

Flooding the Holey Whole



by

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"What we'll always have is something we have lost."
—Ocean Vuong, "Snow Theory"¹

¹ Ocean Vuong, "Snow Theory" in *Time is a Mother* (New York: Penguin Press, 2022), p. 5, l. 9.

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Dead Marriage Continued

We were in the midst of the same age-old argument,
worn out by ancient spirals that only led us
down but not out into longed-for peace,
when I turned my back on you in bed
and said, "Let's just go to sleep and continue this tomorrow."

You woke me later, wild-eyed, gasping.
Despite the frantic call, my attempts at CPR,
despite the paramedics' shocking extraordinary measures,
you died. Heart attack a week after your fifty-first birthday.
I followed the silent siren behind the ambulance
into the darkness, knowing you were gone
while wondering, too, where you were going now.

I sat numb in my black all-weather coat,
perched like a vulture on a neon metal chair
in the corner of the small county hospital treatment room
while doctors and interns took useless turns thumping, pumping,
before the question came, "Continue?" and I had to say no.

Left respectfully alone, I performed last rites:
"Accept, O Lord, this your child, a sheep of your fold,
a sinner of your own redeeming."
I crossed the forehead as with baptized babies,
then venerated that cross with beatific kiss,
saying the only thing that would come—
ancient, rutted words in modern translation:
"May the Lord bless you and keep you.
May God's face shine with delight in looking upon you with favor
as you are welcomed into the Divine Presence
and granted peace."

Just like that, you were gone, whisked away
on a gurney like proofed bread ready for the oven
while I answered endless questions for organ donation.

Since then, I've had questions of my own.
I keep trying to finish our argument, get it all done at last.
And I'm about as successful in death as in life
when you disappeared, sheeted in silence.
Never did we step off the dust-deviled merry-go-round
cycle of childish quarrels to run playful, easy in grass.
We skipped ahead to old age, marriage trapped in convoluted spiral

spinning forever suspended, until slammed into stop, then encrypted.

Kissing Death

I have kissed that damn devil death
full on the lips of my beloved
I sought to revive in vain.

Here was no gentleman
who stepped in to invite one to glide
with him into the ballroom next door.

Here was no blessed rest,
but gurgling struggle, wet bed,
fixed pupils, thick swollen tongue.

Here was the sneering reaper
whose scythe cut a wildflower
budding into full bloom.

Do not tell me this was God's will.
This was no god
anyone who's sane could want.

My God weeps to see flesh destroyed—
a father's light snuffed out,
a husband's ring returned.

My God wails for sons writhing in agony
at the lash of torture's mockery
and words of divine despair.

In holy communion I have tasted God,
and now I have tasted death
to know for sure: they are enemies bitter.

The Senses of Death

As "Silent Night" fades,
your light has been snuffed
like a taper at the end
of a Christmas Eve service
too suddenly blown out
by a petulant teen
disgusted that his mother
dragged him here
in the first place.

Your death sounds like music,
not hanging mid-air
at the end of a lush chorus,
but like a handbell
suddenly damped
by slamming it down hard
against the foam table
with clapper confined.

It smells like roadkill
bloated, teeming with flies.

It looks like slices of roast beef
gone green around the edges.

It tastes like a foul
smashed into the mouth
instead of a ballpark frank.

You are dead.

And all is rotten dark,
muffled beneath a forest
slammed with snow,
silent,
still.

Foul.

Grief

In silent distance of night,
a lone coyote
opens throat to howl pain.



Before the Funeral

Forget the sympathy card,
the casserole, the hackneyed phrases
of intended consolation
that only make me want to slap
some unsuspecting, but well-meaning, fool.
Simply sit vigil with me,
protesting the unfairness of it all.
Stay beside me with a light on
all night while I try to sleep
in the bereft bed.
Say nothing with kind eyes
that know there are no texts
for the deepest things.
The simplest words
we learn at the beginning
are all we have
in the end—
I'm sorry,
Thank you,
I love you—
worship's words
as thou effaces
into Thou.

Grief's Reading Recommendations

The only one who makes any sense
after your spouse just suddenly drops dead
as you alternate between CPR and cradling him ashake
is Jeremiah with his fractured structure
and time shattered between past and future.

Friends gave me the usual to read--
C. S. Lewis on Joy, Wolterstorff's lament for his son.
I'd prophetically read Didion's *Year of Magical Thinking* already,
and ironically remembered it while
watching paramedics work in vain to revive.

But there was no magic there, just the usual hopeless madness.
I received Helen Steiner Rice drivel that meant well;
I threw it at the wall with much bad language.
A friend gave me a CD of gentle Christian rock schlock
that she found comforting when her dog died; I broke that puppy.

A former student sent stanzas of an obscure hymn
that approached comfort for its thoughtful appropriateness.
But I needed the full-throated lament of the blues,
the only music I could listen to that first year.
Mavis Staples' "You're Not Alone" sang me through the night.

I dug out my copy of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*
for a more reflective analysis this side of grief,
and Lady Philosophy kept me company without much consolation.
To be fair, there wasn't much to be had anywhere.
Except with Jeremiah who railed and cried before proffering hope.

Jeremiah had never been a favorite like Isaiah.
He confused the hell outta me, making no sense at all
until my world roiled like the ground in an earthquake,
which is how I suddenly began to understand the odd book
forged in trauma's broken fragments of incoherent meaning.

So Jeremiah's the only work I recommend for making sense
of grief with its grappling for comprehension
where there is none, its clawing for some scrap of hope
in the midst of despair, its tenacious clinging to faith while screaming
over the ragged wounds left when all is ripped asunder.

Rectify

I cannot make this right
no matter how hard I try.
You died with me
mired in anger with you.
And now you're gone,
and I don't even remember
what we were arguing about.
There is no redemption possible,
for there is nothing to redeem,
nothing to purify,
nothing to save,
nothing

except this swirl of shit
I'm trying to slog through—
both yours leftover and mine.
Most days I dissolve
into it like a soldier hiding
from snipers in a swamp.
To the outside world
I look like a stock straight hero
in my dress uniform.
They don't know where I've been
and what I've seen
of life's war on destruction,
of how bent you have to be
to become one with death
in order to wrestle some life
out of the muck of human existence
and the incomprehensible crucifixion
that lies at the crux of it all.

Somewhere in the struggle
I got sucked in, though.
I can't drag myself up
out of this primordial ooze.
I need to be rectified,
drawn up, washed off,
clothed in my right mind,
set right in whatever force
of love might resurrect us all
past this war.



Slap-Fish Death

Death slaps you in the face
like a flying fish in Seattle's market
that missed its mark.
The cold slime colder
than the waning dawn
startles awake.

We are all going to die.
What is the purpose of life
whose end is death?
Are we just so many fish
flying in the wind after all?

But is that the point—
that life is dying:
it's just a matter of what we're dying for
and for whom,
so wake up and die well?

Like Christ, my husband died
to show me love;
that was his life purpose.
And I, not understanding,
did not get it
until it was too late
and life flew apart around me
with dead fish
slapping me in the face
all over the place.

The question now is:
with tardy thanksgiving,
in mournful penance,
can I wake to die
and show others love,
thereby finding life eternal
flying in the wake?

Wordless before the Withered Rose

I should write an elegy,
but I can't.

I could write
about how the world tilted
on edge and turned to gray sludge
the day you died,
and how the routine of getting dressed,
washing face, brushing teeth continued
as ritual ablutions to usher me into
the between
as paramedics ratcheted up a gurney
to carry you away.



I could describe
how I had to tell your daughter, Laura,
in the pre-dawn hours
when phones are turned off
that her father was dead
by going to her dorm-room window
and knocking on it to scare her silly,
and how she, coming to let me in,
and hearing the news,
thought we were just going to the hospital
to see you because you'd had a heart attack.
Though I thought I'd made it clear,
she couldn't comprehend
that you could possibly be dead
until we walked through the ER door
and I told her that this was going to be hard
because your body was gray, tinged with blue.
I could tell you how a life
crumples at such news,
the body slowly folding
into some abstract origami shape
as hands catch to contain the scarring crease.
But I won't.

I could tell you about how I got mad
that the world still had rushing color
and how garish the McDonald's arches
crooked as I pulled around to
the drive-through for Egg McMuffins
neither Laura nor I wanted but knew

we had to eat to just slog through
the mush of time we found ourselves in
on the way to the funeral home
to make arrangements
for your body
being harvested for organs
at that same time.
I could recount our derision
at the cost of deer-antlered urns to house ashes,
tell you about how I could have chosen
to have had you made into a diamond necklace
for a twist on the Oscars' red-carpet question,
"Who are you wearing?"
But, no, thank you, I won't.

I could write about
how the random thought
that we could still make the game
we'd planned to attend
for family weekend that afternoon
finally transmuted into the astonished
realization that you're really dead.
So, instead, while everyone
cheered the team on,
we sat silent in the slow slide of light
in the fellowship space
of the religious center
with its stained leftover living room furniture,
just staring straight ahead
at nothing, unable to do anything else
other than cup tea that kept growing cold,
until it was time to go to the airport
to pick up your other daughter, Juliana,
whom we'd just sent to Tulane
six weeks earlier.

I won't tell you about the hardest call
I had to make in my life,
about asking Juli's hung-over roommate
to wake her and stay around just to be there
as she heard the news
that changed her freshman life
into before and after
as she packed to make a plane
for a funeral she should never have had to attend.
I just can't.

Because making the phone calls
made it all too real.
I managed to call your sister,
and asked her to call your mother,
who had trouble remembering
her husband was dead,
knowing the news would probably kill her,
which it pretty much did.
When I called my mother
dying of her own cancer complications,
she cried, "It should have been me!"
From there on out, it was simply too much
for this Victorian automaton
who could only glide jerkily
through that askew space in time
to talk to anyone else.
I just couldn't deal
with a world without you in it,
though I did what I could
to help our daughters
on the cusp of their own
blossoming time
that had just encountered
a sudden cold snap
to wither their promise
of life's wildflower beauty spread wide
across horizontal fields.

No, I can't write an elegy,
for to do so would be
a kind of defilement
of the sacred apophatic void,
like true theologians know
we cannot speak G*d's name
with any security
about what is ultimately unknown, unknowable.
There is a holy other-ness that remains
no matter how intimate a relationship
that no words can touch.
Elegies can only be con artists
when it comes to the holy,
though it's all we have
with which to bear witness
to the something good
that once was here,

however tangled with thorny imperfection,
and now is not.

All we can do is stare, wordless,
at the mottled body's shell,
the withered rose
marking the edge of nothing.

Despite your hurtful flaws,
you were sacred,
like all humans: scared and sacred,
yet utterly unique in your configurations
of that formula,
like the music that poured through you
in endless patterns of only eighty-eight keys.
How does one define music,
let alone extol a life?
The same way we can speak adequately
of love, Mystery, death:
We can't.

So I won't.

Remains

With each scribbled grocery list,
crumpled lottery ticket,
and sticky cough drop
that goes into the trash,
you leave,
receding further and further
into the past.

With this postmortem cleaning,
the wind passes over your life in full blossom,
and I fear that your place, swept clean,
may indeed be remembered no more.

I want your daughters to cherish
your cummerbund like I do,
remembering how you showed up
in your tuxedo carrying lobster
for dinner on our anniversary.

But they can't.

They can't hear my delight at our dance
when I play the Victrola you found for me
as a way of honoring my memory of an old woman
when I was a child who told me stories of her childhood
as she played her Victrola and we sipped lemonade.

To me, these things are memories,
connections to you,
the only material left of you.

To others, they are but things
shuffled from estate sale to estate sale,
appraised and valued according to market price.
To those left behind, they are things to be dealt with
on top of trying to live today
without past encumbrances.

Yet they are sacraments, too, of what life means:

scraps of baby clothes in a quilt
welcome and honor new life;
a dried flower from a wedding bouquet
unites hands holding it across time;
notes in a tattered Bible
clasp thoughts in resurrection suspense.
But without the stories behind the things,
all is *signum* without *res*,
so the symbols, discarded, die.

Memorialization

Why do we memorialize
our tragic losses
with monuments—
flowers and a cross
by the highway
where a crash killed,
a twisted steel cross
over the smoking ash heap
of the World Trade Center?

In the wilds of Pennsylvania
around the crater
where Flight 93 went down,
we walk a path of trees
planted for each person lost.
In Montgomery concrete blocks
hang to remember
lynchings people spent years
trying to forget.

The hole your death left
hangs over me yet
as I keep walking the road
of endless rumination
that leads round and round
nothing at the center
but twisted tragic memories
I want to forget
that still smoke.

Will it always be thus?
Can the cratered field
flower over in peace,
or will I have to spend years
and countless raised funds
to construct a memorial
worthy of some architect's prize
to draw others to remember in rage
what I want to move past, oblivious?

Wall of Grief

Once again,
it has hit full-force,
this wall of grief,
like a huge wave
I'm not prepared to surf.

It sneaks up unseen
as I tread water,
bobbing in the rise
and fall of daily life,
gathering force

until it comes crashing down
on top of me
crushing the wind out of me.
I am hurled down
to the bottom, dragged along

as pockets of sand
threaten to keep me
breathless below
topsy turvy
not knowing where up is

in the maelstrom of it all.
Then, suddenly released,
I crawl toward light and shore,
weeping in heaves,
until, spent, I wade back in.



Grief Drought

Peering through the grasses
standing like sentinel guards,
you can see that the pond
up on the hill we explored
with the dog is way down now,
exposed for the dank hole that it is.
You can see deer tracks
crowding around the muddy edges
trying to drink from what remains.

Grief, too, has its seasons of drought.

The water of life
with the comfort of its bath
that comes to fill up the hole
you left when you died,
drains in the drought of remembrance.
Suddenly exposed,
its architectural foundation,
built upon with muddied recollections
belies a crater in the soul.

And this dear scrambles.

"Just Heal Already!"

You tell me to heal.
But what does that look like
if every loss in our lives
just leaves a gaping hole
that can't be filled in?
Is healing
learning how to maneuver
around yet another hole?
To prance, instead of mince,
through holeyness?

Clay pots broken
can be glued together again,
and if you move the repair
around to the back,
you can still display it
as an object of beauty,
though it's of no use
in holding water anymore.

Is healing, then,
simply gluing on a smile
and pretending all is beautiful,
though we know where the cracks are
surrounding the emptiness inside
where nothing but dust resides?

Hearts broken can be stented or bypassed,
but which should I choose:
to hold the lethal blockage artificially open
or accept its death,
clamp it off, and bypass it altogether?

Or perhaps a chemical intervention
is in order with a bad country song
serenading empty glasses on a bar
that turns into a questionable character in bed.
That's as cliché as your desire
for me to just heal already,
as though this is possible.

In all your telling me to heal,
will you please tell me *how*?
"Slap some antiseptic salve

and a Band-aid on it,
plaster on a smile
and put it all behind you;
time and distance
heals all wounds"
just won't cut it.

The only scenarios I see
involve vacancy
and terror of non-being,
as when a child
fears disappearing
when darkness comes.

So I've embraced emptiness
like a broken vessel,
holding open the desolation.

But, wait. Let's examine the metaphor.
Doesn't this assume the hole inside
is something other?
But I am a part of it, it of me, not separate.
Holes, like doors, highlight that I have choice
as to what I will allow to move
through my brokenness
to enter the whole of what is me.

We are all broken, blocked,
dead in our abysmal freedom,
part of the interstitial space
of all that is God fully alive
holding our fragments together.
The Presence lurks within,
around, beyond as what Is.
I can thus fall into the hole
and find Wholeness there.

So I slough off this outer garment
of suffering I wear
like a trapped animal's coat of fear,
and naked, I walk
into the empty pool of light
that floods all holes,
eager, though scared,
to greet what awaits.

First Widowed Christmas Alone

In the deepest darkness of the year
I drag myself from embered hearth
to bundle against death's cold
and gather with other would-be pilgrims
somewhere near midnight
on Christmas Eve
in the cavernous tomb of a sanctuary.

Alone in this shade with strangers,
I listen to the bleak midwinter song
and am not warmed by the brass.
I should have stayed home in my grief.
There is no joy to the world for me,
and the angels someone else has seen on high
do not sing to me—not even second-hand.

I can't seem to find myself in this story anymore.

I must be the shepherd who stayed behind
to tend sheep while others went to worship,
for here I sit resigned, resolute,
a dark lump wrapped in shadow, alone.
Except that . . . here I am—
in worship with other hazy figures
huddled in muffled hope.

My neighbor carefully lights
her insignificant candle
and holds it aloft for me to light mine.
I, in turn, hold forth my unsteady light,
for another to light his.
The exchange pricks holes
in our surrounding darkness.

Together we stab our flickers of hope
into the silent night
like ancient people keeping
wild beasts at bay with torches of fire,
wide-eyed with wonder that it works.
We watch the Light gradually break forth
with the singing of the age-old song

and suddenly I find myself found.

Birthday Greetings for a Dead Narcissist

On his Facebook page
on his birthday
his widow wrote three words:
Not "I love you,"
as one might expect,
but "So much taken."

It was presumed
that she meant
so much was taken
when he died so young.
Only she knew
the resented lament.

***Ghost Whisperer* Obsession**

I am obsessed these days
with the *Ghost Whisperer*,
as though somehow
my destiny is linked
to Melinda's at this crossroad.

Of course, my therapist would say
this is understandable:
Melinda is the name of my mother
whose apocalyptic judgments
I've been running from
most of my life.

But that's not it.

I have a Ph.D.
I'm not supposed to like TV,
let alone be obsessed
by a show my child
ridicules me for watching.

Still, why? I wonder.

At first, I think I was trying
to figure out why
I haven't seen my dead husband
when I know many widows do
and hesitate to talk about it.
Evidently mine walked
straight into the Light
and didn't look back
except to connect through
odd thoughts, dreams,
birds, and snakes.

But that's a different story.

What does a co-dependent do
when her husband just up and dies
at the same time the nest empties
and she is left behind
with absolutely no rapture,
confused about how to proceed,
feeling like a lost child

in a darkling wood?

Of course, Jesus
and good drugs save.
This is a given.

But curiously, it's been Melinda
who's been my prophet
through this grief,
for she has taught me
to fear not
all the ghosts,
to instead be open
to what they have to say,
and to help them to the Light
because when you do,
they'll come back to protect you.

It's not a bad philosophy, really.

As I struggle to figure out
how to be a woman now left
with all this sexuality and no husband,
I see that apparently it doesn't hurt
to show lots of cleavage
while running your own antique shoppe
and wearing filmy nightgowns to bed.

Really? Why all the boobs?

Is this to signify that Melinda
is the Supreme Mother
with tatas full of the milk
of divine compassion?
You can't miss what look like nursing breasts.
Is she the maternal goddess
whose mission of mercy balances the world?
Is she the mother I need
and didn't get?

I can't quite figure out
this third-wave feminism
I'm trying to embrace
and still be faithful to God,
while hearing the voice
of MY dead grandmother

asking me, “Where’s your undershirt?!?”
because I was always supposed to
wear one, even in July.

Obviously, I digress.

But here’s where life gets interesting:
I started seeing my own ghosts,
and now I’m on to them.

The dark forces scare
and trick you into believing
that they are more powerful
than they really are
so that you’ll despair
and hide piecemeal
within their pain
until the hopelessness
your doubt engenders
creates the reality
It desires.

They work by force,
manipulation, hidden control
like puppet masters
that we women, sometimes just wanting
to be taken care of
like a child’s beloved doll,
allow, emptying ourselves
of our own desires
out of belief they are not good
anyway.

This I learned from my mother
. . . and faculty meetings.

Now I know why dolls
creep me out
and always have.
I was one, voiceless
except when anxiety
rendered me Chatty Kathy
with Tourette’s
while someone else
pulled the string.

Thus I objectified myself
and condemned others for it
when they didn't care
the way I wanted.

And I continued Its chaos.

But now I see that
what I fear is what
these ghosts of fear do—
separate parts,
compartmentalize,
disorder until all is lost
or inadvertently thrown away.

Is this Jung I see before me?

I fear what I've become
and never wanted:
Angry. Alone. Afraid.
My mother.

But I know from exorcisms
that Jesus does indeed save.
And I have seen the Light
I swim in
like a fish astonished
to see water
for the first time.

In the busyness of noise
that is the darkness,
the Light
that simply is
just quietly shines,
illuminating, warming
enlivening, growing,
empowering the other
to be fully who they are
and embody hope in Life,
saying no
to what objectifies
and destroys—
patiently restoring
and ordering
and polishing the tarnished

and putting away
the doll's broken beating heart
by wrapping it in tissue paper
for protection
until it is time to take it out
and share sacramentally again—
In short, by working through
without condemnation
but only firm care
that here I AM
for the good of all,
myself included.

And that something as flimsy
as tissue of care
and light of being
is what lasts
past the last flicker of TV
late at night.
The rest is just scare tactics
meant to keep us needlessly afraid.

Forgiveness

In wintry winds,
iced trees swirl
toward one another,
sending upper limbs
clacking together
like chop sticks
tapping out slanderous slashing
in whispered gossip
or like small swords
in some ancient conflict
until all crash down, cut off.

Then, silently, spring spreads
and ice melts,
quenching thirsty roots
grown withered
and tangled together,
sheathing wounded limbs
with bandaged sprouts
of tender new leaves
that bend in kisses
toward one another
in winds of change.



DeFuniak Springs

There's a round pond in the middle of the square
in a small town in Florida,
so round as to look human-made.
Some say it was formed by a meteor,
others, a sinkhole.
Legend has it it's a bottomless pit
to the center of the earth,
black as pitch, never successfully plumbed
by anyone who survived.
That was before a geologic survey
determined the maximum depth—sixteen feet.

A quaint village was built around the pond
to accommodate a Chautauqua branch,
and still it stands, draped with Spanish moss
from live oaks damp with hot humidity.
Despite the depth of ignorance at its center,
many schools came and went,
making it Florida's
early-nineteenth-century Athens.
The state's oldest operating library
stands sentinel over gloried archives.

Stumbling upon the town on a trek
to the glorious wide horizon of earth, sky, and sea
at the end of the beached south, you, too,
will gaze in wonder at the village
lost in time, encircled by
a caladium-edged brick walking path
brooded over by hanging gardens

of fuchsia, ferns, and bougainvillea
in deep cicada-ed shade.

But it's the pond, like grief, that beckons
as a siren to psyche—
attractive, dark, deceptively deep,
echoing what we each forget:
meteoric damage can be plumbed
to create lovely communities of wisdom around it,
for even sinkholes harbor eternal springs
that connect to oceans of care.

Gardening Widow's Weeds

Will there always be this hole
in the middle of my chest
like a crater still smoking
from where an asteroid hit?

Will it cool someday
and fill with water
so that it becomes a lake
I walk around as regular exercise?

Do I choose which landscape?
If so I choose the promises
of the desert blossoming
into a baptismal pool of grace

and look forward to walking
in the garden that will blossom
into tender compassion for all
the suffering at the center of it all.

Cutting Ties

I have been holding onto you
in my body,
suffering grief in
muscles bound in tightness
until pain threatens
to undo me.

Now I see
what the new pain is,
and I release
this perpetual ache
deep within
for now I know

it has been my last attempt
to control our love,
to keep it close—
bone of my bone
flesh of my flesh—
though it hurts.

I have been afraid
that if I let it go
you'll go away;
you'll really be dead,
instead of this ghost
I talk to rankling

through my new life.
And I want to keep you.
I always did.
It's part of what killed you.
But the tie that binds
has been cut

and I have to quit
grasping at its scraps
to tie myself up in
so that I don't forget
to remember
that I am guilty

of killing you
with my controlled keeping.

Besides, I never held that cord;
the Holy did
and ever does.
So now, I keep you close

by letting go.

Epiphany in the Night Garden

I have been trying so hard
to get this healing to grow
for so long.

I want to see the seeds
I carefully planted
in the plowed and tilled soil
amended with sand, peat, and cow shit
grow into a garden lush
and teeming full of life for all—
aphids and lacewings alike.

I have grand hopes
of tomatoes lolling about
until staked as saluting sentinels,
of cucumbers' tendrils crawling forth
to clutch onto life for all they're worth
to produce succulent sweetness
tinged with tart.

Sprawling pumpkin vines'
opening trumpet blossoms
will call bees to worship
in buzzing praise
while a choir of asparagus
sways in the background wind
among a congregation of
rosemary, basil, dill, and lemon thyme.

I have charted the sun's movements
throughout the days
of each season,
and I placed my garden's seeds
in just the right spot
with good drainage.
I watered with tears,
sang to them songs
of lament and thanksgiving.
But still, no healing sprouts.

SO WHY WON'T YOU GROW, DAMMIT?
Has my exasperated yelling
and intense effort
only scared you
to lie dormant?



I've done therapy, Gabby, Brené,
Mel Robbins, fasted and prayed.
I've had massage, physical therapy,
Cranio-sacral, Alexander,
special chiropractics.
Not even Jesus and good drugs
have stopped grief's pain.
I've keened the primal screams.
I wrote pages of thanksgivings
for all the life my dead husband gave me.
I've done paintings
intensely sculpted with garbage
and globs of various reds
to get out all the anger.
I scheduled a retreat where
I made a list of all the negative feelings
that weigh me down,
then wrote each on white rocks
I bought at Home Depot
and threw them one-by-one into a raging river.
I have done the work.
So where's my healing harvest?

I'm standing here
out in the night garden in my pajamas
with my phone's flashlight at the ready
to watch and wait and pray,
for little sprouts,
but, nope.
I can't seem to make it happen,
despite everything I've done.

And maybe that's the point.
I've done everything
except trust in that Mystery
that causes new life to grow.
Perhaps when I turn my attention
to other things,
I'll discover the garden's been growing
underground all along
and even now springs forth.

Healing is not a finished project
to be crossed off a to-do list
or a shopping item I can acquire.
It's a gerund or participle,

flowing beyond the fenced stability
of nouns and verbs.
It's something
we make space for, welcome, and tend
like a good host who also knows
when to leave guests on their own
so that exploring friends
visiting the local farmers' market
can surprise us
with sprawling, untidy gifts
of scarred cucumbers and tomatoes
lined up on the kitchen counter
as sentinels of harvest grace.



Drilling Another Well

I kissed you goodbye
for the last time
on the ER gurney.
Then I capped the well
to the depths of my heart.
Like a wounded animal
trapped in the grip of death,
I gnawed off a limb
to keep living.

Grief's amputee,
I walled off that part of me
so that now you exist
as if in the room
you could see from a crack
in the back room closet
in the haunted Victorian house
I lived in as a child.

There was a window
there that you could see
from the outside
with a curtain
hanging in shreds
from dry rot.
Otherwise, we might never
have discovered the room at all.

I used to imagine
that I was Nancy Drew
solving the mystery
of that room
after an imaginary discovery
of skeletal remains
from the murder
that caused the ghost
to roam the halls of the house
in the wee hours of the night.

Now I know too well
the contours of that room,
why it's walled off,
and why the ghost roams
bereft.

So I merely acknowledge
its existence
and, in tatters,
turn to drill another well
with only one arm.

Canoe-Wrecked Date

The metaphor is yours, but I've moved into it
and met you there on the shore
where each of us dragged our canoes
after being dumped out of our former marriages.

We take inventory of the picnic feast between us:
You brought bread thoughtfully kneaded and baked,
stored carefully in a Ziplock bag, and butter on ice.
I share grapes and cheese and brought chicken pesto pasta.

After eating, we walked and talked, then splayed out on the dock
like two kids sunning for hours at summer camp,
getting to know one another down at the river's edge.
We watched tutu-ed poodle clouds gather between the banks.

And then came the rain lumbering up the valley
like a parade of elephants before the circus coming to town.
Beneath sought shelter we waited out the storm and talked
of what led us here—his death, her betrayal—and our perplexity.

We're good navigators; this shouldn't have happened.
We know where rivers grow tricky
and carefully avoided submerged rocks.
It was supposed to be a smooth ride at this point in the river.

Yet here we are, shipwrecked, but not in despair.
We have our damaged vessels yet, and we're creative survivors.
We will make shelter, build a fire, eat, rest, play, process.
On our next date you will bring space blanket; I, matches.

But on that holy evening, we watched the sun set,
grateful for companionship with which to face the dark together
as elephantine rain tucked down into background blankets.
Eager to glimpse circus tents going up on the fairground of possibility,

we agreed to help one another repair our crafts until such day
as we each paddled off alone, going our separate ways,
grateful for this time remembered with fondness,
or perhaps proceeding together in a larger, more stable canoe.

Married Widow's Portage

All rivers end somewhere.
Merging with others,
they meander, rush forward,
to empty themselves like time
or a man making love.
Or they just stop,
perhaps going underground,
fluvius interruptus.

Navigating all this
on the long journey
in a canoe turns tricky.
Portage requires reassessing
what's important enough
to risk the residual pain
of carry across long distances,
and knowing what can be left behind:

Pictures of the ancestral dead,
their journals that list
when they saw what movie
and how much it cost,
vacation brochures with scribbled dates,
greeting cards with glimpses
of personalities now submerged in time.
Are these important enough to move?

Should we lay such things
as a child's report card
with all A's and a B in handwriting,
proving that she was destined
to be a doctor, into a recycling bin
or leave it behind for her to find?
Will she even traverse this same river
or is she following her own?

If we put it in a box for her,
will the wind pick it up
to carry it to her when she is lazing
upon some other riverbank,
like where we stand now at this bend,
to encourage her forward
or simply overwhelm her
with residual ancestral hopes?



What to carry forward?
And what to leave behind
on this portage
to our new river's edge?
It would be easier not to pause
and take existential stock.
But we must, so we patiently unload—
sort and cry, remember and decide.

These boxes of memories
might sink our canoe going forth,
but neither can we afford to cut off
a limb of who we are,
which will do us no good.
We want to be as whole as possible
to navigate the next great unknown,
and we'll need our past hard-won knowledge.

So what to carry,
what to give away?
What to leave as markers
for the next generation?
What to bury so that it ends
like some lost river?
And what to destroy so that the narrative
can meander on with meaning?

Pearls

Opening the divorce file
of all past grievances,
I see how I kept
casting my pearls before swine.
My first husband never saw me
or appreciated my luster
made from love's lack
as anything more than
opportunistic narcissistic supply
raining beauty from heaven
he could wallow and swallow.

He used my early suffering
to ease his own.

I have kept these files
for my own wallowing,
scared to confront the pain,
the black hole of anguish
at the center of my life.
Can I not appreciate others' love?
Or was it really just not there,
at least not how I wanted,
as just for me as I am
in all my shining glory
surrounding irritating grit.

Or did I just idealize his beauty
enshrined in lustrous song?

Like a Stockholm syndrome hostage,
I betrayed my own child
longing for love
in order to fawn like a dog
for some crumbs
falling from the table of plenty
that others enjoyed
while I tried to avoid
getting kicked from below
when I rebelled
and bit ankles.

Ironically, I justified it all
to protect our children.

Yet years later, here I am
returning to my own
journalistic vomit
of past grievances
against a now-dead mate
whose sudden death
was instant liberation
in the story of an hour
when the prisoner,
long dungeon-bound in darkness,
blinked stunned by sunlight.

I still have trouble
staying out in uncomfortable light.

I have well plumbed
the dark well of complicated grief.
Yet I keep striving to attain
the unattainable unreached,
cloaking myself in darkness
of old computer files
when outside the light beckons
on this unseasonably warm day
marking the anniversary
of his heart-rending death
I don't want to grieve anymore.

After all, it's not really him I miss.
It's what I missed with him.

So I will not pretend any longer
to be the good long-suffering widow
by posting Facebook tributes
to our love's rarely-happy ending
so that I can look good
like a fairy-tale princess
rescued by some prince
that we all want to be true
but isn't.
Like all pearls, his charming beauty
was predicated upon frustrating sand

that crumbles
through the hourglass of time.

Now I choose instead
to caress the pearls
my new husband gave me,
restoring my faith
in love's eternal resurrection,
as I hug our Golden
before bounding off
into this gift of a day
with clear-eyed sight
that nothing is ever perfect,
just good,

afraid yet that what's good
may still not be for me.

Grief Years Later

Like the burnt soup
in a desiccated clump
at the bottom of the pan,
the memory of you
gets stirred up still,
contaminating my taste
for life because you died.
You died.
You died.

If I could have let it lie,
maybe the soup wouldn't have been ruined,
but sometimes the smallest
mixture of object, place, and time
conspire to drag it all up again,
so I can't forget,
though God knows I tried.
I tried.
I tried.

Yet still it stirs,
and I hate it because
life goes on,
and I've moved on
and found better love elsewhere,
savory at the top of possibilities
where hope floats and I abide.
I abide.
I abide.



A Widow's Lace Curtains

Somehow every item
from our past life together
that leaves this new house
as no longer useful
or wanted,
feels like a betrayal,
a deliberate setting aside
of mounds of sorted memories
attached to such things
as freshly-washed lace curtains
stacked and packed
into a garbage bag
to take to St. Vincent's thrift.
These adorned the big Vic
we rehabbed together—
curtains you wanted
and were right about
for, at night,
after a long day at work,
the light from inside
shone through
their elegant homeyness
to beckon with anticipatory welcome.
But now your light is gone,
absorbed into all Light,
and someone else could use these.

In this new home
with my new husband
I must be practical
and let these leftover
pieces of you
go.
In truth, we acquired way too much
to fill the emptiness between us.
To keep too many of our things
is a betrayal of sorts
to my new husband
and the new life I want
with him, brimming with love
and filled with light
where I am warm inside, at home,
instead of looking longingly in
from the car where I used to sit

alone in the dark
with only a hint of the promised hope
of warmth inside
gleaming through these lace curtains.
So I shoulder the bag,
like I did most of our life's responsibilities,
and slamming the trunk
with audible relief, I drive off.

I Still Stumble

Years later,
I still stumble across you
stuck deep inside a game
in a pen you insisted
that you had to use
to play Pictionary.
In scribbled labels on old boxes
of Christmas decorations
there you are.
Occasionally your face smiles
at me from scrolling photos
on my computer,
there from the slide show of your life
that continuously ran
during your funeral luncheon.

Then I am once again on my knees
on the bed beside you,
trying to get you to breathe
to no avail.
Every now and then,
years later,
grief still clutches
in cloying waves
that open up the deep void
of your loss yet again,
and though I've moved happily on,
I still stumble.

Grief's Shawl

The Christmas after you died, I got five shawls
from various people as gifts.
Though they're called pashminas today
(to make them more fashionable),
they were basically shawls meant for frigid widows.
Today they abduct me from closet's depths
like overwhelming seaweed entangles
and drags mermaids swimming for light
back down into oceanic gloom.

Six years later, cloistered by summer's heat,
I am considering appropriate wedding music
for our little girl's upcoming nuptials
and the tricky father-daughter dance
with your excellent replacement stand-in,
my new husband, who's all you couldn't be.
Suddenly, though, I'm swimming in loss,
shivering cold, entangled in abducting grief,
and I reach for a shawl.

To My Suddenly and Long-Dead First Husband

It's your birthday again.
Even though you're a decade dead,
all the issues long buried
emerge like vampires
coming after me
to make me
dead too.

My massage therapist thinks
I've interred all the pain of you
in my hip that hobbles me
so that I shuffle like a zombie now,
and I am sick of it.
I want it out, finished, done!
You've sucked enough life outta me.

I don't want this anymore.
I've spent years
trying to get rid of
all your crap with
countless runs to Goodwill,
and curb posts for free stuff
on Craig's List and Facebook Marketplace.

I boxed up what might be valuable
to your children
when they're ready to go there—
to see the best of you
that you gave to everyone else,
performing for empty adulation
while giving me half-dead.

I keep thinking there can't be more,
but it just keeps coming back up
like some emotional *Pet Cemetery* dog
that you want to cuddle
in cute waggly-tail reminiscences
only to find Cujo keeps biting you in the ass
with unresolved longing for closure.

I don't want to relive the fights anymore:
me fighting to connect, you fighting to flee.
You won; you fled forever.
But I can't seem to let it be.

I keep digging you up
like some medieval pope
to retry and condemn.

This time, though, I'm ready to peek into this pain
to see how incredibly sad it all is.
With monumental angels of compassion,
I will consult and mourn all the loss—
not of you anymore—
but of me with you,
and of redemption's incarnate possibilities.

I'm ready to confront the irony
that I knew marriage compromised
the female self, so I was leery,
agreeing to marry you
only after ascertaining
that you'd commit
to egalitarian partnership.

In your passivity you devoured me,
leaving me on my own,
doling out affection for sex,
calling me crazy
when I wanted the you
you'd carefully stored away
in tissue-papered boxes.

I spent my life's energy
trying to be married to you
so that I lost myself,
as feared, for thirty years.
And I am so ragingly pissed
that I can't find subtle metaphors
to make this a poem and not a screed.

It's time to open the box now,
to dig up the rotten corpse of our marriage
one last time,
not to bury it for the dog to find again,
but to plant a memorial crab apple tree
on its green burial plot that can blossom
with remembered joy for years to come.

Last Date

I'm so tired of carrying this grief around
like a heavy, full-length, wet wool coat,
like the dark green one I was wearing
on our first date Christmas caroling
when your hands were cold
and I let you put them in my pockets
to stay warm—
the same hands I held
when we took our wedding vows,
the ones I nearly squeezed off
in labor with our two daughters.
Those hands that caressed
the keys of song and love
clutched at me in death,
then lay cold, still upon your breast
in the foreign funeral home.
They reach beyond to grasp me still.
I cannot warm them,
though Lord knows I've tried.
I need to take this infernal coat off now,
weighed down as it is by tears
of regrets and good memories
that keep me too bundled in the past
to move forward into a warmer future
without you.
Despite this Swiss-cheese life full of loss,
I am ok now.
As on our first date, we've talked too long,
and it's growing late. I have to get home.
Take your hands out of my pockets
and gently kiss me goodbye.
You can have this coat to keep you warm.



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