Behind the Missing Rib: The Five Stages of Grief

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Behind the Missing Rib: The Five Stages of Grief

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Honors Thesis
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Tutor: Adrian Blevins
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To my mother, my best friend: every word I write has always been for you.
You are stronger than you will ever know.

“To me, poetry is about survival first of all. Survival of the individual self, survival of the emotional life.”
–Gregory Orr
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Prologue
“Pray That Your Flight Will Not Be In the Winter”
Title from Matthew 24:2

Today is the first day of winter: the third winter since the first winter where all my hair fell out in clumps, thickets, bundles. I’d reach up to stroke it. My hand would return shaking, coated in thin-brown snake-tears, coiling on the gray-tile floor.

Today is the first day of winter: the first winter since the last winter where I lost a boy—the first boy whose last name I tried after my first. I lost him to a train, not to another girl. My hand kept holding my February-heart, trying to understand how it can possibly stop.

Today is the first day of winter: the first winter since the last summer my uncle died on my kitchen floor—I said this wouldn’t be about that. Four weeks after it happened I took down my calendar and burnt it in a metal bowl in a boarding school boys’ dorm-room.

I opened the screenless-window to let the smoke out so I didn’t have to give myself a demerit, and a red cardinal flew in, the ashes from my calendar crumbling from the corners of his open O beak. He spat them on a piece of paper that looked something like this.

When I lost all my hair I stood in front of the mirror, asked will I be a better person now? Will I be better? Will I write better? Will I? No, the cardinal laughed, the hair will grow back. And the heart will stop. But the heart starts, starts again. The cardinal told me so.

Today is the first day of winter: the third winter since the one where all my hair fell out in clumps. I keep a red cardinal under my ribs now. I feed him poems, vanilla-dipped strawberries, and let people look. Look. Can you hear his February song? Can you?
Stage One

Denial
“God is Faithful; He Will not Let You be Tempted Beyond What You Can Bear”
*Title from Corinthians 10:13*

When they told me you were fishing for the weekend, I believed them, because I was six and believed in Santa Claus. And monsters. And how if I ate a single watermelon seed, it would grow and grow inside me, and I would surely die.

When they said you’d be gone a week, a week or a month, a month at most, I wrote you a letter that said, “I Miss you. So much.” Eleven years later, they tell me—laughing at my ignorance in that terrible-awful human way that makes one feel so horribly small—that *surely I must’ve known* you never even owned a fishing pole. And the sprinkle-coated vanilla ice cream cone—the one that I was eating that day when I was five and someone said you were sick, but not to worry, I couldn’t catch it—still churns inside all these years later.

I thought you were My Tragic Tragedy. I rolled you up into a blue gumdrop ball, pressed you in deep right under my left lung, carved a sugar-cloaked hole into the darkest part behind my ribs. I reveled in the vanilla-injustice of it all. Stuck my fingers in, scraped at the sadness like a fox in a trap. Showed the world, boohooed. I didn’t know then that I was only scratching the hole bigger, making a space for all the other ghosts to come. When they look over the sprinkle stained edge oh, how they tumble right in.
“Knowledge Will Be Pleasant to Your Soul”
Title from Proverbs 2:10

My mother went into the kitchen to make coffee,
her little pastel running shoes tied up all tight, ready

for the day, when she found her brother on her floor.
Why’s he sleeping on the floor? Why’s he sleeping

so late I tucked him in said goodnight I love you
wake up wake up wake up goddammit. God. Dammit.

She’s been screaming for months now. Her hair turned
gray that morning. She sits some days in that spot

on the tile floor and waits for him to wake up
or God to talk or some dumb little thing like that.
“Casting All Your Care Upon Him; for He Careth for You”  
*Title From 1 Peter 5:7*

I’m burrowed into the secret arches of your cut-glass body again.  
Your hair’s longer. You taste like two years ago. There’s a fresh scar  
on the hand I use to trace the curled edges of your new tattoo, snaking  
up your left side. I drag my finger around too-late apologies, past  
squandered stories, and up past my favorite birthmark four inches  
from your waist. Here’s a winter. O, there’s a fall wedged between  
us, sleeping in the crack between our bodies. The space smells faintly  
like cinnamon-stains: other lovers, lost time, red leaves. It’s fall again.  
Here’s the jagged edges of the empty vase you bought for me lying  
on the tile floor. It was an accident. Unavoidable on these tracks.  
There’s the boy I almost loved. Shattered on the city street. I can’t sleep  
alone because he was hit by a train and I hear the whistle all night.  
And O you, you know it is only my Lonely that loves you and lies  
beside you, for it is afraid. Not I. Just my terrible, terrified Lonely.  
I wish either one of us would have the decency to walk away. But  
not half as hard as I wish I could fill, spill, seep like wet cement  
into the rifts between your ribs. I want to press my very bones into  
you, until the ink on your skin bleeds into the very ink of my blood.
Step Two

Anger
I can’t sleep. I’m doing that thing where I think too much. Because it’s a Tuesday morning, and I am tangled in this giant man-boy’s chest hair and sweaty legs. I hate the way he smells. Patchouli-licorice.

It’s been four months of changing my sheets five times a week. I really can’t finance so much water anymore. I feel really guilty about my carbon footprint. I learned how to separate my colors and all that but nobody taught me this part.

My parents have been married for thirty years. I wonder how they can stomach each other. What if I’m going to die alone? Completely. Alone. I can never seem to like anyone back and I can’t even live with cats— I’m far too allergic.

I wonder how many people are pretending to sleep right now in small, cheap-cotton sheeted beds on a Tuesday morning, lying next to someone whose smell burns their throat. It makes me feel lonely, so I press into his chest hair and shudder because it terrifies me. The hair. It scares the Hell out of me and I hate it. The loneliness just makes me feel small. So I breathe in. Slowly. And pray to Jesus, Mother Mary, and a bottle of Tide that I simply lose my sense of smell.

My grandparents’ ashes float in a creek together, beside the hill where they met at age twelve. It’s called Dead Man’s Bluff. Romantic. I just keep picturing my own self floating down a river, cats pacing back and forth, back on forth along the bank. Meowing.
“If a Blind Man Guides a Blind Man, Both Will Fall Into a Pit"

Title from Matthew 15:14

On the television at the gym the news flashed the line, the victim’s mother says “we are so thrilled” and I had to stop running. I knew what she meant, just something just about justice, but it was just the way it was cut that made it come out cutting.

Sometimes I walk with my brow so furrowed I cannot see. I don’t mean that to be a metaphor. I have deep-set eyes. As a child I had this reoccurring nightmare. I’d trip over something I could not see, fall on the pavement, scrape my hands.

I’d stand, look into my wounds. I could see inside my palms at all the green strings curled inside and I’d wake screaming. I never asked why I was green, but I could never stare at nests or clumps or scars or needles without spit clumping under my tongue.

Some days the world is so perforated with pits and holes and madness and sadness and badness I want to vomit fix it break it. Some days the world is so beautiful the edges of the sunset slice my chest so tight I want to laugh-press it in me. Most days I want both.

I don’t want to be political, polemic. I don’t want the victim’s mother not to want anything she doesn’t want to want. I just want to climb down into the dirt besides her, take in my hands the jagged edges of a red maple tree against an October blue sky, and shove it down her throat and everyone’s thick throats including my own, to say stop stop stop but then I’d choke on the words. I just want to take sand and fill the cracks in the mothers’ hearts. I just want to fill up every single yawning hole in this pierced world.
Half her head was shaved. The remnants were dyed burnt-cinnamon red. Her navy blue polo always unbuttoned low to reveal her tattoo, two blue sparrows splattered, beaks singing down her shirt, anywhere that wasn’t her sadness-speckled arms.

On the bench behind the restaurant she smoked a cigarette. I chewed through a pack of pre-portioned organic unsalted almonds, picturing my grandmother’s hands rubbing the Hell out of her rosary beads at the sight of my summer job. The season went slow.

She, the girl not my grandma, was always mad at me because I made bigger tips because people thought I was cute, she said, like a puppy. I told her smiling helped, and she snarled and told me to unbutton one more button and my tips would go up. I did. They did.

She tried to teach me how to lie better so my tables believed the kitchen really was backed up. I tried to teach her how to fake laugh, so people would like her. She laughed in my face, said laughter was the one thing she didn’t lie about. She said she needed the big tables to make rent. I just wanted new pastel Nikes. She told me about rehab and her mom who left. I told her about the absurdity of 350 dollar riding boots, and made her laugh. Sometimes even intentionally. She thought I was made out of opal earrings and khaki pants. I half am. I didn’t say I too know the lemon slick sick way rehab brown carpet smells. But I hinted at it, because I wanted my Big Tragic too. Nineteen-years selfish I thought I had it. But she didn’t want to hear my big boohoo. I wanted her life voice smile all serrated edges and she wanted my stories clean like my shoes. When her girlfriend cheated on her with her ex boyfriend, how f*cked was that? I wanted her to scratch words, cut tables, flip the ovens over, light up the world with her gasoline line arms. But she said instead, “I just don’t like to be alone. Nobody likes to be alone,” and started to cry. I stood there in my navy polo with palms open and watched. I unbuttoned my shirt one more button, left her in the booth and ran to the line cooks out back to win us an ice cream sundae.

We shared it with one spoon. I didn’t even touch her shoulder for I was afraid. I haven’t seen her in a year now. I wonder if she still eats cherries barehanded from the jar with chipped nails. I wonder if she figured it out, that I was the better liar.

She sat saw-toothed side up, and flashed her soft ash underbelly to the world while I stood there eating my cherries with a spoon. But now, I smash the jar laughing, splattering red juice everywhere. I hope she knows how she inspired this mad barefoot-shard dance.
“Anger Reseth in the Bosom of Fools”

Title from Ecclesiastes 7:9

My father sits at his oak desk, staring at his blue fountain pen,

turning and turning the crystal paperweight with the sand from Israel frozen inside.

Someone bought it as a gift. Sacred. He places it on income statements.

They said Jesus walked on it. Bullshit, my father says, bullshit.

I fixed the pool pump finally and had the windows redone

and had the chipped stair fixed and did the laundry dishes cleaning.

fixed the broken tile where His body hit—My father stops.

He fingers the paperweight and we both wait for him to heave it across the room, shatter it on the hardwood

and watch the blessed sands spill so we can stomp on them, hollering,

our fists raised over our heads like apes, like a pack of wailing wolves.
Step Three

Bargaining
On this day last year, my fresh-peeled-orange-sticky fingers were ironed onto his Ash-Wednesday skin. My Lonely loved the way he tasted, like cheap-beer-charcoal. The Swisher-sweat-way he smelled. The way the black-ink in his tattoos seeped right onto a page. It was never love. But I did love the words he made me see, swirled in the edges of the sheets. Perhaps I just loved my own voice on paper. I have to ask myself, would I have slept with a man I didn’t love for three years if I couldn’t tell about it?

I reach my hands into jeans, shirt, apron pockets, and pilfer copper-nectarine-juice-stories from life, from love, from death, from everyone. Does that make me a thief? Oh, yes, but how can I help it? One Wednesday afternoon, my mother cried in the middle of the post-office.

I collected her tears to wet a blue postage stamp and then I pasted it onto a page. My left hand pet her back. My right grabbed a pen. What kind of miserable monster does that make me? From my first lover’s pants, I pulled out three poems. From my ex-boyfriend’s chest, I scraped out a chapbook. From all my Tragic Tragedies, I sliced novels. Then I climbed right into my uncle’s brown-oak coffin, and I carved out this book. But will the ghosts forgive me? If I am honest and show you my bone-marrow pages, will you all forgive me?
“For Every One That Asketh Receiveth; and He That Seeketh Findeth”
*Title From Matthew 7: 8*

I tried to write around the bodies on the tile floor.
Draw a charcoal smudged line of words away,

but left right backwards frontwards I always ended up
right back at the mound of this miserable mess.

I tried to write over the bodies on the tile floor.
I tried to stack the words neatly into makeshift stairs,
crawl on hands and knees and sentences and commas
up the wall of this all. But my white ash steps crumpled.

So I’ve decided I’ll just have to write *through* the bodies. Climb in
there, into this muddled mountain of missing and smear it black.

If I write well enough will you listen? If I give you this
will you give me what I want in return: God? Some serenity?
Step Four

Depression
Someone’s smoking in the gym bathroom again. I always catch just the ash scent of her—the March-window conspicuously open. I never see her face, and I wash my hands quick so people won’t accuse me of being the woman with soot-stained fingertips.

Outside, there are five televisions facing two rows of ten treadmills. One afternoon, Andy Griffith laughed next to a blender commercial. The news wept to the left, lamenting again the impending snowstorm, three kids shot, a fire, a car chase, two llamas on the lamb.

To the left there was a soap opera laughing, an old man in an orange jump suit duct taped to a red-upholstered chair. I had no headphones. I couldn’t hear a word, I could only watch the pixely-colored-fire-edges of the world pirouetting.

There was a woman walking on the machine next to me. Body eighteen, face sixty, we all said. She smelt of rosemary, leather. To my right there was a girl wearing pink, hot-bright as if her mother had not died the month before, but we had all heard.

In the row in front of me a woman ran without any legs, I swear. She ran right on blood-droplet, bone-marrow, tears. The floor shivered under her serrated-sweat-rage. Mornings, nights, Sundays. She’s always there, running like that.

I thought she must be the one smoking, until I caught the perpetrator cold-handed standing under the March-window. Saw in the mirror old bright-pink rosemary-leather bone-marrow me. Saw all of us tiptoeing on tile, sucking in the sorrow deep.
“Blessed are those Who Mourn, for They Will Be Comforted”

Title from Matthew 5:4

I cracked my back, and my mother fell out of my vertebrae onto the stained-gray-carpet of my college dorm room floor. One hundred twenty-seven pounds isn’t heavy until it’s pressing onto lungs, ribs, kneecap, elbow, back.

Back in July, my mother found her only brother’s body on her kitchen floor, and I had to lift her own, and carry it up crooked mountains. She wants to climb all the forty-eight four-thousand-footers in New Hampshire before she dies. Which may be soon she says.

But she lies because they have bad hearts—his heart it just stopped—and she can’t understand so she hikes. She sits on jagged-rock edges and presses her lemongrass-lotioned-hands into dirt, mud, blood so she doesn’t have to sit in that kitchen.

Her blond-gray hair only murmurs this though as she hums, and talks about purple lilacs besides the path. The path that smells like damp leaves, and almost-forgetting. But who knew how big one word could be, almost?

She’s never been to New York City she says, smiling, in February, when I say I’m moving there in four months. I want to pull, press her into my ribcage, shove the shards of her white-marble-tile-sadness into my mouth, heart, veins.

The television in the living room—next to that kitchen—won’t stop saying the same seven things about the blizzard that’s coming. My mother asks if she’ll like the subway, the crowds. I lie yes and start counting every single white flake in the sky.
“Remember Ye Not the Former Things”  
*Title from Isaiah 43: 18-19*

I run. One purple plastic toddler sandal waits, abandoned off the edge of the cracked street that leads to the sea. Morning-mid-October air pricks-stings-slices. The harbor road is hollow, the tourists hobbled home half-shoeless. Right foot. Left foot—

I run. A dead seagull hit by a speeding stranger lies lonely to the left of the breakdown lane rotting below the bushes since August. Right foot, left foot. Yes, I do look every single time, count its ribs showing, black-feather holes growing.

The boats lined up on shore now boast pretty winter coats. Blue vinyl. They look cold. I run. The harbor water sleeps, unstirred-choking brown dreams. The sea’s no longer your green-blue eyes. No, no. I try not to count—seventy-eight days since—

I lie. I still wear your sweat-stained navy-blue baseball hat every day. I want to set it on fire, stomp on it barefoot but I’m afraid—the pathetic plastic edges of this world might melt, and the shoe would cry to no one. Oh—I lie. Who am I without my terrible-sadness?

I lie. I don’t ever want to take off this hat—how much would I weigh without the weight of your absence in my spine? Right left right left. One day I’ll stop running one day I’ll set this hat on fire and fly away with dead-seagull-bone wings one day one day one day right?
Step Five

Acceptance
“Wash Yourselves; Make Yourselves Clean; Remove the Evil of Your Deeds”

*Title From Isaiah 1:16*

Wash your hands, my Grammy would say, before each meal. She’d grab my wrist tight, and check under every single nail. Us kids needed to have clean hands to stuff our little-dirty-rotten-mouths with Grammy’s handmade lemon scorn.

Wash your hands, my Grammy would say before church each Saturday because us kids needed clean hands to pray. Or else God wouldn’t listen. I’d sit in the pew swinging my legs, picking at the dirt in my cuticles knowing I was going to Hell.

Wash and pick, oh I did I did till I bled and then Daddy said I didn’t have to go with Grammy on Saturdays anymore. But Mom said Grammy loved me and sometimes we must do hard things for love. Daddy said Grammy was his mother, and she doesn’t love anything except herself, a thick leather belt, and her goddamn-rosary-beads. But Mom said, sometimes we love terribly, because we are afraid and Daddy got so mad he slammed the kitchen door, and Mom said, See?

Wash your hands, Grammy’d say, and hit my Daddy, red palm open so clean, see? She came from Poland. Everyone called her a bastard till she moved. Then they called her a Polish bastard. And she scraped under each nail with a knife but she can’t find her missing father.

Twenty years later, at my uncle’s funeral she shows up in pink. Her son’s wife’s brother. Her son’s best friend. She tells Daddy now you know what it feels like. Then she says something to me about wasting my life. I say excuse me, I must go be with my family and walk away because hate is easier. Months later I will sit on a tile floor digging at my own nails looking for my own ghosts. I have my grandmother’s heart shaped-face, but God? Not her heart. Please? But then I’ll see her. Under the nail of the thumb of my left hand.

Playing her piano, red hands bleeding just like my red painted nails I paint so no one can see my gravel stains except on white pages, see? Her real father was a rapist, the whole village said. Whore, slut, hedgehog-riding devil. Hate sounds better in Polish. *Nienawiść.*

Forgiveness sounds more jagged because it is. *Przebaczenie.* I won’t paint over you, I’ll paint with you, I’ll use you as my paint, making music meter messes with the stains you left because sometimes we must do hard things for love and this red paint scorches, see?
“For You Have Girded Me With Strength for Battle”  
*Title from Psalms 18:39*

You, O you do smell like my brother—same plastic-wood four-dollar cologne, cloaking Cheetos and sweat. Burns my eyes as you choke me in that same hug—pressing my ribs into my insides and calling it love.

You do look like my brother—same crooked nose, gap tooth. But you’re a little thicker. New scars. Shaved head. Dog tags put away, but I still see their shadows. You scare me. But that’s not new, is it? Once,

I thought you were really going to throw me over the balcony. Because I accidentally wrecked your Nintendo. Covered it with pink painted flowers. But you, O you, only held me so my feet were off the ground. I was never even near the railing.

But now you, you don’t laugh like my brother. Your fists quiver. You chew your lip ajar, split. I want to ask you if you’ve killed anyone, but I know you’d lie. You, O you, have always kept me ten feet from the railing, and there may be seven thousand different ways to say no, but sometimes there is only one way to say yes. Your green-smoke eyes tell me not to ask. So I dangle over the balcony instead, with this man in your hooded sweatshirt until he decides to tell me where you—O you, you missing mess—went, and if you’re ever coming home.

I will wait. Four years. Four years After you were Over There, we will sit at our uncle’s funeral. We will say Our Father, hold Our Mother, her splintered slumped body, between our broken bodies, on those brown stained, flowered folding chairs.

My right hand will hold your left hand behind the back of Our Mother. As she trembles I will rub your fist with my right thumb and I will finally feel your scar from the glass from that one time you hit a bomb and I will find you, my battered brother, there.
“There is Nothing Better for Them Than to be Joyful and to do Good”
*Title From Ecclesiastes: 3:12-13*

Sometimes we eat at the granite kitchen counter again, the one beside that one spot. And my mother plays records again in the corner. We eat lemon pepper chicken, fresh zucchini from the garden. We painted the walls.

Sometimes I pass a train track and don’t even flinch. Most days I look at the sky with my hands at my side.

Every morning now I wake beside a hazel-eyed boy whose smell doesn’t burn my throat not even a little bit.

Why is happiness so much heavier in the writing hand? These moments, skin on skin, yellow balloons on blue sky.

Most days I laugh. My mother laughs. My father too. How funny are our little funny phony battered beating hearts?

Half the heart smiles, swelling ripping raw with the lightness. But the other half whispers oh, oh but do not forget.
Epilogue
“Your Words Became for Me a Joy and the Delight of my Heart”

Title from *Jeremiah 15:16

I wrote this for you and for you I mean me on the way to the airport on a Thursday morning at four am in the back of a taxi with no seatbelts and trash bag-floor carpets in a country even more neon-tourist-sadness soaked than America.

This is not a love poem. I just wanted to say that the warm air was hitting my face, tasting like salt for the windows were broken. And there’s something about the leaving that always seems important. The lights in that one window. That cracked sidewalk.

A better poet than I will write about how leaving tastes like happy-sadness, sad-happiness, burnt caramel. I am not that poet. I am not a poet at all. I’m just a girl with a ribcage full of ghosts. They’ve been sitting on my third rib, right above my belly for years.

Hard to breathe. There’s the first boy I thought I had time to love hit by a train next to a grandmother that didn’t strike her child who’d grow into a father that didn’t drink next to an uncle dead in the kitchen. My God they feel heavy, but my ghosts are not that heavy.

That one book says half of us are missing a rib because the other half is made from one. But I have all twenty-four hours, and ribs. That space was left for the people places poems we lost, left, left us, forgot us, remember? Right there behind the missing rib.

I said I wrote this for you, but of course I meant me. This may be a love poem. But this is just to say you, I, we can finally exhale. We won’t banish the ghosts. But let’s let them pirouette. Let’s let the ghosts stand up, swing tap jazz dance inside the empty empty ribcage.

Twelve years from now, we’ll laugh, drinking lukewarm coffee from yellow polka-dotted mugs because this is the sixth stage of grief and by then we’ll have made it. I say this pointing out a broken window to a black-salt sky, laughing alone in a grinning-gaping taxi.