Black Lake

As the tenth anniversary of my father's death approaches, I find myself months deep into *Black Lake* – a chapbook of poems that meditate on grief, losing him. It explores the lived experience of grieving, looks at the impact a death has on all those around the deceased, and acknowledges the way relationships inevitably shift in the wake of deep, collective loss. When my dad died, all of us who were closest to him asked questions and rehearsed interactions. We—like others who have lost a loved one to suicide—were looking for moments we should have noticed, listening for words we did not speak, trying to find places where the thinnest fragments cracked down our minds as shards, giving way to a thin sliver of doubt or shame.

"home is a splintered word."[1]

After my dad dies, we splinter too. We are thousands of tiny shards strewn across the floor. Try as we might, with glue or patience, we realize we don't quite fit together anymore. At least, not as we used to. We cope in our own ways, overindulge, deprive, try to forget. Tears streaming down our faces, we reckon. We ask questions.

I feel like I've come home when I first read *Bough Down*, Karen Green's poetic reflection on the 2008 suicide of her late husband, David Foster Wallace. I see that Green, too, struggles to let go of the possibility that things could have been different. "I need to talk to you," she writes of the night he died. "The scissors are too dull. The policeman asks, why did I cut you down. The question abides in the present tense. Because I thought and still think maybe."[2] The questions

[1] Green, Karen. *Bough Down*. Siglio Press, Los Angeles, 2013. (88)
[2] *Ibid,* 49.

surrounding Wallace's body move beyond the physical and into a space of regret, of maybe's, of cutting another person down, reduction. And it's hard not to think—as a person close to someone who dies by suicide—that maybe you held the scissors the that did all the harm, that you are a reason why. It's easier to frame questions in the present because to move into past tense is to give voice to words that let go and admit the truth.

I wonder how I was so blind to your pain, why I didn't see a warning sign in your changed behavior. The antique car you once detailed to show-ready perfection filled with empty fast food bags and crumpled receipts. You were silently suffering. Gaston Bachelard says that images are engravings etched into our memories by the imagination.[3] Your silence is etched upon my mind.

I conjure images of you. Sometimes they burst with laughter, at others the sadness is deafening. I see you down in the carport working on your Mustang. I can smell the orange clean you use to wash your greasy hands for dinner (*Did I see a flicker of sadness run across your face when you turned to put the bottle away?)*. I know the question only crosses my mind because nearly all my engravings of you have been overlaid by fissures that only came to be after you had gone. The cracks open, giving way to doubt and shame. They map themselves onto old memories that become more difficult to recall the longer you've been gone.

You stand atop a ladder, plaster in one hand, putty knife in the other. Sweat trails down your back. You've been working for hours. Specks of paint fleck your glasses and stubble your cheeks. You look up at the ceiling, a picture of concentration. You slowly transfer plaster from

[3] Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Beacon Press, Boston, 1994. (52)

knife to sheetrock and twist your wrist to smooth it out. The bare drywall transforms into velvety straight lines to be sanded down in the morning.

I scroll down my Facebook feed and land on a BBC video on grief.[4] The woman on the screen draws a circle. As she colors it in, she says grief touches every part of a person. With a now-filled-in circle, she goes on to explain that people used to believe the shaded part of the circle shrank over time as it became "easier" to cope with a death. She begins to color lines and patterns outside the circle's bounds. *This*, she says, is what grieving *really* is. Imagine that the circle remains the same, but that our lives—like the new shapes and lines she's adding—grow around it. The loss is always part of who we are but the strength of its presence ebbs and flows. Sometimes it pierces, at others it fades, but that filled-in circle is always there, all the same.

I get married on September 12th, 2015, which would have been my father's forty-eighth birthday.

I am in my first year of an MFA program in Creative Writing & Poetics when I start experimenting with erasure. Tasked with trying something new and wanting to feel open to possibility, I grab the only book on my shelf I feel comfortable parting with. It's a self-help book written by Paul David Tripp entitled *What Did You Expect? Redeeming the Realities of Marriage.* With good intention, the text heteronormatively encourages couples to explore their flawed relationships. It focuses on breakdowns in communication and asks readers to take the

[4] Brown, Rob & India Rakusen, "Why grief is not something you have to 'get over'" *BBC,* 03 March 2018, http://www.bbc.com/news/av/stories-43227108/why-grief-is-not-something-you-have-to-get-over.

time to truly see their partner (*Would reading a text like this one have helped me to see you, too?*).

Using an exacto-knife, I cut out words that invoke something in me. As I'm working I spark with the realization that the text is speaking to me, to the deep, raw emotion of losing you. Poems flow as I cut words from the page and re-arrange them on my kitchen table. I hold up a sheet of the paper I've cut into. Light floods through rectangular holes that used to contain words and phrases. I look down at the lines strewn across the table; they are short, fragmented, opaque.

The tea kettle's whistle snaps me back to the present. As I pour the water over a bag of Earl Gray, my eyes move across the poems and settle upon a box of microscope slides I pulled from the creative materials table in my writing class. I leave my tea to steep, sit back down, and pull a slide out. I turn it between my fingers, imagine myself inserting strips of paper between its edges. *How would it feel to examine these specimens of grief?*

I lay the poems atop twenty-six microscope-slide-sized strips of paper that I paint blue. I house them within a white slide case from the thrift store. I carefully pull them out for examination. I see pain, self-searching, questioning, loss.

Months later I reflect on the cut-and-collage method of writing I employed that day and realize my deep need was to use someone else's words—words that focus on failed relationships and communication, no less—to find the language to speak on his death. With every cut-out phrase and word, arrangement and re-arrangement of fragments, I felt closer to the reckoning Tripp

promises his readers. There was something to be said for using language that took up residence in other people's failures to speak in order to find my voice, to hold a mirror to what a decade of living without my dad had revealed at suicide's core: failed communication, an inability to reach out, deafening silence.

"Reverse Comfort: Something you need from others but others silently expect *you* to provide *them* while discussing this awkward topic. Gentle reminder: not your job."[5]

I cannot tell you how many times I have apologized to someone whose facial expression slowly turned to horror as I told them about your death. *It's okay. I'm really not upset. How could you have known?* I'm still so young that cause is always the subject of the second question. *How did it happen? Was he sick? Was it tragic?* How many conversations have I missed simply because other people didn't want to upset me or felt too bad or uncomfortable to bring it up? Not many spoke about you on my wedding day. The few who did were apologetic. They walked right through the empty place where your chair would have been. They didn't hear your missing footprints move across the dance floor. Didn't see the silent tears I cried when it was all over.

My grandmother often sends me affirmational messages on Instagram and today it's one of those graphic quotes that float around social media feeds. "There are four things in this life that will change you. Love, music, art, and loss. The first three will keep you wild and full of passion. May you allow the last to make you brave." I decide there is wisdom in that. The words are credited to Eric Van Vuren. I look him up. He's a poet too.

[5] Birkner, Gabrielle & Rebecca Soffer. "How to Speak Grief." *The New York Times*, 03 January 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/13/sunday-review/how-to-speak-grief.html. Accessed 03 January 2018.

"*The disaster is the gift.* And it was."[6]

(There's wisdom in that too.)

In the winter of working on *Black Lake*, my father's brother takes his own life. My plans crash to the floor.

A Log of Theoretical Wreckage:

1. One Viewmaster accompanied by three different reels containing visual poems to represent my mother, my sister, and myself.
2. Fourteen glass microscope slides with poems etched upon their surface.
3. Three tunnel books fusing the landscape of Black Lake with vellum poems, LED light stars, and mountain silhouettes.
4. A handful of Polaroids—some are live photos, others capture still images from years passed (I don't yet know I will return to these when the project becomes a chapbook).
5. One Magic 8 Ball containing questions of the past and future.
6. A bundle of diary entries, letters and postcards tied loosely with twine.

I lay motionless. Everything recorded in the log feels forced. I go weeks without moving. I stare at stacks of poems and cut paper with resignation.

Seventeen days after my uncle's death I pull out the carefully labeled containers holding fragments of paper. The text has been faithfully separated according to chapter. I snap open the four corners of every lid and stare at the words in each vessel. I have a sudden urge to turn every box over into the middle of my bed and before I know it, a pile of empty containers lay at my feet and I'm running my fingers through a pool of fragments.

I scoop up the bits of text, bring them to the kitchen table, and like a surgeon, rework Tripp's words once again. I break down and mutate phrases. I circle into and out of stages of grief,

[6] Bhanu Kapil Rider. *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers*. Kelsey St. Press, Berkeley, 2001. (32)

inhabit bleakness and confusion, reconcile yet refuse to give answers or try to find a resolution I know isn't there.

When my father's brother took his own life, my decade-old, filled-in circle grew, shape-shifted. It is strange to think of the symmetry in two deaths ten years apart. Weakened arms carried the weight of shared hurt, trauma, a pain I've only heard whispers of from behind closed doors. Those murmurings reverberate through my mind with a force that is somehow both precise and nebulous. They hold an untold story; relief exhaled in each respective last breath.

Maybe it is as my grandmother said, "Some people are just not meant for this world. It's just too much for them."

On March 09, 2009, D.T. Max reflects on David Foster Wallace's suicide in an op-ed for *The New Yorker* that he calls "The Unfinished." The piece moves through Wallace's personal life and career, charting his decades-long battle with depression. I discover that Wallace's 2008 suicide was on what would have been my father's forty-first birthday. In Wallace's final interview—recorded 13 months before he died—Max says it was clear that "He was no longer sure he was the kind of person who could write the novel he wanted to write."[7] *Was it David or his depression talking?*

I begin to see the amorphous collection of poems I've been working on as a chapbook. I continue to rework, evolve, grow. I fuse collaged poems with scanned Polaroids, written portraits, and a crossed-out erasure. Words and phrases repeat and mutate in a circular motion. Like a tornado

[7] Max, D.T. "The Unfinished." *The New Yorker*, 09 March 2009, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/03/09/the-unfinished. Accessed 04 May 2018.

they gain momentum as they pull in words and fragments, spit out others, shift, build upon layers of meaning that open over repetition, rehearsal.

There is an Old Chinese Proverb that says, “The beginning of wisdom is to call things by their right names.”

It takes six-and-a-half hours on the main highway and another slow-moving hour down a dirt road before you’ll reach Black Lake. It’s secluded, with just a few dots of quiet homes perched above its dark shores. The lake blends so well with its surroundings most people don’t even know it’s there.

If you look out over Black Lake, you’ll encounter a deep rocky shoreline surrounded by high hills enveloped in trees. In spring, the mountains come to life with rushing streams fed by melting winter snow. The hills stitch a blanket of wildflowers. In the afternoon, wild turkeys gobble and the deer come by for an apple from the tree out front.

Our corner of Black Lake has been in my family for generations. It is where we’ve spent time together. Where Grandma Tootie and Auntie Greta cooked a pancake and sausage breakfast I can still smell. Where we’ve spread ashes. Here I am connected to generations of family memory; *to you.*

Black Lake is an opaque body of water with depths visible not even from an inch below its surface. To be consumed by grief is to jump into a black lake. Like grief, the shores of the lake ebb and flow. It is sitting in a boat charting a circular, recursive path; at times working toward resolution, at others slipping back into painful methods of rehearsing and coping. My poems, this

land, my heart—together we grief our loss. And in this moment, I know everything is *Black Lake*.

I encapsulate my collection of poems within two sets of coordinates. The first represent the place in Black Lake where we let my father's ashes go that summer three years after he died. The second are for my uncle, whose ashes we spread on a ferry to Mukilteo three months after his death.

We had been afraid of letting your ashes go. It had been years since you'd died but only now did we find ourselves together, just the three of us, in a small boat in the middle of the lake with 3 Coors Lights and your ashes. The cans clinked together as one of us opened the bag to let your ashes free into the lake. A gust of wind picked up just in that moment, coating everything in white dust. We couldn't help but laugh we used lake water to clear the tops and said cheers.

The ashes have been funneled into a biodegradable container in order to comply with regulations. The "journey urn" will be followed by a floral tribute: daffodils just like the one on the front of the program she made for the celebration of life they'll hold later that day. The boat is stopped, but still the wind whips around the stern. They say a few quiet words of goodbye before they fling the container overboard. The horn sounds and the boat begins to move.

I read through the final chapbook draft and find only one maybe: maybe it was just eroding.

How do we cope?

There is an existential thread that connects every piece within Bill Viola's decades-spanning oeuvre of video installation art. No matter how he approaches a project, he always returns to questions about human existence. Because of the connected nature of his installation art, to understand one work is to understand only a fragment of a whole. Full interpretation is contingent upon seeing his entire collection of works. As I read about this common thread, I cannot help but wonder *am I bound to spin a similar fate? Will all of my works touch this pain in the way that Viola's existential questioning weaves through everything he produces?*

Viola, too, works in circles, in representations of non-linearity. He rejects the definitive answer, instead working in a loop. *Will I sew some shape of the shaded-in part of my circle upon all of my future art?*

"I need . . . I cut . . . I thought . . . maybe."[8]

Roland Barthes asks a question of photography that I've found myself asking about you for a long time: "how can we look without seeing?"[9] If I were in a room with Barthes, I'd turn both ways to be sure nobody was listening before meeting him in the eye, cupping my hands around my mouth, and whispering that I know how; I did it for years. Anyone grieving a suicide shares in this knowledge. We fail to see warnings. We play false witness.

Barthes' question comes to mind when I realize there is a problem with the viewfinder in my 2017 Polaroid Snap camera. After opening the package, I try to capture a snapshot of a photo of my dad in a steel fishing boat on the lake. His feet are up and he's eating seeds. It was probably

[8] Green, *Bough Down*. (49)
[9] Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. Hill & Wang, New York, 2010. (111)

taken a year or two before he died. In my mind's eye, he is centered in the frame, surrounded by lush trees and still waters. When the camera dispenses the photo, I only see a small corner of the boat. The picture is composed almost entirely of my hand and bedroom floor, which I'd had no intent to capture.

A handful of photos later, I stare down, discouraged. I've gone through two of the three packages of photo sheets I purchased and still haven't captured even one great shot. Each take is slightly off. My eyes move across a photo in which the boat has been cut off so we only get half his body in the frame. In this take, the original image has evolved into a sort of partial memory, a fragment of the whole. If only I could whisper in Barthes ear, "It too, is looking without seeing." It's a visual representation not of photography's ability to satisfy our obsession with realism,[10] but it's position as false witness. It cannot deliver a complete picture. It refuses to give what we humans beg of it: a permanently etched, accurate reproduction of the image.

I stare down at a floor flooded by imperfect Polaroids. As I inspect them, I am overcome by emotion, am transmuted to grieving family member, friend, spouse, child. I want to find an answer but I'm left to reckon with an abstracted, fragmentary picture. I can't see the whole, therefore I can't solve the problem.

I throw the poem fragments across the wood floor and sit examining the jumble of words and phrases. Many have become like friends over months of working with them: he commits broken potential / we carry withdrawal / you would have known moments / maybe it was just eroding.

[10] Bazin, André. *What is Cinema?*. University of California Press, Oakland, 2004. (12)

In the summer of ’08, David Foster Wallace attempts to overdose on pills in a motel near his home. When he wakes, he phones is wife Green and tells her from his hospital bed that he’s “glad to be alive.”[11] Just months later he is gone. One year and six months after Wallace’s death, Green tells D.T. Max she “believes that she knows when Wallace decided to try again to kill himself . . . ‘September 6th . . . was . . . really good . . . Monday and Tuesday were not so good. He started lying to me that Wednesday.’” Two days later, while Green is out of the house preparing for an art show, Wallace hangs himself. Looking back, she says she was “comforted by the fact that he’d seen a chiropractor on Monday. ‘You don’t go to the chiropractor if you’re going to commit suicide,’ she says.”[12] You don’t schedule a car service either. Or make plans for the holidays.

A documentary pulling from sculptor Eva Hesse’s journal entries[13] makes me fear I was right about the whole Viola thing. “I feel so strongly that the only art is the art of the artist, personally,” Hesse writes. “My interest is in solely finding my own way. I don’t mind being miles from anybody else.” I can’t say I mind it either, being miles away, lost aboard a steel boat upon a lake.

“No one commits suicide because they want to die.”
“Then why do they do it?”
“Because they want to stop the pain.”[14]

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[11] Max, “The Unfinished.”
[12] *Ibid.*
[13] Begleiter, M. (Producer & Director). (2016). *Eva Hesse* [Motion Picture]. United States: Zeitgeist Films.

[14] DeBartolo, Tiffanie. *How to Kill a Rockstar.* Sourcebooks Landmark, Naperville, 2005. (68)

In 1998, David Foster Wallace wrote a feature for *Harper's Magazine* called "The Depressed Person." It begins,

"The depressed person was in terrible and unceasing emotional pain, and the impossibility of sharing or articulating this pain was itself a component of the pain and a contributing factor in its essential horror. Despairing, then, of describing the emotional pain itself, the depressed person hoped at least to be able to express something of its context—its shape and texture, as it were—by recording circumstances related to its etiology."[15]

Were you horrified by the unspeakability of your trauma? I reckon yours may have been worse. Unlike the depressed person you didn't have a therapist to anchor you. Months before you died you and mom went to a therapy session and I know you didn't say anything because when I asked how it went you both joked that she was the crazy one. You? You weren't broken, you were the stable rock, letting the current of your troubled childhood run right over your back. Maybe it was just eroding. *Why couldn't you speak your trauma?*

Wallace's story of the depressed person ends without resolution.
(Sometimes you just can't avoid circling.)

Green picks up a copy of *Harper's Magazine* and falls into the story of "The Depressed Person" long before she and Wallace fall in love. She becomes determined to resolve it's ending, so she phones Wallace to see about curing the woman from the story through visual art. I read that Wallace was pleased with the alternate ending[16] but when I try to find images of the collection it seems there is no digital trace of Green's restorative panels. I imagine cracks etched upon the face of the healed depressed person.

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[15] Wallace, David Foster. (1998, January). The Depressed Person. *Harper's Magazine,* 57-64.
[16] Max, "The Unfinished."

In 2009, Green builds "The Forgiveness Machine." Measuring 7 feet long, the plastic apparatus gives viewers the opportunity to write down something they want to forgive or be forgiven for. Of viewing the exhibition, Max Benavidez writes,

"You put the piece of paper with your forgiveness wish in at one end and it was sucked through the machine and shredded at the other end. Voilà! Instant forgiveness. There were so many wishes submitted that the machine eventually broke down."[17]

I am moved by Wallace's impassioned, run-on story of the depressed person. And by Green's post-Wallace-suicide "Forgiveness Machine." Like the depressed person, Wallace sought therapy and took medication for his depression. Like Green, I long for the magic of instant forgiveness of you, of myself. *Why was it harder for you? Were you thinking about your silence as you drank beers the night you died?*

The poems have long been done. They sit in carefully labeled plastic containers on my nightstand. The numbers used to demark the chapter the words were pulled from, but those labels lost meaning when I swam in a sea of poems and hastily stuffed them back into the containers. At the beginning I obsessed over keeping them organized and together. Now, they were just together and I wondered whether I needed them anymore. I decide to lay them to rest at Black Lake.

The rain has been steady for nearly an hour and shows no signs of letting up. I slip on my pink rain boots, zip up my jacket, and wrap my camera in two plastic grocery bags reinforced by a few sheets of paper towel. I want to immerse the poems in the environment. I scatter them like

[17] Benavidez, Max. "A Conversation with Artist Karen Green on Her New Show—'Tiny Stampede' & Memory, Grief, and Faith." *The American Show*, 15 September 2011, http://theamericanshow.com/?p=1403. Accessed 07 May 2018.

ashes upon the lake and bury them like plants into the earth. I give over authorship to Black Lake. I photograph and film this.

Even though it's been ten years, sometimes I still feel like I can't accept the futility of maybe; writing and rewriting *Black Lake*, continuing to explore its rugged terrain.

I take a video installation art course and challenge myself to bring *Black Lake* to life as an immersive, participatory, visual art experience. I read a selection of the poems and ask viewers to fill seedling starters with dirt and plant poem fragments printed on seed paper. I invite them to view video footage giving authorship over to Black Lake—planting and scattering poems, documenting the environment. It's a layered, circling video projected over handmade fiberglass sculptures and lace. I sample audio from a few recordings taken from various parts of the property, slow down the bird calls and rushing water.

I smile as I watch the fifth "final" export of the exhibit's documentation.[18] I've melded scenes of planters and onlookers into the original video footage. There is something I like about asking the viewer to participate in the act of making the art. And now, of the notion that the poems will live in whatever corners of the world the people who planted them bring them to. Together, we laid my haunted words to rest, nourished them with seeds, and prepared them to grow into something beautiful.

[18] Lybeck, Amanda. *Black Lake*. 22 May 2018, University of Washington Bothell, https://vimeo.com/272471082

I dream of my mother standing in the kitchen. An apron hangs loosely around her waist. She's baking a pie with apples picked from the trees out back and humming something familiar that I can't quite make out from this far away. I inch closer, smell the sweetness of cinnamon and hear her soft voice murmuring "*que será, será, whatever will be will be, the future's not ours to see, que será, será, what will be, will be.*"[19]

In the midst of a hopeless situation I know I can never change, I accept the future that lies ahead. I have to. Yet still, I return to the words, read them to myself, out loud, in silence, to others, again and again…

the memories of our very first garden are still alive and well

our root fails
digging
planting
weeding
harvesting
eating

the memories of our very first garden
are still planting intimate brokenness
devouring heat
weeding life
harvesting seeds that earth eat

the root grew under our skin
devouring soil

living in silence came
crashing
down

a gathering between that consumes

there are things I cannot tell you

[19] Evans, Ray. (1956). "Que Ser*á, Será"* Doris Day. On The Man Who Knew Too Much. [Audio file.] Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xZbKHDPPrrc

I have had the root
bitter, but it won't leave

your eyes like liquid clay
you crossing over

I am like our museum
like a knife
like our very first garden
still alive and broken
tired of distance and pain

I am like the end of a gathering,
that something that wanes

I am like liquid clay
ten thousand little moments

wondering

perhaps it was because your
little kingdom of one
tired of distance and pain

wondering

I cannot tell you
don't let go
come to the place
rebuild what has been broken

Shattered by little moments I was
eroding, living in silence, growing
between. I wanted to witness. I didn't
deal well. I listened to fails, wondering
if you really meant what you said.

I have had the root, bitter but it
won't leave. Rehearsing wrongs
I couldn't help, rehearsing
brokenness I cannot tell,
rehearsing a portrait of the soil.

There are things I cannot tell you. I
have had the root, bitter but it won't

leave. It is sad, intimate, between. It
tends to act on the thought, afraid
you might keep the soil.

You quit talking.
I was eroding.
You just didn't want to have the conversation.
I didn't deal well.
You saying yes to one thing.
I choking the life out.
You failed to consider.
I had fallen off.
You crossing over
your eyes
liquid clay.

if I could go back to the garden
turn us in on ourselves
feel it again.

An inability to solve there would be moments,
opportunities to love, vulnerability, planting
the longings of your heart, earth-eating,
devouring each other, making relational
mysteries in one another's crying out, healing.
We carry withdrawal, wondering what had
happened, harvesting seeds.

The memories of our very first garden are still.