

LIFE COULD BE OTHERWISE: a collection of moments of grief in the workplace

By Amelia Holzer

Poetry editor Hezekiah writes:

Reality poetry—a hybrid between verse and journalism. It reads like a cleansing reckoning, prose for the purging...I hope it was cathartic, or at least some of the anguish has been caste out... “(I measure the time you’ve been gone the way I used to measure your birthdays).” Many fine lines, I had difficulty choosing my favourites, like:

I’m sorry I don’t know anything else.
I’m sorry for your loss
I’m sorry for their loss
I’m sorry

And

Life continues, the world spins and your artwork is replaced with blank walls.../ Something that tastes a little less like grief and a little more like gratitude.

(Spacing is poet’s own.)

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June 13th

You’re not supposed to text and drive.

And, I don’t. (Not *really*)

Except on June 13th.

Bumper to bumper traffic on the 91 E.

I chanced a glance at my phone.

J- passed away

Heart stops with the brakes of my car

Fuck.

The text replays on loop for the rest of the drive.

One Year Later

This wasn't what I expected.

I had *plans*.

For a death day party—to make a sad day, not so sad

Karaoke and ice cream

How naïve was I to think things would go accordingly?

This was not the time.

June 3rd

I spent more time than necessary doing my eye make-up that morning

Only for it to stream down my face an hour later.

D- passed away

Documentation

I couldn't breathe, but I made a phone call anyway

Is there any [gasping for air] paperwork that [descends underwater] I need to fill out?

24 hours

Even death—the worst case scenario—was time sensitive.

I had 24 hours to fill out the paperwork.

Questions

Did the client die?

Yes.

How did the client die?

I can't say this professionally. I can't say it in a way that won't keep you up at night.

Were they admitted to the hospital?

I don't know, I wasn't there.

If so, what were they admitted for?

You honestly want me to call a grieving family and ask for more information.

Was any medical attention needed beyond basic first-aid?

Yes.

If so, what?

The works.

Did the client die?

Yes.

Three days

I was told I got "three bereavement days"

Three

Pack up your tears, your memories, your heartache

Put it in a box

Put it in a bag

Take it to your neighbors across town.

And make sure you're back in three days.

A lifetime

A whole person

Thirty eight years

And all I got was three days.

Apologies

I'm sorry, I know she was a big part of the art center.

She was sick for a long time.

Yes, we're all sad here. Yes, we will watch your son/daughter. Yes, I will keep you updated if I notice anything. Yes, she was a really special lady.

I don't know about a service. This happened yesterday. I wish I had more information to give you

I will keep you updated as I know more. Yes, I will send a letter home

I'm sorry I can't give you this information.

We'll miss her here, for sure.

I'm sorry I don't know anything else.

I'm sorry for your loss

I'm sorry for their loss

I'm sorry

Phone calls

Hello, can I please speak to _____?

Im sorry, she's passed away

Phone calls vol. 2

Hello, can I please speak to ____?

She's not here, can I take a message?

Do you know when she'll be back?

She's in the hospital, I'm not sure. Maybe I can help?

Phone calls vol. 3

Hello, can I please speak to ____?

Shes not available, can I take a message

Will she be back tomorrow?

Shes on leave right now; she'll be back in May. How can I help you?

Phone calls vol. 4

Hello, can I please speak to ____?

She's out today

Will she be back tomorrow?

Yes, I can have her give you a call then

Conversation

How do people die?

Our bodies stop working

....your batteries lose charge?

Yeah.

Blue

Zayn was playing right before I found out you died.

I need

Somebody to

Love me

Blue

I skip it every time.

The Plague

Theres a story in the Bible, isn't there?

God sent the plague for one reason or another to punish people.

I'm still wondering. What did we do to deserve:

Fleas

Raccoons

And two deaths.

Details

I asked for details, when perhaps I shouldn't have

I wanted to hear them

To make sure it was real

To have someone to blame

And then all at once, I wish I hadn't heard them

The details are all I think about

(Im looking forward to the day I stop thinking of you writhing on the concrete and can instead see you playing basketball)

Taylor Swift

Shake it off, shake it off.

The soundtrack for the next month as I attempted to "shake off" the bad days

The sad days

The overwhelmingly quiet days

The days I left feeling hollow

Because there was a hole about her size in the studio and an empty office that was an all too prevalent reminder that she was there

And now she wasn't'.

Shake it off, shake it off

I told myself I could dance it out.

That this would do the trick. I could shake my worries away
The drums would fade out in the song and soon be replaced by a phone ringing.
Asking for her
I press repeat
Shake it off, shake it off
I-I-I shake it off, shake it off.

Tr(easure)ash

Cleaning out her office once she passed brought back memories of cleaning out my grandmothers home.
Why is it that every older woman has a tendency to hoard kleenex?

Paperwork
Condiments
Dried out pens
Cotton swabs

When you've camped out in one place for 29 years, trash is bound to accumulate.

Greeting cards
Candles, small gifts.
Artwork
Framed photographs

When you've camped out in one place for 29 years, treasure is bound to accumulate

Interviews

An older woman came to interview for the open position

Are you healthy? I thought

We can't take another death around here

It couldn't be the reason I wouldn't hire her

But it was absolutely the reason I didn't want to hire her.

Forgiveness

I keep telling myself I should have known.

Because in all the trainings I've been through in my life, the message was clear: behavior is communication

So I should have known.

I should have done more.

I should have made another phone call, another report.

I knew! It was right there!

But you didn't. There's no way you could have known.

Statute.

After 31 days I am no longer allowed to cry at his empty desk.

I will stop wearing sports jerseys to work

After 31 days, it is okay to let someone else use his colored pencils; to throw out the nail polish bottle and the uneaten pretzel; to delete his name from the sign-in sheet.

31 days and the knot in my stomach will go away provided I learn how to forgive myself (*this is harder*)

Exhaustion

A client's caregiver approached me, and said he was "tired of hearing about J-".

His grief was exhausting for him

I repeat: his grief was exhausting for *him*

Trauma

Something as simple as a greeting card became triggering

Is she okay?

...Its a birthday card

Oh! I thought she was sick.

Trauma vol. 2

I'm sick, I can't come in today

That's fine, thanks for letting me know!

No, no, you don't understand. My throat. I'm worried.

Like J-? I can't be sick like her

De-install.

I am hesitant to take down your artwork.

It feels like taking down your life. The second the art comes down from the walls, is the second your presence starts fading.

(is it bad that I've grown accustomed to your ghost?)

I walk into that room and things hurt a little less. A little color, a little movement—my troubles get smaller.

Is that how you felt making these?

Life continues, the world spins and your artwork is replaced with blank walls.

Make room for some(body) thing else?

Something that tastes a little less like grief and a little more like gratitude.

Trying to remember there is room for everyone (everything) here.

Forgetting

I almost forgot

(And I couldn't decide if this was what "moving on" looks like

Or just an accident caused by a full schedule

And a lot of distraction)

But then I remembered

It the 3rd.

And it seemed so silly. Because you're still everywhere

I couldn't forget if I tried.

Candles

Your birthday would've been this month

Do we still celebrate?

Blow out the candles. Make a wish.

Light a candle on an altar. Make some art.

Hope you're doing just fine.

(I measure the time you've been gone the way I used to measure your birthdays).

Reason

I started drawing magazine covers after you died

First to remember you

Then because it brought me joy. [express yourself]

It didn't occur to me that other people would like them.

Tan France thought I was amazing.

Karlie Kloss double tapped.

I don't believe everything happens for a reason.

Because I would much rather see you dancing in the studio than see "likes" on an Instagram post.

But it happened.

Its happening.

You're still the whole reason.

Community

Is it bad that I found comfort in knowing someone else was crying too?

That I wasn't *insane* for wanting to leave the office door closed

A little bit longer

And I wasn't *naïve* for refusing to move his desk

Just in case he ended up coming back.

It wasn't just my candle on the altar.

It was a forest fire.

It wasn't just my tears using the Kleenex

It was a community

Little Things

Its all about the little things.

Its about the people you knew better than they knew themselves

It was about how much they were missed when they left.

Taking with them those little things that you loved *so much*

The ones you miss the most

Because they're the things that just cant be replaced.

Little Things vol. 2

Vogue

Madonna

I think about the time you found a jersey in a goodwill

And got so excited, you decided to strip and put it on

Right then

And there

Hot chips

Nail polish

I think about how happy you were

Just to be here.

Little Things vol 3.

I would give anything just to get one more high five from you

Band-aids

There are no magic fixes.

There is not one grand solution to “finishing” grief

There is just a bunch of *little things*

Strung together

That make it okay

Memory

I took out your sketchbook the other day

The sketchbook you were working on

That's unfinished

Because you had every intention of coming back

You left it on your desk

You left for the day

You left this world

And for the first time, I didn't cry.

I just hope you're finishing it

Somewhere

THE POET SPEAKS: *Life Could Be Otherwise* is a collection of poems inspired by the life-experience of having two people die within the same year at work. I work as a mental health clinician, and much like doctors and other helping professions, sometimes we lose. As a

therapist, we have the privilege of doing long-term work and can get to know individuals over months, sometimes years. Their sessions and presence become routines in our own lives, which makes these losses tricky and devastating. I am drawn towards poetry that tells a story and feels authentic. My writing is influenced by April Green and Tyler Knott Gregson, as well as the raw voices of countless celebrity memoirs I have read over the years (Amy Poehler, Mindy Kaling, Misty Copeland...). Until this year, poetry and writing was never a form of expression I was inclined to do (though I am an avid reader). I am a traditional-turned-digital artist and expressing myself through imagery and movement were always the go-to. But, when tragedy hits, you search for words to say the difficult things for you and for the first time, I couldn't find a single text that was able to articulate everything I was experiencing. I decided to write in hopes of providing texts and "helping" someone else.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Amelia Holzer is a practicing art therapist and artist based in Los Angeles, California. She holds a Masters in Art Therapy and Counseling from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a Bachelors degree in Psychology from USC (Fight On!). This is her first foray into writing, aside from research publications primarily centered around grief, death, dying, and how loss impacts daily life. When she is not writing, she enjoys making art and hiking.*