

THE WAVES THAT KEEP CRASHING: A CREATIVE
EXPLORATION OF LOSS

by

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A THESIS

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This creative thesis project is an exploration of my experience with grief and the process of writing elegies. On November 1, 2018, my father passed away suddenly. For a long time after that I poured myself into academics, sports, friendship, anything that would eat up enough time from the moment I woke up until I laid my head back down to sleep. All I felt I could do at the time was distract myself from his absence. COVID-19 hit in 2020, and this is when I was finally forced to face the loss. I couldn't see any of my friends, school was either canceled or fully moved online. The case was the same with volleyball and rowing. All I had was time to sit in the house I grew up in with him and stare at the empty chair at dinner, his guitars collecting dust in the basement, the space in the mudroom where I used to trip over his plethora of work shoes on my way to school, the list goes on forever. It took me three years to start writing about it.

The first poetry class I took of my own volition was in my senior year of high school. I realized then that engaging in writing elegiac work was a beautiful way to honor my father and my experience with grief. It was something I felt compelled to do and that sentiment has always remained. My poetry is not limited to elegies, I always enjoy writing novel poetry whether that pertains to the thematic setup or trying to use new literary techniques in my work. Elegies are just the type of poem I've been writing the most of. I've discerned that creative inspiration for poetry can strike at any moment, like the way grief can. The most fascinating parallel that I have

drawn between the two is that they both come and go in waves. This realization has taught me to act in the present moment. When inspiration hits, I drop everything and jot a quick word or phrase down so that I can revisit it later. This methodology has made it much more feasible to write good quality poetry because it is not constrained by whether I have time to develop an idea that instant.

For this creative thesis project, I have written a collection of elegiac poetry inspired by the loss of my father among other types of loss, such as relationships with loved ones. I've been influenced by the poetic work of others which I detail in my contextual influences. The overarching influence that has inspired all the creative work that I have ever written is encompassed by a quote from Robert Frost: "No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader." I strive to always have an authentic and genuine poetic voice, especially when writing about a topic as sensitive as grief and loss.

I write poems like these because I am full of love that doesn't always have a physical home. By writing, I'm able to give that love a physical place to exist besides inside myself, on paper. This makes it easier and fulfilling to comprehend something as incomprehensible as loss. By sharing this work with others, I feel that even if only a single person feels seen, I have done what I set out to do. The goal of my work is to engage the reader with concrete imagery and allocate space for them to connect with the work on a personal level. I aim for readers to feel moved by my poetry, especially those that have experienced similar losses. This collection of poetry holds together thematically, with some sort of absence in every piece.

Additionally, this creative thesis project serves as a steppingstone to a greater goal of mine which is to one day publish a book of poetry.

Acknowledgements

This project wouldn't have been made possible without the guidance of my thesis advisors: Matthew Dickman and Robert Mauro. Matthew, thank you for inspiring me to write poetry that is less flowery, and much more fragrant in meaning and diction. Robert, thank you for always holding me accountable and pushing me to just do and to worry about imperfections later. This thesis is dedicated to my hardworking, loving, and unstoppable father who motivates me to chase my dreams every single day. Even in death, you will always live on Big Al.

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Contextual Influences

Contextual influences are the most significant sources of inspiration for my own writing, outlining elegies and media that have shaped my perspective on grief and informed the imagery, structure, and diction I utilize in my own work.

Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night by Dylan Thomas is one of my favorite poems about grief that I reconnected with after watching *Interstellar* for the first time with my father. The speaker in the poem discusses the impending death of his sick father, urging him to continue fighting for his life. The poem is a villanelle, and it is repeatedly recited throughout the movie. In the movie, the main character, Cooper, goes to space leaving his family behind (Thomas, 1957). His absence is felt the most by his daughter, Murph. Cooper is trying to save Earth and trying to make sure that he can come back for his family. *Interstellar* is a movie that focuses heavily on the idea that love is the one thing that transcends time and space (Nolan, 2014). I believe that grief proves this considering it is love that doesn't have anywhere to go in the physical world. Instead, it sticks with the person left behind and festers. These are themes and ideas that inspire my poetry heavily.

The poem works beautifully as an imperative throughout the movie, urging Cooper not to give up hope, to continue fighting against the dying of the light, which becomes quite literal when he descends into a blackhole. I enjoy the contrast Thomas draws between light and dark imagery. Additionally, I'm very inspired by the villanelle form and utilizing repetition of certain words and phrases. It is a more rigid form of poetry, requiring nineteen lines, five tercets, ending with a quatrain, utilizing two rhymes and two refrains, with the first and third line of each stanza repeated throughout the piece. I have attempted my own elegiac villanelle and am still struggling

with some of the required components. In most of my work I enjoy working with a more fluid form of repetition.

Someone who has shaped me into a more flexible writer is Matthew Dickman. I had the privilege of taking poetry classes with him this past year and have learned so much valuable information in the process. Matthew encourages his students to workshop and to let others review their work to receive feedback. However, he stands firmly by the practice of keeping things that feel integral to the poem untouched, regardless of whether someone has criticized it. This process has helped foster my individuality and improve my writing.

Matthew is a master of utilizing repetition as a literary device, to pull a reader through a poem and put emphasis on certain moments. In *Who On Earth*, he uses the sound that a basketball makes when it bounces as a beautiful extended metaphor for grief and pain. The “whomp whomp” sound is repeated throughout the piece along with other words like “some” that act as a driving force through the piece (Dickman, 2025). This threading of the repeated diction turns into momentum that really draws the reader through the poem. I hope to be able to write about my experiences with grief as eloquently as he does.

One Art by Elizabeth Bishop is a poem about loss in a more general sense. It is also a villanelle (Bishop, 1983). Villanelles are wonderful for elegiac poetry because they force the speaker to revisit certain phrases repeatedly mimicking the way grief revisits people in their day-to-day life. I’m influenced by the matched pairing of the format and structure of the poetry and the experience of grief itself. I strive to write my own elegiac poetry with the same intentionality and care.

A more current poet that I have drawn inspiration from is Franz Wright. In my freshman year of high school, I had to recite a poem in front of my class. I looked for works that were on

the shorter end and stumbled upon *To Myself*. I found that although the poem was small, it could fill the largest of rooms. It made me fall in love with tercets and an ambiguous/omniscient speaker that is directly addressing the reader. This piece is about a darker part of oneself, likely corrupted by addiction, that goes with the reader everywhere (Wright, 1998). Although in this case the following is not welcome, I really enjoyed that idea of the speaker following the reader. I think it's especially relevant to grief considering many people hope that their loved ones are always watching them from beyond. I have utilized direct address a lot in my own elegiac work, both from my perspective and that of my late father. It delves a bit deeper than simply writing in third person and is an additional opportunity to address the reader through the writing.

As mentioned previously in the project description, the quote, "No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader," by Robert Frost heavily influences all my poetic work (Frost, 1939). It is the framework for anything that I write because it is exactly what I'm attempting to accomplish with this collection of poetry. To tend to my poetic voice and evoke emotion out of readers, connecting with them through the vulnerability I exhibit.

Methods

In my experience, grief comes and goes in waves, like the way creative inspiration for a poem will strike me. Whenever I feel I've been struck with an interesting image or phrase from a dream, a conversation with a friend, or just by observing the world around me, I drop everything and write down a brief note about it. Later I come back to whatever I jotted down and develop it into what eventually becomes a poem.

I try my best to start with a strong feeling or sentiment that can turn into an image, having something concrete to begin with helps guide the rest of the poem. Sometimes this can also mean beginning with a specific structure. This gives me an outline where I can fill in the blanks instead of writing and trying to group the lines into a good structure later. For instance, with my poem *Once and Future King*, I knew I wanted it to be a concrete poem that resembled a sword in a stone. As I wrote, the stone eventually turned more into the shape of a heart, but I was still able to keep the stone and callousness of the poem in my diction.

Rather than trying to perfect each line as I go, I just write and worry about the clean up afterwards. This way I have more content to read over when I'm finished with a first draft and can chip away at it like a sculpture, rather than scrambling to try and add more after the fact.

I like the idea of being able to interpret something in many different manners, but I also acknowledge that I work hard to get a certain meaning across to the reader, and if that is not well received, I will feel the need to rework it. This is why I enjoy sharing my work with fellow poets and friends. I never preface the piece with anything so that I can get an honest reaction and feedback from them. I listen intently and take notes, incorporating what might be helpful for the fine tuning of the piece. That is how many of these poems were written. This process has always

felt the most natural and authentic to my writing style which is why I employed it for this project.

Additionally, my contextual influences aided in the writing of my collection of poetry. They assist in setting the tone, structure and all other literary techniques that I employed in my work.

Collection of Poetry: Forget-Me-Not

Slopes

He taught me how to stand on my two feet.

How to stand on blades

that carve through snow and ice,

through things that melt and seep

back into the earth,

through things that don't last.

He taught me not to be afraid

of the speed I'd pick up as I pointed my skis

down the slope, to learn to love the blur

of green evergreens and cool fog,

the fluttering of my jacket-wings in the wind.

Flying down the mountain meant I was going somewhere.

That inescapable pull of the Earth let me soar

and smash into the ground.

If I fell and formed the powder beneath me

into a mangled snow angel, he'd be there to smooth it over.

But before he lent me his gloved hand,

he'd force me to try and stand on my own.

My skis morphed into the heaviest weights

that I felt my legs could not lift
alone, my mocking poles spread on either side of the run.
I'd cry and kick the cold at him, but he had all day.
He stood as still as the tall timber,
his arms gentle snow falling at his sides,
until my limbs were all aligned and perpendicular to the steep.
Only then would he bend to lend me his strength.
I never understood that until six years ago—
when I got off the lift and he kept soaring up, up, up.
Not even gravity could bring him back
down to me.

I still kick and cry for you.

Down a Body of Water

Our bed, down a body in temperature.

I found myself shivering there and
down by the riverbank under the stars.

You stood there like a boulder.

Unmoving, your shoulders wouldn't shift
with my hands bobbing back
and forth, along the shore of your tight neck,
where I'd rest to catch my breath.

I wish you had lazed in my nape when you needed to.

I could feel the need beating in me
when we brushed knees
when I found you in the creek
I needed you to breathe
you just rushed downstream.

The slide of your ring on my finger
is haunting in its coolness, akin to your corpse
receding into the depths, deliverer of the repose
you sought for solemnly.

Still, silent, and sinking.

The summer after you became
bigger than the Atlantic Ocean,
I kayaked in the land of our love,
the Outer Banks, where dolphins ascend
into the sky.

As they breach the surface
with the subtlety of lightning striking,
I can hear your laugh in the ocean breeze,
that delayed roll of thunder.

I imagine their smooth bottlenoses
kissing the bottoms of your feet.

Lovelorn

Cascading from vast black night
stars quickly poured
their bright light
into salt water
which stilled like something
that it was not.

Ocean calmed to glass
for a moment,
she may have mimicked
half the red sheen of Venus
who looked below and fell
into a deceptive desire.

Her beauty an untamed fire
blazing ever brighter
in the body of liquid
that longed to be closer,
emulating her warmth.

But the moon was close and cold and
pulling and pinching at the tides

now rolling, thrashing tears of white seafoam,
her cries muffled by the brash breeze.

Wind continued to blow
water flowed cold
the pristine reflection shattered
to the unruly truth.

The moon glowed
as though its light was its own.

The skies
only seemed
to raise.

Goodbye

In the winter, I'm always able to see my own breath. Watch as it materializes and swirls around a peculiar white, like the kind in your eyes. Strolling through the city at night, your cold hand in mine, hot cocoa in the other, laughing under the lights. The foggy haze billows out of my mouth, but never out of yours. Three consonants, two syllables, one touch of the lips, and zero warning. Spring came and went with my breath.

Orb Weaver

My best friend found you the other day,

Mark and *Alan*.

Her dad and mine

hanging from a spinning display

of little Spider-Man keychains.

You were in the wrong section.

Behind you were a bunch more Marks.

Somehow you got placed in the M's,

Next to Mark,

Next to Me.

I don't believe in god,

but I do believe in You.

What were you trying to say?

I am forever caught in these webs.

The intricately patterned silk my mind works so hard to weave,

a meticulous moon white.

It sticks, *can't leave*.

The clever spider tricks the black night

crawling between my vermilion veins

and into my weeping heart.

So long as my sleep never wanes,

it beats, *You are here to stay*.

Even awake, I'm forever caught in these webs.

I'd like to think you're here when I can't see you.

Remember the time you went for a jog and

ran straight through an Alan-sized spider web?

A portal that will only become transparent to me

when I jog, run, trip or fall through it.

I'd like to think that seemingly infinite invisible string

is all that hangs between you and me.

I see the world through webs,

they make my eyes glisten slightly.

They make everything spin and

spin and

spin

at the thought of walking down the aisle alone

at Sting's voice

at the sight of whistling aspens

at your guitar strumming dust in the basement.

At the realization that over time,

these old, lifeless cobwebs collect in my mind and

I go blind to everything behind them.

The webs get me stuck in the past sometimes,
but they are the only thing catching my fall into

Alan into

I am spinning into something small and misunderstood.

Spinning like the earth I am on.

At least I am spinning and not falling into

Once and Future King

Metal
immortalized
melded in blood,
shape of my love.

The blade
sharp
and cut
-ting away
a thicket
of tendinous
strings, can
you hear
them scream

my man of war my man of war my man of war
a harp plucked by you alone.

Mortally wounded
and still I pray
for the day
you realize
this is not
my first time
bleeding in
your name,
though it is
my very last.

The point reaches my centre.

I grip the hilt, feeling my breath hitch under
the weapon, your ruthlessness remains solid, buried.
A spectre in the gaping wound, in a history spanning
the great length of this steel, gleaming at you. In it I see
everything you can't, the tang upholding your onslaught,
handcrafted to snuff out all the things I could become.
I ignited the deep, fire-breathing fear in you, someone
who cannot be wielded by your commanding hands,
slicing out of panic, carving into tuneful strands,
once gently played. All the great sacrifice slides
red down the wall, pooling around my waist,
a sinful embrace, as I hold this sabre close.

My body once tender, turned solid,
a woman hardened to stone,
mettle put to the test,
one last breath,
spent.

Passenger

You are sitting next to me
and making me pathetic.
Making my skin slick
like oil dripping
on the woodsy leather of your car
unbuckled and charging
to the edge of that cliff.
We plummeted

down

bite

down on my neck

hold me close and

down,

I'm not going anywhere.

The crash

a pile up

of engines humming until they
stalled, soot-covered and slackjawed.

You're hovering over me to drink
in my exhaust, my breath caught
in the thick smog

that I'm squinting through to see
you're going to leave.

I close my eyes

while you key at my sides,

you shouldn't make me watch
but you snake your hand under
my chin anyways.

I find myself missing the
fall.

Integrate

I envy ash.

A gray pile unchanged by time and lost in soil,
its existence removed from turmoil.

Sparks aren't bright enough to foster fire,
but a small space is reserved for you to breathe.
In my dreams, you roar and crackle.

Loud and large, luring me into the hearth,
into the warmth of your embrace.
No one believes that I crawled down there,

only to float up reborn, into gray.
Like the smoke from the flames that blew you
far into the sky, away.

Deep into gray,
where we don't need to fight for warmth,
where we can be.

I find it every day up here,
the color intermediate between black and white.

The shade that integrates.

The shade that your hair never turned.

The shade that used to follow you.

The shade that the willows cast

over you, and the moon

that glows

for no reason.

Leaving Me

A year goes by and nobody has died.

Want creeps in and draws the aged blinds open.

It is a funny thing, the way you lied

to your palms, wet with something unspoken.

So easily the shades open and close

in on me, inescapable I want

to let light flow in, drown me in a dose

that dizzies me, until I wake and haunt

my bed. The ghost of your hand, a seraph.

Arms, body, breath– I forget they are mine.

Fluent in touch, you never felt enough,

molding me, an ever-changing shrine.

A year goes by and it is not the same.

A year goes by and it is not the same.

Open Casket

When people die
we stab peripatetic wings into their backs and
gouge them limitless eyes
selfishly manufactured to watch
over us.

We, the living, are con men
who can't shake the reek of unease
underneath neatly folded lapels
wrapped up in nice suits
of tightly stitched regret
words unsaid breaching
the lump in our throats and pressing
uncomfortably hard into the ties holding
up our white button downs
holding our heads in place
and constricting our oxygen intake.

We would rather suffocate than breathe in
a smell that is theirs but cold, and removed
and wrong because they are gone
from this world

and so is their smell.

Even the white t-shirt they wore recently
gets accidentally washed.

People forget

that we wash away with them.

Family Photo

it's always sat under the shade of the dying bonsai, never the center of the conversation pit, surrounded by bright windows, on that purposeless table. Mom is here, in the living room we no longer share. You look at your reflection, so tall, in the black television, and remember when it was smaller. How the blue light would burn your eyes after hours of playing video games with your little brother. He still thought it was cool to hang out with you then. Mom looks at the photo, her eyes water. You look at the photo, you are standing in the tall grass behind your home with your family. It's December, you are wearing a black sweater. You focus on the one person who isn't on the couch with you, the one staring back at you smiling, his arm wrapped around you. He is within the framed, laminated photograph that couldn't preserve or keep him safe. This is where he will remain.

To and Fro

Outside:

moss covered stone

vines

dark wood

fragrant white flowers

dancing up and down the walls.

Boundless forest green pines

a small murmuring stream

misty grey fog

a pebbled pathway

leading to the front door.

Enter:

the weak foundations

beneath me

that squeal

at my feet

towering walls begging

me to fill them

the feeble roof fit to

cave in

warped

tinted windows

the couch all consuming

the torn pillows

bleed white feathers

leaving a trail

of life out

the back door.

Outside:

the stream ebbs and flows.

A Stand

I'm listening
to the sound of nothing
watching thousands of tall pale giants
watch me with their dark eyes and
the wind takes
the warm quiet and gives me
your icy sigh somewhere in
the thin trembling of their golden locks.

I run for my shovel and
dirty my hands
with soil as I dig for proof,
the metal is stopped by roots
holding each other for acres,
holding me in place.

You are all my makers
every branch that I grew:

cool boy from second grade wrote his t's with no tails,
Mom ended every call with *beijos ciao*,
curly-haired first kiss boy laughed like it was the last time and
Dad's half smile he gave when he was more than halfway proud.

The other boughs break off and cauterize into eyes
that envision what could've been.

No matter, I keep growing up and letting my hair
down to whistle in the wind. The ground can
tremble and uproot the Earth and
my limbs will still be

scattered and reaching high for everything that comes after
the quiet that you loved and left me in, sometimes
I'm halfway in your arms again.

A.R.T.

A-Side

They let me know you were gone

Worlds apart

I wrote down this song

I just can't remember who to send it to

All this pain you said I'd never feel

How I wish, how I wish you were here

I close my eyes

It went by like dusk to dawn

Only for a moment and the moment's gone

It slips away

Those yesterdays

Nothing lasts forever but the earth and sky.

It should not end this way.

I have died every day waiting for you

Like a lovely melody that everyone can sing

High up above, or down below

Take away the words that rhyme, it doesn't mean a thing

The past is gone

No it never came around

Stuck in reverse

Wish that I had found the way
Well, the landslide bring it down
If it did, it never made a sound.
I'll remember all my life.

Deep in a dream
Til the end of time
You'll always be
Hot ashes for trees, hot air for a cool breeze
I'm never alone when we're apart
I feel you by my side
And here in my heart
I still love you
The storms are raging on the rolling sea
Then following this single point, this single flame
And on the highway of regret
This single haunted memory of your face
Don't you know that I'm alive for you
So, this ain't the end, I saw you again today
Time has brought your heart to me
And all along, I believed I would find you.

B-Side

God, I miss the girl

I don't wanna leave you

Maybe tomorrow the good Lord will take you away

Take my love, take it down

Cause I know that you feel me somehow

Climb a mountain and you turn around

One step closer

And if you see my reflection in the snow-covered hills

While the memory of it fades

You'll never walk alone.

Eternities still unsaid

Take these broken wings and learn to fly

Into the light of the dark black night

Dream on.

I'd give up forever

Just to be closer to her than to me

I'd go a thousand times around the world

Know there's nothing that I wouldn't do

But I always thought that I'd see you again

You've just got to see me through another day

You know it's true

Lights will guide you home

All your life

Here I am.

Discussion

Each of the above poems is centered around some form of loss, whether that be family, a romantic partner, or the loss of something about oneself. While I don't typically encourage explaining the meaning of a poem, I think that it is important to for the last one. Every single one is my original work, written with my own words. The only poem that isn't written with my own words is *A.R.T.* This is because it is a found poem that is comprised of lyrics from various songs that my dad loved and would sometimes perform for me on the guitar while singing. His initials are A.R.T, which I thought was fitting for the title. The A-side is meant to be from my perspective, and the B-side is meant to be from his. The form mimics a vinyl record. The lyrics are not in order; I rearranged them methodically.

As for all the other pieces I wrote, I won't elaborate on the details. I enjoy when readers can come up with many interpretations. I want the poems to stick to them, whether it's a particularly intriguing image replaying in their head or the feeling they felt reading it, I want them to remember and let it fuel their own creative aspirations. That is how artists are made, that is how you and I were made: by others. I want my writing style to be unique and hold strong so that others know they can lean into their distinct poetic voice while drawing influence from others. I hope that something stuck to you. Thank you for taking the time to read.

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