

Abstract: A collection of poems and nonfiction combined in three parts that work to understand the grief that comes with losing my father to suicide and how to overcome it. Separated in three parts, the first part works to define grief in a personal matter. Most poems simply circle around the feeling of depression. The two nonfiction pieces describe memories of the last time I saw my father and when I was told he had passed away. The second part takes place within a few years after the loss, trying to understand what happened and working through depression and grief so I can move on with my life. Poems typically work with confusion and a feeling of loss, while nonfiction pieces are recounts of lucid dreams. Third part works through moving on and what that means. Poems are more centered around myself and how I feel up to current date, six years later. One nonfiction piece is a memory of realizing my father will always be with me. The second nonfiction piece is a meditation-like piece in which I work through my thoughts, understanding what I have been through and coming to understand that life goes on whether I want it to or not and so I should do my best to live up to my expectations. While there was no closure found in doing this project, I do feel relieved to have gotten such strong emotions released onto paper.

Keywords: English, Creative Writing, Poetry, Nonfiction, Memoir, Grief, Loss

one

Deerfield River, Massachusetts

Waters rushing faster than my thoughts,
than the blood pumping in my ears,
all I can do to focus on the river
underneath the thin wood of our canoe.

The roaring pierces through the pines surrounding us.
My muscles scream in pain
but my father commands behind me,
“Push harder, go faster.”

I am the oarsman but he my stern paddler.
In complete control of my direction he leads me forward
towards the finish line,
towards dry land.

Now I paddle alone, the strength of the river
pulling me through dangerous white water.
With no one in the rear
I have no sense of direction.

I never find the finish line.
The river drowns in its own laughter.

Hold

By a thread –
memory of you dangles in front
of me; a tease of who you used to be.
The weight of forgiveness
strains thin fiber. I let you
hang; I leave you surrounded by air,
where you'll stay until I let you go.
You can't ask me to forgive you.
You never taught me how to sew.

The bank parking lot was empty so it was easy to spot you as Mom and I pulled in. You were leaning on the front of your van – I don't remember if you had gotten your license back or if you were just driving without one at the time. Mom pulled in next to you and I got out of the car. My head hung low as you handed me a check. All the money in the bank account under our name now just one piece of paper. You see, Mom had told me to hope for the best but expect the worst. These words are now sewn into my memory, a chant that never dies down. She had gotten it into my head that I should expect my bank account to be empty, that you would do anything to get your fix, whether that meant selling whatever you could...or taking money straight from my bank account. I was fifteen years old. I didn't understand what was happening or what you were doing. They don't tell you in D.A.R.E. that people who abuse drugs and alcohol still have a heart, that they're still human. I was prepared to be forgotten. So when Mom told me you might be taking money out of my account, the money I worked so hard for, I got upset. It was easy to get upset, because you weren't my father, not really. Not while you were high. So I cursed for the first time and it was directed at you. I wanted my fucking money back. You have to understand, I was so confused. I was so young. So naïve. I'm so sorry. When you handed me that check I wanted to take everything I said back, but there wasn't anything I could say to make it any better. You asked for a hug like I wasn't your daughter. Like you didn't think I wanted a hug. Did you know that would be the last time I saw you? Because I didn't. In a Capital One parking lot in Southold, New York was the last time I saw you, felt you, hugged you.

Forgotten

Certain things, memories,
have been lost in the abyss
of time. Dark and deep with
scary monsters lurking in the
shadows, waiting for you to peek
your head over and maybe fall.

How many times have I fallen?
I don't remember. Pieces of the past
don't stay in your memory, you
lose those battles. I've been
left beaten and bloody, but alive.
I'm stuck in this way of life, never
healing but never giving up.

Find comfort in misery, an addiction.
Some wounds are meant to
stay open; certain strands of memory
the abyss leaves for you to shoot up.
A wound that never fully closes,
never fully heals,
not even into a scar.

Torn

between you and moving on,
do I need to let go or are you
holding on to me? Chained in

place, cuffs chafe my wrists.
My life drips down my arms,
rips me open with a razor.

To release a scream in the night,
relief. But silence stole
my voice; reached down

my throat and took it
from the core – my body nothing
but a broken music box – perfectly

preserved wood, but a haunting
howl escapes if the box is wound up.

I don't remember that day to be any different than any other. It must have been a weekday; work wasn't that busy. I felt fine all day; work was moving by and I only had an hour or so left. I remember getting a little nauseous, just out of nowhere. I mentioned it to Maryanne to see if she had any medicine. It didn't bother me enough to ask to go home early; it was mostly just uncomfortable. But Mom came in, so Maryanne told me to go home if I wasn't feeling well, and what perfect timing my mother had. She came in with Alyvia; she said she was passing by and wanted to ask how much longer I had at work. That's what prompted Maryanne to tell me to go. So I clocked out and Mom told me to take Alyvia in the car with me and buckle her up; she wanted to ask what my hours were for the rest of the week. I thought to myself, I could've told her that, but I didn't question her. I got my sister in the car and waited for Mom.

We lived not five minutes from the deli, so we were home soon enough. Nina, my paternal grandmother, and her husband Lenny were there, sitting out on the porch. If I remember correctly, this was their last year living in New York; they were almost ready to move into their home in Florida full time. But for some reason, I thought it was odd that they were there. I don't remember why. Naturally, I went outside to say hi, and Mom followed me. Now that I think about it, I don't remember where Alyvia went. She was only five years old at the time.

Mom told me to sit down on the stool. She sat on one, Nina and Lenny already slouched on low porch chairs. No one was looking at me, and Mom finally told me she had some bad news. I remember Mom always telling me to hope for the best but expect the worst. So I knew it was about my dad. At that second, my mind started racing. I thought he was in jail. And I said to myself, okay, I'm going to find out visitation rights and I can write to him all the time. That

was the summer before my junior year in high school, which meant prom. I thought, if he was still in jail by then, I could have Mom print out pictures and I could send them to him.

Mom interrupted these thoughts with a big inhale, and finally said, “Honey, your father passed away last night.” And it was like everything just shattered. You know how, you always think if something bad happened to someone you loved, someone close to you, you’d just know? Like this gut feeling, or waking up in the middle of the night and knowing something was wrong. That never happened. I didn’t know that day would forever be the worst day of my life. My lungs felt like they collapsed, my body contracting in on itself like I could just disappear. My mom held me and when I was finally done, I felt empty. Like whatever soul inhabited my body had left and now I was just a vessel.

I remember calling my best friend; my dad and her dad had been best friends, so she was around my house a lot. My father was almost a second father to her. But she knew already. Everyone knew before me. So I just sat on the couch and stared at the blank TV. She came over not too long after the phone call and cried on the couch. But I just sat there. Blank stare, blank face, blank mind.

At the funeral, I felt nothing. I was allowed to see him one last time to say goodbye. His body was pale, but otherwise he looked like he was asleep, as I have seen him many times before on our couch at home. The only difference was the lack of movement in his chest; he wasn’t breathing anymore. That image will forever be the last image I have of him.

There were so many people I didn't know coming up to me and hugging me, telling me how sorry they were. I learned then the correct answer to "I'm sorry for your loss" is "thank you," not "it's okay" because it's not. It's not okay at all. My dad's best friend was completely broken. So many people in one room; the pain was tangible. My sister only allowed me to hold her; she wouldn't let our mom or her father hold her. She only wanted me, as if she knew I needed someone to hold. She was only five.

My mother was the worst I've ever seen her. Distant relatives and friends thought she was my dad's wife. Meanwhile, my stepmother kept to the side with her two sons, all showing no emotion. I'll never understand, but people deal with grief differently. I didn't understand much of that day at all.

Fatherly Advice

You once told me
"you'll have to do things
you don't want to do"
I did not think
that included living
without you.

two

Memorabilia

Empty work boots wait outside your office, untouched. Cobwebs have collected, spiders weaving homes inside them. Much of your office has remained frozen in time—

ties still hang in the closet, next to your favorite dress shirts for those special occasions. The tall stack of CDs still there next to the door, the bookshelf still stands, although the dust

has made the books unrecognizable. All of the beach glass we found together lays in the large bowl we bought at a yard sale. All of the pictures, the playbills— now

a ghost of the life you once shared with us. I can't bring myself to touch anything, in fear of remembering how they came to rest on your desk, or hang on the walls.

Memories are the enemy. I wish to forget the things you'll never do again. My only regret is forgetting the sound of your voice – sometimes I still call your number

in hopes of hearing your voicemail.

New Year's Eve

Buzzing fizzes in the air,
champagne popping
like smiles around me.

My eyes lack the sparkle of
my glass like I have wept
all the effervescence that once

filled my body. My smile as flat as
water, the clock ticking
closer to midnight.

Voices grow louder, bubbles
erupting from throats of
those who believe the change

of time will bring new beginnings.
Glass in hand, ball drops, flutes sing
from the clink of every cheer.

I force the light-colored drink
through my body. But at the bottom
of my glass is another year without you.

Everything surrounding me is white. The seats, the couch, the pillows. The air is white. My best friend, Cassidy, sits in a small loveseat. Her expression is blank as I walk past her. My stepbrothers, Liam and Quinn, have the same expression. In front of me, sitting on the couch, is my father. And next to him his wife, Dawn. I take a seat on the opposite side of the couch and hug a pillow close to my chest. I bury my face, rocking back and forth. I hear his voice, "I'm sorry I haven't been able to visit you before." Into the pillow I say *please stop, please stop*.

I wake up saying *please stop*. My face is wet and I sit up straight. And then I feel everything within me break for the second time. I have never been able to realize a dream is a dream until after I wake up from it. This is my first lucid dream.

Inked

i.

One black, sticky word begins
on the inside of my wrist –
a paradox to its meaning
I wonder what you'd say
but if you could say anything
at all, I wouldn't have gotten it
in the first place.

ii.

You voiced disgust in
this permanent way of representation,
threats were made of disownment,
so I painted the moons alongside
my ribs with a needle –
not the same one you used.

iii.

Hidden behind hair you are
forever a memory now, a date,
an anniversary.
You have been simplified to
the ash of roman numerals.

iv.

Recovery is not easy – you
taught me that but then you
pushed me over the edge and
left me there. Is your ending
my beginning? Or was my ending
yours?

v.

My ribcage extends and with
every breath I inhale change, hope
that you couldn't give me. Ink forever
now part of me, if I died and you had
to identify my body, would you recognize me?

Outside

Empty buzzing fills my head –
white noise coming from mouths
of friends. Bees fly out of
ears and nest within my hair.
My brain becomes a honeycomb,
memories drip out of my eyes, thick
and sweet.

Drip some more, I am immersed in
this sun-kissed liquid which I cannot see
through. Buzzing passes through me, unaware.
No one can see me, suffocating –
in memory, sweet and thick

Liam, Quinn, and I are in the water, playing on a tube. Something like we used to have that attached to the boat. My dad and Dawn are somewhere; I can't see them but I know they are close. We all swim to the dock and tie the tube to it. I can hear my dad laughing.

And then we're in a strange house. But it feels like home. I walk into Liam's room, which looks nothing like his real room. He's playing video games. I ask him, "Is this a dream?" He shakes his head no. I tell him that's impossible. I know it's a dream. He realizes his mistake and apologizes, cringing. I kneel down on the floor, covering my face. I wake up to a wet pillow and a fast heart rate.

That's the second time.

Omniscient

I thought my father was a god,
privileged with immortality,
that I was blessed with a worry-free life.
No one warned me.

Blind, I let him lead me, teach me
all he knows, now in my memory;
forever frozen;
not imagined immortality but a jail cell.

Every chance to own up to a lie I began with
Father forgive me for I have sinned;
and every appreciation I voiced
was a prayer to him.

Now I stare at the ceiling, my faith lost
in the words my mother said to me,
"Your father passed away last night."
I identify as agnostic.

three

Guardian Angel

Warm breath against my ear
you whisper dark secrets,
how the moon watches
every broken soul drink
the night away. Burning liquor
drowns the pain –
the cool glass to my lips,
with every forced sip I hope
to thaw –
ice heavy on my soul,
I drag my feet.
The moon watches over me,
casts shadows that resemble wings.
I stumble less.

Drown

Water me like a small
green child – black tendrils
course through my veins.
I lack voice; parched, my
thin leafy tongue withers
to the back of my throat
and I suffocate on everything
I could not say.

Neglect me as my limbs
break from my body –
small, brittle things not
meant for a living world.
Water me, or watch me burn.

The first year without my dad I learned what it was like to not care about anything. I was late to school every day. I started failing in my accelerated math class. All I did was draw lines in the margins of my paper, not listening to anything. I didn't do homework. I stopped eating. My stepmom shut me out of her life; she dumped some of my things from her house in the middle of the road in front of my mom's house. I never got all of my things back. When I asked her what happened to certain things that meant a lot to my dad she told me he sold them. I was forced into a bias against her I never really shook.

I learned people like to point fingers, looking for a scapegoat when there are no answers. It's taken me until now to realize I'll never get those answers, and I should stop looking. I always thought I was alone through this process; no one really knew what I was going through. Now I know that no one has to have been in the exact same situation as I have been to be there for me.

The first Christmas without my dad, my sister, Alyvia, had those little gift-shops set up at her school for Christmas that helped children buy presents for their family at very low costs. When I opened my gift that Christmas morning I was confused. I had actually thought she gave me the wrong present. What I opened was a Christmas ornament that said "Dad" on it. I thought it was meant for her father, but my mom only smiled and told me to let her explain.

Alyvia told me that every Christmas I could put the ornament on the tree so I knew my dad would be with me during the holidays. She was only five years old and yet she gave me the best gift I've ever received. She couldn't have possibly understood what had happened to me or what I was feeling, and yet, she knew I needed her. She would try to make me laugh when it

was clear I was upset. She gave me this little ornament that probably only cost a dollar. I still have it, and I make sure every year it's on our tree, front and center for me.

3 p.m. Epiphany

Enclosed within four walls I am surrounded
by white – never ending white. Lost in the ceiling above me,
I have nothing to focus on. As blank as my mind, perhaps
I am surrounded by white in my mind.

The whites of my eyes mirror these same walls,
my head is made up of white.
Colorless –
Are my thoughts colorless? Do we not

think in vast arrays of colors more than the spectrum of light allows us to see?
The sun casts rays of gold across the white ceiling,
painfully beautiful gold you see only on royal silk
that says I am Important.

I can't even touch it, this inch of space left within the tip of my finger
and the only thing that differentiates white from anything else,
empty space, it's not even white it's just empty.
The desire to touch even just one speck of gold

and maybe the walls within my mind will be painted and scream
I am Important.

Lights Out

The milk in my cup
coils around black
coffee – a dance of dark
and light within my palm.

The grounds that have escaped
into my cup reach out and
strangle me, a strong hand
wrapped around my throat
and I still watch the
milk leave traces of white
that don't wish to be
forgotten within the darkness
of a medium roast.

This is my third cup today.
I'm finding it difficult to swallow
lately.

It's been almost six years since I lost my dad. Since then, I've had to grow up really fast. No one has asked, *what's it like to live without a parent?* I ask myself all the time. I still don't really know. Sometimes it's like he's on vacation and I'll get a call from him soon. Sometimes I forget. By accident or on purpose, I'm never sure. Mostly, I try not to think about it. I don't ask for help, working through issues that have come up because of his absence. I've become very introverted. I don't like complaining about what I've been through; I'm afraid people will think I'm just using it as an excuse for attention.

I've learned a lot about myself though. I tolerate things less. Anyone who touches or even tries drugs, I immediately cut out of my life. I don't have time to watch someone die in front of me again. I make this stance very clear to people around me. I can't force them to not do things, but I can make the decision to not go through what I've already been through again.

I have commitment issues that are very hard on those I've been with. My boyfriend deals with so much that I don't think he should have to deal with. I'm always afraid he's going to pack up and leave one day, and the thought of that terrifies me. Not because I'm dependent on him, but because I can't stand the idea of people leaving me. I become so attached to people, more than I knew I was before this happened. My brother moved out not long after I lost my dad and for years I hated him for it. I wouldn't reach out to him. I never wanted to see him. I was unnecessarily cruel to him when he visited.

The idea of losing my mom has increased as well. She has smoked cigarettes all her life. I've known people who have had lung cancer, and I'm terrified my mom will die early because of it. And then I'll be left without any parents and I'm only 21. I don't have anyone to walk me down the aisle when I get married, but the idea of my mom not being there either kills me. My

dad didn't get to watch me learn how to drive or graduate high school. He won't see me graduate college. I'm afraid of what my mom won't be there for. It's a struggle to make her understand how much I need her to stay with me.

I hate the smell of cigarettes. I hate the idea of drugs. I'm very careful around alcohol. I have addiction on both sides of my family, depression as well. I won't go see a psychiatrist; and I refuse to take any kind of medication for whatever I'm feeling. I rarely take Advil. I'm afraid I'll develop an addictive personality, if I haven't already. I can't stand the idea of a small pill or any kind of liquid taking over my life. I cherish my independence. I've worked very hard to gain it. I've had to grow up very fast, dealing with the death of a family member. Having to deal with Social Security. I struggled with depression and other sorts of mental illnesses by myself. I've worked long, hard hours to put myself through school. I'll be graduating without any loans and plenty of money in my bank account to get an apartment in Brooklyn come this summer. I can put myself through graduate school. If there was one thing my dad taught me before he left was a good work ethic. And I have my mom to thank for that as well. She never took my bullshit when I blamed my bad grades on being sad. She forced me to work every summer. She never gave me a penny towards anything I wanted.

And now, today, while I would give anything to say goodbye to my dad, I don't regret going through what I have been through. I'm proud of the person I have become because of it and I'd like to think he is too.

Midnight Blues

Pale as the moon
she shone over the sand
dressed in the darkest blue
the night sky allowed.
Silver thread intricately woven
through her tresses
the stars reflected on her.
A light breeze lifted
strands of hair
and sang a deep lullaby.

She stepped into the cool water,
with open arms
the ocean taking her home
deep underwater where her soul soars.