark with stains of God-knows-what on my shirt and pants, my eyes red and my throat sore from screaming at the sky and at familiar faces, they didn't know what I was going through and they couldn't help me, at least then in my mind. My friends told me they thought I'd had alcohol poisoning. I remembered vivid dreams, dreams that had me screaming in silence in a white void where I was so scared of looking down I hit myself in the eyes.

The scar under my left eye was miniscule.

I heard the door open. Suddenly, I noticed that it was darker. The LED clock blinked 2 am, and I heard Sarah.

"What are you doing?" She dropped her keys on the floor, clattering like a pile of coins in a pocket, and came over, crouching down next to me. "Have you been sitting here since you came home from work?"

"I think so." I didn't really know what to tell her. It was like a chunk of time had just disappeared. The glare and noise of the TV had covered me like a blanket.

have that flag in an honored place in my apartment now. Whether it is my flag, it was his. And I honor his gods, as I honor him, even if I myself could never kneel in homage to them, and if I pray at all, it is for their fall.

I have come to a wisdom over these months, not just an acceptance of his death, but truly a celebration. His demons, and mine, and all of yours, are linked, my comrades. They are the same. We all suffer under the tyranny of a bloodthirsty elite, their system and their state, a nightmare world in which not even they can be truly happy. Someday, we shall win, sisters, brothers, and all; never doubt that. Take heart from the battle we each fight, each in our own way, in just continuing to live in this horrific world. Even if our glorious dawn never comes, and the night lasts until we as a species perish from the face of the earth—still, the battle is not lost. My father fought that battle to his death, and he did find his liberation; the monsters who deal in slavery and genocide and all manner of atrocity, the ones he perceived and could not escape in life—they cannot follow us into death. We shall be free. And I am happy, deeply happy, to know my father finally escaped them.

And the beauty he managed to see, and share with me and all his many friends, this shows the indomitableness of the human spirit, which in spite of all oppressions, be they real, imagined, or something between, can remain a vibrant and inspiring wellspring of love, which cannot be defeated. We love each other now, and it is our love, and its power, that proves that our visionary world is possible. If love is possible, even in the corrupting and perverting and soul-crushing powers of this world, then I know anarchy can and will flower in all its ecstatic and rapturous potentials, when this system is finally brought down, or collapses of its own evil weight. If my father could be kind, and loving, a fine father to me, despite all his faults and mistakes, even with the double weight of oppressions outside and inside his head; if my own battle can be fought, and sometimes achieve little victories, with the help of my comrades and friends and my ideals; if people can be good to each other, even sometimes, then our world is possible. Indeed, it already exists, in our hearts. Thank you, Daddy, for giving me hope.

Perhaps the most difficult thing about it all was our political differences, which revolved round the age-old debate of reform or revolution. He never condemned the bastards in his mind; he acknowledged their authority, always defending this wretched system when we argued, because in his mind, it could always be worse; and where I was forced to Revolution to feel any sense of hope or dignity as my monsters assailed me, he urged a pacifist attitude which made me feel shame in his denigration of the working class which he, and I, were born into and, happily or sadly, remain. He was a beautiful, kind, noble human being. But, his unwillingness to make the conclusion I have made, that all oligarchs must fall, and that the People are the only ones worth dying for, made him a sadder man than I have been. No matter how horrible it gets, I can find a strength in my faith in humanity, and their eventual liberation from this terrible Babylon. He never had that. And, while he was alive, I could never give him that gift.

I am sad, contemplating the pain of his life. I grieve for him. But, too, I know he is now finally at peace, his suffering finally over. I know that many anarchists subscribe to the "No Gods, No Masters" concept, and presumably distrust any idea of an afterlife. I myself am not so doctrinaire. I neither believe in an afterlife, nor do I disbelieve it. I guess I'll figure it out when I get there. For my father, Heaven was something he could not possibly live without, and I never tried to take it away from him. When my family went into his hospital room, to view the body the night he died, his face was one of unbelievable ecstasy. His eyes were closed, and his mouth, though it had a great tube sticking in it, was a smile—not a peaceful smile, or one even of relief, but of absolute rapture. Perhaps he never got to heaven; but his last moment on this plane was surely the greatest release he ever felt. I hope my moment of death shall be that totality, even if it's just the last flare of the flame of life, before the final darkness.

My friends were glorious to me, during the wake, and the funeral that followed. They remain my rock and my joy. Solidarity. This is perhaps the most beautiful of human feelings. And though my father was buried under the flag of a country that had betrayed him, that has stood for some of the worst atrocities in human history, I

A white blanket over a face. All of a sudden I had to get up, get out, get it out. I scrambled to my feet, realizing how sweaty and clammy I was just sitting there, as I fumbled around in the dark, looking for the bathroom. I didn't even hit the lights, I just fell to my knees and grasped at the cool, slick, comforting edge of the toilet bowl in the gloom, faintly seeing the white of the tiles.

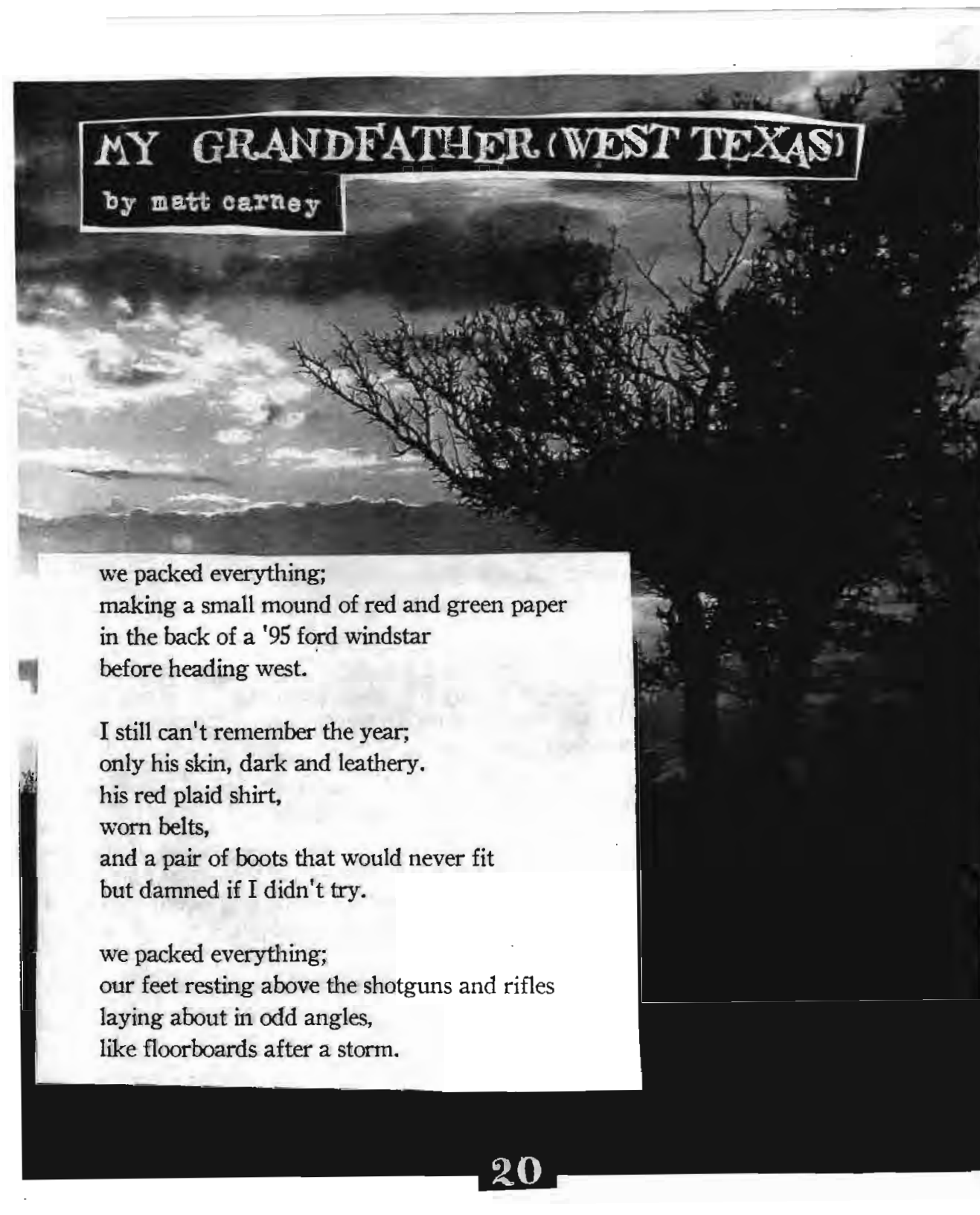
I threw up. I threw up until I had nothing more to purge, screaming and crying as I hung my head there, mouth slack open and drooling, wet tears rolling down my face as I heaved and screamed and grunted and cried. At one point I felt the lights get turned on, though I don't know if that was just in my head as I squeezed my face, squeezing my eyes closed as I felt the sick hot liquid against the back of my throat, against my teeth as I gagged and spat and wretched my stomach, pushing it all out. Every poison I'd felt as they'd given it to her as if it might help, every word I'd wanted to say and curse I'd wanted to scream because my rational brain told me they wouldn't do any good, and every word I tried to choke out but couldn't because I couldn't keep it together and I had to be strong, I'd had to be strong for her. She was gone, gone, and all I wanted to do was just empty myself out of everything that I'd ever felt, from the first moment I could ever remember in her arms, barely able to walk, to that last moment when I almost broke my hand punching through the window.

Finally I was done. There was nothing left, I don't even know how long I'd been there puking up what little I'd eaten and drank in the past few days. I almost fell, face-first into the watery, dirty mess in the bowl but Sarah caught me, by the back of the neck like I was a puppy dog. I felt something cold and wet against my face. "Goddamnit" she whispered. I could hear her fighting back tears for a second, "don't worry, it'll be ok." I curled up, wrapping my arms around my shoulders, my face on her knee. "It'll be ok."

I felt empty. It still hurt, but different. That heavy slow poison from before was gone. I felt the pain in every nerve, every extremity, every inch of my body. And I could feel it slowly die down, bit by bit, and feeling return. Or maybe I was imagining it, I didn't know.

"It'll be ok." I felt a hot tear fall onto my cheek, and I opened my eyes and looked up at her. She grinned at me, wiping at her cheek.

Yeah.



MY GRANDFATHER (WEST TEXAS)

by matt carney

we packed everything;
making a small mound of red and green paper
in the back of a '95 ford windstar
before heading west.

I still can't remember the year;
only his skin, dark and leathery.
his red plaid shirt,
worn belts,
and a pair of boots that would never fit
but damned if I didn't try.

we packed everything;
our feet resting above the shotguns and rifles
laying about in odd angles,
like floorboards after a storm.



by sid prise

My father died in October of 2006, after a year and a half of living with illness, physical, emotional, and spiritual. The last times I visited him in the nursing home he'd found himself in, he would tell me to hush while he listened to "gun shots" ringing through the hallway outside his room. His mind had always been the playground for demons of his paranoia, and the last time he talked with me, he assured me that the powers that be were moving to assassinate him. He'd been tortured by such fears for longer than I've been alive; and from a young age, he schooled me on the dark, inner circles which ran the world, and which had been fucking with him since he was in his twenties. Over the years of their marriage, my mother had to deal with his almost yearly visits to the hospital for extended stays, had to shoot him up with Prolixin, and suffer through his alcoholism.

Yet, I always found him heroic in his battle. Real or imagined, his tormentors represented the most evil tendencies in the human condition, personified in the form of what he called "the bourgeoisie," a word I learnt when I was no more than three years old. When my own schizophrenia began to affect me, in my early twenties, the voices I heard and the "plot" they wrote for me were these same shadows, these same ruling circles, and after some ten years of fighting them, their character has not changed. I have inherited my father's paranoia, his hypersensitivity and hyperawareness of the evil way this world is structured, and, like him, I have made my own private fight against them, taking up my own red and black banner to stand alone on the barricades against their onslaught. I know what my father suffered, because I suffer the same. I love him deeply, deeply respect him, and also I find it hard to forgive him for implanting in me the seeds of my madness.

as your body passed
from this world into beyond.
I was there to send you off,
my friend.
And I am honored
to have witnessed your death.
To me, there is nothing more sacred.

I was there to help your parents
box up your material remains.
I boxed up your material remains
as your other friends wallowed in them –
remembering you.

Sharing those moments after your death with them was strange because they were complete strangers to me.

I got wrapped up in the shit
of those with whom you surrounded yourself in the end.
They questioned my presence,
my intentions.

If they had only known you as I did.
Only known of my promise to you.

by kēndy

I call my parents each night to let them know I am home safe and sound. I do this every night even if I am tired or I do not feel like talking. One time I forgot to call my mom and realized my mistake and called a few hours late. She picked up the phone crying. I am 28 years old, I have been living on my own for 10 years. When I tell people I have to call my parents at night they think that my parents either don't trust me or they treat me like a child. Neither of those are true, it comes down to having lost a child and wanting to protect the other. Truth be told, if I call my parents and they do not pick up, I get worried too. This act has extended to my boyfriend, I like him to call if he is running late or has to do something after work.

My younger sister died October 27, almost 4 years ago at the age of 23. She was in the passenger side of her friend's car. Her friend was celebrating his 27th birthday and was drinking and doing drugs. When he crashed his truck, he lived that night, while my sister lost her life. When I talk to people about drinking and driving I tell them that I still have nightmares of visiting her at the funeral home with the top of her head covered with a white towel. Maybe some day people will realize that drinking and driving is pointless and dangerous. When I meet people who have had a family member die because of a drunk driver I feel a bond.

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MY EXPERIENCES WITH DEATH by ellen catalina

I have thought so hard about how to approach this piece and I still don't know how.

Maybe I can tell you why I am interested at all in writing about death.

Two years ago my son's father died of cancer. He died around 6 weeks after my newest child was born, the child of my current husband.

I had been divorced from my husband for quite some time and I had a very mixed experience with his death, because to be perfectly honest, I didn't like my ex-husband very much. One of my greatest fears in life was that I would die and my ex would get custody of my son, who is now 11. Life with his father would be difficult as his dad was an exacting, criticizing person. But I won't go too far into that, for he is now dead and I have no reason to discuss his shortcomings for they have left with him.

My son has been remarkably free of any grief since the death of his father. I kept waiting for it to hit him, for him to show the grief as I know children can be different than adults in the processing of grief. Sasha, my son, showed anger and contempt for my husband for a few months, but that was it. He got over it quickly. He confessed that he felt secretly relieved that his dad was gone and I affirmed for him that it is OK to have those feelings. I fully expect, however, that he will process this event in different ways throughout his life.

When he is a teen he will likely idolize his dad, because he will be the parent who is not there. I witnessed how my friends in their teens idolized fathers who had picked up and walked out on the family. I could see that he could go through something similar and I fully expect it.

He will also likely go through something else when he is the age his father was when he died (45 years old). He may at that time grapple with his own mortality.

There's no way of telling what the future brings or how he will interpret his dad's death as he matures.

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But I would like to shift focus now and tell you a little bit about things I learned from my ex-husband's death about death itself.

I had the unusual experience of watching my ex-husband die, and he had what might be described as a "good death," in the sense that he organized a dying celebration and ceremony to honor his life and died during it, which seemed to be exactly what he wanted.

I will not pretend that he probably didn't feel horrible before he died, as he most likely did. But I was glad that his wishes were mostly fulfilled about who would be present and what the mood of the event would be.

Although I didn't like him, I felt absolutely horrible about his having to die, I cried with him when he told me the fear he felt, and I would have done just about anything possible to alleviate his considerable pain and discomfort. There are few things worse than watching a person go through something like this as they are often terrified and there are few ways to reassure the person's fears as they face the unknown. I could have told him he would go straight to heaven, but I don't know that and he wouldn't have likely bought it. Even if he did, his fear would have still be looming and heavy.

The only thing I tried to assure him of was that I would care well for Sasha and not speak poorly of him to our son after he was gone. This has been a difficult promise to keep as my son often expresses his anger towards his dad and I feel it is important to affirm his feelings. Sometimes I will affirm that his dad was difficult in all the ways he was, but try to explain to him that his father was a victim of childhood abuse and racism, being born indigenous-looking in Euro-centric Chile. I try to explain how these hardships can affect a person's behavior without them even being aware of it themselves.

I always thought that if a person I knew was dying of terminal cancer, I would try my best to provide them with pain relief, stepping outside the law if necessary. Namely, buying heroin for a dying person in pain is not outside my ethical system. I am very aware that pain is often under treated because doctors prescribing opiates are monitored by the government that is more concerned with curbing addiction than helping people in pain. Which is total bullshit if you ask me.

DEAR CHRIS

by emilia hurd

Dear Chris,

What is left of you in my memory?

I'd like to say that what's left
after your death

are pieces that I knew of Chris-
idea machine Chris;

morning pancakes on the griddle Chris;
humming "tee-tee-tee" Chris;

But that's not all of that's left.

The other night I dreamt
that I was the one who killed you.
Instead of the AIDS virus
that infected your mind,
your inventive mind.

Why,

a year after you've passed,
am I left with feelings
of guilt and betrayal?

You told your sickness to me and no one else.

That was heavier than I could bear.

Seeing you continue your romps with various men,
unsuspecting men...

I told Debbie

since she was the one that convinced you
to get tested for syphilis in the first place.

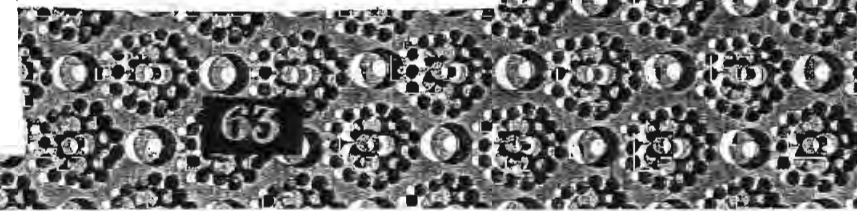
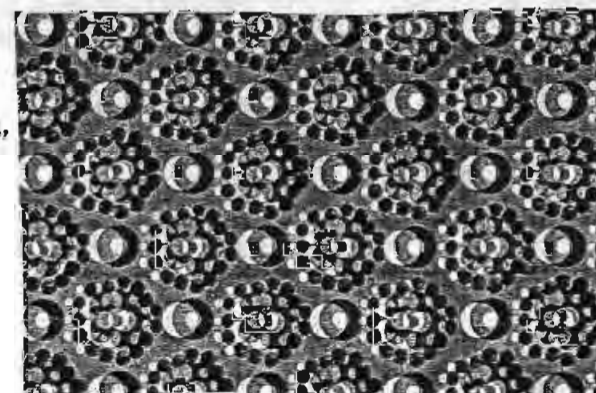
To you, this was betrayal and you shunned me.

But I made a promise to you.

I promised you that I would be there for you through your sickness
as support and as family.

Someone you could lean on,
someone to lend you money.

I was there for you



with me until Kel came, but when she arrived Kel was a complete wreck. I was in shock, completely numb, and thought that I could get on with the next day's plans as usual. After a sleepless night, I walked Kel halfway to the train station before going to talk to a counselor about what had happened. We came up with a plan (simply to eat and to sleep), which I was barely able to follow for the next week: I quickly lost weight, and didn't realize that I was dangerously self-medicating with cold medicine. I closed all the blinds and locked myself in my bedroom, drinking and listening to slow, somber music. In retrospect, my reaction that first week set the course for the next year, a time marked by periods of extreme isolation and depression. Really, I didn't need anyone to say anything to me (there was nothing to say), but I did need people to just be there, to physically be there, and to listen to me if I wanted to talk. Then came the night of your wake, which was by far the worst night of my life and has frightened me beyond words. I was completely unprepared, and sometimes I still try and blame you and that night for my burgeoning alcoholism. I drink to remember you, to feel stronger when talking about you, to permit myself to think and talk about you, and to feel more connected to the people around me. But now it's been 1 and 1/4 years and I want to be done, I want you to never have existed, I want to live with the living, and I want our shit to be resolved -- and it never will be. I love you, always, but now I can see through you. Now, all I can do is apologize. "Metal heart, you're not hiding/ metal heart, you're not worth a thing." I'll apologize to you, to nothing and for nothing, always.

When my ex was dying, however, I realized that heroin would not likely help him. He had tremendous digestive problems in his last days and one of the problems relating to this was constipation, a condition that would surely be made worse by adding street opiates to the other prescribed meds he was taking. I realized a dose of heroin might kill him and I wasn't ready to be responsible for this, although he expressed very clearly that he wanted to die. There is no handbook for how to handle this stuff and when it is best to help someone take matters into their own hands. It must be considered on a case-by-case basis, and even then you are probably likely to feel fear that you are doing the wrong thing or question your actions because we have become a culture very far removed from death. It's kind of like delivering a baby when you have no idea how to.

He told me he had a good doctor who was willing to help him die, which is what he wanted and so I left it at that, never offering him the heroin. The sad thing about the doctor's merciful offer was that he would have to re-enter the hospital to get the doctor's help in dying. I think he would have preferred to stay home, and again this proves the lack of mercy that the law offers in allowing people to have the death they want.

He did, however, get to have his older son come to the hospital and build a sculpture in the room, a tribute to my ex's life as a woodworker, it had saw blades hanging from it and it was beautiful. A fellow Chilean who practices Native American spirituality came and chanted and asked the forces and powers to take him, and after maybe 20 or 30 minutes of this rambling prayer-invocation he died. He had invited many people to be there and the room was full of people he loved most and also people he knew only as casual acquaintances, my new child was there, and others. I think it was the most human death one could possibly have in a hospital setting.

My husband has told me that we have become removed from death as a culture. In the middle ages people buried their dead in their back yards. Later they began to bury them in the town square. Now we bury our dead far, far away in towns far removed from our cities.

I read recently that during the Victorian era people would often picnic in graveyards as an outing. Although I don't think the Victorian era was terribly enlightened, this long-lost practice makes sense to me. I imagine that gathered around the burial place of a dead relative or friend, conversation might turn to that person and what they meant to everyone who knew them when they are living.

by michael

1. We were swept up, or maybe just whirled around. It's hard to remember. But it was consensual and it was nice, and it was intense, and it was fast. We were moving entire continents beneath our feet. Two tickets out, when I left that's all I had. The scales were shifting the weight all on their own. A whole great space was opening and things seemed brighter, more possible.

2. I ended the dream in Portland OR, telling myself I could make it through the winter. That this wasn't the hardest year, and that I had the support web to hold myself above water. I mean I'm just learning how to swim but we were going to make it; we are going to make it, but I really thought it was going to be easier.

3. I got a stream of phone calls in early September. They were so fast I can't really remember who they were from, or the order. Max was arrested on some bogus charge and was convinced his life was over. He was bailed out by a friend. Stole a gun from Kit and went missing. He had a date with his partner. He was going to go see his favorite band. The cops had his insulin needles (evidence). It happened so fast, and the next thing I knew I was at the Kansas city airport with my mom in my arms. Then Donna and I were at the police station, going through his wallet. 14 dollars cash, A debit card, a few pictures, and then the library card. Some times crying is like vomiting. Usually something small triggers it, like a smell, or a sight, or a motion; this time it was a library card. And then something comes out of you, it sprays, it spews, it is uncontrollable, and so powerful. It was no longer an institution of oppression. it was a fucking battlefield, we were struggling to control the raw emotion that we were feeling, we were fighting ourselves, trying to pull everything back inside us, but in a fight like that how can you win.

TO NOTHING

by jenny

I was listening to my favorite song when I got the first call. The song was "Metal Heart" by Cat Power, and it was a song that we used to listen to together. Once we sat on the edge of my bed in my old room, and as I tried to tell you how great I thought the song was you interrupted to ask a silly question. This time, as I was listening to the song, I was painting. Can you believe it? I hadn't painted anything in years, except for this one day when I went out and bought paints and decided that I was going to make something beautiful. I was listening to "Metal Heart" and painting when I got that first call from our friend, Kel. I was so excited to hear her voice, but now she was crying. She said you overdosed. A friend had found you in the bathroom, and there was blood dripping from your ears onto your hair. Pacing back and forth on my back porch, I talked to Kel for almost an hour and tried to convince her and myself that you were fine, that this was totally normal, that you were so tough and that nothing could hurt you. I took a shower to prepare myself and for the first time, I let myself imagine that you might actually be gone. Then, clutching my drained cell phone, I started calling other friends. One friend had just talked to you hours before and thought that I was calling to confirm our plans to party at her parentless house the next night. She said you sounded so fucked up on the phone, but that she didn't think it was strange. (No-one thought it was weird that you were constantly fucked up those last few weeks, and I'm so sorry we didn't do more to get you the help that you desperately needed). The call was interrupted by another call from Kel, this time crying painfully until she finally blurted out that you were gone. I screamed and cried and cried and cried and cried. Just then, a friend of mine pulled up with her car to take me to the hospital to see you, but I had to tell her it was too late. She stayed

While we sat as a group I kept thinking about all the work that's gone into keeping the building alive all these years: from the battles with the city in the courts and the streets, to the years of sweat and blood equity; all the sheetrock carried up five flights of stairs and every last scavenged brick. I started thinking about how we become like the spaces we inhabit, how we grow together in complexity and beauty. Then I started thinking about how when someone as amazing as Donny dies its like they become the mortar that holds the walls of the community together. Like we're the bricks, all us people who are left standing. When someone as amazing as Donny dies, they become the spiritual glue that bonds us together for life, until it becomes our own turn, one by one, to silently play that role.

VII.

It's Monday night and a group of us are sitting outside the building smoking and drinking and telling stories. There are flickering red, yellow, and green candles on the sidewalk lighting a memorial shrine to our lost friend. His haunting photo compels passersby, strangers, and neighbors alike to stop and pay their respects. Lisa's at the center of the crew. Everyone knows this is hardest for Lisa. We all know its getting cold out, that winter is coming, that the easy part of a tragedy is at the beginning when everyone gathers in mass to give support. The struggle is always in the long haul: raising the kids, paying the bills, finding the vision to always move forward when times get hard. We all know that Lisa and Donny had dreams of one day building a house on a piece of land up in Vermont and spending the rest of their lives together. We all know that the weight of lost dreams and responsibility that's just been placed on her shoulders would crush many people with a weaker spirit. We also all know that if there's anyone who can handle the weight its our friend Lisa. She is as strong willed and tough as they come. And when all is said and done, there's a whole pack of us that's going to stand by her and grow old with her together. I close my eyes, listening to the sound of my friends' voices in the quiet lat night street, and just for a second I see blinking red bicycle lights. I'm momentarily overcome with a sense of calm and a feeling that I'm part of something much bigger than myself that I don't really understand. And somehow I know its going to be alright. We're so lucky to have each other.

Lisa smiles her beautiful smile by the light of the candles as she holds her sleeping two-year-old daughter Leila in her strong arms. "See how Leila looks just like her father? Same nose, same lips. Same eyes. It feels sometimes like I'm holding Donny in my arms. Some people would look at my life right now and feel like giving up, feel like this is the end. But I look at the face of my child and know that in so many ways this is just the beginning. This is just the beginning."

4. Upon my return to Portland I was enraged. I couldn't speak to anyone for days, and no one understood my self-inflicted isolation. When I reintegrated myself into social activities I was baffled at the level of intimacy offered. I felt fatigued and starved for some kind of rawness. I want to pour into people and have them pour right back into me. I want the hot and the cold, I want to make hurricanes with the people around me. I need to feel like my surroundings are more community based, and less isolating.

5. Now things are slower, less concentrated emotion, slight stability. We're still searching for something more. I still need something more meaningful, some dream to both contribute to and hold on to. Right now I'd like to call it humanity. It's all I believe in anymore. Everything else seems like an extension. I still need the hot and the cold. I need both warmth and hurricanes. I need more, But i have to remember that sometimes things build slow, and some times things fall apart, but some dreams need to be built, Some empty spaces need to overflow.

I'LL ALWAYS CARRY YOU WITH ME

by sonja e. flowerbox

death

I first met Mosca Avocado when I had just returned from living abroad for a year in England. I was twenty and had just started a job working at a summer camp near Bemidji, Minnesota. I saw Mosca riding his bike around the villages at all staff training. I watched him a long time and decided that we would be friends. We slowly got to know each other. We were both cooks but at different kitchens so I would bike over to his camp to visit. We took saunas and sat out on roofs looking at the stars with other kitchen staff. Soon after that I moved in with him, his dog Chessie and another pit bull Penny into the Penguin Orphanage (an old van) in the woods. We lived there together for a couple months. We went on trips up to my parents near Red Lake and to Duluth where I had been living and going to school. We had a lot to share with each other. I had all of my adventures of traveling Europe and growing up in the woods and he shared his Anarchism and love for trains and traveling. He took me on my first train ride that summer. Wherever we went and no matter the conditions, we were happy together. Towards the end of the summer I drove him to Asheville where he had a room in a house waiting for him. It was a difficult trip but we made the most of it. We stopped anywhere that looked interesting, spent time with his family in Kentucky and arrived in Asheville uncertain of our future but excited. That's where we first told each other that we loved one another. We decided to say together even though I would be in Minnesota and he would be in North Carolina for the winter. After I left we talked on the phone or wrote nearly everyday. After a couple of months we decided to have an open relationship with pretty tight boundaries which I had never done before. There were some issues presented not so much because of our age difference (10 years) but because of our difference in experience. It was difficult for both of us but mostly me. Mosca was patient, understanding, sweet and supportive through all of that.

me wherever I go. To this day when I'm standing at the entrance of the part on St. Marks and Avenue A, I see the fancy restaurants and boutiques and people, but super-imposed over it all I still see a huge bonfire in the middle of the intersection and hundreds of people reclaiming the streets from a retreating arm of police and riot gear. Then I blink and it's gone.

The cops kicked the whole dancing dirty lot of us out of the park that night the Blinkin' Freddies came through town, but we just paraded down to the East River and danced some more to their old time rebel music. I could feel so many layers of history all around me on that walk down the river, stories like coats of peeling paint on the old tenement buildings falling on the bloodstained streets, old traditions I'm a part of that connect my friends to something a lot more powerful than our own individual lives. On the way to the river I proudly pointed out 7th Street Squat to a couple of my younger friends. "some of the most amazing people I know live behind those walls. They're the reason we're still walking down this street."

V.

Back in the springtime, me and some of those younger friends I danced with planted a garden at what was to become Jane Doe, the new anarchy-feminist infoshop in Brooklyn. Last Saturday I went back to Jane Doe for the first time since May and found a forest of collards and kale growing in the backyard. Most of them were from seedlings I grew and transplanted up at the farm in the Valley and now they were huge healthy plants thriving in the middle of the city. It made me really happy. This is about the time of year that collards and kale start to taste good because the cold weather stimulates the carbohydrates in their leaves to turn into sugars and they suddenly become sweet. These are the little things that give me hope. I harvested a big green and purple bunch and brought them back to Lisa at 7th Street.

VI.

We sat shiva for Donny at the Squat. There were warm rooms packed full of good people and good food. There were little kids running around everywhere. Even a couple big kids and teenagers. It was a forest of people; the kids were like the understory and the midstory. We were the trees. There were lots of old familiar characters from my life. We all had more lines on our faces, more stories on our skin and tongues. Lots of long embraces and tears. On Saturday night we sat in a room on the floor and each took turns telling stories and grieving, sharing our memories and holding each other up together.

While it was happening I thought to myself: "If it exists, this is how I imagine the afterlife—a million wandering souls floating in and around and through each other, strangers and friends crossing paths over and over forever." In different shapes and forms what we are doing has been happening for a long time, maybe since the beginning of time, and will continue to happen for a long time to come.

IV.

When you see a flashing red light at the end of a freight train sitting in a yard, you know that train is soon going to be taking off for somewhere else. When you're trying to get out of town in the middle of the night, sneaking through a trainyard with a pack on your back, that flashing red light is the sweetest sight there is to see. People who ride the rails call those blinking red lights "freddies", which is an anthropomorphic slang-play on the acronym "FRED (Flashing Rear End Device)". Back at the end of the Summer, a crew of trainhopping old time-playing musicians calling themselves the Blinkin' Freddies blew through New York City and played a free show in the middle of Thompkins Square Park. They had ridden freight trains together all of the way across the country from Portland, Oregon with their fiddles and banjos and guitars. They communicated their whereabouts across the country through a free 800 voicemail line, stopping along the way to play shows, busk on the streets, and hang out with their friends.

I was one of their friends. I'd known most of that crew for years and was proud to see, as I had suspected as hoped, that many of us are actually just getting cooler as we get older. Which is a good thing, cause time sure ain't moving backwards. When I hang out with certain crews of my friends I feel very much like I'm part of a secret culture of freedom and hope and adventure. And I have so much respect for my people who aren't afraid to follow their dreams and live loud the vibrant poetry of the universe in their day to day lives. I feel happily bound to a lot of these people for as long as we're all around and I'll should it for the world to hear. A bunch of us even all have the same little tattoo on our wrists: two interconnected circles, an old hobo sign that means "never give up." I look down at my wrist all the time when I'm starting to forget.

The night the Blinkin' Freddies played in the park there were about 50 dirty punk kids doing some beautiful and ridiculous mix of countrydancing and slamdancing. There was something so pure and raw about the whole thing, all acoustic and loud, it felt like we were waking up the rebel ghosts of the city with our joy and fire and song. I was one of the few people in the young crowd that night who had been around to remember when Thompkins Square had been the last part in the city not to have a curfew and I carry that history with

He hopped trains up to see me a few times that year. I showed him a real Minnesotan winter: we went sledding, skiing, walked on the ice shelves of Lake Superior. One morning we woke up to three feet of snow and walked to a park to jump in it all. It was so fun to be with him and to watch his skinny Southern frame shaking in the wind but so happy in all of that cold and beauty. We spent nights in my room talking and whispering secrets to each other and cooked peanut butter tofu stir fry as much as possible. Our love grew tremendously that winter. After several months he decided to move to Minneapolis. I went down from Duluth to visit him a lot. We were still in an open relationship and I had become confused about how I felt about him. I wasn't completely ready to be in a serious and dedicated relationship. I had slipped on the boundaries a few times and started to feel overwhelmed. He felt that I was the only one for him while I loved him dearly but wasn't ready to settle into a serious forever sort of relationship. I had a difficult time communicating this to him and he had an even harder time hearing it.



mosca and chessie

Later in the spring I met someone in Duluth. He was my own age, attractive and mysterious, we had a lot in common and seemed to be on a similar place in the world. Even



before this I had stopped being as attracted to Mosca. I still loved him deeply but didn't feel it romantically. It took months to get this through to him. It was incredibly hard and confusing for both of us. He had become my best friend, my mentor and someone that I always wanted to be a part of my life. The last time I saw him was later that summer in Minneapolis. I had told him that it was it. I didn't want to be with him anymore. I couldn't. He sat on the curb sobbing as I drove away slowly looking back in the rearview mirror. I had to get to work on time in Duluth. I couldn't stay there to comfort him.

It didn't take long for me to start a serious relationship with the new person that I had met in Duluth. We had already been hanging out and I knew that we could make it work. This was incredibly difficult for Mosca to bear. I didn't really understand what he was going through until later. But I know he went through hell. I pushed that grief aside, like I was accustomed to do with most things hard and jumped into the new relationship. After several months the new person and I were still together and Mosca and I were emailing again. He moved back to Asheville. We sent letters and packages. It wasn't the same but it was an incredibly loving relationship.

When Mosca died a little over a year ago it had been a year and a month since I had seen him and it was that last place with him on the curb and me driving away. When I heard the news over the phone my legs gave out and my heart stopped. Two days later my partner and I were driving down to Asheville. The drive was awful. It was the same route Mosca and I had taken; the same landmarks, the same towns, the same road side stops where we had taken the dogs for walks. We got to Asheville and I went to the same house that he had lived in when I had been there before. I sat on his bed where he had died and drank his home brew. I sobbed as I went through his things and talked to his friends. I laid on the bed and moaned and wailed like I'd never done before. I sat with his friends in vigil outside the house next to a shrine that was built. At night candles were lit, cigarettes were smoked and we drank and talked. After a few days we headed in caravan to Florence, Kentucky where the funeral was held. When I walked into the funeral home I realized that I would finally see Mosca again but that he would be in a casket. I sat down in a chair and breathed deeply. The scent of flowers brought me back to all of the funerals I had been to before and it made me gag. Eventually I made my way to the front and looked at him. I thought of all the times that I had watched him sleep. Had he looked like this then? Why are his hands folded like that, so unnatural, his hair is so dark, they must have dyed it, did he get a new tattoo? I wanted to touch him and to hold his hand but I couldn't. Before the funeral someone told me that we could put things into his casket. I went outside to write something

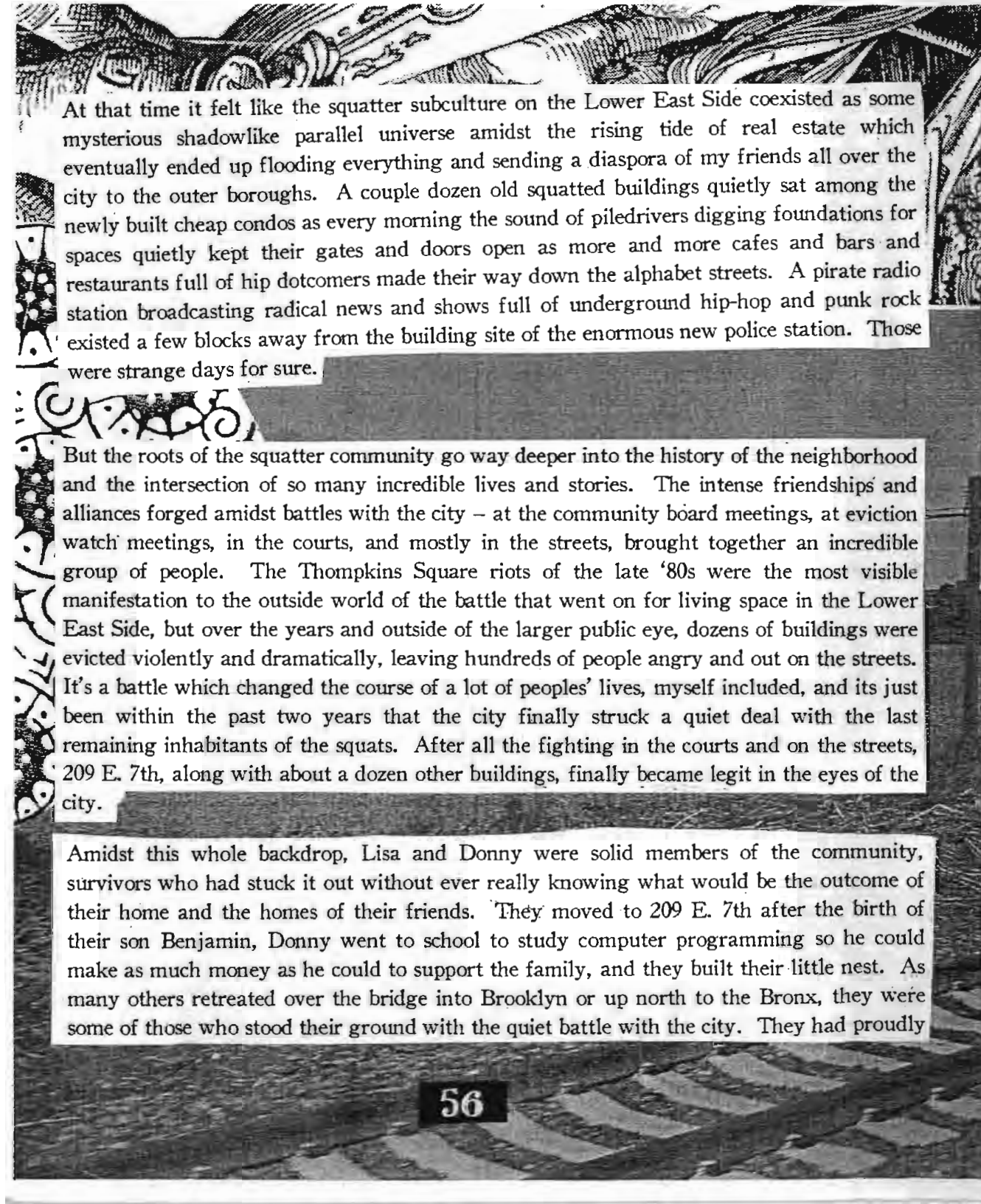
created a life worth fighting for—for themselves and for their children. And while they could have easily chosen a much easier path, their high ideals and vision allowed them to see the larger importance of living a radical life, challenging the system that their kids would eventually have to take on themselves.

III.

The Critical Mass rides in New York City happen the last Friday of every month. We all meet at Union Square with our bicycles and at around 7pm everyone pours out into traffic and takes over the entire four lane street, sidewalk to sidewalk. It's such a glorious sight. The Masses have been getting progressively bigger every month, there were probably a thousand of us at the last ride when we took over the upper level of the Manhattan Bridge and were finally dispersed by the Brooklyn police as we stopped to have a party by the river. Critical Mass is a protest of car culture, part of a larger alternative transportation movement pushing for more bike lanes and better traffic laws in the city. There are Critical Mass rides that happen all over the world. It's a celebration of community and autonomy from all the oil companies and corporate monsters who try to stranglehold our lives. It's a celebration of the simply beauty and freedom of riding a bicycle. It's also where so many of us come to see our friends and feel the power of numbers—the power of The Mass.

Weaving around each other, feeling the joyful unity amongst the strangers and familiar faces, Critical Mass is really a big roving street party that takes the city by storm every month. We ride a different route every time, but at some point we always end up blocking traffic in Times Square, the center of Manhattan, amidst all its corporate Disneyland/Blade Runner-like madness. Holding our bicycles over our heads and screaming at the crazy tourist techno-nightmare that 42nd street has become, it's like we're carving a space for the real people of the city, so that the tourists see that New York has become more than just a huge digital billboard advertising the end of the world.

There was a moment at the Mass a couple weeks ago when we all rode straight through the tunnel under Grand Central Terminal, a surreal visual cacophony of off-time red blinking lights, and then emerged and took over Park Avenue in a flurry of hoots and howls. I suddenly felt like I knew all these people I was riding with, friends of friends or friends, through however many degrees of separation. And it felt incredibly peaceful, the sense of momentarily losing individuality among a friendly mass in a sea of blinking red lights.



At that time it felt like the squatter subculture on the Lower East Side coexisted as some mysterious shadowlike parallel universe amidst the rising tide of real estate which eventually ended up flooding everything and sending a diaspora of my friends all over the city to the outer boroughs. A couple dozen old squatted buildings quietly sat among the newly built cheap condos as every morning the sound of piledrivers digging foundations for spaces quietly kept their gates and doors open as more and more cafes and bars and restaurants full of hip dotcomers made their way down the alphabet streets. A pirate radio station broadcasting radical news and shows full of underground hip-hop and punk rock existed a few blocks away from the building site of the enormous new police station. Those were strange days for sure.

But the roots of the squatter community go way deeper into the history of the neighborhood and the intersection of so many incredible lives and stories. The intense friendships and alliances forged amidst battles with the city – at the community board meetings, at eviction watch meetings, in the courts, and mostly in the streets, brought together an incredible group of people. The Thompkins Square riots of the late '80s were the most visible manifestation to the outside world of the battle that went on for living space in the Lower East Side, but over the years and outside of the larger public eye, dozens of buildings were evicted violently and dramatically, leaving hundreds of people angry and out on the streets. It's a battle which changed the course of a lot of peoples' lives, myself included, and its just been within the past two years that the city finally struck a quiet deal with the last remaining inhabitants of the squats. After all the fighting in the courts and on the streets, 209 E. 7th, along with about a dozen other buildings, finally became legit in the eyes of the city.

Amidst this whole backdrop, Lisa and Donny were solid members of the community, survivors who had stuck it out without ever really knowing what would be the outcome of their home and the homes of their friends. They moved to 209 E. 7th after the birth of their son Benjamin, Donny went to school to study computer programming so he could make as much money as he could to support the family, and they built their little nest. As many others retreated over the bridge into Brooklyn or up north to the Bronx, they were some of those who stood their ground with the quiet battle with the city. They had proudly

to him. It's the strangest thing to be at your friend's funeral, especially a close friend that you haven't seen or talked to in a long time and then to try to figure out the right words to express yourself. Once I arrived in Asheville I realized that he still loved me very much and was waiting for me to come back to him. It was heart breaking, we never got the chance to really talk over what happened nor what we both wanted in the future. We never even got to see each other again. I wrote a paragraph and tucked it into a bright pink toy train engine and walked back inside.

The funeral service was awful. The minister seeing the overwhelming crowd of young misfits obviously changed his sermon to a "Jesus can save you from your life, even though he never got this young man" sort of insult. After the service we all walked past his casket. I touched his hand and left the train by his right arm. On the way to the cemetery, the hearse and precession was stopped at a railroad crossing where a long freight train passed by in front of us. It was the most remarkable thing. I knew in my heart that it was a sign from him. We all felt that. I got out of the car and started bawling. A bunch of us stood across the road watching the train as we rocked back and forth arm in arm and sang to him.



Once we got to the cemetery, the preacher once again went into monologue but the same freight train sounded its horn over and over interrupting the man's plea for our salvation. It was totally Mosca's style. After the service some of us stayed behind. People played instruments and we sang songs and sat while they lowered his body into the ground. We took turns shoveling dirt over the casket.

That night my partner and I headed north back to Minnesota. When we got back I dove straight into my two jobs and one class and didn't talk too much about what had happened or what I was feeling. My partner, the person I had pretty much left Mosca for was there for me in a way that no one else was. I pushed him away for a long time when it came to the grief, mostly because it was so complicated and I didn't feel like I could share those feelings completely with him and wasn't sure if it was fair to Mosca's memory if I did either. I talked to friends a lot, especially at bars after a few drinks. It would come out and I would cry and sob into them. I would write some and find some release through art, music and riding my bike past the lake. I searched the libraries and the internet for some sort of radical grief guide which seemed like the only literature that could help me. Mosca's life was radical, I am radical, the way he died and the complications of our relationship didn't make it easy to process and compartmentalize from some best-seller grief/self-help book. I couldn't find much for radical grief support in writing or in my community. I needed help. I went to talk with a professor that meant a great deal to me. After listening for an hour and somehow knowing what to say she recommended some books. Looking back I see that a large part of my keeping in the grief was that I wasn't sure how he had died. I didn't actually hear what the autopsy reports found until 7 months afterwards. Even then it was confusing. Due to drug abuse in the past Mosca's brain had been filling with a liquid that wasn't supposed to be there, eventually it somehow caused him to have a heart attack. His death had been preventable, if he had gone to a doctor and had an MRI scan they could have fixed the problem. Which of course he would never have done for so many reasons; he had no insurance, doctors and hospitals are scary and strange, he was stubborn. Sometimes when people ask me how Mosca died I say it was of a broken heart and I really feel that that's the truth.

After about 8 months I attended a grief support group at a hospital. We went around the circle but by the time it was my turn I was too saddened by all of the other stories as well as my own loss that I could barely choke out a sentence. I didn't fit in there. It was all older people that had lost their husbands or wives later in life. After that first session I was told about a group that met on campus. I went to that. I didn't feel completely safe sharing

II.

I don't even really know how to find the language that makes sense for talking about this because it's still so fresh and painful, but my friend Donny just dropped dead completely without warning last week at the age of 32. The doctors say he had a rare, undiagnosed condition that left him with an enlarged heart. Which in some ways is fitting because he was such a sweet man who had so much love for the world and the people around him. But his death is one of the most horrible and confusing things that's ever happened in my community of friends and were all still in shock and trying to make sense of it. It feels so unfair and wrong and somehow meaningless. Donny seemed perfectly healthy and was the proud father of three beautiful children. He always had a big smile and kind word for those of us who crossed his path. There are a lot of grieving people walking around right now, feeling the huge loss in their lives that his death has created.

Donny and his partner Lisa lived with their kids on the Lower East Side of New York City at 7th Street Squat, one of the places that has felt like a second home to me since I was a teenager. A building full of rebels and artists and activists, the residents of 209 E. 7th are a group of people who have managed to carve a life for themselves in a city that has become less and less hospitable over the years to dissidents and radical and anyone not willing to drink from the poisoned waters of the mainstream. The physical building itself is one of many old six story tenement walkups in the neighborhood that was a burnt out neglected and uninhabitable shell when the original homesteaders moved in more than two decades ago. So much has changed on the block, in the city, and in the world since those days but all these years later and against the odds, 7th Street's proud walls are filled with families who have beautiful children that go to the local public school together and play down the street in Tompkins Square Park. The building is a solid rock in the community and the epitome of everything I love about my hometown in all its diversity and fighting spirit.

Eight years ago when I stayed at 7th Street with my friend Fly, we would sneak into the abandoned synagogue next door to scavenge bricks for patching up the holes in her walls. The windows of Fly's space were framed by cut up 2x10 pieces of stolen blue and white police barricades. The electricity and water were pirated from the city. People kept their windows shaded and the front door was always locked. But it still felt so warm and welcome inside. That Fall there was a constant flurry of activity in the building as a group of dedicated people banded together for the birth of Felix, Stefane and Arrow's baby girl. In those days Donny and Lisa lived down the street at Bullet Space, one of the other squats in the neighborhood that was part of the scene.

BLINKING RED LIGHTS AND THE

SOULS OF OUR FRIENDS

by sascha scatter

reprinted from slug and lettuce

fall 2003

I.
Like clockwork or maybe something more divine, the leaves just started cascading down from the sky on the equinox, carpeting the ground in a layer of burnt orange, blood red, and mustard yellow. There's a chill in the air and word in the Hudson Valley says the first ground frost is coming any day now. The last apples, corn, and pumpkins are mostly harvested and the fields are being put to bed until next year. It's the end of the growing season for all the plants that aren't frost hearty. We'll wake up one morning soon and the vegetables and herbs we lovingly grew from seed in the spring will be frozen and dead. Just like that. You can feel it in the air: the end is near.

But with the end always comes a new beginning. Last week we cut half a dozen heirloom Striped German tomatoes in half, horizontally down the middle, their thick, sweet flesh a marbled swirl of reds and yellows. You won't find tomatoes like these in big supermarkets anywhere, but people all over the world have been quietly saving and trading their seeds for generations through family and friends. The fruits we chose were the largest ones off the most productive and healthy plants. We squeezed the seeds into a glass jar, their gelatinous coats settling into a thick layer of juicy pulp an inch deep. We let the jar sit for three days until it was smelly and moldy, filled it up halfway with water, stirred the whole mess and poured off the rotting gel and pulp along with the infertile empty seeds which floated to the top. We continued to pour the remainder of the murky water through a metal strainer until we were left with just the glistening seeds, and then spread them on a plate to sit for a few days in an airy place out of the sun. When the seeds were dry enough to snap instead of bend, we put them in labeled packs, and stored them in the freezer to wait for next spring, for another chance at rebirth and life.

the details of Mosca's life and death and my grief with the people there either. It was good because it got me talking and it was comforting to be in a room of people who were going through similar things but I went just a few times. It was soon spring and I began to feel better about things. I realize later that when you are in that much grief you need someone to witness it, to be there and see what you are going through (even if they don't know exactly what to say) and so that you are not alone. My partner stayed by my side even when I pushed him away, he along with several friends were witnesses to my pain, patient and understanding and encouraging in ways I'll never forget. They also helped to keep Mosca alive by sharing memories and asking questions about him. In the last letter I ever got from Mosca he was just about to catch out of Asheville. He wrote that he'd been tying down loose ends all day "soon a freight train will carry me away from here". He wrote about how he had been talking to a friend about how life is so hard and so beautiful. About how things are just too sad sometimes and how we just want to give up and die. He wrote, "but we keep going, our hearts so very strong". He signed the letter "keep loving, keep fighting". I know that Mosca is out there. Every time I hear a train I feel him reaching out. When people die their energy stays behind with us. Mosca's boundless energy inspired many people. He changed my whole life for the better. He was so loved and so loving and I know that that just doesn't just go away. I don't believe that grief is something to be gone through, eventually it becomes part of us, a distinguishing feature for some people and buried deep and seamless for others. But it's with us and it always will be.



the shrine outside mosca's house

I have very recently suffered a new loss, not a death but the loss of my partner to break up. We had been together for over two years and even though things had been rough at times I was and still am very much in love. I planned to be with this person for a very long time. I didn't expect that he wanted to break up with me. When he said those words my heart stopped like before. In the last few weeks I have been going over things and understanding bit by bit. This grief process has been much clearer in its stages than the ultimate loss of Mosca. The shock lasted weeks and is still very present. At first there was denial and memories that made everything seem that our relationship was perfect, there is guilt, acceptance that things were screwed up, anger and so much sadness that sometimes it seems way too much to handle. I am having a fuck of a time letting go. This person means the world to me and unlike Mosca he is still breathing, his heart is still beating, he's still riding his bike and playing banjo. He's out there but somehow not there anymore too.

We've been talking a little and we both want to be in each other's lives. It's going to take a long time, a lot of forgiveness, communication and healing. And we'll never be together again. I've lost who he was when we were partners, his love and who we were together. That will never be the same. Both of our hearts are shattered but we each have to go on alone. Realizing the things that made it this way, the lack of communication, and support and mutual misunderstandings of the last few months, I see it was unhealthy. It's even harder to know that a lot of this was because of something that I did and then failed to know how to, to ask or help to fix. Now I have to suffer all of the consequences, largely the loss of someone that I loved more than anything in this world.

I haven't been not in a relationship for years. I have been lucky to find love and hold on to it and have learned a lot through those bonds. Not having time alone to be forced to acknowledge the mirror and its reflections that are presented in relationships or better yet to work on those things has become harmful. I know that there can be a lot of work done while with someone and I have learned much and become wiser. But obviously, sorely pointed out by this lost love, I have a long way to go. There's something to be said about being alone. I realize that that's what I need now but it doesn't make this loss any less painful. I don't really know what to do. I'm trying to follow my heart but it hurts so badly I can't always tell what it is saying.

edge of material stability. One false step, regardless of need, if not properly calculated could be the choice between keeping your shitty apartment or living on the streets. No, there has to be a constant weighing of factors, of lies that will seem believable enough to allow for one more day to call off without being written up, and of which bill can be late since taking time off to grieve will cut into the insufficient funds coming in. Hold it together, find strength, don't give up or else life will just get worse becomes an internal mantra.

With these thoughts in mind, swirling around incessantly, I spend the next two weeks processing my emotions in between the days I work causing me to feel like a yo-yo, laying low by refusing to answer emails or phone calls, and oscillating between snapping at people for their incorrect use of the term 'poor' and crying rivers of tears mixed with guilt for whatever reason of the moment. Grief is a tricky mistress, connecting dots one hasn't thought about in years by playing them all in surround sound and vivid coloring. Of course these walks down memory lane are useless due to the distortion created by years past causing fuzzy moments to take on the shape and form of the current distress. The years of social, religious, and family conditioning add onto the layers of "should have" and "could have" thoughts already spiraling out of control in this distraught state. In my balanced mind I know that this is unnecessary, know that my loved one doesn't give a rats ass about those growing pains, but in this moment all that is true is the bullshit I carry around that I never got a chance to say or apologize for.

To begin to mend my heart I write out the letters I never got to send, making some peace with my internal monologue and reminding myself that I am loved by this person. I'm lucky enough that I have access to Chinese medicine (since I attend a school for it) and so I tap into some treatments for grief, letting go, and emotional support. Since I am on a school break, I take this time to nourish myself with good company, pleasurable reading, writing, walks in the park, home cooked meals, phone conversations with my mom, and of course oceans of tears. I'm trying not to hold back the waters that seek to cleanse the emotions that need to find release. On top of all this I give thanks for the amazing friends I have who are supporting me through this rough time, and I take stock of my life, reevaluating the elements that cause me to feel less grounded, bitter, and angry in an attempt to make some space for the other issues this grieving will bring. Issues such as the politics of the health system, my part in it, and how I can help create more access for those of us that need preventative care. As John's favorite song reminds me "You can't always get what you want, but if you try, sometimes you get what you need."

In loving memory of John 1945 - 2007

rather an inability to have the basic needs of food, shelter, clothing, water, and health care met on a regular and stable basis. These needs are not the organic, free range with a side of alternative medicine kind, but the food stamps, free boxes, and emergency room visits because you don't have health care (and the ER is required to see everyone, regardless of funds) kind of basics. Being poor means not getting to choose how or where you die or even whom you die with. It often means getting creative and personal with what is available. Like listening to your favorite song over the phone long distance with your loved ones, blasting it loud enough for the comatose and dead to hear, to share in the last few moments of breath.

I'm thinking about all of this as the phone rings and I hear the inevitable causing the damn to break. Every shred of sadness for my mom and John's love being separated by an untimely death, each fist of rage for the doctors who wouldn't help him because there wasn't any money, shreds of anger towards the health system that caused John and so many other poor to stay ill, the oppressive injustice done to my family and all who are poor and homeless, a scream of frustration for all the classist fucks who have no clue what being poor really means other than a tax break or political choice, all the shame and guilt people have laid upon us for not working harder to improve our lot in life, all the good John did for his family and those he didn't know very well, his strength, his smile, his sky blue, laughing eyes flooding past those levies, drowning me in heavy darkness, while I shriek in absolute and completely raging frustrated loss.

Perhaps this seems like overkill to some, but my skin tends to be pretty porous to the world with all my nerves jacked up to receive the wide range of life at high decibels all around me. I can't seem to block out the intersection of my emotions with the spectrum of existence on this planet, just this gift I have I guess. Looking around in a numbed out, drunken rage I trash my apartment in the utter meaninglessness of owning anything when I'm just going to have to pack a single bag and move on again at some point. People like my family never really put any roots down. We are nomads by nature, causing us to becoming highly malleable for any situation, while simultaneously distrusting the concept that anything lasts. A pressure is building in me to run, move on, get to my mother, do something, anything to get away from this anger and helplessness I feel, but I can't due to my own responsibilities and promises. This realization causes me to succumb to my grief, sitting with it, coaxing it into a manageable form that I can live with and still get to work on time.

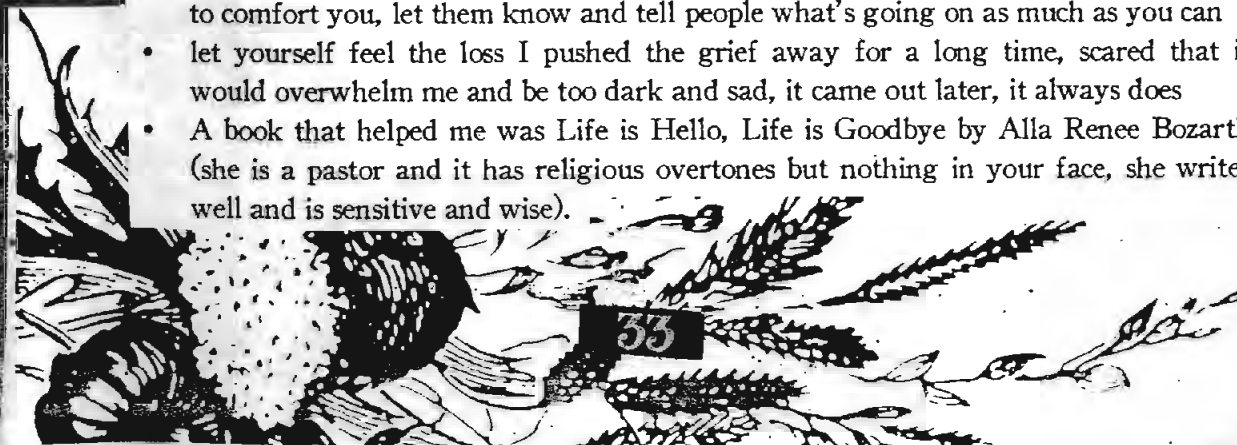
And that is the core of all this anger, the awareness that the poor get screwed in the grief department too. Being incapacitated by sadness is not an option for those who live on the

hope

It seems like it's during these hard times that friends and loved ones really come through. If it hadn't been for them these last few weeks I don't think I would have been able to handle all of this pain. And like Mosca said there is so much hard but there is so much beautiful too. Mosca was one of the people that really taught me what it is to be a good friend. I have already learned so much in my years of loss and I will keep on living and growing for as long as I can. Without a doubt there will be more losses of all kinds. There will be for all of us. Death and grief are a huge part of life. It's important that we have support in our communities, that we have resources and books and zines like this one to help each other and so that we never feel alone. Friends and loved ones are part of that indescribable beauty and finding support and help when we need it is necessary for our health and healing. These roads are both hard and long but they don't have to be lonely. The biggest lesson that I've learned is that it's the people that we meet and love that help to make us who we are as well as the things that we do and the things that happen to us. As long as our hearts are still beating the people that we have lost are still with us. Their strength and passed on wisdom and love lives inside us and it's all we can do to carry them with us and keep passing it on.

Ideas from my experience:

- ask for help if you need it, from friends, from family, and your community
- put off major life decisions for a while
- build a shrine and talk or write to the person that you have lost
- cry whenever you can, it is good for your body and your head and heart, that pain is toxic inside you and the tears flush that out (I had some major issues with crying in public but sometimes I needed to, after a couple of times it got better)
- let people know what you need. A lot of times people have no idea what to say or do to comfort you, let them know and tell people what's going on as much as you can
- let yourself feel the loss I pushed the grief away for a long time, scared that it would overwhelm me and be too dark and sad, it came out later, it always does
- A book that helped me was Life is Hello, Life is Goodbye by Alla Renee Bozarth (she is a pastor and it has religious overtones but nothing in your face, she writes well and is sensitive and wise).



DEATH OF A PRETTY PACKAGE

by m. maines

I.

He is driving when he sums up the hints he has been dropping over the phone. Linda, his wife, my mother, is going to die soon. Maybe he waits to tell me in the car because he won't have to look at my face or because I cannot avoid responding.

II.

It is autumn in New England. It's uncomfortably cold, but thankfully dark, when I decide to go for a walk with a boy I met a few days ago. I don't know the gangly youth well, but feel innocent and at ease. We wander to the edges of the woods, near a scarlet barn with dim lighting. I ask, could we just lie down for a few minutes. We mechanically lower our angle in a field enclosed by a circle of tall thin grasses to face the blank sky. Everything is just barely tinged with the artificial illumination. The moon is not seen, only implied.

I drape my arm over his chest nervously, thinking I am too forward, but he clutches me in return. I rest my head against his rib cage and begin a soft-spoken monologue. My sentences consist of memories about my mother; they are remembrances that sound like war stories. He puts his slender fingers in my hair idly while I talk about her as if she is already dead. I am hypnotized. My inhibitions are lost, and so is the idea of maintaining a conversational boundary. When I find myself staring at his throat, I feel the need to shut myself up by kissing him. I think better of it as I hear the low tones of neighboring reeds, clucking and clicking at me while the wind passes.

III.

When I return home for a leave of absence in October, a bald skeleton is sitting on the musty floral print couch. My mother flexes her pointer finger at me and smiles. This is her way of saying hello, of saying she is happy to see me. Covering her mouth is the plastic cup of the air machine that feeds her life forces. I find myself concentrating to pick up any vocal tones as I have already forgotten what it once sounded like.

GRIEVING BETWEEN THE HOURS

by seven

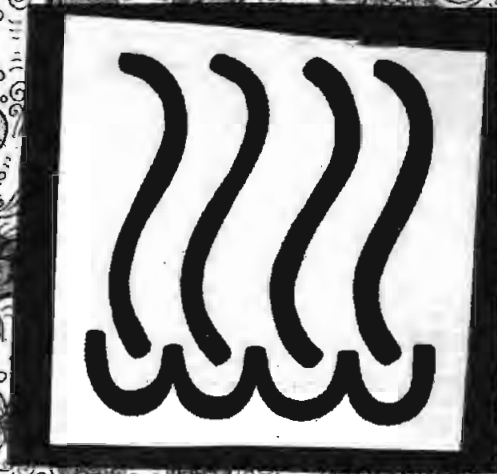
I'm waiting for the phone to ring, passing time until my mother tags me back after this endless game of cat and mouse, to give me news on my step-pop's progression towards the spirit realm. There is a cup of coffee beside me sure to amp up my anxiety levels but I need it to get through my last day of class, work, and two writing deadlines for my second job before I finally have time to process all the events camping out behind my dam of grief. During the waiting game all kinds of thoughts appear to test the solidity of my barrier, tapping on the cracks that are leaking and bending under the pressure of holding back so much until the 'right' moment to set it all free.

Yet, there are rarely 'right' moments when it comes to death, and regardless of how prepared one thinks they are, the blow always finds a sore spot to hit, causing damage where you thought you were ready. Yet it is not the dying that leaves me burning with white-hot rage for this particular passing, but the events that led up to this finale. My mind begins to wander over the last few months of memories as I keep waiting for mom to ring me back, remembering the parts that keep me angry, so that I may stay motivated for action rather than be reduced to a puddle of tears.

I wish I could visit my parents, but being poor means there are not a lot of resources available. Add on homelessness and that there isn't anywhere to spend those last days. My parents weren't always homeless, but family obligations caused them to leave their off-the-grid home for the sour taste of duty. So when I hear that my step-pop put off his looming health problems in order to bring in the meager bacon, I wondered how many others out there put family before their life juice, hoping that eventually there would be enough time and money to take care of those needs. Food and shelter come before healthcare every time when you are living close to the bone.

Being poor is not a fashion statement, or a sub-cultural political strategy to stick it to "the man". Neither does poverty translate to cutting back on lifestyle choices such as dining out, seeing shows, or limiting the number of yoga classes per month for personal wellness, but

All we have created will decay
All that we have will be taken
All that we love shall be destroyed.
With death,
We are all helpless.



Then in later performances I shortened the poem to this:

ALL THAT WE HAVE CREATED WILL DECAY.
ALL THAT WE OWN WILL BE TAKEN.
ALL THAT WE LOVE SHALL BE DESTROYED.

Although the message sounds bleak, I found the act of writing it out cathartic and liberating. It came over me later that this performance also addresses the issue of global warming very directly with the image of evaporating water.

My father died during the period I was performing this piece, so it became about losing my father as well.

I got various reactions from people. Many people ignored me. Others were very interested, and asked for an explanation or offered me sympathy. Sometimes shop owners were annoyed or concerned that my words would stain the sidewalk. (They did not)

Evaporations was performed during the summer of 2005 in California at the San Pedro Art Walk; the Long Beach Art Walk, the Santa Ana Art Walk, and at the Los Angeles Public Library. In 2006 it was performed in New York City: in Brooklyn at the DUMBO festival, the Williamsburg Performance Alliance, and Nurture Art Gallery for Performa 06, and in Manhattan at Le Petit Versailles.

Our house is haunted now by a forty-four year old woman slowly pacing on the first floor aimlessly and angrily. As soon as I go to bed, she and my father perform gruesome medical tasks. I don't inquire about them during the day. I don't want to know. She never sleeps anymore. I can tell because, at night, the floorboards below me do not stop creaking. I lock my door, for the stranger who has possessed our house horrifies me. She is not my mother. She is a walking corpse.

IV.

The pen audibly rattles in her fists as she writes to me on a scrap of paper. "Whenever I see a white 'frail-like' butterfly, I know the guardian angels are watching out for us." She looks into my eyes after I finish reading her inked words.

V.

I part the cheap broken blinds over my window carefully with two fingers so she will not catch me looking at her. The only time Linda Paquet leaves the house is in the mornings. As she often said with a smile, her names means pretty package in Spanish. She sits alone on a wooden bench in our overrun backyard and prays. She watches the birds for hours; her whole head follows their migration as they pass in flight. The Tibetan peace flags she made billow on sticks behind her. There are four of them, one for each of the family members. My flag symbolizes clarity. At this stage, the flags have just begun to tatter, but eventually they will unravel completely. As each thread frays, the prayer is heard.

VI.

In November, I wake up and can't find the will to attend classes. Instead, I decide to dress myself in her shirts and necklaces, items that I quietly collected instantly after the funeral. I like feeling the physical weight of her things. I walk slowly off campus into town. A ten-dollar bill shoved in my pocket and Linda's journal under my arm all that I carry. I don't think much as I slowly move along the pavement.

I enter the first coffeehouse I come across. After choosing a corner seat, I wait until the espresso punches in to gather enough strength to heave open the cover of her penned thoughts in public. I hunch over the book, mildly paranoid that someone else will be able to read the frightening testimonies. The scariest sentence is the last one. She wrote it in a handwriting that I don't recognize. "The tip of the iceberg, up where the layers come off quickly. These bare bones do see and feel. Thanks."

GOOD GRIEF

by laura

My sister and I grew up in the same house, our bedrooms separated by one wall. We learned together how to tell our parents' moods by the sound of their footsteps on the floor above us. We plugged our ears through the same screaming matches and ducked under the same flying dinner plates. We have likely blocked out many of the same memories.

Yet somehow by the time my father died we could not have been more separate.

She didn't have to say anything. I knew from the first frantic gasps over the phone. The coming up for air sounds people make when they're sobbing. She said it though: "Laura, daddy's dead." And the feeling was overwhelming: relief.

That was six years after the last time I really talked to my father, when I was 15. After one too many fights ending in visits from the cops, he had just been kicked out of the house I grew up in. For real this time. He had been calling all night demanding that I put my mother on. I was home alone but he didn't believe me. I was a lying bitch just like her and if I hung up on him one more time he was going to come over there and kill me. I unplugged the phone and ran through the empty house locking every door and window. All I could do then was kneel on the couch in the living room peering through the blinds with my heart pounding, praying that the first pair of headlights that turned towards the house would be my moms, not his. Luckily they were.

After that the longest communication from either of us was a letter from him in which he apologized for hurting me "in whatever way you think I did."

My sister's relationship with him was completely different. Though I hated him for the way he had treated my mother, and the control his mood swings held over all of our lives, she loved him for his special treatment of her, the youngest. Born four years after me, she was too young to understand the abuse she witnessed. He hardly ever raised his voice to her, and she loved him for all of his presents and inside jokes (often at the expense of me or my mother). I think for her the reality of how cruel he could be was too painful for her to accept. He saw himself as a victim whose wife simply did not care enough about him to make their marriage work. This side of the story was somehow easier for my sister to swallow. When our mom yelled back at him, she saw it as a provocation, not an attempt

EVAPORATIONS

performance art by
tamara tornado

I wrote a poem when my cat, Mazie, died of cancer. I was very close to her, and it was an enormous loss for me.

I became inspired to write the poem on sidewalks in water using a brush. The words evaporated naturally from the sun and the air, leaving no mark. The evaporation of the words was an analogy of loss. No trace of the performance is left once the words evaporate.

I dressed in white pants and white shirt, with a symbol of evaporation on my shirt. I passed out small cards of the poem during the performance to those were interested.

The first few times I wrote out the full poem:

I am so sad.

All that I love will be taken from me,

And I will be taken from all that I love.

My body is cold with fear.

Our lives are brief moments,

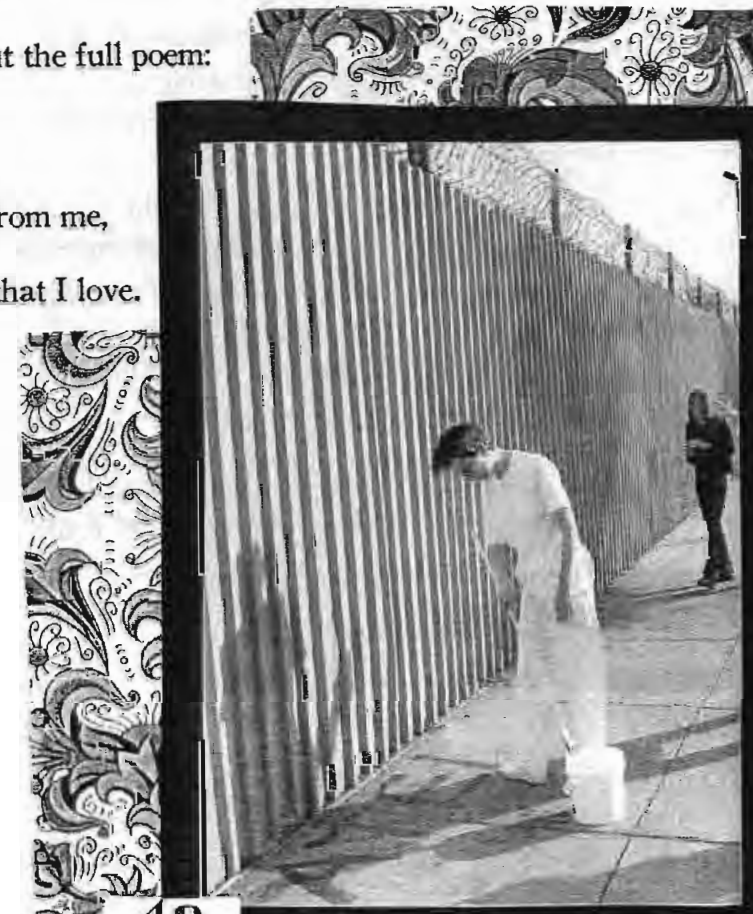
All things pass away.

I beg time for mercy.

I mourn.

Tears wet my cheeks

And I am so afraid.



Finally, the nonrelatives started to dissipate, leaving a hush of whispers and the sobs of my aunt Joy, the one who had walked Scott to bus stop and doled out Little League picture cards with motherly pride. The flowers and wreaths glowed around the casket as I took one last look at my cousin. He was older than I remembered. In my head, Scott is fourteen, kicking me out of my own room to play wrestling with Kenny. They are Hogan and Savage, duking it out clothesline-for-clothesline, and I'm not allowed to watch. Scott is eighteen, just out of highschool. He's the scared kid in the army uniform in the picture my mother keeps on our TV. He is twenty-one when we sit together at Kimmie's wedding, at the same table as Kenneth and Joey, the cousins with Down Syndrome that always want to do the conga line.

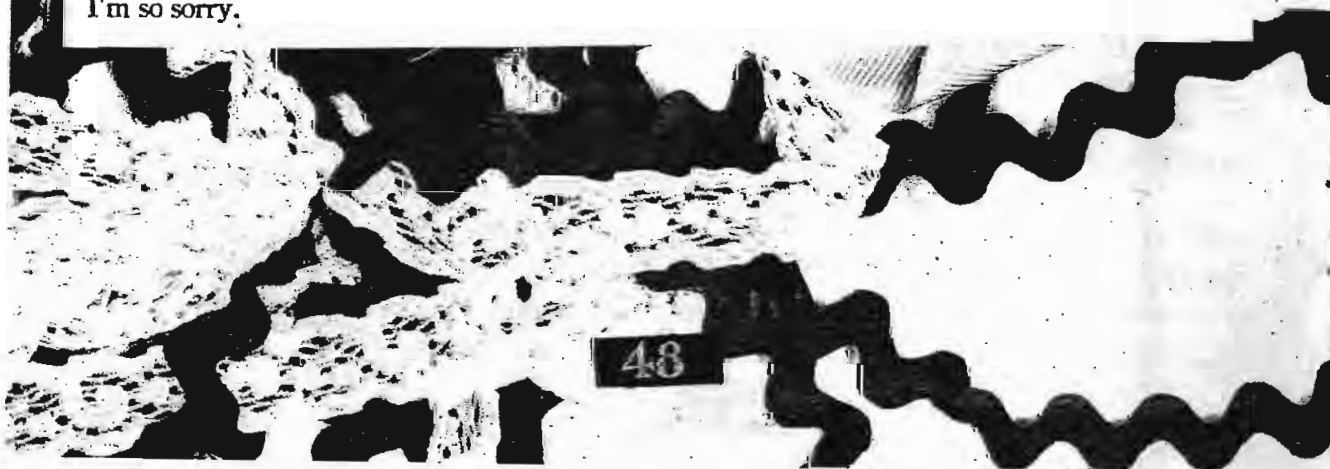
I'm looking at Scott but he's not there. He's somewhere else, frozen in memory in a place in my past that I have to fight to keep from dreaming away. Everyday the memories in my head get a little shorter and the lists of things I wish I remembered a little longer, blurred around the edges and edited together into something that's never real enough.

I walked over to Aunt Joy, who hugged me harder than I've ever been hugged before.

"Why did this have to happen?" she asked in a shuddering breath that wetted my hair with tears. That's the sad thing about dying: the people you leave behind. No matter how long it's been since you've seen someone, they're still going to think about you when you're gone. If it's been a hundred years or a hundred wrestling matches, at least one person is out there, still wondering why and what if.

"I'm sorry," I said.

I'm so sorry.



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at self defense. She even got his nickname for her, Boo Boo, tattooed in script on her hip when she was 16. Those six years I spent rejecting his calls, my sister stood by him, wondering how I could be so cruel.

bell hooks wrote: "Often, children will want to remain with parental caregivers who have hurt them because of their cathected feelings for those adults. They will cling to the misguided assumption that their parents love them even in the face of remembered abuse, usually by denying the abuse and focusing on random acts of care."

At the wake I tried to stay composed. I didn't know what would happen if I really let myself be there. I didn't let the things I was seeing and hearing register emotions. So many pictures of us smiling, the four of us. My extended family exchanging stories, all their happy memories of him.

His face, thin and gray, so different from the last time I had seen it (I don't remember). His body, once about 100 pounds overweight, eaten away by disease and drugs. Just bones.

I hadn't thought about the kids that would be there, seeing them hurt so badly. All my younger cousins, these tough-as-hell Italian boys with hard faces, tears rolling down to lips that struggled to stay in stiff lines. The chaos in my own house had kept me so distant from the rest of the family for so long that we had barely talked in years. The brother, son, uncle they knew was not the same as the father I lived with and there was no explaining that to them.

And my sister, suddenly looking so grown up at 15. She held her head up until walking up to the casket. She didn't want to look at this body, no longer recognizable. How can so much emotion be attached to one person? She grabbed my arm and cried into me. There is nothing like holding on to someone you love while they sob, trying to absorb some of the hurt so they don't have to feel it anymore. The grief and confusion pouring out of her seemed almost tangible, like thick black water that I could take away in buckets for days without making a dent.

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Seeing everyone like that and not feeling it, I thought, "how could I be so cold, so selfish?" Shouldn't I have at least pretended to be sad in front of my family? But for me there was nothing. I could finally breathe.

My whole family knew how I felt, how angry I had been for so long. But it was this unspoken thing that now that he was gone I would have to brush those feelings aside and pretend to remember him in a better light. Even my mother thought so. "You only have one father. Maybe you didn't have the best relationship but you only have one father. There were hard times but Laura he loved you so much."

When the wake was almost over, my dad's uncle, my great uncle came to me and said those things. "This is the only chance you have, you have to forgive him. If you don't forgive him now you are going to regret it for the rest of your life. Come walk up to the casket with me and look at him and tell him you forgive him." I shook my head no but I am always so fucking polite and then there I was with his hand clamped so tight on my arm it hurt.

And we stood there in front of the casket and he said look at him, look at him. Do you forgive him, you have to forgive him. There wasn't the slightest hesitation in his voice, no question about what he was saying. He knew he was doing the right thing. And I nodded my head yes so it would end.

And now I can't believe I did that, can't believe I fucking stood there so angry and not allowed to feel it. My feelings were dismissed because they were not the same as everyone else's. There was my father, dead in front of me and I was being told how to feel. My uncle's sense of authority defined me right then, as my father's had for so many years. I was a stupid, weak girl.

I didn't then and still don't have a frame of reference for dealing with the loss of someone who you have at times loved and hated more than anyone else. Someone who had not been a physical part of my life for years, but whose actions continued to find and affect me the whole time. His abuse and manipulation was something restraining orders could not hold back, something drug and alcohol treatment centers could not contain. To me, his death was one last little stab at everyone who had cared about him. When his body was too weak to punch or even yell, the last thing he could do to get our attention and control our emotions was to make us come to his funeral.

had probably gone to the Chicken Soup for the Soul website and picked out some "Christmas Shoes" rip-off.

I walked inside, hoping to pay my respects and make a quick exit. I felt a little better about my blood relatives when the mother of my stepdad walked in, a woman who waits eagerly each month for the next issue of High Times to be delivered to her trailer. That feeling was fleeting, however, when I remembered my parents had cashed in my college money to buy a trailer of their own. I decided that in this world there are two kinds of senior citizens: ones who take in an opera or volunteer at a soup kitchen when the nest is empty, and those who go to funerals of people they have never met just to socialize, or, perhaps, score some really sweet hydro.

My sister and I groaned when we saw her. I shifted, hoping I could hide in the mammoth shadow of the five-hundred pounder in the aisle seat. Joanne's infrequent Christmas cards showed that she would probably go to her grave thinking my name was Carly, and when she took a seat in the row in front of us, I hoped she was stoned enough not to recognize me. Instead she leaned over and gave my thigh a hearty squeeze, mouthing the words, "I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?" I said, but she'd already turned around to make friends with the bereaved in the next row. I turned to my sister. "Hey, wouldn't it be funny if she just started caressing the inside of my thigh and slowly worked her hand up?"

Solemnity was never my strongpoint. In fact, dead bodies and clergy had always been a deal-breaker for me. At every funeral and wedding I have ever attended, I have had to fake a choking fit to cover my laughter over something that, under normal circumstances, would not be so funny. In childhood, this meant my mother elbowing me violently in the ribs until real tears of physical pain came to my eyes. In adulthood, it just meant that I used sexual harassment humor to spice up the mourning process.

Although I stared at the back of Joanne's head while disgust bore an acidic hole in my chest each time I heard her say the word 'tragic,' there were also various other spectators on hand to vulture group sadness. People who I am sure had never spoken to Scott gathered to chat and bum Newports off of each other in creepy voyeuristic solidarity.

every time someone said something that made me want to scream. Sarcasm bit into my tongue and Kimmie finally walked away, throwing her cigarette into the mulch.

"God, did you hear what she did?" Jamie asked once Kimmie was out of earshot. I shook my head, watching another brushfire smother under the heels of a distant relative.

"You didn't hear about the poem?"

"No. What poem?" My infrequent attendance of weddings and birthday parties meant I was out of the loop for most family gossip.

"Kimmie claimed she wrote a poem for Scott, but she definitely got it off the internet. Then she signed all our names on it and put it in the casket."

To the best of my knowledge, Kimmie was illiterate, as I assumed most people to be when they needed dentures before their thirtieth birthday. "How do you know she stole it from the internet?"

"Every last word rhymes, except where she pasted 'Scott' and 'cousin.' Plus, when has Kimmie ever written anything? Seriously."

I balled my fists in mute anger. If I felt like expressing my lack of feeling for the occasion in a poem, I would have done it myself. Instead Kimmie, with her adult acne and NASCAR Starter jacket, had elected herself poet laureate of my extended family and now, gingerly nestled next to Scott's body for all of eternity was some chain email that probably said Scott's crush would fall madly in love with him if he sent it to twenty of his friends in the next ten minutes.

"That's really great," I said, teeth gritted, wondering why most of my relatives weren't muzzled. I'd only plagiarized once- a senior year thesis on MacBeth- but I'd also typed "I bet your aren't really reading this" on the fifth page and copied a few paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence into it for good measure. I got an A minus on that paper, which I credited to my creative choice in resources and my overall can-do attitude. If Kimmie had perhaps used Frost or Donne or Goethe, my relatives would have been as clueless as if she had farmed Reading Rainbow for a good Levar Burton quote. Instead she

We have all been a number of different people in our lives. For me the most severely disconnected are the person I was before my dad moved out, and the person I became afterwards. The greatest loss for me when he died knew that those two worlds would never come together again. That there are things that only my oldest friends can understand, because they were there and the stories are not ones I know how to tell.

Coming home to my apartment after the funeral, I felt so distanced from all of my friends that hadn't been there. My whole body was fizzing up with these things that had nowhere to go. Little bubbles of anger and jealousy towards everyone that didn't have to feel so alone. Only now, almost two years later, have I really been able to fully close that gap with the slow realization of the obvious - that we all go through our most painful and terrifying times alone. That is what gives those experiences their definitive shapes. It sounds like adding insult to injury, but to me it has been the most comforting thing. When there is no frame of reference, you have to try to create one. When your friends can't imagine how you feel, you have to tell them.

We wind up feeling lost and alone as we all silently try to stuff our emotions into categories where they just don't fit. I felt that way for years, trying to understand how my father and some relatives could use the word love to describe control, humiliation and violence. And it felt amazing to reject that as an adolescent and since figure out how to redefine love for myself as something that must include respect, support, and affection. My feelings of isolation during and after the wake were magnified by the thought that we were all supposed to be in it together; my whole family, along with everyone else in the world who had ever had to bury someone they were close to. We were all dealing with the same thing: death. As if it is one thing. As if my sister's experience and mine could possibly be called the same thing.

At first, I didn't feel like my father's death was an experience I could really call my own because words like mourn and loss didn't seem to apply. Grief and joy are listed in the dictionary as antonyms, but I felt those emotions simultaneously. I know that life is much too complicated for death to be simple. Yet even as a person who has rejected a lot of the teachings of mainstream culture, it still feels strange to think of death and happiness together. I still feel mean and guilty thinking "I am happy my dad is dead". But that is my reality, and it doesn't make sense to act differently for the sake of sounding nice. It is sweet and liberating to disregard everyone else, trust myself and my emotions and say that honestly, I am so glad he is gone.

AND THE BLACK LIQUID RAN DOWN HIS RIBS AND POOLED LIGHTLY AT HIS SIDES

for political education

I now know that he was brilliant. I did not know then. He told me to "think ahead." That blew my small mind: To conceive of change directed at my minuscule existence before it occurred in my window of vision. He was teaching me dialectics. From this mental reorientation, I was imbued with a fascination with life, a love of the world. I did not know that I was not in a ghetto and that most who looked like me were and would die there. He showed me bloody black backs flayed to the spine; I thought they looked like what I was fed. A white man held the whip. He seemed quite evil. I did not know what I looked like. I knew of other blacks. I loved them. And they loved me. I knew of whites; I felt loved by them as well. It would be years until I could make sense of these strange twists in hue and manners of being. I became quite attuned to dialectical reason. I could see the sense that lies at the bottom of all non-sense. I could formulate possibilities and act in short periods of time. My father quickly lost the ability to move; then he lost the ability to think. To reason at all. He lost his mind. It was torn from him. His body too. I witnessed madness. It was fascinating. He could no longer think; he who had taught me to think had lost his own foresight. What did this mean? I later learned that this process had been speeded up by his sniffing cocaine. Malcolm X described cocaine as creating a feeling of invincibility. My father wanted to feel invincible, unassailable, and yet he was assailed. I smelled urine. He had given me freedom of thought. He was losing his and wanted mine back. He wanted a slave. Is that too much to ask for a dying man, dying insanely? I was nine. I

My thoughts drifted to other conversations in the generational clusters outside of the funeral parlor. No one was saying what had happened. No mention of the needle jammed in his arm when they found him, or the Playstation controller in his other hand. "Oh, apathy," no one was saying. "Acute apathy. Didn't want to be anything. Shame really."

"FIRE!" My gaze startled and jumped to where the bushes and mulch were smoking.

RAGING FIRE TAKES OUT ENTIRE FAMILY BECAUSE SOME FUCKTARD
CAN'T BE BOTHERED WITH ASHTRAYS. TONIGHT AT ELEVEN.

An uncle stamped out the blaze with shining all-purpose wedding/funeral shoes and I felt someone else groping my shoulder. I hoped it wasn't one of the creepy bachelor-for-life cousins on my mother's side, the ones that dance a little too close at weddings and had gone off to find a bar when the wake got a little too stiff. Instead it was my cousin Kimmie, who used her free hand to light the cigarette already in her mouth.

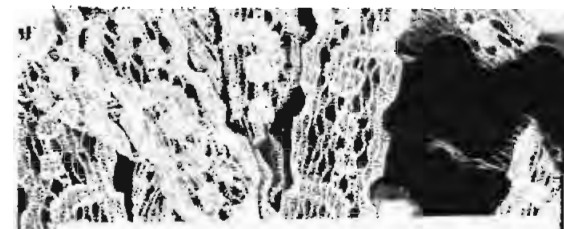
"Hey," she said, like the word 'hey' would combine with overwhelming air of grief to create a soothing, hypnotic effect that would make me forget that she stole the savings from my piggy bank after my father died. You are getting very sleepy...you are handing me a twenty... "How are you kids holding up?"

"Uh, good, I guess," I said, leaving the reply uncomfortably open ended so that she might see that none of us had any desire to speak to her.

"That's good, that's good. We've all got to be strong for Aunt Joy. This is a really tough time for her now." My brain cut to a kindergarten class post 9/11.

"We have to be strong for America. This is a really tough time for her right now."

I realized then that it is as meaningless to be strong for an intangible concept as it is for a relative that lives a hundred miles away that you don't even see on holidays. I had spent all day wracking my brain for something, some shred of depth to my relationship with Scott. He used to like Hulk Hogan. I think he liked baseball, too. Or maybe it was wiffleball. Or maybe I liked wiffleball and Hulk Hogan, and I was just projecting that onto my memories of him. All morning, my brain had been a merry-go-round of these shitty, half-formed memories. I was an emotional narc, disguising the way I really felt with thoughtful nods



SLEEPING DOGS

by cassie j. sneider

"Fucking Scott, man."

Carly and Jamie sucked back on their cigarettes, drawing the warm nicotine in gestures of deeply felt personal grief. I leaned back on the heels of my sneakers and surveyed my other relatives, huddled under the awning of the funeral home, lighting each other's cigarettes and saying what a shame it was. I realized then that I was the only member of my extended family that wasn't smoking, and I was also probably the only member of my extended family that wasn't pretending to be heartbroken.

They weren't crying because Scott was dead. They were crying because he was the only one of us who'd actually done something, the Ultimate Something, the Be-All, End-All of Somethings: he had fucking died. This was enviable to my cousins, most of whom were lifers at Stop-n-Shop, because as the generation with no great war, no Great Depression, their war and depression were separating paper bags at work and looking upon their paychecks each Friday.

"How are you guys holding up?" The hand on my shoulder belonged to Vicky, who as the oldest cousin felt a matronly responsibility to ask everyone if they were okay. I was fine. My pants were a little tighter than they used to be, which seemed to happen with all wake-going gear. I'd like to think that my pants shrank in the closet because my unfeigned zeal for life robbed them of their elasticity, not because I'd yo-yoed since the last relative bit it.

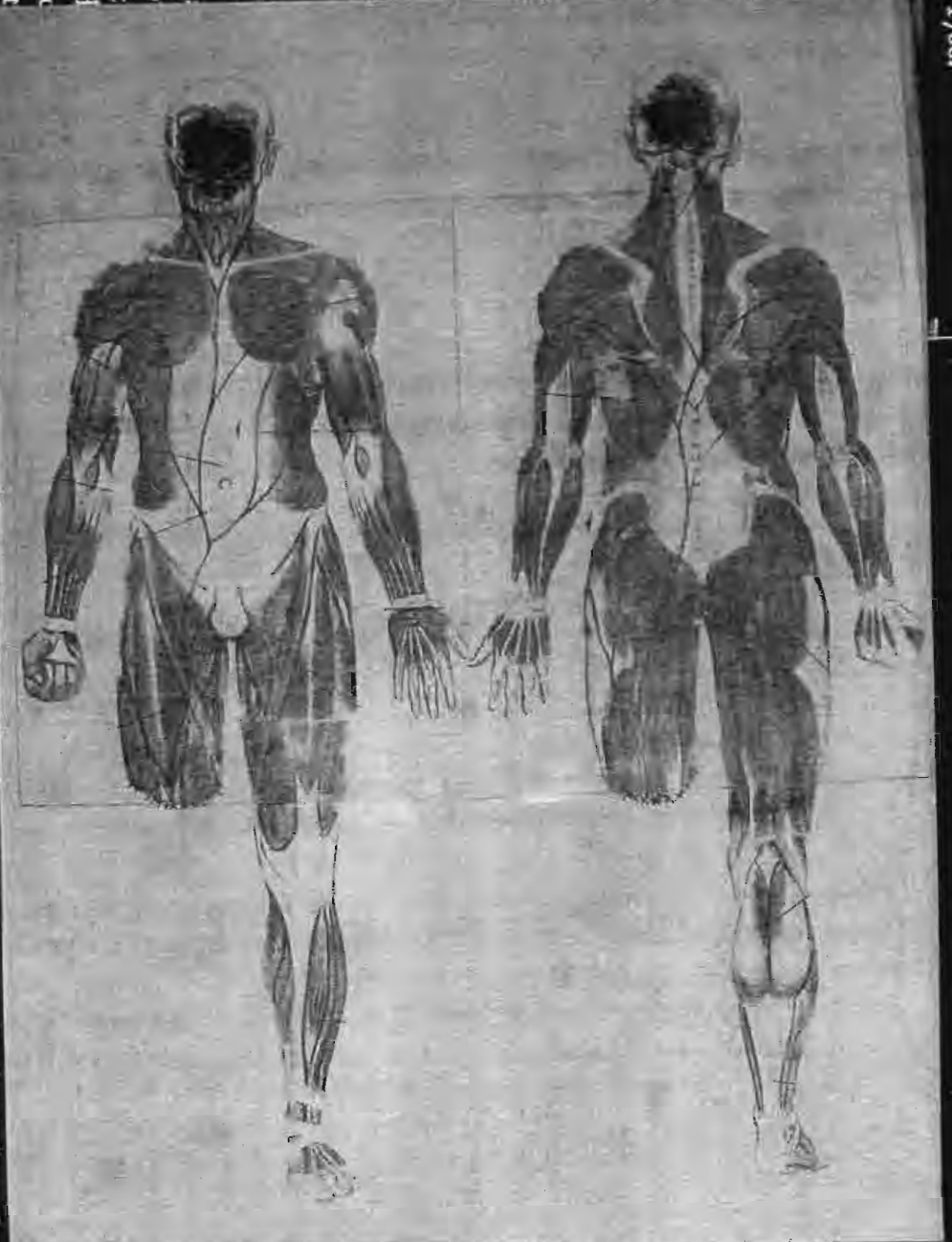
"It's just...I...fucking Scott, man," was all Jamie could say, trailing off for all of us. Yes. Fucking Scott, man. Would this be the rallying cry that would lead us into battle, attacking the world with our youthful indignation as bayonets? Would this be the call to arms that would liberate us from our low-paying jobs and catapult us, dizzyingly free, into our dreams? I know Kenny always wanted to be a professional wrestler. We had discouraged him in those days, suggesting he call himself The Flounder and throw rubber fish into the audience for his gimmick. No more. Now, with Scott waving us on from Heaven, our support could act as an emotional pyramid that could lift him to WWF superstardom.



defied him. My white mother cut the weight. She could not bear it any longer; she sent my father to be confined – a young crazy black man with old crazy white shells of men. I did not understand. My foresight was becoming useless. The man across from my father's new prison was a sad old man who no longer spoke. He had watched his children burn in a fire. My father was left to stare at him. I was left to think. Was it I who was slowly burning? Was it he? He died and his body was burned. And I am left to think. To act. I now take it upon myself to understand his madness. To make his insanity my own, to interpret it, and to use it, for it is the sum of my inheritance. There is no doubt that his disease was, in part, biological. But to say it was fully so would be to throw away the world he lived in, that we live in, simply to reduce the exploding of his mind to his sick black body. Yes, in his genetic make-up was a problem born and bred of his very tissues. But he existed in a web of Others. And it was they who also generated his psyche, and who helped destroy it. He was born in 1954. The white races and the black suffering upon which they built their world were now to be one in knowledge. He came from a matriarchal family which had been propped up as part of the black petit-bourgeoisie, first in Virginia as the den of the slave-trade, then in Philadelphia's "black suburbs" which were reserved for those servile enough to white power and thrifty enough to get by on little. They owned the only store around and were the first to have a small television, selling viewings for a dollar. His father died in New York City buying heroin, with a needle in his arm, slumped-lying against a wall on the floor, hat tilted to the side. His mother committed suicide by opening the exhaust pipe and locking the doors, possibly with her lover. He found himself alone and he looked toward books. Upon graduating from high school, he was told by the white administration that he could go to one of five white colleges on a partial scholarship if he so chose. He did and

learned of the world. He was ten when Malcolm's legs and chest were riddled with metal pieces and thirteen when Martin lay dripping in the sunlight. By the time he was in college, the Panthers were being assaulted for daring to object to genocide and occupation in their own land. The land to which his people had been brought, that they had worked to death, and still to be policed and imprisoned, though they had built the whole thing with their blood. He was alone. Captive to the forced creation of his African Civilization. He perceived his sociogenic abnormality. He knew he was seen as an animal. He dialecticized his world and understood its workings. He saw clearly that to be normal (included) here was to be white. It must have twisted his mind as it must twist all who realize such horror. Their realization is spurned by their humanity. Their double-consciousness is their life. It is not hard to see that the world is glued by race-hatred, how such hatred structures the psychological, economic, social, and political reality. He saw this. And he was obliged to become a living contradiction. He was forced to use his knowledge not for the good of his beautiful black people, but to be used as a tool of white-capitalism (as are poor whites). It must have been this that in turn made him mad in combination with his inherent deficiencies. He was a human being and wanted to be recognized as such apart from any relation to whiteness. But this strange structure was forced upon him and he ran to expensively false feelings of invincibility. But he was quite vulnerable. And he went mad in his contradiction. The contradiction of his intelligence in a world that certainly had use for it, but that whom dismissed him as a Nigger. When he died, I stood silent. And the black liquid ran down his ribs and pooled lightly at his sides. I was left to think. And I am left to act, in this abnormal society, as the abnormal son of an abnormal man.

the first of a line of women aeronauts popular throughout the nineteenth century, and the true ancestor of the woman pilot of today.



born in 1900. It should be noted here that to this day all airship pilots must first qualify as free balloon pilots as engine trouble in a dirigible may turn it quickly into a free aerostat.