Portraits at an Exhibition
An Unlikely Affair with Grief

ABSTRACT This work examines a gay survivor’s grief after his partner’s death from cardiac arrest. Their twenty-four years in relationship inform twenty years of grief. His lived experience questions the often inflexibility of heteronormativity in a world about to change. Like a portrait at exhibition, an image speaks long after the brushstrokes stop and the canvas dries. We are asked to see new things in a painting every time it’s viewed.  

KEYWORDS time, heteronormativity, grief, sexuality

Love happens in the middle of life’s most unexpected events. A curious turn of a person’s head toward you as you sit looking at them from your bar stool, nursing a drink on just another Saturday night. The cosmic rift of such a moment remains lost to you until you experience, years later, one of life’s other curious turns: the death of that person who had followed you home from that “just another” Saturday night bar and had stayed and loved you for twenty-four years. The eternal threads of love, relationship, and death inextricably woven during that life unravel and remake themselves into a garment of grief, ill-fitting at times and much paled in color from the intervening years. It does not help your grief if the relationship you had in those early days together would be suspect at best and reviled at worst. Certainly not considered a marriage in any legal sense by the greater part of the society. Yet the remarkable fact remains: love happens in the middle of life’s most unexpected events. So does death with all its consequences. From that bar stool and all the twenty-four years intervening where life happened for us, I stood alone now, behind a pulpit, in a church, and began a journey that has lasted twenty years, looking to make sense of life, love, and grief in a world not so ready to see the ordinariness of love between two men.

I started with his eulogy and what must have seemed to many an odd remark for such a sad occasion. I asked: “Do you know how many times you can irritate someone you love in twenty-four years together?” The observation received a nervous laugh. It brought to mind for me, though, the true significance of love in relationship. That out of every little irritation comes a new little pearl of love. I thought it a good place to begin my remarks on the death of my beloved.

I looked out at the gathering and told them that those twenty-four years included many irritating moments, and yet those twenty-four years of love tempered and honed those trials, soothed and cooled them with kindness, and undid them entirely through
forgiveness. Love revealed the pearl of great price—that which cannot be bought—that which can only be treasured and shared.

Those long and lovely years came to an end in 1998 as I walked contentedly along the San Antonio River Walk in Texas, having just attended a professional conference. Curios, I thought, not to have had a phone call from Greg in Denver by now? You know the kind. The everyday rhythm of touching base: “Hey sweets, I miss you.”

After all, it had been a grueling hard week before I’d left for the conference. We had just spent seven days prior to my trip arranging the funeral and memorial for my little brother, Andrew, who had died with complications caused by AIDS. We had been in high gear hosting out-of-town family, answering phones, making calls, and conducting all the emotionally draining activities that surround the death of a loved one. We had been exhausted, and maybe, I thought, our usual chattiness had given over to silent grief and that calling had not occurred to us, or perhaps seemed unnecessary?

My conference travel came just two short days after the memorial service, and with the traumatic week and the funeral obligations behind us, we stood at the airport terminal. Maybe silence was not unwelcome. We had, after all, stood on the departing ramp at the airport, briefly consoled each other, and encouraged each other to get some rest. We kissed each other goodbye—our last earthly kiss. He hugged me and said: “Honey, focus on the conference.” I gave a solemn smile, a half-hearted wave, and left him as he returned to the car. I would try to forget the weight of our grief and sorrow in our hearts, so it did not surprise me much that no chatty phone call came from Denver during my weekend in San Antonio. We had been distracted by the detours and intersections that death brings.

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But death had come again . . . and I learned of it over the phone. On Monday, I could not reach him at home or at work to remind him of my flight. I called his best friend, Donna. She told me he was not at work yet, which we considered strange since he always went in early to have coffee with her. “I’ll call him,” she told me. Ten minutes later, Donna called me back, reporting he had not answered. She would keep trying, she said, and if still no answer in twenty more minutes, she would send Tom, his boss, to the house. I called the house one last time and listened to my voice on the phone message again. I hung up, and the moments lengthened. He could only be in one of two places: home or work. I waited, as time and dread pulled me into a black hole. I waited. Donna called. An infinite pause floated between San Antonio and Denver.

“Honey, he is gone,” she said.

Stupidly, I answered, “Gone where?”

“David . . . he died. Tom found him on the sofa in the living room.”

I sat frozen on the stairs of the bed and breakfast. I cried out, “No, oh God no! Oh, God, Donna!” I sat there on a strange staircase, rocking back and forth, holding myself, not able to fathom this reality—yet I could not hold myself together in the fractured reality of death. Pieces of me started falling away, disintegrated by the knowledge of death: isolated moments, little moments of a life together spinning and falling away from
a certainty that a moment ago held such promise. Still, my corporal being sat on a staircase
twelve hundred miles away from a hard fact I could not fathom. The only sound I heard
was the despair and moan of a broken couple’s beating heart. The significance of this
news: of his death. Another death. His death. Our death. I sat there staring into the
cavernous foyer, thinking in simultaneous conjunctions... I am all alone. He is dead.
There is no us. I kept thinking, there is no Greg, there is no US, and now I’m crying in the
middle of the bed and breakfast as thoughts spin: there is no we, no us, no more each
other.

My brain, overwhelmed with thoughts, separated from my physical body. How can
your brain and your body reside in different places? My physical presence in a foreign
world, my mind a catastrophic flood of emotion. Oh, doll, my sweet G, that half of the
equation of our life that we knew... and yet death took you. Thoughts tumbled. The we
of us now gone. We won’t grow old together. The we of a thousand past moments cascade
in a deluge. Why am I having these thoughts now? What am I to do, baby? Never again
will we snuggle by the fireplace, hold each other after a long walk through our trees,
having picked the last of the tiny wild raspberries. I will never again see the fright and
chagrin on your face after having scared you when I pretended to fall off the cliff, and
then the both of us laughing together at my mischief. Why am I thinking of this now? I am
1,200 miles from home, yet I may as well be 120,000. He is dead. No longer here to
bicker or argue with over this dilemma... just gone, in an instant, in an arbitrary flick of
fate’s hand.

Later, after a stranger (the owner of the B&B) had kindly arranged my bereavement
travel back to Denver, I felt the arbitrary nature of it all sink further in. I went for a walk
in the neighborhood. The B&B owner gave me her cellphone, just in case. I left feeling
nothing; I felt so strange, disconnected, lost, just walking and thinking. Never again
would we collapse in each other’s arms, just holding each other tight, standing silently,
saying nothing, feeling our hearts beating. We would never again stumble off to bed, make
love to each other, and doze off, sleeping peacefully side by side.

Tears fell down my face, and feeling them there, I was afraid that years would pass just
like those tears, all our moments past—shared—enfolded so beautifully into our being,
washed away. All the moments held for us together in the vastness of a dreamed future
would fade. The part that was/is Greg and me is gone... just some dwarfed red star
memory cast over to darkness. How would I face it? The world was all around me—sky,
clouds, streets, houses—but I was not there. Inside my head, small moments flashed by at
the speed of light... the sum of a life together, but more than anything, the million tiny
moments of our relationship squeezed together in the span of time. What would become
of those moments?

Small events, not the big ones, shape and sculpt the identity of two people bound
together by love. Banal bits of daily life shape the light and shadow. They create a texture
and depth: passing each other in the kitchen while cooking, looking for the other’s shoes
lost somewhere in the house, ironing a shirt for him to wear. Yes, even the small cuts and
bruises that happen in a moment after an irritated gripe shape the context of a significant
relationship. They become the chrysalis of the worm into butterfly. I grieve over many of
Those insignificant moments, knowing they are lost in death. Yet at that moment, in San Antonio, on an unknown street on an unfamiliar block, all those moments fell to pieces at my feet as I walked on some strange sidewalk.

A thought entered my head. I understood now what *keening* meant. An inconsolable expression of air, like a distorted lowing of cows: a silent rhetoric of pain, a language all its own. You feel great parts of your soul escape with each breath. The surrounding fog of sorrow hangs in the air—you know not yet the full extent of pain, only the dark hollow of emptiness. Those first few hours that existed between the knowledge and reality of Greg’s death created a cosmic rift for me. A seam eternally ripped in the fabric of time with its comfortable texture of our life together in tatters. The disconnected stop of bewildered space where I floated in and out of a ruptured world—liminal—a world at one and the same time real and unreal. I did not yet feel separated from my lover, did not yet feel fright, and did not feel loss. I moved in a timeless space between two moments of reality. Oh, what death does to lovers. The laughable sad truth as Shakespeare said, “...Seeing that death a necessary end will come when it shall come...” It did—I felt so small.

What “comes” from death is not an end but the “me” living through this moment. This phenomenon of survival begins upon my return from San Antonio. I walk toward it. I step into the reality of death as a lived experience. The indignity of that world, which could not legally accept two men bound by marriage, unfolds, and so slowly unfolded my world, as I knew it.

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I learn from our friend Rayanne (ironically the owner of the Monarch Society, a crematorium) that in order to collect the body of my beloved I must prove by official copy the last will and testament, that I, as the personal representative have the right to claim that body. I learned later that married couples do not have to prove their right to the deceased, yet I will have to because same-sex couples still lived in a legal limbo with nagging social questions...can same-sex couples really be married? Can they really fall apart when their “partner” dies? My brother Leonard drives me to the bank to get the will out of our safe deposit box. He drives methodically; I stare into an empty distance. I retrieve the last will and testament.

I’m standing in the Denver Coroner’s office. The foyer seems small, gray, impersonal, institutional—its interior fits remarkably well as the repository of dead loved ones collected by the city. I pass to the clerk through the slot in the glass opening the last will and testament. She looks over the document. She asks, “Where do you want the body sent?” I tell her that the Monarch Society will arrange for pick up. My brother drives us back to Rayanne’s. I report that she can retrieve Greg’s body. I tell her I’ll wait here at the Monarch Society.

“David,” she says, “Go home. I’ll call you when I have the body.”

“I can go with you now, Ray...I want to see him.”

“Not a good idea, sweetie.” She puts her arm around my shoulders and quietly says: “David, he had an autopsy and is not in a condition to be seen...I’ll get him, bring him
back, clean him up and call you. You can come then.” I defer, but feel so lost not to see him.

I am home and family is everywhere. I am the first of my siblings to experience the death of a spouse. Our family circle is tight, and much smaller now after all the deaths in the last year. The house feels weird—I’m thinking again of what was ours and is not now ours—I don’t yet think of it as mine—it’s still metaphorically ours. No matter how normal things seem, they are not. I look around to see what his last days in the house were like—what of him is still tangibly there?

My younger sister Trina and my late brother’s boyfriend Jerry try to console me by telling me some of his last activities. She tells me that they went to dinner at Racine’s on Friday. Then Jerry jumps in with an attempt to brighten a dark moment, “He bought you two Gary Steffens paintings.”

“Two?” I ask. I try to focus on what they are telling me.

“Yes, two,” says Trina. “One was for Christmas and one for your anniversary.”

I look at them and then to my brother Leonard, his wife Mary, and my sister Diane, and ask straight-faced and seriously: “Did he pay for them?” They all looked back surprised. I smiled; I said this in part to keep my sense of humor from leaving me—that and the sadness seemed to be my only company at the moment. I have to explain my humor . . . “I ask only because no one wants a gift that you end up having to pay for,” even if it is from your dead lover. They smile when I say: “I jest.” Later, when I have a chance, I will look in our checkbook and see that indeed he had paid for them, I am heartened and sad—his last material gifts to me. A tangible reminder of a love interrupted by death.

I realize that I had not talked to Greg’s father yet. Even though Donna had already called him, I needed to talk to him. I love his father, Joe, and Greg’s late mother, Juanita. They always treated us as a couple. I call and tell Joe I am back in Denver and that I am sorry about Greg. We chat about how wonderful he was . . . such a great son . . . such a great partner. I tell him that after Greg is cremated, I will bring his ashes to St. Francisville. I tell him that Greg wanted to be buried next to his mother in the family plot. The conversation ends: “Well, son take care . . . I love you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Joe. I love you.” His voice breaks as he hangs up. I hang up the phone and start to cry. My sister Diane holds me.

“Why don’t you go upstairs and lie down?”

The phone rings. Rayanne says I can come when I want. I tell her I will be there in a few minutes. Leonard drives me. Trina and Jerry come along too.

All of my church life, we as Roman Catholics see the living body as a temple of the Holy Spirit—when the person dies, the soul leaves and the body becomes an emptied shell, shedding soul and being from the life we knew. Rayanne takes me back to the workroom. I follow. She stands at a covered gurney. Rayanne pulls back the sheet so all I can see of Greg’s body is his head and chest . . . then she leaves. I am alone and look at Greg. I see his body as cold and dead by fact and belief . . . yet in some transcended liminal way he still looked like my sleeping Greg. I remember that the body “who” was Greg will soon be gone, reduced to fine gray ash, left from the flames of cremation. Still, in that moment I had to touch his hard coldness, trace my fingers across his sweet brow and
lovely jaw—those beautiful green eyes, that brow, those tender lips, his broad shoulders, and loving arms would be gone from this life; from me... but God, he would not be gone from me—but yes, he would be gone. I speak into the empty space: “G this is so hard. I am going to miss you!” I said goodbye to his body with a kiss on that sweet brow, covered him with the sheet, and gave his body up to death and to the flames that would consume him.

Leonard drives me home. I wonder if I am not dead too?

Later that afternoon, I receive a terse call from Greg’s sister-in-law, Ruthie, asking when will I bring Greg home. My head spins—I did not think about this—then I say: “I’ll bring him home in early December.”

Ruthie says: “You can’t do that to Mr. Joe, he needs Greg here now. The poor man is suffering so.”

I plead: “Ruthie, it is Thanksgiving Day the day after tomorrow.” Silence—cold silence on the line. I relent and say: “I’ll bring his ashes on Thanksgiving Day.” I hang up the phone, turn to my family, mutter “that cold-hearted bitch,” and start to cry. My family circles around me, but I am not comforted. I will do as asked. The reality of this demand begins a prophetic litany of many more such experiences over the next several days, weeks, months, and years.

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Earlier that day, my family had called our extended family and told them of Greg’s death. They said they would call our friends, too, if I gave them our address book. No, I said: I will do it. I remember thinking I have yet to call my friends.

My first call was the hardest. I placed a call to our best friends who over twenty-four years spent time with us enjoying the pleasures of life and friendship. We joked and teased that we had become the newly revived Lucy, Ricky, Fred, and Ethel from “I Love Lucy.” I dreaded the call, but I knew I would be surrounded by love and support.

I leaned my head against the wall in our hallway, gripping the phone as the line connected. I reached Jamie’s office in Santa Fe. I asked to speak with him. His secretary indicated he was in a meeting, and I asked if she would please interrupt him, it was an emergency. She asked me to hold...

He answered: “This is Jim.”

“Jamie, it’s David. I am so sorry to interrupt,” I choke... “Jamie... Greg’s died.”

Jamie moaned: “Oh, God! ...how did it happen?”

I told him the details. He said: “Honey, I will call you back in five minutes... hang on.”

The phone rang, and I heard his calm and focused voice. “I just put things in order here. I’ve talked to Rob. I’ll be leaving for Denver in about an hour and should be there by early evening.”

Six hours later, he embraced me and went into action like the rest of my loving family.

I told him about the call from Ruthie in St. Francisville and that I had promised to take the ashes on Thanksgiving. I said I didn’t think I could go all that way by myself and asked if he would go with me. He said of course.
I arranged for tickets, and a hotel in Baton Rouge (about twenty-five miles from St. Francisville). I called Mister Joe and said we would be there on Thanksgiving Day and had made arrangements with the pastor for Greg’s service on Friday at Grace Episcopal Church.

Greg’s ashes resided in a piece of Japanese art pottery I had purchased for him on his fortieth birthday. When he opened the package and saw the vase he said, “Oh, look, it’s so beautiful. I think my ashes can be buried in this.” Prophetic words from a moment of humor. The dust of his existence poured itself into the birthday container.

The journey on Thanksgiving Day had its own perils. Security had to x-ray the jar, and we had to keep personnel from opening it. We took turns protecting the cremains. On our final leg of the trip, we boarded a plane with no overhead space. The flight attendant told Jamie that she did not think the container would fit under the seat and we would have to check it. We ignored her. On her third admonition, Jamie quickly placed it under his seat, looked at the attendant and said: “It fits. These are cremains, so back off.”

We arrived in Baton Rouge late evening, picked up the rental car, and found our hotel. The next day, we arrived at Joe’s place early morning. No one came to the car to greet us except Greg’s sister, Dianne, although plenty of family and friends were milling around. The south has a dynamic about death and human remains that makes anything but a casket burial unnatural, and Greg’s ashes violated the dynamic. The slights continued; people commented on their memory of Greg the boy, sans his relationship with this interloper. At the church, Jamie and I by feint had to sit across from the family, and again only his sister detecting the family’s thinly veiled maneuver, sat with us. I gave a brief eulogy with some lack of charity and talked about how we had twenty-four wonderful years together and that perhaps they only knew Greg the boy. I had known Greg the man. Life there did not include a happy gay romance.

A short drive later, and we arrived at the family burial plot at Star Hill cemetery. After his benediction, the pastor invited everyone to dig a shovel of earth to create a space for the urn. Frightened by strangeness of cremation, few moved forward, so the pastor, Jamie, and I created the hole. I placed a kiss on the jar, put him in the ground, and gave him over to the earth.

Things did not go any better at the small reception at Mister Joe’s house. Feeling like intruders, Jamie and I slowly small-talked our way out the door and drove back to Baton Rouge. In my hurt and anger, I cavalierly suggested we stop by the cemetery, dig him up, and take him back with us to Denver. None of them would know. We flew back to Denver.

Like all the other slights I had experienced, moving forward as a gay spouse would not be easy.

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Not ten days after his death, I sit in our attorney’s office and I am told that while I inherit everything our life has built and brought into existence, it cannot simply be transferred over to me like my father did when my mother died. I have to separate out what is “his”
and “mine.” This even though I have rights of survivorship as a joint tenant in the
ownership of our house, and in his estate. First, she tells me, I must list his portion of
the house as property of the estate and then deed it to me. This process becomes a matter
of some inequity and some difficulty after having spent twenty-four years together. Again
I am reminded that we were not married in any societal or legal sense. So marital
survivorship does not apply.

A few days later, Leonard drives me to our accountant’s office. I sit in the office
and listen as she tells me that among other things in orchestrating Greg’s estate that
I must justify and prove what portion of the money in our joint checking account is
mine and what is his. His portion must then be moved to an estate account. She tells
me further that I must list an inventory of “his” personal possessions; that all artwork
we own jointly falls into the same category, even if it was purchased together with
our “joint” money; and that his jewelry, including the diamond band I gave him,
must be appraised and become income to the estate. At this point I dissolve into
tears and express how impersonal this is—to place monetary value on the significance
of our wedding rings!

These civic issues continue as the days and the estate unfolds. Yet I find the legal
obligations small in comparison to the marginalization I often experience in the grieving
process as a widowed gay man.

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Twenty-eight days after Greg died, I write in my journal: “At last and soon this year will
be over. The hardness, its cruelty, can now begin to soften with time as the new-year
begins and stretches out a new future for me. Each day of the coming New Year will
smooth and temper the sad hurt edges of my life. I hold out hope in a vast sea of turbulent
grief and I think my boat is sinking. Greg—whose deep love for me leaves me hungry for
more; whose kindness always reached out in a loving caress; whose strength and charm
held me and walked with me for twenty-four years—has died. Oceans of grief roil and
I feel alone and adrift from all that I knew. I report deep sadness and only a vague
awareness of God holding me tight to creation... vague as that is, it will have to be
enough. . . . I loved him . . . I love him still.” Sometimes my grief feels like the universe:
billions of years old and still expanding.

Several months later, I am standing in a colleague’s kitchen, trying to fit in with her
house warming party. I am lost. I don’t know many of the people milling about in their
good-natured chatty fashion. She tries to help me by making introductions to the various
guests. She waylays one of them, who is only trying to refill her plate and return to the
merriment. She introduces me to this lady, and my friend mentions that my partner had
recently died. Awkward pause. She looks at her plate full of treats, then at me, and smiles.
“How long were you together?”

I respond proudly, “We were together for twenty-four years.”

She smiles again, the smile of a stranger, and says: “Well, it’s not like you were married
or anything.”
I freeze for a second, then respond: “No, I guess not.” I smile, leave her to the merriment of the crowd, and head off to a corner of the room. I think... no, it’s not like we were married. This thought does not comfort me. I wonder why people think it is so different for a man to love another man. That society believes we are not the marrying kind? I emerge from the shadows of those dark thoughts and carefully small-talk my way to the kitchen. I tell my friend, “It’s a nice party, but I need to go take the dog for her walk.” I leave.

The dog—my sweet Micky, my anchor, now comforts me, but I cannot find my center—my balance. I feel the sucking of darkness because I can’t have contact with Greg. I am the proverbial goldfish in the bowl, swimming in circles and listing on my side out of balance. There are days I try praying to him—“please comfort me... ease my rhetorical brow.” If only I could hear him—even if the slightest touch of his breath could fall across my neck like a gentle kiss. But there is silence, and no such breath.

I keep remembering how handsome he was, how warm, strong, and sweet. I miss the years of little things, like kissing him awake in the morning—his great funny laugh, the way he would play and tease the dog.

At another social gathering, and still feeling unbalanced, I try to share my feelings and experience since Greg died. I start talking, but halfway into my story, a stranger says, “How long was he sick?” (Assuming, I guess, that all gay men die with AIDS.)

I stopped, looked at him, and said: “You misunderstand, my lover died of heart failure.” Before he can offer any sympathy, I continue and shut him down: “He died of heart failure. But I can tell you, that my little brother died of AIDS ten days before.” That puts an end to the conversations. I wonder if having a happy life with someone doesn’t count if you are gay, or “intrinsically disordered,” as the church suggests... or will people ever think that gay people can die just like everybody else from all sorts of things... but could they not just think that their life together mattered? Shouldn’t it be of someone’s interest... couldn’t it be the most normal thing in the world? I am left with the thought, We just have to all die with AIDS. I leave the party.

Outside of my family and closest friends, I can’t seem to find a corner in a conversation to tell our gay love story—a story rich with happiness.

A piece of that long story goes like this: I was always the Gospel’s Martha to Greg’s Mary. You Christians catch the biblical reference? During a festive event at their house, Martha worked while Mary sat at the feet of Jesus.

Martha complains she was doing all the work at the party and that Mary should bear her part of the chores for the guests. Martha complains bitterly to Jesus. Jesus (I’m sure he smiled beatifically) speaks and admonishes Martha: “Martha, Martha, Martha, do not complain because your sister Mary has chosen the better part...” How could Martha respond to that? Who was going to pour the wine and offer food?

Martha and I could have been twins. I could whine about how I did all the chores (not really true), while Greg just enjoyed! The thought came to me after he died. I realized we lived in the whole Martha/Mary dichotomy. I dutifully played the Martha role. He of course did not cast me in this role; I undertook it with social relish.
Once when we were camping at our place in the mountains, I realized who had chosen the better part. It was not that he was unwilling to help with the chores, or didn’t ever pull his fair share—Greg just enjoyed the moment, and life happily embraced him.

Now the Martha in me would labor unloading the Jeep; Greg, the perfect Mary, took in great gulps of the fresh pine air. I unloaded and untangled the “outside gear” from the trailer; he would find the seed bucket and start filling the bird feeders. I’d unload the car and put up the supplies; he collected the hummingbird feeders. As I grunted and groaned from my labors, Greg walked about, looked the place over, and noticed every change from the last visit—literally absorbed in the experience . . . the blue sky, the fragrance of summer. He would stand perfectly still in communion with the surroundings.

I disturbed the tranquility, fussing, panting, and sweating as I lugged cartons from the car. “GREG,” I’d protest, “COME ON!”

I’d hear an exhalation of air and a soft, disengaged “Okay, babe, I’ll be right there.” The minutes and my ministrations rolled on, bearing down on a collision course with my overwhelming sense of unfairness. I continued the drudgery; he’d look at another tree. Me the Martha working—Greg the Mary sitting in the moment, enjoying the wonders of creation. All of this was lost to me until he died. I could have had the same choice of roles (two Marys—fancy that for two gay men—as Marys indeed!). Two Marys locked into the moment surrounded by nature—you can’t beat that. The Jeep would eventually be unloaded, the gear put up and the campsite readied . . . but enjoying the moment in a lovely universe . . . with each other . . . in this special place. In Greg’s mind the chores could wait, and why not? We were not going anywhere. His moment gave itself over to the truth and beauty around us. I feel the admonishment now having missed a good moment for two lives to fall into each other. It has taken a long time for me to understand this, and my grief was no help. I still feel like a Martha doing the heavy work: I search for the Mary moments.

I wrote in another journal entry: “Greg sitting in his favorite aspen glade on our mountain at peace—Greg perfectly still—excited at the prospect of deer moving through the meadow. His excitement so palpable that you could feel his heart beat sitting next to him. It’s but a memory now; too bad I didn’t do a better job sharing the moment” . . . being a Mary to his Mary. Savoring the best part has its own calculus.

Ever the Mary—he dyed Easter eggs and hid them for our nieces . . . all those funny facets of the man I love, and he who loved me. He was always in the Mary moment; I, always the Martha, cooking dinner.

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Just before that last journal entry, I wrote: “I walked around the house today looking for something . . . the thought crossed my mind . . . I could have also been looking for Greg in our three-story home. I miss him: I miss loving him, I miss playing and fighting with him. I miss his voice his laugh, his touch, I miss that part of him that knew me—that part of him that still held mystery.”

I miss his hands and his feet. I miss his irritation, his sense of peace, his confidence, and his wisdom. I miss him everywhere I look, every place I go to find him. I miss his counsel,
his demands, his kindness. I miss his snoring, his touch, his kiss. I miss him cleaning the yard in the middle of winter. I miss him picking up trash for the whole block in our neighborhood. Greg was always a stellar surprise to me in his “ordinariness.”

When we moved into our third house, the yard (the sole domain of Greg’s landscape operations) needed the significant touch of his green thumb. He loved gardening and spent many happy hours planning, planting, and picking weeds. Greg could make the meanest patch of dirt sing with the season. He knew the seasons...he knew about death and renewal. He was a person of the earth. Every time he turned a spade of earth, he knew—life would come again out of the eternal magic of nature. From his arduous care in raking the deluges of fall leaves, through the bitterness and biting cold of winter, he knew life would come again. I knew it too, but through the narrowly focused eyes of the complaining Martha wanting help. I could not see what he could as he caressed dirt with his fingers. A strange sense of whimsy manifested itself in his gardening habits.

The first summer we moved into the “Snell House” (its historic designation), he began his expansive plans. One particular late summer afternoon, I had finished my Martha chores in the house and went to find him in the back yard, where he had commenced his activities—he wasn’t there, but I spotted a pile of weeds, a product of his handiwork. I figured he had moved to the side of the house, so I walked through the gate—no Greg but another pile of weeds—industrious, I thought and continued on to the front—still no Greg but yet two more piles of dandelions. Curious, I looked up the street to see more mounds wilted and cast upon the block-long sidewalk—I looked across the street to a neighbor’s house and there he was with his weed-digger, assaulting the mass of dandelions—leaving behind another trail of green carcass.

“Greg,” I said, “What are you doing?”

He looked across at all he had accomplished and said, “If I don’t pull them all now, the seeds from neighbor’s dandelions will blow back into our yard.” There you have it: a determined gardener. That was Greg taking advantage of in-the-moment living. I also learned, much to my Martha dynamic, that his job was the weeding and mine was to pick up the mess—otherwise weed piles remained until someone—not him—did that chore.

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Over twenty-four years, we learned so much about each other...and a body of knowledge still exists and remains palpably alive, even though his physical presence has vanished from this earth. It still exists in me. David, who gives himself over to this relationship, versus Greg’s death that cuts the fragile web of all that was “us.” The communion of David & Greg? I struggle to find out.

Further, we learned to want each other and/or base our love on the being of and for each other. “WE” always wanted each other and worked to learn and attain that which was relationship—that which was love. It seems a pity that people base their love on need and not on the want of it. It’s the difference between cheap wine and a 1957 Rothschild cabernet.

After 330 days since Greg died, I talk to him in the darkness. I tell him: “You have been able to read my thoughts and my heart considerably more easily than I can read and
understand yours... so I have no secrets from you, for my sadness, for my pleasure, for my
troubles, my height, my depth, my sorrow, and my general state of confusion... what
I say now is already absorbed by you and I guess I say it for me now out loud... to hear it
out loud once more.”

Sometimes when the prevailing social commerce speaks about gays or marriage, I feel
the need to use the empirical approach. I suppose the nature of the academic creeps out.
I want to compile lists of numbers that explain the nature of our relationship. Take 365
days a year multiplied by twenty-four years, then think of the total number of days we
slept together, had breakfast, played, worked, crossed swords, cleaned house, made the
bed, walked the dog—you get the picture... you do the math. I long for people to
understand the ordinariness of it—the utter commonality that made these moments
precious, a profound substance, that with or without a marriage license, made one of
life’s most meaningful pairings in human expression. Happiness and banality come in
small spaces. It is those little bits of nothingness that makes the picture of love so grand.

Lest I be accused of “deification” of dead loved ones, I am not without stories of our
hardships. Those irritations I mentioned in my eulogy—like nights when we would go to
bed mad at each other and hold tightly to the opposite corners of our bed (only to find
ourselves amazingly entwined in the morning). Disagreements flamed over cooking, or
who spent money foolishly, all the usual suspects fraught in a relationship—like weeds
among the flowers. Just so you can see that I view him in a realistic light, I offer the
following: he stole towels from hotels (ashtrays too when they were still an option), he
was from the Deep South yet slowly he transformed his bigotry over many years, and
once, after I had tried to advise him on an issue of arid climate gardening, he threw a pot
of flowers against the fence and yelled at me: “I’m not one of your fucking students!”
(I refrained from telling him that at least some of my students listened on occasion, and
probably saved another pot from destruction.) His frailties were my frailties, as in all good
relationships—they are dismissed because love trumps hurt, and we loved. There are more
stories of love than vagaries of sin, and I am thankful he is not here to list mine. The
Catholic Church defines sainthood as the “extraordinariness of leading an ordinary life.”
Our life was ordinary in the scheme of daily living. I long for people to understand the
ordinariness of it—the utter commonality that made these moments precious, a profound
substance, that made one of life’s most meaningful pairings in human expression. The
habitual ordinariness of existence.

I see those examples over and over again in my journals. “My old morning ritual: I long
for it. I would rise first, set the coffee to brew, and take Micky for a walk. Returning,
I poured myself coffee and read the newspaper. At 6:30, I would pour a cup of coffee and
take it upstairs and set it on the little table in the bathroom. Then I’d walk into the
bedroom, bend down to Greg sleeping beautifully on the bed. I would say, “honey” or
“baby, it’s time to get up,” then ever so lightly I would kiss the top of his head down to his
lovely ears, or some days kiss the nape of his neck, which almost always made him wriggle.
He would sigh and mumble “MMMMMM.” I’d kiss him once more on the top of his
head, give him another vocal encouragement, and then trot back downstairs to make my
breakfast. He always smelled so good—with yesterday’s soap and sleep... oh, how I loved
those little moments... how I still miss them... the ordinariness of love.... The fragrance of his existence has been long washed out of the towels and sheets. I can’t even go to his closet anymore to get the slightest whiff of him.” (Irony, I think, that a gay man has to return into a closet!)

Love of any depth comes in those little blessed moments... not in the big events marked by occasion or anniversary. If you stitch all those little moments of love together, it would appear as a rich as any ancient tapestry... a legacy of elegance for all the things that went right in a life together and in all the in-between—all that rightness of those shadows contrast all of the wrong paths left behind. Or even if these small tender moments could be strung together in a necklace of small stars—brilliance would surely be noticed as they stretched across the universe.

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Twenty-one months after Greg died, I write: “I am sitting roughly in the same spot on the sofa where Greg died. Where he sat down after walking the dog and in the next moment his life just emptied out—in just a fraction of the space of our years together. Intriguing as that may be to me intellectually, I otherwise have mixed emotions—the morning remains quiet, the city quiet, alone with just the normal ambient traffic of everyday life; the living room looks great, cleaned, polished, a new beamed ceiling in place and finished (the Snell House is up for sale). I sit here in Greg’s last earthly spot, wondering how much longer he will from heaven help me march through this mess of survival? Greg had a great deal of patience for all my insecurities. I sit here and remember that he sat here on the sofa, and in a different moment I sit in this very spot there exists a tangible difference—in my life now, my memories, and all my lost connections with Greg so long absent—how do I discover self, with no Greg—it remains an amazing dichotomy.”

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The world changes, and I am still in it. Twenty years since that journal entry I ponder the same dichotomy. In my condo (our house is gone), I sit in the living room chair, as the darkness overtakes the last of the evening light, and look across at that very same sofa. I sip a scotch—not the first—and listen through my Bose headset to Jane Oliver. I have pressed the “repeat one” selection on my iPod and play the song “Beautiful Sadness,” thinking of the last twenty years of my life in the palpable absence of Greg in the physical part of my life. The words resonate. The lyrics in the song have not changed for me in all this time. I hear them over and over—it is the same for me. Sometimes I listen to this song to feel sorry for myself, sometimes to count the weight of sadness, but often I just listen to these words because they ring so true to my grief. I resist notions of pathological grief because by and large I have moved on in many other significant ways in the order of my own life. That part of Greg and me that existed in love together in relationship has become part of that string of stars... it is now in my being and I often give over to it. It happened, and the world cannot change it.
My family, many friends, and many of my students have heard of my twenty-four years of great love. Some have heard the little moments cherished in my relationship with Greg. They have heard me pontificate on the experience of love between two people. They have heard of the frailty of our conflicts. They have heard the litanies of “When Greg and I . . . ” or “Greg said . . . ” or “Greg and I did . . . ” I voice them still but know I have changed. That part of my life subsumed in love with Greg has become time worn, like a fragile photograph held and shared many times.

Love happens when the universe falls between us in our being for the other. I look back a little more closely now on those moments than I did the first day they spun and cast down about my feet when I heard he died. I realize now, I am a different person, evolved over time. Greg still shapes my life, not by my reliving the past but by enfolding it within myself. Love filled us in the odd moment of simplicity: silly laughter in a playful moment, stroking his wrist while we drove back from Springer Hill, sitting in the house together but in different rooms—just knowing each of us is a breath away.

That part of Greg and I captured in relationship fades as Greg the person twenty years later fades each passing year. That which was the love of us floats somewhere in my soul and in some liminal space as a significant part of my life but no longer tangible to me. I cry.

I listen to Oliver’s lyric. I tell myself I have the music played by us written upon my heart. A treasured silent song. I am forever changed, and changed enough now to have my sense of self as a single gay man again. Made the better by our love and made stronger by a “crematorial” fire of burnished grief.

Still, the lyric of Jane Oliver’s repeated song floats in the darkness of my condo and reminds me of the truth. Reverie cannot be the final solace. The ice in my scotch slowly melts and faintly clinks against the glass, but the scotch does not taste like the first sip. Neither do my memories . . . while vivid . . . they reside . . . they replay . . . they rest somewhere in two places. How does anything start? A fractal second collides with another, and a new reality appears. A place perhaps in the person I am today, twenty years later.

I want people to remember that love—our love—remains good in the world. I want these lyrics—our lyrics, composed over those twenty-four years to count—to mean something for everyone—I want them to count like everyone else’s great love . . . these words . . . these words: “I love you, Greg” and “I love you, David” to be there on those stars . . . it happened . . . happened between two men . . . it was sweet goodness . . . a passionate dance that bares the fruit of who I am today . . . it happened. A beautiful sadness. An unlikely affair with grief. 

42 JOURNAL OF AUTOETHNOGRAPHY WINTER 2020