



THE
LOSS OF A
LIFETIME

Grieving Siblings Share Stories
of Love, Loss, and Hope

Edited by Lynn L. Shattuck
and Alyson Shelton

*Praise For
The Loss of a Lifetime*

"I'm so grateful this collection exists. It is validating to read about siblings' experiences with grief and love in their own words. As beautiful as it is heartbreaking, this collection is evidence that sibling love lasts a lifetime - and far beyond."

*-Annie Sklaver Orenstein, Author of *Always a Sibling: The Forgotten Mourner's Guide to Grief**

"I have scoured the internet for resources for my clients who are experiencing sibling loss. I'm grateful to have found a book that incorporates so many perspectives and experiences. My clients, and the population in general, need this book."

*-Dr. Ingrid Clayton, Clinical Psychologist and Author of *Fawning: Why the Need to Please Makes Us Lose Ourselves—and How to Find Our Way Back* (Putnam, September 2025)*

"There isn't nearly enough written about sibling loss. As a parent who lost a child, I was immersed in my own grief and at a loss to be there for my other two children. Not only did they lose a sister who they adored, I imagine they often felt as though they lost their parents, too. I'm grateful for this resource to help other grieving siblings to cope with the loss of a brother or sister. Through this collection of sibling stories, others will surely find new ways to process their grief and hold on to their love and connections."

–Lilly Julien, Founder of COPE Foundation, a grief and healing organization helping parents, siblings, and families living with the loss of a child.

"As someone who lost her 17 year old brother, this anthology really hit home. It's a powerful collection of stories that speak to the unique experience of losing a sibling. If you're grieving or just trying to make sense of it all, this book offers a real look at finding hope—and reminds us all that we are not alone on this journey."

–Dr. Heidi Horsley, Executive Director - Open to Hope Foundation, Adjunct Professor - Columbia University

"Finally! Here is a book that helps you feel and understand sibling loss in the most profound ways. I thought I knew a thing or two (or 2,000) about the subject. But, only after reading this beautiful collection did I feel seen and appreciated for the pain that comes from losing your brother or sister (or both). I'm so grateful to these writers for their poignant, generous and comforting words. What a gift."

–Meg Kissinger, Award Winning Journalist and Best-Selling Author of *While You Were Out: An Intimate Family Portrait of Mental Illness in an Era of Silence*

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For Will and Michael, and all the
brothers and sisters we've lost.

And to our younger selves, with so much tenderness.

“When a brother or sister dies, we lose more than a sibling. We lose the co-keeper of our childhood, as well as the future we thought we’d have. We lose our family as we knew and understood and expected it to be. We lose the versions of our parents that weren’t heartbroken.

I call the loss of a brother or sister the loss of a lifetime. Because who else do we expect to spend an entire lifetime alongside?”

-Lynn L. Shattuck

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Editor's Note

In the shock-bitten months after my brother died, I sat on our parents' porch, chain-smoking and begging for signs.

My parents had morphed into alternate versions of themselves. Several times each day, I'd watch the realization of my brother's death crash over my dad like an avalanche, blanching his face, battering him. My mom confessed that she sometimes thought my brother was in the witness protection program, alive and in hiding.

When my own grief rose in me, knocking at my sternum, begging for release, I'd escape to the porch. At 24, my brother's unexpected death had boomeranged me back to my parents' home. I was a child again, and the porch was my treehouse, my secret space, my respite.

In the dark, shadows of pine trees looming above, I watched clouds drift. I stared at the distant light of dead stars and the space between them. I prayed that my brother's spirit still existed somewhere, and I smoked cigarettes, tears dribbling down my cheeks.

Sometimes I'd build my brother. I'd close my eyes, exhale, and envision his wide frame, shoulders sprawled back in the chair next to me, flicking a cigarette. He'd be wearing his Mr. Clean t-shirt and Carhartt pants, and exhaling smoke rings that would hover and lift into the night. I'd let myself feel his presence, almost as familiar as my own, before opening my eyes again, alone.

I was born first, but Will was the bold one, the one who made friends easily, the one who ran for class president in middle school. Though I harbored a secret desire to be special, to be seen, I faded into the background when I was scared, which was almost always. It seemed impossible that Will was gone and I was still here in this skin, in the shadows beneath stars.

On the porch, I could be devastated or defeated, secure that I wasn't adding to my parents' worries.

I could be furious.

At my brother's memorial service, people urged me, over and over again, Be strong for your parents. In the shadow of my parents' pain, my grief seemed invisible.

I scoured the Internet for books about adult sibling loss. I found one; it was out of print.

When we sent Will's obituary to the local newspaper, they accidentally left my name out.

I felt excised.

From the porch, above the rusting basketball hoop Will and I used to chuck balls at, I wallowed in a wide pool of nevers: I would never have nieces or nephews from him. He would never know the kids I hoped to someday have. He would never sit here on the porch again with me, gossiping and showing off his perfectly puffed smoke rings. He would never touch the cool, curled moss in the forest behind our house or light another cigarette or eat his sketchy scrambled eggs with cheddar and pepperoni. He would never be with me when our grandparents died.

When, someday, we lost our parents.

I spent so much time on that porch that now, more than 20 years later, it's the image I hold of my raw grief for Will—dark, damp air, tendrils of smoke, scanning the sky.

It was decades before I realized the deeper meaning about my porch time.

On the porch, I could feel the enormity of my own grief. Away from the thick, heavy air of my parents' loss, I could explore the field of my own pain. It could seep into the air without burdening anyone. It had no edges. Time would soften and shift it, but it would be with me for the rest of my life.

My grief was huge and fierce. I didn't have the language to express how much I needed it to be separate

from my parents', to have my loss acknowledged without measuring it against theirs.

My hope for this collection of essays on sibling grief is that it allows other grieving siblings to see and feel the vastness of their own loss, and that it acknowledges sibling loss as the uniquely lengthy, painful, complicated, and, so often, invisible brand of bereavement.

Welcome to the porch.

-Lynn L. Shattuck

Part One:

Survival

My Sister Died the Week Before I Gave Birth

Annabel Chown

How the hell am I going to have a baby next week? is one of the first thoughts that comes into my mind when I am told my sister is dead.

The news is delivered to me and my mother by a fresh-faced British Transport Police Officer, in a small staff room at Chalk Farm tube station in London, on a Wednesday at lunchtime, 12 days before Christmas.

The person under a train that morning was my beautiful, brilliant, and loving 45-year-old sister. We knew she'd been depressed over the last few months. It had never crossed our minds that she would kill herself. Or even attempt to.

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Terrified this bombshell has damaged the baby, my husband and I go straight to the hospital. A black heartbeat monitor is strapped around my belly. Soon, we are reassured by the resolute thump-thump of his tiny heart.

Until today, I'd been in no hurry to give up being pregnant. After almost five years of trying to conceive, I'd had an effortless pregnancy. I loved carrying my son everywhere, his body nestled inside mine, while keeping me free from the intense demands early motherhood would inevitably bring. Now, I am desperate for him to arrive. I want to see him, hold him, know he is okay.

The morning after my sister dies, my husband and I escape our flat at 7 a.m. to avoid having to make small talk during our cleaner's weekly visit. From the brow of Primrose Hill, our local park, I spot the orange band of dawn on the horizon, London's landmarks silhouetted against it. I am devastated, yet in this dark and bare wintry park, my husband's warm hand clasping mine, there's a strange beauty to the world, too.

Alongside my fear of whether I'll even be capable of now mothering a baby, I sense a kernel of fierce determination deep within: I will not let this destroy me. Or my son.

A protective mantle of shock envelops me. It helps me navigate the nine days between my sister's death and my son's birth. It's what gets me to my hospital appointments,

to wash miniscule white bodysuits, and to write an email to friends to tell them my sister has died. It's not news I wish to share on the same page as the birth announcement one I will later send, nor can I pretend it hasn't happened.

Occasionally, this mantle slips, such as when my credit card is declined as I attempt to buy feeding bottles online, and I slam my fist on the table and scream, "Fuck you!"

My son arrives, via c-section, on the winter solstice, two days after what should have been my sister's 46th birthday. When I hold him for the first time, I am fairly indifferent. It's certainly not the euphoric 'love like no other' feeling you hear so many mothers describe upon meeting their child.

The day after his birth, as he lies across my chest, sleeping, I stroke his almost hairless scalp. A strong desire to protect him, to never let anything bad happen to him, rises up; the first seedling of love.

Yet as I hold him, it is my sister I long for. My son is gorgeous, perfect, but he is still a stranger. I crave the familiarity of her slender 5 foot 9 inch frame, long arms wrapped around me in a tight hug, her skin smelling of the rose moisturizer she loved. My only sibling, who will never cuddle my son, who will never be there on the other end of the phone to admire photos of him in his elephant sleepsuit or to dispense advice on weaning.

We bring our son home from the hospital on Christmas Eve. As we place him in an Uber, I think of my parents, 46 Christmases ago, also bringing home their precious newborn. My heart aches for them, for all of us.

Once we're home, the overwhelm and relentlessness of new parenthood hits us. My husband and I are clueless. What seemed simple enough in those antenatal classes—changing a nappy or winding—is now like being suddenly expected to be fluent in a foreign tongue.

It feels as if all the ground that previously held me has been bulldozed.

There was the ground I'd created with my husband, which included leisurely Saturdays, with perhaps an early evening movie, followed by dinner at a local Japanese restaurant. Razed by a tiny baby with all his needs.

And there was the ground I'd always had with my birth family, with all its support. Swept away by my sister's sudden and violent death.

I'm edgy and unsettled. Some days, I don't want to be a mother at all. I just want to lie down in a quiet, warm room and have someone drape a blanket over me, bring me a cup of tea, and take care of me.

Instead, I care for my son. On winter afternoons, alone at home with him, the sky dark by 4 p.m., time seems to stretch. Often, he starts screaming. I stand in our bedroom,

trying to soothe him, rocking and singing, while watching the clock and willing the minutes to pass faster. At 6 p.m., relief comes from the sound of my husband's key turning in the front door.

I miss being pregnant. My eyes are magnetized to big bellies and 'Baby On Board' badges, just as they were during those long years we spent trying to conceive. I want to press rewind and return to the innocence of all but the last week of my pregnancy. The one time in my life where both my sister and my child existed.

While buying a sling in the baby department at John Lewis, I spot a heavily pregnant woman and her mother choosing a pram, just as my mother and I did, months earlier. It hits me how much I miss my mother, too.

Close as we are, she is, understandably, somewhat absent. She's busy helping my brother-in-law look after her grandson, or caught up in the logistics of death, such as organizing her daughter's funeral.

Our contact is mostly via phone, when my son naps. We go over the same ground. *How could we have not realized how bad she was... Was it premeditated, or a moment of madness?... If only she'd made it to the psychiatrist.* She'd had the appointment booked for the day after she died.

Often, I'm mothering my mother, reassuring her how amazing and present a mother she always was. That there was nothing more she could have done.

Friends mother me. One, a busy journalist and mum of three, blocks out hours each day for me during the first couple of weeks after my husband returns to work. Another, who has very young children, makes a rare trip to London from Gloucestershire just to see me. She insists on taking my son out for a walk to give me some space. Finally alone, I lie down and sob. It's such a relief.

We bury my sister on a slate-grey day in January, when my son is just shy of a month old. On my way to the church, I am full of rage. *How could she have left us all?* But inside the calm, white space, as the vicar speaks about how every life has its own shape, with its own beginning and ending, my anger yields to sadness.

Not long after the funeral, the protective mantle of shock slips away, and I'm exposed to the full force of my grief. It's only now that it truly hits me that I'll never see my sister again, will never exchange our daily 'Love you' texts again. At times, the realization that I'm now living in a world in which she does not exist literally makes me gasp for breath; that's how incomprehensible it is.

What surprises me about my grief, though, is that it's not the immutable dark and heavy state I'd envisaged. Rather, it feels alive and intense. And it's capricious. One

of its many storms might be set off by simply overhearing a stranger say, “This is my sister,” those innocent words like a knife piercing my heart and activating a visceral ache there. Sometimes a storm will last days—other times, only hours. Just as its arrival can be sudden, its temporary departure can be too, sparked perhaps by a bright and frosty morning walk along the boating lake in Regent’s Park, reminding me that the world is as magical as it is harsh.

I learn to lean into these easier moments rather than feel guilty about them because, surely, I ought to feel sad all the time. I realize they’re a tonic that helps bolster me during the tough periods. A lifeline. Like the day I meet two friends for brunch at my favorite café in Fitzrovia. Mothers of older children, they’re delighted to cuddle my baby while we sit on comfy, orange-upholstered banquettes, chatting about books and writing, and I eat Eggs Florentine, uninterrupted for once. Afterwards, I’m elated.

Equally, when the grief storms show up, I learn that, somewhat paradoxically, they seem to shift more easily when I can dare to stand right in them and feel the discomfort they bring. It’s tempting, though, to distract myself with something like scrolling mindlessly through Instagram, which is sometimes exactly what I do. There

are times I cry in front of my son, as I whisper to him, “Life can be sad, my darling.”

There’s fear there too, alongside the sadness and anger. Joyful moments can even bring it on. Such as the Good Friday early morning, when I walk the sunny, still-quiet London streets, admiring the hot-pink hydrangeas fronting a Victorian mansion block and drinking in the yeast and cinnamon-scented air at the bakery as I queue for hot cross buns. It’s as if the world is saying, ‘Look how beautiful I am.’ I want to believe it, I really do. Yet there’s also a warning voice inside me saying, ‘Don’t enjoy this too much. If you do, something terrible might happen again.’

The only way I can quash the fear is to remind myself that there are no givens in life, good or bad. And to try and bring myself back to right now—to this day, even just to this next breath—rather than projecting about what an unknown future might hold.

By late summer, when my son is around eight months, I’m less edgy. A new ground has started to form beneath me, one created from the life I’ve built with my husband and son, with its own rhythms and routines. It’s a hot August. Most Saturdays, we head to the rose garden in Regent’s Park in the late afternoon and eat takeaway pizza under the shade of a tree, laughing as our son grabs fistfuls of mozzarella and shovels them into his mouth.

It's over this summer that I fall madly in love with my son. It has been a slow-burning love, one that was, undoubtedly, muffled by grief and shock when we first met.

The days now race past, and I'm all too aware of how fleeting life is. How we can never assume how long we'll get to have with anyone.

I watch my son engage increasingly with the world, studying everything with his huge, curious blue eyes, babbling away to himself in his cot at night before he falls asleep, and pointing his index finger at us all day long, as if trying to tell us what to do. When I'm not with him, I think about him all the time. I miss him.

Shadows flit across this new ground, because grief doesn't just fade away. I suspect it never will. It's there the morning I take my son to a baby concert at Wigmore Hall, a venue I'd previously only visited with my sister, who was a violinist. Alongside the delight of seeing my son slither around the edge of the stage on his belly is the sadness of watching the musicians, young students from the same college where my sister trained, and remembering her at their age: so much promise, her whole life ahead of her.

"Who's that?" says my son, who's now almost three, pointing at the photo of me and my sister that sits atop my chest of drawers. "It's Tanya," I reply.

"Can we go to the playground with her?" he asks.

I tell him we can't. For once, he doesn't ask why. One day I will tell him everything. For now, I wrap my arms around him and plant a kiss on his delicious-smelling blonde hair, my heart full with both the ache of loss and the sweetness of all the life that is still here.

One-Hit Wonder

Michele Peters

A portal to other worlds, my great-grandparent's backyard featured endless adventure for my brother Christopher and me. We spent much of our childhood climbing trees, hiding in the bushes, staining our fingers purple from berries, constructing forts, and playing make-believe. We could defend our pirate ship from the gnarled branches of an old tree, have a Wild West shootout along the woodpile, and survive the wilderness by foraging in the garden. We were given freedom to play at will, pausing only for bathroom and meal breaks until the sun went down.

One summer afternoon, when we were eight and nine years old, we gathered various sizes of buckets and containers from my great-grandmother's depression-influenced hoard: empty margarine and mayonnaise containers, mason jars, five-gallon buckets, cardboard

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boxes, and whatever else we could curate for our percussion "rock band." The local, small-town "Community Days" festival was coming, and we thought maybe we could be good enough for the talent show.

Sweet, sweet dreamer kids. We absolutely were not good enough.

Knocking lyrics back and forth, we came up with a good portion of our first song and started our cacophonous drumming. In loud, rock-and-roll voices, we shouted in unison:

"Driving down the highway

Ninety miles an hour"

Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang-bang-BANG-

baaaaang!

We pounded on the buckets like we were Phil Collins with our drumsticks exploding at the crescendo of "In the Air Tonight."

"Saw some girls

Started hugging and kissing"

Bang, bang, bang, bang-bang-bang-bang!

We yelled the chorus even louder, proud of our clever play on words.

"Give us a break, girls!

Give us a break!"

Bang, bang, bang, bang.

"Give us a break, girls!

Give us a break!"

Bang, bang, bang, bang.

That "rock concert rehearsal" occurred in the midst of that fleeting period of childhood where the shackles of judgment and fear hadn't yet taken hold, and we were still completely uninhibited and free from self-doubt. We never forgot our lyrics, and we laughed about that silly song so many times over the years (well into our 40s).

I sat beside Christopher's hospital bed, my heart heavy with grief. The nursing staff had covered me head to toe in protective gear—double masks, surgical gloves, pale yellow disposable scrubs, shoe coverings, and a face shield—to keep me safe from the virus that had essentially already claimed my brother's life. Nothing else could be done to save him. His heart still carried a slow beat when I arrived, but the hospitalist informed me that it would only be a few hours or less.

The hospital staff bent the rules to let me stay more than the two-hour COVID-visitor limit, a gift I will always cherish.

In those four and a half hours, I held his hand, caressed his sunken cheeks, and told him how much I loved him. I reminisced aloud all the fun things we did. I apologize for any times I might have hurt him. I sang "Amazing Grace." I told him I was proud of him. I shared a message from his first love. I reminded him that his son loved him. I assured him that he was a good man. I gave him permission to let go. I repeated these things and searched for words to fill time, over and over and over. And over.

And, I sang about "driving down the highway" at "ninety miles an hour" with a gentle smile, taking us back to our childhood.

The coldness of his bare hands permeated the blue protective wrap of the surgical gloves that separated my skin from his. The audible rattling of fluid with every slow exhalation echoed in the endless seconds, and then minutes, until he drew breath again. Until he didn't draw breath again. Time stood still.

When his heart stopped, I cried.

My brother died at 49 years old. He never experienced a mid-life crisis. He never had grandchildren. He'd never forgiven himself for not being able to raise his only son. He'd never come to an acceptance of all that he'd been through—too many traumatic things that were not his fault.

Michele Peters

We never did play our “drum” buckets or audition our “rock band” for the local talent show. That backyard escape will always be our wonderland of fun: where the world faded away, where we were safe with each other, and where we were always free to be ourselves.

I was there when my brother was born, and I was there the day he died. It was my privilege, to be honest. He was my first “mom-gig” after all.

And I was thankful to be able to perform our private one-hit-wonder one last time.

Reclaiming Lost Love

Kathryn Leehane

I stand at the unfamiliar door, shivering despite the scorching Arizona air. “My brother touched this every day,” I think, turning the doorknob.

Beyond the perfectly appointed decor, I can see the vestiges of a life gone wrong. High-end furnishings that once boasted prosperity are now marred by garbage and filth. Overflowing ashtrays, food wrappers, and red plastic cups litter the coffee table. Dirty dishes, crumpled paper towels, and crusty containers cover every kitchen surface. Unopened bills and prescription bottles lay abandoned on the entryway counter.

My stomach churns. I know what drives a person to forsake their mail, their laundry, their tidiness.

Years ago, I tasted the same kind of suffering that precedes suicide. Contemplated the same way out of the darkness. Let it linger on my tongue.

Though I had spit out the bittersweet notion, I understand. Perhaps I knew my brother better than I thought.

Brushing away crumbs and cigarette ash, I sit on the couch, imagining a time before his death. My brother huddled on the sofa, me by his side. Smoke stinging the back of my throat, I would have placed an arm around his shoulders and assured him everything would be okay. “I can help,” I’d have told him.

Despite my desire to cling to his belongings, I need to empty the apartment. Remove any trace of the person who once could entertain an entire room with his stories. I haul out furniture, box up paperwork, and discard trash. I hold onto each item for a moment, trying to absorb him, soak up his spirit. Sticky ice cream cartons reveal his love for cherry chocolate chip. Empty vodka and orange juice bottles hint at his drink of choice. A tower of greasy pizza boxes tells me his preferred toppings—sausage, mushrooms, and olives.

I talk with him as though he is here with me, sharing stories of my wedding, the one he didn’t attend. I tell him about the niece and nephew he never met. Clearing unwashed pots and pans from the stovetop, I prepare

imaginary meals with him and laugh at his jokes—the way I did so many years ago. Emptying rotten food from the refrigerator, we cry over our parents’ divorce, the one he didn’t witness. We share joy and sorrow. Celebrations and heartbreak. His home becomes mine, if only for a day.

Images from our childhood flash before me. Building blanket forts. Fighting imaginary monsters with swords fashioned out of sticks. Acting as a lookout while the other one stole cookies from the pantry. Growing up as the youngest of six children, we were co-conspirators. He was my first best friend.

By the time I cross the threshold to empty out his apartment, however, my brother is a stranger. I haven’t seen him in 16 years. He left town without saying goodbye, never responded to my attempts at contact, and later hung himself in a city hundreds of miles away. He didn’t leave a suicide note, so I have no insight to his final thoughts. Who was the man I am mourning? His home promises answers. I am searching for information, clues, anything to assuage the guilt of no longer knowing my sibling. I need to reconnect with him and make up for the support I wasn’t able to give when he was alive.

The closet is the last room I scrub of my brother. Pressed suits and button-down shirts hang from expensive wooden hangers, and footwear neatly lines the storage bench. I take note of his preference for Vans sneakers and

his vast collection of neckties. I picture him checking his appearance in the hallway mirror before work each day. A large reddish-brown stain at my feet thrusts me back to the present.

My gaze is yanked upward to the closet rod and then to a shorn necktie dangling from a rack. I'm standing where he killed himself. Where he took his last breath. Where his body hung for weeks before the landlord found him.

Abstract details suddenly become concrete images of The Where and The How. I stare at the serrated remnant of silk, as his final moments replay in my mind until I feel disoriented. My heart seizes as I re-examine the dark stain on the carpet—the dried remains of his bodily fluids, the only piece left of my brother. I would never be so close to him again.

A small swarm of tiny insects hovers over the mess like they want to be near him too. I rip a shoe out of the gore, and something snaps deep in me. My knees buckle. I sit with my brother inside that closet, and we pray the Our Father together—a prayer from our upbringing meant to unite the faithful, one I long since stopped reciting. Trembling on the carpet, I whisper those sacred words for him. For us.

In doing so, I feel the jagged edges in my gut start to soften. Despite our worlds being separated by distance and death, my brother no longer seems like a stranger. I shared

time and space with him that afternoon. Though gritty and ash-covered, new memories have been made. I collect mementos—antique lighters, watches, sports memorabilia—to give to my family. Perhaps they too can feel closer to him, relish the warmth of proximity, and rekindle their own relationships with the man they'd come to see as a specter from the past.

Now he is present, real. Just in time to let him go.

He was Our Brother, and We Loved Him

Victoria Waddle

My mother-in-law Esther, the second of nine children, lived to be 95. She not only outlived her older sister but also four of her younger siblings. I often wondered what this was like for her, the winnowing of her tribe, whether she feared being the last to hold her family's history.

At the funeral of her alcoholic brother John, mourners told off-color stories that Esther didn't like. She'd known her brother as a baby. When it was her turn to speak, she simply said, "He was my brother and I loved him."

My alcoholic brother was also named John. John's trouble with addiction began when he was about ten years old. We'd moved to a new suburb where all of us felt at a loss, our mother lonesome, our father's periodic rage explosive. An event from that period exemplifies why John, naturally anxious, began to self-medicate so early.

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John had been given a BB gun for Christmas. He was shooting cans in the backyard with a friend when the friend shot a hole in the window of the house behind ours. After the neighbor came knocking to report this, our father raged at John, beating him with the BB gun. John drew his leg up in protection, and our father cracked the gun across his shin, breaking the gun in two. Of course, our brother was anxious. We all were.

John and I fought as teens, mostly because he would steal my albums and sell them to a used record seller a few miles away. I wanted to put a lock on my bedroom door, but my parents wouldn't allow it, even after some of my jewelry went missing. Fortunately, we came into adulthood with our differences behind us. We aged in the way of so many siblings, growing to understand that we had simply been trying to survive. Decades later, when I asked John about his addictions—as a teen, he'd grown marijuana in our backyard because our parents didn't know what it was—he said he needed the lightness of spirit weed offered.

As an adult, John was a high-functioning addict. Though he finished his education with high school, he was very bright and had a good-paying job where he was a valued employee. He lived with, and later married, an older woman who was kind and creative. They owned their home outright—no small feat in Southern California,

where property costs are astronomical. As well as he could, John conquered his demons. He enjoyed biking and kayaking, once taking my young son with him on the ocean, where they saw dolphins. Generous, he purchased a home with a friend who used it to care for disabled adults. He later gifted his percentage to her in exchange for a promissory note, which he asked to be forgiven upon his death.

I have many of these stories and long ago stopped worrying about John and what he would become. But in his mid-50s, he lost weight at a precipitous rate. He thought it was because he'd stopped drinking beer, but soon found that he was battling stage four kidney cancer. As though the furies were after him, during treatment, his wife, Ellen, became sick. Their illnesses marked the beginning of a cycle of tragedies in our family, unrelenting for five years.

I'd always been a walker as well as a reader. In this period, I often climbed into the hills behind my house, hoping to unburden my heavy heart. John's cancer treatment—employing a chemotherapy drug called Sutent, which has many side effects—quickly began to fail. I whispered prayers for him on a trail across from a parched meadow. There, the dry grass, soft and gray, was highlighted with golden stalks. It seemed so like an animal's fur, strangely alive, warm. My purpose in

heading outdoors was to accept all that was beyond my control, and I was grateful for the opportunity to find beauty as well.

John had a wonderful doctor who was undaunted and began immunotherapy. Early on, John had no side effects, felt well, and continued to work. In months, the extent of his cancer diminished. Healthy enough to allow surgery, he was scheduled to have his kidney removed at UCLA's hospital in Santa Monica, some 150 miles south of his home in Lompoc.

My sisters, my niece, my husband, and I waited long hours for word of the surgery's progress. When the surgeon finally arrived, the first thing he said was, "Well, he's alive." After letting us know that the complicated surgery had taken a year off his own life, the doctor finally discussed John's condition; he'd removed John's kidney and the spleen, which had supplied the vast tumor with blood via vessels as thick as a man's fingers. The tumor itself was gone, and the surrounding areas it had pushed into had been repaired—the diaphragm, the lungs, the pancreas. I forgave the surgeon's lack of tact, grateful for his skills. I refused to think past the moment.

During John's recovery, Ellen finally received a more accurate diagnosis: acute myeloid leukemia. John, who was staying at our parents' house while recovering, canceled an appointment to talk with a doctor about a

clinical trial and drove home as soon as he could get his surgery staples removed. This was when my subconscious understanding of how much of a stabilizing presence Ellen was for John began to surface.

Ellen was transported by ambulance to USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center. My husband, David, and I took the train 40 miles west to Los Angeles twice a week to see her. Several other family members visited her as well. During this period, our sister's husband died of complications of alcoholism, my good old dog crossed the rainbow bridge, and our parents were chronically ill with diseases of old age; our father with a leukemia that left him anemic, our mother far into dementia that left her uncertain of John's condition.

Like a baseball player hit by a pitch, I kept trying to walk it off. I'd stand against the Jeffrey pines absorbing their vanilla scent, undetectable except in the closest proximity. I listened to the birds in the oaks and watched the breeze bend the grass, so that it curved silver in the sun, shimmering as if it might tinkle like chimes. I wanted to believe in the gifts of the universe, and this is how I found them. Despite this, I sometimes stood crying, mourning future losses.

Six weeks into her hospitalization, Ellen died.

John became our single miracle in this time of loss, the one stricken person who was, astonishingly, still standing.

As the pandemic set in, my sisters and I stayed with our parents, chaperoning them through death's dance. We told John not to visit for fear that his compromised immune system couldn't withstand serious illness. He said when this was all over, he wanted to send us on a spa weekend as a thank you.

After a period of grieving, John felt healthy, but without Ellen's stabilizing presence, he was lonely. He turned to a dating app. Just as our father was dying, John met a woman. Though younger than Ellen, Melinda looked so much like her it was uncanny. She and John quickly became a pair, albeit a constantly arguing one. John often talked to us about the difficulty of this, but something in him needed a partner. The worst thing that could happen, he imagined, was to be alone. They married, yet they were often apart.

John and Ellen had always come to all our large family gatherings. Now, John began to miss holidays. During Christmas Eve 2022, our aunt came from Pennsylvania, a rarity. When she spoke to John on speaker phone, she told him she was eating a slice of rum cake. "That's my cake!" John exclaimed.

I had wanted to surprise him with it.

John's health deteriorated rapidly, his cancer spreading once again, his depression and loneliness mounting. He'd been having seizures and was prescribed medication to

stop them. Our fear began to mirror his; John might die alone. We begged him to come stay with any of us for the time being. When a friend who had faced death several times said it was best to allow John autonomy over his decisions, we decided to hold our tongues.

In the summer of 2023, Melinda was hospitalized with a septic infection. John—barely able to walk, fighting seizures, cancer spreading—was responsible for making the house more accessible for Melinda’s return. His anxiety about not being able to care for her spiraled.

At the end of August, David and I were on our way to John’s with a mountain of food. We’d both been cooking for days so that Melinda’s transition home would be easier. About two hours into our car ride, John called me. “Turn around and go home,” he said. “Melinda left me. She’s never coming back. Our marriage is over.”

While we had been honoring John’s right to make his own decisions, even when they altered within minutes or hours, dread overtook me. Because of his deteriorating physical and mental condition, I might never see him again. John had the right to live his life, but I had the right to be his sister, his support. I said no.

David and I stayed with John a few nights. David cooked one more meal of green enchiladas, rice, and beans. John thought it smelled delicious, but when it came time to eat, he barely touched it. Most of it went into the

freezer with the other meals. He was repeating the same stories over and over. He didn’t want Melinda around. He just wanted her to come back.

Uncomfortable and unsure what I should do in this rapidly shifting landscape, I announced, “I have a rum cake.”

“That’s my favorite,” he said.

“I know! I made it for you!”

I cut slices and spooned the glaze over them. We ate it immediately, a way to share our love.

Food often smooths over the awkwardness, and we talked about old times. John’s talent as a baseball player and the time in high school he pitched a no-hitter. The opposing team’s pitcher also pitched a no-hitter, except for one; John’s home run, which won the game. Our father, who was rarely at games, was there and complimented him.

We then talked about our parents, how much John looked like our father. I pointed at his feet. They were the exact model of our dad’s, an image I was familiar with after caring for our father in his final illness. John laughed at this. He had forgiven our parents for their faults, all based in their persistent anger, the source of which none of us ever understood. He said he thought of them often, of their better selves. And he thought of Ellen more and

more frequently, missed the even keel of her daily life. I shared how I had missed her, had heard her voice the morning she died, telling me she was looking for the right words. And there I was also seeking the right words.

At Thanksgiving, John planned to go to our brother Lee's but was in too much pain to make the trip. Not wanting him to be alone, Lee and his wife said they would bring Thanksgiving dinner to him. No worries, John said. Melinda had decided to spend Thanksgiving with him.

Again, we deferred to John's wishes.

After my own Thanksgiving dinner, I was scrolling through social media when I saw Melinda tagged in a photo. She and her friends were having Thanksgiving dinner at one of their houses; John had spent dinner alone.

And he died alone, days later. Melinda found him on the floor, items knocked off a shelf where it seemed he tried to grab hold as he went down.

Even expected deaths are a shock when they don't land as we imagine, when they stir a terrible sense of injustice and steal the chance for a heartfelt goodbye. My siblings and I have repeatedly questioned whether John could have had a different outcome, if there had been a way to bring him to us. Each time I consider this, I'm grateful for making the decision not to turn around and go home when he told me to. To have had that last visit.

As we parted that last time, John told me he appreciated all his siblings' worry and care.

"You're our miracle," I told him.

"I know," he said, and then he laughed ruefully. "I know!"

He was our brother and we loved him.

Shouting Distance

Katie Daley

Find me here: 1975. A shy, 18-year-old newcomer to the Cougar Hot Springs camp near Blue River, Oregon. Sitting speechless under the Milky Way with 15 or so fellow travelers gathered in a ragged circle around a bonfire and music jam. Douglas firs tower above us on all sides, keeping vigil—for us or the stars, I'm not sure. Each breath I take pings my nostrils with a tang of sulfur from the hot springs just over the hill, where water that's been boiled by Earth's bowels spills down a ravine into a series of muddy pools. Musicians percuss the darkness with their guitar riffs while we pass pipefuls of hashish and drink from jugs of cheap wine. I am in exactly the kind of freewheeling, hobo wilderness that I always imagined would turn me into my bravest, most alive self. But my spine is not tingling. My heart is buried so deep in my chest, I can't feel it beating. When I open my mouth, only bruises fall out, no matter how funny or cool I try to be.

The Loss of a Lifetime

My mind has set up camp miles away from my body, and the tale that sent me here is mute.

Four months and thousands of miles ago, I set out from Cleveland, Ohio, to live out a childhood dream of adventure. I believed that by leaving home, sticking out my thumb, and hitchhiking westward, I could prove myself as the hero of my own life. But the same day I hit the road, my brother Walter ran off the roof of a ten-story building and fell to his death.

The news sent a cannonball through my chest, but my skin and bones refused to burn. Keeping my feet to the road and my face leveled at the dream was the only thing I knew to do. But no matter how many moments of beauty and danger I've witnessed since then, I'm suspended several arm lengths away from all of it—the hands I've shaken, the achingly cold mountain lakes I've swum in, the flashes of adrenaline and despair that have shot through me. I used to be able to describe, down to the most hair-raising detail, what it would feel like to be fully alive, but now I don't have a clue. I just know it's not this.

The thing is, Walter was the most alive person I've ever met. In a family full of liars and deniers, he was the truth-teller. Way before he had his first psychotic episode and got locked up as a schizophrenic, he was always trying to convince us to tell each other what we were really feeling. He played piano like each chord was a possible friend and

sang like every note was a place to belong. He joined the Young Socialist Alliance in junior high and waxed poetic on how oppression hung out in the most unexpected places, especially our own minds.

In 1972, he came out as bisexual to a high school full of homophobic punks. He was forever coaching me to tell it like it is. "It's like your boy Neil Young says, Katie," he'd tell me. "All we are is what we feel." So why waste your time pussyfooting around it? I believed him, and I still aim to live up to his credo, but it turns out nobody wants to hear about a brother who's just killed himself. Not even my friends back home. And if I'm going to tell the truth, what else is there to say? So I mostly stay quiet and hope for a different truth to come along.

A guy with an accordion strapped to his chest strides into the firelight and plants himself there as if he's Hercules. He's big and broad, and his legs are bowed like he's holding up the world. As he lays down a jumpy riff on the keyboard and starts to brawl the blues, other musicians around the fire pick up their instruments and fall in with him one by one. His torso rocks back when he pulls out the bellows and pitches forward as he pushes it in. Without thinking, I start to rock back and forth in sync with him.

His brows are furrowed into a don't-fuck-with-me grimace, and from where I sit, I can see reflections of the bonfire flaring up in his eyes. There's no spit flying out of

his mouth, but there might as well be. His voice is so raw and booming, it feels like even the giants keeping vigil around us are trembling. His fury terrifies me, but I can't look away.

When he gets to the refrain, he bellows it over and over again:

Broke and busted, nowhere to go

I know exactly what he means, and it has nothing to do with money or jail or having no place to sleep. He's singing about the deep-down blowout there are no conversations for. Like when your brother runs off the roof of a ten-story building and you want to explain to all the strangers you're meeting that this is why you're not who you're meant to be. Not yet, anyway. What can anybody say to *that*?

But this Hercules guy? He's turning brokenness into an anthem. Now I want to do the same thing. I want to rock and pitch, snort and howl, fry my mind on the hot pan of my tongue, and send the smoke billowing out of my mouth. But I don't think I'm ready. I figure it will take me years to get to the point this guy is at. I'll have to learn accordion, for God's sake, take singing lessons, drink a whole bottle of wine.

I'm just as envious of my brother Tom. A couple weeks after Walter died, in the middle of reading condolence cards, Tom stood up from the kitchen table, took six eggs

out of the fridge, and hurled each one at the wall. He let out a long, guttural howl that started out as Noooooo! but morphed into something much fiercer and wilder. He was a volcano hurling lava at the world, and nothing else mattered.

The weather, the cost of gasoline, the world's plans for the future—they had nothing on Tom and his red-hot magma. Every hair on my body stood up and paid attention. It had never occurred to me to be pissed off about what happened to Walter and what happened to the rest of us because of our close proximity to him. In that moment, Tom made anger look like the key to life, like the force that might get you breathing again. I've been looking for it ever since, but no matter how much I feel around inside myself, I don't find anything like it.

I don't remember Walter being angry much. He was more into showing his longing and how willing he was to love the world.

But one night during a psychotic episode, he'd been awake for a few days, and my mother kept pleading with him to try and sleep. Walter finally put his hands on her shoulders and steered her towards her bedroom. "Are we feeling a little anxious today, Mrs. Daley?" he asked in the fluttery voice of a psych nurse on duty. "Why don't we go into our room and lie down 'til we feel better, hmmm?"

Then he marched out to the garage and punched his fist through a window. We could hear the glass shatter on the ground, and for a split second, it felt like something unspeakable had finally been admitted. Like a veil had been torn open and the truth had broken out.

My mother opened the kitchen window and cried, "Oh, Walter!" in a voice as shattered as the glass. Within seconds, he came marching towards us through the backyard, his bleeding fist raised high, croaking out the refrain to Bob Dylan's "It's All Right, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)."

I used to think Walter's sense of humor was the guarantee he was still there under all the shredded rants and weird hallucinations.

He's still funny, I thought. Even in the midst of this hell, he's showing us how absurd we all are. Someday, he's going to come back to us.

Obviously, I was wrong. His shrink says, chances are, with his level of schizophrenia, nothing would have brought him back. His mind was too fractured for him to bear living with it. But I keep wondering, maybe if he'd punched his fist through a lot more windows, he'd still be around.

And then there's me, not feeling angry and trying to get people to love me for how funny and unafraid and

freewheeling I am. Still hoping against all odds that I can be the hero of my own life.

What does that mean, anyway? Who exactly am I trying to save with my heroics? I look around the circle, searching the firelit faces, the bodies dumbfounded by how broken and busted and utterly lost this colossal accordion player has admitted to being.

And it suddenly dawns on me that maybe we're all heroes. We're here, aren't we? We've hitchhiked, slept in doorways, slogged through rainstorms, dumpster dived, and busked our way to this circle in the woods under the Milky Way. Even those of us who aren't bawling the blues or hurling eggs or admitting anything at all. We've all gathered around the same fire and agreed to bear witness to a brokenness that belongs to every single one of us.

As the final notes of the accordionist's song stomp off into the darkness, we clap and hoot for him, but what he's done feels almost too holy to cheer for. Most of the musicians lay their instruments down and start to talk among themselves, but one guy sitting near me begins strumming around on his guitar.

When he hits on some blues chords, I surprise myself by moaning along with my lips pressed shut. He hears and responds with more blues chords. Because nobody else seems to be listening, I open my mouth to let out some more moans, a breath or two louder this time. He plays it

all back to me and weaves in some long, bent notes of his own.

I sing low and quiet at first, but bar by bar, as I hear that what I'm sending out isn't wildly off-pitch or sour, I forget myself and slide in alongside him till I'm belting it out. I scat, I moan. I sing out phrases that come from deep in my belly and the ground beneath me and in between the stars. I have no thoughts or words. I'm not trying to be clever or funny or cool. I'm not even trying to be me. I'm gone into all of it.

When we ease our jam back down to earth and settle into silence, the grin on my face is so wide it hurts my cheeks. The guitar player grins back at me, and we shake hands.

I'm exhilarated. Spine tingles, flushed cheeks, heart blamming away in my chest—the whole nine yards. No one claps for us or seems to have heard us, and I'm astounded to discover I don't care. I don't know if my scats sounded ugly or plain as dirt to anyone else. It doesn't matter.

I set my blues free. I opened my mouth and let the brokenness fly out. I didn't have to take singing lessons or drink myself silly. I have no idea if my moans came from sorrow or anger, but I do know they came from being alive—deep down, full-on alive. They rose up from the end of Walter's life and the beginning of mine.

Katie Daley

That's all I'm sure of, and for now, it's enough to go on.

As I Lost My Brother, I Recovered Myself

Jennie Burke

My husband Mike and I boarded a tour bus with our four teens at 3:30 a.m., bound for a remote corner of the Grand Canyon. As passengers slept, boisterous laughter erupted in the back of the bus. I turned around to give my best stink-eye to the noisy offenders, only to realize it was my own kids, cracking each other up with the same silly joke they'd been practicing since pre-school.

“What has 100 legs but can't walk?”

“FIFTY PAIRS OF PANTS!!!”

They doubled over in laughter, beating the back of the seat in front of them.

I texted them.

You kids are gonna wake up this whole bus!

Their antics reminded me of the mischief my brother and I caused together as kids. Matt recited movie scenes at the supper table nightly. One night he channeled agoraphobic boundary-pusher Bob Wiley from the film *What About Bob*¹. He nibbled on an ear of corn typewriter-style while asking our mother incredulously, “Faye, is this corn *hand-shucked*?!”

I sat next to him, cackling at his portrayal, lining up peas on my knife. Together we reduced mealtime to mayhem and were often banished to our bedrooms, where, even then, he shouted movie lines at me through the walls.

Humor was Matt’s Midas touch. At the funeral of a family friend, as our father peered over his readers and delivered a eulogy from an altar lectern, Matt sat beside me and riffed on the deceased’s affinity for feral cats. (Miss Casey actually hated cats and was allergic, but she loved Matt and me.) While our fellow congregants wept over Dad’s poignant words,

I closed my eyes and prayed to God to please quiet the convulsive laughter that was about to ruin my life. I couldn’t look at Matt, out of fear he’d whisper, “Pull my finger,” and all hope would be lost. Looking back, I wonder if Matt loved entertaining... or if he loved entertaining *me*?

After Matt’s fatal overdose in 2020, I didn’t know who I was without him. I felt guilty for missing him so much. I

felt like I needed to put what little energy I had into comforting our widowed mother, and Matt’s wife and kids. Bereaved siblings, like me, are often called “forgotten mourners.” If there’s a hierarchy of grief, we exist on low rungs, far below grieving children and spouses, and nowhere near grieving parents, who suffer the greatest injustice of all. But I think about Matt every hour. Sometimes it feels like few people remember the thing about me that I can’t forget: my brother died.

As adolescents, Matt and I each lived with darkness we didn’t talk about. Distracted by anxiety and feelings of unworthiness, I hated school. At night I stared at my open textbooks, hoping the minutiae of early Mesopotamia and geometric theorems would sear onto my brain, but it never worked. I flunked a grade and was held back.

Academics came easily to Matt. He played three varsity sports and was football captain—until he was permanently sidelined by a series of concussions. He fell into a deep depression, exacerbated by months on anti-seizure medications. I suppressed the shame of academic failure by acting ditzzy like Chrissy from *Three’s Company*. School turned me into someone I wasn’t. In adulthood, prescription OxyContin turned my brother into someone he wasn’t too.

Matt was first prescribed OxyContin after an emergency appendectomy in 2009. Months later, he

stopped coaching youth sports with me and spent his weekends “napping” unconscious on his couch. I shared news stories about prescription drug addiction with our parents and repeatedly pressured Matt into rehab. I hired a professional interventionist to take Matt to a nine-month treatment facility, after 12-step, outpatient, and sober house programs didn’t work. He stayed for just three weeks.

One day, after another drag-out fight about the pills and his bizarre behavior, Matt said “Maybe you should deal with your own problems instead of mine.” Meanwhile, my telephone rang with calls from friends who had spotted him unconscious in a parked car or spaced-out in a restaurant downtown. Once Matt called me in the middle of the night after a bar brawl. “Go home to your family!” I whispered, before hanging up. As addiction took over, we didn’t just give up on one another; we hated each other.

My parents thought Matt drank too much at times, and, at first, they didn’t believe he had a drug problem. “You make too big of a big deal out of everything,” my father said to me. Unable to save my brother, or our family, I felt like a failure again.

At my husband’s urging, I began sessions with Julie, an addiction therapist. She taught me that my intentions were no match for Matt’s drugs. Matt’s recovery was up to him... just like my recovery from self-loathing and

shame was up to me. I needed to take responsibility for my own life instead of focusing on his.

When I stopped researching rehabs and organizing interventions, time opened up for me to focus on myself. I exercised, cut back on wine, and woke up early to write. Julie taught me how to “box breathe” when I felt overwhelmed or scared. Throughout the day, I practiced the slow inhale and the controlled exhale. One day Julie asked if I thought the child I once was, who I always believed was a disappointment, was worthy of love. When the lump in my throat subsided, I whispered, “Yes.”

“Then say it,” she said. “You *should* love yourself!” I imagined a girl like me in adolescence, coping with the daily humiliation and hopelessness of failure. I closed my eyes. “Jennie,” I said. It was hard to get the words out. “I love you.” I wondered if Matt, in the throes of his opiate battle, believed he was worthy of love too.

As Matt’s addiction progressed from prescription Oxy to black market pills to heroin, I set boundaries to protect my burgeoning mental health. The hardest call I made was when I let my mother know I wouldn’t be coming home for our extended family Christmas even though my father was terminally ill. I said I couldn’t expose myself to the pain I felt being around Matt when he was high. Defeated and quiet, Mom said she was disappointed—but also that she understood. When I hung up the phone, I knew I had

finally succeeded in centering my life on my needs instead of on Matt's addiction.

The following spring, Mike and I took Stella, our fluffy lab mix, to the vet. As we sat in the exam room, Mike's phone dinged.

"It's Matt," he said.

I peered over Mike's shoulder to see that Matt had sent a photo of himself. His freckled face was bruised and swollen. An ear lobe was crusted with blood. He had a fat lip and a black eye. I gasped.

A text message bubbled up: *Neighbor kid accidentally hit me playing baseball*

Julie had taught me that lying was an expected part of addiction. She was right—I *knew* Matt was lying. I *knew* someone had beaten him up. Then Mike said Matt was on his way over to meet us at the vet's.

"No," I said. "I can't do this anymore. I *don't* do this anymore. I have to take care of *me*."

As Mike paid our bill, I saw my brother on the other side of the glass door. He wore baggy black sweatpants and a thick, red and black buffalo check shirt. He was bloated and beefy, not the lithe athlete I'd coached rec sports with a few summers before. Not the scrappy

wrestler who swiftly pinned towering opponents when we were in school.

I hugged him.

"Dude!" Mike said. He and Mike slapped backs. Mike invited Matt to coffee. "Can we get lunch? How about coffee?"

"Nah... I can't," Matt told him. "Client meeting." He shifted from one foot to the other, checking his phone. Again with the lies. Rage surged inside me.

"A client meeting?" I blurted. "Your face is all bashed in!"

I grabbed Matt's hands and started to cry. I thought of the times I'd been called overdramatic in my family, but I couldn't hold back.

"Matt, you are going to die. Please, come with us—can we just go to the diner and talk?" I waited for his response. *Please just come with us*, I wished, boundaries be damned. I held my breath.

"Jen, I can't," he said flatly, pulling his hands away from mine. "And you guys don't have to worry. I'm fine."

After what felt like a lifetime of fighting battles I could never win, the only word I could say as he walked away was "Okay." Matt was no match for OxyContin. And finally I realized, neither was I.

Jennie Burke

I have forgiven myself for the lessons I've failed to understand; from high school physics and calculus to the chemistry of addiction and the economics of Big Pharma. But I'll never understand sibling grief. It feels like it should be normal, but it also feels like I'm the only one. Over a quarter of a million Americans have died of overdose since 2020—and I imagine most of those victims had siblings too. I will always remember my brother, but I wish I could forget the years that stole him away. I want laughter when I think of him. The kind that permeates bedroom walls and builds a house of worship from the recycled ruins of memory.

If I go to sleep at night feeling hollow or resentful, I wrap my arms across my chest and squeeze like a hug. I remember my funny brother, my aching ghost limb, my constant reminder. I focus on breathing. My hammering heart settles to a soft, steady rhythm. I drift off to the sound of my own voice, reminding me *Jennie, I love you...* and sometimes, in the darkest hour, I swear the voice is Matt's.

The Loss of a Lifetime

Part Two:

The Messy Middle

Signs of Life

Khara-Jade Warren

[Noun] **sign of life** (*plural signs of life*)

1. An implication that someone is living, i.e. vital signs.
2. (*figuratively*) The suggestion that a being is present.

to show sign of life

I wasn't there when my little brother's life ended.

I made it to his bedside just hours too late. He was still there, lying quietly. I held his hand, kissed his forehead, and said his name over and over, like an affirmation of his existence.

Keagan, Keagan, Keagan...

I saw him in the coffin after, and for the last time. The life force energy that, only days earlier, had animated this

The Loss of a Lifetime

body, which belonged to my brother, as I knew him, was no longer present.

In time, I started trying to reorient my heart and mind to this strange new landscape. I scoured the internet for anything I could find about sibling loss (there wasn't much). Like a bereaved archeologist, I began to excavate his death for some meaning. I hoped to gather up enough fragments, enough scattered memories to piece together my evidence: the signs of his life.

In *Surviving the Death of a Sibling*² (the only book I could find on sibling loss), T.J. Wray wrote that when you think you get a sign from your sibling, or you feel as if they speak to you in some way, you should accept it as that. Not because you believe in anything in particular, but because it comforts you.

I thought that if I could just keep my eyes and my heart open, I might get a sign from Keagan—a message from “beyond.” Whatever and wherever that might be, if it existed at all. I wanted him to prove to me that it did. I wanted comfort, to feel that we were still connected, that the weight of my grief could keep his soul tethered to mine.

As if on hold, I waited on my end of the line, listening hard—but the connection had dropped and I couldn't make anything out. Not broken fragments. Not even white noise. Only silence...

Metaphorically speaking in my case, but not in his. Being Deaf, Keagan had spent almost all his life in literal silence.

He wasn't born that way. Not long before his first birthday, he contracted (and very nearly died from) spinal meningitis. In the end, he survived, but his hearing didn't. And that was how my sister and I came to learn Sign Language as children, so we could communicate with him.

We learned the signs for "what," "why," "how," and "where." For "family" and "I love you." We spent countless hours in the waiting rooms of speech therapists and hearing aid technicians. We became honorary members of the Deaf community, waving our applause at school concerts and gesticulating our support at sports days.

Deafness and Sign Language were a big part of Keagan's story, his identity. But they were also a big part of the story that my sister and I shared with him, our identity as his siblings.

One of the most memorable books from my childhood is *The Comprehensive Signed English Dictionary*.

But after he died, and after his memorial service, after we said goodbye to all his Deaf friends, our connection to that world slowly withered away. With no reason to sign, we stopped doing it.

As years passed, I worried about forgetting the details of my brother. The deep, flat sound of his voice. Our personal vocabulary of signs—both learned and invented...

I longed to have dreams about him so I could 'remember' these things more clearly, but those dreams never came. Except for one time. It's still the only dream I've ever had about my brother.

We were in a kitchen that seemed a bit like the one in the house we grew up in. My sister was there too. We were about to have lunch, preparing a meal. Keagan walked in and we were surprised to see him. We said something like, "We thought you had gone?" He laughed in his warm, toneless way and said, "No, I've always been here, just not in the same way as before."

As this dream settled into the cracks of my consciousness, I began to re-examine the evidence that remained after Keagan's death. I listened less for his voice and more for the inextricable echoes of his presence that have formed the shape of my life after he died, like the empty space around an image. He had changed everything about and around me, and he had done it quietly.

The signs I hoped to get from him have been there all along, just not in the way I expected.

I can't be sure—though, as T.J. Wray said, that's not the point—but I like to think that Keagan had a hand in my friendship with Fiona. We met by the pool on a family holiday. It was one of those rare connections that you can feel within minutes of meeting them, when you just “click.”

I can't remember how it came up, but it didn't take us long to discover our shared Deaf history. Fiona had grown up with two Deaf parents. Like two people who never met but grew up in the same neighborhood, we compared notes and swapped funny stories. We laughed at the words that our Deaf family members got “wrong,” mimicking their beautiful, toneless voices (this kind of good-humored mockery is almost a love language with the Deaf). We shared their name signs (every Deaf person has one). And we agreed on the particular Deaf quirk that drove us hearing people the craziest of all (closing their eyes when they disagree with or want to ignore you).

As our friendship evolved, this kind of conversation became a sort of game for us. One weekend away together, my eldest son approached Fiona and I as we sat in camp chairs on the grass, facing the river, signing away to each other and speaking in toneless voices and he just rolled his eyes and said, “Oh, you guys are playing Deaf again!”

It's hard to explain quite how deeply infused with affection and longing this silly little game of ours is, how

much joy it brings me, and how sure I am that my brother would approve.

The best way I can describe it is a game of remembrance. We sign, we play, we remember.

In *Seeing Voices: A Journey Into the World of the Deaf*³, Oliver Sacks tells the story of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, where, because of a hereditary recessive gene, one in four people was born deaf and sign became part of the vernacular, even amongst the hearing who continued to sign even after there were no deaf people left on the island.

“Intriguingly, even after the last deaf Islander had died in 1952, the hearing tended to preserve Sign among themselves, not merely for special occasions (telling dirty jokes, talking in church, communicating between boats, etc.) but generally. They would slip into it, involuntarily, sometimes in the middle of a sentence, because Sign is ‘natural’ to all who learn it (as a primary language), and has an intrinsic beauty and excellence sometimes superior to speech.”

Deaf was just one of the things that my brother was. He was, and still is, many others besides.

Khara-Jade Warren

He lived for 26 years, and then he died. He exists now only in my memory, and in the memory of all those who knew him and who loved him. He's different for each of us, I imagine. We all carry some fragments of who he was, of what his life meant, and what it still means to us. But even if we were to gather these fragments, fit them carefully side by side, piece by piece, and glue them together with our grief, we would still have only an approximation of Keagan Patrick Small, 1987-2013, son, brother, friend, boyfriend, colleague, beloved Deaf man.

Or would we? Does memory fade and diminish over time or does it grow larger, like echoes?

I like to think that the memories of my brother, the messages—real or imagined—that he has left for those of us who are still here, will be passed on through time as a living relic of his existence.

Maybe someday, generations from now, my great, great, grandchildren will be the custodians of these signs of life...

Perhaps without even needing to think about it, the rhythms of their everyday lives will slip into natural conversation with the intrinsic beauty of this dirty, holy, shared experience that we call 'being human.' An experience sometimes best carried not in words, but in hands and in hearts.

The Loss of a Lifetime

The only thing I can say that I know for sure is that life grows into and around death, and the two tangle together in mysterious and surprising ways.

Ten Years Time

Molly Fowkes

When Jimmy died, a part of me died with him. I lost my favorite person, my North Star, my best friend—my older brother.

From the time I was born, Jimmy was kind and nurturing. Despite our four-and-a-half-year age gap, he took an interest in me, determined to understand my experience as the younger sister of the family. We had a sibling dynamic I seldom witnessed amongst my friends growing up. In turn, I did my best to emulate his every move. I wore his clothes, adopted his hobbies, and developed similar dreams and aspirations. Rather than find this annoying, Jimmy welcomed every opportunity to spend time together. We were “Jimmy and Molly,” the close-knit duo. While we, of course, had our healthy share of sibling disputes, it was no secret that he was my idol and the model big brother.

The Loss of a Lifetime

On January 11, 2006, at the age of 13, Jimmy was diagnosed with Medulloblastoma, a type of brain cancer. The following day, a golf-ball-sized tumor was removed from the base of his brain, something the doctors believed he was born with and that grew over time. From 2006 to 2014, he endured several recurrences and countless treatments and surgeries. It wasn't until the cancer spread to his spine at the end of 2013 that we knew we had run out of options and were running out of time. Jimmy died on February 16, 2014, at the age of 21.

In the fall of 2010, when Jimmy started his freshman year of college, our family moved from Oregon, our home for ten years, to Northern California. Somehow the timing had aligned for our family—my parents were eager to move back to the state in which they resided for most of their lives, I was determined to play softball for a competitive California team and earn a college scholarship, and it was imperative that we be just a drive away from Jimmy should anything occur with his health. We all benefited from the move, but that's not to say we weren't sad to leave our community and the friends who consistently stood by and showed up for us.

Moving to California meant that, for the first time in my life, I was making friends who didn't get to know Jimmy. For the three years he was away at college, I navigated life without him in the house. We were fortunate

to have Jimmy home for the summers, which never felt like an adequate amount of time. When his health declined significantly enough for us to need to bring him home, our family was intentional with every visitor, only permitting those closest to Jimmy and us to exchange goodbyes and treasure final moments with him.

Grieving the death of my brother in a town where no one had known him was incredibly lonely. Every person in my life knew what had happened, and no one had the courage to talk to me about it. I felt like a spectacle—I was the girl whose older brother died. It felt like their fear and discomfort outweighed my pain.

Without warning, I was burdened with the responsibility of sharing about Jimmy with those in my life who hadn't gotten to meet him. It was a burden I struggled to bear and often refused. As a result, others didn't fully get to know who I was, because *not knowing Jimmy was not knowing me*. He has influenced every part of who I am, including parts that I don't yet know exist. But at the time, it was easier to keep people from knowing him, from knowing me, from knowing us, than to allow them to see the Jimmy-sized hole left inside of me.

I survived the pain by hardening every part of me and being unwilling to be vulnerable with anyone, myself included. Instead, I suppressed everything and my grief took the shape of a box that even I didn't have the key to

open. By keeping it compartmentalized, the rest of me was able to stay numb. In the early years, I struggled to talk about Jimmy with anyone, convinced that not talking about him would somehow keep his death from being real. Just saying Jimmy's name was too overwhelming.

After Jimmy died, people often said or implied that grief gets better with time. This led me to believe that my Jimmy-sized hole would get smaller or that I was working towards "healing." But losing a sibling comes with a pain and a loss that time, alone, doesn't heal.

Even on the brightest, most monumental days—getting into college, playing in my first collegiate softball game, graduating from college—the joy was always paired with a deep sadness. With every milestone, the contentment was fleeting, and I couldn't escape the pain of Jimmy's absence. Very quickly, my grief, and the loneliness, despair, and darkness that followed would wrap its arms around me, reminding me that it was never far behind.

For several years, I dreaded the question from a well-intentioned stranger, "Do you have siblings?" and navigating both the complexity of my answer and the mental gymnastics required to prioritize the other person's comfort over my own. In an attempt to proactively protect myself from this kind of engagement, I sought ways to steer the conversation away from topics like upbringing, childhood, and family. While this approach spared me in

the short term, closing myself off quickly became a habit, and this hard, impenetrable exterior kept me armored for years, making it nearly impossible to develop meaningful relationships.

Eventually, my lack of connection with people forced me into a decision—I had to muster the courage to risk my vulnerability or continue down this lonely path. It took years of talking about Jimmy and repeatedly answering this question before it felt “easier,” and, to this day, I still have a physiological response when those four words are asked. But it’s conversations with the people who, despite having never met Jimmy, are eager to learn about him through me and my parents, that have enabled me to slowly open back up to the world and soften the hard exterior I’d once spent so long creating and maintaining. They are the people who don’t shy away from the discomfort of grief.

Over these last ten years, I’ve realized that nobody tells you the dirty little secret: *grief never goes away*. And how could it? Why would I want it to? To me, Jimmy was larger than life, and grieving him is acknowledging how much I love and miss him, and the impact he’s had on every aspect of me.

Accepting that grieving will be a lifelong process has allowed me to engage and even reconcile with grief. While reaching this understanding was painful and arduous

because I was determined to suppress it for so long, it freed me to embrace the duality of being open and vulnerable while living with immense pain and loss.

I don’t know what my relationship with grief will look like over the next ten years. Or what it will look like tomorrow, or a week from now. But I do know that the only option for me is to keep engaging with and talking about it. I can’t pretend, to myself or others, that it’s not there. Through therapy, personal reflection, and conversations with family and friends, I will continue combing through and untangling my grief, piece by piece, carrying Jimmy with me as I keep moving forward.

The Best Grief Gift Ever

Meghan Britton-Gross

BRRRRRIIINNNGGGGG! The school bell rang that Friday, May 1, 1992. The countdown had begun to my 13th birthday and the last day of seventh grade. One of my best friends was having her 13th birthday party that night, and I couldn't wait to get home and pack up.

As I exited the school, I was hit by warm and inviting gusts of air. I smelled the diesel as I climbed onto the school bus, walked to the back, and sat by my friend Molly. I don't remember what we talked about as Ruth, the bus driver, delivered kids home. I do remember seeing an ambulance stopped at the side of the road and I randomly stated, "Wouldn't that be weird if I knew the person in there?"

Turns out, I did.

I was always one of the last students to be dropped off the bus. As it rounded the corner to my house, the driver

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slowed and approached cautiously. Through the window, I could see a number of police cars and people milling around our front yard. I stepped off of the bus and into that warm air that suddenly felt like it was bringing a storm. I could hear the police officer ask for me.

"Meghan, there's been an accident. Your brother Andrew was hit by a truck and has been taken to the hospital. Your mother has gone with him and your father is on his way. Your pastor is here. He will take you to the hospital."

As I walked to my pastor, Tim, I saw Andrew's space-themed backpack on the side of the road and felt so confused and shocked as I got in the car. I didn't know how serious it was. Andrew was seven so he'd be fine, and I would be late for my friend's party.

I was wrong on both accounts. I would never make it to the party, and while Andrew may have been seven, he was not fine.

I walked into the hospital emergency room and saw some of my dad's coworkers sitting in the waiting room. They led us to my parents, who were tucked away in private. From time to time, doctors would come in with updates, and I'd have to stand in the hall and wait. Family members showed up as the dinner hour came and went. Even with additional family presence, I had no idea how

serious it could be. I thought maybe he had a broken arm and some broken ribs.

Eventually, I was brought back into the room where someone told me that Andrew had passed away. Was it my mom? My dad? Our pastor?

This was not on my radar. Things like this didn't happen to us. I'd never dealt with death this up close and personal. No one I knew had lost a sibling or parent. None of my friends' parents were even divorced. Life was easy!

As a 12-year-old, I thought I was an adult. I thought I understood how life worked and how to behave. This was not in the playbook.

I walked into a room with my parents and saw my brother lying in the bed. (Even now at 45, I can still picture this perfectly.) I couldn't handle the sight and spent little time in the room.

After seeing Andrew, I made a few calls to my friends. I told them I wouldn't be at the party and explained why. I called another friend, and when I couldn't reach her, I exclaimed to her brother, "Andrew was hit by a car, just died, and I don't know what to do." Upon reflection, there were better ways to have handled that. (Sorry, Seth!) I can laugh about that moment now. I called back a few minutes later and was able to talk to my friend.

The days following Andrew's passing were full of family flying and driving in from out of town, and everyone who was local bringing food. Someone sent me balloons. Very few people checked in on me other than my parents. People were there to support them. Everyone could relate to their loss—losing a child was every parent's nightmare. No one could relate to me because he was my brother, and most kids take their siblings for granted.

When we were settled back at home, my dad told me not to go into my brother's room, but I did. He thought it would upset me. But I needed to feel the emotion of what had just happened. I needed to understand Andrew was not in that room. I needed to smell him. I hoped I'd see him. Still, the tears didn't come. I was still in shock.

The day for the viewing at the funeral home came. I wanted to wear a tie with cows on it because it would make people smile. My parents didn't put up a fight; I don't think they had anything left. They just wanted to get through the day.

At the funeral home, it was hot, stuffy, and smelled like the caked-on makeup my great-aunt Naomi wore. My church youth group came to see me. Otherwise, people were there to see my parents.

My parents held court by the casket the whole day. I sat in a chair nearby. The man who hit Andrew with his

pickup truck came. I realize now he was probably at our house when I got off the school bus. My parents left their casket post and went to speak with him and his wife. He'd had a few sips of liquid courage to walk through the door. My parents prayed with him and told him they forgave him.

I was in awe. Of the immense courage it took to walk into a funeral home where the boy he'd hit with his pickup truck lay. My parents, only in their mid-30s at the time, had just lost their son in an unexpected accident. And yet, they had the grace and composure to greet him, pray for him, and forgive him.

At some point, my mom's best friend Karen, a woman I'd known my whole life, pulled me out of the funeral home and said she wanted to take me somewhere. We walked outside, got in her minivan, and drove a few minutes down the road to a Hallmark store. Karen was a frugal person who had five growing boys and didn't spend money unless it was critical, so if she was taking me somewhere, I knew it had to be important.

When we walked into the store, she took me to the journals and diaries and told me to pick one. I picked out a 90s-tastic diary with a lock. The book had a poem on it about seeing the world through curious eyes. She also let me get a purple pen. She told me to capture everything I had experienced and everything I felt in this diary. It is the

single, kindest thing someone did for me in the wake of Andrew's death.

We drove back to the funeral home with its weird smell and crowded room. I sat and wrote. I couldn't write for long; writing and managing the feelings that poured out of my pen was new for me.

The next day at the funeral, people gave me a Walkman, markers, and some other things. That was how people "helped" me—with gifts. How strange it was to get presents at a funeral. This wasn't a birthday party! Looking back, I see how they were trying to connect with me and acknowledge my pain.

The church was just down the street from my best friend's house. A few of us left the funeral meal and walked to her house. None of them spoke of Andrew or asked how I was doing.

I remember bursting out with something like, "Aren't you guys even impacted by this? Don't you miss him?"

What I was trying to say was, What was even happening? How would my life change? Would people just stop talking about Andrew? Would people remember him? Do people care about me and my feelings? From the time Andrew passed to well after the funeral, I was so incredibly lonely. I'm sure my parents checked on me and tried to help me, but they were just trying to survive.

After the dust settled, I struggled to go back to school. How was I supposed to go about my life like it hadn't been permanently altered? How was I supposed to walk through the halls thinking people were staring at me and saying, "That's the girl whose brother died." Once, a peer spotted me crying in class, and said, "You're not over that yet?"

No, I was not over it. How could I get over something like that?

A few years later, on May 1st, my dad's dad called:

"Hello, Meg. It's Grandpa."

"Hi, Grandpa!"

"Are your parents home?"

"No, they aren't here right now."

"Okay. Well, since it's May 1st, I wanted to tell them I was thinking of them."

After I hung up with Grandpa, I had to sit down. His words played over and over in my head, "I wanted to tell them I was thinking of them." He didn't mean anything by it, but Grandpa's call turned a lightbulb on in my head. He didn't think Andrew's death impacted me like it impacted my parents, and neither did anyone else.

That was the problem with my grief! That was why I felt so alone in my experience! Once I realized that, I had more grace for the hurt I felt. It wasn't me. People weren't

avoiding me or leaving me out maliciously! They just legitimately didn't think I was impacted.

The truth is, it impacted me just as much as it impacted my parents. To this day, it impacts all of us. The loss of a child or a sibling is life changing and unnatural. So much has been stolen from my parents and me. Now that I have a family of my own, I could argue it's been stolen from my daughters, too.

When Karen bought me that diary with its cheesy poem and faulty lock, she bought me so much more. Receiving that diary changed my life. Journaling and writing have become amazing tools for helping me manage my thoughts and emotions in all of life's events.

Karen told me to write everything in that diary, and I've kept some form of a journal ever since. I have over 30 different books of bound memories. When I look at that first treasured diary, I can see where 12-year-old Meg thought she'd remember everything. I wish I'd written more down.

I frequently think about that classmate who said, "You're not over that yet?" We all expect to be "over" grief at some point. My loss at the age of 12 reared its head when I was in college and realized that, even after receiving counseling in high school, I hadn't really dealt with Andrew's death. Through the years, grief still surprises me.

Now, as a 45-year-old mom of two girls, one of whom is 12, I realize how much my age held me back in my grief and changed me developmentally. I thought I was too old for tears. I thought everyone would lose someone while they were a kid, and it was just my turn. I wanted to have three kids in case something happened to one. When someone doesn't show up when they are supposed to, I have to actively try not to freak out and worry they've been in an accident.

I don't handle surprises very well, especially if they are hard. When people I work with leave to go work somewhere else, I have a grief response. I rarely attend funerals, as I get overwhelmed with emotions. When I got divorced, I experienced complicated layers of emotions that I'm still trying to sort through. The whole concept of life not turning out how I anticipated is messy.

Also messy? The resentment that creeps in because I don't have a sibling anymore. When people ask if I have a sibling, I just own up to it and ruin whatever mood has been flowing. (See my TEDx talk about what happened the one time I lied and said he was alive... I never did that again!) Knowing you are going to crush a vibe, feel someone else's tremendous pity, and potentially be asked invasive questions is never something you get used to.

When my grandparents passed away, I saw my parents being supported by their siblings. I thought: *I will never*

have that. That piece of grief hit me like a ton of bricks. Andrew was supposed to be here to help when our dad was a cranky old man, or when our mom was sick. I've had a tense discussion with Andrew and God on that one.

Recently, I went through a counseling session where my counselor used EMDR, and I imagined going to visit 12-year-old Meghan in her grief. I told my younger self that she mattered, her grief mattered, and she was loved. It was life-changing. Every kid who experiences the loss of a sibling should know that.

If you lost a sibling as a kid, I see you. I relate to you. You are not a forgotten griever or a part-time sibling. You are a sibling who had another half, no matter how close you were or weren't. If you know a child who has lost a sibling, buy them a journal and tell them to write.

I can't thank Karen enough for what she did for me—she gave me a way to process my grief. To record and remember it. To create ripples that help other siblings feel seen and validated in their grief.

The Light He Left Behind

Stephanie Gutiérrez, as told to Alyson Shelton

My brother, Fernando “Fernie” Gutiérrez Jr., was born on January 31, 1981, in Los Angeles, California, to two Mexican immigrant parents who came to this country with hopes and dreams. They gave birth to a baby boy who grew up to be a joyful, smart, selfless, and charismatic boy who loved sports, dancing, and being with family. On weekends, I’d watch him play soccer, spending my days at the park with family and friends.

But as Fernie got older, life became harder for him. The soccer games stopped, the playful, cheerful boy was on pause. He became rebellious and ended up in some trouble landing him in Eastlake Juvenile Hall and halfway homes, facing the consequences of his struggles. But in our eyes, he was still the same sweet, humble kid—just a little lost and vulnerable, trying to figure things out. As time passed we drifted apart.

The Loss of a Lifetime

It was just before Christmas in 2000 when my mom and I went shopping. I was twelve, filled with hope, and couldn’t stop myself from thinking things like,

My mom got him a gift. That’s a good sign. That means they’re going to talk again at Christmas.

She bought him a coat, and I picked out a shirt that I bought with her money. We were happy. I felt, deep in my heart, that when Christmas arrived, my mom and brother would reconnect, and that would be the best gift of all. As the little sister, all I really wanted for Christmas was for my mom and brother to talk again. The distance between them—the silence—was unbearable. He wasn’t around the house much, they weren’t speaking, and it just didn’t feel right. That wasn’t who they were. They loved each other. They still do.

On the morning of December 23, 2000, I woke up in my bed, stretching with a smile on my face, filled with the energy of Christmas hope. It felt like it was going to be a good Christmas.

If only I had known then what had already happened while I slept.

That night, Fernie—just 19 years old—was taken from us. He was walking with a group of friends, moving from one house to the next. But as they stood outside, trouble unexpectedly found them. In an instant, what seemed like

an ordinary night spiraled into chaos, leading to a tragic turn of events that would cost him his life.

We buried him in the clothes we had bought for him, the Christmas gifts that would never be opened. Watching my mom tenderly touch his body, during the time we had with him before his services, I heard her whisper,

“He’s cold, he needs socks on. Put on his socks.”

I touched his face, his feet, trying to imprint every detail of him in my memory because I knew I would never see him like this again in this life. The Christmas I had imagined—where we’d come together, forgive, and celebrate—didn’t happen. Instead, we buried him.

When my mom went back to work, she threw herself into her job. My dad, struggling with his own grief, withdrew emotionally. It was hard, and I felt so alone in my sorrow.

I was twelve years old. No one checked in on me. No one asked,

“How are you feeling? Do you want to talk?”

I was more worried about my mom. Her pain was heartbreaking, and I couldn’t bear it. She had just lost her only son, and that was her world. But in the midst of it all, I felt invisible, lost in my own grief. I hid my feelings, crying alone when no one was watching.

On the first day back to school, I remember my mom and I sitting in her 4Runner. She asked if I would be okay, and I just said,

“Yeah.”

As I walked through the school gates that morning, I thought to myself, *This is my new reality.*

From that point on, my life was divided into two parts: before and after Fernie’s death. He wouldn’t be at the school gates when I was picked up anymore. I wouldn’t hear his voice, his teasing, or his laughter. At school, no one knew what had happened. To them, life was normal. For me, everything had changed.

It took months for the full weight of his death to settle in. I would mention it casually to some teachers and friends, but we were kids, and they didn’t know how to respond. My mom and I joined a counseling group for families who had lost loved ones to homicide, but even there, I felt out of place and couldn’t truly open up.

It felt like I had no one. My therapy was drawing, writing, and music. I guess they thought that because I was only 12, I didn’t feel it as deeply. They downplayed what we went through as kids, as if our pain somehow mattered less.

I was angry at the world. So angry. My heart was filled with hate, and I couldn't express it properly. When I cried alone at night, I would shout to God,

"Why did you take him? It was supposed to be me!"

As I got older, I became rebellious, starting at sixteen. My mom and I fought constantly, a bitter back-and-forth that never seemed to end. I was the only child now, and I was causing trouble, pushing my parents away, but deep down I just wanted their attention. I wanted my mom to see that I was hurting, that I needed her.

Fernie's killer was never caught, and my mom stopped looking for answers. She simply said,

"What for? My son isn't coming back."

She felt empty inside, and the only thing that had kept her going was her family. But now, with my brother gone, she didn't know what reason there was to keep going. Nothing could bring him back. The painful truth was, all we ever wanted was for him to come home.

I wanted to wake up and hear his footsteps—his signature way of opening and closing the door and gate. I wanted to hear him laugh, to see him smile again. I wanted to see the man he would have become, and the future that was stolen from him.

Even as I grew up, I carried the weight of that loss. It was lonely, and sometimes it felt like I was carrying it all on my own. But when I wrote about Fernie, it was like I could bring him back for a moment. He was there with me. Sometimes, I would feel his presence—like a breeze, brushing by me, reminding me that he was still there.

I've only dreamt of him twice. The first dream came months, maybe a year, after his death. My mom and I were fighting again, and in the dream, Fernie stood in the kitchen, silent. I broke down in tears and said,

"I don't care if you're mad, I'm so happy to see you."

I hugged him, kissed him, and begged,

"I love you. I don't want you to go. I don't want you to go."

He didn't speak, but in that silence, I knew what he was saying:

"I'm here, and I'm watching what you're doing, get your shit together."

And then, he was gone.

There have been other moments—late at night, waking up to a white light, rushing past me. Instead of feeling fear, I felt comfort, knowing that he's still with me. That's a kind of peace I never thought I'd find.

Now, every year on Christmas Day and on his birthday, I visit him at the cemetery. No matter the weather, I'm there, rain or shine. As a kid, we didn't really celebrate Día de los Muertos. But after Fernie passed, I began to embrace the holiday, a tradition that feels powerful. It's my time with him, to remember, to tell stories, to keep him alive. I know he's there. I can feel him there, along with my grandparents, family, and friends. It's a sacred time for me. I cry, I laugh, I play music he loves, and I dance. I talk to him like he's right there with me.

I still cry a lot. I still miss him but thank God for allowing me to call him my brother and for giving me 12 years with him.

I think about him often—what he would look like now, how his life would have unfolded. How many more kids would he have? Would he be a little chunky? Would he be married? I imagine him growing up, just like I would have loved to see.

These days, my relationship with my mom has improved. I understand her feelings so much better now and truly empathize with everything she's been through. Now that I'm a mother, I can see the depth of the pain she must have felt. Living without her only son, her baby boy, would break any mother who poured everything she had into raising her child—only to have him ripped away before his time. A part of her lies buried in that casket

When my son was born, I truly felt like he was a gift from above. It was as if my brother and God made a pact to send me this boy, a living reminder of Fernie. Because, lord, the way my son and I argue sometimes, it feels like my brother and I are back at it—ready to throw fists. I can almost hear his voice in the back of my mind, like he never left.

But beyond that, Fernie's spirit lives on in the way my son brings joy to everyone he meets. It's almost as if Fernie is whispering, "I didn't get enough time on earth, but here's this boy. A gift—a reminder that I'm still here, living on through him."

With my son's birthday just a day before Fernie's anniversary, it feels like a sign—a deep, unbreakable connection I can hold onto. A small glimpse of light, a reminder that Fernie is still with us.

It's still hard. But it's also incredibly special.

Letter Across the Border

Daniel Simpson

Dear Brother,

I hope you aren't affronted by this letter,
opposed as you were to fictions about the soul and
afterlife.

In my dream, where we talked in the car,
you were as believable as gravity and pain.

Who was it, then, who told me, "Going back
to the problem is the only way you'll solve it?"

I went back, and what had eluded me for hours,
revealed itself in a minute or two.

Some days, I walk down a hallway just to say
to myself, "I am walking. Look
how I put this foot in front, and then the other,"

The Loss of a Lifetime

and in saying that, I hear that my voice still works,
that I still have control over my lips and tongue.

We could do worse than to spend every moment of life
being fascinated with the nuts and bolts of living.

Are we any less fascinating in our dying, our
unravelling?

You didn't seem to think so. Science was still science.

For a while, you could stand for fifteen minutes.

Washing the dishes, you said, made you feel normal.

Then dying moved you to the Lazy-Boy, then Grandma's
chair

with the button to help you stand, then permanently to
bed.

Your soul kept clapping its hands. Like Solzhenitsyn,
you composed poems in your head, but flat on your back
in your private gulag. You shouldn't have dissolved so
soon.

That's what I think. But you would say it was just
a bad hand, which followed a slew of good ones.

There's winning and there's losing.

There's starting, and then stopping.

Daniel Simpson

Things work, and then they don't.
It's nothing personal. It's not unfair.

The Color of Endurance

Anne Pinkerton

“Why did he have to die on a holiday weekend?” I complained loudly, causing others to look our way.

My then-husband and I stood in line with dozens of other customers snaking through stanchions at Budget Rent-a-Car. It was almost Labor Day for everyone else. We had flown to Denver to observe a different occasion: the tenth anniversary of my big brother David’s fatal fall from one of Colorado’s 14,000 foot mountains.

Though David had been an accomplished radiologist, his consummate passion was challenging himself athletically in the great outdoors. The paycheck and vacation time from his day job served to fuel his exploration and achievements. An early triathlete, he went on to excel at ultramarathon running and hundred-mile mountain bike challenges. And he loved to learn new disciplines: snowshoeing, kayaking, horseback riding. He

captained an adventure racing team, which married his skill in orienteering with a multitude of sports and took him to competitions all over the world. Every terrain was a fascination, different cultures an exciting curiosity, the globe a giant playground.

Over that holiday weekend a decade earlier, David had embarked on a solo hiking excursion for his most recent quest—to bag all 54 of the 14,000 foot mountains in the state. The last photo I have of him is a selfie taken atop one of the 40 that he did summit, wispy clouds against a blue sky, and blonde jagged rocks in the background. He wears a hat from a previous adventure race, sunglasses perched on the brim, a deeply satisfied grin, and an orange long-sleeved shirt.

My brother was 12 years older than me, protective, and exceedingly generous. He changed my diapers when I was a baby. He helped me learn to ride my first bike and to waterski, and taught me about poisonous snakes. My first taste of gin was a cocktail he shared with me after his college graduation. He performed a CT scan on me when I had a series of severe headaches during my college years. Whenever we went for dinner or for drinks when I was a young adult, I'd pull out my wallet and, invariably, he'd push it away saying, "Your money's no good here."

I adored David. His advice was always heard, his support revered. David's birthday calls were as sweet as

any present, and his hugs made me feel uniquely safe. When I left our home state, Texas, he was one of the only things I really missed.

On his last morning, David awoke in his RV, which he had driven from his house in Houston and parked at the base of the Sangre de Cristo Mountain range. If I had to bet, he ate a bowl of cereal standing up while looking out at the peaks, dressed and packed efficiently, and left at dawn. We know he rode his newest mountain bike—painted a vivid orange—through the dirt roads leading to the trail before he took off hiking on foot because it was later found, partly hidden, behind a boulder.

Past midnight, our mom called and told me he'd gone missing. The bargaining and praying began in earnest the following morning when he still wasn't found. He was too organized, fit, and responsible for worry not to consume us.

After nearly 48 hours of tracking him by GPS via the personal satellite messenger he carried, a volunteer search and rescue team finally discovered David's body. It was—and is—unclear whether bad weather rolled in, altitude disoriented him, or he succumbed to his own ambition or overconfidence as he summited three 14ers in one day, a feat we learned of from the timed and dated records of his signature in the log books on top of Little Bear and two other nearby peaks.

He took a wrong turn through, which was very unlike him, and slipped. Our only consolation was the end of the coroner's report: after what appeared to be about a 200-foot fall, my beloved big brother had died instantly. There had been no suffering.

In lieu of a coffin or urn at his memorial service, his treasured bright orange mountain bike stood at the altar of the church, a metal steed stripped of its rider. In honor of its fiery hue, the team made orange rubber bracelets for the bereaved in attendance emblazoned with the letters WWDBD for What Would Dave Boyd Do? The wristlets became beacons, worn reminders of his usual sound judgment—as team captain, friend, doctor, brother—a way to carry and remember him.

When I looked out from the pulpit as I addressed the other mourners, I saw a sea of orange flashes on the wrists of hundreds of well-dressed loved ones. If there was a signature color for David's death, it was this unapologetically energetic color. Soon after his death, I had a swallow tattooed on my right shoulder in his memory, and specifically asked for the bird's belly to be colored the same vibrant orange.

I missed him so much, and yearned for any sense of his loving protection in a world deprived of his living presence. When I couldn't will David to appear in my dreams, I searched for other signs. For a long time, I

poetically assigned the North Star to him, appropriate for a person who loved nature and orienteering. When I, his not-so-directionally-inclined little sister, realized that I'd been waving at Mars in the west, it was funny and sad at the same time.

After a turbulent plane trip to Denver, I was eager to be in control of my own travel, to guide myself and my husband the rest of the way. Many of the places near the mountains are accessible only by dirt roads, so when booking a car, I reserved a midsize SUV. Once we finally reached the service counter, the rental agent asked, "Would you like a Jeep or a Subaru?"

"A Subaru," I declared for no particular reason.

In an enormous lot, bigger than any car dealership I'd seen, jammed with hundreds of vehicles of all shapes, sizes, and colors, we ambled through a backwards alphabet: H, G, F, E, turned right, and then counted forwards 17, 18, 19, 20. When I eyed our assigned Subaru Cross Trek, I laughed out loud. It was a brilliant orange.

I loved driving it. The sporty car fit my petite frame and handled smoothly. Driving it south from Denver down the highway, I felt free. On Alamosa's narrow two-lane roads and dusty curved paths my brother must have driven, I felt safe and assured. I unflinchingly tackled sloping roads with boulders jutting out of them, determined to see a waterfall deep within a crevasse in a mountainside. I

steered us through the slippery roads at Great Sand Dunes National Park, skirting cattails and wetlands in wildlife refuges, braving loose gravel on the way to our rented log cabin. I wondered if my newfound assurance and ambition mirrored, in some small way, what David had felt while scaling mountains.

On our last day, the anniversary date, I pointed us toward The Mountain, which we'd been admiring from afar, but skirting. In the tough orange car, I felt unusually confident that, despite not knowing the exact directions to the base, we would find it.

I easily found the turnoff and moved deliberately next to imposing behemoths, which I side-eyed for a mile until the range sloped downward as if making an offering. We crept along lonely dirt roads, treeless, vulnerably open to the sky, then bumped and lurched over larger and larger rocks until we had to ditch the Subaru, just as David had to ditch his bike, and hike.

Though neither of us had any delusions about getting anywhere close to the top, we reached a high spot providing an excellent view across the sweeping San Luis Valley below. We sat and meditated on the beauty, surrounded by paddle cacti and blooming sagebrush.

"It was nice of David to die somewhere so cool," my husband said.

With dozens of grey stones, we carefully built a cairn and released the parcel of ashes I had hoarded for a decade, giving my brother back to the mountain that claimed him.

Through tears, holding the peak in my gaze, I announced, "OK, he's yours."

I drove away with the mountain in the rearview mirror, and a peace spread over me that I had struggled to find for years. Back at Budget, I reluctantly handed over the keys to the Subaru, my own orange steed, and we flew home.

Once back in my adopted state of Massachusetts, I texted a photo of the orange Subaru to my surviving brother, knowing he'd uniquely appreciate the significance of its hue. He and my nephew had traveled to Colorado right after us to mark the same anniversary, and were still there. He texted me a photo right back. It was another orange Subaru Crosstrek, this time seen in Colorado Springs.

OMG, sis, he wrote. Dave's definitely laughing somewhere!!

Ha! Amazing, I wrote back.

Srsly! I can't believe it.

I could believe it, but something made me write him again, *Is this YOUR rental?*

Anne Pinkerton

*No, but we JUST saw it and it's the same car, Anne.
The SAME car.*

I pulled up the photo of our borrowed vehicle on my phone, realizing I had captured the license plate. His picture showed it, too. I matched the letters and numbers. It was the exact same car. The one we had rented in Denver and driven three and a half hours south to Alamosa showed up in Colorado Springs a week later on the street. Not impossible, but a coincidence for sure. And also?

A sign.

It was finally possible to imagine David winking at us. We could think of him with humor and light, instead of just pain and sadness. It confirmed our fervent, deeply sought-after—if fantastical—belief that David was still watching over us.

I look up all the symbolic meanings of the color orange: enthusiasm, happiness, excitement—but the one that sticks with me is “endurance.”

Resentenced

Ona Gritz

I'm writing this on my sister's birthday. She'd be 68 if, when she was 25, a couple she considered trusted friends hadn't taken her life, her husband's, and their infant son's. Mass murder, as defined by U.S. federal law, is “the killing of three or more people in a single incident at a single location.” My sister was pregnant, so in our case, there were four murders. She was carrying a girl who, at thirty weeks, would have been the size of a beet. I know this because I've already clicked away from this essay twice to look things up. It's what I do to avoid the thickening in my throat, a fist as heavy as a brick pressed against my chest.

Four murders. Four life sentences without the possibility of parole. For years, the details were lost to me—the killer's names, the season the murders took place, just how long ago it was. That's what grief does. Leaves fingerprints on the brain, plumping up one section,

smoothing down another, so that words, facts, years fall away. Still, even during my decades of near amnesia, I remembered this. I remembered their brutality cost them everything. Everything times four.

Angie, Ray, and little Ray-Ray. That's who I lost, along with my beet-sized niece whose face I never saw and whose name, if she had one, I never knew. Her brother had straight sandy hair, chubby cheeks, and six toes on one of his plump feet. I meant to write him an extra stanza of "This Little Piggy," but I didn't get to it in time.

Ray, my brother-in-law, was a calming presence—deep-voiced, warm, unflappable. "Your picture doesn't do you justice," he said to me the first time we met. Such kind words to a skinny, insecure teenager whose beautiful sister he loved. Six years later, at the age she was then, I attended the sentencing of their killers in a building called the Hall of Justice, wondering if there was such a thing.

My sister had elegant hands, dark searching eyes, an impish grin. Philip and Velma Henderson strangled her with a towel, shot Ray with his own gun, smothered the baby. *Baby*. Whenever I hear my sister's voice in my head, that's what she calls me. "Come here, baby. Lay with me, okay? Just for a little while."

"Gimme some skin," she used to say, and I'd glide my fingers across her palm.

"Pinky swear," we'd whisper, linking our little fingers, promising the honest truth.

Sometimes, for mere seconds, I can picture their struggle, feel their adrenaline and fear. But that brief scene is always silent. I can't let in any sound.

Four for four without parole. Without even the possibility of it. Not justice, exactly, but the closest we have to it. I leaned on that unequivocal sentence like I would a solid object. I thought that's what it was.

"How do you raise your hand in school?" That was one of Angie's favorite jokes when we were small. I'd lift my arm and she'd dive straight for my armpit with her long, probing fingers. I fell for it every time.

If an inmate dies in prison, they send out a notice of release. I learned this when Philip Henderson died and a notice arrived by certified mail. The word **Release** in bold letters was visible through the envelope. *He's out*, I thought, tears already obscuring my vision, hands shaking so whole minutes passed before I could break the seal, unfold the paper, read that he and the evil he carried left this world.

When the second notice came via email a few years later, I assumed it was the same. After all, Velma was much older than her husband. But no. She was actually to be released in two days, resentenced to time served. The

Ona Gritz

notification timed so that Ray's brothers and I couldn't oppose it, make her face us, speak on behalf of the ones we lost.

On a Zoom call with the D.A., prison reform was cited. The pandemic. That she was elderly, infirm, had "a robust reentry plan with community support."

"But *four life sentences* means forever, right?" we kept asking. "*Without the possibility* means forever is supposed to stick." She served a long time. She did. Thirty-eight years. "Ah well," a friend said to me when I told her, and I left it at that, though I felt my throat filling with cement, which happens because the glottis tries to stay open, but, with each swallow, is forced to close.

That was just a year ago, Velma's release. I'm certain as I write it. Pinky swear. Still, I check the backlog of my email and discover it was actually nearly four. This is where you find me on what should have been my sister's 68th birthday. Distorting facts and time. Ducking into Google for relief. I've been resentenced to the beginning of my sorrow. My heart, which is likely slightly larger than a clenched fist, clenching anew. Thirty-eight years may be long, but it's not equal to forever. A murderer is eating with her family tonight.

My family is still gone.

Beauty in the Pain

Susan E. Casey

One sleepless night, I tiptoed down the stairs, slipped outside, and stared up at the low-hanging moon, so close to me it looked as if it had been pinned against the black canvas with a Thumbtack.

I reached out a hand to snatch it from the sky, tuck it inside my heart, feel its warm, steady glow burn through my body, filling the empty places my brother's death left behind.

Perhaps I'd be able to float, or fly into the midnight sky, join him there in the crook of a star, swing our legs and whisper all that he gave to me in his short life. How he inspired me. Expanded me. I'd tell him my favorite parts about being his sister and the infinite ways he changed my life and is changing it still. I'd tell him how he taught me about love by giving me the gift to love and lose him in this lifetime.

Love, the lightest and heaviest four-letter word that keeps artists sweating and panting as they attempt to capture this elusive emotion in words, in brush strokes, in haunting notes strummed on an acoustic guitar. To open the chambers of our hearts to real intimate love—love for our children, our parents, our best friends, our lovers, and our siblings requires courage. The courage to be vulnerable. The courage to allow another human being to tread into our shadow side, that sacred, secret space where our fears, our hurts, our unrealized dreams curl up and cower.

Many of us let our loved ones halfway in, or three-quarters of the way in, but protect the lady-slipper fragile parts that belong only to us. The last quarter of who we are as reassurance we'll remain whole and standing and alive when we inevitably lose someone we love. At least this is the way I lived my life; I just wasn't aware of it until my brother Rocky died. Grief lit up those dark, protected corners like someone shot a flare through my heart.

Those fears, past hurts, unrealized dreams surrendered with their hands in the air. There was no more hiding. There was only me and my cracked-open heart, gazing bleary-eyed at the pieces of me I'd shooed into the shadows, and said, "Keep quiet. I will keep you safe."

Three months after Rocky died, after my travels to Asia, after watching his ashes glint under the Balinese sun

and drift away from me and his beloved wife, daughter, and brother, after the memorial service in the States, after there was nothing left to distract me, nothing left to keep my mind from re-living that nanosecond when my life blew apart as if I'd swallowed a hand grenade, I offered up a gift to my brother. I offered up a gift to me: to allow myself to dive into the deep river of grief.

I was terrified I'd drift away to some remote semblance of myself, but I was sure if I wanted to arrive somewhere new, it was necessary. I've known my sibling for 43 years.

I remember when my parents brought him home swaddled in a blanket. I want to feel the loss. I want to because it honors what we had. It honors the sister-brother bond we shared. It honors the love we had between us. It honors my brother's spirit.

Moving through grief is a choice. I'm not talking about the aftershock, or the endless days, clutching photographs to our chest or breathing in the scent of our loved ones' clothes or the desperate, dire need to join them on the other side. I'm not talking about remaining stuck in the stages of grief. I'm talking about being present in the process, moving with it and through it so we can rejoin the living and hear the sound of our own laughter. Real laughter. Guttural laughter.

I'm talking about giving ourselves the space, the time to feel into the murky depths of our grief without the

numerous assistants eager to numb the edges of our emotional discomfort: Valium, anti-depressants (when it's grief, not depression), street drugs, alcohol, and busyness. Why is it we want to numb our pain? Where do we think it goes when we don't allow ourselves to feel it, breathe into it? I've witnessed it over and over as a therapist and medium, the "assistants" and "distractions" that keep us from feeling love and losses fully. We would not know one without the other.

Only a few months into my own grieving process, my doctor wanted to put me on anti-depressants.

I said, "But I'm not depressed."

He said, "Well, it's situational depression."

I said, "No. It's grief."

We don't, as a culture, want to feel the depth of emotion that sears through the heart like a fire through a parched field. We want to slap some salve on the rising blisters, cool the hot, raging ache. But those blisters need to rise. They need to pop, scab over, and scar. I don't believe we ever "heal" from profound loss or that grieving has an end point. Over time, our grief transforms into mourning, into learning how to integrate the loss into our lives. Our grief transforms into something new, something different when we allow ourselves to feel our way through it.

And even if it's not our pain, but that of a friend, a loved one, it's no easier. A human being in suffering releases an energy that is thick, and palpable. It cups its mouth over yours and siphons your breath. We don't want to suffer, and we don't want others to either. It hurts because we, you and I, are powerless to transform those blisters into scabs.

As I stood motionless that night, just as my brother had done in a photograph where he and his two college pals tilted their heads toward the sky, mesmerized by stars or the moon, maybe both, I thought about how that picture captured his spirit, the way he lived his life, one moment at a time, immersed in the wonder of it all.

My brother taught me about love, about loss. He showed me there's beauty in both. My blisters are not scars yet, I'm not even sure they've scabbed over, but I welcome them because the beauty in the pain is that I had the chance to love him in this lifetime. And that I'd choose over and over and over again.

Crystal Clear Pepsi

Artie Johann

I was ten years old in 1993. I had a neon green Velcro wallet in my back pocket with twelve dollars in it—allowance or leftover holiday money. Didn't matter—it was mine and I knew what I was buying with it: a Crystal Clear Pepsi.

I can't remember the exact date, but I know it was summer, so I'm going to say it was July... 14th. Yeah, it felt like July 14th. Mid-July was the best part of the summer to a ten-year-old.

It'd been a month since I'd been in school, and there was over a month left before I had to go back.

It was the part of summer when kids felt the most free.

But on this day, that was definitely July 14th, 1993, I was not free. I was crammed into the backseat of my grandmother's white 1992 Dodge Spirit between my younger brother and twin sister. My older sister,

The Loss of a Lifetime

Catharine, the tallest, rode shotgun. In a family with four kids, seat position was determined by height and girth, and since I was shorter than both my sisters and skinnier than my brother, I was a forever middle-seat kid.

So, I sat in my spot with nothing to lean on but my siblings' disgruntled shoulders. My feet on top of that weird middle bump that was in the backseat of every 90's car, forcing my legs to splay out against the two sets of equally angry legs on each side of me.

We sat, sweating and sticking to each other as my grandmother drove us to the Babylon Yacht Club, where she had a pool-only membership. I focused my attention for the 20-minute drive on the windshield in front of me. But the windshield wasn't the preferred focal point when the person driving you had gone through two of them.

My grandmother was a terrific grandmother, but a horrible driver. She survived multiple car crashes, two of which she was ejected out the front windshield. You couldn't tell by looking at her; she was physically fine. The only noticeable side effect of all that trauma was her refusal to make left-hand turns on streets without a traffic light. That seemed fair. It turned ten-minute trips into 20-minute zig-zags around town, but as the only person without a shoulder belt in the car, I was not currently complaining.

So, again, there I sat, staring at the windshield. I wondered if I was even heavy enough to make it through the glass. Given the way my uncles pinched my biceps when they saw me, I didn't think so. The concept of death, or even pain beyond a bonked head or scraped knee, wasn't really something I could understand. I only knew that my body + that glass = probably not good. My best-case scenario was bouncing off the windshield and becoming a crumpled pile of boy. A little, pale dashboard ornament. I wasn't ready for that, not before tasting Crystal Clear Pepsi.

So, I mounted my defense. The best I could think given my limited resources: I pushed my arms against the front seats to physically hold myself back from flying forward. My older sister, annoyed by the sudden nudge on her back (and maybe sensing my fear) craned her head around and said, "Stop it. We're almost there. It's gonna be okay."

I eased up. It did make me feel better. Everything she said usually did. She was a backseat kid before any of us were even born, so if she survived a short trip to the pool, I probably would too. Also, she could actually see where we were going and, based on her tone, we were still on the correct side of the road.

The Babylon Yacht Club sat on the south shore of Long Island, overlooking the Great South Bay, a body of grayish-blue water that separated Long Island from Fire

Island and the Atlantic Ocean. The club was split into four areas: The Clubhouse (for full members), the pool, the marina, and the play yard. Each area looked exactly how it sounded, except it was all brand new in the 1970s and not brand new in the 1990s.

The saltwater and sun were only part way through their process of sucking the nutrients from the once-rich paint. We entered from the parking lot, only briefly glancing up at the Clubhouse People inside who never bothered to glance back down. Too busy sipping on their vodka-cranberries and waiting for their subsequent 4 p.m. headaches to kick in.

There was efficiency in the way my family split up once we entered the gates. We all knew where we belonged. My grandmother and sisters went to the pool for lap swim and swim-swim.

The pool was long and cold, and it was always just windy enough to be uncomfortable to the easily goosebumped. There was always a steady line of soggy kids waiting to use the spring-loaded diving board in the deep end, the main attraction. All day you would hear the clunk of the board, the splash of a kid, and then a flurry of slap steps racing back to the three cement stairs that led to the board.

Clunk. Splash. Slap-slap-slap. Clunk. Splash. Slap-slap-slap.

Catharine and Heather immediately joined the clunking, splashing, and slapping. They actually knew how to dive, and it felt like a waste of time to not show that off for the next three hours. My brother Eric would flee to the marina to look for crabs that would perch on the side of the dock to eat whatever crabs eat. I always went anywhere away from the water. I didn't like swimming. I knew how to swim fine; I was just better at sinking. I preferred the sweet buoyancy of asphalt and concrete: the play yard.

The play yard was off to the side of the club, its view covered by a large handball wall and a snack stand. It was the only unsupervised part of the club. No lifeguards, no adults. It was the perfect place for the shittier-acting kids to act a little shitty. Innocent things like racquetballs to the back of kids' heads, or a handful of sand to the eyes.

The surface of the yard was cracked, patched, and cracked again by a few overly ambitious weeds. I loved this area because it was where the Ball Sport People came to hang out. The Ball Sport People were my people, and on this day, July whatever-I-said, 1993, I was finally going to be their people, too. Thanks to Crystal Clear Pepsi.

I went right to the snack stand, a yellow and white hut that sold the things your parents didn't want you to eat for lunch (hotdogs, candy, and soda), but that you had to eat for lunch because they only gave you five dollars.

It was run by teenagers who were aspirational levels of cool (to a ten-year-old me and maybe still to a 41-year-old me). There were usually three or four of them, a mix of boys with budding mustaches and girls with chunky bra straps peeking out of their tank tops. They spent all day in their ten-by-ten hut laughing at things I didn't understand, with their oily skin, and probably sore nipples, and I desperately wanted them to like me.

"Next," the Mustache behind the counter barked as I stepped up, only a little bit on my tippy toes to appear taller in the window. I pointed up at the 12-ounce bottle of Crystal Clear Pepsi on the display shelf, the only bottle amongst a lineup of faded cans.

"Crystal Clear Pepsi and a 3 Musketeers, please."

The Mustache wordlessly grabbed my order, while the-Bra-I-wished-was-helping-me leaned on the ice cream cooler, snapping her gum.

"Sup," I thought but didn't say.

The Mustache put my order on the counter, and I pulled out my wallet, opening it with its signature Velcro crunch. I put my money on the counter, then grabbed the bottle. It was cold, a bead of sweat ran down its side as it took its first breath of the humid air. There was a small nick on the label from a finger or neighboring bottle, but otherwise, it looked as advertised: it was Pepsi and it was clear.

I turned and retreated to the yard with my drink and candy as a snort-laugh from the Bra fired out of the shack.

Teenagers laughing when you turn around is not the best noise to hear as a ten-year-old (or any-year-old). I plopped down and put the soda and candy bar on the asphalt, label out, for everyone to see. The 3 Musketeers' silver wrapper shimmered in the sun like a bait fish. I waited for people to notice... no bites.

If I had learned anything from '90s commercials, it's that the sound of a soda being opened attracts attention, usually from ladies in high-waisted jeans. So, I picked up my soda and twisted open the cap, and it let out a short, sharp hiss. From the corner of my eye, I saw a blur running towards me. Finally! The attention I deserved for drinking a soda I saw in a commercial—

“Artie, we have to leave. Catharine's hurt.”

I scooped up my snacks and rushed over to the pool, where my older sister was lying on the ground. A lifeguard was holding a blood-soaked towel to her lower leg. She had slipped while stepping up to the diving board, slamming her shin on the corner of one of the concrete steps. There was a three- or four-inch gash on the front of her leg. It was gnarly. Or so I was told. I didn't look. The white faces around me implied its gnarliness.

Catharine looked scared. I had never seen her scared. I had never seen her hurt. I had never seen her anything but annoyed with me. She was my tough older sister; I didn't think she could actually get hurt.

I was terrified. My stomach began to burn, my own little sympathy cut. Catharine saw me, looked at me, and said, “It's okay, I'm okay.” And she was. An ambulance came and took her to the emergency room (the same place my mom worked) where she was given stitches, a bandage, and an extra-long hug from one of the nurses.

My grandmother took the rest of us home. Heather, now the default tallest, sat up front. I split the backseat with my brother. Plenty of room this time. I sat behind my grandma with my now warm Pepsi and a soft 3 Musketeers in my lap. I twisted open the soda, and it let out another hiss, this time like it was almost out of breath. I took my first sip as we all sat in silence, a clear void in our dynamic. I didn't like it. The void and the soda. Catharine wasn't allowed to swim for the rest of the summer. Her cut healed and turned into a pale scar on her shin.

It was our family's first scar.

A cattle brand courtesy of the Babylon Yacht Club. We would spend years telling stories of where we were that day, like it was our little war story. I spent the rest of my childhood staring at the scar on her shin. It served as a reminder to never run on pool decks. Catharine insisted

that she wasn't running that day, and I believed her, but when a kid slips at a pool, there's usually one common denominator. And it reminded me of Crystal Clear Pepsi, which came and went and left its own scar in some marketing department somewhere.

The last time I saw Catharine was September 16th, 2012. I remember the exact date this time. My whole family was in Waialua, Hawaii, where she lived with her husband. We were there because Catharine was dying. She was lying in a recliner, her legs elevated above her body, hoping gravity might help ease the swelling that had taken over her legs. My brother and I rubbed her feet, hoping to give her some sense of relief. She said it helped, which I wanted to believe.

The night before, Catharine sat our family down in her living room. Our first family meeting in over twenty years, or maybe ever. The room was hot and humid (so is Hawaii). There was a slight haze in the air fogging the room. Or maybe I was fighting back tears the whole time, making everything appear a little cloudy.

A lone gecko had snuck in from outside and crawled up the wall, not realizing it just crashed the worst party on the block. It all felt fake. It felt like a sales pitch where I liked the presenter but hated the product. But it was real. My sister was standing there in front of us, telling us that, probably soon, she'd be dead.

She said that the fear, the tremendous fear, when you're told you're dying is rooted in the inability to let go. To be at peace, you have to learn to let go of literally everything that is your life. You have to say goodbye to the little things in life. The things that seem stupid or silly, but suddenly meaningful when you're told you'll never be able to do them again. Like your morning coffee, or say, a soda you've always wanted to try.

You also have to say goodbye to the big things like your body, your career, your friends, your house, your pets, all of your goals, all of your dreams, everything you've ever wanted to do with your life.

In short, dying sounded hard. It sounded like extreme fucking FOMO. Catharine said all of this that night, the haze in the air now confirmed to be tears, because she needed to say goodbye. She needed to let us go. We were her family, and we were last on her list. The hardest goodbye.

So, there I was, rubbing Catharine's feet with my brother. Her eyes were closed, her body mostly still. I looked down at the scar on her shin, now nineteen years old.

I thought about that day at the pool...

I thought about that empty drive home without her...

and about all the drives I was about to do without her...

Artie Johann

And, finally, I thought about stupid, fucking Crystal Clear Pepsi. At the end of the day, I told Catharine I had to leave. She opened her eyes and looked at me one final time. Part of me expected her to tell me that everything was going to be fine, like she had done time and time again. That this was all a collective bad dream and we were about to wake up. But instead, she looked at me, said, “Okay,” then closed her eyes. And that was it. I was gone.

The Loss of a Lifetime

Part Three:
Our Sibling's Keeper

The Light in the Storm

Julie Cantrell

Why him? Why not me? This is what I thought as I stood beside my brother's casket, the memorial displays spotlighting his role as a local football star.

He was just a teenager. A high school kid. A boy on the brink of manhood. When my brother's life was cut too short, too soon, leaving behind a grief too big to hold. Not just for our parents or for the hundreds of friends who overflowed from the flower-filled funeral home, but also for me, his "big sister." The one who was supposed to be my brother's keeper, the one who was supposed to make sure the world did not devour him.

And yet here I stood, living, breathing, crying.

And there he lay, no longer in this world, no longer in pain.

My brother's traumatic death was not the first big loss in my life, nor was it the last. In our rural patch of

The Loss of a Lifetime

Louisiana lowlands, my brother and I had roamed the swamps together, climbing trees, building camps, shooting glass Coca-Cola bottles with our BB guns. And we had usually been accompanied by another set of siblings, two sisters who were our close friends.

But then, like the bottles, they fell.

One by one by one. My brother. My friend. Her sister.

Eventually, I became the last one standing.

Survivor's grief can be intense. Like a wounded soldier returning from a bloodied battlefield, the one who makes it out alive carries the pain of all who remain behind. It's no small cross to bear, and the weight can drag us down into the dark depths where an anchor of loss forever holds.

But the loss of a friend, even the dearest of friends, is different from the loss of a brother, and just like burying a child, standing at the grave of a school-aged sibling is something no young soul should ever have to do.

At the time of my brother's passing, I was 23 years old and had not yet become a published author, but I did what I had always done. I took my pain to the page, journaling through the unanswered questions, puzzling my way back to sanity, one small syllable at a time.

I'm not the first to explore the love of siblings through the written word. The sibling bond has served as a topic in

tales across time. Of course, the earliest storytellers also understood the power of a page-turner. Perhaps that's why we only need to read to the fourth chapter of Genesis to see sibling rivalry at its worst.

Here, Cain kills his brother Abel and then lies about his jealous act, sarcastically taking a jab at God when asked, "Where is your brother?" Instead of showing remorse or grief, Cain replies with a snide remark, saying, "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

Whether we grew up reading Bible stories or Greco-Roman myths, many of us learned about the bitter battles between siblings like Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, or Romulus and Remus.

But there are other stories, much less told. The myth of the twin brothers, Castor and Pollux, for example, who shared such a deep bond that when Castor was killed, Pollux offered to share his own godly immortality with his beloved brother. This selfless gesture inspired Zeus to place the brothers together in the heavens, where they remain shining still today as the two brightest stars in the Gemini constellation.

Together, Castor and Pollux send a guiding light from the great beyond. Known as St. Elmo's Fire, their captivating glow has signaled many a sailor to safety on the stormy seas.

Modern scientists explain that St. Elmo's Fire is produced by an electrical discharge, usually circling the highpoint of masts. But this glow has been documented since the earliest works of literature. Christopher Columbus, Charles Darwin, Julius Caesar, Pliny the Elder, and Herman Melville are just a few of the authors whose writings have been inspired by this spirit of the sea. Even William Shakespeare wrote about it in *The Tempest*⁴:

I boarded the king's ship; now on the beak,
Now in the waist, the deck, in every cabin,
I flamed amazement: sometime I'd divide,
And burn in many places; on the topmast,
The yards and bowsprit, would I flame distinctly,
Then meet and join.

Pliny the Elder, in his second book of *Natural History*⁵, wrote:

I have seen a light in that form on the spears of soldiers keeping watch by night upon the ramparts. They are seen also on the sail-yards, and other parts of ships, making an audible sound, and frequently changing their places. *Two* of these lights forbode good weather and a prosperous voyage, and extinguish *one* that appears single and with a threatening aspect—this the sailors call *Helen*, but the two they call *Castor and Pollux*, and invoke them as gods. These lights do

sometimes, about evening, rest on men's heads and are a great and good omen.

As Shakespeare and Pliny described, the most interesting aspect of this mythical glow is that it can divide into two (the twin brothers) and can move from place to place. But another fascinating characteristic is that St. Elmo's Fire usually occurs near the end of a thunderstorm, suggesting clearer weather is soon to come. Thus, a visit by this saintly spirit is seen as a blessing, a reason to hold on to hope when life becomes scary and uncertain.

Like the twin brothers who serve as the guardians of St. Elmo's fire, the flame represents the good of the world. And this is what a sibling relationship is supposed to offer us too, a source of companionship and balanced support, as we see between Castor and Pollux. In healthy systems, a sibling can serve as a steady reminder that one person will always be by our side in this life, especially when the storms swell against us.

So if I am my brother's keeper, what does it say about me that my brother didn't live to see 20? And how will I ever answer those burning questions... Why him? Why not me?

The day after he turned 19, my brother could no longer hold the hurts. Despite all our best efforts to help him overcome the dark horse of depression, he put his hunting rifle against his head and pulled the trigger. In that split

second, he ended his own pain by transferring it to those who loved him most. It took me a while to forgive him.

Nothing about suicide is fair. Or easy. Or rational. Nothing about it is clean or peaceful or understandable. And it leaves loved ones behind to carry the ache, a loss too immeasurable for words. Even for a writer.

But in time I did forgive my brother. I forgave him and I came to not only understand his choice but to empathize with his decision. He saw no other way through the depths of depression. He had worked with counselors, taken medications, and altered his diet. He had turned to football, gym workouts, boxing matches. He had found healthy outlets through nature, music, art, and physical labor. He had developed a circle of loyal friends who kept him busy, social, and engaged. He relied on humor and was always the one making everyone laugh. He had tried everything. Most of all, faith. But life had been hard on him, and he could no longer see through to the other side.

Somewhere along the way, my brother had begun to believe lies about himself. Lies that told him he was worthless, a screw-up, a failure. He'd begun to believe the world would be better off without him. It didn't matter that he had a loyal clan of friends who loved him fiercely, spraying graffiti on the high school gymnasium the night of his death, determined not to let him go gently into that dark night. It didn't matter that he had a family who had

rallied around him, taking him to specialists and therapists and pharmacists and vacations and practices and tutoring and church. It didn't matter that he had tremendous talents and that opportunities were about to unfold for him.

One week after my brother's death, my mother received word that he had been hired at the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. It was his dream job. And he had landed it. If only that news had come a little sooner. If only he had managed to hold on a few more days. Life would have shifted, the seas would have calmed, and he would have had reason to hope again.

But he couldn't hold steady in the storm. He couldn't see the promising glow of St. Elmo's Fire. And worst of all, I hadn't been there to save him.

My brother died nearly 30 years ago. He would be in his late forties now, an image I struggle to generate. I will always see him as a 19-year-old high school football star and boxing champion, carting coolers of fish from the river into my mother's kitchen, working on his fixer-upper Ford truck in the driveway of her humble home.

I will always hear his gruff voice, laughing only after the rest of the room had erupted with joy in response to his dry humor. I will always hear the Willie Nelson song he was playing when he died, and the lyrics will forever bring me some sense of peace, knowing he was not alone in the

moment he pulled that trigger: "I thought about you, Lord. I thought about you."

Today, as I consider the timeline of my life, I see a series of fault lines, before and after marks that signal the touchpoints of my journey. My brother's birth and death are two such marks, contradicting one another with a spike and a sink.

In all these decades since he left us, I have missed my brother in ways that could never be measured. I haven't yet found answers to the questions, Why him? Why not me? But I no longer think of him as being "dead." I believe he lives on, in another form, and that in the great scheme of time and space, there is not much separating us across the universe. So instead of grieving his passing or focusing on the missing pieces in my life, I choose to picture my brother forever shining his star beside my own. There we remain, the two brightest lights in our own little constellation.

Sometimes, the storms of life hit full force, and the seas become rough and dangerous. In those times, we divide and move separately for a while, like Castor and Pollux becoming two as they dance across the ship for sailors. But just when I start to feel unsafe and abandoned, I listen for the crackle on the mast and I watch for the parallel glow of St. Elmo's fire. If I look hard enough, he is always there to be found—my patron saint, my brother, my closest

Julie Cantrell

companion—lighting the way in the storm. Reminding me to hold on to hope.

The Long Game of Loss and Life

Gretchen Kelly

I was determined he wasn't going to change my life. From the moment my parents announced the impending addition to the family, I decided it was no big deal. The notion of a baby in the family seemed boring, and if I'm honest? Annoying. At seven years old, all I cared about was riding my bike and playing with my friends. I was more than a little weary of a baby in the family cramping my style. My sister, older and more mature, was beside herself with excitement at the announcement. Me? I faked it.

The details of meeting him for the first time are murky. I couldn't tell you what I was doing or what happened in the days leading up to it, but I vaguely remember walking into my parents' bedroom where my sister was already holding him in the wicker rocker, cooing at him, and gently patting his swaddled back. I tried to keep my distance, not sure I even wanted to be in the room.

So many of my early childhood memories are vague, almost like I dreamt them or imagined them, but I remember the moment I held my baby brother and looked at his beautiful face for the first time. The feeling, the image—all of it is burned into my brain. I didn't know much at my young age, but I knew that my world was shifting and nothing would ever be the same. The change I had been resisting was, in a matter of seconds, the best thing that had ever happened to me. The apathy and trepidation I had felt for nine months melted away, and all I could think was, "How did we exist in this world without him?"

We had a typical brother/sister relationship. He harassed me with the glee of a younger brother, waking me early on Saturday mornings just because, teasing me about the boys I dated, coming to me for advice on girls when he got older. I responded with a mix of exasperation and the fierce protectiveness of an older sister. We joked that he was spoiled rotten, but the truth is my sister and I were leading the charge—we doted on him and reveled in watching him grow into a young man.

It never occurred to us that we wouldn't get to see him grow into adulthood.

He was just entering high school when he started having strange, unexplained health issues. He was 16 when he was diagnosed with cancer. Eighteen when he

took his last breath. That was 25 years ago. None of these numbers make sense to the grief-addled brain. Time becomes nebulous when you lose someone who is a part of you. What was long ago also feels like yesterday, while also feeling like a distant memory. Sometimes the pain and sorrow is background noise, other times it hits you like it did in the immediate aftermath. Grief has a way of staying unpredictably fresh. It's taken me this long to become accustomed to the confusion of living with grief; the normalcy of missing him never feels normal.

I was in high school when I attended my first funeral, that of a childhood friend. He and I shared almost identical last names, creating a convenient friendship by virtue of proximity and alphabetical order that governed our early school years. We sat next to each other in classes year after year, stood next to each other in line for assemblies and school pictures.

We lost touch when we split off to different middle schools, but we were always in each other's orbit with mutual friends. Every time I'd hear about him from friends, I would think, "I really need to catch up with him," but I never got the chance to follow through. The news spread through my high school, across town from his own school, about his death. "He'd just gotten his driver's license..." "New car..." "Curve in the road..." We were

shocked, trying to process that he was gone while also grappling with how shaky the invincibility of youth truly is. Those of us who knew him past and present shared memories of him, told stories of his kindness and good humor, little snippets of how he'd touched our lives. It was decided we would all go together to his funeral. I was struck by how sure my friends were, how calm and mature they were acting about going. I, on the other hand, was panicking.

I didn't know how to witness a family's pain in the face of a tragedy. What can you possibly say to express how sorry you are? Do you speak to your sadness, or is that prioritizing the grief of a teen who hadn't seen their son in years over their much more devastating loss? Is that selfish or commiserating? What if I can't stand to see their pain and I cry? Or worse, flee? These thoughts played on a loop in my head as we joined a long line of mourners that snaked its way out of the funeral home and into the parking lot. "I'm so sorry for your loss," I mumbled as I passed each family member, looking down at the floor, not sure if I was showing reverence or being a coward by averting my gaze. I wondered how it was possible to stand and greet hundreds of people when your world had shattered. At the end of the line of parents, stepparents, and grandparents, his sister.

She was three years older than him, in the same graduating class as my own sister. They knew each other and knew that he and I were friends. I wondered if they joked about how annoying he and I were, the way he and I pretended to be annoyed by them. I couldn't take my eyes off of her.

She seemed separated from her family, even as they stood shoulder to shoulder. I studied her, taken by her lack of pretense. Everything about her expression, her mannerisms, in stark contrast to family members who were nodding through their tears and forcing out smiles. She seemed uninterested in hiding her pain, unwilling to prioritize the comfort of those around her by denying her own. She stood on an island with her thousand-mile stare, looking through every guest that greeted her as if they were invisible.

I was struck by the sheer strength and bravery to stand fully in her grief, unapologetically. I wanted to hug her, to tell her how sweet and funny her brother was, how he and I bonded over our shared middle-child status, and how he spoke of her with awe. But I mumbled my rehearsed script and moved on, not sure if I was respecting her grief or ignoring it.

It was only after decades of my own grieving and therapy that I learned about the "forgotten grievers," a vague label

given to those who lose a sibling. It's darkly ironic, considering how much time I've spent searching for resources about sibling grief online, that I never knew of this term until two decades after experiencing it myself. "Forgotten mourners" speaks to the grief of siblings that is overshadowed by the grief of the parents, spouse, or children of their sibling.

The strange way we categorize things like love and loss, as if some relationships matter more than others, is never more evident than how sibling grief is an afterthought in our society. The truth is that all grief is profound, it all matters. It isn't mitigated by the fact that others are affected as well; that is not how the heart or the brain works. There is no rating scale, and even if there was, who can rate grief or love or pain?

Understanding that the loss of a sibling is significant doesn't diminish the grief of the other family members, yet we treat it as if it's a limited commodity. Culturally, sibling loss is the last sliver of pie, the one you forgot to include when you were allocating servings. Oops. Here you are. That should be enough, right?

Maybe there's a limit to how much grief our society can bear to witness.

The narrow space given to losing a sibling is in direct contrast to the intense connection and bond of siblinghood. The relationships we have with our siblings

are one of the most powerful human bonds we experience, not more or less than any other, but different. Expansive in a way other relationships aren't.

Our siblings are our history, they help shape our identity, are integral to our development during adolescence. Our roles within the family are oriented around our siblings; when a child is integrated into a family, the family structure changes. My identity shifted when I went from the youngest member of the family to the middle child. My sister's protection and nurturing as the oldest were amplified when our brother entered the picture.

Those early shifts imprint on us. For all the impact parenting has on our idea of self, our siblings add texture and context in our formative years that we feel and absorb, but rarely recognize. It stands to reason that the reversal of this –losing a sibling–is equally significant in impact. There's no one else who fully understands the experience of growing up in your family, the nuances of daily life, and the dynamics of the family, like your sibling.

No one else understands the way my brother, my sister, and I infused companionship, rivalry, and unconditional love into each other's lives. We were a unit while distinctly individuals. The three of us couldn't have been more different in personality and temperament, but also... similar.

When push came to shove, it was the three of us against the world. There were conversations we could have with each other that no one else could. There was a shorthand no one else could understand, tilts of the head, knowing smiles, meaning conveyed without uttering a word. The loaded glances we would exchange when our mom announced we were having quiche again. No one could possibly understand the year she experimented with quiche, coming up with new, strange combinations of meats and vegetables to fold into egg and cheese, all housed in a flaky pie crust, trying to force a breakfast food into a hearty dinner food. You can try to explain it, but to have lived it is to understand the dread, the pit in our stomachs, the stifled laughter at the dinner table. The year of quiche is something only the three of us could truly understand.

I was fresh out of college when my brother got sick. My sister and I worked in tandem, staying with him during chemo treatments, bringing him treats, trying to alleviate the load our parents were carrying. Our shorthand shifted into reading his body language and advocating for him in ways no one else could have. He was fiercely protective of our parents and would communicate some things with us that he wanted to spare them. The intertwining of our lives provided an ease in communicating during the most trying time, when the exertion of communicating was sometimes too much for him.

During his last night, it was my sister and I by his side, my parents in the next room sleeping fitfully under the weight of the last weeks. We kept watch; we needed him to know we were there. My sister was steady and calm, always knowing what to do and how to take care of us. I was a mess but leaned on her for strength and kept it together for him. The whole night, my brain repeated on a loop, “How do we exist in this world without him?”

Twenty-five years since that night, and I’m still asking that question. In the days, weeks, and months after my brother’s death, I lived in a holding pattern, waiting for direction on how to grieve, how to live in a cruel new normal.

My sister and I shifted our attention to our parents, conferring daily on their well-being. Occasionally, one of us would pause to ask, “How are you doing?” Our responses were always some version of “fine,” a brushing away of our own grief in deference to the pain engulfing our parents. I distinctly remember wondering when it would be acceptable to fall apart. I wanted to break things, scream, curl up in bed, and shut the world out, I wanted to cry until exhaustion set in. I wanted the world to see my pain, I wanted to be unapologetically grieving for my beautiful baby brother.

But I did none of these things. I stifled my grief like an unruly child and put on an act of normalcy. I told myself I

was doing this to protect my parents, but the reality is there was denial and fear and shame around wanting to take up space grieving.

The funny thing about grief is it doesn't just recede, waiting for a convenient time to reappear. It is not something we can strong-arm into submission. It will make its presence known, usually when we're least expecting it. It took me many years to accept this and to learn to ride the waves of grief, to even welcome them.

What I've come to understand is that birth and death, love and loss are different shades of the same thing. They don't exist in vacuums, emotionally siloed within us. Our grief is informed by the love and relationship we share. It makes it messy and complicated and confusing. Trying to organize grief is futile; allocating how much grief any person should be able to feel and express is an attempt to control the uncontrollable. Tying it up into politeness and meager slivers of pie and rote expressions of sympathies is a flimsy facade, toppled by the slightest breeze.

The limits imposed on sibling grief compound our loss, leaving the forgotten mourners to quietly sweep up the mess before anyone sees it. The implication of it all is that we should internalize it, handle it, and keep a lid on it. But what if we didn't play along with the arbitrary rules of grief? What if we claimed our pain and love and loss unapologetically?

There is power in unapologetic grief. Looking back at my friend's funeral, his sister's seething grief, I understand it in ways I couldn't possibly then. She likely didn't know it, or care at the time, but in her refusal to acquiesce to what was expected of her in the wake of losing her brother, she showed me that grief is not something to be contained or sanitized. As she stood in that receiving line fully in her grief, I felt like I was witnessing a silent rebellion. A declaration that her grief mattered, that losing a sibling is a profound, life-altering loss.

Age, coupled with 25 years of my own grief, make me feel a closeness to the young girl I mumbled my sympathies to. I feel a kinship to her, to others who've lost their siblings. "I get it now," I wish I could tell her. I get it.

I would do anything to change the past and erase the loss of my brother, but I have come to a place of seeing the delicate beauty in grief. I know that it has shown me layers to love that I may have otherwise missed. I know now, all these years later, that losing him has made me more fully human, and at the same time, I would trade this awareness to have him back. I still grapple with the reality of his death. I'm still trying to answer how it's possible to exist in this world without him, but also feeling a tether to

Gretchen Kelly

him, to the three of us. The sibling bond unbroken just because of a small thing like death.

Equinox

Lynn L. Shattuck

I don't remember precisely when I realized that you'd died on the Spring Equinox. It was sometime in that clump of early days when we were still counting the weeks you'd been gone. March 20th, the first day of spring—it seemed wrong, a fistful of salt poured into a gaping wound. You were 21; your life just beginning to bloom.

“Which one of you is adopted?” people used to ask us. You, with your wispy bleach-blond hair and startling turquoise eyes, favored our dad, while I took after Mom, olive-skinned and dark-eyed.

“Where on earth did you get those big, blue eyes?” one of Mom's friends asked when you were a toddler.

“From God,” you said, your eyes shimmering, casting your luminous spell.

Did I envy you, even then? How comfortable you were with your own sheen, while I hid in the shadows of shyness?

Whenever I think about God, about light and energy, and some way in which we might exist after our bodies die, my mind returns to the gleam of sunlight on a bubble.

I was three years old, standing in the backyard of our childhood home, blowing bubbles. Wood chips shifted beneath my feet. Warm air grazed my cheeks. Colors merged and bent. Forms morphed: liquid to bubble to air.

I was entranced by the iridescent colors, the violets and blues, the reflection of light on the filament-thin skin.

Something about the colors and the light and the expressionless air made me think about death and heaven and invisibility.

If I can't see the liquid that once pooled in the bottle and then, as I blow through the wand, becomes a bubble, does it still exist?

There are some things our minds just can't grapple with. Tell me that my desk is made out of molecules, and I start to disassociate. The same thing happens if I think too hard about my children, and that my husband and I made them. Or if I consider that 100 years from now, everyone I love so fiercely will be dead. Our minds, held up against this wide, wacky world, are miniscule.

Still, unseen forces exist. Salmon, hatched in small freshwater streams, return from the vast, salty sea to the exact rivers where they began. Their bodies transform, the colors of their scales changing from silver to maroon and green. They breed; they die.

The magnetic field of the human heart extends several feet beyond the boundaries of our skin.

White light—the light emitted from the sun, or from LED or fluorescent light bulbs—holds all the colors of the rainbow. I forget this on the regular, and am reminded by a random rainbow that appears on the bathroom floor or on a white wall in the afternoon, a flash of color bursting through a prism.

Scientists have discovered dark matter, which my poet brain strains to grasp. My best understanding is that it's something physicists know exists because of unseen but measurable changes in gravity.

I can almost comprehend dark matter if I think of it as grief. How an absence can feel physical, a force field of pain. You can't see it, can't measure it, but it hangs on you, heavy and dim, just the same.

When I started dreaming of you, a few months after you died, you always appeared in a gray, hooded sweatshirt.

“Will! You’re alive!” I’d say, hugging you, my hands grabbing the sturdy bones of your shoulder blades.

Then the rage would arrive.

“How could you do this to us? Do you have any idea how sad we’ve been?” I’m still holding your shoulders, but at a distance now, my arms stretched between us, my face twisted with fury.

“It was just a joke,” you’d say. “Jeez.” You’d shrug, like you’d left the toilet seat up instead of pulling a return from the dead prank.

Life always seemed to slide off of you, while I ruminated over everything, wrung all the beauty out in my scan for meaning.

“Lighten up, Lynn timer.” You’d smile, and I’d hug you again, my anger evaporating, making way for a bright and buoyant relief.

“I have a surprise for you,” you teased on my 19th birthday when we were out to dinner.

You’d brought home a scrawny white kitten with huge ears and yellow eyes. You’d been riding the bus back from work when the creature poked its head out of a friend’s backpack. I don’t know if you stopped to think about the two cats we already had at home, or what Mom and Dad

might say. Or if you just decided it was my birthday, I loved cats, and this one needed a home.

The kitty had been weaned too soon; she sucked loudly on her paws in the night. Her breath was bad, her ears oversized. A smudge of charcoal fur on her head, the rest of her pale as paper.

Mom and Dad groaned about adding another cat.

“Please?” I begged them. I already felt something adjacent to love.

When the puny white kitten tried to steal Dad’s steak, Dad rose up from his chair and bellowed, “If you do that again, I’ll squish you as flat as a pancake!” We named her Pancake. When she grew into an overweight cat, you nicknamed her The Snowcow. She was strange and sweet and not very smart.

After you died, she perched on a laundry basket outside your room. I wondered if she could feel the space you left, the dark matter. If all along, she’d been deeper than we’d given her credit for.

As months passed, and I began to metabolize your death, I pondered the day you died.

The irony was awful, I’d thought; the first day of spring, cue bright green baby buds uncurling. But at some point, I realized it was the halfway mark between the two

solstices; a liminal time that marks the transition of seasons. The Equinoxes are notable for their equal measures of sunlight and darkness.

Dark: the images that would enter my head when I tried to sleep, of your gone body, of the moments I imagined that led up to your death.

Light: the friendship we'd been on the cusp of. Our privileged childhood. The time, weeks before you died, when we'd played checkers online together, you in Seattle, me in Maine, for hours.

Dark: I'd never see you again in this lifetime. Maybe in any lifetime. I'm still here—how can I still be here when you're not?

Light: I'm still here.

Dark: Our parents are suffering.

Light: We all suffer.

Light: If we're willing to face our suffering instead of hiding from it, if we allow it to shine on us, to reshape us, we might grow.

Dark and light, I began to realize, cannot exist without each other. If the sun never set, what would light even mean?

I thought I'd suffered before. I'd dealt with depression, anxiety, loneliness, the gnawing certainty that I wasn't

enough, would never be enough. But these ailments all had some semblance of a cure. They had treatments that offered the promise that things could get better.

But your death? There was no cure, only the slow drip of time that might ease the pain. I knew instinctively that no drink or drug or boy or book would be wide enough to soak up my grief. Or maybe I was just too scared to try, my responsibility to our parents, the mantra of the surviving child: you must stay alive—too urgent. With no quick fix, no pill to take, no drive-thru to order from, no fantasy enticing enough to absorb your goneness, I was forced to sit with the pain.

Sometimes I still tried to stuff it down, tried to push it towards the edge of my vision, out of sight. But it was like trying to stuff the moon into a handbag. I'd start to feel the grief in my body, a cramped, coiling reminder, a feeling of intense uneasiness that meant I needed to cry. I needed to turn towards my pain, to make space for it to wash over me.

On the other side, if I allowed the tides to push and pull me, I'd experience the brief moments of relief that come after a deep cry. A feeling close to buoyancy. The startling realization that there is only now, only this current cloud of respite. Only these sweet sighs of sunlight, more apparent after long moments spent in the dark.

One night, about a month after you died, I saw something.

I was lying in our parents' bedroom, wishing for sleep. I could hear the little puffs of air that Dad made as he breathed. Mom couldn't sleep, either, and had retreated to the couch.

That's when I saw it.

It looked like curls of light. Little tendrils of bright energy, floating in the hallway outside my parents' bedroom. Later, I'd wonder if it had been a migraine aura, but it didn't flutter across my vision the way those auras do. The cluster of light was clearly in the hallway. It didn't come closer. I don't know how to describe it except to say it was incandescent, it was energy. Fluid and pulsing. Motionfull.

Is that you, Will? I whispered. *Grandma?* I didn't recognize the light to be your or our grandma's energy, but it occurred to me that perhaps it was. I hoped it was; I needed it to be something.

I closed my eyes and opened them again, and the little swirls of light were still there. It has been 23 years now, and I can no longer remember exactly what it looked like, just that it was there, swimming in the air, bursts of light in a dark hallway. It has been 23 years, and I've never seen anything like it since. I wanted it to come closer, but it

didn't. I thought about moving closer to it, but I didn't. I thought I might be going crazy, but that didn't seem right. It was, I was near-certain, something.

I closed my eyes again and opened them, and it was gone. The light matter was gone. The air, dark and hushed again.

A few minutes later, my mom trudged up the stairs to bed.

"Did you just—see anything?" I whispered into the dark. Next to us, my dad continued to sleep.

My mom's eyes glimmered in the dark.

"I saw Will's hand," she said. She sounded reverent, awed.

"And I could feel it on mine." She unclenched her hand, spread her fingers out.

"Why? Did you see something?" she asked. It felt like a normal conversation, like we weren't talking about ghosts of hands, about mysterious coils of luminous matter.

"I saw these curls of light," I said. "Right there." I pointed to the hall.

For weeks, I'd been searching. I'd sit on the porch at night, smoking, waiting for a sign that you still existed somewhere. I wanted a raven to perch on my palm, a pine

tree to crash to the ground in front of me, a parade of shooting stars to streak through the sky. I'd been begging for something and there it was: a small storm of light. It could've been you or Grandma or both of you. It could've been the babies I'd someday have or the formless being I prayed to. It could've been a vision or a hallucination born of desperation. It could've been photopsia—the phenomenon of seeing stars, usually caused by pressure on the eye.

But if I was looking for something so hard that I'd imagine it, wouldn't it have been more solid? A hand, a voice? A vivid dream? Why, I sometimes wonder, would it be a pocket of light in the hallway?

Then again, what could be more perfectly you than a scattering of light?

Sometimes, when I'm thinking of you or I'm struggling in some way, I'll spot a penny on the ground. I always stop to tuck the copper coins into my pocket. "Lucky ducky Linnie. Linnie found a penny," you once said in your child voice that was somehow both singsongy and jealous. Now, when my eyes catch a flash of russet against asphalt, I kneel down to grab it, then tilt my head to the sky, as if you're watching. Even the oldest, grimmest pennies possess luster, if you look close enough.

Once, when I was walking to my car after work, I said to my husband, "You know what? I haven't found a penny in, like, forever." In my mind, the scene was late fall, twilight, that silky, slippery pause when it's neither day or night.

Less than a minute later, on the sidewalk: a parade of pennies. A plethora. Like it was raining cents. I turned to my husband, our eyes widening. *Thank you*, I whispered to you, to the universe, as I bent down to scoop them up.

If grief is dark matter, then perhaps love is light. Time might sand the edges of the memories, but the glow remains.

When I had kids of my own, what struck me most was how they arrived, already themselves. Yes, they change almost constantly, but some portion of them, essential and shimmering, never wavers.

When I was pregnant with my son, I already had a sense of him. The rowdy acrobatics he performed in my belly. He was a night owl, jabbing and rolling just as I was trying to settle into sleep. Later, I'd understand this energy as his iron will, asserting itself even in utero. My son is funny and sharp-witted. He's more sure of himself and his beliefs than anyone I've met. He is delightfully, sometimes maddeningly, himself.

Lynn L. Shattuck

My pregnancy with my daughter was different. I found out I was pregnant on April Fool's Day; she was conceived in a moment of lightheartedness. She seemed slippery; I used to have nightmares where she'd slipped right out of me before I noticed.

With our son, I knew his name was Max. With my daughter, names slid off of her, nothing quite sticking. For a few weeks, I was sure her name should be Lucia, which means light, but my husband vetoed it. After she was born, I realized that the slipperiness I'd felt was luminosity. She was not the dark-eyed mini-me I'd expected. She was herself, full of light.

They both remind me of you. My daughter, lustrous and laid-back. My son, with his blue eyes like yours and silly faces eerily like the ones you used to make. These moments when a prism catches the light just right, time goes blurry, and something of you is made visible.

I'm still learning how to hold it all. The darkness of your absence, the way it trails through my life. The bright strands of you I see in my children. The yin-yang of us. The way your death eclipsed and revised me, offering a portal to this lush life.

In that same essential way in which children arrive, already themselves, that's how you remain for me, Will: a supernova, a wild blaze of bright, radiant light. A flash that lingers on my eyelids, long after the gleam is gone.

Celebration of Sisters

Judy Lipson

With our newly laced Riedell ice skates, Margie age ten, Jane five, and me age eight, dashed to be the first sister on the freshly cleaned, slick, gleaming ice surface. Margie, the oldest zoomed on first, followed by Jane, the youngest, and I, the middle sister, trailed on last.

I adored and idolized Margie, the quintessential best older sister. Because of my insecurities, I became jealous of her beauty, popularity, and talent as a cheerleader and ice skater. No one knew me better than Margie, despite her challenging times. Margie called me Lipson, and we referred to each other as Rho and Bren from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. At her lowest of low, our closeness remained. When Margie asked me to play the piano in our living room while she and her middle school friends practiced for a talent show singing, "You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown," I thought I was in heaven. Every day when I put on black eyeliner, I think of Margie with her

bright, big brown eyes, and remember sitting on the floor looking up to my big sister.

I loved having a younger sister, with her dimple on her right cheek. Jane and I shared a room until I reached age fourteen, the closest time of our relationship. During the four years I went solo to summer camp, Jane and Margie didn't tell me about the outings they shared, fearful I would be jealous. They sent me Polaroid snapshots of the two of them with endearing notes on the back. When Jane joined me at overnight camp, I recall being elated to ride the sister bus. Jane enjoyed working with children and her large circle of friends. The year I picked Jane up from her freshman year of college, we drove together for four hours, laughter emphasizing the sister dynamic. Jane and I were opposites. Despite our differences, we possessed unconditional love, shown by the lovely cards I received from Jane.

Jane died at age 22 in 1981 in a tragic automobile accident, and nine years later, we lost Margie at age 35 after a 20-year battle with anorexia and bulimia. My sisters are my constant, champions, and competitors. In my favorite black-and-white photo, taken in our backyard, I'm in the middle, squashed tightly between Margie and Jane. In our 1960s outfits, I reflect the typical middle child. Anchored by my two extroverted sisters who wore sleeveless tops and flip-flops. I, the introvert, wore a short-

sleeved top, sneakers, and a wristwatch. Margie and I looked alike, often mistaken for twins. It's only recently that I realized my strong resemblance to Jane. We all share the effervescent Lipson smile.

Looking back, I understand losing two sisters, and the trauma of Margie's illness became too surreal for me to fathom. To cope, I suppressed the grief for thirty years. I constantly felt a part of me was missing. Although my sisters are gone, they remain a part of me, solidifying my identity.

Little did I know, ice skating would be the cord that connected me to my beloved sisters.

Ice skating provided the happiest memories of us three sisters, and it is fitting I honored Margie and Janie in a sport we all shared. Celebration of Sisters, an annual ice-skating fundraiser benefiting Massachusetts General Hospital, brings together figure skaters of all ages, levels, and disciplines.

We chose to hold the bittersweet, emotional day during the first week in November to ease the pain of Margie and Jane's birthdays—November 6th and 8th, and Jane's death on November 7th. Having a project to focus my thoughts on other than the looming dates eased some of the heartache, although emotions about my sisters never escaped my brain. I had to take a break from several practices because of the floodgate of tears. But as the U.S.

Judy Lipson

Figure Skating platform states, as in skating and in life,
when we fall, We Get Up.

And now, it's showtime! Gliding onto center ice, my body shaking, anxiously waiting for the music to begin, the song carefully selected with meaning and connection to Margie and Jane. On the year that the event fell on Margie's birthday, I skated to "Downtown," recalling Margie strumming the song on her guitar. Another year, I chose "Both Sides Now," evoking memories of the three of us seeing Judy Collins in concert. The year the event fell on Jane's birthday, I skated to "Beautiful." Margie and Jane were both Carole King Fans—each owned a 33 record with a bright neon sticker with their name.

Often, before a performance, I meltdown on the ice and have a good cry, my heart missing Margie and Jane, wanting them there skating with me. A part of me still doesn't believe they are gone. The day after a good cry, a calmness overcomes me. I feel the music. I am skating for Margie and Jane.

How ironic—the shy, middle sister is performing before a large audience. I can hear Margie and Jane cackling, and commenting, "You have too much blush on, pull your dress down," knowing deep down they are proud.

As I skate, I lift one leg up high into a spiral and glide across the ice, the wind blowing through my hair. I feel

The Loss of a Lifetime

Margie and Jane on my shoulders whispering in my ears,
"Judy, you've got this."

Margie and Jane, I will always love you.

The Forest of Crying

Rebekkah Dilts

I am not my parents' first child. I am not supposed to exist at all. Their first baby, a girl, was their first child, and she died right before her due date, while she was still inside my mother. She died for no reason anyone can figure out.

My parents named her Malka, which in Hebrew means "queen."

My mother had become pregnant with me just 18 months after Malka died out of raw and primal necessity. My father had not been ready to try to have another child again—and maybe never would be. But my mother had to try to have another child, she has said, whether it was with my father or not.

During her pregnancy with Malka, my mother had done all of the recommended tests, checkups, and ultrasounds.

The Loss of a Lifetime

"You don't even really need to come for any more of your checkups," she remembers one of the nurses joking to her near the end of the pregnancy. "You're so healthy, and your baby is going to be so healthy."

So during her pregnancy with me, my mother decided not to do anything. No exams, no ultrasounds. She decided to tell fate that this time she would go a different way and see where they would meet on the other side.

Who would I be, if I made it?

What would I be?

Alive was all my parents wanted of me. A living baby was what my mother would tell people when they asked if she hoped for a boy or a girl during her pregnancy with me.

Items purchased for my birth—far fewer than those for Malka's—were all gender neutral.

The sparse nursery they readied for me was painted yellow.

When I became an adult, my mother told me she had been worried about how to talk to me about Malka because of the complicated truth that only in Malka's dying had I been made alive. Still, my parents tried to keep the presence of Malka's absence visible instead of hidden.

They decided to bury Malka in the tightly packed section of the Jewish cemetery in Brooklyn reserved for my mother's side of the family. We would sometimes visit, and when we did, I stared at the tiny gravestone, inscribed with Malka's name in big letters, and the one date—the day she came out of my mother. We placed small stones on the top of the grave, a tradition in Judaism. During a visit there when I was two years old, my grandmother took a picture of my parents and I kneeling before the gravestone. I had just created a row of pebbles on the top. The photograph is framed and sits in our living room.

While I was growing up, friends who saw it often asked about the picture with a particular horror.

“Whose grave is that? Why did someone take a photo of you and your family at a cemetery?!”

“That's my sister's grave,” I would say. “She died before she was born.”

I could feel their horror strengthen.

The friends or guests who would come to our home had the same reaction when they saw the one and only picture of Malka.

The picture was taken by a nurse at the hospital who had helped to deliver Malka upon my mother's request, and it is tiny and grainy. My parents enlarged it, which

only worsened the quality. But they framed it and put it up in our hallway among the school pictures of me and the two other daughters they went on to have after I was born.

The people who remarked on the pixelated, black and white photo of Malka, the crumpled face of a baby who had just emerged from the womb and is no longer alive, have already understood that it is not of me or my sisters. There would have been so many preferable pictures to choose from there would be no reason to frame one like this.

“Who is that?” the people asked cautiously. “That black and white picture of a baby?”

“That's a picture of my older sister,” I would say. “She died before she was born.”

I have always referred to Malka as my older sister. But that isn't true. She would not have been my sister, because if she had been, I would not be.

But I wanted Malka to be my protectress, my guardian, my guide. I became the older sister when my parents went on to have my younger sisters, Clarice and Nora. I loved them with the ferocity of a lioness, so elated when they both were born, it surprised even my parents, who anticipated some level of jealousy from me towards them. But all I wanted was for my sisters to want me and to love me in return. I pretended that Nora, who was born when I

was eight, was my baby. I cradled her, changed her diapers, and dressed her. In the imaginary games my sisters and I played together, I was always the mother, and they were my two children.

I would sometimes dream about Malka when I was a child. When she appeared to me, she always had jet black hair because my parents told me her hair was jet black when she was born—just like my father’s father, my namesake. She had wild blue eyes because my grandfather with the jet black hair also had wild blue eyes. I never really remembered the details of these dreams except that Malka felt bigger—older, taller, fuller than I do.

On a bulletin board next to the family phone in our kitchen, there was a cardstock with the cover of a book. The cover featured the statue of a person folded over on the floor, their arms wrapped around their chest, their head hanging toward their knees.

That cardstock had been produced by the support group my parents were a part of for people who had lost children before or right after they were born. Malka’s death created a chasm so wide and so big that my parents and others like them had to find a way to feed it forever. Otherwise, it would swallow them whole.

The book the cover was from was titled, “The Anguish of Loss.”

Every time I looked at that image, which was every time I used the phone, it emanated with messages I understood: that I had been created by loss, and because of this, I would always be a shadow, and that life can fold me fully in half, and that if it hadn’t yet, it probably would at some point.

It is how I’ve gone through life, expecting to be brought to my knees and grateful when I haven’t been, as if scraping by, as if any escape was an accident. Anticipating tragedy, grief, the unimaginable, has been a default setting.

Why, though, has it been, when I could have seen myself as a miracle, as a rainbow baby, as an incarnation of pure luck, a gift, as anointed?

But I never have.

I have always felt like a shadow.

I didn’t know the word poem or even how to read yet when I recited what I called a song at three years old. My parents and I were driving home after the annual service of their support group.

With my feet dangling out of my car seat, the afternoon we drove out of the redwood glen where the service was

held, I saw the force. I saw it in the spaces behind the trees that moved past my window. Then, it flew at me. It was wild and black, but it came in the form of words. I spoke them, and my father caught them and wrote them down.

Finding Your Way Out of the Forest of Crying

By Rebekkah Dilts, Age 3

In the forest, people are crying.

It is very dark

When you are in it

And you can't see.

But if you let your feelings out

You will be set free.

You will find your way home.

From then on, words and I were fused.

I needed to be read words, books, and poems until I could read to myself. I spoke songs or poems, inventing words sometimes, until I learned to write. Once I could read words myself, I wanted to write them. I wanted to use them to attach me to time. By writing the memories of days, the shadow of minutes, by writing certain rays of sunlight or small piles of pebbles, I can pinpoint myself within the world. Otherwise, when time is happening, I am

not there. But when I write words, I can make a self. I can make a world to inhabit that is entirely of my own creation.

Sometimes I would write to Malka.

Dear Malka,

Where are you? What is it like where you are? I don't really believe in Heaven exactly, and not in a Christian Heaven, but I am sure you are somewhere because I feel you. And when you come into my dreams, it is so real. I want to know what it is like where you are. I miss you, Malka, even though I didn't get to meet you.

Always, always, I thought of her as my older sister, when really I am her shadow.

And as a shadow, I needed to be filled with light. Words become my light. When writing or reading their characters, when writing or reading the space of other worlds, I became something. However briefly, I have a shape.

I made my life about following words, needing words, earning a Master's and then a PhD in Literature, and reading, reading, and reading.

But at a certain point, early in high school, I stopped writing. I'm not sure why. I seemed not to trust my ability to make words anymore, and I only felt safe inside of the words of others.

Then I reached the end of the carved path I'd followed to Literature, to the PhD, and no job came. The preformed life of Literature refused to keep infusing me with light. Yet, this didn't surprise me. It was a tragedy, a loss I had expected. So I became a shadow again, gray and empty.

The only way to stay alive, it seemed, was to try to write again.

And when I did, it was about Malka. And then I started writing to her again.

Dear Malka,

I am writing about you. For the first time ever I am writing about you.

I used to write to you.

But I stopped many years ago.

I suppose I became self-conscious of writing to you because it seemed silly. Childlike.

Because, after all, I didn't know you.

You were not knowable to anyone.

You were pure possibility, just formed, and then you were a mystery.

Gone.

You are both poles—possibility and ultimate mystery, which frightens me, if I'm being honest. I suppose that you have always frightened me.

And I suppose I have been afraid to tell you that.

You should be only a source of love, devotion. An angel.

I studied angels in graduate school, you know.

They became the subject of my Master's thesis project.

I had become fascinated as an undergraduate by the notion of the angel the Belgian feminist theorist Luce Irigaray wrote about.

Irigaray was criticized for this theory because people thought -- just as I thought in writing to you -- that it was silly. Childlike.

But Irigaray wasn't referring to a white-winged angel holding a harp.

She believed angels were intermediaries between two worlds, and because of that, they could be the ultimate mediators.

They could offer a third way, she wrote, between, between masculine and feminine, between love and hate—an alternative to binaries.

I wonder if you are part of why I became so interested in angels, and in Irigaray's angel?

I wish I had written to you before now instead of being so afraid.

Because the truth is, you have at times felt more like a ghost to me.

A haunting.

I have also been afraid to write for a long time,

Or,

To write about me.

But I have tried to start writing again.

I am in a writing workshop, and they asked us to write to someone from our past

And you came to me immediately.

I wanted to write to you.

I was right about what I knew when I looked at that statue. I have so often found myself folded over like the statue. Sometimes in those moments, I feel as if I am superimposed onto the statue. I feel my arms fold over me in the same way. I feel my head fall down into my chest, my body begins to curl into itself, hardening like the

statue. The sounds I hear myself make in these moments, the gut punch, the feeling of utter absence, of shame, of not being something real, something that can realize life again, feels like a promise. Like destiny. Like I am returning to the source, to my source, to the very way I began.

Dear Malka,

When I became pregnant for the first time, you were there even though I wanted to ignore you.

You were hovering over me when I took the pills that extinguished the small light in my body.

I couldn't see you until my friend saw you and pointed you out to me.

She told me that the twin hands of promiscuity and obsession that come to wrap themselves around my neck in the months that follow might be those of a ghost.

Of your ghost.

Your ghost was guilt.

It turned me to ash for months, powdery and dark, desperate for someone to sweep me away.

You were there again, in the form of fear, when I became pregnant a second time, with the child I have.

You were there when I would have to run home and lie down on my side, guzzling ice water, and counting kicks to make sure that this child would not go to meet you, that he was still alive.

I wanted you to stay away.

I wanted your ghost to leave.

And then you were there when the contractions sputtered and started, refusing to take flight. You were there as I labored for days, when the doula asked me:

“Do you think there's anything holding you back?”

Your ghost was standing in that room, hovering by the door.

His due date was yours, after all, even though you ultimately came and went several weeks before.

Because of that, I wondered if you were going to take him from me.

Or, were you giving him to me?

It must have been the latter, because finally he came, his head emerged, and his body was placed onto my chest.

My gratefulness filled that room with the brightest light I've ever seen.

But really, more than grateful, what I felt was that I had broken a spell, narrowly avoided.

But I didn't break the spell. I haven't avoided a curse. You've come back in the years that have stretched between his birth, as I try desperately, fledgling, failing, to bring life again.

I can hear you whispering somewhere behind me as I hear myself recount my story—my diagnosis—“secondary infertility”—to the doctors, the acupuncturists, the specialist massage therapists, and healers, the story of how I cannot seem to conceive another life.

All those moments during the pregnancy that lasted, that brought life, I thought I was in a war with fate—would what befall you and my mother befall me?

The relief, giant waves of it, rushed and rushed when the pregnancy made it, when the day of labor finally ended with a healthy baby.

“I won't have to look that grief in the face,” I thought, with a deep sigh.

I only have to know it from the side.

But not anymore.

Each month that passes with an empty womb,

Each month that passes with another friend pregnant,

Another colleague pregnant,

Then having birthed,

Rebekkah Dilts

Your ghost looms larger,

Taller,

Fuller.

I see you everywhere now.

You are with me all of the time.

Curse.

But how do I transform you into my angel?

I am realizing, in all this writing,

In writing to you,

That you brought me to words.

The words are the bridge.

The bridge between you and me,

The bridge between me and everything.

The form, the force, the structure, the outline.

Transformation was your gift to me,

Through words.

Is that how I transform you, how I transform me?

To pick up the pen?

To see what is in the forest,

And bring it down to the page?

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The Lion's Way

Sarah Leibov

I was used to my grandmother retelling the same stories on autopilot, so our discussion that day took me by surprise. “Did I ever tell you about the book I read, the one about the opera singer whose child had Tay-Sachs?”

“No,” I answered, pausing from rummaging through a cupboard in her kitchen to glance at her. “Was it a true story? What was the name of the book?”

“No, it was fiction. I don’t remember the title. I was reading it and I wanted to mention it to your stepmother to warn her, but she was already pregnant with Mindy, and as you know, it was too late.” My grandmother looked troubled. “I wonder what would have happened if I had told her. I’ve always regretted keeping my mouth shut.”

I had never heard her speak this way. Grandma was in her nineties, and almost never mentioned my sister, who, on the day in 2010 when Grandma brought up the book,

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had been dead for over twenty years. I had no idea my grandmother thought about her at all.

My sister Mindy was born in 1985. As an infant, she appeared strong and held her body erect when held; in fact, my parents dubbed her “super baby.” However, at ten months old, she couldn’t sit on her own or rock on all fours. When my father and stepmother took her to see specialists, she was diagnosed with Tay-Sachs, a rare genetic disease.

I was ten years old the summer I found out that Mindy was going to die. The first decade of my life had been disrupted by my mother and father’s divorce, and my brother Ben and I struggled to endure several moves after their separation. Shuttled between their two homes, the only constant since their divorce was change. Mindy was my father and stepmother’s firstborn, and for me, her birth was a sign that things were finally going in a better direction. I longed to live with her more often than every other weekend.

I delighted in her long lashes, brown curls, and eyes that resembled my own. Perhaps because I was almost a decade older than Mindy, I considered her to be my baby more than my sister. Ben and I often fought over who could pick her up first and play with her.

I did not cry when my father told us that Mindy had Tay-Sachs and, like others affected by the disease, would

die before the age of 5. Instead, I carried my baby sister upstairs after dinner to my bedroom. I turned the music up loud and danced wildly, holding her in my arms and singing along to my favorites—Madonna, George Michael, Cyndi Lauper. In between songs, we collapsed on my floral bedspread, as she giggled, eyes shining, seeming to ask for more.

Over the next few years, we grew alongside each other, but while my body was made awkward from puberty and pimples, Mindy’s deteriorated. All the things she once did—holding herself upright, eating baby food, showing interest in toys—faded away. She became blind, deaf, and had to be tube fed. Our interactions grew less frequent as she lay on a beanbag chair in a corner of the living room, like a beautiful, motionless doll. Touching her might make her startle, trigger the seizures that would cause her eyes to roll to the back of her head and her limbs to flail. I wanted to avoid seeing her like that, to prevent causing her any discomfort.

The last year of her life, my parents sent Mindy to live at Misericordia, a residential center dedicated to caring for disabled children on the south side of Chicago. We’d visit her on the weekends. My father referred to it as “Misery-cordia” and I felt just what he meant. It was hard to know how long to stay because she didn’t know we were there. I felt helpless in her room, filled with other children with

similar genetic disorders. My parents made friends with the parents of these children, who had symptoms just as debilitating, but their lives of suffering would be prolonged. Mindy died at three and a half—to the day, her half birthday. It was two weeks after my 13th birthday.

The last time I saw my sister was the morning of her funeral. Jews don't have open caskets, but the family is allowed to see the departed before they are buried. She was wearing a red dress with tights and Mary Janes, and she finally looked free and peaceful.

I don't remember who said we were supposed to feel relieved when my sister died, only that I latched on to this because it felt true. I was relieved she was no longer suffering. I told myself that the worst was over, and now I was supposed to move forward. But in clinging to that narrative, there was no permission to mourn, so I carried my grief. I couldn't escape it.

Until our conversation, I hadn't realized my grandmother, too, was still coping with the loss of my sister. After we spoke, I searched periodically for the book she mentioned to no avail. I wondered if her aging brain had dreamt it or confused the echo of our family's trauma with a similar story she'd once read. Tay-Sachs is something you read about in medical books, not novels.

Last summer, a decade after my grandmother died, I found the book when I did a Google search for "fiction,

Tay-Sachs, opera singer." A reviewer on Goodreads, to whom I'll be forever grateful, mentioned the disease in her review, one of the few written about *The Lion's Way* by Lewis Orde⁶. I'd had difficulty finding it because Tay-Sachs is missing from the novel's description and jacket copy. The book was published in 1981, four years before my sister was born, so the dates fit. I'd found the book my grandmother had read.

I immediately ordered it from my library and a few days later picked it up while on a walk with my husband. His eyes grew wide when he saw how thick it was. I flipped to the end to discover it was almost 700 pages. I wasn't surprised. My grandmother was a prolific reader. For me, though, reading it seemed a daunting task given the already large pile of books I had on my bedside table. I was also writing a memoir and freelance articles, running a small business, and caring for my family.

And yet, how could I miss this opportunity to travel back in time to share headspace with my grandmother? How could I walk away from a novel that still troubled her enough to mention it to me decades after Mindy died? My grandmother was no stranger to tragedy. She had lost two sisters of her own, one in childbirth and the other in a car accident, but it wasn't those deaths she mentioned towards the end of her life—it was my sister's.

My resistance was not just about the length of the book. I don't enjoy reading about someone else's trauma, just as I don't enjoy writing about mine. It hurts to continue to revisit a family tragedy that occurred in the 1980s, one that my parents barely spoke about after the funeral. When Mindy died, a part of me stopped breathing in solidarity with her, and that felt appropriate. I swallowed my unexpressed sorrow and became a ghost in my own life.

Losing my sister caused significant anxiety and affected the decisions I made for years. I went from being a straight-A student to a teen who could no longer focus in her honors classes. I numbed my feelings with drugs and bad relationships. I dropped out of college a few times and sought therapy before I was able to move forward with my life—before I would allow myself the future Mindy had been denied. Later, as a mother, I grew overly anxious when my sons were sick with temporary illnesses. The loss is something I carry with me always, whether I write about it or not.

My grandmother passed away at age 94, a few years after mentioning the book. During her long life, she made it clear that she loved me and her other grandchildren unconditionally. She never went to college and, despite her love of books, told me she wasn't a good writer, but that I was. We had a close connection, and I felt privileged to share in her care in her later years.

As my grandmother grew weak in the final months of her life, my mother encouraged me to see a therapist. "Do it now, before she goes. You are going to need to talk to someone about your grief." And grieve I did, perhaps allowing myself to finally feel all the pain I'd avoided after my sister's death decades before. I'd be in the kitchen cooking dinner, and out of nowhere, would sink to the floor, my back against the cabinets as I sobbed.

The day we buried my grandmother, a stranger grabbed my arm as the casket was lowered into the ground, directly next to Mindy's grave. "Did you see that the concrete chamber of your sister's grave is exposed? That's very special; they will be resting close together." I pulled away from her grasp and turned away. I didn't want either of them to be gone, and I didn't want to be left behind to grieve them.

Given all that, how could I turn down the opportunity to read this book as my grandmother had, even knowing how fraught it would feel to read it as I was writing a memoir about the devastating effects my sister's death had on my life? My fulfilled wish to find this book felt as though my grandmother wanted to remind me what she had been through as well. It was an invitation to see it through her eyes. What we didn't discuss in life—our grief about my sister's passing—we could share together now, years after my grandmother's death.

Reading the first page, I saw why my grandmother had been drawn to the book. It begins with the protagonist performing as a tenor in *La Bohème*. An aficionado, my grandmother once said that opera was her first love. She spent many afternoons of her youth listening to arias on the radio while restocking the shelves in her mother's grocery stores.

Only thirty pages of *The Lion's Way* depict the main character's and his wife's struggle with their daughter's disease. The scene of the diagnosis is similar to my parents' experience: there is a moment in the specialist's office that includes the detection of the tell-tale cherry red spot on their baby's retina, followed by the tears and terror as the truth settles in for her mother and father. But as the doctor tells the parents about the symptoms that they will see in their daughter as time goes on—the blindness, the weight loss (Tay-Sachs babies lose the ability to eat, to swallow), the convulsions, and finally her death, he tells them that they should consider putting the baby in a hospital for chronic diseases. He warns them that keeping an ill child at home could have a negative impact on the other children in the household. I almost overlooked this.

When the parents explain that they don't have other children, the doctor recommends it again because of the negative effects it might have on them. The father decides that they will keep their baby at home instead of placing

her in a hospital because she'd be incapable of processing what was happening to her, and wouldn't experience suffering. Her parents, of course, would suffer for her, exponentially.

This is where the similarities between the book's characters and my family end. The father, frantic to escape his devastation, runs off to nightclubs. In his absence, his wife ends their daughter's life by smothering her before killing herself. With this devastating turn, I can understand why it would be hard for my grandmother not only to read about Tay-Sachs, but to speak of it. There are no good outcomes in this story.

I could relate to the main character's need for escape. I carried an irrational sense in my ten-year-old body that I should have prevented Mindy's pain, even though I was helpless to do so. But isn't the oldest sister responsible for the youngest?

There's always been an undercurrent of failure and shame mixed in with my feelings of loss. It kept me from talking about my sister for years after her death. I understand my grandmother's grief and regret for not warning my stepmother about the disease after reading *The Lion's Way*, but I also forgive it, though I know there is really nothing to forgive. It's no more her fault than it was mine. And I can continue to share her grief, knowing that she felt similarly.

Reading this book offered a portal back in time, knowing that she was on the other end of it, the adult she was, and the adult I am now, a woman who can utilize her experience to speak about Tay-Sachs and other genetic diseases. There are alarm bells to ring, and although the need to do so has passed for my family, I can continue to write and speak about carrier screening, to alert others to be tested so that the same doesn't happen to their families. When my grandmother lamented keeping her mouth shut, it enabled and invited me to keep mine wide open.

From my adolescence on, I warned friends to get screened for Tay-Sachs so they could avoid a similar fate, but only after that conversation with my grandmother about her regret did I start writing about my sister. I want everyone to know her story so they might learn from her short life. I want meaning and purpose for my sister's decline and death, and I won't shut up about it—or the damage witnessing it did to me and my grandmother, and the rest of our family.

I have spent the past decade writing and speaking about Mindy's illness to inspire audiences to pursue genetic screening. I know my grandmother would be proud. In a video interview filmed before her death, she mentioned all her grandchildren, including Mindy. Together we share the vow to remember my sister, to carry her life forward,

to mention her name because she will always be a part of our lives.

Nearing the end of *The Lion's Way* I grew teary, perhaps because I was reaching the end of this experience I shared with my grandmother—reading the same book together almost four decades apart and sensing how she must have been moved by the story of an unlikely opera star who, despite his poor upbringing and the tragic death of his wife and daughter, rose to stardom. But I was also touched by the character's arc, one which resonated with the satisfaction of a life well lived, despite being touched by tragedy.

There was a happy ending for us, too. My father and stepmother had two more healthy children, both of whom grew to lead fulfilling lives. And my husband and I created our own family with two sons, one named after the aunt he will never know. Mindy's short life is a chapter in our books, and yet it's so much more than that. The thread of her narrative, the loss that changed our lives, is woven into our story, richer and deeper than it might have been otherwise. The happiness we've experienced is more pronounced alongside its contrast. The impact of her loss reverberates in a way I wish it wouldn't and gives meaning to the rest of my life in ways I couldn't have imagined.

The Scream

Lia Woodall

1.

There is a scream. Buried in bone, calcifying for 22 years.

I feel it bubbling. Shifting the plates of my skeleton. Mountains breaching my epidermis.

I expect bumps on my skin. Explosions less friendly than my freckles.

I will explode.

But there is only dryness. Of aging and living on the Colorado plains east of real mountains. High desert.

You were low desert 22 years ago, a valley in the shadow of the Superstitions. Deep valley without a Phoenix.

The Loss of a Lifetime

2.

In New York, I put my foot down. We will go to MoMA. We will see *The Scream*. In all its pastel nicety. Hanging on a freshly painted wall. Fifth floor.

“Behind bulletproof glass,” I tell my husband.

“Plexi,” he corrects.

I have seen it before. Once. A different iteration. I remember it dark, menacing. On the wall in another quiet museum. Soundless—in the loudest way.

I think that was before, not after, the scream inside. We were just husband and wife—not yet the children, who were fresh to this world when you left it. Therefore, before the scream.

Perhaps a preparation.

3.

They found my sister in an IHOP. She looked up from her coffee. She’d come from a fellowship meeting, her third that day. Had called into work that morning, too. They were afraid she’d scream when they told her.

We’ll tell you after you get in the car.

I won’t go with you unless you tell me.

She was frozen in her chair. Determined to make them dispense their news under the fluorescent lights, against the clanking of stainless steel.

Your brother's dead.

The patrons looked up from their coffees as the restaurant shook.

4.

I told my therapist, the good therapist after the bad therapist, I told her that I needed to hear glass breaking. Inside my head, I could already hear it. Muffled and small. How my nails sounded when they were being trimmed.

It was not enough.

I had a plan. I would take my glass bottles to the recycling center and hurl them one at a time into the metal bin. Listen for the explosions. I was proud of my idea. I could have been a therapist.

But every week when I met with her at six in the morning, when she squeezed me in, and she asked if I'd gone to the center with my bottles, I had to tell her that I hadn't. Shattering glass will not release the scream.

5.

I yelled at my husband, though.

Often.

I yelled at him for bouncing a check, and then another. I yelled at him when he said, "I never have trouble starting the car." And when he didn't read my mind after all the hints I'd left. I yelled at him after I'd quit my job, a second time, certain that this time he'd told me his transfer had finally been approved and we were moving to Colorado.

I even yelled at him for being so careless as to rush in the middle of the night to comfort our baby boy and breaking his toe against the door jamb on the way.

One night after dinner, I yelled at my husband for nothing at all and walked out the front door. I needed to see the new French thriller about a young woman kidnapped and buried alive in a bucolic countryside where no one will hear her scream.

6.

I saw a lot of movies in the spring of 1991. I re-watched *The Godfather* and thought about family loyalty, I rented *The Other*, about a charming, but evil twin brother, I went to see *The Silence of the Lambs* and heard the screams of

slaughter and abandonment, I rented *Ordinary People* about the stronger sibling surviving, but wanting to die.

That spring, each Movie of the Week had a character who took his or her own life in some melodramatic manner. Or so it seemed.

My life was badly made-for-TV. B-rated, but I couldn't change the channel.

7.

I met a friend at the National Gallery in DC. I ordered mashed potatoes at the cafeteria, and we sat near the waterfall wall. The way they served the gravy made the mound of potatoes look like a castle surrounded by a moat. I took a couple bites, careful not to spill the dark goo.

I told my friend how my twin brother shot himself in the heart in his condo in Arizona. Then I broke the moat and watched the gravy bleed onto the white plate. I told my friend that I was mad at the grocery clerk who rang up the wrong price and the photo clerk who didn't process the duplicates I'd carefully requested, then argued with me that I must not have checked the box on the envelope.

How exponentially important it was to me that they got it right, suffering as I was.

8.

At the viewing, my best friend from college held my hand, let me rest my head against her. Her shoulder was tense. She said, I am so angry with Larry. What a selfish thing to do.

I retrieved my hand and sat up straight on the wooden bench.

I felt betrayed. I felt betrayed. I felt betrayed.

I got up and left. I could not sit beside her anger.

9.

That first year, I read Theo's letters to Vincent and saw *The Starry Night* in New York at MoMA. Fifth floor. I stood in front of it, holding my baby boy, thinking how you'd just taken dozens of pictures of him, in his crib and on his blanket, surrounded by playfulness. And of my toddling daughter, too.

How you'd taught her to say, "Don't touch the cactus," on our walk to the park. How you'd captured her laughter in the twirl of her hem, like the swirls in Van Gogh's sky.

But then you'd retreated into his night palette.

10.

We went to Disney World with our two children. It was eight or nine years after their uncle shot himself. We were seated far from the stage for the new Indiana Jones show. Someone would be chosen to come up on stage based on how loudly, how convincingly, they screamed. On the count of three, I opened my mouth with hundreds of kids.

I was a dried-up corpse in rags, buried alive.

Thousands of sand flies spewed from my oval cleft. I convinced the lady in front of me. She flinched, then turned suddenly, eclipsing my scream.

What's wrong with you?

She didn't really want to know, but I wanted to tell her, to shock her. Only there was too much heat in my cheeks.

11.

I'd promised to take my toddling daughter shopping, but I was crumpled on the kitchen floor.

Why are you crying, Momma?

I miss Uncle Larry, sweet pea. I miss him so very, very much. I don't think I can take you shopping today.

Look, Momma, she said. He's right here. We can take him shopping with us. And my magical munchkin scooped him

up in her fist off the linoleum and placed him carefully in her little purse.

Her innocence pulled me off the floor.

Later, when we were leaving the parking structure, I turned too sharply and scraped a cement pillar. I screamed louder and longer than warranted, until the look on my daughter's face silenced me.

I had frightened her that day.

12.

We must wait in line to approach *The Scream*. There are crowds and cameras. I turn to pass the time with my husband and my twenty-something daughter who now lives in Manhattan. The *Starry Night* is over their shoulders, on the wall directly opposite.

An honest conversation is forming.

13.

My sister visited that April following his death. We went to Union Station in D.C. and visited the Easter Bunny. My toddling daughter ran up to him and could not tear herself away. She had on the black and white polka dot dress with

the picture of a bunny, multicolored, on her chest. One ear was bent over in guffaw.

I saw where joy might still exist in a train station at Easter.

The following day, on my way home from work, I returned there and took a picture of myself with the Easter Bunny. I had on my Liz Clairborne black dress with the long sleeves and princess seams. An illusion of polka dots. It felt like a cocoon.

I gave the picture to my husband.

14.

My sister had written a poem. She's in a big house and there is a storm outside. Lightning flashes and all the windows shatter at the same time. She hears the glass breaking.

When she read it to me, I heard organ music.

15.

I had lunch with another friend, one from college in Arizona. We went to my favorite diner and I ordered mashed potatoes with lots of gravy. I played with my food. I told him how my twin brother killed himself with a 22-

caliber pistol. How there was only a small mark on the sofa that looked like oxidized ketchup.

We walked out to my car afterwards. Someone had parked a truck behind me in such a way that I had to back up and inch forward many times to be free. Halfway through my maneuvers, I said to my friend, See those guys leaning against the light pole, watching me struggle while they smoke their cigarettes?

They got into the truck as I drove away.

When I returned home, I went into my basement and stared at the exposed pipes.

16.

My sister likes razor blades and sharp knives. She likes how they feel on her skin. I am glad she screamed in the restaurant.

17.

I am close now.

I had waited, so patiently, 22 years' worth of patience, for the other museum-goers to take it in. Take their photos and move away. Now it's my turn to stare into that open

Lia Woodall

orifice, to see it stare back. Recognize the scream still inside. Suck it out of my mouth and into its own.

18.

Did you scream when the bullet tore your flesh on its way to your heart?

Did you even have time?

I hope not. I hope not even time to form the idea.

But here it is facing you on the fifth floor of MoMA, swirls meeting swirls.

I hope I have left my own. Trapped behind a Plexiglas window. Soundless—in the loudest way.

Beyond the glass shattering.

This bulletproof scream.

My Lifetime Loss

Carol Schultz Vento

“I thought we would grow old together,” I whispered to my 22-year-old sister, Rosemary. She didn’t answer, lying still and silent. She was frozen in time in a white satin-lined casket, a favorite beige dress with forget-me-nots on the bodice, her forever outfit.

Four days earlier, on Thanksgiving evening on November 22, 1973, her life had ended. I can still hear that dreaded doorbell ringing, ringing, ringing, in the dead of the night at the Philadelphia duplex we shared with my mother. I was barely 27 and lived in the upstairs apartment with my husband. I rushed down the steps and saw the policeman. As I opened the door, he asked, “Does Rosemary Schultz live here?” He entered my mother’s downstairs apartment and asked to use the phone. After he hung up from the call, he turned to my mother and stated in a monotone, “Your daughter is dead.”

I fell to the floor, screaming “No, no, no!” My mother sharply said, “Stop it, Carol.” Upon those words, I froze my grief. I was used to denying and suppressing my emotions. As the eldest daughter born to an unlikely pair—a daughter of an Italian immigrant in Philadelphia and an adventurous son of the West, who was a risk-taking 82nd Airborne paratrooper—I was accustomed to appearing brave.

My father was my role model, teaching me, a sickly, skinny child with episodes of rheumatic fever, which left me bed bound for a while, to be strong. I was 11 when my parents divorced and missed my dad terribly, but didn’t show it, since my parents had their own struggles amid a contentious divorce. I took the admonition, “Take care of your sister,” even more seriously after the split, but I had always felt protective of her. The two of us became an enmeshed unit, each other’s companion since our father was struggling to overcome alcoholism triggered by his unrecognized post-traumatic stress disorder from combat in World War II.

My mother was working long hours as a hairdresser in the front of our rowhouse, which had been converted to her beauty shop after the divorce. Dinnertime was usually my sister and myself with mom grabbing a quick bite at the counter in between customers.

Dad was a weekend presence for a while until he remarried an alcoholic woman he met while drying out at an addiction rehab center. The newlyweds kept drinking and became suicidal. One evening she slit her wrists. Dad called and told me he had “missed the boat” and was going to kill himself. I talked him down, and the next day, he left our lives for three years, moved to California with his parents, and finally achieved sobriety.

All this chaos was difficult on us. Rosemary had a harder time, being the youngest, but I tried to be both a sibling and surrogate parent to her. Upon her death, I felt an enormous sense of guilt, even though I could not have prevented it.

She was a passenger on a motorcycle driven by her careless, manipulative boyfriend, whom I didn’t like, but I had no control over her choices. He was driving recklessly that night when he slammed into a car, my sister flying through the air and becoming the sole fatality. My feeling of failure haunted my dreams for a number of years after her death. She appeared in a mist, in trouble, I attempted to save her, but was unable to again and again.

Fifty years without her have now passed. I no longer have those disturbing dreams, but a day doesn’t go by without my thinking of her, especially now as I have grown older without her. I ponder the happy and sad life experiences she has missed. Her college graduation, a

wedding, maybe children, but also the deaths of our parents, dad at 82 in California in 2005 and mom in New Jersey at 92 in 2014. They both lived long lives, and always missed their two children who died young, Rosemary at 22, and an infant named Mary Ann at two days of age in 1947. My parents told me of Mary Ann's loss, but at a year old, I was too young to remember it. It was lonely to go through our parents' deaths without Rosemary.

And it was lonely to know I'd live the rest of my life without the only person I'd shared a childhood with.

I've kept my emotions partially bottled up over the years, doing what I do best—intellectualizing. I finished my doctoral work in Political Science in 1979, six years after my sister's death, although there were times I felt like quitting.

During those years of dissertation writing, I was also teaching. Ten years after obtaining the Ph.D., in 1989, I started to attend law school, juggling studying and tests with the raising of my daughter, who was four at that time. Keeping my mind active and full was a coping mechanism. I avoided thinking a lot about the loss, but it was always beneath the surface. At Thanksgiving and her birthday, I felt depressed for the entire week.

I have been an overachiever. I wonder if my parents' losing both Rosemary and the baby spurred me to

compensate. I was the sole survivor of three children born to them, and was internally driven to make them proud. No pressure was put on me by my parents; it was all me. Since I was the recipient of a longer life than my siblings, I determined to make it worthwhile.

As I have gotten older and less busy with work responsibilities, the memories have been flooding back. Similar to older war veterans who have seemingly adjusted well, but who experience war flashbacks when they retire, the losses are more prominent in my psyche.

During the first five years after Rosemary's death, I was in a state of shock and denial, which often occurs with a sudden, unexpected death. It took me that long to fully comprehend that there would be a "forever" without her at my side.

Isolation was a constant for years. I did not know anyone among my family or friends who had lost a young sibling. The Compassionate Friends organization was in its infancy and had a parents' group in my area, but nothing for siblings. It was more than a decade before I met someone else that had lost a young sibling. It is easy to identify with someone who'd experienced sibling loss, but those who hadn't experienced it always assumed I was "over it" or would get closure.

Therapy has aided me in realizing there is never really closure and one does not get "over it." You go through

Carol Schultz Vento

your life managing the loss the best way you can, but it changes you. I am a more anxious person, and I worry that a catastrophe might befall a family member. Therapy has helped with that anxiety also. Other tools to center myself have been yoga and meditation, and trying to live in the present, although that is difficult for me.

Keeping Rosemary's memory alive and sharing her with others is a way to make sure she is not forgotten. Writing is therapeutic, and in my first book, *The Hidden Legacy of World War II: A Daughter's Journey of Discovery* (Sunbury Press 2011), I was able to understand the negative impact of our paratrooper father's untreated post-combat PTSD on our fractured family and how significantly it affected my sister.

In my June 2024 book, *Twisted Strands: Secrets, Lies, and Generational Trauma* (Sunbury Press), I go into more detail about how the family dynamics of two previous generations set into motion a chain of events which have negative consequences on my generation. This process of writing has enabled me to share my sister's life and has given me a more complete comprehension of the forces that may have led to her choices, the accident, and her subsequent death.

I will miss going through life with her and feel the sadness of our not growing old together forever.

Waves

Jennifer Hilbert Speak

The first wave was a crushing tsunami.

My mom told me to come home without telling me why.

As I drove, I imagined everything that could have happened. Except the one thing that did.

I knew if my brother's car was there when I arrived, that he had come home from college.

And that would mean it was very bad.

His car wasn't there. And it was very bad.

My mom, eerily calm, told me he was gone.

The wave came for me. I turned and ran.

And ran. But people caught me, and so did the wave of pain. I screamed as it crashed into me.

Waves of grief slammed into me every morning I woke up.

Jennifer Hilbert Speak

The night held dreams where it was all wrong.

It was a mistake; he was alive.

Waking knocked me down with inescapable reality.

Waves of reminders brought sadness constantly.

A friend who had been a second mother to us described how her watch stopped on the same day at the same time he died.

I ran into the man at the car repair shop who worked on LifeFlight, which transported my brother to the hospital in a race to save his life, who later unknowingly ended up buying my brother's car.

"Forever Young," a song played at his high school graduation and then four months later at his funeral, played in the grocery store.

I reread the card I wrote that went along with the memory box I gave him for graduation, empty but full of potential, where I told him I hoped his life would be filled with precious memories.

The waves of effort I spent trying to recover sent me in the wrong direction.

I stayed with the man I told my brother I was going to break up with.

The Loss of a Lifetime

I married him, the man who couldn't come to the funeral because it was "too intense" for him.

My parents and I celebrated our return to normal with a 200+ person wedding.

I realized my mistake 18 months later.

My parents provided a safe harbor when I left the marriage.

Waves of healing sent me in a new direction, to a new person who was right.

I cried an ocean of tears the night I told him the story of my brother.

He will never know my brother.

He just knows the ghost, hears the memories, sees the pictures, tries to remember the stories.

He never forgets the anniversary.

After time had passed and I knew happiness again, a new crushing wave arrived.

We had children.

Two uncle-less, cousin-less children.

I grieved for them, never having known him.

We arrived at the 20th anniversary of losing him.

He had been gone longer than he was here.

Jennifer Hilbert Speak

These two things caused a new level of sorrow that was deep and raw. Unexpected. Unabating.

Inescapable, again.

Nobody told me there was going to be a second round of grieving, nearly as tough as the first one.

I was adrift.

The scab slowly healed again, but with more scar tissue.

More waves.

My father had a stroke.

My mother had heart surgery. It failed, so she had another.

It is just me here to help them, and I am scared.

I'm aging and I desperately want help recalling our memories, but my fellow childhood historian is gone.

I feel unmoored and angry and responsible and alone.

Nobody told me there was going to be a third round of grieving.

I hate National Sibling Day.

The wound continues to ache, and I'm resigned that it always will.

I build more scar tissue.

The Loss of a Lifetime

And then, a surprise. My brother caused ripples among those who loved him.

His best friend had kept his water ski in storage for the last 29 years.

A good friend of my brother's needed one, and this ski was perfect. Oddly pristine for its age.

It came out of storage on the very same weekend my parents gave my daughter his college sweatshirt for her 8th grade graduation—something that also hadn't been touched in 29 years.

That summer, after all this time, his treasured ski hit the water again, creating waves of its own.

And his precious sweatshirt was lovingly worn.

My daughters joined me for the first time at the annual ceremony where the scholarship in his name is awarded.

My oldest daughter, whose middle name was given in honor of him, writes a school essay about him.

For the first time in so long, I feel joy knowing his spirit is at play, and his memory is still alive with others beyond me.

Nobody told me there were so many levels of sibling loss.

But finally, this one brings a smile.

Jennifer Hilbert Speak

I will always carry sadness. Scar tissue. Fear of loss.
But I'm not alone in keeping him alive.
He has a legacy. And that gives me peace.

Death is Not the End

Alyson Shelton

My father traveled alone to Vegas, to purge, to clean out my just-dead brother's apartment, to prepare it for the next renter.

I remember that he returned with very little, almost nothing, and the words, words he spoke quietly and with a gentle shake of his head, almost disbelieving,

“Heartbreaking to see how he lived.”

Funny that we were such a neat family. Tidy. Metaphorical military corners on a bed. Funny because, we were the weirdest on our block, in the neighborhood, potentially in our town. My parents, divorced, but living together in separate bedrooms, with sometimes boyfriends and girlfriends. My mother with a muumuu, and tarot cards, and runes, and freshly squeezed carrot juice, when everyone else ironed their crisp tennis whites daily and sipped martinis.

Our emotional mess seeped out through words and glances, or simply by ignoring the reality of each other.

Michael, my brother, always the outlier, even in death. How dare he share his disorder? Not only in the unapologetic chaos of his apartment but in his untucked shirts and broken glasses. Why couldn't he hide it better? Where was his shame?

What did he leave behind? That could be passed on to his parents, his surviving three brothers? To me, the youngest and his only sister?

While writing this, I texted one of our other brothers, curious what he remembers of the aftermath.

“Dad got rid of everything. All I've got are my memories and photographs of him.”

I remember it a bit differently.

Michael left us his baseball memorabilia. His almost new car. His sense of humor. His nearsightedness. His love.

Baseball, the language Michael spoke and understood. It's the late 70s, and he would listen to a game while watching another on his tiny black and white TV.

Baseball, his escape. A place where he made sense. His pencil, keeping stats and scores, predicting endings. Giving his life structure.

One high school summer, he traveled the country by bus to visit and attend a game at each Major League Baseball ballpark, the trip ending in Cooperstown, at the Baseball Hall of Fame. The whole family met him there. I'm a toddler, my first plane ride, my first adventure, and it's fueled entirely by my brothers' dreams.

Decades later, I attended Northwestern University and became a Cubs fan, a transitory one, I'll admit, but for those four years, I loved the Cubbies and Wrigley Field. It's a place that explained his obsession to me. I glanced at the mustachioed fans, drinking their second or third Old Style, cheering for Sosa, or heckling almost anyone, and imagined Michael there, with me.

I cannot conjure the sound of his laugh, but I feel it. It is deep, the deepest voice in my life. It grounds me and assures me, if we can just laugh at all of this, we can find a way to survive it too.

I cannot hear his voice, not anymore, but I know it. It's in old Major League Baseball parks. And it's in my bones.

His baseball things, the valuable ones, his Al Kaline Detroit Tigers jersey, we donated. My brothers considered keeping the baseball cards, but in the end, didn't, what

would they do with his childhood obsession? I don't know what became of them. A cousin? A neighborhood boy?

What we all know is, they're gone.

His almost new car. Our youngest brother, Eric, just 20 and living in Tahoe, took it. I'd like to say it lasted until he drove it into the ground. But cars, at that time, in my family, didn't do that. They didn't last. They rolled. Were totaled. Wrecked beyond repair.

There's an easy metaphor there.

Michael's car was no different. It didn't last the year.

His sense of humor.

We gathered to remember him, to celebrate him. Instead of having a funeral, we held hands, making a circle in Brand Park. The summer sun shining down on us, the best it could through the haze of smog. It's the San Fernando Valley, it's the 1980s, the air never quite clear.

I am wrung out with grief. That place where more tears feel impossible and inevitable. How can the body produce so much tangible sadness? When does a body get cried out?

I don't know. Mine never has.

I am an easy crier. If I read this out loud to you, I would cry, remembering that day, I was only ten, and still, here I am, decades later, feeling the echoes of my loss. If you told me something vulnerable about yourself, something precious and rare, I would cry. Maybe I'd try to hide it, try to keep the story about you and swallow my own sadness, but know, the tears would be there, just past the curtain of my lashes.

My tears are never far away.

I'm fluent in sadness and loss. So are my parents, I learned the nuances—the choices of how to grieve or deny—from them.

My mom meditated and changed her name to Zorah and believed that Michael was still with us, in us, around us.

“Death is an illusion.”

Or

“Death is a transition.”

I don't disagree, but also, I was a child, and I wanted to hold his goddamn hand. I wanted him on my team in this family of taking sides.

I wanted his brilliant barbs at the expense of my magazine-cover-ready brothers. Brains over brawn, etc. Our team needed him, now everything was out of balance.

The best I could do now was to hold my mother's hand at Michael's service, as she said,

"Let's think of Michael, all his qualities, and think of one that will live within us. Always."

One of those camera-ready bros (before bros were a thing) said,

"His sense of humor."

I don't know what I said. I was in shock. How? How could he want his sense of humor?

All his "jokes" were at our (team brains/team underdog/team Michael) expense. He wasn't and never would be funny.

I swiped Michael's gallows humor. I didn't claim it that day, but I stole it. I made it mine.

I am quick to laugh.

I will laugh at myself first. Yes, I do it first so you do it second, or maybe not at all. Yes, it started out as a trauma response. And now, I find life comically tragic and beautifully hopeful.

I laugh and I cry. I allow myself to feel things.

I try not to apologize for myself or make excuses.

I have to remind myself from time to time, these feelings and giving myself the space to feel them is a revolutionary act.

His nearsightedness. Sometimes contacts, sometimes glasses, always impaired.

On that day, wearing glasses with only one temple. The piece that settles over the ear, the piece that holds the glasses on the face, it's called the temple, and one was missing. Michael knew how to make do, how to cause the least bother, and we wonder if that is why he died in the accident. He lost his glasses, he lost his way. Would new glasses have changed the ending?

My son wears glasses. Lets them wander down the bridge of his nose, allows them to rest there, occasionally pushes them up his nose like Michael.

A deep, bass voice I haven't heard in decades pours from his mouth as he grows taller than me.

The humor I stole, the darkness I flirt with, so does he.

Do I wish Uncle Michael could be here for my boy?

Yes.

Though our birth family is no longer together. We're scattered across states and realities. We don't agree on the truth or consequences. And in the quiet moments when I

reflect on our relationship, and my current reality, I'm not certain we'd be close if he were still alive.

I'm not sure we'd be as inseparable as we are now, his voice with me, his laughter in my lungs, and these flickers of him in the face of my son.

Did loving Michael help me love this boy, my son, now?

Yes.

I know that time is precious and not only because I've known loss but also age and change. So I stay up too late with my teenager trading stupid jokes and hug him and breathe in every last ounce of his body, straining to be grown, to find his place.

—

Love.

What is that? And how do I know he left it to me?

Because I feel it when I speak his name, when I write his name. He is the spark between me and the youngest brother, his other team members.

We remember him. And he loves us.

When Michael died, it would be acceptable, predictable even, to say that the whole world shifted. But that wouldn't be accurate, not for me.

My father almost died two years before Michael's death (Staph Infection) and a year after (Windsurfing out to the open sea). Our eldest brother almost died too (Gun Violence). The youngest (Motorcycle Accident). Oh, and me (Medical Misdiagnosis).

The specter of death, an unwelcome acquaintance and a certainty. I chose to believe death would take someone deserving, a devil, not an angel.

I was wrong.

Death doesn't take orders, at least not from me.

Life doesn't either.

Seven years after Michael's death, that's my before and after. The chasm from which I couldn't return, couldn't go back to "how things were."

Not ever.

And Michael was there. In my memories, whispering through my subconscious, helping me to believe myself. His voice stronger than my own, turning up the volume on my truth,

"It all happened."

That midnight, he broke through my fog, my confusion, and disbelief, why was I just lying there, I should fight back; I would fight back; that's what a girl like me would do.

Alyson.

He reminded me I was there. Real, corporeal, with choices that I could reach if only I extended myself.

He got me out of that room. His voice told me to,

Get out. Run. Go now.

While that boy fumbled in the bathroom, I woke up to myself and slipped out the door.

When I sat in the hallway of that hotel, alone, wearing only a wet oversized t-shirt and my bikini bottoms, shaking, shaking so hard I felt my teeth in my chest, he directed me to that pay phone, informed me I could do something I'd only seen on TV shows and in movies,

Call Mom.

But I don't have any money.

Call Mom. Collect.

And so I picked up that phone and dialed "0" and even though, or maybe because, it was the middle of the night and I was on a Spring Break trip with "friends," she answered, she handled it, she rescued me.

When others, in our family, called me a liar or dramatic or a bitch, he said,

I believe you.

He never stopped saying,

I believe you.

Even as the collect call from Arizona morphed into a call from inside the house, and grew into an indictment against our family and our childhoods.

Seventeen wasn't the first time I froze and floated above my body, accepting cruelty as my fate; it was just the first time I ran. It was the first time I had the words. It was the first time I told anyone. The first time I spoke. The first time. And the last time we were a family.

I believe you.

That's love.

That's what he left me.

Pieces of myself that I didn't know I'd lost.

As a Long Griever, Pain Is a Gift I Welcome

Lisa Cooper Ellison

The day started with a six-word text: What song should I listen to? It was one of three I'd receive, acknowledging the anniversary of my brother's suicide. After 26 years, I can count the members of my inner circle who knew my brother on one hand. For everyone else, he's a story I've told them.

The rituals I use to commemorate his death are simple. Listen to Nirvana's *Nevermind*. Flip through the photo album containing Joe's pictures. Hug his Marlboro hoodie. Inhale the faint aroma of Egyptian Musk still haunting his leather backpack. Write him a letter. Pick a song for that friend.

I ended the day by calling my father—this year, from my car after running some last-minute errands. Night had just fallen. Outside, the final glow of dusk created a scrim

The Loss of a Lifetime

of light on the nearby hills. I pressed the phone to my ear as my father said, "I can't believe..."

We've been saying these words for years.

On the day of Joe's wake, I shuffled around the funeral home. Every few steps, family members or friends grabbed my arm. "I can't believe he's gone. We waited for Joe to walk through the door and tell us this was all a terrible mistake, yet knew he never would."

To believe is to accept something as true. At first, we couldn't believe the unfathomable had happened—not just that my 20-year-old brother was dead, but that he'd chosen to check out. Denial, that sweet state of disbelief, shielded our hearts from this burden.

As the days turned into months and then years, I found myself saying I can't believe again, only this time my incredulity was about the passage of time. That sting hit particularly hard on those milestone anniversaries: the five, the ten, the twenty.

With each passing year, the soundtrack of our shared lives degraded a little more. First, the precise combination of fragrances that made up his scent. Then the sound of his voice and the contours of his face. Now, I wonder about things I rarely paid attention to during his short life, like whether hair ringed the knuckles of his toes or how high I had to reach to touch his shoulder.

Each new loss made me want to claw back time. Knowing that was impossible, I wrote about him, hoping to preserve what was left. Over time, a story of acceptance that allows me to love a brother who was deeply complicated and angry but also kind and generous embedded itself in my bones. His death has been integrated into my life. But integrated means coordinated and unified, not pain free.

And so that phrase—I can't believe—continues to rest heavy in my throat.

Sitting in the car, watching a moon just a sliver past full rise above me as my father heavily sighed, I confided that sometimes I can't believe Joe lived at all. While my relationship with him is stronger than it was when he roamed this earth, what I know of him is mostly memories and musings with his ghost.

Earlier that day, I'd shared a post on social media so I could publicly say his name and remind others that grief isn't something we graduate from, but rather something we carry with us.

While I don't do this for condolences, they often pour in, along with well-meaning strategies others hope will eradicate my heartache, as if uncomfortable feelings are something I need to get rid of.

They are wrong.

While sadness is something I occasionally experience, my days are largely joyous, and in them, I bring Joe's memory along for the ride. It's only on anniversaries, or while listening to the songs we shared, or when the infrequent trigger arrives that white-hot shards of grief pierce my chest, and I know my brother isn't a figment of my imagination.

So, I stay in the car long after my father hangs up. Darkness folds over me as I listen to "Smells Like Teen Spirit," the song I'd texted to my friend. An ache grows in my chest, the pressure so intense it steals my breath. As it reaches its crescendo, I feel Joe next to me, and in that moment, our life together is real.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to every sibling who's trusted us with their stories. We hope that this book will provide a space for your loss to be seen, mirrored, and taken seriously. Like a textbook "forgotten mourner," I spent decades trying to tell myself that it was "no big deal" and it was "time to get over it." And if I hadn't come across Lynn's writing during the pandemic, I might still be telling myself that. Through my friendship with Lynn, and other siblings, I've made a space for my brother Michael in my daily life. And I can think of no better way to honor him and our relationship than editing this book with Lynn.

This book, and the world we live in, are constant reminders that community is essential—not only to survive, but to live, and hopefully thrive. We would not be here without the enthusiastic support of each and every contributor. Extra special thanks to Lisa Cooper Ellison for her friendship, encouragement, and support, and to Molly Fowkes for her partnership and creation of The Loss of a Lifetime website. Thanks also to Judy Lipson and Michele Peters for generously supporting the

publication of this collection. And to our small, but mighty, publishing team; cover artist, Elise McCall, proofreader LeAnn Beckwith, and technical wizard, Brittany Meng. Thank you to Jessica Handler, Dacher Keltner, Gregory Orr, and Stephanie Wittels Wachs for your generosity and words of encouragement; though we weren't able to include your beautiful essays in this collection, please know that your support propelled us forward in completing this project. Thank you to the friends and sister writers who were available and responsive to all the little questions and issues that come up; Ingrid Clayton, Margo Fowkes, and Esther Goetz. And thank you to Heidi Horsely, Lilly Julien, Meg Kissinger, and Annie Sklaver Orenstein for taking the time to read this collection and share their praise with us and the world.

I cannot name all of the people who have believed in us and this book because they are innumerable. Lynn and I felt buoyed by each person who reminded us how important this book is and told us they couldn't wait to read it and share it with others. Thank you.

There are times when hopelessness is so close it's palpable. It feels as if anything we try to do is either impossible or meaningless or both. That is a lie. You matter. The feelings you feel matter. And the actions you take make a difference.

Thank you for joining us on the porch, we hope you'll visit our website, learn more about us, the sibling loss community we're building—including book clubs and an In Memory page—on our website:

www.lossofalifetime.com

Contributor Bios

Alyson Shelton is an award-winning screenwriter and essayist. Her writing is widely published at outlets including *The New York Times*, *Ms.*, and *The Rumpus*. She's deeply proud of her collaborations with other female creatives, most notably, the comic, *Reburn*, and the film, *To Hold The Night*. She's anthologized in collections including *Comics Lit Vol. 1* (Accomplishing Innovation Press), *No Contact: 28 Writers on Family Estrangement* (Catapult 2026), and *Root Cause: Stories of Health, Harm and Reclaiming Our Humanity* (Editor: Jeannine Ouellette). She's best known for her Instagram Live series inspired by George Ella Lyon's poem, *Where I'm From* where she's hosted close to 200 writers. The poem also provides the spine for her forthcoming memoir.

Annabel Chown was born in London. She studied architecture at Cambridge University, then worked as an architect for several years, in both London and Berlin. At 31, she was diagnosed with breast cancer, started making notes while going through treatment, and discovered a passion for writing. Her memoir, *Hidden: Young, Single,*

Cancer (Blue Door Press, 2020) emerged from this. She is also a journalist and a yoga teacher. Her writing, on topics including illness, loss, motherhood, and wellbeing, has been published in leading UK publications such as *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, and *Grazia*. She lives in London with her husband and six-year-old son.

Anne Pinkerton is the author of the memoir, *Were You Close? A sister's quest to know the brother she lost* (Vine Leaves Press, 2023).

Artie Johann is a TV writer/performer who has written for *Family Guy*, *Big Mouth*, and *Beavis & Butt-Head*. He lives in Los Angeles with his wife, kids, and cats.

Carol Schultz Vento is a retired political science professor and attorney. Her Ph.D. is from Temple University and law degree from Rutgers University. She is the author of 2 books: *The Hidden Legacy of World War II: A Daughter's Journey of Discovery* and *Twisted Strands: Family Secrets and Intergenerational Trauma*. Her sister Rosemary died at age 22 in a Thanksgiving accident in 1973.

Daniel Simpson's most recent book, *Inside the Invisible*, published by Nine Mile Books in November 2022, won the inaugural Propel Poetry Prize. Other books include *Border Songs: A Conversation in Poems*, co-authored with Ona Gritz (Finishing Line Press, 2017) and *School for the Blind* (Poets Wear Prada, 2014). His work has been

anthologized in *About Us: Essays from the Disability Series of the New York Times*, *Welcome to the Resistance: Poetry as Protest*, and *Beauty Is a Verb: The New Poetry of Disability*, and has appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *The Cortland Review*, and many other journals. He serves as flash nonfiction editor for *Wordgathering*, and leads, along with Ona Gritz, online workshops in poetry and flash memoir. He sings with the Mendelssohn Chorus of Philadelphia and works as a technical support specialist for the Library of Congress.

Gretchen L. Kelly is a writer, parent, and middle child in a close-knit family. When she was in college, her younger brother began having vague health issues. Years later, within days of becoming engaged to her husband of 25 years, her brother was diagnosed with stage four pediatric cancer. Ten days before her wedding, he lost his battle. Grief has been the throughline in every milestone since.

Jennie Burke is a teacher, mother, and harm reduction advocate from Baltimore. Her work has appeared in a variety of mainstream and literary outlets. She holds a B.A. from Boston College in Secondary Education and Faith, Peace and Justice studies, and an MFA in Nonfiction writing from Goucher College.

Jennifer Hilbert Speak is Chief Operating Officer at Pinwheel.us and spends her free time volunteering at the local SPCA and community theatres, as well as reading,

kayaking, and driving teenagers around. She lives in Roseville, California, with her wonderful husband, two amazing daughters, and an adorable rescue dog.

Judy Lipson is the author of *Celebration of Sisters: It Is Never Too Late To Grieve*, winner of the Literary Titan's 2021 Silver Award. The sole survivor of three sisters, Judy founded Celebration of Sisters, an annual ice-skating fundraiser to commemorate the lives and memories of her beloved sisters Margie and Jane to benefit Massachusetts General Hospital's Eating Disorders Clinical and Research Program.

Judy shared her experience of losing two sisters, her life forever changed, as the keynote speaker for The Bereaved Parents National USA 2023 Conference, The Compassionate Friends National Conference, The Open to Hope Cable television, and as a board member of the COPE Foundation.

Judy's passion for figure skating was rewarded by being the recipient of the 2020 Get Up Award by the U.S. Figure Skating Association for her resilience on and off the ice.

Julie Cantrell is a multiple award-winning, *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestselling author, editor, instructor, TEDx speaker, and ghostwriter. Her novels have earned starred reviews from *Publishers Weekly* and *Library Journal* and have been featured in Top Reads lists by *LitHub*, *Redbook*, *Southern Living Magazine*, *REAL*

SIMPLE, *BookBub*, *HuffPost*, *USA TODAY (HEA)*, and more.

The recipient of two Christy Awards, two Carol Awards, and the Mississippi Library Association Fiction Award, Julie was named a short-list finalist twice for the Mississippi Arts & Letters Fiction Award as well as a two-time short-list finalist for the Pat Conroy Southern Book Prize.

Julie currently serves as managing director of *Story Summit*, an online writing community for writers across the publishing and film industry. She works full-time from her home in Fairhope, Alabama. Learn more: www.juliecantrell.com or www.storysummit.us

Kathryn Leehane is an award-winning writer, speaker, and humorist. Her work has been featured in several anthologies and a variety of publications, including *The Washington Post*, *Under the Gum Tree*, *Hippocampus Magazine*, *McSweeney's*, and *Ms. Magazine*. Kathryn lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her husband, two children, and a menagerie of rescue dogs. www.kathrynleehane.com

Katie Daley has performed her poetry across North America in theaters, radio broadcasts, ballrooms, and junkyards. She's a recipient of three Individual Creativity Excellence Awards from the Ohio Arts Council and a fellowship at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown,

Massachusetts. Her poems and essays have appeared in various publications, including *High Country News*, *Exposition Review*, *Hippocampus*, *Seneca Review*, *Slipstream*, and *Times They Were A-Changing: Women Remember the '60s and '70s* (She Writes Press). Her memoir about the journey she took hitchhiking and migrant-working her way across the USA in the wake of her brother's suicide was a finalist for the 2020 Autumn House Press Nonfiction Prize. Her most recent book of poems is *Any Closer to Home* (Finishing Line Press, 2023). As a teaching artist, she does therapeutic writing outreach in drug rehabilitation programs, hospitals, schools, and community centers throughout Northeast Ohio. www.katiedaley.com

Khara-Jade Warren lives with her husband and two sons in a small town in South Africa, somewhere between the Drakensberg Mountains and the Indian Ocean. She works as a copywriter and content marketer, but her one true love will always be books. One day, she hopes to write a few of her own.

Lia Woodall (she/her) is an award-winning essayist who experiments with form to explore her experiences of twin loss to suicide and family dysfunction. Her hybrid chapbook "Remove to Play" (*The Cupboard Pamphlet*, 2020) was the 2019 contest winner. Her work appears in *Best American Experimental Writing 2020* (digital

edition), *Under the Gum Tree*, *Literal Latté*, *Sonora Review*, *The Rumpus*, *Bomb Magazine*, and elsewhere, and has been recognized with Pushcart Prize nominations and as notables in The Best American Essays series. She is at work on a collection-across-genre called *Leaving Twinbrook: A Memoir of Duality*.

Lisa Cooper Ellison is an author, speaker, trauma-informed writing coach, and host of the Writing Your Resilience podcast. She works at the intersection of storytelling and healing, blending her lived experience with suicide loss and CPTSD with clinical training to help writers transform their toughest moments into art. Her essays and stories have appeared on *Risk!* and in *The New York Times*, *HuffPost*, *Hippocampus Literary Magazine*, and *Kenyon Review Online*, among others.

Lynn L. Shattuck has been publishing essays on the topic of sibling loss for more than a decade. She was a paid columnist at *Elephant Journal* for ten years; several of her essays on the topic of grief and sibling loss have gone viral. Her writing has also appeared on *The Huffington Post*, *Human Parts*, *Vice*, *The Fix*, and *Al Jazeera*. Along with her partners, Molly Fowkes and Alyson Shelton, Lynn co-founded the Loss of a Lifetime, a community and resource for grieving siblings.

Meghan Britton-Gross is located in Fort Wayne, Indiana. She has contributed to “Sweet Tea for the Soul” by

Dayspring, featured in an NPR interview and article, “Good Grief” podcast from Lemonada, and has given a TEDx talk on supporting siblings who have lost a sibling.

Michele Peters is a self-proclaimed survivor who writes from the heart with the goal of bringing light into dark places. She believes in love first, always. She lives in the Pacific Northwest, US, and realized she had stories people wanted to hear when she auditioned for and read on the nationally syndicated stage show *Listen to Your Mother* in Spokane, Washington, in 2022. She is a contributor to *Her View From Home* and has two essays published in *So God Made A Grandma*, released March 2025. She's working on her coming-of-age memoir and regularly publishes her non-fiction essays at *Light Into Dark Places* at Substack. The essay in this collection was originally shared as part of a longer tribute work titled *The COVID Diaries*.

Molly Fowkes lost her older brother, Jimmy, to brain cancer in 2014. His battle with the disease lasted over eight years. She was 17 and he was 21 when he died.

From a young age, Molly knew her passion for helping others would be within the healthcare space. After pursuing degrees in Product Design and UX Design, she began working as a designer in healthcare, with a specific focus on cancer. Her first role was with Blue Note Therapeutics, a prescription digital therapeutics company

dedicated to transforming mental health care for cancer patients.

Molly is currently a designer at MD Anderson Cancer Center, where she works to solve complex problems and generate long-term, meaningful impact for those directly impacted by cancer.

In 2022, Molly began working with Lynn Shattuck and Alyson Shelton on their website, *Loss of a Lifetime*, which offers community and resources to those who have lost a sibling.

Ona Gritz's new memoir, *Everywhere I Look*, was named the StoryTrade Award Nonfiction Book of the Year, and has won the Readers' Choice Gold Award for Best Adult Book, a Pencraft Best Book Award in Memoir, the Independent Author Award in New Nonfiction, the Independent Author Award in True Crime, and is a Foreword Indies finalist in Grief/Grieving as well as an *Independent Book Review 2024* Must-Read.

Ona's nonfiction has appeared widely, including in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Brevity*, *Hippocampus*, *Salon*, and *River Teeth*, and has been named Notable in *The Best American Essays*.

She is the author of two 2024 young adult verse novels, *The Space You Left Behind*, which was featured in *The Children's Book Council's* "Hot Off the Press" roundup of

anticipated best sellers, and *Take a Sad Song*, which has been selected as one of *Kirkus Reviews'* best YA titles of 2024.

Rebekkah Dilts holds a PhD in French and English Comparative Literature and is a writer, teacher, labor organizer, and mother. Her writing has appeared in *The Rumpus*. She has finished a draft of a memoir she hopes to publish.

Sarah Leibov is a writer, storyteller, and advocate helping to save lives by inspiring audiences to pursue genetic screening. Sarah's personal essays have appeared in *HuffPost*, *Newsweek*, *Tablet*, and other publications. Her memoir in progress is based on a 2012 article about coping with her younger sister's death from Tay-Sachs disease. "Dancing with My Sister" was published in *Jewish Chicago: The JUF Magazine* and led to her role speaking about the importance of carrier screening for the Sarnoff Center for Jewish Genetics. Sarah is a Feldenkrais Method creative movement instructor and enjoys sharing her stories onstage and online at www.sarahleibov.com.

Stephanie Gutiérrez is a proud Mexican-American with a strong work ethic and a commitment to being present in every aspect of life. Known for her willingness to help others, she brings positivity and a selfless attitude to everything she does. With a kind heart, infectious smile,

and vibrant personality, she leaves a lasting impression on all.

A dedicated parent, Stephanie supports her son, an aspiring football player, in his dream of making it big in the sport. Family and community are at the core of her life.

In her free time, Stephanie enjoys hiking, traveling, and exploring new cultures. Her love for food leads her to seek out exciting culinary experiences, finding joy in sharing meals with loved ones. Always positive, she approaches life with a smile and strives to make the world a better place, one kind gesture at a time.

Susan E. Casey, MSW, MFA, is an author, a licensed mental health clinician, a podcaster, a psychic medium, a certified bereavement group facilitator, and a certified life coach. Throughout the past 25 years, Susan has worked in hospice, in-patient, and home-based settings with teens and adults and provided clinical coaching to therapists, psychologists, and psychiatrists countrywide to improve mental health outcomes for youth and adults. Susan's blog and podcast can be found on her website: www.Rockyourshine@gmail.com

Susan's fiction has won numerous awards, and *Rock On: Mining for Joy in the Deep River of Sibling Grief* is her first work of nonfiction published on February 14, 2020 by Library Tales Publishing. *Rock On* won 1st place in general nonfiction in the Royal Dragonfly book contest

and was a finalist in the Best 2020 Books American Fest national book contest, the Book Excellence national book contest, and the National Chanticleer Book Reviews.

Victoria Waddle is a writer with work published in literary journals and anthologies, including Best Short Stories from The Saturday Evening Post Great American Fiction Contest. Her books include a novel, *Keep Sweet* (Inlandia Books), a collection of short fiction, *Acts of Contrition* (Los Nietos Press), and a chapbook, *The Mortality of Dogs and Humans* (Bamboo Dart Press). Her essay on the harm of sexual purity culture went viral on *HuffPost* and *BuzzFeed*. She was formerly a high school English teacher and a teacher librarian. She can be found on the Substack at *Be a Cactus*, where she writes about book bans and other literary topics.

Elise McCall (Cover Artist and Designer) is a multimedia artist and storyteller. Through her art she makes explicit that which is often hidden and shamed from sight. She worked on the concept art for the film *To Hold The Night*. Her comic credits include: *Reburn*, *Spy Island* (Dark Horse), and *Man-Eaters* (Image). She has shown in traditional art in galleries on the west coast. She notably designed the logo for Fredrik Knudsen's *Down the Rabbit Hole* series on Youtube. She's a longtime gamer who resides in rainy Portland, OR.

Notes

“One Hit Wonder” by Michele Peters was originally published on Substack as part of a longer tribute work titled The COVID Diaries.

“The Color of Endurance” By Anne Pinkerton is excerpted and slightly modified from *Were You Close?* a sister’s quest to know the brother she lost, published by Vine Leaves Press, 2023.

“Reclaiming Lost Love” by Kathryn Leehane originally appeared on Headspace.

“The Scream” by Lia Woodall originally appeared in the Sonora Review.

¹ *What About Bob?* Directed by Frank Oz, performances by Bill Murray, Richard Dreyfuss and Julie Hagerty, Touchstone Pictures, 1991.

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⁶ Orde, Lewis. *The Lion’s Way: A Novel*. Arbor House, 1981.

Leave a Review

If you found this book helpful, we hope you might take a few moments to leave a review on your favorite book website, so others can find it more easily and hear what you liked about it.

Share it with anyone—friends, family, teachers and therapists—you know who has experienced sibling loss. We hope to bring healing to “forgotten” grieverers like us.

Thank you!

Proof