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Topographies of Grief

Joshua Kurtz

Faculty Advisor: Terry Tempest Williams
Teaching Fellow: Michelle Bentsman

Spring 2025

A Senior Paper Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Divinity, Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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The Work of Grief

I am asking the word *grief* to do so much—

To carry my anger and my wonder. To teach me the ways of a mourning, magical
world. I even ask it to turn me towards

the divine. Timidly, I call to grief in the dark. I wrap it around myself
like a shawl. I walk into it as if it were a labyrinth, and as I walk, I walk

too into myself, into the earth. I walk into time.

The talmud teaches me that every life is a universe. How dare I ask grief,
this humble, precious noun, to encapsulate the void where

a universe once was, where a life once was, where everything now
collapses into itself.

So I make the word a metaphor, afraid to look it in the eyes—

Today grief feels like a lighthouse, beckoning.

But where? I ask, as if grief were a tiny being I could hold in my two chapped hands. As if I could turn it this way and that, running my fingers through its soft fur. As if grief were some object, a glass paperweight perhaps, I could polish and polish until it was so clear, so translucent, that I could see my reflection in it.

Tomorrow we will change the clocks. Every day, the dogwood I sit beside
loses more and more of her leaves, and I imagine that this tree, too, is grief.
I want to touch and kiss and sing to her trunk as those bright, burnt

orange leaves fall. I am beginning to suspect that creation was an act of profound grief – a *pouring* forth, setting in motion a world whose mysteries are known to us only in grief, only in this.

Open your eyes, grief says, the word carried gently now in my hands. May it be an incantation. *Open*.

(November, 2024)

Introduction

This Dewdrop World

"What shall be safe from the anguish of borders."
—Brenda Hillman, "Yellow Tractate"

Let me tell you a story.

The setting is Brooklyn – Midwood, to be precise – sometime in the early 1950s. When my father first told me this story, decades ago, I could not quite imagine what New York City looked like in the mid-20th century. Was the weather different back then? What did the mornings smell like? How did people spend their days? A child of the late 90s and early aughts, my only frames of reference for this historical period were clichés. I imagined children playing stickball in the streets; teenagers smoking on street corners; and the cast of *West Side Story*, formidable in their leather jackets, looking for trouble. Even now, as I recount the city where my father grew up, I see it in black and white.

Peter David Kurtz was born on April 5th, 1944. Although I never met my father's parents, Harry and Fanny, they appeared frequently in the elaborate and occasionally absurd tales that he used to share. Harry owned a furniture store just north of Union Square. According to legend, he paid off the mob every month and wrote erotic dime novels in his free time.

A skilled painter, Fanny was known for her reproductions of impressionist masterpieces. My favorite was always her rendition of Renoir's *In the Meadow*. The painting features two women, one in coral and another in white, sitting amongst wildflowers, tall grasses, and trees whose branches undulate in the wind. Though distinctly human, their bodies seem to dissolve into the landscape, each strand of hair morphing into a strip of bark, each ripple of cloth a brook, each brook a mirror.

I like to imagine that, when my father was a child, this scene introduced him to shades and colors, to the way light reflects on moss. I imagine him sitting on a soft carpet, staring at the painting on the wall. One by one, he points to each leaf, each branch, each blade of grass. Emerald, he says. Sage. Chartreuse. Each color an adventure, a universe.

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Throughout his childhood, my father's most prized possession was his bicycle. Although I cannot remember its exact make and model, I like to imagine that it was a bright red Schwinn with squeaky

brakes and a tiny bell. Whenever he had a free afternoon, he would explore the city on his bike. Sometimes, I wonder where he went. How far did he go, and did he ever get scared? Was he running from something? *Toward* something? Although he never used these precise words, perhaps he found a sense of freedom on the back of his bike. Perhaps these excursions planted within him a love of adventure, even a fearlessness, that would define him for the remainder of his life.

On one particularly clear afternoon (let's say it was early fall), my father was riding his bike leisurely around Brooklyn when, suddenly, a group of teenagers cornered him at a stoplight. They weren't especially tall, at least not in my imagination, but they reeked of tobacco and carried themselves like mobsters. My dad knew what they wanted, even before the words came out of their mouths.

"Give us your bike," the leader of the pack demanded.

The next scene is a bit blurry, but I imagine my dad walking home with tears in his eyes. I wonder whether he stopped for a rugelach, a bagel, anything that might bring him some comfort. As I write this, I realize that I don't know what brought him solace as a child. Were they the same things that brought him peace decades later, after he became my father? In any case, he was heartbroken. He walked past pharmacies and department stores, butchers and synagogues, parks full of joyful children and their doting parents. He barely registered any of it, as his head was down and his gaze narrowed on the sidewalk in front of him.

Hours passed. But then, all of the sudden, he noticed a daunting shadow in front of him. Nervously, he looked up. Standing there, right in front of him, was the tallest kid he had ever seen. "Was he 7-feet-tall?" I might have asked my dad, once, sitting at our kitchen table. "Yes, sweetie, he was 7-feet-tall," he might have responded.

Quickly, my dad realized that there was something rather unusual about this stranger. Somehow, strapped to his bony shoulder was a bow and arrow. Not a cheap, plastic one, like you could find in any toy store. This one was made of polished wood. It even glistened in the sun. "Hey kid," said the tall stranger. "What's wrong?"

"Some kids, bullies, they took my bike," my father responded, trembling.

"Alright," the stranger replied. "Let's go find it."

For the next several hours, the unlikely duo wandered the borough together. It must have been quite a sight: a young boy, no more than ten, with red, puffy eyes, and a 7 foot tall teenager holding a bow and arrow. They walked up and down every street and avenue; they investigated the alleys and the parks; they looked behind trees and under benches. The sun began to set, imbuing the city with that liminal quality that only appears during golden hour. That sense that everything – every lamppost and trolley, every subway grate and brownstone – could dissolve at the snap of a finger.

And just when they thought that they had failed, they heard laughter around the corner – a cruel, guttural laughter, the kind that could only come out of a bully's mouth. My father and the stranger rounded the corner and, just like that, his bright red Schwinn came into view, more beautiful than he could ever imagine.

Here is where the story slows, where time starts to stretch and bend like taffy. "Hey!" the stranger called out, cocking his bow. "That's my friend's bike. Give it back."

I reckon that, for my dad, the next few seconds lasted a lifetime, as the glee on the bullies' faces morphed into terror. Here's what I know: minutes later, my dad was back on his bike, peddling home as quickly as possible. He never told me whether the stranger let go.

+

When I was a child, I adored this grandiose tale. It incorporated everything that I looked for in a story: a quest, an unlikely hero, and an underdog who, against all odds, succeeds in defeating his bullies.

This story, moreover, showcases myriad aspects of my father's personality, such as his unwavering love of exploration, his uncanny ability to connect with strangers, and his commitment to finding joy even in the direst of circumstances. To some extent, I have come to see this tale as an origin story – a *setting in motion* not only of my father's life, but also of my own.

And yet.

This is not where I typically begin the lengthy, and at times circuitous, story of my father's life. Indeed, I often begin at the end.

The setting is northern New Jersey – some subacute rehab facility, to be precise. There is one doctor on-call, and she is exhausted. It is May 8th, 2020. The light is dim, artificial. Everything smells of

disinfectant. I imagine that somewhere, music is playing quietly, though no one can hear it over the steady hum of monitors. The sun has yet to rise.

Something peculiar occurs in the immediate aftermath of loss. Time begins to bend; it slows, then quickens, without permission. Even the light takes on a different quality, as if it too were grieving. "As if," Virginia Woolf writes, "the air were a fine gauze which held things and kept them softly in its mesh, only gently swaying them this way and that." The world shifts, and though the cracks are imperceptible at first, they are deep.

During these twilight hours of grief, everything becomes porous. The refrigerator, your desk chair, all the books on your shelves. Bewildered, you sense the borders of your own body begin to dissolve. Into what? you might ask. Into what?

Oftentimes, I begin the story with my father's death. With the frenzied rush to find a funeral home. To remember what his wishes were, whether he wanted to be buried or burned. What do the rabbis have to say about that? you wonder. You've decided, so now you must purchase an urn. There are so many types of urns. Did you know that you can buy them on Etsy? Set a date. Call the people who must be called. Email your boss. I emailed her. Did I forget to write "Sincerely"? She called me the next morning, sobbing. "Yes, I know," I told her. "I know."

Yes, I usually begin at the end, and then work my way back from there.

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"What grief displays," Judith Butler writes in *Precarious Life*, "is the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control."

When I first encountered these words, roughly a decade ago, my father was still alive. At that point, however, I had already been introduced to grief. During my senior year of high school, I sat by my grandfather's bedside in the days leading to his death. Years before, I watched my father have a stroke while driving me and my mother through the mountains of Vermont. When I was in elementary school, I listened attentively, albeit anxiously, as my mother informed me that she had multiple sclerosis. And then, of course, there were the everyday griefs, the moments that we do not always recognize as grief, despite the harm they cause. Crushed dreams and missed opportunities. Ancestral

traumas that evolve, yet never disappear, from generation to generation. Not to mention the experience of living in *this* world at *this* time.

Prior to reading *Precarious Life*, I didn't quite have the language to describe the experience of these many griefs. How they lived both within and outside of my body. What they felt like in my skin and in my joints. I didn't know how to explain the paradoxical way that grief took me out of my body, while simultaneously rooting me more firmly within it.

I sometimes wonder what would have happened if I *had* possessed such language. If, as a twelve-year old, I could have exclaimed to my therapist: "I am being torn from myself! I am not an individual, after all. I am an interdependent being, trapped in a web of relationships that I will never comprehend." I imagine she would have smiled gently, then called my parents. Though, who knows, perhaps she would have been pleased. "Ah, I think you're right," she might have said. "Tell me more."

As an undergraduate student at Brown University, I found myself drawn to writers and thinkers, such as Butler, who sensed not only that there are experiences in our lives that rip us open, but also that these tears create possibilities for wholeness. For new relationships, stories and practices. For new conceptions of what it means to be alive in this world.

One such thinker was Simone Weil, the French mystic and activist whose work grappled with the perplexing relationship between creation and the divine. After reading her remarkable collection, *Waiting for God*, I was hooked. To the chagrin of my friends, I even printed stickers featuring a photo of Weil in the Renault Auto factory where she briefly worked. I was particularly drawn to her notion of *decreation*, the process by which "something created passes into the uncreated."

Weil believed that creation was, fundamentally, an act of renunciation – even, perhaps, an act of grief. To create the world, God had to *give up* something. And, echoing myriad Christian theologians, Weil believed that this act of sacrifice was inextricably bound up with love. To some extent, Weil theorized decreation as a set of practices through which human beings can mirror, in our own bodies and communities, this act of creation. Decreation, that is, invites us into relationship with the divine.

Eventually, I decided to write my thesis about Weil – specifically, about what I referred to as the "theory and practice" of decreation. I was especially proud of my final chapter, which endeavored to square Weil's obscure theology with Judith Butler's understanding of interdependence. I sensed that both scholars were, in their own ways, committed to developing a new ethics that was rooted in a rejection of individualism and an awareness of relationality.

That is, both Weil and Butler invite us to pay attention – not only to the workings of our own minds and bodies, but also to the myriad relationships in which we are enmeshed.

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After my father passed away, I found myself drawn to the forests, shorelines, and vistas that he had adored. These landscapes, I have come to realize, are embedded deep within me – in my bones, in my memory, and even in the way I carry myself through the world. Over time, I discovered that these are places where I can communicate with my dad – where I can encounter not only *his* life, *his* stories, but also the countless echoes that he left behind.

When I say that I *communicate* with my father in the natural world, I do not mean that I somehow call him on a mythical telephone, placed there just for me – although I do, from time to time, speak with him out loud. Who, though, is the "him" to whom I refer? When I speak to my father, when I sense him on some turbulent shore, who am I really encountering? Aren't I, in some way, encountering *myself*? Aren't I dissolving into something vast and unknowable? To conjure my father is also to conjure myself – the self I aspire to be, as well as the self I wish to leave behind.

To be clear, I don't mean to romanticize these encounters. They are painful, even gut-wrenching at times. They are tinged with guilt, anger, and regret. My father was neither an easy nor a simple man, and my relationship with him was tumultuous. In a sense, I am endeavoring to write myself *into* a relationship that never quite existed. Or, if it did, it existed only in glimpses, in brief bursts of light.

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This collection, entitled *The Topographies of Grief*, is an archive of sorts. An archive of stories, memories, conversations, and dreams. An archive of perceptions, questions, and half-formed thoughts. An archive of maps. If grief is a landscape, as I believe it is, then what are its contours? Its summits and craters, valleys and plains? Where does it lead? And what does the journey demand of us?

These writings are rooted in my conviction that *grief attunes us to our fundamental interwovenness*. In conversation with the myriad thinkers and writers who have mentored me through grief, the following essays, fragments, and poems explore the intricate – and, at times, mystifying – relationship between grief, ethics, and the natural world.

"Most people think that grief is privatizing," Judith Butler writes in *Precarious Life*. "But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility." Indeed, the ways in which we grieve greatly influence how we treat one another. In reminding us of our relationality, grief invites – even *demands* – new conceptions of ethics and politics.

And yet, we must also tarry with the personal, the private. If grief is to have political potential, we must first allow ourselves to experience it, to approach it with curiosity. I agree that grief – this inexplicable, yet universal, experience – engenders community. Still, grief is housed first and foremost within our bodies. Grief is a rush of adrenaline. It is dizziness, insomnia, muscle soreness, and fatigue. It is a headache that won't go away, a knot in your stomach. Grief is *felt*. It works its way into our bones.

To linger here, with the personal, is not to abandon grief's ethical or political dimensions. After all, the personal is universal. In the midst of great loss, we learn to see the world through the eyes of grief.

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Something strange has occurred, in the years since my father's death – and, shortly after, my grandmother's as well. Over time, I began to see grief everywhere. In the books I read, the films I watched, and the songs I played over and over again. "We could see this sadness as a gift and still / feel too heavy to hold," Adrienne Lenker sings. I began to see grief in conversations with friends, family members, and even strangers. In the wild turkeys who frolic clumsily through our neighborhood, and in the dogwood tree that sways all day outside our window. In the low rumble of planes taking off. In chairlifts that wobble, precariously, as they ascend and descend mountains. In the raspy voice of Leonard Cohen.

In my community, I speak about grief so often that one friend recently referred to me as 'the grief guy' – an apt phrase, perhaps, though a bit mortifying. Grief has also begun to appear in quite absurd, albeit occasionally eerie, ways. A bumper sticker, spotted on our street, that reads, "I'd rather be grieving." Or a woman, sitting beside me at a local coffee shop, annotating a musical composition entitled "Ecstatic Burial."

From time to time, I wonder whether these are signs. If so, what do they point to? What can they teach me?

Grief is difficult to write about because it is all encompassing. It is unwieldy. Like any word, the more you say *grief*, the less meaning it carries. The more I write, read, and speak about grief, the more it bleeds into other terms: grace, gratitude, love, God. Like a rock covered in seaweed, grief is a slippery thing.

Many of my interlocutors in this collection recognized the difficulty of writing both *about* and *into* grief. "I see myself as a fish in a stream," Virginia Woolf writes. "Deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream." And yet, as her oeuvre demonstrates, Woolf believed deeply that the work of our lives is to describe the stream, to search tirelessly for language that can awaken something within us. Indeed, in *Água Viva,* Clarice Lispector describes writing as "the method of using the word as bait: the word fishing for whatever is not word." What, I wonder, is the word *grief* fishing for?

Of course, there is no single answer to this question. There are many ways to write about grief, many approaches to the mysteries that grief unveils. In her poem "Sideways Tractate," Brenda Hillman writes "so instead of the descent into hell / it seemed I had learned death / by looking sideways." What does it mean to look at death sideways?

As I have endeavored to write about my beloved dead, I have come to realize that all we can do is look at grief sideways. To even use the word "grief" – to name this inexplicable, mystifying experience – is already to approach it from the side. All we can do, in the face of unfathomable loss, is describe how grief moves from day to day. How it lodges itself in our bodies and communities. How it transforms even the land, inviting us to re-draw our maps of the world. All we can do is describe what grief feels like. What it smells, tastes, and sounds like. How it appears to us. And this, I think, is enough.

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Recently, a mentor shared a beloved haiku, written by the Japanese poet Kobayashi Issa. It reads:

This dewdrop world—
Is a dewdrop world,
And yet, and yet...

Born in 1763, Issa wrote over 20,000 haiku before passing away in 1828. A Buddhist priest, as well as a renowned poet, Issa faced a great deal of loss throughout his life. His mother passed away when he was three years old; he and his wife, Kiku, lost three of their children; and Kiku herself passed away only a few years after their third child died. Issa composed this haiku shortly after his daughter passed away.

In the opening of the haiku, Issa invokes a recurrent Buddhist image. This world, he reminds us, is a *dewdrop* world. It is fleeting, fragile. Liminal, even. The world is formed – and, just as easily, it transforms. Just as dew evaporates and becomes vapor, our lives are impermanent. Eventually, we take on new shapes. For many, there is comfort in this understanding of existence. I, too, find peace in the notion that I am nothing but a wave that appears only briefly before once again being subsumed into the sea. The world is always ending and always beginning.

Issa, however, does not stop there. "And yet," he writes. "And yet." Indeed, we inhabit a dewdrop world, but that doesn't mean our lives are somehow painless. Grief hurts. Loss rips us open. The comfort of impermanence does not detract from this fact, from the reality that those we love most will one day die. Grief is inherent because our lives are fleeting. Some days, there is comfort in this. Other days, we are nothing but heartbroken.

I have found great wisdom in Issa's words in part because they speak to an anxiety that I have struggled with, particularly while writing these essays. To some extent, I am uncomfortable writing about grief as if it were somehow *useful*. I occasionally wonder whether, in writing about grief's potentiality, I have looked past the havoc that grief wrecks, as well as the ways in which grief and loss are unequally distributed in our world. "Make sure you don't describe grief as *good*," a mentor even warned me.

All we can do, Issa seems to suggest, is sit in the discomfort, in the many contradictions that grief carries. Grief is universal, yet it is also particular. Grief is everywhere, but it also resides in the body. Grief is painful, yet it reminds us of our most loving connections. Grief is destructive, but it also presents us with opportunities for renewal.

This collection exists in the *and yet*. These writings, these dispatches from grief, are watery and repetitive. They meander in and out of the body – my father's, mine, the body of the land. These reflections echo one another, first and foremost because grief, for me, so often feels like an echo. To experience grief is to step inside a cave, a tunnel, a wide chasm. Grief, in so many ways, invites us into the *and yet*. May we sit together in that space between our lives and those we have lost, between this world and the next, this world and the one we wish to build.

Let me tell you a story.

One

The Wovenness of Things

Notes on Grief and Halibut Point

"There is a power to place – a hold that is kept over us – a woven thread that never really loosens itself once we have been there, and been held by it."

— Kerri ní Dochartaigh, *Thin Places: A Natural History of Healing and Home*

I am sitting on a slab of granite overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. The tide is coming in quickly — water cascades over the rocks. I'm searching for a word to describe that shade of teal that emerges right before a wave breaks. A family of ducks passes by, indifferent to all the commotion — the roaring wind, the whistling of far-off birds, the swelling water. It is unseasonably warm for early March in New England, but my fingers are freezing. I take note of the patterns in the water — the marbling of white against turquoise, the sheets of sea foam that reflect light like crystals. I take note of my body, which is achy, and my breath, which is shallow but slowly softening. For a few moments, I try to breathe in rhythm with the ocean, but I soon get distracted by the ducks. Are they harlequin ducks, or are they loons? Today, the horizon is impossibly blue, a thin string tenuously stretched between worlds. I feel as though, if I reached out, I could grab it and watch the border between sky and ocean slip away.

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Halibut Point State Park sits at the northern tip of Cape Ann, a rocky peninsula in northeast Massachusetts that is surrounded by the Ipswich Bay on one side and the Atlantic on the other. Along the coastline, boulders and sheets of granite tumble from rocky headlands to tide pools that are home to sea stars, snails, and hermit crabs. Above the shore, there is a walking path around the former Babson Farm Quarry, a rocky crater that is now filled with water. The soil here is thin, and the winds are constant and fierce. Still, this landscape sustains life — wildflowers, blueberry, arrowwood, shadbush, bayberry, catbrier. Centuries before this land became a state park, Pawtucket people traveled seasonally to this coast to harvest fruit, catch fish, and hunt game. Every winter, ducks find sustenance in the rich offshore waters. I've even spotted a snake or two slithering lazily across the thorny, narrow paths that lead to the ocean.

I don't remember when I first visited Halibut Point, but I know it was my dad who brought me. He adored the rocky shores of New England, where lighthouses are perched gracefully above the coast and tide pools are like tiny windows into other worlds. Throughout my childhood, he and I would traverse these landscapes together. We approached this activity as if it were a game. How will we get from this

rock to that one? Will that rock be too unstable, too slippery, or too narrow to balance on? What creatures might we find lurking around the next corner? What might we see from the boulder up ahead? It brought me immense joy to navigate these jagged landscapes. To watch the tide move in and out, and to run my hands through thick blankets of slick, green rockweed. On these shores, I learned to pay attention. To delight in the bits of color and life that flourish even in rocky crevices. To savor the sounds, scents, and tastes of the ocean. Here, I felt awe for the first time — that strange and joyous experience of dissolving into something mysterious and achingly beautiful.

I don't know much about my dad's relationship to this place — the meaning it held for him, how he came to love it. I know he returned often, perhaps out of nostalgia for his college years in Massachusetts, or out of a deep love for the Atlantic and all those who call it home. My dad had many of these places — Pemaquid Point in Bristol, Maine; the summit of Equinox Mountain in southern Vermont; even the mosquito-ridden hike along the Branch Brook to Buttermilk Falls. Throughout my childhood, we returned to these landscapes year after year. We returned despite my adolescent grumblings — the incessant question, "why can't we go anywhere *exciting*?" It has taken years for me to recognize that these trips were gifts — that these places, including Halibut Point, have been woven into the very fabric of my life.

+++

The thing I love most about woven cloth is its porousness — the way you can see light pass through it. When I first learned to weave, however, this characteristic concerned me. The first scarf I ever wove was a mess. The pattern was all over the place; the colors didn't complement one another; the edges were uneven. After I removed the fabric from my loom, I panicked when I saw all the gaps between interlacing threads. I thought that I made a mistake. Perhaps I used the wrong kind of yarn, or maybe the tension across my warp was uneven. I washed the scarf carefully by hand in a massive soup pot. As the yarn softened and shrunk, the gaps began to fill in. Still, when I held the cloth up to a window, I could see light pouring through it. It must be broken, I thought.

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My dad, Peter, died on May 8th, 2020 after contracting COVID-19. The last voicemail he left me was a panicked one. He was in the hospital, but he didn't understand what was happening. My dad, who spent his life cultivating a deep sense of place, didn't know where he was. Disoriented, he asked me to come get him, to take him back home.

If I could have taken him anywhere, where would he have asked to go? If I had given him a map, where would he have pointed?

As was the case for so many families, we did not get a chance to say goodbye, other than a few words spoken quickly into a cell phone that a nurse held up to his ear. We were not able to grieve together, at least for a while. In the days and weeks following his death, I found myself driving, again and again, to Halibut Point. Each time, I would sit and stare out at the ocean. After a little while, I would stand up and stretch — bending my body forward, and then gently back. I would take a breath and, quietly, so that only the wind could hear me, I would say my dad's name. I would speak with him tenderly and apologetically, as our conversations rarely were in the last years of his life.

I returned to Halibut Point because it is a place my dad loved. A place where our relationship was joyful and gentle, and where we could celebrate our shared similarities rather than fixate on our myriad differences. Halibut Point was a place where I could find my footing. A place where I could care for my grief. Where I could allow it to unfold, and allow myself to be undone by it. Halibut Point is still a place where I can locate my dad – no longer in person, but in the birds and the grasses, the winds and the ancient rocks.

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In the months after my dad died, I searched for a practice through which I could reconnect with my breath and body. I went on long runs and hikes. I played the fiddle and baked bread. I knitted scarves and carved rubber stamps. For my birthday, my mom bought me a loom — large enough to weave a scarf, towel, or table runner, yet still small enough to fold and pack into a closet. I spent hours watching YouTube videos, reading blogs, and flipping through the pages of craft magazines. I began seeing weaving patterns everywhere — on leaves and pine cones, sidewalks and shutters, overgrown lawns and rippling waters. Out walking, I would stop and stare at interlocking branches and the intricate patterns of bark. I watched in awe as streams of autumn light wove through thick patches of orange, red, and yellow leaves. I spent evenings scrolling through the websites of yarn stores searching for that perfect shade of blue, the one that would remind me of Halibut Point.

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If you stand in the right spot, you can see both the ocean and the quarry — two bodies of water with little in common, except for a shared history of violation. Starting in the 1840s, Halibut Point was mined for its 440 million-year-old granite. At first, this rock was mined only from the shoreline and

other easily accessible locations. Later, the Rockport Granite Company purchased the land and expanded the operation. Halibut Point granite was prized for its purity, durability, and density. For decades, quarry workers toiled to keep the pit dry, removing buckets and buckets of water by hand or by ox. After the granite industry collapsed at the start of the Great Depression, the quarry quickly filled with water and with life.

At the northernmost edge of the park, there is an overlook on top of a massive grout pile — a mountain of granite waste that tumbles haphazardly into the ocean. On a clear day, you can see Mt. Agamenticus and the Isles of Shoals. You can spot the domed roof of the reactor at the Seabrook Nuclear Power Plant. To your right, you can see the abandoned Sandy Bay Breakwater, built during the 19th century as a safe haven for ships sailing between Boston and Portland. Today, the partially constructed breakwater is considered a hazard to navigation.

When I visited Halibut Point with my dad, I didn't know this history. I didn't know that the rocks I loved to run across had been ripped from the earth and dumped here. Among all this brokenness, I had built a playground.

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The first step in the weaving process is called warping. The warp is a network of threads strung lengthwise across a loom. These strings provide the foundation for all woven fabrics. The warp is the scaffolding that supports the weight of woven cloth. Warping is the most essential step in the weaving process, and it is also the most difficult one. If the tension is uneven, your fabric will fall apart.

Learning to weave, I struggled with this step. There were always threads that were looser than others. Sometimes threads broke because they were stretched too tightly.

Outside of weaving, the word "warp" carries multiple, and at times conflicting, meanings. To warp is to bend or twist something out of shape. An object might become warped after being exposed to moisture or extreme heat. A person can have a warped sense of time or humor. To warp is also to flood a piece of land with river water so that its sediment can nourish the soil. A warp can also be a rope used to move a ship in bad weather.

Over time, I have become more comfortable warping my loom. Now, to check my tension, I close my eyes and run my palms across the warp, paying attention to where the yarn is too slack or too taught. I've learned to trust my instincts.

To warp is both to distort and to reinforce. To break and also to mend. It is to lose and then to once again find your way.

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Shortly after my dad died, I sent a message to an acquaintance who is a Rabbi in Baltimore. After I told her about the time I was spending by the ocean, she told me, "The ocean is a good place to take grief. It knows all about it." This comment struck a chord deep in me, and I reflect on it often. When I sit on a granite boulder at Halibut Point, I don't only feel connected to my dad. I also feel intimately connected to all of those who have mourned on its shores — all the beings, human and otherwise, who have experienced loss. As I gaze over the Atlantic, with its rising and warming waters, I feel the borders of my grief begin to dissolve.

In 2021, the American Psychiatric Association announced that a new diagnosis, "Prolonged Grief Disorder," would be added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (commonly known as the DSM-5). Prolonged Grief Disorder — which has also been referred to as "chronic mourning" — applies to individuals who continue to experience grief more than one year after the loss of a loved one. It sets an expiration date for grief and deems certain forms more acceptable than others.

So often, our society discusses grief as if it were a temporary circumstance. We have this notion that grief is an aberration or a problem that should be solved — a process that, while painful, will ultimately end in something that feels like acceptance.

My experiences have not aligned with this mainstream understanding of grief. I am drawn instead to Judith Butler's notion that grief *tears us* from ourselves and, in doing so, exposes our fundamental interdependence. Grief reveals our interwovenness — not only with each other, but also with the earth. In this framework, grief is not an individual experience. It is not something that we must bear in isolation. Far too often, grief is spoken about in these narrow terms. What would happen if we changed this narrative? If we spoke about grief as an experience that unites, rather than alienates, us?

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I received the hospital's call in the middle of the night. The exhausted doctor had neither the time nor the energy to comfort me. Before I could begin to wrap my head around the news, the doctor told me, "You have to get him out of here. I don't have refrigeration." Over the next several hours, my partner

made frantic calls to funeral homes in Northern New Jersey. Eventually, she found one that would provide my dad with a *shomer* — an individual who, according to Jewish tradition, would sit with and pray for my dad's body. I spent most of that night on the phone with my mom, who was recovering from COVID-19 in a rehabilitation facility. The last time she saw my dad they were in a hospital room that they briefly shared when they were both sick.

If I could have taken them anywhere, where would they have wished to go? That night, on the phone, my mom and I were mostly silent.

Sometimes, when I sit on the shores of Halibut Point, I speak to my dad without ever making a sound.

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As I have become more adept at weaving, I've realized that the porousness of woven cloth gives it strength. When one thread breaks or frays, the structure does not fall apart. A network of threads, crossing over and under one another, supports the fabric.

Weaving is a practice that has attuned me to our interdependence. It is an invitation to honor, celebrate, and care for all the beings and lands to which we are connected. This is the work of weaving, just as it is the work of grief.

Recently, I walked past a small home a few yards from the entrance to Halibut Point. I had never noticed it before, but this time I was drawn to its worn yellow siding and squat brick chimney. Reading a nearby sign, I learned that this home was built in 1702 by a man named Samuel Gott. He was a weaver.

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In her book *Thin Places: A Natural History of Healing and Home*, the Irish writer Kerri ní Dochartaigh writes about places where, according to Celtic mythology, there is little distance between heaven and earth. "They are places," she writes, "that make us feel something larger than ourselves, as though we are held in a place between worlds, beyond experience." For me, Halibut Point is one such thin place, where the borders between worlds — between sky and ocean, wind and breath, love and grief — all collapse.

What does interwovenness demand of us? What would it mean to recognize that our fates are intricately intertwined? That we have all experienced, or at some point will experience, grief? That grief often feels like love?

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When I was a child, I spent hours with my dad at our local AAA office. Before every family trip, we would buy a map — one of those flimsy brochures that were impossible to close once they were unfolded. Sometimes, we'd try to find the most direct route between our house and our destination. Other times, we'd look for the scenic route — the roads that might take us past a waterfall, a gorge, or a path through the woods. For much of my childhood, my dad pined for the West Coast landscapes he left behind — ones that were far from our home in suburban New Jersey. Still, he was someone who could forge a deep connection with any place, even the ones that are easy to overlook. It was like a superpower. No matter where we were, he knew where the park was, where the bakery was — where we could rest, even for just a moment, and take in a bit of beauty.

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Since my dad died, I have woven potholders, towels, blankets, and scarves. I have experimented with houndstooth, twill, and plaid. I've woven fabrics that remind me of the ocean and the mountains. I have purchased enough yarn to fill multiple duffle bags, and my collection is steadily growing. I have woven in moments of grief and love, and in moments when I can't quite tell the difference. I have woven in solitude and with loved ones. I've woven in the places that I call home.

In the coming months, I will weave a *chuppah* — a canopy under which Jewish marriage ceremonies are performed — for my wedding. Chuppahs can be blankets, tapestries, or prayer shawls. They can be woven, knitted, or embroidered. Ours will be colorful. It will remind us of the places we love — of the trees, flowers, and animals who live there. It will be woven by our friends and family, whom we will invite to contribute small sections. The chuppah will be a celebration of the people and places to which we are connected. It will be imperfect, and it will be whole. When we hold it up to the window, light will stream through.

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Oddly, the name "Halibut Point" does not refer to the fish. Rather, the name derives from an old sailing term. Centuries ago, when south-bound ships reached the tip of Cape Ann, captains would call

out “haul-about!” before resetting their sails to navigate around the peninsula. Over time, this phrase evolved into the word “halibut,” which I suppose is a rather fitting name for a place along the New England coast. Still, I am drawn to the name “Haul-About Point.” There’s a certain music in it, a kernel of truth. This is a place where you can change direction. A place where you can take stock of where you’ve been and set a course for where you need to go. It is a liminal space, where I am reminded again and again of all the ways in which we are connected.

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The tide is beginning to recede, and soon it will be time to return home. My fingers are freezing, and I could use a cup of tea. Nearby, a man is taking photos of the ocean, the family of ducks, the darkening horizon, a sailboat in the distance. I try to imagine what Haul-About Point might have looked like if it hadn’t been mined. If the rocks that tumble into the ocean were still buried deep in the earth. If the quarry was a meadow that sloped gently down to the water’s edge.

This is the power of thin places — places where we are invited to sit with and find beauty within brokenness. There is healing here, amongst the rocks and the birds, the quarry and the tide pools teeming with life.

After a few minutes, I stand up and stretch. Slowly, I bend my body forward and then gently back. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the ducks paddling to shore. Everything is shimmering. I take a deep breath and, quietly, I say his name.

Two

Conjuring our Beloved Dead

Grief and Interwovenness in the Work of Virginia Woolf

"How then does light return to the world after the eclipse of the sun? Miraculously. Frailly. In thin stripes."
— Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

June 10th, 2024. Somewhere on the southern coast of Iceland, I stand at the mouth of a deep cave. It is late morning. Bright, cool. This time of year, the sun rarely sets. All day and night, it waxes and wanes, imbuing the landscape with a certain ephemerality, a wispiness, as if, at any second, all things, all beings—the grey rocky mountains, rivers that wind half-frozen into the sea, meadows bursting with lupines, families of arctic terns, even you and I, wrapped tightly in wool, the sharp sound of ice breaking beneath our feet—might dissolve, perhaps with the muted snap of two fingers in a glove, with the chirp of puffins coming home to roost, or even the groaning of an iceberg as it shifts its weight, hesitant at first and then all at once, time itself stretching as the brilliant blue of its belly comes into view for the first time, for the last, this ice that has never known sun, only water, as if we could whisper ourselves into and out of existence, here where ocean meets glacier, into and out of ourselves, quietly beckoning the water to take us back, beckoning—

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At first glance, Pemaquid Point is not particularly remarkable. Standing a mere 38-feet above the ground, it is neither the tallest, nor the oldest, lighthouse in Maine. Its white paint, once pristine, is now weathered, as is the squat, stained fence that surrounds it. And yet,

there is something otherworldly about this place. Something in the quality of light, here, where Muscungus Bay and Johns Bay pour into the Atlantic Ocean. There is something in the ceaseless drumbeat of waves crashing on rocks, and in the rocks themselves – broad, smooth sheets of grey quartz, feldspar, and black mica that slope gently, like flying buttresses, down to the shore, interrupted only by the occasional granite boulder and hundreds of tide pools that swell and contract throughout the day.

As a child, I adored these ancient, textured rocks. Most summers, my father and I would explore them together, traversing crevices and ledges, slick seaweed and boulders so large I could only imagine one day being tall enough, strong enough, brave enough, to climb them. On those warm, sunny days,

Pemaquid Point was my own personal playground, a tapestry of textures, sounds, sights, and scents that never failed to amaze me. There, I was introduced to creatures as majestic as hawks and as humble as periwinkles, whose camouflaged shells protect them from wind, water, and predators.

On this rocky, weathered shore, I found my footing. Against the backdrop of the vast Atlantic, I began to learn my body's choreography. I learned to run without twisting an ankle, to hop from rock to crooked rock, to step on seaweed without slipping, to dip my hands into cool water and acquaint myself with the texture of starfish, mussels, and rockweed.

"Hello," I'd say to these beings, and in doing so – in exploring their tiny, miraculous worlds – I became the ocean, the wind that weathers, the rocks that humbly carry the earth's memory. I even became the lighthouse, beckoning towards something I knew to be true, something I felt so deeply, but could not yet name.

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Towards the beginning of Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, the character Septimus, a World War I veteran suffering from PTSD, comes to a striking realization while sitting in Regent's Park.

"But they beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive," he discerns. "And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement. The sparrows fluttering, rising, and falling in jagged fountains were part of the pattern; the white and blue, barred with black branches."

Amidst birds and trees, children crying and horns blaring in the distance, Septimus senses his interconnectedness with the natural world – and, perhaps more broadly, with some pattern that underlies all of creation. Although this experience is disconcerting, both for Septimus and for his caretakers, it is nonetheless described in spiritual, even revelatory, terms. "All taken together," Woolf writes, "meant the birth of a new religion."

Throughout her life, Virginia Woolf endeavored to excavate the nature of reality. Specifically, she was interested in untangling the very type of revelation that Septimus experiences in *Mrs. Dalloway* – namely, that we exist in a strange and sinuous network of relationships to one another, to the natural world, and even to some conception of the divine. As her many writings demonstrate, Woolf sensed that there was more to life that meets the eye – that we each inhabit vast, watery depths that are often, but not always, inscrutable.

In “A Sketch of the Past,” an autobiographical essay written towards the end of her life, Woolf describes the philosophy that guided her work. “Behind the cotton wool,” she writes, “is hidden a pattern; that we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are part of the work of art.” This conviction stemmed, in part, from Woolf’s own experiences of liminality: hearing waves break, for example, as a young child in St. Ives, or realizing for the first time that flowers emerge from the earth. In these moments, Woolf articulates, “without a reason, without an effort, the sealing matter cracks; in floods reality.”

Throughout her life, Woolf was committed to uncovering, describing, and calling attention to the *hidden patterns* to which we are all connected. Through writing, she dug her hands into the cotton wool that fills our lives, searching desperately to grab a hold of something real, something with its roots deep in the ground. Her novels are populated by characters who similarly seek out such “moments of being,” moments in which the invisible threads between us are laid bare.

I first encountered Woolf’s work as a graduate student at Harvard Divinity School, and I quickly found myself transfixed by her tireless endeavor to articulate something that I have long sensed: namely, that the boundaries of our bodies and lives are not quite as impermeable as we are led to believe. Hungry for what Woolf was offering, I poured over her novels as if they were sacred texts because they *are* sacred texts. And in Woolf, I have found my patron saint of grief.

As her diverse writings demonstrate, the stakes of Woolf’s project were high. She believed that the work of our lives is to excavate the depths. For, in doing so, we might even save one another.

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For as long as I can remember, I have been drawn to stories of lighthouse keepers. Although my own interest in this career path has dwindled over the years, I still often wonder what it would be like to spend my days in the lantern room of Pemaquid Point.

Would the light begin to play tricks on me? Would I learn to see through dense fog, or would I resign myself to the ocean’s opacity on stormy days? In tending the light, would I also learn to tend to myself? To the natural world? To all the beings, human and otherwise, who call this land home?

Would I, like Mrs. Ramsay in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, learn to praise myself “in praising the light?”

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In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler contends, "Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something."

Predating Butler's work by decades, Woolf arrived at strikingly similar conclusions, albeit in distinct ways. Both Woolf and Butler are interested in experiences that somehow *undo* us. There is, perhaps, a kinship between Butler's conception of relationality and Woolf's understanding of the patterns that lie hidden, like undersea cables, between and beneath us. Both writers, that is, are interested in uncovering the depths so that we may better witness one another.

Whereas Butler approaches this work through philosophy and critical theory, Woolf experiments with fiction. The characters in her novels model myriad practices through which to uncover and connect with reality. Just as salmon leap into and out of rivers, these figures continuously traverse into and out of the depths, searching for fragments with which to create meaning in their lives.

"I attain a different kind of beauty, achieve a symmetry by means of infinite discords, showing all the mind's passage through the world, achieve in the end some kind of whole made of shivering fragments," Woolf writes in her diary.

Her characters find meaning not only in moments of tragedy or ecstasy, but also in the seemingly mundane activities of our daily lives. For example, Mrs. Dalloway experiences wholeness, or even transcendence, during the parties that she meticulously plans. "Every time she gave a party," Woolf notes, "she had this feeling of being something not herself, and that everyone was unreal in one way; much more real in another." During these gatherings, Mrs. Dalloway both experiences and offers opportunities to "go much deeper." Guests find themselves more willing to disclose, to embrace their own vulnerability.

Similarly, numerous characters in *To the Lighthouse* model the type of excavation that Woolf calls for. In the early pages of the book, for example, we are introduced to Mrs. Ramsay's son James, who adores creating collages from catalogue photos. Mrs. Ramsay, moreover, experiences a sort of transcendence while reading poetry, and Lily Briscoe spends much of the novel working on a painting. In their own ways, each of these characters endeavor to create a "whole made of shivering fragments."

There is a distinct generosity to Woolf's writings – in part, perhaps, because she offers us so many windows into the depths. Our day-to-day lives, she suggests, provide numerous opportunities for

reflection, connection, and transformation. As *Mrs. Dalloway* demonstrates, even a humble bowl of fruit can forge community. Woolf's stories teach us that we, too, have the capacity to approach one another with wonder.

In *Precarious Life*, Butler contends that grief is an experience that somehow undoes us. Although Woolf's conception of "undone-ness" is more spacious than Butler's, Woolf too believes in the transformative potential of grief. Throughout Woolf's writings, grief is described as an experience that both undoes and, simultaneously, recreates us.

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I am terrified, standing here at the mouth of a glacial cave, a cave that soon, within weeks even, will melt, collapse, and reshape itself into new architectures of water, dirt, snow, and molecules both ancient and brand new. Ice carries history, our guide tells us as I clip the harness around my waist to a thick rope, nailed deep into the walls. All around, the ice is speckled white, grey, black with dirt from the mountains, from nearby roads, from the worn shoes of travelers, mine leave marks in the snow, jagged edges where the metal has dug in, we are told to walk like we mean it, otherwise we'll slip. Someone has taken the time, I notice, to chisel steps into the cave—a steep, narrow ladder descending down the throat of this glacier, one of the largest, one of the last—

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In 1635, the *Angel Gabriel*, a massive ship transporting English settlers to Massachusetts, sank off the coast of Pemaquid Point during a particularly harsh storm. Although most of the ship's passengers survived, the hurricane resulted in the deaths of numerous indigenous inhabitants of the land, as well as catastrophic destruction of the landscape.

Almost two hundred years later, President John Quincy Adams commissioned the construction of the Pemaquid Point Lighthouse, recognizing the danger that this particular strip of coast posed to mariners. Contractors, however, mistakenly mixed salt water into the mortar, and the lighthouse soon began to crumble. When the structure was rebuilt in 1835, workers opted to use fresh water instead.

If I close my eyes, I can envision the view from the top of the lighthouse. Ocean as far as the eye can see. Gulls perched precariously atop the towering crests of waves. Fishing vessels shrouded in fog, searching for red and white buoys that only occasionally come into view.

One afternoon, years ago, my mother and I decided to traverse the thirty-nine narrow, winding steps to the top of the lighthouse. This was a rare occurrence, as I usually preferred to spend my time exploring the coast. Nevertheless, I ascended the lighthouse with glee, waiting in anticipation for the vista to appear.

On this particular summer day, however, I lost my footing. I remember slipping on a small, metal step near the summit of the lighthouse. I remember tumbling haphazardly down the spiral staircase on my back. I recall my bewilderment, as my mother's scream ricocheted off the cold, stone walls. Though the descent was rather painful, I must admit it was also exhilarating.

Writing this, I am reminded of Mrs. Dalloway's jarring response to Septimus' death. "He made her feel the beauty," Virginia Woolf writes, "made her feel the fun."

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There is an undercurrent of grief that runs beneath Woolf's writings. As she recounts in "A Sketch of the Past," her childhood and early adulthood were marked by numerous traumas and losses, from the sexual abuse that she experienced at the hands of her half-brother to the deaths of her mother, sister, father, and brother.

Indeed, one of Woolf's earliest memories was learning about the suicide of a neighbor, Mr. Valpy. "The next thing I remember," she writes, "is being in the garden at night and walking on the path by the apple tree. It seemed to me that the apple tree was connected with the horror of Mr. Valpy's suicide. I could not pass it."

Woolf lived through both world wars, and her writings are often preoccupied with investigating collective grief as well. In *Three Guineas*, for instance, she endeavors to answer the pressing question: how can war be prevented? Septimus' struggles with PTSD, moreover, reflect Woolf's own mental illness, as well as her understanding of the personal and collective impacts of war. *To The Lighthouse* underscores the disorientation and anguish of war, as well as the ways in which tragedy bends time. Even *The Waves*, Woolf's most experimental novel, engages with the cyclical nature of creation and destruction.

Throughout these texts, death is described as a break, a shattering of one's reality and sense of self. This experience is blunt, even violent. After learning about Septimus' death, for example, Mrs. Dalloway responds initially with anger. "What business had the Bradshaws to talk of death at her party?" she

wonders. In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily responds quite similarly to Mrs. Ramsay's passing. "It was all Mrs. Ramsay's doing," Lily thinks. "She was dead. Here was Lily, at forty-four, wasting her time, unable to do a thing, standing there, playing at painting, playing at the one thing one did not play at, and it was all Mrs. Ramsay's fault."

In *The Waves,* Woolf expands upon, yet complicates, this understanding of grief. *The Waves* invites readers into the lives of six friends – Bernard, Jinny, Louis, Neville, Rhoda, and Susan – as they grow, celebrate, and mourn throughout their lives. Following the death of their beloved friend Percival, the lives of these characters are thrown into disarray. "Then the blow; the world crashed," Neville says. "Barns and summer days in the country, rooms where we sat—all now lies in the unreal world which is gone. My past is cut from me." For Neville, the shock of Percival's accidental death fundamentally alters the very movement of time. The world that Neville once knew – a childhood in the country, afternoons spent with one another – has shattered. Gazing out the window, he notices in dismay that passersby are going about their days, unaware of the rupture that has occurred. "From this moment," he thinks, "I am solitary. No one will know me now." This is an experience I, too, know well.

Likewise, Percival's death upends Bernard's very sense of self. In some respects, Bernard's defining personality trait is his love for the company of others. Amidst his friends, or even strangers on a train, Bernard finds meaning. Echoing Cam from *To the Lighthouse*, Bernard collects words and phrases from those around him – and in this practice of collaging, he creates a sense of wholeness. In the aftermath of Percival's death, however, this all changes. "I need silence," he says, "and to be alone and to go out, and to save one hour to consider what has happened to my world, what death has done to my world."

"This then," he continues, "is the world that Percival sees no longer. Let me look." Rhoda echoes this sentiment mere pages later. "Look at the street now that Percival is dead," she says. "The houses are lightly founded to be puffed over by a breath of air." In these passages, Neville, Bernard, and Rhoda are thrust into a recognition that nothing will ever be the same. There is, of course, rage in this realization, yet there is also a sense of curiosity. The world has changed, but how? The very texture of reality has been altered. What, these characters wonder, are we to do now?

In *The Waves*, grief endows these six friends with new eyes. Death crashes into their lives, and suddenly, all objects and landscapes, all beings and perceptions, appear different. These objects, Bernard notes towards the end of the novel, are "still as on the first day of creation, but acquainted with grief."

What happens, Woolf asks, when we are acquainted with grief? What does grief foreclose, and what does grief invite?

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Water drips steadily, here in this cathedral of undulating, breathing ice. I have never seen so many shades of blue, whitish and fragile at the summit, where spires and spirals of ice are carved, all day and all night, by a blistering sun; then turquoise, almost tropical, tall sheets of ice textured, pockets of ancient air, with the dirt of past eons, and I cannot help but run my gloved hands over the cave's cracked skin, its taught muscles, until my fingers are numb, until I too am water. At the base, I am enmeshed in a blue so rich, so brilliant, so oceanic, it looks like the origin of something, of everything even, the blue of creation, a blue so blue it works its way into my veins, into the very fibres that run through and between us, weaving a new religion of blue, of brittle mornings, of light so vivid it can reach even here, a light that cracks and a light that mends, as if the hand of God has slipped gently into this place, reaching us here, calling us, I am the ice, I am the ice, I am soaked through—

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Weeks before my father died, I wrote a poem – or, perhaps more accurately, a blessing. "In the morning / begin to conjugate all the verbs you've heard only at a distance," I wrote. "And if the word 'light / house' were a verb, take solace in the home you built there."

I am not quite sure what I meant by this, and I wonder if, somehow, my body could sense the coming storm. If the word 'lighthouse' were a verb, to what action would it refer? What might it mean for us to *lighthouse* one another? To *lighthouse* ourselves? Where is light housed? Where, in our bodies, does light reside?

The day finally arrived when, all of the sudden, I was tall enough, strong enough, even brave enough to traverse the boulders that once intimidated me. This transition, though exhilarating, carried with it a certain experience of melancholy – a recognition that time was passing and, with it, we were weathering.

Just as Pemaquid Point weathered, so too my father aged. I realize now that, along that rocky coast, I was introduced to mortality, to the ceaseless rushing of time. I, too, weathered, my body no longer quite so sure of its footing. I am more cautious now. I take my time.

And yet, years after my father's sudden passing, this landscape still carries traces of his youthful body – his beaming smile and shaggy, though thinning, hair, the hands that caught me and the legs that once chased me, gleefully, across the rocks.

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Grief, in Woolf's novels, is a destabilizing force – an "undoing" force, to borrow Butler's term. At the same time, however, grief is also described as a *creative* force, opening up new possibilities for reflection, community, and meaning-making. Grief, thus, is a process of both breaking and mending, shattering and reassembling.

"I ask, if I shall never see you again and fix my eyes on that solidity, what form will our communication take?" Bernard wonders, shortly after Percival's death. "You have gone across the court, further and further, drawing finer and finer the thread between us. But you exist somewhere. Something of you remains."

Throughout her writings, Woolf blurs the line between presence and absence, life and death. Bernard understands that, even amidst the breaking of the world, something of Percival endures; and for the remainder of his life, Bernard can remain in relationship with those traces, however faint. Death, here, is not a closing, but rather a transformation. In this passage, Bernard echoes Lady Bruton in *Mrs. Dalloway,* who ponders, "As if one's friends were attached to one's body, after lunching with them, by a thin thread." Over the course of a lifetime, these threads gradually thin and sag. From time to time, they snap, though Woolf seems to suggest that even then, we can thread ourselves once anew.

Woolf is attuned, in many of her novels, to the traces that we leave behind. "The chairs," she writes in *Mrs. Dalloway*, "still kept the impress of the Prime Minister and Lady Bruton, she turned deferentially, he sitting four-square, authoritatively." Mere moments after learning about Septimus' death, Mrs. Dallow turns her attention to the imprints that our bodies create, not only when we die, but even when we exit a room. The Prime Minister and Lady Bruton are both alive, and thus the marks they left behind are not weighted with grief. Nonetheless, I wonder if the news of Septimus' suicide somehow enabled Mrs. Dalloway to recognize these faint, yet profound, traces.

In *To the Lighthouse,* Woolf is similarly interested in how objects carry traces of our personalities, bodies, and stories. "What people had shed and left—a pair of shoes, a shooting cap, some faded skirts and coats in wardrobes—those alone kept the human shape and in the emptiness indicated how once

they were filled and animated." Once again, Woolf troubles the distinction between presence and absence; and, in doing so, she invites us to seek out the echoes that reverberate in our own lives.

Almost immediately after Mrs. Dalloway observes the impressions made by her guests, she experiences her grief in strikingly embodied terms. "Always her body went through it first, when she was told, suddenly, of an accident; her dress flamed, her body burnt," Woolf writes. This account mirrors Woolf's retelling of her own mother's death in "A Sketch of the Past." There, she recounts, "It was partly that my mother's death unveiled and intensified; made me suddenly develop perceptions, as if a burning glass had been laid over what was shaded and dormant."

In both passages, grief is described as a 'burning' that tears not only through the body, but also through the world. I wonder whether this fiery experience is itself a trace of the love that is, at times, indistinguishable from grief. Mrs. Dalloway returns to her party, suddenly saturated in the present moment, in the true nature of things. Like a burning glass, grief renders the world more vivid – and, perhaps, more available for revelation.

The question remains, though: What does grief reveal? What are those "shaded and dormant" things to which Woolf refers?

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Months after my father died, I inherited his car, a 2019 dark blue Honda CRV with a wrecked bumper and a galaxy of scratches. One summer afternoon, I nervously brought a trash bag, roll of paper towels, and bottle of disinfectant to the parking lot behind my mother's house. When I opened the car door, I was met with the many relics of my father's life: crumbs from countless almond horns, which were his favorite baked good; hats, sunglasses, and coats stuffed with used tissues, candy wrappers, and receipts; opened bags of mints from CVS, which he bought when his stomach was upset; and bottles of iced tea, still wedged underneath the seats. Slowly, I began to clean the car, careful to save anything that seemed meaningful, anything that might preserve his personality.

Stepping into the car for the first time, I quickly realized that the driver's seat immediately reverted to the position in which he always sat. The pedals were far away from my feet; the back was reclined at a ridiculous angle; the mirrors were nowhere near my line of sight. Sitting there, I recalled the shape of his body in the car, driving far too fast on the highway, across the bridge, towards the coast. Even my car carries the memory of his body.

I find traces of my father's life everywhere now, even in unexpected places. I encounter him in bakeries and hotel lobbies, car dealerships and impressionist exhibits. I encounter him here, on this page, and even in my own body, in my aching muscles and receding hairline, in my love of road trips and Emmylou Harris, in the way my eyes light up when a vista suddenly appears.

"Hi, dad," I say to the ocean, to the lighthouse, to seagulls hunting for mollusks. "Hi dad."

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Soon after Mrs. Dalloway learns of Septimus' death, something quite striking occurs: for a brief moment, Clarissa embodies Septimus in the final seconds of his life. "He had thrown himself from a window," she thinks. "Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes." Mrs. Dalloway, here, is not merely imagining Septimus' descent. In some strange way, she is experiencing it herself. We get a sense, in this passage, that the boundary between Clarissa and Septimus has somehow thinned.

"Her dress flamed, her body burnt," Woolf tells us. What, I wonder, is this burning? What does it signify?

In the midst of profound loss, many of Woolf's characters experience a dissolution of self, an *undoing* of the borders between self and others, between self and the world. "Distance had an extraordinary power," Lily reflects, while gazing across the bay. "They had been swallowed up in it, she felt, they were gone forever, they had become part of the nature of things." There is a suggestion, throughout Woolf's work, that grief initiates us into the *nature of things* – the "rushing stream" that Bernard references towards the end of *The Waves*.

Indeed, several characters in *The Waves* experience this thinning of boundaries. Fifty or so pages after Percival's death, Neville says, "I am merely 'Neville' to you, who see the narrow limits of my life and the line it cannot pass, but to myself I am immeasurable; a net whose fibres pass imperceptibly beneath the world. My net is almost indistinguishable from that which it surrounds." Here, Neville calls attention to a discrepancy between his own self-awareness and the ways in which others perceive him. He is Neville, but he is also a node in a vast web of relationships, or a wave that ebbs and flows and, once in a while, crashes upon the shore.

As he grows older, Bernard experiences a similar dissolution of the self. Recounting his childhood, he notes, "We suffered terribly as we became separate bodies." Poignantly, Bernard perceives that aging, in

all its permutations, is a process of *severing*. As we grow older, our borders harden; they become more distinct. And yet, *The Waves* argues that this hardening, this separation, is neither permanent nor true. In the final pages of the novel, Bernard remarks, "I am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am – Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louis: or how to distinguish my life from theirs." Bernard's experience of aging, as well as the tragic death of his friend, allow him to recognize and even embrace the porosity of his being. The various facets of his life that he once called 'his' are, in fact, not his alone. Despite the distinct paths that their lives took, Jinny, Susan, Nevilla, Rhode, and Louis are intricately and mysteriously bound up with one another. They form, as Woolf notes elsewhere, a "six-sided flower."

The experience that Bernard gives voice to is, like grief, both terrifying and life-sustaining, both destructive and creative. Bernard wonders, in the final pages of the book, whether this blurring of boundaries is "a sort of death." Perhaps, yet Woolf insists, again and again, that this experience is also a sort of *rebirth*. In losing ourselves, we simultaneously open up new possibilities for creation. As her novels demonstrate, we can even learn to conjure the dead.

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Minutes pass. We are quiet, saturated by something, by the light ricocheting off our bodies, by the blue that softens, deepens, the more we look, by our breath, one breath now, and before we know it, as if it had never happened, as if nothing has changed, or as if everything has changed, we are back on the bus, barreling home—

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In the months and years following my father's death, I sought tirelessly to create some semblance of wholeness in the midst of despair. As I learned to weave, I began to stitch my world back together. I took myself to the ocean, to the mountains, to the desert. I found wisdom in Kabbalistic creation stories, which teach us to collect shards of light that are scattered throughout the world. The goal was not to repair what had been broken, but to learn how to recognize the cracks, and to build around them.

Woolf offers an interpretation of grief that is nuanced, tangled, and even contradictory at times. As I've sought to demonstrate, her novels present grief as a process of both shattering and collaging, breaking and healing. Her characters respond to loss with anger, impatience, curiosity, and grace, oftentimes all at once. Though grief breaks us, Woolf suggests that it is also an offering. Grief invites us into a deeper

relationship with the world. “But what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing?” Bernard asks. “Percival, by his death, has made me this gift, let me see the thing.”

Woolf suspects, I think, that if we all embraced the lessons that grief has to offer, we’d choose to live our lives differently. We’d even begin to shift our language. We, like Bernard, would come to distrust “phrases that come down beautifully with all their feet on the ground.” Instead, perhaps, we’d embrace language in all its imperfection, its fragmentation.

Years ago, after my grandmother’s death, my mother told me that she felt as though she had lost her language. I didn’t quite understand what she meant, at the time, but now I realize that grief alters the way we communicate with the world.

Moreover, Woolf seems to believe that grief and its lessons, its insistence on interdependence, can even foster peace. If we could only peer into the depths of one another, she suggests throughout her work, violence would no longer be an option. Who knows whether this is true. Nearly one hundred years later, we have not yet attempted it.

“One wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with,” Lily reflects towards the end of *To the Lighthouse*. “One wanted most some secret sense, fine as air, with which to steal through keyholes and surround her [Mrs. Ramsay] where she sat knitting, talking, sitting silent in the window alone.” I suspect that Woolf, too, wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with. Or, perhaps she knew, deep down, that the eyes we have are enough. Perhaps she was more concerned with what we *do* with our eyes, particularly once they have been acquainted with grief. Virginia Woolf knew how and where to look.

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Despite her reputation as a staunch atheist, Woolf offers readers a blessing halfway through *To the Lighthouse*:

“Let the wind blow,” she writes. “Let the poppy seed itself and the carnation mate with the cabbage. Let the swallow build in the drawing room, and the thistle thrust aside the tiles, and the butterfly sun itself on the faded chintz of the armchairs. Let the broken glass and the china lie out on the lawn and be tangled over with grass and wild berries.”

Let us grieve deeply, in community with all those around us: with friends and strangers, orange trees and red birds, rivers and lighthouses. Let us grieve even with our beloved dead, whose lives are etched into the earth, whose memories are thrown over us "like nets of light."

Amidst a blaring sun, the ice begins to melt.

Three

The Eyes of Grief

Two hundred miles northwest of Salt Lake City, the artist Nancy Holt invites us to turn our gaze.

In 1977, Holt constructed the *Sun Tunnels* – four massive, concrete tunnels situated in the heart of the Great Basin Desert. Arranged in a cross formation, the tunnels were designed to frame the sun as it rises and sets during the summer and winter solstices.

Within each tunnel, Holt carved holes of various sizes that correspond to stars in four constellations: Draco, Perseus, Columba, and Capricorn. All day and night, the sun, moon, and stars shine through these openings, projecting intricate, overlapping constellations onto the curved, concrete walls – "changing patterns of pointed ellipses and circles of light," Holt writes.

Through these small apertures, visitors are invited to look towards the sky. And, in turn, the sky looks back.

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"If I can learn to love death," the writer Terry Tempest Williams remarks in *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, "then I can begin to find refuge in change."

Here, in the basement of Harvard University's Museum of Comparative Zoology, I am struggling to love death. Everywhere I look, there are birds – gray pelicans, buffleheads, pintails, shovelers. Some are mounted in adorable, yet eerie, poses in glass display cases. Most, however, lie flat on their backs in tall metal cabinets.

Known as *study skins*, these specimens are preserved not for public viewing, but rather for scientific research. As such, aesthetics aren't a priority. The concern, rather, is quantity. According to Dr. Krista Fahy, a curator at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, "The more you get in a drawer, the better."

With roughly 400,000 specimens, Harvard's collection of study skins is one of the largest in the world, representing over 70% of known species.

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As a child, I spent countless hours in the basement of Simon Pearce's flagship store in Quechee, Vermont – a picturesque town known for its impressive gorge, which was formed by glacial activity nearly 13,000 years ago.

A renowned Irish-American glassblower, Pearce relocated to the United States in 1981, and he quickly gained recognition for his artistry and skill. In the decades since, his company has opened stores across the country, selling everything from handblown glass trees to modernist chandeliers.

Powered by a hydroelectric dam on the Ottauquechee River, Pearce's flagship store houses a restaurant and, in the basement, a small glassblowing workshop, where visitors can watch artisans create the company's signature objects.

Throughout my childhood, my parents and I visited this region of Vermont frequently. Over the years, we developed – and gradually perfected – an itinerary of our favorite shops, restaurants, and activities. Every summer, we visited the Vermont Country Store to purchase cheese and old-fashioned wooden toys. We drove to the summit of Okemo Mountain, where new vacation homes would appear every year, each one a bit gaudier than the last. We wandered the streets of Woodstock, swam in Echo Lake, and gazed at pastoral oil paintings at the Southern Vermont Art Center.

I don't remember the first time we visited Simon Pearce's factory, but I remember the reverence I felt as I watched molten glass, gooey and bright, solidify into wine glasses, vases, and serving bowls. Before I understood what glass was, I assumed it was magic, some type of sorcery that required years of training to master. I remember staring in awe at the glassblowers in their t-shirts, gloves, and dark glasses.

I remember the heat of the furnace, a heat that crawled its way under my clothing, up my arms, and into my eyes.

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Everything about Harvard's ornithology lab is clinical, cold. The light is artificial, as if we were in a hospital, or even a morgue, each bird a patient, a body hovering between death and what comes after.

It is late fall, 2023. We are here to acquaint ourselves with the birds of Great Salt Lake, whose homes, communities, and lives are being threatened by the lake's rapid decline. Encountering the bodies of

these tiny, precious beings, we hope to introduce ourselves, too, to the dying body of Great Salt Lake – to her contours and colors, her salty waters and brittle bed.

The birds lay on their backs, with legs tied in twine, on a heavy metal table in the center of the room. I feel rather queasy, though I am also overwhelmed by the beauty of these creatures – their sharp beaks, graceful tail feathers, and the bright splotches of color on their heads and underneath their fragile wings. Purple and turquoise, red and sky blue.

Unlike specimens intended for public viewing, study skins do not need to appear perfect, intact. They don't need to be arranged in lifelike poses – mid-flight, hunting for fish. Their seams are imperfect; we can even see bits of cotton poking out. These birds, I realize, don't even have eyes.

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During the final years of my father's life, I found it increasingly difficult to look at him.

In the summer of 2017, shortly after I graduated from college, he tripped and tumbled down the stairs of my childhood home. Although the fall itself did not result in any serious damage, he soon contracted double pneumonia in the hospital. Right before the doctors intubated him, he turned to me and said: "This was your fault. You made me sick." And then he closed his eyes.

My dad spent three months in a medically induced coma. Hackensack University Medical Center is a sprawling and rather hideous level 1 trauma center, mere minutes from where I grew up. From time to time, we could hear helicopters landing on the roof of the building. Once, I walked into the ICU to find several police officers guarding one of the rooms. A gunshot wound, I think. A few weeks into my father's coma, a nurse told us that my dad was the sickest patient in the entire hospital.

Eventually, nurses transferred him from a regular hospital bed to a "proning bed," a massive, circular contraption that looks like a dystopic torture device, or some kind of training module for astronauts. The bed is designed to rotate a patient face-down in order to improve their oxygen levels.

When my father was strapped into the proning bed, his body was all but hidden, as if he had been swallowed up into some alternate reality, as if the bed were a spaceship on route to some way station between life and death.

"You won't be able to see him," the nurses warned us beforehand. "But don't worry, he's in there."

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The day we visited Holt's *Sun Tunnels*, the clouds were bright and wispy, like cotton wool as it begins to come apart. Though it was cold, we were saturated by sunlight; the only shadows were those of our own bodies, the tunnels, and our bus, a rickety thing that was not designed to traverse such distances.

From afar, the tunnels look like the detritus of some abandoned construction project, heaps of concrete that were left behind in a hurry. All around us, the ground was dry, cracked; suitable only for sagebrush, which, in turn, provided meagre sustenance for a handful of cows that dotted the land, each one emaciated, bony. In the distance, we could see the Pilot Range, snow-capped peaks that blended almost seamlessly into low-lying clouds. It was silent, except for our breath, the occasional moo of a far-off cow, and the quiet whir of our driver's electric skateboard.

Deep in the desert, time begins to slow, solidifying like beeswax after a candle has been blown out. "Time is not just a mental concept or a mathematical abstraction," Holt once wrote. "Time takes on a physical presence." Here, time is not merely the ticking of a clock. Rather, time is a rock, steadily weathering in the wind; a horizontal cut across a mountain, where ice once passed; even a bird call in the distance, a Great Blue heron perhaps, greeting a mate. Time exists, too, in our own bodies, rooting us not only in this moment, this breath, but in all those who came before.

Indeed, as we approached the tunnels, I felt a peculiar sense of kinship with these gentle, rolling forms, this vast desert. Where am I? I asked myself quietly; and, to my surprise, the land called back.

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"Eyes are the first things to disintegrate after an animal dies," a researcher at the ornithology lab told us, unsurprised by our discomfort with the study skins and their empty sockets. "The eyes that you usually see in taxidermied birds aren't real," she continued. "They're made of glass."

Many of the eyes at Harvard's Museum of Natural History were sculpted by Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka, a father and son who are best known for their work constructing intricate glass flowers and sea creatures. The first time I visited the museum, I wasn't aware that the eyes in these specimens – in room after room of taxidermied birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians – were made of glass. The eyes looked too real, too soulful, as if they had always been there, guiding these precious animals day after day.

Standing in the ornithology lab, I could not tell what upset me most: the fact that these study skins were *not* given new eyes, or the existence of glass eyes themselves. I began to wonder whether these eyes are designed, at least in part, to quell our discomfort, to trick us into believing that these birds somehow live on in their lifelike poses and glossy display cases. As if bodies didn't break down, slowly but steadily, in death. As if we could somehow stop time.

Are these eyes gifts? I asked myself. And if so, to whom? To the birds? To museum visitors, children on school field trips? Or are they distractions, turning our attention away from the reality of death? Are the study skins, with their humble postures and loosely tied legs, somehow more real than the birds we typically see at museums?

In the weeks following our visit, I learned that there are multiple companies that produce glass eyes for taxidermied animals. One such manufacturer, eerily named *Chipping Away*, claims that their eyes are made under strict quality control. What, I wonder, are these controls? The company's website asserts that their eyes are suitable for "most birds." But which ones? And does it matter?

I wonder what it feels like to sculpt these miniscule, sacred objects. To transform grains of sand, formed millions of years ago, into eyes. Do these glassblowers see themselves as surgeons? As miracle workers? And what drives their work? Is it a desire to see through the eyes of winged beings? Or, is it merely hubris? Do these artists stop from time to time to imagine where these birds might have traveled?

I wish I could speak with Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka, who worked together for over fifty years. I wonder whether their work brought them closer together – whether the practice of designing these tiny eyes allowed them to somehow better see one another.

And yet, as I think about all those stunning birds, I can't help but ask: What does sight even mean for a dead body? For a bird who must lie, day after day, in some ridiculous pose, greeting all those who ask it for wisdom, for revelation?

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When my father finally woke up, he had deep marks underneath his eyes – pressure sores, the nurses told us, from the proning bed. He was skinnier, quieter, and clearly traumatized. His recovery was long, partial. After an extended stint in a rehab facility, he and my mother moved into a new

apartment, one that would be more accessible for both of them. It's a cozy place, with sweeping views of the Hudson River, the George Washington Bridge, and a wedding venue frequented by Orthodox Jews and Russian immigrants.

Until his death, my dad slept in a large, black reclining chair in the center of our living room. He watched television often, spent hours researching trips that he and my mom would never take, and poured over copies of the *New Yorker*.

I'll admit that part of me is ashamed to admit this, but I found it difficult to look into his eyes in those final years of his life. It wasn't only that his body, in its new configuration, upset me, though his scars did remind me of all that we had been through, how we spent day after day in the ICU, only to return home exhausted, wounded, unable to even speak. It wasn't only the sores on his face, his hunch, or the cane that he began to walk with.

I realize now that, in some peculiar way, we weren't quite able to look at one another in those final years. After everything that had occurred, it became more and more difficult to truly *see* each other, almost as if some thin veil had been placed over our eyes, blocking the light.

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"I wanted to bring the vast space of the desert back to human scale," Holt wrote in *Artforum*. "I had no desire to make a megalithic monument. The panoramic view of the landscape is too overwhelming to take in without visual reference points. The view blurs out rather than sharpens. Through the tunnels, parts of the landscape are framed and come into focus."

The *Sun Tunnels* turn our attention to fragments of the landscape. Rather than witnessing the dramatic expanse of the desert all at once, visitors are encouraged to narrow our gaze. Through one hole, you may see the peak of a far-off mountain, a scattering of sagebrush, or even the gentle quiver of a yellow-bellied marmot. Through another, you might only see sky.

Holt understands that sometimes, the enormity of the landscape – and perhaps, of creation more broadly – inhibits our ability to make meaning. Without frames through which to focus our gaze, we would rarely appreciate the specificity of a single Pinyon pine, a cow with particularly defined spots, or the quality of sunlight as it passes through a single cloud. There is something almost terrifying about witnessing the desert all at once, Holt suggests, and this terror forecloses, rather than invites, reflection on our place in the ebb and flow of time.

Holt's *Sun Tunnels*, with their delicately curved apertures and graceful forms, invite us into relationship not only with the land, but also with the mysteries that underlie our lives. Like parents, chaplains, or God, the tunnels cradle us as we, slowly, open our eyes.

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Side by side, we rested in one of the tunnels, the one nearest to the mountains. The sloped walls cradled our spines, and out of the corner of my eye I could see small, colorful stones – chestnut, bluish-gray – embedded in the concrete.

For a while, we were silent, except for our breath, which echoed softly through the tunnels, as if they were lungs, vocal cords, church organs constructed to praise the land itself, the brittle earth that, somehow, sustained life even there, miles and miles from water.

Minutes passed. We watched shadows shift across the landscape, across the walls of the tunnel. And then – as if a switch on some faraway mountain, in some celestial realm, had been turned on – we began to sing, quietly at first, and then all at once. We hummed and chanted, constructing melodies that seemed, remarkably, to originate in that place, as if our lungs and the lungs of the earth were one, as if the borders between our bodies and the body of the desert were collapsing, as if the tunnels were portals and, stepping into them, we had crossed some imperceptible boundary.

We began to sing a prayer, written decades ago by a member of the Chippewa Tribe, that we learned a few days prior: "The river is flowing," we sung. "Flowing and growing, the river is flowing down to the sea."

Oh mother, carry me, your child I will always be. Oh mother, carry me, down to the sea.

Afterwards, we went off on our own. Some of us wandered into the desert, toward the cows and the sagebrush and the snow. Others stayed close to the tunnels, drawing and journaling, praying. Hours passed imperceptibly. Like tree trunks, the tunnels mark time differently.

"I want to be buried with the watch on my wrist so that in the earth something can pulse time," Clarice Lispector writes.

It is March 14, 2024. Ninety-three days until the solstice.

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A few days before my 30th birthday, my mom had a dream. In it, my father returned home with bags of gifts from Toys 'R' Us in hand. Stuffed animals, Lego sets, puzzles, and slingshots. Presumably, the gifts were for me. "Sweetie," my mother told him, "he's all grown up."

"I don't see your dad much in dreams anymore," she told me. "I can't wait to go back to sleep."

My dad did not live to see me turn thirty. He didn't live to watch me get married, begin graduate school, or learn to weave. He didn't live to read this essay.

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Many spiritual traditions teach that certain experiences, certain mysteries, are too overwhelming to observe all at once. Echoing Holt's understanding of the *Sun Tunnels*, for example, the Hebrew Bible time and again reminds us that human beings cannot gaze upon God's true, unmediated self. To do so, the text suggests, would be fatal.

During the Jewish ritual of *shiva*, the seven-day period of mourning that follows the death of a community member, mourners are encouraged to cover their mirrors. Although there is no *halakhic*, or legal, obligation to do so, this custom allows mourners to grieve unencumbered by self-consciousness, embarrassment, or even vanity. In periods of mourning, Jewish tradition teaches, individuals should not worry about their physical appearance. Rather, *shiva* should be a judgment-free period of reflection, storytelling, memorialization, and mutual aid.

This practice, however, points to an even more profound truth. In some respect, this tradition acknowledges the ways in which loss alters our sense of self. As the writer Daniel May has noted, "Mirrors are covered, an acknowledgement that even looking at one's own living face in such times can be unbearable, as the self that returns the gaze appears alien."

To look in the mirror while sitting *shiva* would risk not only self-consciousness, but also disorientation. "The self that returns the gaze appears alien" because the self *is* alien – newly aware, as scholars such as Judith Butler would argue, of its vulnerability and interwovenness.

Just as the landscape, according to Holt, can appear disorienting if taken-in all at once, grief too requires "reference points," frames through which to see.

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By the time I turned thirteen, I had decided that, no matter what, I would grow up and become a glassblower. At that time, Simon Pearce offered an apprenticeship program, and I intended to devote my life to the art of sculpting this uncanny material. I, too, wanted to participate in the sorcery that had so captivated me as a child.

My parents were hesitant, though they generally accepted my many whims. At various points throughout my childhood, I had decided to pursue a number of careers, varying from architect to cartoonist. In my parents' minds, I'm sure, my love of glassblowing was just another fantasy that would, inevitably, pass.

I do not recall how old I was when I finally worked up the courage to speak to one of the glassblowers in the basement of Simon Pearce. I'm not entirely sure what I was looking for – encouragement, perhaps, or words of wisdom that would guide me on my journey. Maybe I was simply looking for a good original story that I could tell one day, when I was an established, even celebrated, artisan.

"I would love to be an apprentice one day," I told the glassblower, unsure whether he could hear me over the cacophony of the hot shop.

"That's fantastic," he replied. "Though you should know that it's dangerous work. It's always hot, and you have to carry heavy equipment. My body is covered in burns, and it's absolutely terrible for your eyes."

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Wandering through each of the four *Sun Tunnels*, I noticed something striking. The interiors of each tunnel are covered in crisscrossing black streaks. For a moment, I imagined that they were footprints left by some strange desert creature – a reptile, perhaps, with a long tail that secretes black fluid. Or maybe they were tire marks left by toy cars, those flimsy things that I used to purchase in our local drugstore.

Eventually, though, I realized that they were bullet marks left by visitors over the years. When a gun is fired into the tunnel, the bullet spins and ricochets before exiting the other side. Before she died, Holt surmised that local residents were responsible for these marks. She didn't mind, though, and rather than washing them off, she encouraged future conservators to leave the streaks untouched.

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Grief, I am beginning to suspect, lends us new eyes, fundamentally altering how we see not only ourselves, but also the world around us. Loss challenges us to recognize our own mortality, yet it also invites us to acknowledge – and even *celebrate* – our interwovenness. The nature of this interdependence is mysterious, watery. As Judith Butler notes, when we lose someone, the boundedness of our own identities – the very notion that there exists and *I* without a *You* – comes into question.

There is something of the divine in this. Miraculously, grief allows us to look the divine – call it God, mother nature, mystery – in the eye. And in the intimacy of that exchange, grief teaches us to see anew.

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The last video I have of my father was taken on New Year's Day, 2020, just a few months before he passed away. That evening, we celebrated by watching a PBS recording of a Leonard Cohen concert. My father's favorite song was "So Long, Marianne," and in the video, he is singing along.

Now so long, Marianne, it's time that we began. To laugh and cry and cry and laugh about it all again.

It has taken me years to revisit this video. Recently, when I finally watched it, I couldn't help but notice how similar our expressions are. From time to time, I wonder if, as he and I grow more and more alike, I am beginning to see the world as he once did.

Looking in the mirror, I sometimes wonder –whose eyes are these?

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I set out to write an essay about the *eyes of grief*, by which I mean the eyes of God and the eyes of birds. Glass eyes and fleshy eyes. Eyes given and eyes removed. Our eyes in the midst of grief, and our eyes as we return once again to the world of the living.

If grief were a creature – a bird, even – what color would its eyes be?

Walking through Harvard's ornithology lab, I noticed my breath quicken and heart begin to pound. Each study skin is categorized according to its species, its date of collection. And yet, those tiny, luminous beings once traversed the world. They migrated and roosted. They called out to one another. Their eyes, long gone, were maps.

To confront these birds is to confront grief. Grief over the fate of these storied, speckled beings. Grief because we will never know what these birds once knew. We will never see what they once saw. What did they think of us? If they could speak, could we bear to listen?

Grief does not only lend us new eyes. Grief also demands that we look. *Here*, grief tells us, in whatever language we can understand. *Take these. Put them on*. Grief, that is, enables us to see topographies that had once been concealed. This is a gift, and it is also a responsibility.

Like the *Sun Tunnels*, grief has something to teach us about what it means to witness. To reckon with loss, rather than attempting to prevent it. To stare into the dark, empty eye sockets of those study skins, even though they cannot, will not, look back.

Four

Where the Soul Hovers

The room is small, bright. Everything is clinical, as you would expect, except for several plastic, glossy posters on the wall, each covered in prayers, instructions. There is a tiny replica of the Western Wall, just one stone, at the far end of the room. A touchstone, a reminder that this place, too, is holy.

On the floor, there are metal and plastic buckets. A couple of pots – Cuisinart, I think. There are gowns, gloves, and masks crammed onto shelves; white sheets and towels folded carefully; and two metal carts carrying everything we may need: bandages, gauze, tubs of Vaseline, a Tide bleach pen for blood stains. There is a hamper in the corner. A biohazard bin.

I am standing in the basement of Brezniak Funeral Directors. 1251 Washington Street, West Newton, Massachusetts. There is a bakery next door. A barber shop and pilates studio. A store that sells window blinds. It is 7:00 pm, Eastern Time. Sunday.

We are here to perform *tahara* – the ritual cleansing of a body before burial – for a man I have never met. It is my first time participating in this ancient Jewish tradition, and I am terrified. Although several friends recommended that I resist eating prior to the ritual, I was starving. I ate chicken soup and spinach pie. I drank fir needle tea.

Traditionally, tahara, which literally means 'purification,' is performed by a chevra kadisha, or 'holy society.' Today, there are five of us in the room. A deceased body is referred to as a *meyt, meyta, or meyteh*, depending on the individual's gender.

Before we begin, we gather, for just a few moments, to prepare ourselves for the ritual. We take turns using the bathroom. We silence our cell phones. We share the little that we know about the meyt, the deceased. We don't know much, besides his name and age. We don't know how he lived or how he died. We don't know his coffee order, or how he spent his evenings.

This, I remind myself, is how it should be. According to Jewish tradition, tahara should not be performed by the deceased's loved ones. It would be too excruciating, too intimate. There are some things we aren't supposed to know, aren't supposed to see.

After we introduce ourselves, our leader for the evening – an elderly man with kind eyes and a hearing aid – offers us an intention. Tahara, he reminds us, is a gift that cannot be repaid. As such, it is considered the highest form of *gemilut chesed,* or loving kindness.

Someone begins to hum a *nigun*, or wordless melody. Slowly, softly. Recognizing this haunting, yet somehow joyful, tune, I begin to hum along.

+

It takes me forever to put on the gloves. "There's baby powder in the corner," our leader says gently, though I can tell that the group is a bit antsy. I know that I'm holding up the process. Everyone else has their gloves on, their N95 masks, their plastic gowns. While they wait for me, they start fussing with the equipment. They fill buckets with water and prepare the white, crisp burial shrouds. The wheel the casket, or *aron*, to the corner of the room so that it won't be in the way. Everything has its proper place.

The first time I see his body, it is by accident. An arm slips out from under the white sheet. I'm not prepared for this, for his purple, spotted skin. For the way his fingers are curved ever so gently. Someone quickly tucks his arm back under the sheet. And now, we're ready to begin.

The first thing we do is ask for forgiveness:

We ask your forgiveness for any distress we may cause you during this tahara. We will do everything possible to ensure that you are treated with respect, and that all the elements of tahara are properly completed. Everything we are about to do is for the sake of your honor.

Silently, I ask the meyt's forgiveness for forgetting his name. For being frightened, unprepared, disturbed by his cold body, by the sores that must have hurt terribly. I ask his forgiveness, too, for not knowing how to grieve him properly. For leaving at the end of the night. For going home.

Before we continue, we must inspect the body – "To know what we're dealing with," our leader says. I'm not quite sure what to look for, so I observe from a distance. The meyt wears a hospital bracelet; we cut it off. He has a diaper; we remove it. He is bleeding just a bit; I find bandages.

We uncover his body gradually, ensuring that he is covered as much as possible throughout the process. There are two of us on each side of the meyt. I stand by his left side, just below his shoulder. Always, someone is there to stabilize his head.

It is time to wash his body. We grab buckets of water and soft towels. Everyone knows that I am a novice, and they are patient with me. Still, they expect me to contribute, and I am grateful for this, grateful to have a task, to have something to hold onto. "We start from the head," our leader informs me, "and we work our way down from there. Be careful not to scrub too hard."

The meyt is fragile and surprisingly heavy, given how thin he is. I have trouble turning him over, though I soon learn that there is a method for this. Cross one arm over another, and lift from the shoulder. Cross one leg over the other, and lift from the hip. His mouth is open, and I cannot help but briefly look away.

We take care not to pass anything over his body. Instead, we pass our tools around, in a circle. I ask why. "His soul is hovering here," our leader tells me. "We must not disturb it."

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My father was born in the spring of 1944, just a few months before the end of World War II. As far as I know, he was not a particularly religious man. We attended services occasionally, and from time to time he recounted memories of the Orthodox synagogue where, as a child, he served as a youth leader. Culturally, he was a proud Ashkenazi Jew. He loved Mel Brooks and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and Russian dressing. His parents were once members of a Yiddish Gilbert & Sullivan troupe. And yet, he didn't speak often about his relationship with God. By the time I was old enough to ask him about his Jewish identity, he had already retreated into himself, into the massive reclining chair in our living room, into daydreams and nightmares, memories of long lost friends, long lost lovers.

This is what I know. My father believed deeply that, in a past life, he was a child who perished during the Holocaust. That is, he sensed that he was the reincarnation of someone who had died mere years, or even months, before his own birth.

He did not speak of this often but, when he did, he recounted terrifying dreams that began when he was a child. I do not remember how he recounted these visions. What did he see? I close my eyes and, for just a moment, I try to inhabit my father's world, the cavern of his subconscious. I can hear the shrill, metallic sounds of war. I am lying in a room, and something terrible, something meaningful, echoes between the walls. The ticking of a clock. The hum of one world ending and another beginning.

Is this what my father saw or heard, all those years ago? There is a line drawn between memory and imagination that grows thinner, fainter, the older we get. I open my eyes and, once again, I am sitting at the window. The magnolia branch I took from a neighbor's front yard is still there, sitting in a mason jar of cool water. The buds are white, fuzzy. Almost bursting.

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The landscape between Jerusalem and Hebron is gorgeous, almost otherworldly. Driving through the Judean Mountains, I began to understand why so many consider this place to be holy. There is something about the light there, the way it reflects off ancient, stone structures and seeps into every crevice, every lush valley. There are olive trees and pine trees, trees that tell stories and trees that erase, trees planted in memory and trees planted over ruins.

Our tour bus moved swiftly between the two cities. Too quickly, in fact. We took roads accessible only to Israelies. Unlike Palestinians, we did not have to cross the checkpoints. Our first stop was a small, unassuming park in Kiryat Arba, an Israeli settlement just outside of Hebron. The park is named after Meir Kahane, an Orthodox rabbi and ultra-nationalist politician who called for the expulsion or enslavement of Palestinians. At the center of the park is a single gravestone, belonging to Baruch Goldstein, a religious extremist who murdered 29 Palestinians as they worshiped in the Cave of the Patriarchs.

“To the holy Baruch Goldstein, who gave his life for the Jewish people, the Torah, and the nation of Israel,” the grave reads.

Our tour guide was a young Israeli man who worked for *Breaking the Silence*, an organization founded by veterans committed to exposing the realities of life in the Occupied Territories. As he explained the history of this settlement, a group of settlers approached us. “Goldstein was a hero,” one shouted. Another even threw himself on the grave. Stoic, our guide did not allow us to leave. Instead, he just raised his voice.

We spent the rest of the day wandering the streets of Hebron, a city divided into distinct, militarized Israeli and Palestinian areas. Many of the streets where Palestinian communities once flourished are now abandoned. Some Palestinians are not even allowed to use their front doors. Others have metal cages built around their porches. Sensing our confusion, our guide explained: “People throw rocks at their windows.” We drove back to Jerusalem in silence.

The next day, I took a bus to the Dead Sea. Like so many before me, I covered myself in mud and cringed as the briny water stung my skin. All around me, children were playing in the mud, as their parents tanned themselves on the shore. No one seemed to notice how much the sea had receded, how little water was left. Later that afternoon, I hiked Masada, the rocky mountain where, millenia ago, Jewish rebels committed mass suicide rather than surrendering to Romanian soldiers. At the summit, I heard a group of children shout *Am Yisrael Chai*, or "The people of Israel live," into the chasm below. The echo was startling, violent.

It was early 2019, and I was visiting Israel-Palestine for the first time. This was a surprise – and cause for suspicion – to the officers at Ben Gurion airport, who questioned my Jewish identity, my family, and my passport. "You're 25," they exclaimed when I first arrived. "Why has it taken you so long to visit?"

"It's a long story," I wanted to reply. "Can I share it?"

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Throughout my childhood, I was taught that Israel was my true home – my tether not only to God, but also to the history of the Jewish people, to ancestors who wandered in the wilderness for so long that they could barely remember the taste of garlic. Ancestors whose grief runs through my veins and whose memory is coiled, like DNA, around my bones, my muscle, my marrow.

This is not a unique story. So many American Jews have grown up in this paradigm. "Is it our land," we are told. "Of course, we have a right to be there. Look how we made the desert bloom." And for years, I didn't ask many questions. My grandparents were both Holocaust survivors and, as such, the existence of Israel was not a question to be wrestled with. Rather, Israel was the answer.

Something shifted, though, when I became a teenager. What began as a series of innocent questions about the founding of the State of Israel and the plight of Palestinians quickly escalated into shouts and curses, slammed doors and Shabbos meals left uneaten on my grandparents' dining room table. At that age, of course, I didn't quite understand why these questions evoked such rage. To some extent, I enjoyed the newfound attention – the awareness that even I, a lowly teenager, could spark such heated debate. As the years passed, though, the novelty of my rebelliousness wore off. I began to internalize the notion that I was somehow a 'self-hating Jew,' a phrase so often wielded in Jewish communities that it has become something of a cliche.

Family members approached these arguments in distinct ways. My grandmother recounted her experience fleeing Romania during Ceausescu's dictatorship and resettling in the United States. My uncle, on the other hand, purchased me books, written by conservative historians, about the history of the Middle East. My aunt preferred to yell. My father and I only spoke about Israel-Palestine occasionally, but when we did, he recounted those vivid dreams that haunted him throughout his life.

Eventually, these confrontations became routine, even familiar. We knew what to expect before anything had even begun. We knew when the yelling would start and when it would end. We knew who would retreat and who would attack. We knew that, at the end of the day, we would sit in silence and eat my grandmother's beloved pound cake, distracting ourselves from a rupture that none of us knew how to mend.

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The most important component of tahara is the ritual purification of the deceased. One after another, three buckets are poured in a continuous stream over the meyt. This ritual echoes the *mikveh*, the ritual bath that many Jews visit in periods of transition – during a conversion, for example, or prior to a wedding. Both traditions acknowledge the capacity for water to cleanse, to carry us across thresholds. To reconnect us, even, with the ancient, deep waters out of which the world was created.

Before we begin the ritual, we place the meyt on three damp wooden boards. "His whole body must make contact with the water," someone tells me. "Even his back." Our leader then invites me to pour one of the three buckets. This is an immense responsibility. One of our team members expresses some concern about this. He's worried that I'll make a mistake, that I'll slow down the process. "If he does," our leader replies, "we'll try again."

The bucket is heavy and cold, and I struggle for a moment to get a grip on the handle. Soon, it's my turn. As I pour, I hesitate once or twice. When I do, our leader gently places his hand over mine, tipping the bucket so that the water continues to flow. We chant *tahor hu*, "he is pure," as we go, guiding the meyt from this world to the next – from this body to that of the earth, the divine.

We dry the meyt as thoroughly as possible, making sure to pass the towels *around*, never over the body. It is time to dress him. As gently as we can, we place white linen shrouds over the meyt, taking pains to ensure that there are no stains on the garments. This is slow and awkward work. From time to time, our leader takes out a bleach pen. We pause as he scrubs blood stains on the shrouds.

It takes me several tries to learn the distinct, sacred knot that is tied around the meyt's pants, shirt, and headdress. These knots are tied in the shape of the Hebrew letter *shin*, the first letter of *Shaddai*, one of God's many names. Indeed, tradition teaches that God performed tahara for Moses.

We all have bad backs, so we use a lift to carry the body to the casket. We strap him in. There is something startling, profane even, about the mechanical whir of the machine. After we place him in the casket, we scatter soil from Israel on and around his body. We place shards of pottery on his eyes, symbolizing not only his return to the earth, but also the grief of his passing.

"In the tahara room, we create wholeness in the midst of all that is broken," a rabbi once told me.

As I look upon the deceased for the last time, I cannot help but think of this body as my father's body. The meyt's hands as my father's hands. His eyes as my father's eyes. We close the casket, and I begin to wonder whether somehow, in some mysterious way, we have also cleansed my father's body, carrying him – finally, after all these years – toward something unknown, beautiful, terrifying, holy.

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As the years have passed, and as my family has steadily become smaller, I have come to realize that our heated arguments about Israel-Palestine were rooted in loss. Each member of my family approached these discussions from a place of profound grief. Grief over lost childhoods, lost homes. Memories of bomb shelters and pogroms. Dreams that vanished at the blink of an eye and nightmares that never ceased, only transformed.

Over the past several years, fractures within the American Jewish community have deepened. The stakes of these political divisions are high, particularly since the deadly October 7th attacks and the ensuing genocide in Gaza. In these uncertain and heartbreaking times, it is incredibly difficult to envision how these ruptures may be repaired.

Myriad leaders, thinkers, and activists have written eloquently about this political moment, including the numerous controversies that have emerged on college and university campuses. I am uninterested in re-litigating these disputes here, but would rather explore the nuanced and vital questions that have arisen since the war broke out. As American Jews, how can we resist the oppressive policies of the state of Israel, while simultaneously honoring the complex trauma that has led us to this moment? How can we expand our movement without invalidating the grief of those who are concerned with our tactics

and commitments? How might we build new spaces in which grief is *held* and *shared*, rather than weaponized?

In other words, how might we begin to look at this conflict through the eyes of grief? Once again, I am reminded of my father, whose commitment to the state of Israel was born neither out of hate nor out of ignorance, but rather out of a grief too tender, too thorny, for any of us to know how to hold.

Grief, as I noted in the previous essay, does not merely lend us new eyes. Grief also demands that we look. That we *witness*, even when the witnessing renders us vulnerable. When grief is weaponized, it shuts our eyes and prevents us from seeing one another. Grief over Israeli lives and grief over Palestinian lives are not competing. To view them as such is to deny the fact that our fates are intertwined, first and foremost because, after all, our lives are interwoven.

When grief is *held*, on the other hand, it invites us into expansiveness and tenderness, into a vulnerability through which we may recommit to one another. Tahara teaches us this lesson. Tahara is a gift that cannot be repaid. Why then, do we do it? Why do we wash and dress our dead, even when we know that the process will rip us open?

We perform tahara because we know that when we care for one another, we are also caring for ourselves. We do this sacred, excruciating work because we are committed to building a community in which grief is shared and honored, rather than avoided or ignored. Tahara reminds us that every life is precious, even when the meyt lying in front of us is a stranger. As the Talmud teaches, every life is a universe. And thus, when we lose someone, a world collapses.

Confronted with this devastating, though awe-invoking, truth, we are invited into humility. During tahara, we never pass anything over the body. The soul, after all, hovers there. Instead, we pass objects in a circle. We share, and we take our time.

And through all this, tahara recognizes that the work of grief is messy. Tahara, indeed, is a ritual of contradictions. It is meaningful, yet devastating. Intimate, though mechanical. Holy, and so awkward. And yet, it is worth the effort.

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The ritual concludes where it began. We ask for forgiveness. *Forgive us for any indignity we may have caused*. *Everything we did was for the sake of your honor*. Dad, I'm sorry that I didn't ask more questions. I'm sorry that I responded with anger. I'm sorry that I looked away.

Slowly, we take off our plastic gowns, our N95 masks, our gloves. We check the room; it is clean. We look at the casket; it is closed, in its proper place. We walk upstairs and, quietly, someone begins to sing.

Five

Lost & Found

"I write to you in disorder, I well know. But that is how I live. I only work with the lost and found."
—Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva*

I am continuously surprised by how similar grief is to the experience of getting lost.

When I was younger, my parents and I occasionally played a bizarre, yet thrilling, game. After school, I would pick a random car on the highway, and we would follow it – from a distance, of course. I can't remember *how* I would choose. Did I select cars based on their colors? Their license plates? Their bumper stickers? Did I pick cars with friendly-looking drivers, or dogs in the backseat?

We would follow the car for a while – until we got bored, or the sun went down, or the car disappeared into rush hour traffic. I remember how delighted I'd be when the car took an unexpected turn, or led us somewhere we had never been. One day, we ended up somewhere along the New Jersey – New York border. I cannot recall exactly where, but I remember a winding road that ascended a beautiful, tree-lined street. Surrounded by lush greenery, we couldn't see any houses, any shops. Just leaves, with that glint they get sometimes, during golden hour. *This is freedom*, I must have thought.

Years later, I wonder why this game brought me such delight, such exhilaration. Why did I want, so desperately, to be lost, even for just a little while? I would feel such panic, such dread, when we lost sight of the car for even a moment. The notion that the car could be lost to us, possibly forever, terrified me. All I wanted was to glimpse into someone else's life, even for just a few minutes. Did this desire stem from trauma? From grief? Did I, on some level, want to escape myself, my family, the boundaries of my tiny world? What was I running from? What was I running *toward*?

Looking back, I hope that the drivers never figured out what we were up to. And if they did, if they knew that we were following them, I hope they sensed the innocence, the vulnerability even, of the whole charade. I hope they weren't scared.

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The night before my father passed away, I spent hours on the phone with my mom and brother. It was early May, 2020, and hospitals across the country were running out of beds. Given the uncertainty of the moment, most hospitals had banned visitors, no matter how dire the situation.

That evening, however, the doctor at my father's rehab facility decided to make an exception. Knowing that his case of COVID-19 was particularly serious, even fatal, she informed us that one family member would be allowed to visit him the following day. Just one.

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Throughout his life, my father was an avid user of Tripadvisor, founded in 2000 by a businessman who was frustrated by the lack of reliable, unbiased information online about hotels. Today, the website is an encyclopedia of raves and complaints, with over a billion reviews of hotels, restaurants, car rental companies, and tour bus operators.

My father loved to travel – and, when he could no longer travel, he loved to research all of the places that he dreamed of visiting. When he died, he left behind fifty-five Tripadvisor reviews, all under the username *goaroving* – a reference, perhaps, to Leonard Cohen's rendition of the Lord Byron poem, "So We'll Go No More a Roving."

"Magnificent meeting of land and sea," he wrote about Point Lobos in Carmel, California. "This is a magical place! Walk any of its trails to get a startling view of rocky coast, sea lions and birds. You will ooh and ah at the view, and at the ground cover."

He wrote about restaurants and hotels, parks and museums, scenic drives and general stores. "I will start this review by stating that I hated the colors of this hotel. A lot of reds, slightly too bright blue," he wrote of the Residence Inn in Auburn, Maine. He even reviewed my college campus. "Start at the campus center," he suggested, "and ask about events, as there is always something happening – music, drama, dance, etc."

In recognition of his reviews, Tripadvisor deemed him a "Pro." Forty-five more and he would have reached "Superstar."

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"Let us trespass freely and fearlessly and find our own way for ourselves," Virginia Woolf once wrote. In *A Sketch of the Past*, she recounts the daily walks that she used to take with her father, the acclaimed atheist critic Leslie Stephen. Despite being a rather stuffy man, he encouraged Woolf to trespass.

"Whenever you see a board up with 'trespassers will be prosecuted,'" he once told her, "trespass at once."

My father, too, believed in trespassing – or, at the very least, he didn't mind it.

When I was in middle school, all I wanted was to be an architect. I once spent hours constructing a paper-mâché version of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. I was particularly obsessed with Gehry's organic, even poetic, forms, which seemed so radically distinct from the structures I was used to: strip malls, stucco facades, six-lane highways, and gas stations where we bought lotto tickets and York peppermint patties.

Throughout my childhood, I was drawn to anything that seemed like a rupture in the monotony of the suburbs. I remember my delight, for example, when I discovered a tacky, Wild West-themed "village" in the basement of a local mall. I sought out the peculiar, the wild, the out-of-place – fish ponds in the middle of cities, gazebos covered in spider webs, buildings a bit too ornate for their surroundings. I even loved the cars that, inexplicably, would end up in the lobbies of malls. "How do they get there?" I used to wonder.

One summer, in the midst of my Gehry obsession, my parents took me to Boston. We wandered around Gehry's quirky buildings at MIT, which look almost like misshapen legos, or some sort of robot in a Pixar film. A student let us into one of these topsy-turvy structures, and we spent a while exploring the various stairwells, hallways, and classrooms. At one point, we came across a door with a sign that read: "Do Not Open. Alarm Will Sound." I remember my panic. *We have to turn around*, I thought to myself.

My dad, though, pushed the door open. Of course he did.

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Some time ago, as I was beginning to develop these essays, I found an email, written by my father and sent to a friend – a nurse he had met, I think, who was considering having a child.

What was I looking for, when I logged onto his email? I recognize that, to some extent, I was trespassing, breaking down a door that I hoped would lead me into my father's personality. Perhaps I would discover some aspect of him that would surprise or intrigue me, a key into the inner workings of

his mind – or, at the very least, some confirmation that I've *gotten it right*, that I've tapped into the truth, somehow, of our relationship.

And yet. "Josh turned up," my dad wrote, "and for me was difficult from the start. I was fifty when he was born. I love kids and not liking Josh at times was difficult. It made me rethink who I was. I was taking care of delinquent kids, some murderers, and I liked them all. But Josh, unlike his brother Jeffrey, did not take to me."

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After his stroke – and particularly after his coma years later – my father gradually got lost within himself. This was partially the result of the physical traumas that he had experienced. The stroke altered his personality. His time in the ICU, in that godforsaken proning bed, diminished his ability to move.

This was also, of course, the result of the emotional trauma that he had suffered. Much went unsaid between us, especially as I grew older. He spent more and more time on his computer or in front of the TV. Our conversations grew shorter and shorter. We were both afraid, I think. But of what?

In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler suggests that we are all fundamentally unknowable, even to ourselves. Our lives are always obscured, at least partially, from us. We spend our days endeavoring to make legible those mysterious aspects of ourselves, those corners of our identities that never see the light. To make the illegible legible is the work of our lives. The work of grief.

I never knew my dad's family. His parents, sister, aunts and uncles, all died before I was born. The majority of his life passed before I came into the world. I sometimes wonder if I, too, will become a question mark to my family, a source of their not-knowing.

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We spent hours on the phone, deciding who would visit my dad – who would be the one, perhaps, to see him in his final weeks, hours, days. My mom wasn't able to see him, as she was recovering from COVID-19 in a different rehab facility. As such, the choice fell on me and my brother. He lived rather nearby, while I was several hours away. Nonetheless, I had a closer, albeit similarly complex, relationship with my father. My brother, Jeff, had gradually distanced himself from our dad, following years of reflection. For as long as I can remember, this was a sore spot for my dad – a regret that he carried, mostly in secret, close to his chest.

The decision was, of course, impossible. At first, I believed deeply that my brother should visit him – that, perhaps, the two of them could make amends. This would make my father happy. It could even save him. My brother, on the other hand, suggested that I was a more appropriate choice, given that I was closer to our father – that, in some ways, I represented the second chapter of my father's life, a chapter riddled by despair, yes, but also by a deep and enduring love.

I'll admit that I didn't want to go. A part of me was desperate to look away, to drive north instead of south, to find an excuse, any excuse, to avoid yet another trauma, yet another hospital bed. But it was decided – I would drive up first thing in the morning, as early as possible. My partner would come with me, and my brother would wait in the parking lot outside.

It didn't matter, in the end. It was too late.

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"If you have a child, awe and wonder is here," my dad wrote about the Museum of Natural History in New York City. This is probably my favorite of his reviews, the one I come back to.

"Dinosaur re-creations, a wonderful informative exhibit on the creation of man, a terrificate [sic] attached planetarium and other wonders make this a must see with children. Can get a bit expensive for a family – consider membership."

At first glance, there's nothing particularly remarkable about these reviews. Most are rather long reviews of hotels around the country, though he also loved to comment on restaurants, including some of my childhood favorites. If I were a stranger perusing Tripadvisor, I don't think that I would take the time to peruse these brief, occasionally banal, reviews.

And yet, I am not a stranger. And as I have reflected on these writings, I've discovered just how sweet, strange, and fitting they are. Hidden within these reviews are sparks of my father's personality – his love not only of exploration, but of sharing his own adventures and empowering others to do the same.

"Be adventurous and you will be rewarded," he wrote in a review about some restaurant in New Jersey, mere miles from where I grew up. He described the Element hotel in Princeton as "a high concept eco-hotel for those with Museum of Modern Art tastes." Though he approved of the Metropolitan Museum's pay-what-you-can policy, he warned visitors: "Do not abuse it." Describing a farm stand in

Vermont, he wrote, "Rustic selling area complete with flies, but you are on a farm." Reading this, I can hear the sarcasm in his voice. I can see his smile.

There is a profound sense of care in these reviews. "Not if you are handicapped," he wrote of a restaurant in Providence, Rhode Island, where my mother had struggled to access the restroom. His reviews, as well as his messages with fellow travelers, are full of tips and tricks, warnings and suggestions. Perhaps Tripadvisor, for him, provided an opportunity to connect with the world, especially as his own world narrowed in the final years of his life.

Perhaps, in writing these reviews, he was endeavoring to say: "I've been there. I've seen it. I've felt it. Here's what I want you to know. Let me tell you a story."

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What do we leave behind?

My father is survived by fifty-five Tripadvisor reviews, hundreds of letters to friends and colleagues, clothing stacked in drawers, crumbs between cushions, photos scattered around our house, voicemails and videos. He is survived by my fondness for hearty soups and berry pies, my back pain, my unequivocal love of day trips, particularly those involving bakeries or vistas.

And yet, he is also survived by emails, like the one I found. I'll admit that, when I first read the note, I experienced it almost as an affirmation. It is true that I didn't always "take to him," particularly in the early years of my life, the years he references in that email. He was a warm and welcoming man, especially to strangers, yet he could also be rather alienating and stubborn, unwilling to see himself as someone who could cross the line. I remember him confiding in me, years ago, that he wanted to cheat on my mother. I remember his insistence, time and again, that I was somehow in the wrong for asking him to pull back, to honor boundaries, to stop talking, to say something different. And yet, I also remember the pride he felt when I first learned to cook or ride a bike, or when I first got a poem published. "The Poet-Chef," he used to call me.

It is true that, in some ways, I never *took to him*. And it is also true that, as the years go on, I recognize more and more of him in myself. I am the one he called, at the end. I am the one who was chosen to visit him. And yet, and yet.

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What makes a text sacred? As a mentor recently suggested, a text is sacred when a community treats it as such. The archives that we leave behind are sacred. Even my father's Tripadvisor reviews are sacred. What would it mean to treat them as such? Would I re-read them each year, searching for clues, for answers? Would I visit all the places that he wrote about? Would I write my own reviews, under his name? Anything can be a sacred text, I've learned, as long as it speaks to you – deeply, mysteriously – from some other place, from some realm beyond your own.

Grief, I've come to realize, is a continuous retelling. A story that we return to, again and again. And through that repetition, through the steady heartbeat of grief, we remake ourselves.

So, we'll go no more a roving, Leonard Cohen sings.
So late into the night, though the heart be still as loving, and the moon be still as bright.

Six

Mapping Sanctuary

Mount Equinox and the Topographies of Grief

"The sanctuary is the space that opens into death."
—Fanny Howe, *Indivisible*

The light here is otherworldly. Although we are just 3,800 feet above sea level, we are enveloped in clouds. The air smells of spruce, fir, birch, and mountain ash. All the trees are stunted this high up, but we don't mind. They still tower over us, offering shade and, once in a while, letting in the sun.

Thick moss and bright green ferns cushion our footsteps. We walk slowly towards the overlook – a small clearing in the forest with one bench and a wide, flat rack, perfect for a picnic. We are careful not to make a sound. All around, there is music – ovenbirds, blackpoll warblers, white-throated sparrows, Bicknell's thrush. Although I have been here many times before, the call of these birds always sounds like revelation.

At the overlook, we catch our breath and gaze out onto the vast slopes of the Green Mountains. I marvel, as I always do, at the way the colors of the landscape shift the farther I look – first green, then dark blue, and finally purple where the mountains meet the horizon. Here, on this storied peak, I carry my father's memory like a map.

Do you remember the first time you brought me here? Do you remember what it felt like to walk this path? Did you have a favorite bird? If so, did you know its name?

Wind rustles through the trees, and I take this for an answer.

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Mount Equinox is the tallest peak in the Taconic Range, a sweeping landscape known for its underground streams, high-elevation marble, and abundant plant life. The name *Taconic* stems from the Delaware word for "in the forest," and the term *Equinox* derives from the Latin words for "equal" and "night."

In the 1940s, Joseph George Davison, a Union Carbide executive, purchased the majority of Mount Equinox. An accomplished chemist, he contributed to the development of mustard gas and the atomic

bomb. When he wasn't designing this machinery of war, he dabbled in other commercial and household products, such as lacquers, plastics, and even safety glasses. At the time of his death, he held twenty-eight patents.

After Davidson retired from Union Carbide, he spent several years building a long, meandering, and perilous road up Mount Equinox, as well as a small hotel at its summit. He lived on the mountain for the rest of his life, alongside his wife, Madeleine, and their beloved dog, Mr. Barbo.

Davidson passed away in 1969 at the age of 77. His hotel closed in the 1990s, and it sat untouched – amidst foxes, porcupines, snowshoe hares, and the occasional moose – until 2011, when it was finally demolished. As a child, I loved to peer through the broken windows of this ruin. I often wondered: What were the guests like? What did they talk about? What did they see when they looked up into the night sky?

Mount Equinox overlooks the town of Manchester, a quaint community in southwestern Vermont best known for its outlet malls, historic sites, and picturesque streets. I was first introduced to this landscape as a young child, and it has since become a second home. Every summer throughout my childhood, my parents and I would spend a week or two in this verdant region. Our favorite activities included swimming in Echo Lake, riding the gondola to the top of Killington Mountain, sampling cheese at the Vermont Country Store, reading for hours in the Northshire Bookstore, and traveling to the peak of Mount Equinox.

Over time, Mount Equinox became a sanctuary – an enchanted place that continues to surprise and delight me.

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The term "sanctuary" derives from the Latin root *sanctus*, or "holy." For hundreds of years, the word was used to describe spaces that were believed to be sacred – places that were somehow distinct from our day-to-day lives. Indeed, the Hebrew word for sanctuary, *mikdash*, stems from the root *kadash*, or "to set apart as sacred."

Throughout history, sanctuaries have thus served as places of worship, ritual, and transformation. Sanctuaries – whether synagogues, cathedrals, or even less overtly religious spaces such as gardens and wildlife refuges – have been, and continue to be, places in which individuals may encounter the divine.

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Nestled in the woods at the summit of Mount Equinox is a small grave. It's easy to miss. If you walk by too quickly, or if you are distracted, you might not notice the weathered granite standing in a bed of tall grass and wildflowers. You might not see the pile of tiny stones and leaves that have been left by sympathetic travelers over the years. You might not take the time to read the grave's dedication, lovingly etched under a small portrait of Mr. Barbo.

"We loved him," the plaque reads, "and he repaid that love with an adoring devotion that only a dog could give. Shot and killed by a malicious hunter, Nov. 20, 1955."

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Since the Middle Ages, the term "sanctuary" has also been associated with safety and belonging. In Medieval England, for example, many churches offered sanctuary to fugitives on the run from the law. Although sanctuaries have historically connoted religious spaces, today the term is employed more broadly to describe *any* place that offers refuge to those in need.

The concept of sanctuary continues to be salient in contemporary society, particularly in this moment of ongoing violence, inequality, and climate crisis. Perhaps sanctuary's continued salience – as an aspiration, strategy, and conceptual frame – stems from the term's expansiveness.

Today, sanctuary denotes a wide variety of spaces, communities, and projects – from sanctuary cities that are committed to protecting immigrants to nature preserves and animal refuges. The term "sanctuary" describes not only physical spaces – houses of worship, museums, parks, and so on – but also particular ethical and political visions. Sanctuaries provide immediate and temporary assistance, while simultaneously seeking to envision and enact a future in which all beings are safe.

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Shortly after Mr. Barbo was killed, Davidson banned all hunting on the slopes of Mount Equinox. As the story goes, he also tried, to no avail, to identify and hold accountable the hunter responsible for his companion's untimely death.

In the final years of Davidson's life, he gradually gave away all of his land to the Carthusian Order, a reclusive Catholic community founded in 1048 by Saint Bruno of Cologne. The community's motto is *stat crux dum volvitur orbis*, or "the cross is steady while the world turns."

Davidson passed away decades before I was born, and little has been written about his relationship to Mount Equinox. Thus, I do not know what his motivations were in bequeathing this land. Perhaps he grew tired of the demands associated with land ownership, and simply wanted to live out his final years in peace. Perhaps he felt a call to *give back* to the world after years of grueling – and, I would imagine, even soul crushing – work. Perhaps he wanted to preserve something, rather than sanctioning its destruction.

However, I like to think that in his grief, Davidson chose to transform this landscape into a sanctuary – not only for monks with whom he had built a relationship, but also for all the plants and animals that call Mount Equinox home. And of course, for Mr. Barbo.

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What makes a sanctuary? Myriad scholars and writers – from scientists and policymakers to activists and spiritual leaders – have highlighted the ethical and political possibilities that emerge from the concept of sanctuary. Throughout its history, sanctuaries have functioned as potent critiques of power structures. In fact, the practice of sanctuary in Medieval England came to an end only when it began to pose a significant threat to sovereign power.

To this day, many sanctuaries still position themselves in opposition to structures of oppression, from inhumane immigration policies to violations of animal rights. The history of sanctuary spaces continues to inspire those who are committed to building new, liberatory communities. The historian James Chappel has even argued that the concept of sanctuary allows us to investigate "novel forms of non-national religious belonging" that challenge normative understandings of the secular state.

Rooted in both religious and legal history, sanctuary opens up new possibilities for activism and community building.

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Despite its continued salience, however, "sanctuary" is a contested term – in part, perhaps, because it encompasses such a diverse range of meanings.

Today, many sanctuaries function as temporary responses to acute crises, such as wars and natural disasters. These types of sanctuaries, which often take on crisis-management responsibilities, pose a number of nuanced ethical and political questions.

Take, for example, organizations that offer sanctuary to immigrants and refugees. Although these communities do life-saving work, many activists have noted that these groups tend to reinforce the very power structures that they seek to abolish. As the scholars Patti Tamara Lenard and Lauda Madokoro have argued, "Sanctuary practices, somewhat paradoxically, reify the differences between 'us' and 'them,' even as they seek to break down this distinction." This tendency, they continue, results from a definition of sanctuary that "requires a provider and a recipient, a savior and a benefactor." Lenard and Madokoro are attuned, here, to the power imbalances that can arise between those who offer sanctuary and those who receive it.

Animal sanctuaries face similar challenges. As activists such as Catherine Doyle have noted, many communities that claim to be animal sanctuaries actually exploit the animals in their care. More broadly, animal sanctuaries pose complex ethical questions about activism, advocacy, and the relationship between human beings and the natural world. For example, what role should these spaces play in the fight for animal rights? How can animal sanctuaries, particularly those that care for wild animals, avoid becoming prisons? How can these organizations balance their ethical responsibilities with the perpetual need to raise funds and garner support?

These kinds of *reactive* sanctuaries can, perhaps inadvertently, turn our attention away from the root causes of harm. If endangered species are safe *over there*, we might tell ourselves, then why should we worry about them *here*, in our communities? As long as sanctuaries exist, some may even argue, then the stakes of structural change are not so high.

However, sanctuaries can also function as *constructive* acts of radical imagination. For example, animal sanctuaries can serve as temporary homes for vulnerable creatures while, at the same time, striving to be radical experiments in sustainability and reciprocity. Similarly, sanctuary cities and congregations can empower us to envision and enact a more just world.

Can the concept of sanctuary accommodate these two interpretations – as a *reaction* to injustice on the one hand, and an act of *radical imagination* on the other? What is the throughline between these distinct manifestations of sanctuary?

I would like to suggest that the throughline is grief.

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If grief were a place, what would it look like?

After my father and grandmother died in 2020, the world shifted. Suddenly, ordinary places – bakeries, parks, bookstores, even the interstate – transformed into potent reminders of loss. No longer could I walk into a supermarket without remembering my father's favorite foods or the way my grandmother used to converse with her local butcher.

There's a bakery in Londonderry, Vermont that now brings me to tears because my father adored their summer berries pies. My apartment is covered in bright, patterned Romanian textiles that I inherited from my grandmother. And although they are reminders of my family's heritage, they are also reminders that I will never again hear her voice.

There are days when memory comes to me like a freight train – sudden, violent, and clumsy. And there are days when memory feels like a second skin, layered ever so gently over my own.

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Whenever we set out to build a sanctuary – whether a nature preserve, a hospital, or even a sanctuary city – we start from a place of profound grief.

We grieve because we have constructed a world in which so many beings are unsafe. We grieve because we live in a society marked by violence and oppression. We grieve because life is both precious and fleeting. We grieve, and we remember what so many have forgotten – that this planet is a sanctuary, and that it is burning.

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To reach the summit of Mount Equinox, you must first traverse Skyline Drive – a steep and serpentine road that ascends over 3,000 feet in roughly five miles.

Although the view from Skyline Drive is stunning, the journey is perilous. You must take it slow, careful to avoid colliding into wildlife, trees, and other cars. If you drive down the mountain too quickly, you might burn your car's brakes – a sharp, rubbery smell that I am all too familiar with. You will be tempted to gaze out the window, but remember – all pilgrimages require patience. The vista will appear to you, as long as you know where and when to look.

As a child, I adored the long, slow drive to the mountain's peak. With my head against the window, I watched in awe as the trees became smaller and smaller. Every time we turned a corner, I waited in anticipation for a glimpse of far-off mountains, valleys, and lakes. As we neared the summit, I always opened the window. I delighted in the cool air against my skin. To this day, I am still astonished by how quickly the temperature drops.

Growing up, this drive felt like a pilgrimage. A pilgrimage to a place where the moss grew wild and the wind was fierce. Where, for a little while, nothing else mattered. Mount Equinox was a place where my family could rest, walk, and picnic together. It was a place where we could leave behind our many troubles and, even for a short time, share an experience of reverence and joy.

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In the years since my father and grandmother died, thinkers such as Judith Butler have taught me that grief reminds us of our interwovenness – and, thus, of our vulnerability. We are always in relation with one another and the world around us – with rivers and peaks, birds and trees. Indeed, our lives depend upon those of others. And while these relationships leave us vulnerable to heartbreak, they also invite us to experience profound love – and, thus, to practice an ethics of care.

Exodus 25:8 reads, "And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them." What would the world look like, if it were truly a sanctuary? How might *we* become sanctuaries for one another?

To this day, I still find sanctuary at the summit of Mount Equinox. And yet, the journey has changed. Traversing Skyline Drive continues to be a pilgrimage into wonder and joy. I still delight in the birds and the mosses, the wind and the sprawling vistas.

However, the drive is now also a pilgrimage into grief. Every switchback, lookout, and picnic area evokes a memory of those I have lost.

This is what grief does. Grief transforms the world into a palimpsest – faint traces of loss lurking underneath every landscape. Just as trees and boulders carry the earth's memory, the echoes of my father and grandmother – their stories and distant voices – can still be heard on Mount Equinox.

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What would it look like to recognize interdependence as the condition of our lives? How might our relationship with the world change, if only we paid attention to our grief? Moreover, can we think of grief as a form of sanctuary?

Throughout their essay "Violence, Mourning, Politics," Butler calls on us to *attend to* our grief – and, thus, to resist the urge to turn away. This is an arduous task. In many respects, our society is built around the very myth that grief destabilizes – namely, the myth of the autonomous self. As such, grief is often viewed as an aberration from some normative state of being. Grief, thus, is an abnormal state that requires fixing.

Many scholars have noted that grief, like sanctuary, threatens structures of power. For example, in his essay "The Right to Grieve," Erik Baker notes that bereavement leave challenges capitalism's reliance on productivity and compartmentalization. Echoing Butler, he notes, "Grief splits that atom of the capitalist individual."

As a result, many of us are taught to repress grief. Time and time again, we are told to turn away from our grief. After my father and grandmother passed away, I quickly realized just how difficult it is to discuss loss in our society. I noticed how reluctant many of us are to openly share our fears, worries, and questions. For months, I struggled to communicate my experience of grief to those around me.

After reading the DSM-5's new definition of "Prolonged Grief Disorder," which pathologizes grief that persists for more than six months, I began to wonder whether something was wrong with me. I asked myself: How long is *too long* to grieve? When could I expect to return to the world?

Our society's aversion to honest discussions about grief has both intended and unintended consequences. "When grieving is something to be feared," Butler writes, "our fears can give rise to the impulse to resolve it quickly." Thus, we seek "to banish it in the name of action invested with the

power to restore the loss or return the world to a former order, or to reinvigorate a fantasy that the world formerly was orderly."

That is, when we turn away from grief, we risk transforming it into violence. In doing so, we also deny ourselves an opportunity to reflect on – and recommit to – our intricate connections with one another, and with the world around us.

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What would a map of my grief look like?

Like my father, I have always found sanctuary in the natural world – in landscapes both near and far, narrow rivers and vast seas, mountains and gentle slopes. I have sound sanctuary in the expansive deserts of Southern California, the old-growth forests of Romania, the rocky shores of mid-coast Maine, and even the humble backyard gardens of New Jersey. Amongst lichens and wildflowers, pines and cattails, I have experienced enchantment. I have found rest.

In "The Science Center as Sanctuary," mental health professionals Donna Gaffney, Karen Dunne-Maxim, and Mary Ann Cernak explore the restorative role that nature plays in the aftermath of trauma. They write, "A return to nature communicates that the world is still here, although it is changed." The authors are particularly interested in institutions that cater to children. Nonetheless, their insights are applicable to the natural world more broadly.

Similarly, the historian Mac Griswold has written about the transformative power of nature, specifically in the context of sanctuary gardens. These spaces, she notes, invariably include "a growing thing whose span of years is longer than our own...or a plant that tells us more directly about the passage of the seasons, something that sprouts, flowers, withers, goes dormant, and is reborn within the annual round."

Nature is healing because it invites us to reflect on our place in, what the poet Mary Oliver calls, the "family of things." Nature reminds us that, even in the midst of loss, the world continues to evolve. Forests and gardens provide endless metaphors for resilience and even hope. Within these sanctuaries, perhaps we may begin to recognize mortality not only as a cause for despair, but also an opportunity for connection and care. In this way, the natural world teaches us that grief is intricately intertwined with joy.

“Joy is not the opposite of grief,” the activist Malkia Devich-Cyril Writes. “Grief is an evolutionary indicator of love.”

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At the base of Mount Equinox sits the Charterhouse of the Transfiguration, which is the sole Carthusian Monastery in North America. Although visitors are not allowed, you can catch a glimpse of the sanctuary from the summit of the mountain. As a child, I stared in awe at the sprawling, geometric granite structure. I pondered: What were the monks doing down there? How did they spend their days? What did they pray for?

Saint Bruno, the founder of the Carthusian Order, once remarked, “Only those who have experienced the solitude and the silence of the wilderness can know the benefit and divine joy they bring to those who love them.”

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In the years since my father passed away, I have often felt called to speak with him while hiking through the woods or strolling along the beach. In many ways, these spaces feel safer than others. Alone in a dense forest, no one can hear my words. No one will think I’m losing my mind. Far from any crowd, I can allow myself the space to speak honestly.

I wonder, though, whether there’s something else – something deeper – taking place in these moments. Surrounded by plants and animals, I feel closer to all the people and places I have lost. The trees remind me that I am merely one strand in a vast web of life. No matter how “autonomous” I sometimes feel, the birds remind me that I am inherently interconnected with all beings. I am vulnerable to heartbreak, and yet I also have the capacity for wonder and joy.

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To build a sanctuary is to set something, whether a plot of land or even a room, apart as sacred. Sanctuaries envision – and endeavor to enact – a world in which all beings can thrive. These consecrated spaces offer endless opportunities for transformation, both alone and in community.

“Whether public or private,” Griswold writes, “two of the most important functions of a sanctuary garden are to stretch time through memory and allusion, and to offer a gateway to something larger than the self, or even human community.”

All sanctuaries, from houses of worship to nature preserves, allow us to experience something greater than ourselves – God, perhaps, but also community. Sanctuaries are portals not only to the world, but also to ourselves.

Sanctuaries look to the future, even as they honor the past. Sanctuaries exist both within and outside of us. Sometimes, *we* bring a sense of holiness into a space, whether a forest or a church. Other times, sanctuaries invite us into the sacred, whether in the form of prayer, light through a stained-glass window, birdsong, or even a bud.

To stand in a sanctuary is to be reminded not only of our vulnerability, but also of the myriad ethical obligations that stem from our interdependence.

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Grief, too, consecrates space. Grief transforms even the most unlikely of places into portals. Just as sanctuaries offer us a glimpse of a different and better future, grief invites us to envision a world that is rooted in interdependence.

Although Butler would not use this language, perhaps interdependence is closely related to the notion of the divine. According to the theologian Jon Sobrino, sanctuaries express a fundamental truth about existence – namely, that holiness exists in our world.

Grief, in its own way, conveys a similar lesson. Grief exposes our ties to one another. For me, these connections, both heartbreaking and wondrous, constitute the sacred.

As Fanny Howe writes, "It is as if we each had two little darts lodged in our flesh in exactly the same spot and they moved in relation to each other like charged needles that seek a thread."

If sanctuaries teach us that *another world is possible*, perhaps grief reminds us that we are not alone in this work.

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At the summit of Mount Equinox, where Joseph Davidson's hotel once welcomed guests, there is now a visitor center. The building houses a prayer space, historical display, and lookout, and it provides

refuge from the weather, which changes drastically from one moment to the next. There are spaces both for quiet reflection and for community. For picnics, which too are forms of prayer.

Gazing out the window of the visitor's center, I remember my father and grandmother. I think of my grandmother's fiery red hair, her thick Romanian accent, and her love of butter on warm bread. I remember her pearl necklace and the vibrant, turquoise sweater she used to wear. I smile as I recall my father's adventurous spirit – his love of paper maps and roadside farm stands, rhododendrons and marzipan. Looking at an old photo of him, I remember that we have the same smile.

The map of my grief is also a map of these memories. It is a map of joy and gratitude. A map of pine needles, rocky overlooks, and tall grasses. It is a map of Mount Equinox.

I take a deep breath. *We've made it*, I whisper quietly.

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"The sanctuary is the space that opens into death," Fanny Howe writes. At first glance, this comment is terrifying. One might ask: How could this be true? Aren't sanctuaries committed to the preservation and flourishing of *life*?

However, perhaps Howe is pointing towards the multifaceted relationship between sanctuaries and grief. Sanctuaries are spaces in which the boundaries between worlds – between life and death, here and there, past and future – are thin.

At the summit of Mount Equinox, memory rushes towards me like water.

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Grief can be a sanctuary, if only we give ourselves the permission to mourn. Rather than fearing grief, perhaps we must welcome it with open, though trembling, arms. Here, I don't mean to suggest that grief is a *desirable* condition. Grief breaks our hearts. And yet, it is also the condition of our lives. It is, as Devich-Cyril writes, an expression of love.

Sanctuaries are manifestations of – or, perhaps, *recognitions* of – grief. Often, the demand for sanctuary arises when we fail to protect one another. Perhaps the difference between sanctuaries that

harm and sanctuaries that heal lies in their distinct approaches to grief. Perhaps sanctuaries fail when they turn away from grief, rather than towards it.

It is not enough, however, to merely recognize grief as an expression of our interdependence. The stakes of what we *do* with our grief are high, particularly in this moment of global conflict. As Butler powerfully demonstrates, grief has ethical and political connotations.

Butler reflects, "Is there something to be gained from grieving, from tarrying with grief, from remaining exposed to its unbearability and not endeavoring to seek a resolution for grief through violence?"

As a sanctuary, grief demands that we both imagine and seek to build a world in which all beings are cared for. Grief invites us to acknowledge our vulnerability not as a weakness, but rather an opportunity for love, transformation, and community.

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There is a spot, along Skyline Drive, where the clouds never fail to amaze me. After driving for miles through yellow birch and red spruce, the vista finally appears – mountains and sky as far as the eye can see. Often, however, the view is obstructed by thick clouds, so close you can feel the mist on your face.

I am always a bit disappointed at first, until I remember that clouds too are miraculous. That light always manages to carve a path through the fog. That eventually, the expanse will once again appear.

Epilogue

Notes Toward a Grief Garden

"There are moments in our lives which, threaded, give us heaven—"
– Jorie Graham, "Over and Over Stitch"

Everywhere I look, there are wildflowers and grasses, shrubs and towering trees. There are magnolias and evergreens, ornamental onions and pots filled to the brim with Chinese indigo, shining sumac, and bay laurel. Near the entrance to the greenhouse, there is even a patch of Tuscan kale. From a distance, their elegant, blue-gray leaves almost look like brushstrokes. Up the hill, bright orange fish, camouflaged frogs, and dragonflies with transparent wings call the aquatic gardens their home. Some months, the water is inky, almost black. In late summer and early fall, the surface of the pond is concealed under hundreds of yellow water lilies and bright green leaves.

I am strolling through Wave Hill, an oasis nestled along the Hudson River, just a few miles from Manhattan. Down the street is the small apartment where my mother grew up, and where my grandparents lived until they passed away. Throughout my childhood, my family and I visited Wave Hill often. Some years, we were there almost every weekend. With 28 acres of gardens, greenhouses, and woods, Wave Hill invites exploration.

When I was a child, I particularly loved to wander through the steep, shady woods. Although the hiking trail is only half a mile long, it always seemed much longer, much more strenuous. In early spring, the forest floor is blanketed with small, violet-blue flowers. Colloquially, they are known as "Glory of the Snow," I have since learned. Bright, soft mosses wrap themselves around tree trunks, and ferns of every shape dot the ground. Once in a while, you can even spot a poppy, a squill, or a wild geranium poking through the underbrush.

Many weekends, my parents accompanied me to art classes at Wave Hill. Each week, we would explore new colors, textures, and materials – watercolors, collage, crayons, and thin, nearly transparent tissue paper. Although I do not remember most of these classes, one particular activity often surfaces from the depths of my memory. It was early winter, many years ago. The trees were already bare, and the mornings smelled of snow. Although it was quite cold, our art teacher that weekend took us outside. Holding two massive garbage bags, she led us to the start of the woodland path. When we arrived, she turned over the bags, and, to our amazement, heaps of colorful leaves – yellow and orange, red and green – tumbled out onto the bare, wintry ground. She had collected these weeks earlier, before the seasons had changed. "I've been saving them," she said, before inviting us to scatter the leaves on the

path. “Make it colorful,” she told us. For the next few hours, we meticulously dispersed the leaves on the woodland trail. Soon, the greyish-brown path, which had once been covered in dirt and pebbles, was transformed into a rainbow, a mosaic of dried leaves that crunched delightfully under our feet.

Looking back on this practice, years later, I now recognize that we were constructing a monument to the changing of seasons – to the trees that had lost their leaves, the forest that had lost a bit of its color, and to us, too, who were growing older and, whether we knew it or not, on the verge of losing our childish wonder, our deep and mysterious sense of connection to the natural world.

“Return,” our teacher seemed to be telling us. “You can come back here. These woods will always be a part of you. Yes, there is grief here, but there is also deep and profound joy.”

And indeed, whenever I hike the short, meandering path through these woods, I imagine piles of colorful leaves. I imagine, too, my parents and grandparents, who once held my hand as I explored this place for the first time. If I pay close attention, I can hear their voices rising and falling; I can even hear the leaves crunching under our feet.

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The first essay in this collection, “The Wovenness of Things: Notes on Grief and Halibut Point,” was initially written as a final paper for a course at Harvard Divinity School entitled *Finding Beauty in a Broken World*. This piece marked my foray back into the lyric essay form after several years, during which I barely wrote. When the class concluded, our professor, Terry Tempest Williams, posed a question:

“Like so many others, you weren’t able to memorialize your father,” she told me. “In the midst of this pandemic, there is so much grief, and so few spaces in which to hold it. What if we built a COVID-19 memorial?” she asked.

A few weeks later, we were on a plane to Philadelphia, where we met with Terry’s dear friend Lily Yeh, a community artist, Chinese landscape painter, and force of nature. Within minutes, Lily shared a vision for a memorial, centered around a stunning drawing that she had begun to work on. The piece was vibrant and haunting. At the center, there was a tall, almost surreal, Saguaro cactus surrounded by stars, Buddhist symbols, and representations of the COVID-19 virus. In the foreground, there was a vulture, menacing though strikingly beautiful. Somehow, the drawing captured the cacophony of grief, the sheer mystery of it. And with this small, yet masterful, work of art, a project was born.

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I have always had a complicated relationship to memorials. Throughout my life, I have visited many of them – from the stately monuments of Washington, DC to the Holocaust memorials that are ubiquitous throughout Europe. Although I have found several of these spaces to be quite moving, these monuments also raise myriad questions about how we honor and remember all that we have lost.

In his reflection on the architecture of Holocaust memorials, the artist Samuel Holleran argues that many of these monuments seal off history, rather than encouraging reflection and community building. What we need, he suggests, are *living* memorials that invite us into new relationship with grief. Indeed, grief isn't something that can be locked behind concrete walls or towering statues. How might we, instead, design spaces that acknowledge the ways in which grief transforms us? Spaces in which we may reflect, both alone and in community, on the many griefs that we carry throughout our lives. Spaces, that is, in which we can actually *grieve*.

"After great pain, a formal feeling comes," Emily Dickinson writes. There is wisdom in this, I think. Often, grief evokes a desire to formalize – to erect statues and build walls. And yet, Dickinson's quote is missing something. Grief also summons all that is wild and mysterious, wondrous and strange. Grief, as I've suggested throughout this collection, attunes us to our fundamental interwovenness. Nothing about this is formal. Nothing about this is fixed.

How, then, can we construct spaces that honor the watery, meandering, and ever-evolving dimensions of grief? How, in other words, might we build a memorial that dwells in the *and yet*?

Although I cannot offer definitive answers, I have been blessed to be in community with others who are invested in the questions.

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In the years since our first gathering, the world has changed – and, with it, our project. Months after Lily, Terry, and I first met, war broke out in Gaza. Tens of thousands have been killed. The world has seen hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, and fires. Amidst the uncertainty, fear, and division of our times, we realized that we could not build a memorial only to victims of COVID-19. Rather, we began to envision a memorial space that would make room for many forms of grief. For collective and personal grief. For climate grief. Lily, as always, had an idea. "Let's build a grief garden," she said.

For years, students, faculty, and staff at Harvard Divinity School have endeavored to build a grief space on campus – a place where community members can gather to mourn, share stories, and honor all those we have lost. Over the past several months, students have come together to envision what this space may look, sound, and feel like. Will it be outside or inside? If there are walls, what art might we hang? What candles might we burn?

Soon, we will gather to consecrate a space for our grief garden. We will paint tree branches and twigs. We will sing, pray, and tell stories. We'll bless one another and, in doing so, we'll bless ourselves. The grief garden will be a space of reflection and exploration. It'll be a space of play as well, a space where grief and love, beauty and brokenness, will be held, stitched together in a mosaic too vast for any of us to comprehend.

It will be a place where, spiritually, we will return our loved ones to the earth. Where I will return my father to the earth. Where I will return my grandparents, and all the ancestors I have never met. I will scatter their stories like leaves on the forest floor, knowing that, miraculously and mysteriously, new life will one day emerge.

A Thread

Begin with the sound of a needle in cross stitch. Begin with spine arched like
seaweed and feet planted to the ground. Begin with the pattern your hands

make when cupped around disaster. Begin again and again, this time tugging
at the thread that connects your body to what isn't. If you leave fringes,

don't be afraid to dye them with winter berries. Begin to read that book about
the Renaissance, or tune the violin you were given back when your fingers

knew only how to grasp. Begin to play a melody you heard in the country where
your mother was born. Where you tied red and white yarn to tree branches on

the first of spring, and where you held yourself tightly as you learned why she
left in the first place. Begin to write a list of all the rituals you've witnessed,

starting with the phrase "may you be inscribed in the book of life." In the morning,
begin to conjugate all the verbs you've heard only at a distance. And if the word 'light

house' were a verb, take solace in the home you built there. Note the root of
this unwinding—the anchor that stretches far and deep and blue and begins

quietly, in a whisper. Take a chair out to the porch and listen to the lattice
work of bud against branch. Begin to hum the protest song you sang

in the room where everyone wore white and locked arms. Remember
wearing more than this ache—the weft of wool against skin. There is

nowhere to go. Begin with the chorus, and wait for others to join in.

(March, 2020)

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