

**grief is returning home**

by alexandra axel

*to jess,  
the reason this even exists*

*to hen,  
the best reason to continue*

*and, of course, to you dad  
the reason i am*

## here's where we should begin

a friend and i started a shared document in which we wrote a poem every day. one month into our project my dad died unexpectedly, sooner than we thought anyway. the practice became a way to process the grief.

this is true: i have always been grieving. “saudade means nostalgia, i’m told, but also / nostalgia for what never was.”<sup>1</sup> there was a world that could have been and the world that we’ve inherited. how could i not grieve for the stolen opportunities to be in right relationship with each other and the land? but it is also true that i have always felt i have been waiting to grieve. i was lucky to be waiting in a long line until loss. losing my father was a personification of the very condition i have been shaped by. these poems attempt to breathe life into both the micro and macro state of mortal grief.

this is true too: there was grief for my dad long before he died. as a practice, a therapist once had me hold a funeral for the dad i longed for, the one i did not have. our relationship, historically, was very difficult. in the last few years before his death, he began to change shape to the point of becoming almost unrecognizable. i was slow to thaw to this new shape. when he passed, the lifelong shape i had contorted into had untwisted and i was filled with unexpected, unconditional love for him—a state that i did not have access to when he was living. these poems, too, were a way to weave together all of the time-stuck, contradicting parts that could not exist without the transcendence of poetry.

out of many rambling, repetitive poems where i mostly write about smoking and this dog and my dad, i have whittled them down to the following. there will be a lot of poems still about smoking, this dog, and my dad but i hope i have pinned down a little more than that too. i have kept them in chronological order so there is no start, no finish. no ramp up or crescendo, except the ones that i stumbled my life into. this is one segment of one line in a much longer, continuous line and the line is a drawing, a line drawing and it’s actually a drawing of nothing at all.

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<sup>1</sup> “saudade” by john freeman, supposedly characteristic of brazilian or portuguese temperament according to the internet

**you ask me about birds<sup>1</sup>**

7.20.2020

sometimes it's easier  
when you see us as  
strange birds  
simply because  
being alive makes us  
less human  
but less like  
birds also

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<sup>1</sup> *vertebrae* by samuel green

## **bumper sticker**

7.21.2020

pray for america sure  
but you mean north america  
you mean the usa  
you mean this stamp  
this back that curves  
out of the water  
and when you say pray  
could we get a little  
clarity around  
what we're asking for  
just in case we only get  
one outgoing call  
like we could generally  
ask for some fixing or  
we could even  
apologize  
which might go over well  
considering how  
sick we're all getting  
i'm gonna go ahead and  
pray that we actually  
have enough time left  
to win—you think i should  
phrase that as a question?

**is there anything more cliché than a  
new yorker starting a sentence  
with *my therapist says***

8.1.2020

once you started sleeping with  
a penis // maybe that's the  
energy you needed, to not be  
afraid of being littler, to be safe  
in big arms // of course, kink can  
be helpful in healing those wounds  
and it doesn't sound very imago  
to me // how about you try writing  
or drawing these dreamings or  
dream waking, have you heard  
of that before? // it's great to hear  
these updates from you, it sounds  
like you made some strong choices  
and i see now that our time is  
coming to a close.

**equis**

8.12.2020

we are speaking evolution  
into existence, faster than we're evolving  
that's for  
sure.

sure,  
like a word is a wish, but we  
often throw words a little just above  
how high we reach.

*my therapist also says*

8.13.2020

of course, your arousal during  
these dreams is uncomfortable  
because it's your dad and i know  
you feel revulsion toward the idea  
when you wake but i want you to  
think of the three things he might  
represent: those, you see, are  
parts of you. your dreams are  
a shattered mirror of you.

just like the bed is you and the  
mountain is you and the water that  
slows your run and the boardwalk  
you fly over are all also you. it's  
perhaps not by accident that the  
dreams stopped their insistence.



**we get the news he's dying for real this time**

8.14.2020

when my dad is buried here i guess  
i will be finally able to call this city  
home.

**the day after he died**

8.16.2020

i told my nephew i forgot it is my birthday today

he said: is that how sad you are that grandpa died?

kinda, yeah.

**a loved one  
loses her best friend and brother  
in the same week**

8.24.2020

i don't want any kind of spirituality  
that doesn't consider  
suicide as a viable option

**it might be grief that prevents me from sleeping**

8.25.2020

i am certain there is no  
more pain left between us

i have gained a father in  
losing mine

dad is an altar now  
and i slide his picture into old frames  
over other faces

## **bridges are a new york thing**

8.26.2020

you can take your time now. *click-click, click-click*. there is no more rush, no more waiting, to get it right. you have been lucky to be in such a long line to loss. and now that you've arrived at the start, it brushes softer than you imagined. you, dog and the presence of your father wander the apartment, not touching much except the seeds you bring home to grow. the air around you speaks to it best: still and moving. impossibly quiet and sirens in the distance. the silence of the car as it drives over the bridge, metal expanders beneath the tires: *click-click, click-click* and the orange street lights wash over your face. *click-click, click-click*. how could anything else be as sad or as promising as coming home.

**a wandering jew could be the start of a problematic joke  
but in this case i'm dead fucking serious**

8.31.2020

i wake up to an article about white christian evangelicals, the thesis being that they are masochistic. the desire is manifestly for pureness but the latent desire is for hatred. anything to avoid the shame of white. i desire the purity of body and mind. to be clean. clean in a way that is divorced from the color white, clean in the way dirty fingernails are clean, clean in the way i kiss my dog on the mouth after she has most certainly rubbed her nose in piss, clean in the way of discomfort.

i look at the purity of the fuchsia flower emerging from the lips of the purple leaves of this purple heart, this wandering jew. i wish, almost entirely, to be that.

**east river ashes**

9.1.2020

this skyline is my father  
the river, his ashes

wrapped in a cloth that once  
hung as a curtain in the room  
where he did what he did  
and what he did not do

the cloth is of tropical waters  
so not the gray ocean he  
stood before under the gazebo in the  
rain without anyone in the  
world who wanted him around  
and i saw him through the  
passenger window and i thought  
“i should love him more.”

this: this right here is the bottom of my heart.

so, yes, the skyline that my dad is  
carried by and the ocean  
that is bright and green and clear

**whoops**

9.7.2020

when i wished, as a child, that the summer  
would never end i didn't exactly mean  
for the planet to become uninhabitable.

there are small respites. for instance,  
when this dog drinks from her water bowl  
and my thirst feels quenched.



**still we dream of liberation**

9.9.2020

i stayed up late again  
watching videos of seedlings  
growing, a folding of time  
like when nine becomes two  
and then on the other side  
me on the roof watching  
plants grow like i used to  
in tennessee, five years  
pressed like dried flowers  
into memory. i close  
my eyes against the bright  
day listening to the hum of  
the buildings below me.  
i read about a small girl  
whose throat was slit,  
and left for dead.  
the man who did it—i push  
myself to answer the question:  
him too? yes, him too.  
turns out there's no historical  
evidence of peace but still  
we dream of liberation without  
any blueprint. even if you fold  
this corner of time, there  
is still suffering. jess says  
pain is neutral and that i

must remind her of this.  
suffering is our job to  
accept and lessen. i'm  
sorry to the ant i killed  
today because they  
inconvenienced me. i am  
really no better than the rest.

## **powerpoint in the early aughts**

9.16.2020

slide one

a white person on a roof,  
looking the skyline. the  
text reads: i know my body  
the most when i'm about to  
get my period

slide two

text reads: stop differentiating  
your body from your mind and  
several bullet points about  
how white people, in the grand  
scheme of things, barely know  
anything. the image is of  
nothing at all.

slide three

sound clip of a dog snoring  
typewriter effect: one whale left!

etc.

## **the wire drawn around nyc**

9.23.2020

i used to say i studied boundaries:  
lines drawn on a map, my flesh  
from yours. i think i meant to  
say that i study suffering. lines  
drawn on a map. my flesh, from  
yours. i'm searching for the  
boundary between violence and  
suffering. lines drawn. mapped.  
my flesh. yours. how thick is skin,  
really.

there is a wire that draws  
a line around the city, an eruv.  
i'm looking at nothing now. picking  
at my face, i think about how a  
deer feels once the car has struck  
and how long it takes her to die.  
there's an overpopulation, most  
say. this is not the full picture  
unfortunately. it's a thin line  
between the deer poised for  
death and the walls we've built  
around this world.

tell me at what point oxytocin  
is released and i will wrap the

eruv around suffering. my skin  
is not thick enough for all of this.  
i am only flesh.

**not even one of them**

10.20.2020

there are three microphones in the latest iphone  
but none of them can talk to the dead

**settling home**

10.27.2020

so easy to lap

up tonight

the sounds from

neighbors

crack me open

this is what home

feels like

this is why

i came back

**between the ache**

11.22.2020

of grief and fasting hunger i am  
very much a pocket to shove something into.

i like to sprinkle the needle-like hair that  
rubs off dog's body onto the carpet and floor.  
does that count?

i am filling the shape i lost



## **the rate of healing**

1.8.2021

using comfrey oil on a deep wound will heal  
the skin too fast, will trap infection beneath  
the surface.

i don't need to talk about the  
abuse anymore, since my dad died—it was  
all i could talk about once.

i think about the moon,  
who left me while i was healing being  
left. the moon who i punished for not  
being my parent. the deeper tissue.

**dreaming of some home once**

4.7.2021

i can return home, i've discovered, in my dreams  
to smoke out of the window and ruminate  
on loss. from the other room, i can hear the  
familiar sound of my dad clearing his throat.  
he is really there, some surgery he got for five  
dollars, lets him stand in front of me, and i  
wrap my arms around him like i am a little kid  
and like that gesture isn't just another ghost.

**all windows are my dad**

4.27.2021

my dreams of you grow sweeter  
vine ripening on a dusty windowsill  
the one small tomato you were proud  
of so like your children.

i've been leaving your books around  
new york as a birthday gift  
and i've decided i need your picture  
on the windowsill i look at most

living in grief, living in the city  
made up of windows, my dreams  
are windows. visitations. of sun.  
of you.

**changing how change lives in this being**

6.11.20201

i write that i lost you and that i'm changing  
my relationship to change.

and there's simultaneously some hope and  
no hope rattling around my heart.

i'm changing my relationship to  
change by watching all of the plants i love die  
despite my best efforts.

i'm changing my  
relationship to change by never again thinking  
crypto just won't gain much traction or that  
augmented reality is  
fake.

i have a little beard growing now and  
i save used paper towels like you did. the end,  
i guess.

**i talk a lot about ghosts since  
jess saw one and she didn't believe in ghosts  
before then which i kinda thought  
protected you but i guess not / this is about  
another nashville lover turned ghost**

6.13.2021

it's alright if he  
becomes another ghost  
in a city of ghosts  
redacted by ghosts  
colonized by ghosts  
i will never go there  
again

o heavenly dad  
what ghosts of yours  
do i contain  
as if a ghost  
could be contained

## **my healthiest relationship**

6.14.2021

dating a sociopath  
does not lend to joyful searches  
on the internet trying to understand  
if i'm being abused or if someone  
is telling me the unwrapped truth for once.

he says i am better off searching up  
what it's like to date a monk.

he says i'm sorry so many people  
have broken me before you.

a friend tried to  
soften the blow: maybe there  
are gradients of sociopathy?

that's very nice of you. but no.

he offers a girl his travel-sized jojoba oil  
because she has only donated white  
products for her hair. that's sweet i say  
and he responds: i'd just as soon step  
over her dead body. okay, i correct  
myself. not sweet.

just the right thing to do he says.

i admire him. he does not allow me to  
be manipulative. he does not humor me  
when i pout, waiting for him to ask what's  
wrong. he won't accept my apology.

just do better he says.

i am changing shape, an iron bent over  
a furnace. i forming into a  
person who says what they mean.  
who knows now that "i love you" is not  
a tool but a space of being.

i am sorry that people broke you into  
such a remarkable person. so many people  
have far greater kindness in their  
histories and spend their whole lives  
causing harm.

he says this is what i have to offer you  
and i am living into the understanding that  
this gift is what i have pivoted my whole life  
towards.

maybe someday i will write a blog post  
with a clickbait headline that reads:  
dating a sociopath is what finally healed  
me.

***it* pronouns are a contentious topic where the nays  
and yays break down to those who have been  
called *it* before and those  
who have definitely not**

8.23.2021

the rain drips from the window, a dream-warped  
foot stomp, a slow clap no one picks up.  
it counts minutes around the bed  
and dog is an hour hand.  
sometimes it wakes up drowning  
or goes to bed dripping.

as the night pours in, as the water  
pours in, the bed is a raft, time-ticking  
along a current. look at it closely.  
jaw clenched hard enough to whittle bone.

dog sometimes moves to  
couch, seeking calmer waters. good  
move dog, the water is rising, speeding up.  
dog has a sense for this. last night it  
asked a ghost for one more  
thing. an impossible thing. a selfish  
thing. as the bed, the clock, the drums,  
and it pour into the deep like water into  
a glass, it dreams that maybe this is  
the ghost's answer.



it wakes up to the same soft clap of rain,  
and dog grunting out a  
good morning. it can still taste  
the drowning.

## **recovery is a spiral**

10.6.2021

i think

i am here again in this sensation  
of warmth cracking across my chest  
a glass tube breaking and fizzing  
where everything i say to you is a  
mixture of i love you, don't leave me  
and everything you give to me  
says goodbye

could i

keep you praising me  
even when you are working long days  
and chatting with other people  
if i send more nudes and videos  
of me cumming

i am

desperate to be near you, as if  
proximity will make you more mine  
maybe you could fall in love with me  
and worship me, just as soon as i stop  
opening and closing this app.

i will lose my legs for this

i will lose my neck for this

i am looking down down

i am waving to my body

i am saying goodbye

**i wait for a lover at a rent-by-the-hour motel  
during a global pandemic**

10.7.2021

51

10th st

river, hudson

meat packing

tesla benz

2 hour room

not quite on time

do we kiss

flag waving in

reflection

my reflection

wavering

enter: me

me: thoughts of

someone else

we lost a generation

we are losing one

again

**t4whoeveratthispoint**

10.11.2021

t4t and i'm a little gunshy tbh  
meanwhile jumping right  
into the bed of he who fucks  
me like biblo when he wanted  
that ring back, o he who says my  
name with a s instead of x which is  
the thing i miss most  
and the pace we talked and  
walked around dumbo  
losing myself in the fantasy  
until he bought a pepsi and  
fully disappointed me

**despite its many flaws, rent was right about  
measuring a life in cigarettes**

2.22.22

i am taking a hiatus on not smoking  
to smoke again just to enjoy the two  
spring days in february and to unclench  
this fist i had been making for a year.

so far it's working. i give the first cigarette to  
the tree that appears dead outside my  
building. the tobacco rests on dog shit  
and a sleeping rat, gathered at the trunk.

**what a recurring theme this is turning out to be**

2.15.2022

what if instead i thought of smoking  
as an offering to my creativity?  
today feels like some cold but the sun  
is working as i recline into this indulgence

ruminating on a poised text:  
your complacency!!! this, of course, is to  
manage my own discomfort. i mirror the  
exclamation at myself instead. breathing  
in smoke, my answer is to kill myself little by little.  
i now get butterflies when i think of dying.

i know the option  
on the table. it never comes of the table once  
you set it. so there must be something  
way deep down.

instead of the text, i fantasize about dead cops:  
the rage in me hungers for the simpler  
story of retribution. we need to aim our weapons  
higher. how high!

last cigarette for who knows how long.  
sometimes i can hear the longing so  
loudly it sounds like spirit.

meanwhile, i am trying to decrease this dogs suffering  
meanwhile, egyptians are looking to sudan, and saudis  
look to egypt

if our lives were one weapon, where would we aim it?  
when death is both a certainty and an option.



## **the land is our culture<sup>1</sup>**

2.14.2022

land is body body is land  
hairs that grow like maypop vines  
across this face arms legs buttocks  
a fertile earth and blood as red clay  
those hills are old friends  
plates shift plains shift  
shifting planes  
tobacco as an offering from lungs  
to the favorable winds carrying  
seeds wings winged seeds  
blood recedes from fingers and toes  
to heart the tide recedes from these shores  
most this self among the seas  
ancestors: homo sapien erectus  
neanderthalensis cetacean quadruped  
pakicetus protozoa or rather those secret  
names what they call themselves  
this body is a new earth and an old one  
neurons reaching toward tomorrow

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<sup>1</sup> we take care of the land because without the land we have no culture. our culture cannot exist without these places.  
- joshua lanakilaoka'āinaikapono manguail

**that lake in chicago is the  
what this love looks like now**

2.13.2022

i long for you but i don't suffer  
chicago remains a placid fantasy

i think of how you became a shiver  
of earth breaking open at my hand

whatever you do wherever you go  
i am loving you in motion and without pain  
these waters are not the sea but  
something quieter and more still

**threats abound!**

2.24.2022

i try to wake up early to suffering, when i am warm in my bed, with this dog pressed against me. today it is the threat of nuclear war and planetary extinction. thursday!!! i'd rather be in the blast zone than not in the blast zone.

**capsicum frutescens**

2.25.2022

cayenne placed directly on the tip of the  
tongue will stop an oncoming heart attack.  
had i been there when my father had his  
i wouldn't have known this yet.

i dream of him in our apartment. he is alive  
and cooking in the kitchen or sitting in his  
recliner watching some sport. he is somewhat  
like other dads who watch a sport and  
somewhat not.

the heart attack looms in the dream  
he tells me he doesn't have much time.

i place cayenne directly on the tip of my  
tongue and feel fire rush through my  
system. i am so deeply and unwillingly  
alive. everything outlined silver today  
slippery and frozen.

grief is my furnace  
lit by capsaicin.

icefall and burning.

**yes, dogs teach us unconditional love**

**if we let them**

3.2.2022

my mother is a nervous system

my father ash

i am a reaction

a response at best

you must keep your love for dog

front and center.

**i cut my knuckle doing something i didn't  
think would hurt me**

3.29.2022

wounds, am i right?

*wounds*, i chuckle in assent.

**everything you change, changes you<sup>1</sup>**

4.20.2022

i don't want to make too big of a deal of it but,  
despite my best efforts, hope has shone its  
strange teeth at me.

i am disturbed by the easter trash on the side  
of the road but it does not displace the sub-clavicle  
softening taking place. there are the usual worries  
batting around but a new seed has emerged and  
it looks something like this:

but first let's discuss passionflower and how  
hard she is to crack. passion is the seedling  
sprouting once she has been soaked in water  
and her hard shell then nicked by knifetip. the  
ones who float are tossed aside. (*the ones who  
walk away.*) given the right conditions she does  
emerge after all. it has taken years of failed  
attempts, mind you. and we count  
our plants before they grow too soon, it is still too  
soon to open her up to the general suffering  
endured by the world beyond. this time though,  
i might be doing it right.

and yes i am talking about us. obviously. it's the  
whole mollusk debate once more, i say, inhaling a

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<sup>1</sup> excerpt from earthseed, *parable of the sower* by octavia butler

deep breath of smoke. nociception is distinct from pain but is it really? the tender tissue of the spirit can be bruised, if not more easily than when we were made of rubber, floating in water.

to return: it looks like lying on my back, tears at the ready. it looks like giving names to each emotion as they rise from the tide, many moons on one lit up horizon. their proper names. the names they call themselves. what is the name you call yourself?

for one day everything is pastel and then it is trashed for harsher colors. but for one day we can soften our gaze.

maybe one day, if we're lucky.



**continuing on**

4.24.2022

mourning dove

wind whistling through her

graying man faded yankee blue

buildings like this going gone

everywhere in new york

it wasn't the cancer but the

ache and squeeze

men carry in their heart

i kneel into some body

*i think this life can break you*

from this crown the bright

light shudders down and

the red roots curl up

grief is returning home today

the skyline unfurling seeds

from soil

i am from the place where

red and bright meet and

surrounded blue

kneeling into somebody  
with windows to visit  
in dreams eyelids  
closed i see you  
coming home

not one of us survive  
this life

## **about this writer**

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*in memory of richard h. axel*

