CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

THE SPACES IN BETWEEN:

GRIEF FROM AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Arts in
Communication Studies

By

Julianna Jeanine Kirschner

May 2012
The thesis of Julianna Jeanine Kirschner is approved:

______________________________________________      ___________________
Dr. Jeanine Minge                                      Date

______________________________________________      ___________________
Dr. Kathryn Sorrells                                   Date

______________________________________________      ___________________
Dr. Rebecca Litke, Chair                               Date

California State University, Northridge
Acknowledgements

Writing a Master’s thesis cannot be done in isolation, and my experience shows that this is true. There are so many people that have been there for me, and I appreciate it more than all of you could know. Without the support of so many, this project may not have been completed.

Thank you to my thesis chair, Dr. Rebecca Litke, for all of the time and effort you put into guiding me through the revision of this work. I appreciate everything you have done for me, and all of the advice that you have given me. Thank you for the stylistic and holistic suggestions for this work, which have strongly upheld my overall goals. Your support has always been unwavering, and I strive to be a scholar like you. Thank you for being a wonderful mentor and friend.

I would also like to offer my gratitude to Dr. Jeanine Minge, who gave me helpful suggestions on how to improve my methodological approach. This work grew from the paper I wrote in the Textual Studies course that you taught in Fall 2010, and your support of my contributions to autoethnography has helped me continue writing. Thank you for giving me a standard I can embody in all of my performative work.

I am also thankful for the support of Dr. Kathryn Sorrells. I appreciate your input on the cultural and theoretical approach of this piece, and I could not have articulated my academic and personal position without your guidance. Our conversations in your office have helped me formulate the approaches that I included in the final draft of this work. Thank you for all that you do.

I also appreciate the support of the entire Communication Studies Department and the Teaching Associates. Thank you for welcoming me when I returned to campus two
weeks after the loss of my father. In any other social situation, I felt like the elephant in the room that everyone should avoid. I did not feel this kind of apprehension when I came to campus, and I appreciate that more than words can say. All of your suggestions have been so meaningful for this work. Thank you for offering a fresh pair of eyes when I needed it. I appreciate all of the Teaching Associates that I have had the pleasure of working with over these past two years. During the writing of this piece, I can honestly say that many were given!

I would especially like to thank my friend and fellow Teaching Associate, Tamar Artin, for your unwavering support, and for listening to me when times were difficult. I will miss the times we spent at the Coffee Bean getting our work done. I am so glad we became friends, and I do not think I could have done this without you!

I also feel a great deal of gratitude for those who attended the conference, Doing Autoethnography: Here and Now, in November 2011. Thank you for offering your constructive comments on the first writing sample that I created for this piece. The invaluable advice I received helped send me in the right direction for this piece. Thank you for your support and friendship.

I would like to acknowledge two wonderful mentors that have helped guide me through my grief: Rabbi Mark Blazer and Laurel Davis. Rabbi Blazer offered the Jewish perspective to me, and I appreciate learning a different way of grief management. Laurel has kept me focused on bettering myself over the last year and a half. I cannot thank you enough for the enriching conversation.
I also could not have done this work without the support and strength of my family. I really appreciate the support of my siblings, and all that you do to keep the memory of our father alive.

Words cannot express the gratitude I feel for my brother, Joey, who assumed the role of planner and set up the meetings at the mortuary, which I discuss later in this work. I know it was hard for you, and I admire your strength.

I appreciate my brother, Jake, for creating the Irish cross that is now resting with our father. I know our dad would have loved the fine craftsmanship you put into that oak piece! Your words from the eulogy will remain with me forever.

To my cousin, Linzi—I will always consider you my sister, and I appreciate the support you’ve given me throughout this experience. There were so many times when you held me up, both figuratively and literally. When I am having a difficult day, I think of one of our jokes, and I cannot stop laughing.

Thank you to my sister, Jess, for continuing to collect images of our father’s life, and for preserving them. I find it amazing that you were able to compile several hundred of his photos for the slideshow at the reception, while having a small window of time to complete it. Thanks for always listening without judgment, and for always being there for me.

I appreciate the support of Aunt Beth and my cousin, Sarah. I know I can always count on you, and I appreciate your support of the work I am doing. Thank you, Uncle Mike, for also being there in my most difficult moments. I appreciate all that you do, straight up to the sky.
To my mother—I could not have done this without your support! You are an amazing woman, and I am in awe of you every day. You are a powerful example for your children and your grandchildren, and I am so proud of how far you have come. Thank you for never giving up, and for staying true to yourself. I am sure Dad would be saying this right now: “As long as you, Mom!” You deserve all things good in life, even more than a boxcar full of it. I love you more!

I would like to thank my husband, David. I appreciate you in more ways than I can articulate. You have been a source of strength throughout this experience, and I cannot fully express the gratitude I feel. I could not have written about this experience without your encouragement and support. Thank you for always offering me your honest opinion. You mean so much to me, and you make me so proud to be your wife. I love you.

Lastly, I would like to thank my father. He has taught me so much about what it means to be in this world. Thank you for being my first confidant, and for giving me the strength to share this story with others. I love you, and I will miss you always.
# Table of Contents

Signature Page ii  
Acknowledgements iii  
Abstract viii  

Chapter 1: Considering the Dash Symbol 1  
Chapter 2: An Exploration of Death and Grief from Multiple Perspectives 18  
Chapter 3: Retracing My Steps There 38  
Making Decisions 53  
The Visitation and Vigil Service 69  
The Funeral Service 82  
Chapter 4: Interpretations of the Past and the Art of Living Forward 94  
Chapter 5: Reflections and Goals for the Future 113  
Works Cited 123
ABSTRACT

THE SPACES IN BETWEEN:

GRIEF FROM AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE

By

Julianna Jeanine Kirschner

Master of Arts in Communication Studies

We will experience grief many times during our lives, and it comes in a variety of forms. The loss of a loved one is an impactful experience, and I offer a perspective of grief that is reflective of my own experience. In this piece, I will explain the effects of pre-grief and grief itself. In early October 2010, my father experienced three surgeries to remove a benign tumor. The pre-grief that I experience during this time is noticeable in the change in our relationship. After his passing on October 28th, I experience a series of rituals which shape my journey through grief. In consultation with Communication Studies and Performance Studies scholars, I contribute to the conversation in the academy and in every day communication regarding grief and loss. While this story is not universal, my goal is to offer hope to people grieving losses of all kinds.
Chapter 1: Considering the Dash Symbol

It is a beautiful summer day, and the sun shines brightly in my eyes. The car stereo radiates songs from my childhood, and the music comes to an abrupt stop as I take the key out of the ignition. I adjust my sunglasses as I exit the driver’s seat. I lock the doors and hear a familiar click from my car. I think nothing of my normal compulsive tendency to check the door handle to ensure it is locked. It usually consists of three separate pulls to the door handle, as though these similar actions will somehow end up with a different result. One, two, three. . .

I begin to walk through the iron gates. It is not long before I can hear the sound of cascading water from the central fountain. As I walk closer, I notice an enormous amount of loose change at the bottom of the fountain. The metallic surfaces of the coins reflect the sun’s light, and they look like desolate diamonds. They are wishes that will never be granted.

I pass the second set of gates, which open into a vast courtyard. The scent of the flowers that I began to smell when I entered the first set of gates slowly becomes stronger, and the fragrance is even more robust now that I am in the courtyard. I hear chimes in the distance, and my nervousness from coming to this place is starting to ease from the familiar sound. I step onto a concrete sidewalk, and continue walking forward.

I walk twenty feet until I reach a dirt path to my right. I walk the entire ten-foot length of the path until I reach the grass. I can tell the grass has been mowed recently, and there is a slight hint of morning dew still present on the tips of the grass blades. I step hesitantly on the grass, and I walk quietly forward. The green bench is in the perfect place; it is adjacent to my destination and the trees from which the chimes hang.
I gently brush the thin layer of water off the bench before I sit down. As I do, a slight breeze comes through and stirs the chimes. They are clanging wildly, as though their very existence were dependent on their frenzied pace. I remember the chimes my neighbor had when I was younger; the melodic tunes of the bamboo and silver chimes from their porch would echo into my yard often. The sound reminds me of a life lived long ago, only to be replaced by an uncertain one now.

I look at my feet, and take in the beautiful stone that lies there. The granite surface is one of which my father would be proud. He quoted movie lines, and integrated them into everyday conversation. Some of his favorite movie lines are ingrained in the way I speak now. Using his impersonation of cousin Eddie in *Christmas Vacation* to express his approval of a product, my father would often say, “That’s a fine quality item, Clark.” I laugh quietly at the memory, knowing he would say the same of the stone at my feet.

I bend down now to examine the stone at a closer distance. The surname Mathwig appears in all uppercase letters, etched with precision. I trace each letter with my finger feeling the toughness of the material used to make it. The left hand side is a beautiful depiction of a life well lived through baseball and craftsmanship, among other things. The dates beneath it make my hand shake as I trace the numerals: September 2, 1946 – October 28, 2010. My hand lingers over the dash line for a little longer than the rest of the inscription.

This is my father’s grave.

I would have never imagined myself, a young woman in her mid-twenties, to visit him this way. His vibrant personality was infectious, and his love for family was just as great. I keep my finger on the dash symbol a little longer, holding onto the significance it
holds. It represents the life lived between birth and death; the time that he never took for granted. The dash symbol embodies the middle period, the time where every story begins. I keep my right hand on the dash, as I wipe a tear with my left hand.

I can smell the carnations in a pot nearby. The wind has just picked up enough that I can smell the unique fragrance. My mind begins to wander as I breathe in the familiar scent. I lift my hand from the stone for a moment, and then something changes and I cannot see clearly. It feels like my body is somewhere else.

“You can see me, but I cannot see you.”

My vision is fuzzy as I lift my hands from my eyes. “Ready or not, here I come!” I shout, my voice echoing from the dining room in which I stand. I hear snickering coming from the kitchen, so I walk quietly, but expeditiously toward the space. My bare feet brush against the carpet, and the softness buffers the sound of my approach. I am now at striking distance, and I leap onto the vinyl floor of the kitchen. “You’re it!” I holler, jabbing my brother in the shoulder with my right index finger, “Nice try!” He reluctantly comes out from under the breakfast table. “Okay, it’s your turn,” he relents, and covers his eyes tightly; “I’m going to get you this time.”

I run quietly upstairs as I hear his countdown, and I scurry into the space my parents call the game room. The large pool table that rests in the center of the room has an opening underneath, so I begin to maneuver my body to fit in the condensed space. My mother is sitting on the couch across from the pool table, and she is on the phone. “Mmm hmm,” she murmurs, noticing my body contorting to fit in the space. As my last limb enters the small compartment, I can hear my mother say very lightly, “Please don’t do that.”
“Jake is coming,” I whisper, “Don’t give me away.” “Mmm hmm,” she repeats, once again enmeshed in the phone conversation. My brother’s less than stealth approach signals to me that he is nearby. I hold my breath in fear that he can detect my respiration. While it is only three years that separate us in age, I still believe my eight year old brother possesses super powers.

The floor creaks agonizingly as Jake places his weight on it. He is standing right next to where I am, but he does not realize it. “We’re leaving now,” my mother says frantically, “I am coming. Don’t tell me otherwise.” I hear the buffered sound of the phone clicking, indicating that phone call is over. “Get your sister,” my mother says to Jake, “We need to leave now.”

“I’m still looking for her,” he whines, “Can we finish our game?” “No,” my mother says, “She’s stuck in the pool table. You’ll need to pull her out. We have to go.” The hurried and stern voice of my mother surprised me, because she never performs this way. “Julianna,” she called in my direction, “Out, now.”

Whenever our legal first names are used, something is wrong. Members of my family refer to me as Julie or Jill, so this formal address shocks me. “Julianna Jeanine,” she says matter-of-factly, “Dad needs us.” I am in huge trouble now. No one ever calls me by my middle name. I start crying suddenly, thinking that I will not be allowed to play Hide-and-Go-Seek again.

I then feel warm hands cradling me, and I open my eyes. “I’m sorry,” my mother says as she pulls me out of the tight space I am in. “It’s not you; it’s not your fault. We do need to leave though. It will take forty minutes to get to Anaheim.”
I cry violently now. I do not want to leave, because I know we will be going back to the hospital. The sterile smell and curtains they use to separate people concerns me greatly. I do not feel willing to enter such a questionable space.

I also have darker suspicions of what the doctors were doing to my grandmother, who is their patient. The needles and contraptions they use look like they hurt her, but she never complains. I feel helpless, because I know there is nothing I can do.

I continue to cry during the car ride to Anaheim, California, which is 70 miles north of our home. My brother bribes me with candy to quiet me down. As I eat each Skittle one by one, I look up at my mother. She has one hand on the wheel and the other is massaging her temple. I wipe the last tear from my eyes and finally notice the red carnations lying on the seat next to me. All but one of the flowers has bloomed.

I hold the carnations with me as we walk through the sliding double doors toward the waiting room of the hospital. I do not see grandma, only my father who is rubbing his temples as my mother did earlier. He says something I cannot understand, and my mother embraces him. Then, I am surprised a second time that day; my father cries in front of me for the first time in my short life. He is hesitant with his tears, but he allows them to fall. The smell of carnations is stronger than ever, because I am squeezing them tightly, worried that I will drop them.

In that moment, the carnations fall to the floor.

The sound of someone approaching stirs me from my daydream. I am still at the cemetery, sitting on the bench. It is a man holding a small book, and he walks over to a bench ten feet away from me. I see from the corner of my eye as he kisses his hand, and touches the stone beneath him. He then crosses his legs in the shaded spot, and begins to
read. The sounds of the chimes are amplified again with another passing breeze. I carefully sit down without taking my hand off of the dash symbol of my father’s headstone. I repeat the same gesture as the man did earlier; I kiss my left hand and place it on my father’s name: William Edwin Mathwig.

I compose myself, and stand hesitantly. I live 140 miles away, so I do not get many opportunities to visit. I walk toward one set of iron gates, and I pass a large rock on the ground to the left of the sidewalk. The iron plate fixed on it is inscribed with a poem, which asks its readers to “Miss me—but let me go” (Guest). Letting go is not always easy, but I am trying every day.

I get back into my car, and turn the ignition. As I pass Mission Avenue, I take a deep breath. I would not have been able to walk into a cemetery a year ago, let alone spend an hour alone there. The fear would cause me to freeze in place, and it was debilitating. The acute fear did not just originate from what is really there, which is a resting place for the deceased. Rather, the performances and the meanings attached to them are the ultimate triggers.

It represents the end.

The cemetery is a symbol of conclusion, and it offers no room for an epilogue. The monuments built within and around the cemetery suggest that death is final. My experience shows that there is no true finalization of a person’s influence, as I will articulate later in this piece. Even after my father’s death, I continue to embody the traits of my father both consciously and subconsciously.

I do not think a person’s influence dies with them, because their impact on the lives of other people will continue in marked or unmarked ways. I believe there is room
for footnotes to each person’s story, even after the person has died. By footnotes, I am referring to the ways in which the person continues to live after their organic body has died. Kurt Lindemann agrees when he says, footnotes “are interruptions in the narrative. . . [They are] something I struggle to include in the name of ‘valid’ scholarship, something I perform with and against as I write myself into them, trying to make sense of it all” (65). Every time I tell this story, I can share and learn more.

I remember, and I am present in that place once again.

My story is what Carolyn Ellis calls, “a text in motion” (13). It is a series of remembrances, all of which offer one or more pieces to the puzzle. As a memory comes forth, it changes how I might tell a story. Ellis considers all of her past writing, and she combines them “into a form more akin to a video” (13). I follow the same pattern in my telling of stories. Although my father cannot tell his story, I will write mine.

I make a left turn onto the 76 highway, and I take one last glance at the San Luis Rey Mission where my father is buried before the monument disappears from sight. I drive east, and Guajome Lake begins to appear to my right. This is familiar territory for me; it was at this very lake that I spent many of my childhood days. This small area of Oceanside, California is where I was born and raised.

As I enter the Jeffries Ranch neighborhood, I drive down the winding roads and recognize the curb I had used to practice parallel parking. I drive further and see the elementary school that I attended from first through fifth grade. The adjacent horse trail was the route I would follow on my short walks home after school. These landmarks are reminders of a simpler time—a world in which my father lived.
My hands rest firmly on the steering wheel of a car that my father picked out. I was thirteen years old when we arrived at the dealership to purchase this 1999 Mitsubishi Eclipse. It was for my sister who had just earned her license, and she would drive it until she sold it to me in 2005. I remember the look on my father’s face when he saw the car displayed proudly on a raised concrete pedestal. “This is it,” I remember him saying, and it was ours shortly after.

At last, I arrive at the home of my parents. The garage door is open, a nonverbal symbol to indicate that someone is home. I hear a lawn mower running in the backyard, and the familiar sound soothes me. At any given moment in my childhood, there would always be a yard project in progress.

As the youngest of five children, I grew up in a busy, but also close family. Everything is a family affair, from trimming the bushes to vacationing at Yosemite National Park. There are always performances involved, which “do something rather than simply assert something” (Siray 17). Every performative choice is deliberate, and each movement was a building block to some end. My parents taught my siblings and me to rely on our bodies to build and fix our own things, and it is seen as a weakness to hire a contractor or plumber to complete the things we have been taught to do. My father takes great pride in manual labor. The power he gained from his work was the same as what I found in academia. I diverged from the norm that my family had established when I pursued a Bachelor’s degree and eventually a Master’s degree. College was never considered a requirement by my parents, but I required it of myself.

“Hey!” I hear my mother call as I exit the car, “It’s good to see you.” She embraces me, and we begin to walk toward the garage. My older brother Joey walks past
with a hedge trimmer in one hand. “Hey,” he says as he returns to the backyard. I hear the hedge trimmer come to life as I enter the house with my mother.

   Even though my father is not here, the home appears as though he never left. The blue blanket he loved still lies on the large green couch in the middle of the living room. A towel still hangs in the bathroom that he used every morning.

   It even smells the same. A hint of vanilla and musk permeate the place.

   My mother begins to recount the events from earlier in the day as she enters the kitchen. I sit on a stool in front of her and begin to listen. My nieces are growing rapidly, or “like weeds” as my mother exclaims. I smile at her, feeling the warmth from a home in which I spent the first twenty years of my life.

   My mother’s hair is long, and it reaches just past her waist. She leans her hand against the apron that is hanging against the wall of the kitchen, a garment she would use often. The one that hung there before was adorned with lace and varied miniature stains. They were beautiful remnants of the meals she would cook for the family every night. The old apron has now been replaced by a newer, stain-free counterpart. I like the older one better.

   My mother always calls herself a “1950s housewife,” and this persona is one my mother has adopted ever since I could remember. She is the one with dinner ready when her husband gets home from work. She is home when her children finish school, and she spends her days caring for her family. My mother does more work than that for which she is given credit. She is afraid to cause any trouble, because she prefers the “order” that is created through the divide between the public and the private.
I am different. I agree with Audre Lorde when she describes the inseparability of the private and public worlds, because both have influences and connections with one another. Lorde articulates her struggles in a way that parallels mine: “I didn't know how I was going to bring my personal and political vision together, but I knew it had to be possible because I felt them both too strongly, and knew how much I needed them both to survive” (Lorde 197). For me, the educational institution is a place for me to gather my thoughts, and recognize my own vision for myself. It is also a space in which I feel comfortable sharing the private with the public, and I find that these ideas are definitely intertwined. The personal is absolutely the political.

I began the Master’s program in Communication Studies at California State University, Northridge in August 2010. In addition to my course work, I began teaching two sections of public speaking as a Teaching Associate, and I also continued the part-time job I held through my time as an undergraduate student. The schedule I planned for myself did not leave much room for unexpected circumstances, let alone the grief I would endure just two months from the start of my program.

My mother now begins to gesture with her hands, the raised tips of her fingers touching. I speak with my hands much like she does, and my animated facial expressions must originate from her. She is weaving a tale of mischief, and she describes the awe of childhood that has resurfaced with the birth of my nieces. She tells me that my niece, Samantha, got into the Tupperware cabinet again, and she started her own fictitious band with serving spoons and containers. My mother’s smile is familiar, and her happiness from telling the story comforts me. Her unique laughter echoes into the living room. It is a welcome reprieve from the morose conversations we often share.
In that moment, I recall my own use of this same space as a child. I remember sitting at this kitchen countertop to work on extraneous art projects I chose to do on my own. I recall decorating the countertop with various construction paper clippings and art supply kits. I would often create desk space anywhere in the house that had a flat surface, but the kitchen counter was often my workspace of choice.

As usual, a pitcher would rest on the kitchen windowsill with Lipton tea steeping with the heat of the sunlight. When my mother came to get a glass of iced tea moments later, she noticed a bit of paint smudged underneath my eye. “Warrior paint?” she asked as she wiped it off with her thumb. As she surveyed the mess I had made, her laughter at the display made it impossible to not join her. The typical summer day in this home was nothing short of extraordinary.

Now, my mother’s expression changes, and her gaze moves toward the floor. Her narrative changes as she recounts the loneliness she feels at night, a stark contrast from the playful tone she had when speaking of my nieces. This sudden shift is not uncommon in our conversations lately; something in the space will remind her of her singularity.

I find myself in a unique position, one that my experiences have not prepared me for. My mother asks for my guidance through the murky path of widowhood, albeit indirectly.

“Why did he have to go?” my mother asks, folding her arms.

I am cautious now, because I do not have much to offer. I want to help, but I am not prepared for such a responsibility. I am unsure of the right words to say, and I do not want to upset her further.

“I don’t know,” I say without making eye contact, “I wish I knew.”
Seeming somewhat satisfied with the answer, my mother abruptly switches her tone again. “Want to see the bedroom?” she asks with a smile spreading across her face, “I worked really hard.”

“I would love to see it,” I reply, feeling relief wash over me. My unease with somber conversations has increased in the last few months, because I worry that I will intensify the damage that the loss has already started. The conversational shift to remodeling is one that I welcome.

“The house looks great,” I say to my mother as she brings me up to her bedroom. My parents had the same waterbed for thirty years, and it sprung a leak a few months after my father passed away. My mother was forced to do the remodeling that my parents had discussed for years. She painted the walls and replaced the bed. The rest of the house is the same as it has always been, but the master bedroom is unrecognizable, except for my father’s endless collection of baseball caps that remains in sight.

Change can be a welcoming haven in times such as these. As I watch my mother fawn over the delicate changes she has made in her life, I am contemplating mine. “On your drive down here, you said you wanted to tell me something,” she says, speaking in the form of a question more than a statement. “Yes,” I reply, straightening my posture as I always do when I have something serious to say.

“I want to get a Ph.D.” I say simply, not fully prepared to listen to her response. Although, I already know what she is going to say.

“Okay,” she says sullenly, “So, when are you going to have my grandbabies?”

This is the question that will continue to haunt me until I decide with my husband whether we will have children. I feel a pull between two polar opposites: the childless
academe that travels and publishes articles, and the mother that balances a life with her family and her personal aspirations. I feel a sense of failure in regard to both; I cannot give all of myself to both at the same time. Not right now. Like Stacy Holman Jones, I feel a sense of shame from not being a woman in the Western sense that I know (306-307). I feel “an uncanny, sudden ghosting of my own love and grief, about the paths my life has taken, about my guilt and not being a good or right (enough) mother, lover, creator” (Holman Jones 307). I want it all, but I cannot have it all at once.

“I can’t answer the question of when or whether I’ll have children,” I admit to my mother. Before I allow a major life change that a pregnancy would bring, I need to live childless a few years longer.

I step back from the performance and watch intently. Telling my mother that I am not ready to have a child suddenly stops me in my tracks. I see my body frozen with my hands reached outwardly for acceptance. My mother shows compassion in her eyes, but try as she might, she has no similar experience in her life with which to compare mine. When she was my age, she already had three children and she was pregnant with me. Her world is significantly different than mine, but she still listens.

As I study performance and my own life, I can recognize the complicated web that my own life spins. From the mundane experiences to the extraordinary, there is much to be found in investigating every facet.

“Look at how cute your dad is,” my mother says, referencing a black and white photo of my father as an infant that sits on a mantel next to the closet. Her digression is not unwarranted; I know she still wants to talk about my deferral of children, and I am sure she is trying to investigate indirectly.
“He is very cute in that picture,” I respond.

I consider now the multilayered approach of Performance Studies, and I recognize that more is happening in this conversation than what the surface shows. Not only am I experiencing, but I am also critiquing my own performance and those of others. I use my own perspective, or lenses, to view the world. Alan Peshkin elaborates, “We are never free of lenses through which to perceive” (242). I also find it is possible to use the same lenses to analyze what I see and how I see it. These lenses originate from different aspects of my identity, including my gender, age, social status, and religious beliefs, among others. However, I cannot distinguish which lens I am using when I am offering my insight, because often times, these lenses operate simultaneously. I hope to offer a holistic view of my identities throughout this piece, so the lenses in operation may become more apparent.

“Do you like what I did with this shelf?” my mother asks, removing me from the swirl of information I am processing in my mind. She gestures toward the mounted shelf near her dresser across the room, which has a collection of Catholic crosses displayed. These icons share a different story than the relatively secular upbringing that I experienced. My mother has embraced religion since my father’s death, and I have recognized that my own position is agnostic. I am glad that my mother has found solace in her faith, regardless of the fact that my beliefs do not align. I nod my head respectfully in reply to her question, admiring the strong material used to make the crosses more than the symbolic significance they hold.

Acknowledging the performativity of the current moment and those I have experienced prior, I recognize autoethnography as the best approach to utilize in my
research journey through grief. This method allows my voice to be present through narrative, and it lets the focus be on my own embodiment of grief. Walter Fisher contends that such a narrative is innate in human beings (6). Autoethnography is a methodological approach that speaks specifically to the human condition, the characteristic that Fisher calls, “homo narrans,” or the story-telling animal (6). Fisher goes on to say, “The idea of human beings as storytellers indicates the generic form of all symbol composition” (6). Autoethnography utilizes the inherent nature of our storytelling, and it allows the researcher to theorize based on their narratives.

The act of narrative, which is indicative of autoethnography, is a universal practice; there is not one culture without it (Barthes 95). With relation to history, international relations, and transcultural communication, “narrative is there, like life” (Barthes 95). Narrative articulates the cultural rules and assumptions expected of people, and these notions are marked in the telling and writing of cultural anecdotes. Autoethnographic experiences demonstrate the historical period in which they occur, which also strongly implicates the ritualistic nature of our being. The narrative I will share is one that connects all of these ideas, in one way or another. Autoethnography shifts the academic focus toward the personal.

In essence, autoethnography places the researcher at the center of the project, and it embraces their subjectivities. This methodology intends to break down the barrier between the researcher and the researched, objectivity and subjectivity, process and product, self and others, art and science, and the personal and the political (Ellingson and Ellis 450-459). Autoethnography employs the narrative method, so it transcends the boundaries between academic fields and even those separating academia and everyday
life. Autoethnography is a methodological praxis within which the human spirit can be performed, both on the page and through the body.

As I stand in front of my mother, I hear echoes of Tami Spry’s words as I consider my own positionality: “In seeking to dis-(re)-cover my body and voice in all parts of my life, I began writing and performing autoethnography, concentrating on the body as the site from which the story is generated, thus beginning the methodological praxis of reintegrating my body and mind into my scholarship” (Spry, “Performing Autoethnography” 708; emphasis added). It is now that I must step back and reflect upon my experiences, and to have the chance to develop myself more as a scholar and a person.

“So,” my mother hesitates, “How long does it take to get a Ph.D.?” Her genuine interest is reassuring to me; she is engaging with my choice of education before children, at the very least.

“It varies,” I reply, “but it usually takes four to five years.”

I am guessing that she is doing the math quickly in her mind, because her gaze now drifts pointedly toward the ceiling.

“You’ll be in your early thirties when you finish,” she states.

My guess was right. I realize that her calculation serves another purpose; my mother is trying to determine what age I will be when I contemplate the possibility of children. Pregnancy in my early thirties seems like an appropriate option to me.

When I analyze moments such as this, the autoethnographic method is most useful, because I can see them from a place of displacement and past-knowing. Autoethnography is exploratory, and it possesses “very powerful explanatory, revelatory,
and expressive powers,” which qualifies the nature of grief about which I write and perform (Goldie 137). While my hope is to help those going through a significant loss, I recognize that my story is specifically mine. It does not represent everyone who could possibly read this text, but it can give perspective and hope. Sharing this story allows me to be in that place, and to take others there with me.

“I’m proud of you no matter what you do with your life,” my mother says as she embraces me.

“I am proud of you, too,” I reply. I mean that with every fiber of my being.

When I was growing up in this home, the possibility of my father’s death and my continued education would have shocked me to say the least. I recognize that my career choice is not the most obvious one, considering the skills I have learned from the white working class family in which I was raised. This complexity significantly impacted the ways I handled and continue to handle the loss of my father.

I find that what helps me most understand the present is to look back to the past.
Chapter 2: An Exploration of Death and Grief from Multiple Perspectives

I enter a room, and an acquaintance acknowledges me.

“How are you doing?” the person asks.

“Fine,” I say automatically.

No, actually I am not fine. I am crumbling into smaller pieces of myself, and I am beginning the arduous task of picking up the pieces. I fear the figurative wind picking up, because part of me can be taken away with it.

This scenario has repeated itself ever since I experienced the loss of my father. It has been a long time since someone close to me has died. I feel programmed to deliver the “right” response, but these are empty words. They are my avoidance, an ordinary coupling of words and phrases to disguise the despair underneath. Although it is hidden, grief remains. Even though these words may be empty, they are still mine. They highlight the performance I hope to deliver, a moment of simply being, “fine.” “Instead,” asserts James Loxley, “our speech acts tether or bind us to our words in a way that is not always open to the prospect of either disavowal or of excuse” (39). Had I followed up my response with a sudden wave of sobbing, the acquaintance would likely feel conflicted, just as I do. If I am not fine, what am I?

I find myself in a constant exchange of “being here,” and “being there,” or a sense of consistent living and reflection, much like Tami Spry does when she applies the work of Clifford Geertz (Spry, “Performing Autoethnography” 708-709). I am here when I can look back to the past with a sense of the present; I reflect knowingly. Here, my voice grows louder with the support and agreement of other scholars. When I am there, I am in that place of newfound mourning, living fully within that moment.
For now, I am here.

In the scholarly conversation about grief, I do not feel alone. When I tell countless people that I am “fine,” I am offering an incomplete picture of myself. Edward Sapir would agree that I am not exactly fine, because I am a reflection of the social reality within which my grief does not fit (Miller and Swift 150-151). Remnants of grief are shunned when they are not behind closed doors, because I believe people do not want to be reminded of their own tribulations. Public displays of grief, as I will define further, are unacceptable, even taboo.

The innovations of the modern world have made the experience of death the “ultimate catastrophe” (Dumont and Foss 1). Medical breakthroughs have extended life more than before, so grief is encountered less often. The number of identifiable griever dwindles in numbers. The lessened experience of grief and loss can make the onset of a new experience a traumatic one, particularly in my experience.

My experience represents a piece of Western culture, particularly European-American. My roots are primarily Italian and German. In the Southern California community of Oceanside where I was raised, the concept of death and grief is rarely discussed. In fact, my experience with death and grief has been laden with resistance, particularly before my father died and the initial moments thereafter. My community’s perspective is that of the current Western vantage point.

However, Western culture has not always maintained the same mode of rejection that is present now. In order for me to explain this more clearly, taking a step back to observe the past will be most beneficial.
During the time of the Middle Ages and the peak of the plague, the attitude surrounding death was encapsulated by “the phrase, Et moriemur,” an acquiescent sentiment meaning, “we shall all die” (Aries 55). The frequency of the deaths caused by widespread illness made the impact of grief less threatening.

In fact, the term cemetery did not originate in the funeral context. The French term, “cimetiere” comes from the idea of asylum, or a place to care for people (Aries 23). After bodies had been buried in the earth for some time, they would be brought to the surface. In clear view of the townspeople, the bones would be brought to the charnel house, a structure that stores human bones (Aries 22). People unknowingly desensitized themselves with respect to death and grief during this time when they began to build homes and offer business services at the site of the cemeteries. The people wanted the comfort that an asylum provides, and little consideration was given to the juxtaposition created between the world of the living and dead.

Ironically, my mother grew up in a home built on top of a Native American graveyard, and the home is also behind the Mission San Luis Rey de Francia cemetery, where my father is now buried. The areas in which my mother played as a child were cemeteries, because those spaces were wide open to play games. The silent asylum offered my mother and her seven siblings a reprieve from their household chores; it became a place of freedom.

Furthermore, the acceptance of death during the Middle Ages in Europe gave way to the modern era, which placed the focus on the self and, “la mort de soi, [meaning] one’s own death” (Aries 55). Herein lays the traces of today’s Western thought: “Death became the occasion when man was most able to reach an awareness of himself” (Aries
The contemplation of my own mortality is something I would have considered less frequently prior to my father’s passing, but I find my mind wandering to this subject now when I try to make sense of my loss. Today’s society has created a sense of “avoidance and denial of death . . . as a means of masking the narcissistic wound of mortality” (Kauffman 80). The familiarity of death and grief in this sense makes the concept reach closest to home. There are few things more personal than one’s own death.

Despite the overwhelming despair that results when I think of my own death, I fear the loss of my loved ones most. A phrase, “la mort de toi, [meaning] the death of the other person” is more salient for me, because the pain I feel from the grief is stark (Aries 56). The hysterical mourning that I experienced then and now is very personal, and this type of loss touches us all in one form or another in our lives.

Now that I have provided a foundation upon which the Western approaches to death can be understood, what is grief exactly? For me to give an appropriate answer to this question, I would like to offer a window into the onset of my own grief. As I type in the comfort of my apartment, I begin to hear the clicking of multiple computer keyboards. The room expands into the office where I once worked.

Once again, I am there.

“I need you to come to my desk.” My supervisor is acting out of character, and it startles me from the project I am working on. “Okay,” I reply, “I will be right there.” He seems suddenly nervous, and he runs his left hand through his hair. “You have a phone call.”

My job consists of accepting calls from customers across the country, but rarely do I ever receive personal phone calls at work. I rise from my chair, and I follow him into
his glass encased cubicle. Before I pick up his headset to answer, I immediately recognize the phone number on the caller ID.

“David?” I whisper.

“It’s not good,” my husband David says, “He stopped breathing.”

I do not recall speaking then. I must have wrapped the phone call up quickly, because the next thing I know, I am leaving the office. I hear coworkers giving me the routine “Goodbye,” many of them likely assuming that, “I’ll see you tomorrow,” is implied in my responses. I will not be here tomorrow, but I do not have the energy to explain why. Their smiles are achingly familiar, and I need to leave. Ironically, I want to run into the dark and unfamiliar place that I am headed now. I would get no answers in the corporate structure in which I spent most of my days.

Upon my exit from the building, I immediately call my mother, then my sister, and subsequently, my brother. The familiar sound of their voices in the recorded outgoing messages only causes more fear. Someone has to answer their cellphone. Every attempt leads to the same result, and I record a bit of my frenzy as I leave messages for each of them.

I take the familiar path every day to get home from work. The trees adorned with lights cascade down the sidewalk, guiding me to my destination. Several couples hold hands and venture into the opposite direction, toward my ignorant and blissful past. I try to keep my composure as I travel down one of Santa Clarita’s busiest streets, because my emotions could not be hidden for much longer. Walking simply is not fast enough; I begin to run as quickly as my nimble legs will take me. My sweaty hand clutches my cell phone tightly, for the fear of dropping it would not allow me to receive more information.
My hands shake violently as I fumble for the keys that would access the side gate of my apartment complex. I notice a line of sweat dripping from my forehead, threatening to fall into my right eye. One second of blindness while my contact readjusted was too much time to waste, so I hastily wipe my hand across my brow. At last, the gate opens, and I bolt immediately toward my building. I begin to cry as I scramble up the stairs, suddenly slowing my pace.

On the second flight of stairs, I lose my balance, and grasp firmly on the hand rail to support my weight. The same stairs I use every day suddenly feel like they are growing taller as I make my way up. After what feels like an eternity, I reach my apartment on the third floor. My fumbling hands struggle with the keys once more, and they fall to the concrete floor with a resounding crash. The clanging echoes down the dark hall several feet to my right. The position of the sun has made it look like a vertical abyss. My train of thought is erratic while I retrieve my keys from the floor. I fight with the keys once more until it allows me entrance into my apartment. While this haven normally provides a sense of relief, I only feel increased panic, because my cell phone has been silent this whole time.

The afternoon sun is shaded by the swaying trees outside my living room window. I sit on the couch and allow my sadness to take over. The salty tears stream down my face, and they are flowing at an alarming pace. I can no longer see, and it frightens me. The control I enjoyed so much in my supposed normal life was being snatched away from me, leaving me feeble in its wake. I make another attempt to reach a family member, but I fail once again. My hand begins kneading the arm of the couch in anticipation, just like a cat ready to pounce on its prey. My cell phone has remained quiet,
and I raise it in the air in preparation to throw it. My anger quickly gives way to defeat, and I lower my hand gently with hopes that it will come to life. I realize that I am beholden to this small device in this moment. I begin to hug a pillow when the menu screen illuminates.

“What is going on? Have you been able to reach anyone?” I shriek, clutching the phone with both hands.

“I am almost home,” says David on the other end of the line, “I have talked to James.” Of course, I think, I should have known to call my brother-in-law.

“I need to know what you found out. Just tell me! Everyone I called will not answer their phones,” I howl, hoping to get a less than vague answer.

“I am almost home,” he repeats, “I am exiting the freeway.”

“That doesn’t answer any of my questions.” I am angry, and he knows it.

“I am almost there. I am almost home,” he reiterates, “We’re going to be okay.”

“Tell me he’s not gone,” I cry, my hysteria suddenly climbing, “He cannot be gone. It’s not possible.”

“I am almost home. We’re going to be okay,” David repeats, and he cannot veil his sadness any longer.

It was in that moment I knew; no more words were necessary. Up until this point, I had been successful at lying to myself. No incoming calls meant that I could hold on to that shred of hope that everything was fine. My arms began to spasm, because I can no longer contain the fear that controls my body. The deadbolt of the front door creaks as a key is inserted, and David enters. The crease in his brow is more defined, and the hue of his vibrant skin is shaded with a deep red.
“I am so sorry. . .” he says.

From that point on, I cannot hear another word. The nearest projectile I can find is a floral pillow. All four of the couch pillows are strewn across the room, as I face the realization I had been trying to avoid. I shout, “NO! NO! NO!” repeatedly. The voice coming out of my body does not sound like my own. I howl with an intangible infliction, as though an unskilled surgeon sliced open my chest without using any anesthesia. I clutch my chest in agony, and I can feel David’s arms wrapping around me.

As my body shakes from the crying, I can feel his doing the same. The grief is pulsating within our bodies; the rhythm is exact. I struggle for air, because I am depriving myself of the adequate amount. I suddenly feel a paper bag placed over my mouth, and I mildly calm down as my hyperventilation subsides. David holds my right hand tightly. My father would often squeeze my hand in his whenever he knew that I was doing something I was afraid of. In that moment, David squeezes my hand. One, two, three. . .

I open my eyes once again in my apartment, only it is sixteen months later. I am here again, shaken from the relived moment. My petite cat Lucy rests on my legs, and she stirs from her nap when she feels my body tense. Her eyes meet mine to make sure I am okay. Once she is satisfied, she resumes her nap amidst her own cheerful purring. I relax for a moment as I listen to Lucy’s rhythmic tune.

It would be accurate to say that my reaction to my father’s death has roots in my past experiences. My fear of mortuaries and places specifically constructed for the dead has lasted at least a decade, and a particular moment on vacation in San Francisco illustrates this distress appropriately.
I am there. It is October 2008, exactly two years before my father’s passing. I feel the cool breeze blowing against my skin, and the chill in the air makes me bundle up even more. I can smell the perfume that I wore when I used this scarf last. I am not wearing any fragrance now, because I neglected to place it in my travel bag. I burrow my nose further into the scarf to inhale the familiar scent. Noticing how cold I am, David rubs his hand on my back to create warm friction. The boat’s horn sounds, and I can see land slowly drift away from behind the window. The waves lap against the side of the boat, causing it to rock gently from side to side.

Moments later, the boat slows down and stops in front of the crude dock. The wind blows even more sharply as we exit the boat, and we walk past a small blue and white sign announcing that we have arrived at Alcatraz. The straight streets of San Francisco curve with the rolling landscape in the distance. “Indians welcome” in spray paint greets us as we enter, a piece of performance art referencing a revolt of a different kind than that which existed before the paint touched the concrete. We walk up an uneven hill toward the right until we reach the base of the abandoned prison structure.

Old living quarters rest to the side of where I stand. The concrete aches as I step inside to see the rubble that remains. I take a photograph of David examining the architecture adorned with graffiti, his eyes focused with inquiry. “Take another one,” he says, much as he always does after I take a candid picture of him, “I want to be smiling in this one.” I oblige, and snap a photo of him with a delighted smile on his face. His hand rests on the nearly indestructible support wall, and he lifts his arm as he approaches me. I hand him the camera, so he can take a photo of me. I feel the tendrils of the end of my
scarf wave in the wind as the flash goes off. To me, the scene filled with smiling faces of fellow tourists seems like an oxymoron in comparison to this facility’s original use.

David holds my cold hand as we walk further up the jagged hill. He smiles at me as he tucks the small silver camera into his pocket. “Is this what you imagined it would be?” he asks.

“I’m not sure,” I reply, “I didn’t know what to expect.”

The crowd appears to dissipate as we climb further up the hill. My breathing increases its pace. The laughter seems far away now. I stop for a moment and look down at the scene below. I see scattered groups of people, and one particular animated group catches my attention. An energetic woman waves her hands in the air expressively, and she fans her arm toward the mural of spray paint before her. Although I am a considerable distance away from her, her admiration of the monument is clearly visible from where I stand. I smile for a moment, thinking of how this space was used by Native Americans when the government forcefully threatened to take their federally issued land away. This space was abandoned, and they made it their asylum.

I turn my attention toward the north-facing massive structure ahead of me. David is now standing a short distance from me, and he begins pointing out interesting buildings that we can see from our vantage point. A small, ignored concrete room rests behind me. My shoelace comes untied and I trip in front of the entrance to the small shack. My right hand falls on a rock, and David clutches my left hand to ease the fall. “Are you okay?” David asks, and I nod my head. I regain my composure quickly, and I retie the laces together immediately. “What building is this?” I ask David as I walk to the right to read the faded mural next to the door. “I don’t know,” he says as he walks closer to me.
“Mortuary,” is displayed in simple white letters with a black background. Smaller text below the title explains that this small space is where prison doctors prepared the deceased bodies of prisoners. My hand begins to shake violently, and I immediately rush toward the main entrance.

“It’s okay,” David says as he stops me gently and wipes the steady tears streaming down my face. I cannot respond verbally without getting upset further, so I shake my head. My thoughts flash to graphic images of the procedures which morticians are trained to follow in order to prepare bodies. I fear the space of the metal preparation table will be taken by someone I love, and the possibility of that pain already hurts. Rather than my own mortality, I am overwhelmed with the thought of the mortality of my family and friends. This is also the closest in proximity I have come to a preparation room for the deceased, and it frightens me. I pinch my eyes closed in an attempt to rid myself of the excess tears. I push myself to walk and I pull David abruptly behind me. I do not want to use my voice; the rest of my body is doing all of the talking.

I guide David into the building, and David does not protest my hurried pace. My movements are a deliberate attempt to (re)place myself, to occupy a more desirable place than the front door of the mortuary offered. My shaking hand slowly begins to calm and the shaking stops completely when I put on the headset provided by a tour guide. I occupy all of my energies on the articulate narrator telling the story of Alcatraz and many of its famous criminal residents. While the audio provides disturbing tales, its distraction is welcome.

I inhale deeply, and I am here again.
I am consumed with thoughts of my pre-grief and grief experiences. To live within grief can be a challenge, but I find the visitation to these moments of performance to be both terrible and important. In these moments, although difficult, I lived fully. I experienced.

Now that I can recognize my own body’s first experiences with this phenomenon, I find it valuable to explore the experiences of other scholars in order to better understand grief. However, I would like to carefully point out my concerns regarding a singular definition of grief. I believe the concept warrants a plethora of perspectives, which I will attempt to offer here. Despite these efforts, I recognize the partiality that will always exist. The discussion of grief that I will provide is not intended to fully encompass the experience, nor do I suggest any of my discussions of my grieving experiences to be generalized. These discoveries of subjective experience are intended to offer more lenses with which to view this phenomenon.

Ronald E. Shields’ assessment of grief performed in opera closely emulates that of performed grief typically found in Western culture, because he appropriately compares the staged grief with his own loss. Opera composer Richard Wagner’s character Kundry embodied the nature of grief that Shields found most notable. Kundry presents “an image of grief rehearsed, grief embedded in performances seen and remembered, performances repeated and recorded, and ultimately performances silenced and resisted” (Shields 372). Although Kundry is an example of a culturally-specific theatrical performance, Shields problematizes what Western culture teaches in terms of grief. He discusses Kundry in connection with his own loss of his mother, and his conundrum lies in his own voicelessness. “We don’t talk about it. Our silence is our way of controlling our story”
(Shields 381). Kundry embodies the voice which Shields does not possess. With respect to my grief, I am told both directly and indirectly to perform grief in a subdued way, but my feelings of loss do not align with complacency. Here I can speak when I have lost my voice there.

Like the experience of Kundry unfolding on the stage, grief is often explained in terms of a process. Put simply, Psychologist Judith Stillion defines grief as “the complex process that follows bereavement and takes time and energy to work through” (112). In Stillion’s perspective, the period of time that includes discovery of the death and the moments that follow are known as bereavement. The “time and energy” that Stillion refers to is reflexive and contextual. The later chapters of this work refer to the ways in which my “time and energy” has been spent, including writing this Master’s thesis.

Peter Goldie’s conception of grief is similar to Stillion’s, but his version includes the person who has died. From Goldie’s perspective, grief is identified by feelings of “sadness on the recognition of the irrevocable loss of someone (or something) loved” (119). Goldie furthers the idea of grief as a process, which contrasts the notion that grief endures in Western culture. As a process, grief is perduring, “as its identity is not determined at every moment of its existing” (Goldie 124). Sometimes grief is intense, other times it can seem like it is nonexistent. I agree with Goldie’s assertion that grief is rarely consistent.

To illustrate the notion of grief as a process, Robert J. Kastenbaum discusses the phenomenon in terms of communicative reactions between grievers and Western society. This “interaction” is integral, because other people are present during grief (Kastenbaum 359). The rituals that we follow are set by culturally specific practices, such as the vigil,
wake, funeral, Shiva, etc. At every one of these events, grief is expected to be public, and these social functions serve as the moments of interaction with a collective of grievers. They are also what Victor Turner calls liminal spaces, or moments in between (52). Rituals are highly performative, and they follow specific predetermined patterns. These liminalities demonstrate the cultural, and often times religious, nature of mourning; a grieving person is expected to participate in various rites of passage for the deceased person. According to Kastenbaum, each of the events that are held in memory of a loved one infer a process within them, and it generally follows that the griever continues the process after the ceremonies have concluded.

Rack, Burleson, Bodie, Holmstrom, and Servaty-Seib offer another perspective in the grieving process, which represents those family and friends that come to support the grieving. Despite their sincerity, “most people feel ill-prepared to help another person deal with a loss” (Rack, et al. 1). Although they are a part of the grieving process, they may feel as though there are no right things to say or do. To an extent, their concerns are warranted in a Western context. In my experience, the presence of other people in the time of mourning is more important than any words they could offer. This argument for process does not fully encapsulate the idea of grief, so other scholars offer different explanations.

Philosopher Stephen Wilkinson believes that grief is best explained in terms of a mental disorder. Wilkinson’s view contrasts the accepted view of grief in the psychology community by denying the grief as a process claim. “[G]rief’s normality is really no reason not to regard it as a disorder, since lots of disorders (e.g., influenza) are similarly normal” (Wilkinson 292). Wilkinson cites disorderly body responses to viruses as similar
to that of grief. Although Wilkinson makes an interesting case, his argument primarily focuses on the reasons why we should not rule out grief as a mental disorder. He does not offer a straight forward discussion on why he contends that grief is a mental disorder.

Proponents of the mental disorder classification of grief make their claims based on qualitative traits. Similar to many mental disorders, the early onset of grief entails those things that can inhibit normal functioning. “Feeling slowed down, with accompanying postural changes, [which] may alternate with agitation, restlessness, and increased motor activity,” are among the general descriptors of a grieving person (Osterweis, Solomon, and Green 50). As some of the initial shock lessens, reactions to the death are indicative of “depression, anxiety, anger, pining, social and personal withdrawal and, for some, somatic symptoms” (Reed 286). The term “symptoms” is used in an explicit way to reveal the assumed notion of grief as a mental disorder. Moules, Simonson, Prins, Angus, and Bell suggest that many of the symptoms of grief are similar to mental disorders because of a long-standing modernist belief; they identify a Western cultural belief that a “successful recovery from grief” is identified by an absence of grief-related symptoms (99). In this context, a lack of a “grief ‘resolution’” implies “failure and incompetence” in handling one’s own affairs (Moules, et al. 100). These qualitative symptoms and traits of recovery are intended to nullify the idea of a process driven grief.

I believe all of these perspectives make exceptional points. The idea of a process is one that I find accurate, but it is incomplete. The notion of a process can offer progress and a means to move forward. However, grief is not linear. This is not to imply the connotation that a process is a set path, one that everyone can follow in a prescribed line. It is quite the contrary.
I mourn alone, much like Ragan Fox who experiences the slow loss of his own father (4). As Fox demonstrates, grief does not follow a prearranged path, and it can occur even before the mourned person dies:

I suppose I have spent the last 10 years mourning the loss of my father. Each time he forgot my name, I mourned. When he forgot to attend my college graduation and said he never remembered being invited, I mourned. When he stopped eating solid foods, I mourned. The tears I expect at the death call have already been spent. I mourned a dying father so much that I have no idea how to respond now that he is actually dead (Fox 4).

Fox’s experience demonstrates the nonlinear aspect of grief, but he still has a path that he follows. The path is not predetermined.

The indeterminacy can also result in the reference of grief as a mental disorder by some scholars. I disagree with the term mental disorder, and I would like to reference this end of the argument as pro-mental illness. Disorder typically references disarray and malady, and the term illness is more open-ended and holistic. Some of the scholars I previously referenced used the terms interchangeably, but I believe there is a difference. Mental illnesses provide an explanation that remains unanswered by the process discussion; grief is often unpredictable and unstable, similar to that of a mental illness. From this point on, I think it is most accurate to use the term mental illness.

Furthermore, I do not feel that we must make a decision between a process and a mental illness when describing grief, because the entire phenomenon cannot be reduced to such a simple dichotomy. Both of these ideas hold some truth in my own experiences,
so neither of them should be discounted. Rather, incorporating all ideas into one cohesive account of grief is the best alternative.

Grief is a process and a form of mental illness for several reasons. Each person follows their own pattern based on their predispositions and personality. The notion that grief is a mental illness does not indicate its abnormality; rather, it demonstrates our lack of immunity to what we cannot control. The time of exploration and explanation of the death encompass the period of expressed grief, and it lessens at the point where understanding begins. This is not to assert that grief concludes, because the void from the loss of that person will never be filled.

One of the first steps is to understand the journey of grief, and my understanding starts with talking and writing about it, as I am doing now. In addition to therapy-related approaches, there are many different medication solutions to other mental illnesses. However, I do not believe there is a pill one can take to eradicate grief. Instead, self-help books are often the sources of information that grievers turn to, especially in my experience.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’s notion of emotional stages of loss in her text published in 1969 has been replicated in many books and informational tools. The stages are as follows: denial/isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and ultimately, acceptance. Her work identifies the ways in which the dying approach their own impending deaths, and this context is what her stages are intended to describe. It is a last stand for the dying, because justification of their feelings is empowering. After all, “when a patient is severely ill, he is often treated like a person with no right to an opinion” (Kubler-Ross 7).
The advocacy for the dying found in Kubler-Ross’s writing has since been ascribed to those who are grieving.

Although Kubler-Ross’s work has no identifiable data or research, it appears that her claims are based on her experiences in Western culture for the most part. Still, her steps, as applied to grievers, have been mass marketed since her book’s release in the late 1960s. However, she clearly notes in her writing that these steps refer to those who are trying to understand their own impending death. “Soon an industry had grown up around the funeral business that found it convenient to guide the bereaved through her stages” (Kohler 62). The use of the steps has branched out to other forms of loss or life changes, such as divorce and addiction. It is important to recognize the impact of Kubler-Ross’s work in the area of grief research, because her ideas have contributed to how people expect themselves to grieve.

Therein lays the problem.

There is not a set pattern or rules that grievers should follow. I feel that an imposition of strict rules is detrimental to the growth of the person who is grieving, because my process of grief is not straightforward. My experience includes moments of extreme pain that is indicative of mental illness. However, it is still a process.

My process.

The journey that I follow indicates my particular situation and perspective, which means I am also using words that illuminate the person that I am. These words that I use are chosen deliberately, among many other words that could have been chosen. However, there have been moments during the early grieving process where I feel the need to
substitute words. Whether my intention is to spare someone else or myself, I use these words to mask the reality of which I speak.

In moments such as these, I cannot use certain words, because the literal definition of these terms speaks to the reality of the situation. Even when softer words are not present, I create my own. In the weeks after my father’s passing, I began to refer to hearses as “h-cars,” so I can say the word without actually saying it. I use a mix between indirect and direct words now, but I realize that direct words clarify my communication. However, my use of replacement words, or euphemisms, is not unique.

“We often use euphemisms to tell it like it isn’t” (McGlone, Beck, and Pfiester 261). Euphemisms are words that are used to displace another, especially when the topic is taboo in Western culture. Many scholars, including Ralph Keyes, explain the great extent to which people use euphemisms to refer to a person’s death (138). Grievers will often adopt these terms to avoid the speech act of confirming their loved one’s death. This list of possibilities is not exhaustive.

The dead are no longer with us. They left the building. Kicked the bucket. Bought the farm. They’ve gone home, or south, or west, or to the last roundup. They’ve laid down their burden. They’re pushing up daisies (Keyes 138).

These phrases dance around the concepts much like I do when I discuss my father’s death. The phrase I use most frequently is, “He passed away.” This statement is not denotative of death, but the connotation has been established over time.

My made up word, “h-car,” for hearse does not transgress far from the euphemistic changes this signifier has experienced. At the turn of the twentieth century, the funeral business started to grow significantly, and new words were introduced to
further spread the use of euphemisms. People’s “remains” weren’t ‘hauling’ to funeral homes; they were *transferred*. The ‘hearses’ used for this purpose became *professional cars*” (Keyes 144). In my situation, I find my usage of “h-car” to be more straightforward by using the “h” prefix, while also avoiding the questionable word entirely. However, “professional cars” might be one that I would consider.

There are other words that I try to avoid. The word casket is one that I do not have another word with which to replace. I will change the subject if the concept of casket arises, or remove myself from the interaction space that involves this discussion. Even the term casket has become tainted from its connotative use; at one time, the word casket itself was a euphemism for coffin (Keyes 143). Casket had been used to signify “jewel boxes” prior to its funeral association (Keyes 143). Not once do I recall ever using the word coffin since my father died, nor have I heard another person around me use the term. The word coffin may be too historically bound in its lexical definition, which likely results in my limited association with it. Considering my use of euphemisms and the use of others, I realize how unclear the communicative process can be with these elements present.

Grief can be found in a multitude of contexts, and it can occur for different reasons. Despite how one might frame it, whether it may be as a mental illness, a process, or a euphemistic phenomenon, grief’s impact cannot be denied. To support the nonlinear process of grief and sporadic moments of mental illness, tracing one’s own steps is the first method to make sense of the complicated web this phenomenon spins.
Chapter 3: Retracing My Steps There

It is September 2010.

I am driving on the freeway toward Santa Clarita, and my father’s voice is being channeled through the Bluetooth attached to my ear.

“My vision is strange,” my father admits.

“All of your kids wear contacts or glasses, so it’s about time you joined the group!” I joke, but I keep my rising concerns at the back of my mind. My father rarely has anything wrong with his health. This is probably nothing, I reason.

“It’s just one eye that is giving me problems,” he says with a slight edge of worry in his voice, “The right one.”

“That can happen,” I offer, “Without contacts, my left eye is worse off than my right eye. The optometrist will tell you for sure.”

“We’ll see,” he concludes, and I hear him sigh gently into the speaker. I hear the low murmur of the television on his end of the line.

“Let me know what they tell you tomorrow,” I reply, “Call me anytime.”

As we say our goodbyes over the phone, I feel an unwarranted amount of confidence. I consider the multitude of harmless explanations for my father’s vision suddenly clouding. I am sure that what he has can be fixed with no problem. I tell myself these stories in order to get sleep that night.

The next day I receive a call from my mother. “We don’t know anything yet,” she says, “The optometrist doesn’t seem to know what it is.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.
My mother explains that my father’s eye did not respond like a normal eye would, and there is nothing clouding his retina. I can hear the tension in her voice as she explains something that she does not quite understand, nor does anyone else. My mother hands the phone to my father, and he tells me the same story.

“These headaches are horrible,” he explains.

Again, my reasoning justifies this complaint with the possibility that he is squinting too much. When I found out I needed glasses, I had been getting headaches from my extra efforts to focus on the white board during my first semester in college. I remember the feeling of constantly looking through stained glass; everything had been distorted and partial. That must be it, I consider.

“Maybe the next optometrist will figure it out,” I suggest.

“I hope so,” my father says quietly.

Over the next couple days, my father tells me that his condition is worsening, but none of the optometrists he has seen can tell him what it is. I can hear the frustration in his voice every time he updates me. When the headaches suddenly spike, he hands the phone to my mother. “I don’t know what to do,” she says. Neither do I.

The next day I get a frantic phone call from my mother during my lunch break at work. “We’re going to the hospital,” she says starkly, “One of the optometrists thinks it is more than just his eyes. He cannot take it anymore.” Her voice is pained but strong.

“I’m coming,” I assert.

“Finish your work first,” she replies with a strong tone.
The concerns I had kept hidden in the back of my mind flood forth. Maybe this is something more than a pair of glasses could solve. I feel the stress begin to center at the pit of my stomach, weighing me down like a ton of bricks.

I walk through the rest of the day in a zombie-like state. I complete all of the required tasks efficiently, and I leave my workplace right at my scheduled time. The sun is setting as I exit the building, and the shopping area surrounding the corporate building is starting to bustle. I see couples and families filing in and out of the restaurants adjacent to my building, and I walk quickly to escape the noise. I pull out my phone from my pocket once it is sufficiently quiet, and I call my mother as I push the crosswalk button.

“Is there anything I can do?” I ask, “I can drive down now.”

“Wait until the morning,” she asks, “I don’t want you to drive in the dark.”

I agree with my mother’s suggestion as I approach my apartment complex. I unlock the iron gate, and I walk inside. Before I reach the end of the walkway, I see a familiar white car appear at the driveway. The car turns right and parks in the covered spot marked number 130. David gets out and waves in my direction.

“Was that your mom? What did she say?” he asks as he nods toward the phone in my hand.

“They don’t know,” I reply as he embraces me. The wind picks up and a chill runs down my spine. “Let’s go inside,” I suggest, and I hold his hand as we walk toward our building.
I am making dinner when the monophonic ringtone of my cellphone sounds. I wipe my hands with a nearby towel, and I answer the call.

“They know what it is,” my mother says with worry in her voice, “It is a tumor on his pituitary gland, and it’s not cancerous. Supposedly it’s quite common.” I can tell that my mother is trying to hold it together as much as she can. Her voice quivers slightly.

“Wait. What?” I set down the wooden spoon I am using to stir the sauce I am making, “I don’t understand.”

“It is pushing on his eye,” my mother reports, and her guard seems to be lifting, “The surgery is scheduled for tomorrow.”

“I’ll be there,” I announce, “I will come in the morning.”

“Whatever you can do,” my mother replies. Although she is being strong, it sounds like she is relived that I will be coming.

“Is he sleeping?” I ask.

“Yes, the headaches are really getting to him,” my mother says sadly.

We talk for a little while longer about my graduate program. It seems as though my mother wants as many distractions as she can get. I wish her and my father well before we end the phone call. David comes into the kitchen dressed casually, and I update him on the neurologist’s findings. Shock spreads across his face, but he tries to be reassuring.

“She said it is common,” David reminds me, “It will be okay.” That evening, we eat dinner in silence.

The next morning, I drive from my home in Santa Clarita down to the hospital in Oceanside mostly by way of Interstate 5. It is raining outside, and it pours heavily when I
am in the heart of Orange County. I call my mother a few times to get updates on my father’s surgery. I am reassured that everything is going well. The rain lifts slightly once I enter the Oceanside city limits. I merge onto California State Route 78 for a short period of time before taking the exit for the hospital. Once I pull into the parking lot, I realize that I have never seen the hospital lot this full. I take the only available parking spot in sight, and I walk toward the entrance covered by an umbrella. I feel my heart beating through my chest, because I do not know what I will find. I am directed by a nurse toward the Intensive Care Unit, and another nurse guides me to my father’s room at the back. I open the sliding door and I walk inside.

My father is lying with his head leaned back, and his eyes are closed. Various tubes are hooked up to the IV connected to his arm. My mother gets up from the pink chair next to his bed and she gives me a hug. “Thank you for coming,” she says. My father’s eyes open slightly, and he half-smiles. He moves his hand slightly toward my direction, and I grab his hand with my own. He has gauze covering his nose where the operation took place. He blinks his eyes carefully toward my direction, and I return his gaze.

I sit in the room with my parents for a long time. My mother and I talk quietly as my father drifts into and out of sleep. The soft clicking of the machines magnifies the sound of my father’s heartbeat. My mother looks tired, and I place my arm on her shoulder. “Take a breather,” I suggest, “You’ve been here for a long time. I’ll stay with dad. Relax at home for a little while.”

My mother’s tired eyes look back at me. “No, no…” she begins.

“Seriously,” I assert, “We will be fine.”
My mother nods her head, and it does not appear that she has any more energy to argue. Before she leaves, she kisses my father goodbye, and we hug. I see her hand wave as she closes the door quietly.

I lean back in the chair and begin reading one of my textbooks for class. I place my hand on my father’s arm, and I rub his skin back and forth with my thumb. Several minutes pass, and I hear my father exhale strongly as he wakes up from his slumber.

“How do you feel?” I ask as I sit up from the chair.

“I’ve been better,” he says with a chuckle. He looks at the book in my hand titled, *How to Read a Book*. “Is that for school?” he asks.

“Yep, I’m just keeping up with this week’s reading,” I reply.

“Read it out loud,” he suggests.

“Sure,” I say as I lean back into the chair. I keep my right hand on his arm, and my left hand holds the book. I continue where I left off: “To pass from understanding less to understanding more by your own intellectual effort in reading is something like pulling yourself up by your bootstraps…” (Adler and Van Doren 8). I continue to read for several minutes, and I notice how silent my father has been. I look up to see his eyes closed and a partial smile. I stop for a moment.

“I like it,” he says, “Keep reading.”

I grasp his left hand, and I continue reading aloud until the chapter concludes. After I read the last word, I suddenly hear snoring. It appears that he had tried to stay awake for the chapter, and he gave into sleep once it ended. I set the book down, and I pull the white covers up a little further. I sit back into the chair and continue reading to
myself. A nurse comes in the room to check my father’s vitals, and he does not stir. I sit in silence with him for hours, and I hold his hand the entire time.

The remainder of the visit continues much the same way. I read to him intermittently and we take naps at the same time. When I cannot sleep, I listen to the soft hum of his snoring. The regular rhythm he emits replicates the effect of white noise. The sound lulls me to sleep in little time. I do not recall when my mother returned to the room, but she is there when I open my eyes.

My father seems to be getting better quickly, and I am reassured by my mother that it is okay to go home the next day. “We will be okay,” she says.

I drive back to Santa Clarita in my rain-washed car. The clouds still linger, but there is no rain in the general area. I drive home listlessly, and I have little memory of the drive at all. The traffic-ridden roads leading toward the Los Angeles area follow their typical patterns.

I arrive home in the early afternoon, and my cats chirp excitedly upon my arrival. I play with them for several minutes until the cats are sufficiently tired. Then, I get in bed, and sleep for several hours. My irregular sleep of late is catching up with me.

My body resists when I get up early the next morning to work another shift at the company, because I am so fatigued. I get up slowly and walk into the kitchen; the agonizing pain in my back is magnified. I place my hand on the torn muscles at the center of my back. The scoliosis I have feels worse than it ever had before. To take my mind off the pain, I decide to call my mother to check on my father’s progress.

“They didn’t get all of it,” she explains to me after answering the call. There is more to the tumor than they originally suspected.
“What?” I exclaim, “Will he need to have surgery again?”

“Yes, we will be going in shortly,” she says, and her voice sounds drained.

I feel the need to drop what I am doing to care for my hurting father, and my exhausted mother. My tired body halts as though it were made of stone. I know they will be less understanding at my job on a Saturday; it is one of the company’s busiest days. I feel a pull in either direction, so I freeze. My heart beats noticeably into my ears.

“It will be fine,” my mother says, “It’s a common surgery. Go to work, and we’ll let you know what is happening.” It seems as though she read my mind.

“Keep me updated,” I ask, suddenly thankful that my shift today is only four hours.

I sleep-walk through my shift, but all of my work gets done. It is like my body has taken over, because I complete work without remembering the process. All of the memorized mechanics are there, and it takes little direction from my mind. It feels as though my body is caring for my mind, because my body can handle the trauma more than my mind can.

On my way home, I speak with my sister who tells me even more alarming news. “The procedure they are doing isn’t working,” she explains, “Dad’s vision is still off. They’re going to have to do a craniotomy. That’s the only way they can remove the pressure from his eye.” I hear quiet sobbing on her end of the line.

“I’m coming,” I announce.

I collect a few things I might need before leaving the house, and I arrange for someone to watch after my cats while I am gone. David left the day before to go on a business trip, and he is unable to get a flight back home sooner than the next day. When I
call him about my father’s third impending surgery, David does not seem to know what to say. “We will be okay,” I assure him.

I get into the car and drive south. The halting traffic in southernmost point of Los Angeles County forces me to take another direction. The new scenery is welcome during the drive through Orange County. I arrive at the hospital before the sun sets.

I walk directly to the Intensive Care Unit this time with full knowledge of the location of my father’s room. I hear frantic sounds at the nurses’ station around the corner when I enter the ICU. As I approach the door to my father’s room, a nurse runs into me, apologizes quickly, and rushes off. Something bad must be happening in one of the rooms, I consider as she disappears out of sight.

I open the door slowly and push the curtain aside. The room is lit dimly, and my eyes focus in the scene in front of me. What I see is out of the realm of anything I would expect to find.

My father is bleeding, but I cannot tell where it is coming from. My mother has her back turned to me, and I realize what is happening once she places a small bucket under his mouth. My father is vomiting up blood.

“Help me,” my mother asks with a sad look on her face. I come immediately to his left side, and I take another bucket to put under his mouth. He spits out a small bit of blood, and some of it has clotted. He coughs a bit, and I can hear that his airway is somewhat intact. I take a moist towel from the table next to the bed and I wipe his face and mouth. I notice a tube that emerges from the surgery site, and blood drains down it slowly. My mother tells me that she has already alerted a nurse, and they will be there soon. She shakes her head slightly, and I notice a tear fall down her cheek.
I continue wiping my father’s face, and he suddenly makes a gagging sound again. I place a clean bucket under his mouth, and he vomits a little more. My mother takes the bucket and places it in the sink behind her. I wipe his mouth again as he clears his throat several times. I turn my head away from him and I cry momentarily. The man who always cared for me is now allowing me to care for him, and his vulnerability is not a trait he would show often. I do not emit a sound from my weeping, because I know he cannot handle it right now. Other than the tears, I do not allow any further expression. My body tightens from the restraint I am exercising, and I find it hard to breathe.

My silent crying is interrupted by a nurse and doctor who enter the room. The doctor examines the tube, and he tells us that it is clogged. The blood that was supposed to be draining down the tube has been redirected to his throat, activating his gag reflex. I sit down for a moment as the doctor fixes the problem. My father’s normal breathing is restored almost immediately. My mother paces back and forth on the other side of the bed. Her hand is on her forehead, and shock reads across her face. The tightened feeling of my body does not release, and the alertness that it requires is exhausting. I justify my reasons for holding back emotionally: my father is dealing with enough right now, and he does not need to endure my hysterical reactions. This is a trait that I have learned from him, because he kept his own vulnerability hidden from everyone, or at least from me.

The doctor nods his head toward my mother and me, and he offers his assistance if we need anything. I thank him for helping, and he disappears behind the curtain and sliding door.

I rise from my chair, and stand on the opposite side of the bed from my mother. I hold my father’s hand, and he clears his throat a few times. “You didn’t have to drive all
the way down here. . .” he starts, but he is interrupted by the need to clear his throat again.

“I wanted to,” I reply, squeezing his hand slightly.

“Your hands are cold,” he exclaims in a sudden change of subject. I see my mother place her hand in his. “Your hands are cold, too,” he says to my mother. My mother emits a small snicker. He turns back to me and says, “But yours are the coldest. Will you rub my neck with those freezing hands?” I see a smile spread across his face, the grandest expression I have seen ever since this horrible ordeal began. I cannot refuse his request.

“You win,” I say jokingly.

I position my body in the tight space behind his bed, and I am careful to avoid the wires of the various monitoring machines. I lose my balance slightly, but the enclosed space catches me. I lean forward slightly, and I feel minor fatigue. My back aches from not standing straight, but I ignore these minor ailments. I justify this dismissal of my own body by considering the pain my father is experiencing. What I have is nothing compared to his current state.

“Can I lift your head slightly?” I ask him hesitantly.

“Just the back of my head,” he says, and he clears his throat once again.

My mother moves from the side of the bed where she is standing, and takes the seat on the opposite side. I run my fingers through his hair slightly. Despite the trauma he has experienced, his hair is very silky. I pay special attention to the drainage tube along his hairline; I do not want to touch it. I continue to run the fingers of my left hand through
his hair as I slide my right hand underneath his head. I start to rub the skin on the back of
his neck.

“Freezing hands,” he mumbles quietly.

As I am rubbing my father’s neck, other visitors appear at the door. My Uncle Mike steps into the room after opening the sliding door without a sound. He smiles at me, and takes a small chair and places it on the other side of my father. “Is he asleep?” Uncle Mike asks me. I shrug my shoulders.

“No...” my father whispers and I can see his long upper eyelash flutter slightly.

Right then, the door slides open, and a nurse checks my father’s vitals. As he leaves, my oldest brother, Joey, walks into the room. “Hey,” Joey says.

“Mmm...” my father responds. I hear the sound of snoring rising from his throat.

“He is trying to stay awake,” I offer as Joey sits on the seat next to my mother.

She raises her hand slightly in greeting, but her eyes remain closed. The five of us are relatively silent for the next several moments. I continue to rub my father’s neck until my hands ache. I slide my hands out from behind his head, and my father continues snoring. The fatigue I was experiencing earlier is becoming worse, so I sit down as well. I do not know when I closed my eyes.

I wake up lying on the convertible chair alongside my father’s bed. My feet are propped up, and a basic hospital blanket is draped over my body. I feel a roar erupt from my stomach, and I feel the fatigue from earlier wash over me. My head pounds, so I sit up and pull out a granola bar from my purse. I hear the steady beating sounds from the machinery next to my father. He is sleeping, and that relieves me. His lack of sleep has been worrying me. I hear my mother stir in the seat behind me, and her eyes are closed.
Her hand is outstretched over her forehead; the tips of her fingers twitch slightly. I look around and I see that the remaining visitors have already left. I look toward the clock on the wall, and I realize that I slept for over four hours.

My back aches slightly, and I place my hand at the point of contention. The scoliosis I was diagnosed with in January 2009 has restructured my back entirely; the mild twisting of my spine has made the left side of my back slightly larger than the right side. The way I was just sleeping put too much pressure on already strained muscles, so I massage the area softly to release some of the tension.

My mother yawns, and I see her contort her body in a stretch. “Hey,” she says breathily.

“Hey,” I respond.

“They are going to move him out of the ICU soon,” she explains. This discussion must have occurred while I was sleeping. I can see the happiness spread across her face over this change. My father has occasionally commented on the noise and its contributions to his lack of sleep. I am glad to hear that he will finally get some of that relief.

“Good,” I reply.

We rest for a few moments until several nurses enter the room. The dim lights flicker slightly, and they suddenly become brighter. My father’s eyes flutter a bit, and he looks over at my direction. “I can see you,” he says.

I chuckle, and I grab his hand. “I see you,” I reply. Along with my mother, I begin to pack up some of my father’s things before they move his room. I hesitate when I reach
for the bucket in the sink. It is clean, but the memories of its use are enough for me to change my mind. We leave the room and the bucket behind.

We enter a large elevator, one that has the capacity to fit my father’s bed. We are brought to the second floor, and we enter a room with an armoire and two chests with drawers on either side of the bed. The nurse asks me to leave for a moment while they move him to the new bed. “Keep the drapes closed,” my mother instructs before looking around at the busy hallway. Guests for other patients are milling about on the walkways, and I do not want them to see my father disrobed. I hold onto the drapes covering his room tightly.

About thirty seconds later, a nurse comes my way. She opens the curtains abruptly to enter, releasing the end I am holding from the other side. The opening reveals my father completely disrobed, and visitors are within sight of the scene. The one thing I recall most is the pained look on his face.

I close the curtain as quickly as I can, and I hear a low pitched argument occur between my mother and the nursing staff. I cannot make out the words, but the overwhelming guilt I feel dominates my thoughts. I was given simple instructions, and I failed.

Moments later, the staff leaves, and I am welcomed back into the room. My mother is visibly irritated, but she tries to reassure me. “You didn’t do anything wrong,” she insists, “They should have known better.”

My father moves uncomfortably in the bed, and he clears his throat quietly. “It’s okay,” he whispers. He reaches for my hand and squeezes it tightly.
In this better lit room, I can see the surgery site clearly now. At the age of 64, my father has not had any trace of hair loss, and I notice the pattern of the shaver across the uppermost part of his forehead. They had to artificially recede his hairline an inch and half. The brutal looking staples line the path of the incision. The skin appears irritated but healthy.

My thoughts are distracted by the nurse delivering my father’s dinner. “I’m not really hungry,” he says as my mother lifts the first spoonful of mashed potatoes for him. “You need to eat,” my mother insists, and he takes a bite. “These are pretty good,” my father replies, “but not as good as yours.” The two of them laugh and smile warmly at one another.

“You’re looking pretty tired,” my mother says to me, “You should go home and get some rest. We’ll be fine.” She lifts her eyebrows slightly.

My mother hugs me tightly. “Yes, you will be okay,” I reply. I kiss my father on the cheek, and I squeeze his hand. One, two, three. . .

Four weeks pass, and my father’s recovery is slow but steady. On October 27th, he feels strong enough to drive a car. That night, my mother recounts my father’s first time behind the wheel, and he does not complain about any pain. He is out of the woods, it seems.

The next day, October 28th, I receive the phone call from David while I am at work. “It’s not good,” David says, “He stopped breathing.” Moments later, my life changes forever. My father died from a blood clot that had reached his lungs.
Making Decisions

It is early November 2010.

I hear the song, “Surfer Girl,” by the Beach Boys playing in my father’s truck as I open the door to sit in the back seat. The interior appears untouched from the last time my father drove it. The smell of leather and his cologne is strong, and the familiarity of the scent is exactly what I need right now. David gets into the car and sits next to me in the back. He holds my left hand, and starts smoothing the back of it with his thumb. My brother Joey is in the driver’s seat, and he pulls the car in reverse. My mother is sitting in the front passenger seat, and she covers her red, swollen eyes with her sunglasses.

As Joey drives, the CD continues to play the happy-go-lucky music of the Beach Boys. I can hear my mother’s sniffling increasing in frequency. We are getting closer, and she is dreading every passing moment. I see her place her hand over her mouth from the rear view mirror. I place my right hand on her shoulder, and she grasps it. She squeezes the tissue in her right hand as she visibly fights back tears.

My body begins to shake as Joey pulls into the parking lot. Everyone removes their seatbelts slower than usual. Joey escorts my trembling mother from the car, and his own eyes are bloodshot. I clutch David’s hand as I exit the car, and my shoes graze against the uncaring asphalt of the parking lot. My mother adjusts her sunglasses nervously as the four of us make our way to the other side of the truck. The rest of the family is already here, and all of them stand at the beginning of the concrete walkway. A turquoise fountain rests to the left of the walkway, and the sound of water flowing is conspicuous. Pleasantries are exchanged between everyone, but little else. No one seems
to know what to say. I walk haphazardly with my family toward the entrance, and David firmly grasps my hand.

We are at the mortuary. The building is a transformed home, an attempt to maintain the integrity of the original structure has been made. However, it does not offer me any solace as we enter the front hallway. I immediately smell lemon cleaners, the industrial kind with a stronger odor than those I use at my home.

As I am standing in a space in which I fear, I recall a conversation I once had with my father about death when I was thirteen years old. The first cat I ever had, Max, did not come home for dinner that night.

“I’m scared,” I tell my father.

“Why?” he asks, remaining calm.

“I’m afraid of things that are dead. I do not want Max to be one of them,” I say.

My father wraps his arms around me, and says something I will never forget:

“There are living and dead things all around us. You are sitting on a leather couch, and it is made of a dead thing. You have nothing to be afraid of.”

This calms me for some time, and I am overjoyed when Max returns home the next morning.

Now, back at the mortuary, I repeat my father’s words over and over again in an attempt to calm myself. A young man greets us, and he introduces himself as Gregory. He offers his condolences in a meaningful way. His voice is low and calm, and his gentleness communicates a deeper understanding. The wisdom he shows transcends his youth, and I feel less tense as he leads us to a large room with a dining room table. He sits next to my mother, and he speaks soothingly to her. The table is made of solid oak, and I
consider the appropriateness of this fixture in a difficult moment. I recall my father choosing his own slabs of wood with which he would build his own creations, and oak would always be his wood of choice. This table would have made him proud.

Each member of my immediate family sits in the chairs surrounding the table. I sit near my mother, and David sits on the other side of me. I see my sister’s rose-colored face across from me. A tissue is balled up in her hand and her eyes study the room closely. It seems as though she is intentionally distracting herself with the architecture, because the discussion that would soon commence will not be a pleasant one.

Gregory clears his throat and sits at the head of the table. He bows his head solemnly in the direction of my mother, and he opens a folder already resting on the table. He thanks all of us for coming, and he makes a precautionary statement: “There are some basic things I need to ask, and others” that are not as basic. I dread the not so basic questions, and I will myself to tune them out when they come. I repeat my father’s words to reassure me that I have nothing to be afraid of, but it does not work this time.

I try to displace myself, to enter a vacation in my mind; a place that I can inhabit until this horrible nightmare is over. I imagine my father setting up an umbrella at the beach, and he is wearing his signature black sunglasses. “Want something to eat?” he asks as he gestures toward the blue cooler that would always accompany us at the beach. “Sure,” I reply from the green folding chair on which I rest. “It’s a nice day at the b-c-h,” he says while handing me a sandwich and then opening one of his own. My father notoriously shortens words, and he would always refer to the beach using the “b-c-h” abbreviation.
He sits in a similar chair next to me and leans back. The attached foot rest on the chair is extended and he stretches his legs across it. His left arm is bent and supports his head. I turn to look at him closely; he is wearing a baseball hat and bits of untrimmed hair peek out from the side of his hat. I have always preferred his hair when it was a bit too long, because it is natural.

Untamed.

My father smiles back at me when my eyes meet his gaze only slightly hidden behind the sunglasses. Then, an incredulous feeling comes upon me, and my mind begins to question this reality.

As the waves crash, my heart breaks with them.

I do not smell the salty air anymore, and I consciously rejoin the conversation. “Where was William’s mother born?” Gregory asks. “Los Angeles,” my mother replies quietly, her eyes focused on the floor. Gregory writes a few more notes for documentation and it is silent for a while. I hear the gentle ticking of the clock that rests on the desk behind him.

Gregory takes a meaningful deep breath, and he pulls out another sheet from the folder. He begins to tell us that the following questions will be difficult, but they are important. I realize my daydream did not last long enough; I have returned for the most difficult part. I try to retreat back to the paradise again, only to be met by an impassable brick wall. I cannot hide anymore.

Gregory turns to my mother and addresses her directly to discuss preparation and preservation. My mother nods hesitantly as Gregory discusses the importance of her
consent before anything can be done. He advises that he will personally carry out our decisions.

“To have him embalmed, you need to sign here,” he says calmly.

“Don’t use that word,” my mother replies sternly.

“Which word? Embalm?” Gregory is puzzled but he is still gentle.

“Yes. Don’t use that word,” my mother exclaims as tears fall down her face, “I don’t want to think of him that way.”

“I understand,” Gregory says, “I promise I won’t use that word again.”

Although my memory is foggy in this difficult moment, I can recall this exchange vividly. My heart is screaming for an alternative, a hope that nothing being agreed upon actually happens. I do not want my father altered at all, and that includes embalming. I open my mouth to speak, but the words disintegrate. I do not know what to say, but I need to say something in this moment. I try, but words fail me.

My mother strikes the pen against the paper to agree with the embalming decision. I am too late. I scream in my mind, much like Kurt Lindemann in a similar setting. “You did not speak, not at the funeral home,” Lindemann reminds me, “And you realize this speaks volumes” (67). I internally fight with myself, but this accomplishes nothing. My weeping must have increased in intensity, because David now hugs me tightly. His breathing is fast, and I hug him back in a small effort to soothe him.

I also know my father is here; his body is physically in this same building. This knowledge is conflicting for me, because I want to see him. I want to wish him goodbye in the form that I remember him. I know that once the embalming is completed, he will
not look the same. At the same time, seeing him post-mortem is frightening for me. In this moment, I choose to say nothing again.

“Now we have to make another important decision,” Gregory announces, “We need to choose a casket.” My mother nods as Gregory rises from his chair. He walks over to a sliding wooden door, and he opens it. Gregory waves his arm inviting all of us inside. As I enter the room following my sister, I begin to weep quietly.

In a room that once appeared to be a bedroom, there are at least six caskets displayed. In a place normally oriented for rest, this transformation into a showroom for caskets does not appear too far-fetched. The styles differ slightly, and I find myself staring too long at the white lining at the bottom of each casket display. I cannot imagine my father laying in any of these.

My brother Jake motions all of us toward one of the caskets resting toward the entrance of the room. It is an oak casket, but my trained eye notices that it is not solid oak. “I like this one,” Jake says, “but it would be better if it were solid wood.” He notices this flaw, too; I nod toward him in agreement.

“You’re right,” my mother says, “Dad might think it’s cheap.” All of us laugh quietly at the truth in her statement.

“We can order a similar one in solid oak,” Gregory offers, “Do you like this style?”

Everyone within my eye sight nods in agreement. I look at my brother Joey behind me, and he is nodding as well. “Good,” Gregory says as he leads us back to the room with the grand oak table. After each person is seated, Gregory shows us another
catalogue with a similarly fashioned casket built out of solid wood. A consensus is quickly reached upon this selection through a series of nods.

“I appreciate everything you have been able to provide today,” Gregory says and bows his head once again. His tone indicates that we are not quite finished. Gregory then takes out a small pamphlet and prayer card samples. “Families usually give out prayer cards at the vigil service,” he says as he shows us the designs that we can choose from.

My mother takes the pamphlet and shows it to all of us.

“I like these,” she says in reference to the Renaissance-influenced design featuring Catholic figures.

I nod my head, and I see my two brothers do the same from the corner of my eye. My sister comments positively on the selection, and my mother nods in response. “We’ll go with these,” she says to Gregory, as she points to the design with the tip of her fingernail.

“That is a nice choice,” Gregory replies, and then he writes a note on a separate sheet of paper. “Also,” he suggests, “you can personalize the message if you like.”

The room is silent. I want the message to be personalized, but no one is taking that role for themselves. “I’ll do it,” I respond, “I’ll write a poem.”

“Thank you,” my mother says without making eye contact, “You’re good at that.”

Gregory hands me his business card, and he reminds me that I only have a short period of time to write it. The visitation and vigil service is scheduled to occur in one week.
“There is also the option of the obituary in the newspaper,” Gregory recommends, “If anyone would like to take that responsibility.” Everyone turns their gaze to me once again.

“I’ll do that, too,” I say.

Gregory hands me the application form for the local newspaper, and he points out the specific requirements of the editor. “You can send that to me as well, and I’ll forward it to them,” Gregory offers.

“Thanks,” I muster, but I am overwhelmed by what appears to be two enormous tasks. My self-imposed need for perfection will be extraordinarily high. The concise nature that is required for both projects is alarming to me, because I am already verbose when trying to communicate to others about my father’s death. I exhale deeply, and I feel a yearning for sustenance at the pit of my stomach. I place my hand over my midsection as soft rumble erupts from within. My preoccupation with the projects that lie ahead immediately take precedence over my bodily needs. How could I be hungry in a place like this?

Despite my current internal conflict, my shortened attention span does not dwell on it for long. My thoughts once again drift elsewhere. I am still struggling with the idea of embalming. Like my mother, I cannot imagine him that way. I begin to consider ways that I can change this decision, but my logical functioning is clouded. I want to stop it, but I do not seem to know how. I hear echoes of Kurt Lindemann in my head, “Goddamn it!’ my theory says” (68). I feel defeated.

Gregory thanks us for coming, and he gives his business card to the rest of my siblings. I stand and begin to walk out with David by my side. “My deepest
condolences,” Gregory says as I approach the front door. I feel my lip curling in response to another series of tears, but I stifle them as best I can. “Thank you,” I reply before walking out the door.

Joey is walking ahead of us, and he holds my mother’s hand tightly. I see her place her head on his shoulder, and the faint sound of her weeping begins to be overshadowed by the water chuting down from the fountain. Joey has taken a lot of the responsibility; he coordinated with the hospital to have my father transported to this mortuary. He also set up today’s meeting. The difficulty of my future writing tasks pale in comparison to the difficult decisions he has already had to make. I look at him with admiration as he walks with my mother ahead of me.

When I reach Jake’s truck, he tells me that everyone is going to drive to a café across the street. “Okay,” I reply. I know that I need to eat, but my mind is resistant to the necessity. The growling once again erupts in my stomach can no longer be contained, but the idea of consuming food still fails to hold appeal for me. I walk toward my father’s truck, and I open the door slowly. My mother is already inside, and her tears have lessened. Joey has not come to the driver’s seat yet, but my mother has already inserted her key into the ignition. The sound of the Beach Boys is already playing as I sit down in the seat behind her. A laid back song about traveling to Hawaii emanates from the speakers. Seconds later, David joins me in the adjacent seat.

Joey enters the driver’s side of the car. He tells us the café that we are headed to is called the Sunrise Café. He pulls out the parking spot and drives a small distance to meet the rest of my family who had already parked their cars. I find the name of the café
ironic, because I will have to face the sunrise of every day differently now. With each sunrise begins another day without my father.

The four of us walk inside the restaurant to meet with the rest of my family, and we are seated immediately. The place is nearly empty, and in this moment, I feel the same way. I have cried so much that I doubt there is enough fluid in my body to generate any more tears. My hands begin to shake from my plummeted sugar levels. I feel like my body is beginning to evaporate.

The plate of toast and eggs that arrives for me is a treat to look at, but I feel no desire to eat it. My trembling hands remind me of my need for nourishment, so I take a bite of the scrambled eggs. I look around the table to see my family eating slowly and steadily. It does not appear that anyone has an appetite either. As I chew the food, I feel numb. Food has become a chore when it once was a pleasure.

I enter a dense fog, and my sense of being is clouded. I feel as though I am being carried through life at the moment. I am not walking; my body feels like it is floating. My sleep walking clouds my vision, and days begin to pass without recognition.

A few days after the visit to the mortuary, David and I drive back to our home in Santa Clarita. The drive always feels agonizingly long, but this time is different. I stare out the window and do not recognize the normal landmarks that I typically take for granted. Nothing is right with the world it seems.

When we arrive at our apartment complex, I exit the car and begin walking up the steps, with David following behind me. The last time I walked up these stairs, I was in a blissful state of denial. I did not know that my father had died. Now, my walking is less
hurried and more mechanical. I feel as though I am in a funeral procession, and my rigid body marches toward the place that I began this horrible nightmare.

I insert my key into the door, and I open it carefully. A friend had been watching our cats during the time we were in Oceanside, and I was unsure if the cats would try to sneak out in an effort to search for us. The cats often pull these shenanigans when David returns home from a business trip. When I peek inside, I see a black cat sashaying by the shoe rack that rests near the front door.

I do not recognize my own cat. “I have a black cat?” I think incredulously.

The gentle cat we named Misty calmly walks toward me and winds her petite body around my leg. I reach down to pet her head, and she leans up to meet me halfway. I look into her golden eyes, and I immediately remember the first day I saw her four years prior.

My mind moves back to that place again. It is July 2006, and I am walking with David down Westwood Boulevard in West Los Angeles. We are just a block from the apartment he shares with his sister. I see a sign in front of the pet store that advertises kittens for adoption, and the sign acknowledges the store’s support of a local animal rescue group.

“Let’s go inside!” I suggest to David, and he obliges.

The kittens at the front are many different colors, and they cry with excitement when Kris from the rescue agency allows me to hold one of them. The kitten is so small that I can hold her in one hand. “Unfortunately, all of these kittens already have homes,” Kris says, “but we have a cat in the back that you might want to see.”
As I walk toward the back of the store with Kris, she explains to me that the in-store groomer was given this particular cat by a nameless, well-dressed man. He had given the groomer false contact information, and never returned to retrieve his cat after she had been groomed. He just abandoned her. “She is a little scared,” Kris cautions.

Kris invites me into a small room where a medium sized cage sits in the corner. A black cat is curled into a tight ball at the furthest end of the cage, and her food sits untouched in the opposite corner. Her golden eyes stare back at me, and they reflect a promising future. Kris opens the cage for me, and allows me to pet the fragile cat. She responds wholeheartedly to the small pet I give her, and she stretches to show the smoky grey fur of her belly.

“She has never opened up like that for us,” Kris says, seemingly in shock, “We’ve been calling her Misty because of her grey underside.”

I smile at the tiny cat, and she became mine shortly after.

Now, I look at Misty in the doorway of our apartment four years later. I feel instant gratitude for her and our kitten Lucy. Lucy peers from the bedroom doorway, and she emits a squeal when she recognizes me. With both cats expressing their joy over our arrival, I am overcome by the unconditional love of my pets. David grabs my hand as a tear falls down my face. Now that I am in my own home, I can allow myself to feel fully without interfering with anyone else’s grief. I sit down at the foot of my bed, and I allow my emotions to wash over me.

The clouds close in once again. The only energy I have is now being occupied by sleep.
The next morning, I attempt to work, but my hands tremble as I try to type. Each key is agonizing, as though the striking of them were actually inflicting my body instead of their square hollowness. I am having writer’s block, and it is a debilitating, forceful block on my grasp of language. I want to write more, but I am deficient right now. I look at the clock at the bottom of the computer screen and feel my body shudder. I have a deadline, and this is not one I can miss.

I write my father’s name again, hoping a beautiful memory will surface. I want to remember him smiling and laughing. The reflection of the past days has clouded my mind with haze. It is almost as though I have just completed a riveting book, and it ends without any previous indications of closure. I am searching the hazy book again to find clues, or something I missed. It offers none.

Perhaps it is the setting that is throwing my mind off, I consider. The narrow blinds that cover the window by the door are opened just slightly, allowing a small amount of light in. The door is open, and I hear my husband shuffling papers as they exit the printer. His movements echo the entire office, and no other sounds can be heard except my own. We are alone in his office, while his colleagues are off work for the weekend. I shake my head at my concern for the aesthetics of my location; I should get used to being out of my comfort zone.

“William Edwin Mathwig,” I write again, musing some more. I begin to consider his hobbies, and how others might remember him. I laugh a little, considering the paradox of this moment. My father’s strength was words, and I have lost mine.

One of his sentiments begin to echo in my mind: “We’re gonna win, ‘cause we’re gonna win, ‘cause we all want to win!” This was one of many sayings that he would use
to get both his family and coworkers motivated. In the multipurpose Gemco store that my father once worked, he would frequently make announcements to his coworkers over the intercom before the store opened for the day. He coined the “we’re gonna win” slogan during these pep talks, and it was often accompanied with a “groovy” or two. It seemed that when all was lost, my father would always be there to remind us of our desire to keep going, despite our failures. With that inspiration, I gain the inspiration to write a poem laden with his language and the simple joys he found in life:

William Edwin Mathwig,
Husband, father, brother, papa and friend.
He was the most caring man,
And we hope to continue his life’s plan.
He taught us right from wrong,
To avoid major mistakes.
His laugh was the greatest song,
While picking up leaves with rakes.
He treasured the outdoors.
The most perfect day ends,
With sawdust on the floor,
And laughter with family and friends.
Many words he said,
Made the hard things better.
Meet him at Cahuenga and Schnodgrass;
He will be there forever.
Each line holds different significances to each person who knew my father, and my hope is to capture this in one simple poem. After I hit the last key on the keyboard, I exhale deeply. I do not feel the need to scrutinize every word of the poem as I typically require of my usual writing. I immediately feel satisfied with my work.

My thoughts wander a bit as I ponder the existence of Schnodgrass Street, one that intersected with Cahuenga Boulevard at one time. Or so my father claimed. I recall asking him that question many times, only to receive a small chuckle in response.

“I have looked at every map out there, Dad,” I urge, “Tell me where this Schnodgrass Street is!” My frustration gains pity from him, but little in the way of a real answer.

“I don’t know,” he says, curling his bottom lip.

He looks at my forlorn expression and I see his mind trying to come up with a reasonable response. “But it’s Cahuenga and Schnodgrass!” he exclaims, seemingly expecting this to be an acceptable conclusion to the conversation. I exhale audibly and I smile back at him.

Back in my husband’s office, I lean back in the chair and stretch my arms. “How is it going?” David asks, coming in with an unreasonably large stack of paper. He places it on the desk with ease.

“Fine,” I reply, feeling less than confident about my answer. I tap my fingers on the keyboard, but with less force than is needed to input letters. The next task is going to be more painful than the first, and I know it. I need to write my father’s obituary.

“Take all the time you need,” David says as he begins separating the documents from the stack he had just brought in.
The time pressure begins to weigh on me; I need to finish everything by this evening, because I want the obituary to appear in the Sunday paper. Time is slowly falling away. I type his name into the word processor again, and I consider carefully what elements I want to include. Suddenly, inspiration hits me again, and I type feverishly to avoid losing the vision I have in my head. For me, the writing is surprisingly concise:

William Edwin Mathwig, 64, passed away on October 28, 2010. He was born in Hollywood on September 2, 1946. He lived in Oceanside, and is survived by his wife Audrey; his children: Joseph, Jessica, Jacob, Julianna, and Linzi; his grandchildren: Joseph, Madison, Samantha, Andrew and Lily; and his brother Mike and sister Jackie. He loved his sons-in-law and daughters-in-law like they were his own. He was a very handy man; there wasn't something broken that he couldn't fix. He enjoyed spending time with his wonderful wife and family at the "B-c-h" (beach). He always had a smile on his face, and there are no words that best describe him. He will be greatly missed.

I want to say more, but the details for the services need to be provided as well. I send Gregory what I have so far via email with my take on the details. He responds a few minutes later. “How about this?” he asks. The following represents the final conclusion of the article:

Visitation for William will be held on Monday November 8, 2010 from 4:00 - 8:00 P.M. with a vigil service beginning at 7:00 P.M. at Allen Brothers Mortuary, Vista Chapel. A formal celebration of life will be at the Mission San Luis Rey on November 9 at 1:00 P.M. followed by interment in the Mission San Luis Rey Cemetery.
I finish the projects just in time. I email my final versions to Gregory, and I sit back in my chair. The term “interment” is not one I would have chosen on my own, and I used it at Gregory’s suggestion. I hear echoes of Ralph Keyes’ discussion of euphemisms in the back of my mind. “Bodies that used to be ‘buried’ during ‘funerals’ were now interred during services” (Keyes 144). The performance is the same, but the words are used differently.

I see the stack of papers that David had brought in the office has now decreased in size. I help David sort the rest of the paperwork, and we leave shortly after. The next thing I recall is sleeping in the car ride back to Oceanside. The emotional exhaustion from writing translated into even further physical exhaustion. I find comfort in sleep that night.

The Visitation and Vigil Service

Sunday passes without recognition.

I wake in the middle of the night with sweat beading on my forehead. The nightmares I am having are too intense, and they keep me awake for extended periods of time. I squint my eyes to read the time that illuminates on my cell phone.

1:30 A.M.

I begin to mutter quietly to myself as I sit up, because I have to use the restroom. I do not want to turn on the light out of concern for waking David. I rise from the bed that I once used as a teenager, and I plan my movements precisely. David unconsciously notices my absence, and I hear his hand thump on the place that I was previously laying. The moonlight that pours in from the end of the blinds illuminates his sleeping face. I navigate my way toward the bedroom door, and I exit carefully. I manipulate the door
handle to avoid the normal squeaky sound that it typically emits; I do not want him to have the same sleep deprived misfortune as me.

Once in the hallway, I turn on the light. All of the bedroom doors are closed, so I know very little of the light will sneak in. I walk down the hallway toward the restroom and I carefully avoid the spots on the floor that creak. I bend my body awkwardly forward to accomplish this goal. Living in this house for the first twenty years of my life has given me this specialized knowledge.

After using the restroom, I trace my steps back toward my bedroom. From the corner of my eye, I notice slight movement near the front window. I stop and I examine it closer. I look incredulously at what appears to be my father staring in the window. He is wearing the suit we will bury him with, and his hair is slicked back as it would be typically.

I panic at my hallucination, fearing that I have completely lost it. In my silent frenzy, I look away for a second. When I return my vision to the window, the image of my father is gone. A chill envelops my body, and I stare at the window for several minutes trying to make sense of what happened. Without any satisfactory answers, I relegate the experience to my lack of sleep.

I return to the bedroom, and I hear David’s discreet snoring. The familiar sound calms my nerves a bit, and I reclaim the spot that I occupied earlier on the bed. I stare at the patterns on the mattress in the bunk above for what feels to be an endless amount of time, until I listlessly drift off to sleep.

The next morning, I awake with a start. What felt like a dream had happened while I was conscious, and I try to make sense of it once again. My frayed nerves noisily
distract my thought process, and I resolve none of these concerns due to my current state of mind. David sits up and puts his hand on the small of my back.

“You can do this,” he says.

“I hope so,” I reply, nodding my head slightly.

Today holds a lot of plans for me, and none of it will allow me to ponder the hallucination I experienced during the night. Contemplating the obstacles ahead begins to make me nauseous, so I suppress these thoughts.

I hear the echo of the television downstairs and some quiet chatter, which indicates that most of the family is awake. As I stand up beside the bed, I smell the coffee that Joey brews every morning. The smell is inviting, so I get dressed quickly. David walks downstairs with me, and he holds my hand for support.

I see my Uncle Mike, my father’s brother, sitting on the couch.

“Hey,” he says with a minute squeak in his voice.

“Hey,” I reply with a voice that sounds like sandpaper.

I see David nod his head toward Uncle Mike from the corner of my eye. I turn toward the kitchen to see Joey wrestling with some pots and pans. He seems nervous, but he is cooking just fine. Another chorus of “Hey,” continues as I exchange pleasantries with my oldest brother.

“You can have some coffee if you want,” Joey offers with his back toward me. His eyes are focused on something in the refrigerator.

“Thanks,” I reply. I head toward the coffee maker by the sink to fill a cup.

I come toward the breakfast table where David is sitting, and I accept the pastry that he hands to me. As I bite into the lightly frosted surface, I contemplate the irony of
our morning ritual, which seems unaffected by the events that are scheduled to transpire this afternoon. After finishing the entire pastry in a few bites, I take a drink of coffee to awaken my tired nerves.

Most of the day passes in silence. I nibble on small bits of food throughout the day, but my appetite remains constrained. My stomach groans for food that will not please it.

It is 2:30 P.M., and I begin to prepare myself for what is to come. I change my pants to a pair adorned with pin-stripes, and I switch to a blouse and a violet cardigan. I wrap a ruffled scarf around my neck to match the cardigan. The biting breeze of the last few days has reminded me of this necessary addition.

My hair is a natural disaster; my normally straightened coif is in its most basic state. The ends of my hair curl haphazardly in all directions. I smooth the top of my hair with a soft brush, and I pull some of the stands out of my eyes. I pin the recluse hair away from my face. As I do, I begin to study my appearance in the mirror. The woman in the reflection looks like me more than usual; my lack of makeup and hair alteration shows more of what I really look like. My face is relatively weathered, but my eyes show hope in their reflection.

My sister, Jess, walks in the large master bathroom where I am preparing.

“Are you ready?” she asks.

“As much as I can be,” I reply as I stand up from the same wooden chair my father would sit in when he would get ready for his day.

Jess grabs my hand, and we walk down the stairs toward the garage. Moments later, I find myself sitting in the back seat of my father’s truck. From my window, I see
Jess gets into another car driven by my brother-in-law James. In the car I am in, Joey is in the driver’s seat and my mother sits next to him. David sits to my left and he smiles at me as a tear falls from his right eye. I squeeze his hand tightly. One, two, three. . .

The drive passes by in a blur. During the drive from Oceanside into the adjacent city of Vista, I consistently hold my breath and my eyes are squeezed tightly. I try to withhold all of the emotion that is now creeping out of my body. My stomach tenses, and I feel fatigued. I feel compelled to scratch and claw my way out of this moving vehicle, to escape the destination in which we are headed. I do not withdraw from this fighting feeling inside my body, because I understand the anger it is conveying. My mind and my body are finally in agreement, but their truce is accompanied by subtle restraint. It seems as though they are trying to decide between fight and flight.

Joey pulls into the familiar asphalt parking lot. The internal struggle in my body is heightened as I recognize the tiled roof and stucco exterior. David grips my hand quickly before he lets go in order to exit the car. Seconds later, I see David outside of my door. He opens it and offers his hand to me. I take his hand, and I hesitate as I exit the car. My flight instinct is highly elevated, and I want to flee immediately. However, I have a strong pull within me that beckons me to walk inside. My mother is being supported by two people on either side, because she can barely stand.

We have returned to the mortuary once again to visit my father, and to observe the vigil service.

I walk in quietly, and I see the prayer cards sitting on a table at the entrance. I pick one up and look at the poem I had written printed on the back. I read and re-read it to myself, hoping that this familiarity will calm my nerves. It offers no relief. I walk to
the left of the entrance to see a poster with images of my father on vacation. My mother is pictured at his side in each one. I see James with a stroller by the entrance, and his face is turned downward. He nods his head toward my direction and refocuses on the carpeted floor. I can see from where I stand that the stroller is empty. David stands next to me and grips my hand for emotional and physical support.

I look toward what must have been a living room at one time. The entrance to the room is framed with carved wood and the ceiling has crown molding. My experience with assisting my father on wood working projects makes me notice such detail. I can hear his voice echoing in the back of my mind, “That is some fine craftsmanship.” The small bit of strength this memory gives me propels me faster toward the room.

I begin walking through the archway, and I see him for the first time.

My knees crumble as I feel the reality that his visible body delivers. I am overcome by the grief I had pent up. The feeling concentrates its energy at the pit of my stomach, and it explodes compulsively in all directions. I lose control of my arms, and they fall limply into David’s clutch. I feel him adjust his support of my body, because I am losing control. My knees become weak, but I continue walking down the path between the benches. I want to see my father at a closer distance.

My mother has already reached the casket, and she sobs with her head on my father’s chest. Several family members surround her, but their faces are blurred in my vision. I feel more arms holding me, but I do not see to whom they belong. My eyes close and all I can perceive is a soundscape of grief. I hear chatter on all sides of the room, and sobbing is coming from an unknown source. I open my eyes at the front of the altar.
My mother has lifted her body from my father, and now I see him entirely. His eyes are closed gently as though he were sleeping. His mouth is curved into a smile that I have never seen him use before. His hair is thinner toward his hairline from a surgery he had nearly a month prior. I see a jagged scar that embodies the struggle he endured during the last weeks of his life. I look at the scar, remembering the drainage tube that once emerged from there. Images of my father vomiting up blood flash in my mind, and I realize that I would rather be in that place than in this one.

His skin is greyed, and I do not see the vibrant red on his cheeks that he would normally have. His skin is sculpted and formed in ways that his body would not normally assume. The only thing that is familiar is his hands. They are formed at the base of his stomach, and his fingers are intertwined together. This mimesis of a real gesture my father would use, particularly when he was enjoying leisure time, causes my body to convulse. The realism that I see in this moment is another knife of reality slicing into my back.

I begin to collapse, but I catch myself before I lose full control. I stand up steadily and I cry so hysterically that I do not recognize my own voice. I have not cried this heavily before this moment, and the agony escapes out of every outlet I possess. My pain is embodied to its greatest extent and I cannot look at my father right now. The image is just too real, and I will myself to reside in a fantasy land. As I did the week earlier, I hit a figurative brick wall once again.

I feel arms with no attached bodies embracing me and helping me toward a nearby seat. I look to find a bodily extension to these arms, but I cannot identify their owners. My vision is so contorted that I see only partially; my peripheral vision is faint. I
sit down in the seat that was offered to me by an unknown source, and I try to compose myself. The dizzying thoughts slow this process significantly.

Moments later, my vision becomes clearer and I observe my surroundings. I see my Aunt Jackie, my father’s sister, sitting in the first bench across the aisle to my right. Her sobbing echoes slightly in this small room. I stand and look at my father lying toward my left; he is peaceful but unrecognizable. I walk toward Jackie and I occupy the seat next to her. I wrap my right arm around her back, and she grips my left arm. Amidst her weeping, I see her shaking her head vigorously. I lay my head on her shoulder as I feel another tear roll down my cheek.

My cousin, Linzi, sits on the other side of me, and we embrace. My parents became her legal guardians when she was eleven years old, and she is like a sister to me. Her mouth is quivering as though she wants to say something, but she does not know what to say. I nod my head toward her, and I wrap my left arm around Linzi and my right arm around Jackie.

The crowd around my father’s body becomes smaller minutes later. Both Jackie and Linzi have been brought to other parts of the room to talk to other family members. I stand from the bench where I had been sitting, and I approach the altar hesitantly. A few of my father’s coworkers are there, and they offer me room as I approach the casket. I take the space next to my Uncle Mike, who is smiling lovingly at my father’s face. Mike is smoothing my father’s hair in the direction that it would normally be combed.

“Want to touch his hair?” he asks, moving toward the side.

I am fearful, but his invitation makes me consider this possibility. I am concerned that touching his body in this form will take away my memory of his warm hands, his
vibrant face, and his perfectly manicured hair when he was alive. Uncle Mike nods his head toward me, so I agree to touch my father’s hair.

It has the same texture that it always had, except the hair closest to his forehead has a thinner consistency. I brush his hair back with my fingers, and it falls into place. My hand begins to shake, because I feel the coldness of his scalp. The last time I touched my father’s head in this way was the neck massage I gave him in the hospital. At the time, my hands were cold compared to his skin. Now, the roles have reversed.

“It’s okay to touch him,” Uncle Mike says as he begins to brush my father’s hair with me. These words suddenly transport me to a time eighteen years earlier, where a similar conversation was once held.

I am five years old. I am with my family inside a cramped room, and I am holding my mother’s hand. I hear the adults in the room talking about things I cannot understand. Behind the veil of bodies in front of me, I know my grandmother is resting in a casket. I want to run toward her and tell her about everything that has happened. I quietly ponder the reason why she does not wake up; the chatter in the room would certainly break my own slumber.

My father stands next to my mother, and he looks at me standing behind him. He gives me a half smile.

“Daddy?” I ask, still not quite understanding what is happening yet, “Are there clouds in heaven?”

My father nods and replies, “Well, yes, I think so.”

“I think grandma is riding a horse. When she falls, she will land on a cloud.”
I recounted this line from the movie *My Girl*, but it did not matter at the time. My father hugs me then, but he does not cry. I feel his body tense as he fights the urge, likely trying to shield me from the trauma he is experiencing. I understand this restraint in retrospect, but my five year old being does not comprehend the complexity of this situation.

Then, my father picks me up and carries me toward the casket where my paternal grandmother is resting. My Uncle Mike is standing next to me as my father places me on a small bench to accommodate my height.

“*It’s okay to touch her,*” Uncle Mike says as he rubs my grandmother’s arm with his index finger. She is wearing a dress of some sort, and the sleeve is slightly transparent. I look at my uncle quizzically, and he takes my hand carefully and mirrors the same movement that he had been doing seconds before.

“She’s cold,” I say quietly.

Uncle Mike nods as he stares into the face of his mother. He begins to rub her arm again with his finger alongside me. “*Yeah, she is,*” he says softly, but it does not appear that he is talking to me anymore. His eyes seem to be fixated elsewhere.

Nearly two decades later, I am standing with my Uncle Mike once again.

I realize that this will be my last chance to make material contact with my father, so I decide to touch his cheek that once had a pink glow. His skin is colder than I thought, but I do not take my hand away. I rub his cheek with the tip of my index finger similarly to what Uncle Mike had done with his mother.
Then, I reach down to his hands and grip the tips of his fingers as best as I can, considering their final clasped position. “You will be okay,” I tell my father as I squeeze his hand. One, two, three. . .

Moments later, I sit down next to David and I cry into his shoulder. He wraps his arms around my shaking body. Like the moment David told me about my father’s passing, our shaken, grief stricken bodies now pulsate as one. I lay my head on his chest, and I listen to the steady pace of his heartbeat.

My perception of time begins to stray, and the spoken portion of the vigil service begins in what feels to be minutes later. A nun from a nearby church begins telling the audience some of what she knows about my father and my family, followed by a telling of the Catholic narrative about conceptions of heaven. My foggy state of mind delays some of my understanding during this moment.

Then, the nun opens up the microphone to anyone who would like to speak. The room is quiet. I feel this internal pressure to stand, but my body freezes. My reaction time is slowed, and my fatigued body resists my mind’s request.

“I will speak,” my mother says as she stands and walks to the podium. Jess follows behind her and stands at her side. As my mother begins to speak, I feel the hold release my body and I move to stand on the other side. My mother thanks everyone for their attendance, and she explains how touched my father would be to know how many people care about him. I look out toward the audience, and I see a crowded room. Some faces I recognize, others I do not. As my mother completes her speech, she bows her head and my sister and I escort her back to her seat.
Jake stands immediately after my mother’s departure and he begins speaking about the transcendental friendship he had with my father. Just over a year ago, our father stood alongside Jake as his best man in his wedding. Jake tells the audience about the special times he spent with our father during the multiple construction projects they involved themselves with. Not only did he learn a lot from these experiences, but he got to spend more time with our father than he may have had otherwise. Then, Jake mentions the wooden cross that had been placed in the casket, and explains that he made it using the knowledge he gained from my father. “It had to be oak,” Jake says, and everyone chuckles. My father would not have it any other way.

After Jake sits down, I stand and make my way toward the podium. I thank everyone for coming and supporting my family. “For those of you who worked with my father, I would like to offer some insight to what he was like as my dad,” I begin, “And for those of you who knew him well, you’ll agree that this story I will share shows what he is really like.”

For the remainder of my speech, I start telling a story from when I was younger. In the early 1990s, my father was working on an extensive project at our house. He began building brick walls around the perimeter of the property. During the first set of walls he built, I recall him digging small trenches where he would later place the foundation. I was little at the time, and all I wanted to do was play. I jumped in the trench that he had just dug, and I started dancing. I asked him to dance with me, but I fully expected him to reprimand me for doing something dangerous. After all, the trench was nearly as tall as I was. Instead, he placed his tools on the ground, and he danced with me in that trench for
a good ten minutes. I remember his laughter and the small bits of concrete smudged on the tips of his fingers. It was a normal experience, but with him, it became extraordinary.

I nod my head toward the audience, and I take my seat in the front row. The nun that began the spoken service concludes with a prayer, and she sprinkles holy water on my father’s body. Following this ritual, I notice the pictures that line the cover of the casket. I recognize photos of every immediate family member, all of which will surround his face upon the closure of the casket.

With the conclusion of the spoken service, Gregory makes an announcement to everyone that there is a limited amount of time for final goodbyes. He is respectful and caring as he makes this assertion. I walk toward my father, so I can see his face one last time. My mother drapes her upper body over my father’s chest, and her weeping is nearly inconspicuous. As she lifts her body, she makes room for me. I kiss my hand, and I touch it to his mouth. The overwhelming power of grief takes over my body, and I can no longer see clearly. The greyed image my eyes project shows Gregory closing the casket. He shakes the hands of my brothers, and then I can see no more.

The drive home may as well have been nonexistent, because the next memory I have is arriving back at the home of my parents. Once upstairs, I walk into the shower stall that I once used every day when I was younger. As the water falls loudly, I allow myself to cry and feel without any hesitation. I am concerned that my full embodiment of grief will exacerbate the intensity of this same process for others, so I allow this private time to be my moment of free expression. My voice is unrecognizable, and my breathing takes on an accelerated pace. As the water flows down the drain, my tears go along with it.
The Funeral Service

I wake the next morning feeling disoriented. I stare questioningly at my childhood bedroom. My thoughts mirror those of Peter Goldie: “What’s wrong with the world to make it so flat, shabby, [and] worn-out looking? Then I remember” (136). The memory of the evening before rushes back into my mind as blood might rush into one’s head when hanging upside down. My body feels off balance. I hear David stirring in the bed next to me.

“How did you sleep?” he asks.

“Fine,” I reply, “How about you?”

“Alright,” he says as he lays his head further into the pillow. His arms arc above his head, and he stretches.

I can already smell the coffee that Joey has brewed downstairs. The sweet smell beckons me to get up, so I stand up and pull my wild hair back into a pony tail.

“We should eat,” I say to David.

“Yeah,” he says with a sigh in his voice. His normal appetite appears to be just as diminished as mine.

I do not bother changing out of my pajamas. I walk downstairs with David, and I see Uncle Mike lying on the couch. His face shows pure exhaustion, and he lifts the tips of his fingers to greet us. “Good morning,” I say, knowing the day will not be.

Joey is on the phone in the kitchen. He tilts his head upward in acknowledgement, and he points toward the dining room to indicate where he is headed. I tilt my head similarly in response. After Joey has left, I pull out the orange juice, and I pour some in a large glass. I take a sip, but the fresh, tangy flavor is suddenly off-putting to me. I hand it
to David, and he drinks it with no hesitation. The coffee appears more inviting to me, so I pour a cup of it as I had the morning before. The caffeine infused beverage may be the only thing that keeps me awake today.

The thought of consuming milk in cereal causes my stomach to churn, even more than the orange juice. I grab a pastry, and I hand another to David. We eat in silence. The only sound I hear is the humming of the television and the unnamed show my uncle is watching.

After breakfast, I walk upstairs to visit with my mother. David and Uncle Mike remain downstairs as they have a conversation. I enter my mother’s dark bedroom, and all I can see are the whites of her eyes.

“Did I wake you?” I ask, and she shakes her head.

I walk over to the side of the bed once considered my father’s side. My mother is wrapped in the blanket that he would often sleep in. I sit on the curved edge of the waterbed, and it emits a similar creak that it does whenever I occupy this space. We begin talking about the surreal feeling that the loss of my father has created.

“I just don’t get it,” my mother says with her hand on her forehead.

Before I can respond, I hear a loud, “Whoa!” come from downstairs. My mother and I look at each other questioningly.

“What was that?” she asks, sitting up in bed.

“I don’t know,” I reply as I walk toward her bedroom door.

“Is everything okay?” I call. My voice echoes off the walls of the family room.

“Come down here!” David and Uncle Mike respond simultaneously.
I walk quickly down the stairs, and I hear the quiet thumping of my mother’s feet as she follows me. I come into the living room to see both David and Uncle Mike’s faces lit up with delight.

“What is going on?” I ask as both my mother and Joey enter the room behind me.

“We were just talking about dad,” David begins.

“And, I was saying how much I wish I could hear from him right now,” Uncle Mike continues, “Now look.” Both of their fingers point toward the restroom just six feet away from where we stand. The light is on.

“No one was near the bathroom!” David explains, “It just turned on after Mike said that.”

I am not sure what to make of this, but David and Uncle Mike are so excited over this occurrence. “I’m a skeptic,” David explains, “but this is quite something.”

I am glad to see happiness in a grief-stricken home, no matter how long it lasts. This restroom is significant, because it is the one my father preferred to use. A towel still hangs in there as though it were waiting for him to take a shower in its stall. I give both David and Uncle Mike a hug. They both begin to chatter again and retell the story to one another with enthusiasm. I notice a tear that falls down Uncle Mike’s face as he looks toward the lit bathroom with admiration.

“I don’t want to be the one to turn the light off,” I insist.

“Neither do I,” says my mother, “but your father would always tell us to turn off any light that was left on. If he were here, he would call us all crazy and turn the light off himself.”
Everyone laughs at this comment, because its truth value is so strong. “I’ll do the honor,” Uncle Mike says, and he turns the light off. “Keeping me on my toes, are you?” he whispers to himself with a chuckle. All of us exchange puzzled looks for a moment, and then Uncle Mike and David turn to each other again and recount the story. The smiles on their faces are like a breath of fresh air.

A little while later, I walk upstairs and begin to prepare myself for what this day has in store. The formality of this afternoon’s event makes me consider ironing out the kinks in my hair so that controlled, emotionless straight hair is left behind. Today’s event will not be held in a venue where my embodied grief will be allowed. I take out the flat iron and begin to flatten out the erratic twists and turns that represent my hair in its natural state. Once finished, I stare stoically at myself in the mirror.

My mother walks into the large bathroom and sits by the counter near where I am putting makeup on. She is wearing a purple dress. Her tired eyes look downward, but she still looks beautiful. We ready ourselves without saying much to each other. I quietly wish there was something I could say to her to take away her pain. As I am putting the last touches on my hair, I hear the garage door open below us.

“Alright, alright,” my mother says, “I know they’ll be out there with the motor running.”

I cannot contain my laughter; that is something my father would often say whenever he was ready before us. He would sit outside with the car motor running as an incentive for us to get ready faster. Today, I do not think it will be motivation enough.

Our timing is perfect, because both my mother and I finish at the same time. She holds my hand as we head down the stairs together toward the garage. As soon as we
come outside, Joey pulls out the car from the parking space, and my mother, David and I take our seats when the car stops just outside of the garage. As the car navigates in reverse down the driveway, Uncle Mike’s car comes to life and he follows us.

Joey turns the vehicle onto the 76 highway and we drive west for five miles. When the car reaches the right turn lane at Rancho del Oro Drive, I feel my leg tapping as the Mission San Luis Rey de Francia comes within sight. Although we are half a mile away from its entrance, I can already see people congregating outside. The car makes the turn, and seconds later, it is parked. I remain in my seat as everyone begins to exit the car. I slowly take off my seatbelt, and I brave the sunlight as I exit the car last.

Extended family members begin to greet us, and I begin to cry on the various shoulders of the people that embrace me. I walk toward the entrance of the main hall that we reserved, and I suddenly notice the hearse that had arrived before we got here. The cries that erupt from the core of my being are debilitating. I see the casket inside, and my howling makes it hard for me to function. Hands from all directions reach out to support my swaying body, and my balance is steadied and straightened through their physical encouragement. My grief is not so accommodating.

Someone ushers me inside of the church suddenly, and my voice echoes in an instant. The space already requires that I regulate my voice, despite the fact that the funeral service has not begun. Terry, the director of the cemetery at the church, tells me that I can utilize the front stage to practice the passage that I have already agreed to deliver during the ceremony. I walk toward the podium, and I test the microphone by mumbling, “testing,” several times. My magnified voice is demonstrably different when
projected through this device. I speak, but I hear someone else’s voice. After I have practiced sufficiently, I exit the church to join my immediate family.

   Silence permeates the church upon my exit; the Catholic funeral service is about to begin.

   I stand on the left side of my mother while my sister remains on her right side. I see Gregory open the back door of the hearse, and his assistant helps him carry out the casket and place it on a rolling device. He proceeds with my father in front of us, and my family follows in procession.

   As I reenter the room, I see numerous faces on both sides of the aisle. My mother cries hysterically as we proceed down the walkway toward our seats at the front. I have a horrible feeling at the pit of my stomach, and I feel like it is about to detonate. Tears roll down my face as seepage of the grief appears once again on my exterior. After the casket reaches the altar, Gregory bows his head toward us with his hands clasped. He walks toward the back of room immediately after.

   Father Dolan begins the service, and something occurs to me after he introduces himself. My father would often refer to himself jokingly as, “Daddy Dolan,” so the person officiating the service could not have a more appropriate name. The conflicting emotions concentrate toward the pit of my stomach, and the pain elevates even more.

   “I would like to invite the first speaker to come to the podium. . .” Father Dolan says, and this cue stirs me out of the frenzied world of my mind. I clear my throat, and I walk speedily toward the altar. I bow my body toward my father’s closed casket, and I join Father Dolan center stage. I read a passage from the bible about upholding those who have died, but also continuing to live in their honor. My voice cracks noticeably as I read
the last line, but I maintain my composure reasonably well. Despite my agnostic religious perspective, I consider this passage to be both calming and helpful during this difficult time. I touch the wooden surface of my father’s solid wood casket before returning to the seating area.

Father Dolan continues the dialogue that I started, and he speaks beautifully. Moments later, I am escorted toward the back of the room with my siblings, including my cousin Linzi whom my parents helped raise. We are preparing to begin a procession with offerings, which is indicative of typical Western Catholic funerals. As we wait for our cue to begin walking, I notice how full this room is. There is not a single seat empty.

The cue is given, and the five of us walk toward the altar bearing crackers and wine. We leave the offerings and return to our seats, except my brother Jake who remains standing. He makes his way toward the stage, and he clears his throat before approaching the podium that I stood behind moments before. Jake expresses his appreciation to the audience for their attendance, and he places his sunglasses on to begin the eulogy.

“I don’t mean any disrespect,” Jake says directly to Father Dolan, “but my dad would always wear his sunglasses whether he was inside or outside. I would like to invite everyone to here to put on sunglasses in honor of my dad.” The sounds of shuffling can be heard as people around me locate their sunglasses; the movements are loud enough to echo the grand hall in which we sit. Just seconds later, all of the faces within my sight are adorned with various styles of sunglasses.

Jake smiles with approval at the sea of sunglasses before him. With that encouragement, he tells the story of how he and our father expanded and rebuilt a small home in Big Bear City, which is not far from the popular skiing resorts. Over the course
of several years, the two of them gutted the original structure, laid the foundation for the expansion, and began the building process. The final product was one they were proud of, and Jake beams with pride as he recounts the story. With every bump that the project delivered, our father always approached it with a cool head. “Most of all,” Jake says as his emotions wash over him, “I am glad I was able to spend that kind of time with him. I wouldn’t trade that for anything.”

Although Jake is maintaining his composure throughout his speech, I can hear sniffling and crying in the pews around me. The horrible feeling of grief at the pit of my stomach is lessening as I look toward the closed casket containing my father’s body. I do not think I am at peace with his loss just yet, but I feel that I am beginning to understand that he is gone. The body that remains is no longer animated by the person that he was. This realization allows me to fully embrace the remainder of Jake’s eulogy. “He is my best friend,” Jake says as he concludes his speech. On his way back to his seat, he touches the top of the casket tenderly.

After Jake exits the altar, Father Dolan offers a beautiful conclusion to the service. He sprinkles holy water on top of my father’s casket, and he takes his position in front of the concluding procession. Six pall bearers composed of my brothers, uncles, and family friends lift my father’s casket with care and ease. My mother, Jess, and I walk slowly behind the casket, and my mother loses her balance a few times as the grief appears to wash over her body. I feel the muscle in my arm contract as I help support her small frame. We walk a slow, measured march outside of the church doors. The procession continues into the cemetery that is adjacent to the church.
We pass through the first set of iron gates which holds the oldest part of the cemetery; graves from the eighteenth century lie here. The second set of gates that we enter opens up to the newer part of the cemetery. I see a white canopy above the resting place that my family had already chosen. I notice a large pile of dirt nearby and I look away. I do not want to think about my father’s body being covered and never seen again. Although I know he does not occupy this flesh any longer, I fear losing my material, earthly connection with him.

Once we arrive at the burial site, I am given a violet rose, my father’s favorite color. Once the casket is placed on the correct spot over the perfectly cut rectangle hole, I place the rose on top of his casket. Alongside Linzi, I kiss the top of the perfectly carved wood. Violet roses appear by the dozens. In a matter of minutes, the casket is covered in a vibrant floral blanket.

There are white seats for the family next to the casket, so family and friends offer their condolences to us after they say their final goodbye to my father. People I have never met before come to embrace me, and they tell me stories of what it was like to be an employee for my father. “Everyone wanted to work for Will,” a coworker from my father’s Gemco days tells me. I am touched that so many people from Gemco actually came, because the stores closed when I was six months old. The impact my father had on people from all walks of life makes me so proud.

As people begin to file out from the small space, Gregory announces that the service is coming to a conclusion, and he encourages everyone present to offer their final farewell to my father. I kiss my hand, and I touch one of the few spots on top of his casket that is not covered in the perennial floral offerings. Gregory comes toward me, and
I hug him immediately. His respectful nature and understanding is exactly what I need during one of the most difficult moments of my life. I thank him profusely for all of the work he has done. My brothers and sister approach Gregory and shake his hand. “Thank you for everything,” I say as I walk away.

Once we reach the sidewalk, I look back one last time at my father’s casket. The bright sun shines down brilliantly on the scene, and there is not a cloud in the sky. The solid casket looks sturdy and beautiful. Just like my father.

I hold David’s hand as we follow my mother and Joey toward the exit of the cemetery. In the older part of the cemetery, the sound of the rushing water of the fountain is conspicuous. I see a few pennies on the rocks which line the bottom of the fountain. I stop for a moment, and I toss a few pennies in from my wallet. The copper reflects the sun’s rays back at me; the facets are striking. I smile at the simple beauty, and I continue walking with David toward the car.

The drive back to my parents’ house is mostly quiet. My mother offers some pleasantries regarding the service, and Joey, David, and I agree. After that, no one seems to know what to say.

We arrive back at the house five minutes later, and cars line the streets in anticipation for the reception inside the house. More cars pour in the area after we park. Once out of the car, I open the front door and invite people in using the best host qualities that I can conjure up in this vulnerable moment. Once most of the people are inside, I take a seat on the couch in the exact spot that my father usually preferred.

Jess already started a slideshow that she created for this event; photos of my father’s life flash across the screen. Images of our Disneyland trip when I was young and
our adventures in Yosemite National Park appear before me in this extensive montage. My father’s iPod plays on the table next to me, and I hear Tal Bachman swooning about a woman that he considers too high above him.

In my mind, I can hear my father’s voice reaching the correct tone and pitch during the chorus of this song. On multiple occasions, I have found him sitting in this exact spot listening to this song with the volume using the highest possible decibel. His grand voice would be singing along with the recording, and his head would be leaned back in the chair. The intensity of his singing would render his eyes closed.

I continue to focus on this memory repeatedly as I recall my father’s artistic interpretation of each song I hear. I spend the entirety of the reception watching the slideshow on loop and immersing myself into the music my father enjoyed. The Beach Boys debut for a few songs, and then the mood changes slightly with the introduction of Fleetwood Mac. Some people engage in small talk with me, but the conversations end quickly when they run out of things to say. I do not have the energy to suggest discussion topics, so I allow the conversations to flounder. I feel like the concept of taboo embodied, like the large elephant in the room that everyone deems necessary to ignore. I do not make an effort to change their minds, because I will my mind to be elsewhere.

I see the profile of my mother’s body sitting in the recliner near the television. There are numerous people crowded around her, and I see nervous hesitation in many of those waiting to speak with her. Her face appears pained, but she manages to engage with people for their sake. I look around at the empty space around me, despite the large number of people occupying the house. I realize that I must be very unapproachable right now.
The speakers connected to the iPod begin to play, “Surfer Girl,” and I try to imagine my father singing the song directly to me like he once did. The memory becomes clouded by the initial trip to the mortuary, and the anxiety that I felt when entering an uncomfortable space. Now, in a different uncomfortable setting, I allow my grief to wash over me, regardless of who is around.

I allow myself to just be.
Chapter 4: Interpretations of the Past and the Art of Living Forward

It is late in the night, and I cannot sleep.

I rub my eyes roughly, and I open them toward the direction of the ceiling. The room is almost completely dark, except for the small bits of light that escape from the miniature cracks between the blinds. I stare into the vast ceiling which mirrors a starry night, but the simulation does not soothe me into slumber.

I roll onto my side toward the nightstand, which is covered with towers of books. I consider reading for a while, but I know that the vivid stories on the pages will keep me awake longer. The development of an intriguing book is too much for me to put down once I begin. I will my eyes to close as tightly as they can. I know I need to get up in a few hours, and tonight’s attempt at rest has proven to be fruitless. I place my hands over my eyes to further darken my plane of vision, but this method also fails. The energy that I possess right now is too much for 3:00 A.M.

I shiver suddenly, and I realize that my arms have been outside of the blankets for too long. I feel the goosebumps that begin to prickle up my arm. I rub my right arm with my left hand to create warm friction, but the bodily reaction to the cold persists. I burrow further into the sheet and comforter to warm my frozen arms and hands. My teeth chatter slightly, so I pull the white sheet over my head as well. I breathe shallowly under the thin sheet in order to spread my body heat toward my lower extremities. The darkness from under the white sheet seems a little ironic, because the light hue is creating the dark shadow that covers me. I drift into sleep slowly with my body entirely covered by the white sheet.
I breathe in deeply, and I feel the muscles of my chest contract with the respiration. I glance at the clock to find that I have one more minute before the alarm goes off. I exhale abruptly, as I recognize my body has a clearer conception of time than my mind. I think I slept longer than I really did, but my body is far more knowledgeable. I turn off the alarm before it has the chance to wail loudly at me, and I rise from my bed.

I walk into the kitchen barefooted, and I feel cold vinyl against the pads of my feet. I locate a box of cereal, and I pour morsels into the bowl. I no longer have the aversion to cereal that I had before. As I consider this, my mind begins to wander.

I begin to think about the past few weeks, and I notice a constant. No matter what the situation entails, I realize the importance of being myself. That includes a diminished sense of restraint when it comes to grief and related emotions. Moments where I allow myself to feel and be in the moment, no matter how difficult, makes this journey far more healing than it would have been otherwise. However, I had to learn this simple truth the hard way. The loss of my father and my resulting experiences contribute to the person I am today.

I set the box of cereal down when the bowl is sufficiently full, and I locate the milk inside the refrigerator. As I pour the milk over the cereal, I feel as though I have done these same movements thousands of times. Still standing in the kitchen, I raise a spoonful to my mouth. From the corner of my eye, I notice the pile of dishes that have collected from our various meals the day before. Bowls and plates line the porcelain surface of the washing station, and pots and pans are stacked adjacent to the sink, all seemingly begging for me to clean them. I eat the remainder of my breakfast quickly, and I begin the chore of washing the dishes.
As I am working, I think of the events that have brought me here. I feel the bubbles of the soap trail down my hands as I scrub a plate, and the rough edge of one of my callused fingers draws my attention. I wash the soap off of my hand, and I bring it to eye level. My many years of writing have done a number to my hand. My right middle finger has taken the brunt of the force, and my fingernail has conformed to the shape my hand makes from holding a pen. I look at the small imperfection, and I recognize it as a perfect imprint of who I am. I place the last pieces of silverware into the dishwasher, and I close the door of the appliance. Like the breakfast ritual, I have a sudden need to resume a practice I have done thousands of times before.

I locate an unused notebook from the bookshelf next to my bed, and I take a simple, yet smooth writing pen from the desk near the kitchen. I sit on the grey couch in my living room, the same couch where I sat upon receiving the news that my father had died. Here, my written autoethnographic journey begins on what will become the tear-stained and smudged pages of a spiral notebook with a blue plastic cover. I begin my first entry with a salutation to my father, and I write directly to him. *I know it has been a while since we talked,* I write, *and I have a lot to tell you.* As I continue to explore my own life, this writing helps “me make a mental break*through* out of a mental breakdown” (Spry, “Body, Paper, Stage” 120). Without remembering and recording this valuable information, it would be difficult for me to comprehend what feels like the incomprehensible.

As I consider one of the darkest moments in my life, I can see a transformation take place in my communication. I am a very outspoken person most of the time, but this one defining day silences me in more ways than one. The unimaginable tragedy of my
father’s death occurs on a typical day in southern California; the sun is shining and there is not a cloud in the sky. I revisit October 28, 2010 once again; I am there.

I am on the second floor of the corporate building that I have worked within for over three years. It is the morning, and I attend a group meeting held by the Vice President of Customer Service. He wants to know about the progress of a recent policy that had been introduced weeks prior. I raise my hand, and I begin my response by explaining how other recent factors are limiting the potential for the new policy’s effectiveness. Before I can explain the connection between the related factors and the new policy, the Vice President cuts me off, and insists that he only wants to hear about how the new policy is working. I am stunned to be silenced so quickly, and I have no time to respond before he moves on to the next person willing to speak.

I return to my desk after the meeting, and I try to continue my work without letting the earlier meeting impact my performance. I am preparing to work with a new coworker on a project when my supervisor notifies me of the atypical phone call waiting for me. When I speak with David inside of my supervisor’s cubicle, my voice is silenced again. I am conscious of those around me, particularly those within earshot. I do not want a floor that houses the workstations of nearly two hundred people to see me cry. My fogged memory in this moment is likely due to the mechanical persona I assume while at this job: I get the necessary information and perform appropriately. Rinse and repeat.

My silence is maintained as I exit the building and traverse through the sidewalks toward my nearby apartment. The familiar surroundings offer a sense of release for me, so my feelings begin to show increasingly as I get closer to my private space. Once there, I feel allowed to grieve the possibility of my father becoming injured. I silence my own
mind when thoughts of his possible death begin to escape. Although I subdue them, they continue to creep out from unguarded spaces.

My thought process is interrupted as my cat, Lucy, walks toward me and coos. I am here, still writing to my father in the journal. My legs are stretched across the couch, and my journal sits on my lap. Lucy jumps on to the couch, and she lays her small body across my legs. A ray of sunshine from the window behind me shines directly on the spot Lucy chose. Her sleepy face is illuminated, and the detailed patterns of Lucy’s fur coat are prominent. I smile at her and enjoy the simple moment.

This mundane moment makes me think of the similar moments I had when my father was alive. I pick up my pen again, and write my way there.

I wake up on a Sunday morning to the chatter coming from my parents’ bedroom. There is an unwritten rule in my household that allows entrance into a room when it is clear the occupants are awake. Spoken conversation is considered proof enough of their consciousness. My sister Jess moves her head out from under the comforter on her trundle bed.

“They’re awake?” she asks as she places her arm on the covers atop my trundle bed.

“Yep,” I say, and I step out of the bed and open the door of our bedroom.

My brother Jake is already halfway down the hallway, and he places a finger over his mouth. “Shh…” he whispers, and he continues walking toward the closed door of our parents’ bedroom.

I shrug my shoulders and follow along. I crouch down behind Jake when Jess walks out of the bedroom we share. I turn around and make the same gesture as Jake had.
“Shh…” I whisper. Jess rolls her eyes, and crosses her arms. Although she does not appear willing to play along, she does not seem interested in spoiling our fun.

Jake places his hand on the curled doorknob, and he starts to turn it slowly. His movement is measured and precise, so the internal mechanism of the door does not give us away. I hear my father tell my mother a joke of some sort, and her following laughter is unrestrained. Finally, Jake has turned the handle 180 degrees, and he opens the door carefully. His left hand is in the air in the shape of a claw.

“I know you’re there,” my father announces. Jake’s shoulders slump a little, but he continues to open the door slowly.

Jake jumps into the room suddenly, and he hurls his body onto the raised carpeted platform where my parents’ waterbed rests. He emits a primal growl with his arms raised in the air. I jump in the spot behind him and growl quietly.

“Terrifying,” my father says, and I see him roll his eyes from the opening of the bedframe. My mother starts laughing, and my father snickers a little bit.

“Ugh,” Jake sighs, defeated.

“Maybe you should show more teeth next time,” my father suggests as he sits up in bed, and he rolls his eyes some more. He throws his head back slightly in an effort to mock our foiled plan a little more.

Jess stands in the doorway, and shakes her head. “I doubt that will work,” she comments in reference to my father’s suggestion. My mother nods in response, and she stretches before getting out of bed.

“Prull me up,” my father asks me and Jake. “Prull,” is my father’s made up word to replace the word, “pull.” He raises his hand in the air, and I slap my hand against his to
create the perfect pitch. “Good,” my father says in regard to the pleasing sound. Jake places his hand over mine, and the two of us pull as hard as we can to get him up. “Put some elbow grease into it,” he says jokingly, and he eventually pulls himself out of the bed with very little effort.

Most of the family heads downstairs to the kitchen for our traditional Sunday morning breakfast. I walk into my bedroom to put on a shirt that will warm my upper body more than the thin sleep shirt could offer. When I walk out of my bedroom, I see my father sitting at the top of the stairs waiting for me. “Hop on,” he offers and points to his back. I run happily toward him, and I wrap my arms around him. He carries me downstairs, piggy-back style, toward the breakfast table. I hold onto his strong shoulders, and I smell the pancakes my mother has already started cooking in the kitchen. My laughter echoes off the walls and the high ceiling of the living room.

My pen slows its pace, and I am here once again.

I have not thought about the typical Sunday morning ritual of my childhood for a long time. I know that this beautiful memory would have fallen into the recesses of my mind if I had not started grieving in a healthy way. “What needs to be challenged here is the definition of grief as only sorrowful, as opposed to the poignant, important reminder of the lost person” (Moules, et al. 103). For me, healthy grieving requires the expression of the agony that has existed in the pit of my stomach for so long. Crying when I want to cry, becoming angry when the emotion wells up inside of me, and collecting my thoughts when they are in disarray are among the examples of reactions that need to occur naturally for me. Feeling these emotions and all of their complexity reminds me of the reasons I am hurting. I miss my father and everything about him that made him the way
he was. If I denied the reason for my grief, I would fail to recognize all of the wonderful memories that I can revisit in my mind. All of my growth has transpired during moments of free expression, and I am not alone in this affirmation.

Nancy Moules, et al. agree that griever need to do what is best for them (99). While the media communicates specific ways to perform as a grieving person, the strategies for restrained expression of grief do not work for me. The commonly used phrase, “Do not cry,” is a direct way of shunning a natural response to the trauma that grief sparks. When my behavior does not measure up to the accepted norms of a given context, “this very contradiction can inadvertently create a sense of failure, incompetence, and even pathology. . .” (Moules, et al. 99). This downward spiral can make a difficult situation even worse.

An example of my suppressed expression occurs before my father died. The moment that I walk into the hospital room to see my father vomiting blood, my initial reaction is to be active. With my mother, I begin working to remove the blood from my father’s face and neck. Once the situation is nearly over, I feel my emotions well up, and I deny them. My churning stomach from the stress of restraint is my own embodiment of what I have been socially trained to do. I worry that my embodiment of my real emotions will make me appear incompetent.

My own feeling of incompetency rises when I unknowingly allow a nurse to walk into my father’s private room, which results in his body being exposed to anyone within sight. I realize that the staff should have known better, but I feel pangs of guilt since I was a bystander to the whole scene. My father shields his body when he is in public, and he rarely removes his shirt when he is at the beach. My sense of protection is highly
elevated from this point on, and I maintain this heightened sense of awareness for several weeks after.

After my father is released from the hospital, I visit him at home. My father does not want to be touched, and he asks to sit alone on the couch. I sit on the opposite couch in the living room with David. My self-awareness increases ten-fold, because my father is experiencing excessive migraines. My voice must be low, and I cannot laugh as robustly as I normally do. The distance and lowered volume is a stark change from the way this space had been occupied during my childhood. The house is always bustling with activity and various conversations. It was during this last visit with him that an interesting conversation occurred.

“Dad,” I whisper, “Look at these running shoes. I got them on sale.” I gesture toward the new pair of grey shoes sitting on the tile floor behind the couch.

My father does not respond. “I saved 50 percent,” I insist, trying harder to get his attention.

“Money does not matter,” he says, “You can always get a new pair of shoes.” He sits uncomfortably in his chair and looks away from me. He almost appears disgusted.

“I thought you would be proud that I saved money,” I reply, “You taught me how to do that.” I am trying to figure out if it is the shoes that are agitating him, or if it is something else. My father clears his throat in a pronounced way.

“I don’t care about the shoes,” he explains, “They don’t matter. . .” His voice trails off as if his mind is somewhere else. “I’m proud of you, but not because you saved money. You can always make more money later.”
This sudden change surprises me. I stare at him for several moments trying to figure out whether he is angry with me or proud of the things I am doing with my life.

“I’m not mad at you,” he says, and it seems as though he has read my mind. He then tries to reassure me, “You didn’t do anything wrong. I’m just feeling bad. I’m sorry.”

This next turn is one I do not quite expect. My father has apologized in the past for things that may have been warranted, but this is a situation that is vastly different.

“No need to apologize…” I begin, but he cuts me off.

“Yes, there is,” he retorts, and there is no disagreeing with his tone. He moves uncomfortably in his place on the couch, and he clenches his teeth slightly as he feels pain from the movement.

For the remainder of the visit, my father engages with us with visible effort. It appears that he is trying to be a gracious host, even though he is in a lot of physical pain. I offer to let him rest for a while, but he insists that he wants to stay awake. My mother brings him a soft drink, and the four of us engage in small talk. When it is time for us to leave, I kiss my father on the cheek, the only contact that he allows for the duration of the visit. The last image I see is his hand hovering over the developing scar on the uppermost part of his forehead. It appears that he wants to touch it, but he is hesitant. He lowers his hand as though the healing skin is unpermitted territory. At the time, I do not know this will be the last time I see him alive.

My father is beginning to feel better in the later weeks, and the hair around the scar is beginning to grow in a bit. He is becoming less and less concerned about the appearance of his body, he tells me over the phone, because he is slowly looking like he
did before the surgery. His sudden death is striking and unpredictable. Doctors believe the cause was a blood clot that reached his lungs. One moment he is there, and the next he is not.

The first week after my father died is a blur. I remember visiting the cemetery to help choose a resting spot for my father, and I do not want to make the decision. I agree with the choice my mother makes, which is a spot next to a bench and near the flowers. I leave with my mother and my sister, Jess, as my brothers and my husband handle the paperwork. I hold my mother’s hand and we look at the San Luis Rey gift shop nearby. I look for a moment, and then wait outside. Jess exits the shop with three bracelets, and she gives one to me. “Now, we’ll remember where Dad is,” she says. The violet and silver beads sparkle back at me.

The rest of the week passes in flashes. I remember crying so much that my eye contact becomes lodged on the side of my eye socket. It takes me several hours to locate and remove it. It is painful, and my eye becomes dried out. The flow of the subsequent tears stings my eyes. I choose to wear glasses only for several weeks after the incident.

The most notable memory I have of this first week is the trip to the mortuary. My father did not say anything about what he wanted with his body after he died, but my mother is the most knowledgeable source. I do not want him to be molded and crafted as is indicative of embalming, but I allow my mother’s knowledge of my father to take precedence. I want to speak, but the words fall away. I think, who am I to say otherwise? I know now that my opinion matters, and I will speak up when I have this feeling, even if it means that I will contrast greatly with a group’s decision.
Writing the poem for the prayer card and the obituary article for the newspaper were two of the most difficult works I have ever had to write. It is like a runner in the 26th mile of a full marathon, and they have only 0.2 miles left. The pain and exhaustion that gets them to the finish line is exactly what I feel when writing these two pieces. The finish line is gratifying.

Another moment of note is the night before the visitation and vigil service. On my way back to my room from the restroom, I see an image of my father in the front window. My panic comes from the questions in my mind: Is my father still alive? Why would he lie to us? The convulsion I feel in my body is unparalleled to any experience I have had prior. I consider running down the stairs to come closer to his face, but my body reacts too slowly. It is in this moment that I feel the mental illness of grief is manifested. I believe that something is there when it really is not. The blink of my eyes causes this abrupt shift. He is there one moment, and gone the next. It is much like his death.

When I see my father’s actual body at the visitation and vigil service, I crumble even further. When I am able to collect myself and focus, I see strong correlations between my father’s service and that of my grandmother’s. Uncle Mike is the consistency; he offers for me to come close to the body of our loved ones, and he encourages me to touch them. My hesitation explicates my fear of death and dying, and touching the deceased only solidifies the fact that they no longer reside within these bodies. My experience is similar to that of Carolyn Ellis when she visits her brother Rex at the funeral home: “I glide my hands over the hardness of his body, remembering his being and adding to my memory now his deadness” (134). I worry that touching my father’s lifeless body will replace the memory of the times that he was vibrant and alive.
However, I am glad Uncle Mike encouraged me to touch them, because that is the last material connection I had with my grandmother and my father. He offered this support in both situations despite how difficult it may be for him; he had to bury both his parents and his younger brother at such a young age. He continues to teach me every day that the small things matter.

The next morning, a light spontaneously turns on in the restroom downstairs. David and Uncle Mike are discussing my father, and they interpret this occurrence as the possibility of my father communicating with them. In retrospect, I still do not know how I interpret this scene spiritually, but I relish in the positivity that this scene generated. My father’s funeral is only hours away, and this moment is a flicker of light in a dark cave, both literally and figuratively.

The funeral is difficult, in more ways than one. I feel nerves for the first time in a long time when delivering a speech; I deliver a passage from the Bible in front of several hundred people. I feel more pressure than usual, because I want to be perfect for my father. I begin to cry halfway through the passage, and the struggle to hold it together until the end is difficult. After I finish, the walk back to my seat feels like an eternity. The energy that I exuded for the speech takes everything out of me.

After the ceremony concludes, I feel very detached from everyone, because I do not want to engage with small talk. The emotions that well within me are complex, and I cannot detach from the emotions in order to communicate in a socially acceptable way. I am also unsure of what people will say to me, and I am in a “proactive process of creating predictions” (Berger and Calabrese 101). At the time, I do not realize that I am engaging with Uncertainty Reduction Theory; I am in such a vulnerable position that I do
not want to engage in any communication that can further exacerbate my grief (Berger and Calabrese 101). However, I perform counterproductively. I realize in later months how valuable communication with others impacts my journey through grief. Writing this Master’s thesis is a product of the many engaging conversations I have had with family, friends, and colleagues. However, I feel a sense of resistance that continues to pressure me to perform in a prescribed way.

The resistance with society that I experience as a griever is a constant struggle that I must face when I perform the mourning that is within me. As a person with relatively high metabolism, I also embody grief in an indirect way. After the first week without my father, I am standing in the restroom downstairs. The scale that my father would use to strictly monitor his own weight rests on the floor in front of me. I step onto the scale, and the screen illuminates as it calculates my weight. The number that appears seconds later reveals that I have lost three pounds over the last week. This is weight I cannot afford to lose. I place my hands over my stomach, and I feel my ribs poke out slightly. This immediate weight loss worries me, because I have trouble maintaining my weight in a normal circumstance. I choose to hide this concern from my family, because I feel that it is an unnecessary imposition on their own mourning. I suppress my emotions as I continue to unintentionally lose weight. By the second week, I have lost six pounds. When I am there, it can be seen that my dwindling weight is an actual manifestation of grief, and likely a result of my efforts to keep my emotions inside.

While I recognize the need to allow my emotions to come forth, I can also see the contexts in which the dominant societal standard is still upheld. Professional corporate environments would be one such example. Even though I know something is terribly
wrong with my father on the afternoon of his death, I leave my office with a half-smile plastered to my face. I even exchange parting pleasantries with my coworkers as I make my way out of the building. Although I am experiencing pre-grief, I choose to emotionally react to the news of my father’s state in private. I feel displaced as Ragan Fox does when his own father slowly slips away, and I simmer with partial anger. *This should not be happening to my father,* I think to myself, *he has been through hell the last few weeks.* My legs ache slightly from my hurried pace on the way home, but I am glad that I am no longer at work.

Considering the restriction of a corporate space, I find that my displacement is necessary if I am to progress through grief in a healthy way. My future at the corporate job is proof of that necessity.

I decide to return to work three weeks after my father’s passing, in addition to teaching public speaking and taking graduate courses at my university. When I arrive in the corporate space after being absent for what feels like an eternity, I feel out of place. The fluorescent lighting and steady clicking of keyboards is not nearly as inviting as it once was. I sit at my desk, the one I had been in the process of moving to on the day my father died. I see pamphlets and product information sheets piled high next to my multiuse telephone. The disarray I see in front of me as I sit in the red chair is not familiar. My normal standard for organization cannot be found in this mess. I look for the name plate, because I believe that my confusion may be a result of sitting at the wrong desk. I move some papers aside, and I see my name displayed in a dull font.

“We have a lot of calls holding,” one of the supervisors announces as she walks down the aisle next to me. I look at the phone and see a hideous red light flashing. I press
the button labeled queue, and it lists over one hundred calls holding. I gasp, and I pull the
headset out from the top drawer to my left. I place it on my head, and its size setting is
uncomfortable. Small strands of hair fall into my eyes, because the headset is leaning
forward. I blow air out of my mouth upward, but the hair falls right back in my eyes.

“How can I help you?” I ask as soon as the first call rushes in.

The woman on the other line is hard to understand, so I ask her kindly to repeat
what she is telling me. “I don’t know what to do. . .” Her voice trails off, and I cannot
understand her again.

“Are you still there?” I ask calmly. The static in the connection slowly improves.

“Yes, I can understand you now, dear,” the woman says sounding relieved, “I
hope that you can help me.”

“I would be happy to,” I reply, hoping that my first call will be a simple request.

“My husband is very sick,” she explains, “I don’t know if he will still be able to
go for our reservation. . .” Her voice trails off again, but I can tell that it is not due to a
bad connection. The woman composes herself suddenly, “I need to know if I will be able
to cancel the plans, if necessary.”

The automated response that I would normally employ in this situation feels
deactivated. I do not know what to say. A few seconds pass in silence.

“Ma’am?” the woman asks on the other line, and her question stirs me from my
disjointed thoughts.

“Yes,” I reply. I realize that I do not have what I would consider an appropriate
answer to her question, or at least one I would find personally satisfactory. The company
policy requires that customers buy an insurance plan at an earlier time in order to get their
money back if an emergency arises. It is too late for me to suggest this option to my caller; any cancellation at this point would result in a full loss of her investment.

“I wish I could offer more . . .” I begin, but I do not know what else I should say. I completely disagree with the company policy, and I am fighting the urge to tell her.

“I understand,” she says sullenly.

However, I do not. I end the call with professionalism, and I change the function on my phone to disallow another call from coming through. I sit silently and stew with reserved anger. I feel so useless, because I could not help her. I am not given nearly enough autonomy in this job to do so. I feel as though the policies handed down by unknowing decision makers are restricting me to the point that each subsequent call I receive is incomplete. I feel like I do not belong here anymore. I need to leave this space as quickly as I can.

I find that my displacement needs to be permanent. I quit my job six weeks later.

_Here_, I realize that this decision is the right one. In the months prior to my father’s death, I sleep walk through my days, because I am overextending myself. I continue moving through each day with my mouth closed.

I notice two themes in my experience with grief. My pen is raised in the air with hesitation. I know what I need to write next, but I do not feel equipped to articulate it. I sit in silence and I wait.

This is exactly what happens during many weeks before and after I experience my initial moments of grief. I am silent, because I do not feel that my opinion is adequate. I am also silent when I feel that my grief will impede on other people. I do not speak at the office; I simply occupy the space like a good soldier. I march along until I cannot bear it
any longer. I do not speak at the mortuary, even when the most important decisions are being made. I do not feel whole enough to contribute, so I remain silent.

In my silence, I wait. The services are delayed nearly two weeks after my father’s death. In order to use the larger hall within the church that my mother attended as a child, the dates of the services are pushed forward. While I am happy that our requests are met, I feel that we should not wait. The progress of my grief is halted, and I take several steps back when I follow through with the services. I feel as though I am unable to look forward, and I am stalling in the morbidity of my grief. My body is constantly tensed, and I ache with the pain from using muscles I did not know I had before. The thin muscles at my collar bone are agonizing, and for nearly three weeks after my father died, I carry what feels to be a ton of bricks on my chest. The waiting makes the weight unbearable.

The weight lessens when I realize my own agency with respect to grief. I have the choice to allow grief into my life, and this decision is freeing. Grief can be accompanied by a number of losses in life, even those that do not involve the loss of a loved one. I recall grieving when I moved out of my parents’ house at the age of twenty. With this change, my relationship with my parents evolves, and I separate my body from the space in which I grew as a child. My visitation of this space later allows me to feel connected, but I feel disjointed. My parents’ home is my home, but it is not at the same time. However, this change has allowed me to grow into the person I am today, and to respect all that my parents have done for me. Several weeks into the grieving of my father’s death, I notice the importance of allowing grief into my life, as a visitor of sorts. If “room is made for this houseguest, its presence becomes expected at times, [and] its comings and goings are not surprises. . . . In time, its presence even becomes welcomed as
something familiar” (Moules, et al. 104). During the reception my family holds after the funeral service, I recognize for the first time that it is acceptable to allow grief to become a part of my expression. My embodiment of grief in a relatively public setting is unconstrained for the first time.

With this knowledge, it is valuable to consider a positive view of grief, and this is one that will stay with me for the rest of my life. Moules, et al. discusses an Eastern tradition that differs vastly from the Western prescription for grief (103). In China, a common practice for a person is to walk backwards, because it is seen as cleansing. For the body, it also exercises muscles that are normally not used, and this exercise is similar to how I experienced grief. My expressed grief exercises muscles that remained dormant for many years. The art of walking backwards is one example of how a person may view grief positively:

We are always, already moving forward in life, and walking backwards requires that one move ahead, periodically faced to the past. Therefore, the future, as is always unknown, remains outside of sight, yet the past is necessarily in sight as it glides within vision and continues to recede, as the past is inclined to do (Moules, et al. 103).

This metaphor is an accurate assessment of how I live my life. I continue to learn from the past by revisiting particular moments. I cannot know the future, but I am headed there in the best way that I know how.
Chapt er 5: Reflections and Goals for the Future

It is April 2012— a year and a half since my father died.

I am sitting on the grey couch in my living room, and I am considering the events that have transpired in order to bring me to this place. The window is open, and I hear birds cooing outside. The branches of the trees sway slightly as a breeze passes through.

My cell phone rests on the arm of the chair, and it buzzes softly. I look at the screen to see an image of my mother and the word, “Ma” displayed below to indicate that she is calling. I answer the phone, and I hear laughter in the background immediately.

“How’s it going?” I ask.

“Good, good,” she says, and her voice clearly articulates the smile she must have on her face. I hear more laughter ensue in the background, and I identify my niece, Madison’s unique chuckle. “The kids are a handful today,” my mother remarks, without any hint of exhaustion.

“Sounds like it,” I reply.

“Um, so. . .” she stumbles.

“Yeah?” I ask.

“I think I might have a date. . .” she hesitates slightly, but I can hear the happiness still maintained in her voice.
“That is great!” I respond, despite the fact that I know it will be awkward for me to see my mother with a person other than my father. However, the joy I hear in her voice is far more important to me than that.

My mother then tells me some of the details, and her happiness continues to build. She begins cracking jokes as she always used to do when my father was alive. This time it is different, though. Her humor seems to have evolved in a way; her jokes now focus on the liminal space she is in. I am glad she is finding humor in a space that could easily be framed as depressing and dark. She has chosen to look toward the positive.

“You know,” my mother says, “I kind of thought you would be the one who wouldn’t handle this well. You are the baby of the family, after all.”

I do not define myself in this way, nor would this identity have ever impacted my decision-making. I reassure her of this, and she exhales seemingly with relief.

“It’s not too soon, right?” she asks.

“Only if you think it is,” I explain, “Do you feel ready?”

“Yes,” she says confidently.

“Then it is not too soon,” I confirm.

I hear my mother giggle in response on the other end of the mediated phone line. I have not heard her sound this happy in a long time, and it is refreshing. I am thankful that she is doing what is best for her. There is the possibility of someone else telling her that she should not be dating right now, that somehow society’s rules for grieving know better than her own intuition. She seems prepared for this; it is time for her to write her own story.
As I write my own story, I am learning a lot about myself and about grief itself. There are things that I never thought I could do before, but my experience with grief guided me through some of my worst fears. The embodied fear I feel when I see the mortuary during my visit to Alcatraz in 2008 demonstrates my fear of losing my loved ones. I do not fear my own death; rather, I fear the inevitable sorrow of being left behind. When I enter the mortuary for the first time, I am placing myself in a space that I fear most. I remember the words that my father told me when I was thirteen: “You have nothing to be afraid of.”

I have learned so much about not only the history of death studies, but also the embodiment of the grief phenomenon. Grief has given me the perspective through which I can articulate the person my father was. He would not want to be placed on a pedestal, as some griever might do for their loved ones. He would want to be remembered for the person that he was, for his wonderful and flawed moments alike. Grieving in an unrestrained fashion allows me to move through this process in a healthful way, and it proves that a person can live with grief. I do not think that grief ever fully dissipates, but it lessens with time. For instance, June 2012 marks twenty years after my grandmother’s death, and I still mourn her loss. The pain is just not as bad as it once was, but I have learned so much from my first loss of a loved one. After my grandmother’s death, the most poignant performances in front of my five year old self were those of ritual. I understand their importance fully now that I have the same experience as an adult.

The rituals that I experience during the earlier phases of my grief for my father are the events I am most concerned about, even in retrospect. The visitation and vigil service and the funeral service are intended to move the grief process along, but I feel
that they occurred at the wrong time. If I could be in that moment of decision making again, I would advocate for an earlier date for these events. Waiting nearly two weeks after my father’s death to have these rituals feels like I took several steps back in my process of grief. These rituals should occur as early in the grieving process as possible, so the family can experience the closure they need. Jewish rituals for burial require that this process occurs early, particularly the day following the person’s death (Kolatch 64). The idea behind the speedy burial is to dignify the deceased; it also allows the loved ones to move through the initial stages of grief without taking a few steps back, as I had done when we waited. I would have liked knowing the Jewish perspective, and other cultural perspectives, during the decision making process.

The decision making process for my father’s preparation and burial became a difficult portion to write about. In many of the moments that I discuss, I had been in a daze, and the difficult situations right in front of me became those to be avoided. An example of this can be seen when I imagine myself sitting on the beach with my father, when my physical body is sitting stoically in the mortuary. Despite this challenge, I am making an effort to be as true to the experience as I experienced it. However, I have also considered the impact of sharing certain details about myself with an audience of an unknowable size. I have even battled with myself in regard to the things I include in my writing. The concept of censorship is one that I find damaging to the practice of autoethnography, because it limits the full expression of the story.

There is one question I have asked myself since beginning the writing of this Master’s thesis: Is this information helpful to someone who reads this work now or in the future? Consciously, I can say that I did not censor the content of my work. However, I
cannot be fully sure if I subconsciously did so. It is for this reason that I have asked members of my family to critique my work, in addition to the guidance I have received from fellow colleagues in the Communication Studies field. Like Carolyn Ellis, I am a “writer—not a reporter—which means I focus on the construction of stories and their meanings rather than on the collection, organization, verification, and presentation of evidence” (14). My writing has not always followed this format, and it has taken me considerable time to get there. As an autoethnographer, I hope to continue this practice in future works that explore the human condition. The words you are reading now reflect my perspective of loss and life. Nothing should be censored.

The idea of censorship can also be seen in my discourse about the experience itself. The moment where I hold in my sadness until few people are present is a deliberate suppression of my communication. My restraint is similar to the notion of contrasting communication when one is present in, and absent from, certain spaces, according to Goffman (170). Comparatively, waiters in the service industry are engaged with transgressive communicative behaviors. On the one hand, they are enthusiastic and cheerful when communicating with their customers. However, the performance changes when the waiters enter the kitchen, or a space of absence from their customers. The customers “are often ridiculed, gossiped about, caricatured, cursed, and criticized when the performers are backstage” (Goffman 170). Although the contexts are different, the behaviors of waiters and grievers do not vary much from a communicative standpoint.

Generally speaking, grievers do not communicate fully with every audience before them. Rather, they might develop fronts and varied levels of self-disclosure, depending on their audience. Only in a safe place, a backstage of sorts, will a griever let
go of their inhibitions fully. This perspective is highly westernized, and I do not intend to imply that it exhausts the possibilities. However, I notice this trend in my own experience of initial grief, and other grievers might relate. The ability to express one’s emotions with their loved ones is a necessary part of grieving, and I accepted this necessity several weeks after my father died.

Secondly, another type of expression is necessary before a catastrophe of this kind occurs. Self-disclosure about what one wants after they die is a very necessary part of communication, and it should happen sooner rather than later. I never had a conversation with my father that made clear what he would have wanted done with his body after he died. Due to my uncertainty, I continue to mull over the embalming decision. My mother’s decision went unquestioned at the mortuary due to the fog I was experiencing in the first week of grief. The same might be said for the rest of my family present in the room. I strongly suggest griever to have this conversation with their loved ones. Ask them to decide what they want for themselves, so decisions do not have to be made during a confusing time.

In addition, a more general approach to grief might be most beneficial in the long run. By this, I mean that deaths are not the only kind of losses that we experience in our lives, and the acknowledgement of other losses we have or are experiencing will help ease the sense of death being the “ultimate catastrophe” (Dumont and Foss 1). I am not trying to take away the importance of the grief that occurs from the loss of a loved one, but the burden can be lessened when one relates it to other loss-related experiences, such as divorce or moving residences. Consciously working through other losses may prepare us as close as possible for the unfortunate loss of a loved one.
Working through the loss of my father has really changed me, and I know I will be more adequately prepared for future losses, whenever they may come. Grief has also taught me of the importance that autoethnography plays as a methodological praxis. The shift toward placing the researcher at the center of the research is a powerful move, because it values the subjectivity and the experience of that person. I appreciate the opportunity to share my story in connection with the dialogue of other scholars, because I believe that humanity can be best articulated with performative autoethnographic writing and the methods that support this style, among others. I think Walter Fisher is right; human beings are naturally oriented to tell stories, and they enrich our lives in so many ways. When consulting Carolyn Ellis about this work, she tells me that every story matters, and mine is no exception. Autoethnography transcends the boundaries within and outside of academia.

I may not have been able to discuss my suggestions for grief without the experience of writing an autoethnography. The practice of autoethnography is more than just a personal experience; it is a communal one. Throughout the writing of this piece, I have been consistently engaging with my family and friends in regard to the loss of my father. This experience has proven to me that losses do not occur in isolation, and the discourse I have had with others continues to shape the ways in which I tell this story. I have also found that autoethnography is inherently cultural, because my experience and the experience of other scholars are laden with ritualistic properties that make each narrative unique. With each contribution that every autoethnography provides, we can gain a greater understanding of cultures and humanity as a whole.
Although I offer my experience here, I recognize the multitude of perspectives within and on the periphery of the scholarly community. I encourage everyone, scholars and non-scholars alike, to share their own stories, and to contribute to the pool of information available to grievers. I also encourage writers to consider autoethnography, but it is not the only means to express the concept of grief. Consider adopting other methods, so more approaches and results can be represented. Although experiencing the death of a loved one as an adult is a relatively frequent experience, little research has been done in this area in comparison to other phenomena that we experience. The increased discourse about a concept that is taboo in Western culture will likely lessen the negativity that surrounds it. If we allow grief to be a guest in our lives, perhaps others will do the same.

The increasing discourse on the subject of grief does even more. My communication regarding grief has given me so many positive lessons, such as the ability to continue living after a difficult experience, and to remember the happy moments while my father was still alive. The reason I am able to do so lies in a theoretical framework within which much of Communication Theory rests. The concept of the social construction of reality is based upon the lenses we use, and the ways we interact with phenomena, as posited by Berger and Luckmann (15). The notion that reality is constructed offers more autonomy to people interacting with phenomena, particularly grief in this case. What may be real in one culture is not necessarily real in another, because we are participants in our own co-construction of the realities in which we exist. It is for this reason that I assert that my story is not universal, and it assumes a certain
construction of reality that I, and the community that I live in, co-create. That does not mean the construction must stop there.

I offer my story to an audience of an immeasurable size with the hope that this reality can be used and reshaped to fit another person’s needs. The concept of allowing grief to be a guest in one’s house is a deliberate reshaping of the current Western viewpoint on how grief should be handled. As agents, we can take our reality and construct it in such a way that more voices and perspectives can be heard. This movement toward change will not only allow us to process and work through the trials that grief imposes, but it will also allow us to embrace our own humanity. This change can start with the individual, the person reading these words right now.

Grief does not have to always reflect the pain and suffering, because that perspective leaves a lot out of the picture. The reason we grieve is because we have lost a person that makes us laugh, love, and live. If we deconstruct grief in a meaningful way, we might notice its beautiful qualities. The lost person has not really left us, because we might embody their mannerisms and virtues on a regular basis. Our social construction of grief can choose to focus on these positives and the happiness they generate. Grief can become a celebration of that person’s life.

As I ponder this, I remind myself of the dash symbol on my father’s headstone, and the importance it represents. I choose to honor his life, rather than focus fully on his death. My new reality that I have constructed, along with those around me, has allowed me to redefine grief in this way. Now when I visit the cemetery at San Luis Rey de Francia, my experience involves less fear and avoidance. This is not just any space; it is the place in which my father rests. I am comfortable with that now.
Still sitting on the couch in my living room, I rest my head on the cushion. I imagine my father doing the same thing, leaning his body as far back into the plushness for maximum comfort. His body has been on this same couch countless times. I run my fingers along the fibers of the cushion, feeling the crossed pattern of the design. I sit up slightly, and I feel the need to visit my father. The sounds of the chimes and the smell of the flowers feel welcome to me, and I marvel at my desire to be in a symbolic place that I once feared so greatly. More than anything, I want to be present in the space where my father’s physical body remains.

The drive is unusually seamless, and I encounter very little traffic. I arrive at the church just before closing time. I park right next to the entrance, and I pass a maintenance worker as I walk through the gates. He smiles knowingly at me, and I return a similar expression. He lowers his head as he walks in the opposite direction, and the brim of his hat covers his eyes.

I reach my father’s grave moments later, and I lower my body over the headstone. I cover the dash line with my left hand, and I feel the grooves of the rectangular etching. I hold on for a long time. I do not want to let go of the present, of the liminal space I am in. “You will be okay,” I whisper quietly to my father and to myself, and I squeeze my right hand three times. One, two, three...
Works Cited


