

Lanterns

1.

Ypsilanti, MI
August 2015

When I read the diagnosis, I sat at home numb, unable to grasp the what-comes-next of the thing. On the fourth day, my partner walked me to the community garden in our apartment complex. He emptied our compost and left me on my hands and knees planting.

A friend of ours departed a week before. She requested a green burial.

This week, the heaviness of her loss, my brain MRI results, the uncertainty of reading “pituitary tumor,” the reality of being ill for most of the year.

Our friend was 29, exactly one week and two years older than me. In high school, she, my partner, a good friend, and I formed a tight group of comrades. We all grew up in Detroit.

Like me, my friend chose to attend college on the east coast. Like me, she dated my partner at some point, drawn to the kindness of a friend. In the years since my partner and I married, I had grown closer to her. But she lived far away, pursuing graduate studies for many years. She had moved away from Detroit after high school and it was not known if she would ever move back.

To hear of her leaving us was a heavy weight. There was more I wanted to do to include her in our lives. More time I wanted to spend with her. More memories I had hoped to make.

Done in my garden, basil planted, I ran after my husband. The wind whistled past my ears, the verdant green of summer above my head. It had been so long since I allowed myself to run. Too long since I let my body be just a body.

2.

Early 2015

When the ground was covered in snow, my vessel of a body began to break down. First my mind, full of tears and weight. I laid in my living room looking out to a frozen lake. Depression was the blanket I wore in winter.

My salted cheeks were replaced with dizziness. One evening, I fell to our kitchen floor. Three pairs of eyes bewildered, mine and two gray felines staring down at me.

Take more vitamins, my doctor told me. And so I did. And though my mind improved, the sadness lifting, my body was still exhausted. Days started striving to stand up, but taken down by this dizzy.

So I learned to conserve the precious energy I had left. I let go of things I loved in the uncertainty of not knowing what was wrong.

Yet while I ran after my partner, I recalled that these limbs know how to dance across ice. I remembered that this life still laughs. I remembered that I am still here breathing.

3.

Hartford Memorial Baptist Church, Detroit, MI

Early September 2015

At our friend’s memorial service, my partner was greeted as a brother. Her sibling’s arm circled his shoulders and pulled him towards the first row of wooden pews. Minutes later, my partner’s hand was on her brother’s hunched and shaking shoulder.

Gathered were those I had known from ten years prior. A time when we were young and hoping for the life that comes after. We Detroit children made it past high school, most past college, despite. But achievements alone do not form a life.

At the end of the service, a tear escaped down the cheek of our ninth grade English teacher. Seeing his tears, my own finally found their way out. The loss that had been stuck in my chest. The caught words I had wanted to say found release through weeping.

4.

I wish I spent more time with my friend before she left. The last time, our group of 4 played board and card games in her hotel room in Southfield, Michigan. The summer she interned in Detroit while studying ministry. The memories of that day are a jumbled bag of Scrabble pieces. More than half a decade ago. Too far away to get back.

5.

After her service, we gathered to honor her with lanterns and a bit of light on the well-kept lawn of the gothic church where she had been ordained, the same church she worked at the summer I last saw her.

Only a handful of paper lanterns were lit. One lantern flew into the nearest tree, caught in high branches. The fire department called.

But a few purple and white lanterns found free sky. I watched one white lantern float away until I could no longer find it.

6.

Losing a friend is a box full of jagged questions and what ifs. Maybe a call, reaching out, being more supportive would have made a difference.

Maybe if I had been wiser about marriage and friendship, less insecure at the start of my marriage, maybe she would have had a bigger place in our lives. Maybe I should have encouraged my partner to call her more often. Maybe all of this would have made a difference. And maybe not.

Losing a friend is knowing there wasn't anything you could have done to keep that person here and alive. But it's still wishing you could have found a way.

I have been at the cliff of not wanting to be and have made it back, clawing for light. I can honor the fight it takes to simply be and to live.

And what a light-filled life my friend lived. Kind, compassionate, brave.

7.

These days, I’ve learned what helps me stay well. Therapy when the dark is too much. Doctors who I can ask hard questions of and who want to see me well. Yearly brain MRIs. Tumor medicine. Vitamins. Slowing down when my body tells me I am taking on too much.

There are still weeks at a time of dizziness and fatigue. But I’ve learned to honor my limitations and take better care of myself.

When I’m on the ice skating, I am free. Skating and dancing I gave up when I was most ill. It is a joy to be able to do the things I love again.

This pea sized thing at the base of my brain that should not be here does not stop me from living. It does not stop me from dancing across my kitchen floor.