

GRIEF MAPPING

JANICE MARIE ZERFAS



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— Digital Edition —
With Alternate Pagination

Friends of Poetry
Kalamazoo, Michigan
Celery City Chapbooks
2026

ISBN 978-1-969982-02-6 (Print Edition)

Dedication:

John Tolliver, Mekong Brown River Vet, River Division 55

PBR Mark 11, My Tho, Ben Tree, Chou Dou

and to Michael R. Hilligoss, my dearest friend, lover, and life-partner who led me from loss to loving.

and to my son Michael LaBorn who is proud of mom.

and to my friends who are writers.

Preface: Grief Mapping, Following the last breath

Concise language
 Strong images
 Surprise & momentum
 Compelling voice . . .

So many lists have been devised to ‘pin’ down the prose poem form, that resemble advice for good writing no matter what the form. It can be heavy with images or devised without lyricism. It can have a narrative arc or dispute a narrative arc, focusing only on a few seconds of consciousness or the minutia of scene or an object. A beginning, middle and closure is recommended, but readers do not mind if the form is baffling, elusive, or incomplete. Short epiphanies. Power of direct address, though to what end? Direct address that named the spirit or person or breath that had passed on, that was my intent revealed gradually.

Considering that my prose poems extended the memento mori tradition, how would I entrance a modern audience to read the grief mapping poems without solipsism, egocentrism the topic extended into. I followed the possibility of taking a journey somewhere, and could I follow it, without knowing where. The prose poem carries with it so many expectations for form and possibilities; and then one adds another layer: the elegy with its multiple forms, possibilities, and, for both the prose poem and the elegy, the anti-prose poem, the anti-elegy. Doesn’t all this get confusing?

The Friends of Poetry Judges for the Celery Chapbook Competition 2026 said the “forms and content of these were so well matched and what comes across in these is a deeply and beautifully felt attention to the world which, of course, includes all of nature and all of humanity, including the departed” (email.) I started the poems by sending John, my ‘Nam vet partner who served/volunteered on the Mekong, known as the dirty river, letters informing him of the day’s news, and back then, Trump’s first election & friendship with Musk, the war beginning in Ukraine, the impact of the weather and out-of-town tourists on the Southwest Michigan orchards driving an orchardist friend of mine to distraction—a tourist really did use a tree crown as a trampoline--and my own quiet back yard watch. Well, I was numb. I had been a caregiver for so long, so what was my role to be now? Who was I?

I was meeting him for the last time in the letters, so I felt. The prose poem felt like the best form as though I had my ear to the ground, instead of the stanza which felt too constraining, unable to convey the pace and texture and tenure of my grief. And at the beginning as I was creating a chapbook, I realized I was mapping my own grief, not that I found it healing, nor cathartic. Where does the last breath go? Could I capture it, follow it, bring it back? I was obsessed. But the chapbook lacked energy. They didn’t breathe! Thanks to Ignatius Valentine

Aloysius, who brought a knapsack of books to an Interlocken Writer's Retreat class each day, in a workshop I attended with him, I found Dane Cervine's *At Home in the Burning World*, prose poems that end with a haiku whispering back into the poem, known as a haibun. This reinvigorated the prose poem for me, adding time for reflection/meta-cognition. The haibun's whisper lifted the words, his spirit off the page. I could follow it in the back acre, watch it at twilight. I felt comforted, consoled, relieved.

I am grateful to the Kalamazoo Friends of Poetry for giving *Grief Mapping* a home. And to the reader who follows the spirit of the last breath.

— JMZ
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Introduction

Good afternoon and welcome to the 2026 Celery City Chapbook Reading. I am Scott Bade, President of the Friends of Poetry. Thanks so much for coming today and for your support of poetry in Kalamazoo and Michigan. Before we begin, I'd also like to thank Elizabeth Kerlikowske for her incredible work getting all of these books printed. Thanks also to Penny Rose for overseeing all of the design and printing work at Kellogg Community College. Additional thanks, too, to the Celery City student designers (at KCC) Andrew Sheldon, Brooklynn Hunsicker, and Audreia Lower. Gratitude also to Elizabeth K (again), Jennifer Clark, Elizabeth Bullmer, Melanie Dunbar and Robin Church for working with the authors to bring the books to their final shapes. And one more thanks to Emily Daniel for putting together the poster for this event. Just a couple of reminders: please silence your cellphones. Finally, the authors will have copies of their books available for purchase after the event. Now, it is my pleasure to introduce our first reader. Janice Zerfas — *Grief Mapping*.

What can we be sure of? The answer and idiom is “Death and taxes,” of course. But, the longer I live and learn, it seems to be there’s at least one more sure thing. It’s grief—that country/wilderness all will visit in some way at some point no matter what. Right? Janice Zerfas’ *Grief Mapping* is a record of one such visit. A meditation on grief and its processes and, importantly, its processing of us. “Lines of love, of grief, where I walk in the back acre overlap” is the beginning of “Back Acre” perhaps the book’s most direct and raw epistle that walks us through the back acres’ fields with the speaker as they consider an appropriate spot to bury the ashes of their partner. This poem (and, really every poem in the book) walks between the present, grounded in dirt and bounty of the orchard fields and the present -wilderness of grief, that country that welcomes all but which has no maps and very few signs and the present absence of the partner. So there’s three paths here and this book braids them directly, authentically and without pretense: “I can feel the aquifer beneath my feet: that’s what your spirit feels like.” In another poem she writes “Grief is a bodyguard who refuses to be fired” and then extends the metaphor so successfully that we can only say yes, yes, fully in compliance with this guardian’s orders. Many of these poems adapt the Japanese Haibun form (a form combining prose and haiku) which support and illuminate grief’s shape-shifting and time-breaking character. But these are poems that engage and explore the breath, too, in the body, out of the body, and on the page in moments of powerful imagery: “I knew trees captured what I thought I couldn’t have: the tallest branch reached the evening’s constellations. Dog star. Moon acreage.” And in these explorations we are guided by a writer who has “the courage to walk the back acre.” A writer unafraid to chart and share their journey in grief even if she knows each of us will, eventually, have to draft our own maps. For the generosity and insights shared in these poems, though, we must be grateful. Please welcome Janice Marie Zerfas.

— Scott Bade

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Blackberries

There are no blackberries in this poem.
Farther on in the yard where we target practiced,
weight of blackberries rise and vanish in deep briars.
Bits of swollen iron. The absolute purity of darkness.
They lean under blue-skulled weeds, nightshade retaking
interred yellow stars. But recall my claim, my reminder,
not one blackberry in this poem. Not one, though
they are delicious, growing wild, still there despite
the pre-solstice heat wave and accompanying drought.
Stuck in junipers too low for vultures,
and too far in to reach with a hand without dragging briars,
scratching, cutting a hem. Nor are there blackberries
down M-140 at the fruit stand, or local Costco.
You think aquifers replenish to feed your desire,
your wish for blackberries? To watch starlings
drunk on blackberries while the target practice stump
decanted to dirt. You are tempted to drive slowly,
hoping to spot a field's sweet spot, trespass.
This is no partial deal. Understand,
living and deceased, not one taste.
Walk all day in the back acre, but you will not
find one blackberry in this poem, on this tongue,
or you.

A month after your passing, no one comes to visit but the owl. Twilight, her sound mud filled. I count the end of the day's sounds, a mower threading its way; liquid in the neighbor's sprayer tank rocking; coyotes orbit around an evening fawn, roadkill. No one there to tell me to come in. Rest. There's tomorrow. No one to ask, turn the news off? News of your passing, perhaps. I listen to sounds. I didn't pay attention to the slow but generous cicadas; a crow sounding like far-off gunshots; the intermittent start-up of a chain saw. Then silence. I know which maple stump he's erasing the rings out of. I know it is time to go in, but the new anonymity scares and prevails. Shell casings wait. Neighbor dogs have stopped their alerts, meaning they have been fed. A doe snorts by, stops by the easement, as if signaling me to go in, let her eat at the bait pile in peace. I count her snorts. She's impatient. I get it, I tell her, getting up. I will get used to her advice, that snort half-cough half-word, but I'm not ready. Nothing sounding in nature calms me.

*"Explanations come to an end somewhere,"—Ludwig Wittgenstein
like sounds,
twilight's cicada artillery*

Ode to Swimming After a Long Hiatus

1.

Cotton wool, steel wool,
pressed clotted cream
in my chest,
I haven't breast stroked
since the November election,
for so long

I forgot to breathe.

2.

My legs are still strong,
a cutting ax in the water,
back and forth.
My indwelling self,
pushes against the pool's six feet,
carves and thins water's pressure
against my thighs.

3.

Cheese cloth, muslin, heavy velour—
what is in my lungs
so that I cannot find my breathing rhythm,
the breadth-breath of the water becoming
my pace, my arms.

4.

And how can I kiss
mother of pearl,
cranberries in a box,
water in a conch,
if I am not strong,
if I do not practice long breathing
while swimming.

5.

I haven't even described your lips:
a water line.

6.

Yoga water swimmers align along the pool
stretch their legs
do the warrior pose
flex
skin like clarified butter or molasses.
Press against the pool's concrete wall,
push their arms as if
following safety instructions.

7.

Should I time myself
along the cabled
one person swimmer's lane?
Or share with another,
circle,
without touch, & then
knock into his chest?
When will breathing become one
within my body again?

8.

Oh, practice box breath and swimming:
Inhale when I reach the end of the swimming lane: 4 counts.
Hold 4 counts breast stroking along the side.
Exhale 4 at the beginning of the pool.
Hold 4 counts swimming back along the side.
Recidivist!

9.

Cobblestones,
said the ER doc after my Nam partner passed,
describing his lungs.
Crispy papers and compression gauze and bandages
like water bombs
all over the hospital floor, his bed, the doc's feet,
made a crispy sound.
The Upanishads say the space inside the heart
equal to the size of a thumb,
and what about the lungs?
Could an iris rhizome fill,
or my breath?

10.

I swam for a while.
To synchronize my breathing with my body.
Followed the yoga teacher's advice: lean into it.
But please, dear love, be the end maker
of the breath of my sorrows.

Homage to the Supermoon

Last night was the supermoon, so I got up at four to see her so close to the earth. I took a breath, and moon gazed. Never trust the moon, you said. Too many chemicals, night-messing pheromones, scents to give a headache. So I sat with her for a long time, wondering what you feel or believe now that your breath might be one with the light. It was so light for a while—your breathing. Ahead of me, a Canada goose out paces your heartbeat, I swear, the one calling and calling across the lake. That I am matching my breath with instead of yours. But the moon cannot breathe, you will laugh. But I remember, I said to the moon, I remember the light and then the breath no longer lighter. Neither yours nor the moon's.

I moved the bait pile again, not that it matters to you, but perhaps you will stop there at night, check out the oldest doe, the one you said you would cull if needed. You probably wonder why a bait pile when the orchards are full, though now they are picked and gleaned, gleaned and fallen. Fallen yellow golds as if the sun has declined, then again, an illusion. Loss, though, is not an illusion as the apples so blighted and scabbed like your skin color before you passed. You must have known. I think to myself why not let me know what's going on, as the FIPS and poachers and trespassers do, leaving condoms on their water bottles. Too weird for me. Or sometimes I will find a condom on a branch, to use again? They confuse a branch with a stag's antlers, then again, if you were really passing through the orchard, or at least I believe your spirit does, then maybe help pick up the litter. Do a wind catch-all; your last breath a catch-all. They say I am too obsessed with the last moments, but wouldn't you also be obsessed when someone stops breathing? I am still breathing. You are still breathing. They are still breathing. It's a conundrum because some do and some are not breathing, willingly not or loss of will or hell of not their choice. What do you say, spirit, if I put the image of your last moments away for a while, so I can focus on I'm not sure what: a long walk by the lake, chores, walk the dog? I can feel the aquifer beneath my feet: that's what your spirit is like. Get used to it, I tell others; it's there if you want to feel currents of water and air your loved one left for you to continue, if you want it. Yeah, my hands are in the air current. Braided frost on the shingles today. It's your breath.

Conjugate the verb
'to breathe':
then the verb 'to lose'

Less the clematis vine. Less the blue shadow embroidered on a shirt for the pow wow then a hummingbird scattered sky. But on his back. Less the eagle feathers tied with cat gut to a pole, a staff, feathers over closed ground. Is that what makes them frail? I could step on their hollow stems, but I would not hear the air escape. Like the last breath. Less time with the medics. They did nothing. Wrote his name and birth date on their arms. I could have been speaking to crows. Less the beads on the regalia pressed into my arm. When I think of death—well, I try not—I am easily triggered, like today, the speaker talking about the beauty of walking in a field of fallen grass, and I recall walking on thick grass at the pow wow, heel to toe, heel-toe, slow. Less heel-toe. Less cedar, junipers, no heel-toe dance. Less the heel print, though a doe's imprint I measure with my hand lasts longer. Less the drums that began to sound like heart beats. Slow. Not his heartbeat. I walked heel-toe, heel toe in a circle around drumbeats. Listen. The sound directs my steps, pushes my steps around the circle. Juniper branches overhead with their cast iron blue beads. I walk in the circle without holding anyone's hand. He said I had to go alone: Does the body hope for breath forever, I wanted to ask, but he was already gone. Less breath, less breath, why did I have to follow less breath?

Heel-to-toe
heel-toe
slow

I keep you up on the news: the apples are sweeter because of the June drought, though small; the Chicago FIPS complain about the size, saying it's not worth the time to pick; and then I caught one FIP on the apple tree crown as if it was a trampoline; the peach tree still has drops for the deer, though I didn't spray; I'm leaving them for the doe who always snorts when I am outside too long at twilight; the doe who wants to eat undisturbed. Why did you name them all? How do you expect me to keep up with all the names when they look so the same browsing by the bait pile, but now I get it, I check out their weight, how their long backs slope against the peach branch, which one is meatier than the next, especially the old doe, who pushes the others away. At least she's not jumping on the tree crown. The FIP drove me nuts, complaining that if there wasn't any the right size to pick, then he ought to have fun. I was about to call the police when my fake cardboard coyote twirled on its stick like a compass, swishing tail, and oh he ran. I knew I should have added a howl! A call. A stream of yelps. The weather is just as bad as when your blood pressure dropped; the Farmer's Almanac predicts a hotter September into the Perseids; the neighbors still target practice beyond twilight. Isn't that illegal? I put out the dry wall pails full of apples near the bait pile, as you instructed. I hung a new body image outlined in orange on the target practice post, as you wished. I refill the possum's bowl, and why you named her also is beyond me, with grapes seven dollars a pound. Really? If you were here, you could tell me what to do about the FIPS who keep knocking on my door for larger apples, for pumpkins decapitating across the field, for crook necks, it's a kind of squash, I must constantly explain, as they only want butternut, as if that's the only variety. Do you want to hear the news beyond the field? Trump has over forty indictments; Biden has gaffes; the Twitter King interfered with the recent Russian assault on Ukraine; the Canadian prime minister says there's nothing he can do about the wildfires. The smoke still smudges the outhouse where I hide sometimes to watch the sunset; no one knew where I was, and that was fine with me, listening to the rain. If you were here, you could tell me what kind of Glock or rifle the neighbors were practicing. All I know is that it sounds like rain, like the creek in the ravine finally filled with water so the black flies can pass. Did I put out more apples today? Of course, I put out more apples, and molasses-soaked corn too. Oh, your awful NRA crap keeps arriving, though I send it back with notes in red, and I love doing the surveys as if I was you, you of all people telling me that you wished you had loved more; you love now, that was the best news.

I know I talk too much.

*All you wanted was news from your dying pontoon
crew that you had permission to love.*

How often we went to the river to quiet our thinking, picking up conversation along with the current. Sometimes the river breeze made us calm: sometimes it was the charred remnants from someone's forgotten all night river fire that cleared our thoughts. Yes, fear made a blackened lure hang from a branch. Who would throw it there, and forget? We will not forget. We agreed to come to the river, light a candle under the bird-soaked mulberries, cry. Sometimes you would go to the river by yourself to think the war over. I wish you had told me what you were thinking over. Sometimes you come back and say you understood. What did the river say, I wondered. The river, down by the dam, was always murky. Full of trash, unrepentant, discarded fishing lines. Knotted. Potato chip bags gleamed in the sunlike like a salve of minnows. Clam shells flat as hands left by the racoons washing their catch at night. Broken rosaries of leaves floating burrowing. How the river's broken crockery of leaves reassured me. I am driving by the river now and look below to see if anyone is fishing. I haven't been there since you passed. There were a few times I came close to walking by where we waited, trying not to crisscross lines—there's only love or fear. I learned it wasn't my responsibility to give up breathing. I learned how listening to breathing made passing slow.

*Your fishing line
disappeared before mine—
That's how I should have known*

Good and Plenty. Ampules of pink, white, black licorice candy. Good and plenty is small enough to hold his ashes. I spill the ampules on the table. Shake and stir his ashes, see what direction spin, see what she has given me, look at the baggie of ashes. His daughter left his ashes near the vise on the work bench her father, my lover, forgot to use. 'Nam vet. Take a teaspoon from the baggie to preserve forever, a yellow ribbon, a fat free candy adorns the box. Take a teaspoon, there's more, whenever you want. His ashes will run out like licorice. What will his daughter do with hers? I can barely slip open the Ziploc bag. My hands shake. His ashes smell like perfumed compost. Do I dare touch his ashes? I have my old light metal teaspoons out. If I do this, I'll never use them again. Throw away in the back acre so I cannot retrieve. I stare at the baggie for a long time, my rescue dog whines, barks. It's not like there's someone at the door delivering a package. There were no taps nor church bells, no thresholds to walk over to reach the eye-socketed name and dates; only boring choral music from the 7th day Adventist station. Pastor discusses Exodus. I feel like an exodus. I cradle the baggie for a while; it fits in my palm. Net weight 6 oz (170g): his ashes or Good and Plenty licorice. Fuchsia or white? What color do you prefer most? Oh, grey. Dark grey, of course. I cradle the baggie for a bit. Maybe I can do this. Hold my breath, so I don't spill any. Yet I can't proceed. A bone, a shell pokes out. Oh, she gave me part of a knee bone also where waves (Mekong delta) once hit.

*Good and Plenty—
licorice ampules—
He is there*

If you were walking along the Mekong, and I said if, because pontoons loitered, and no one walked, if you were hoping to hear sand crystals singing to make you wonder if a cantor nearby, if you appreciate nature without human interference, then think about the loss of sand I read about in the Mekong, sand depleted along the river and delta. If you have never been there, you may know someone who has, who commanded a pontoon from the delta to Laos, and did you say there was a secret war—what a joke, everyone knew the war began from a sand grain on the delta. Oil, but sand, why less sand, and especially, the Mekong, so much sand dredged and depleted so homes list, losing their crawl spaces. The roofs are now a bafflement, meeting a bird's eye nesting in the grass. If you could return, would you recognize the shoreline, the long haul of pinging sand and bone amulets? Curbs, bridges, concrete stairwells, basilicas, patio blocks, Disney turrets, refurbished stadiums, succulent planters, egg cups, a DIY concrete lamp, and so much sand retrieved that it cannot remake itself out of unceasing wind like unceasing mortars. First body bags, and now sand—like water in the aquifers so depleted that the earth's axis has changed slightly impacting the earth's rotation. Just stand in the back yard, pick a zinnia, twirl it slightly to another direction to see what it may be like. Sand for windowpanes, paper weights, globe earrings to hold cremains, floating like neck feathers. Cities need the sand, stated the article, rural areas need hospitals, schools, prisons, sweat factories, and bags to sell of quick-mix concrete, one bag to ground the mailbox from the snowplow, the old fir trees sorting themselves out above. Enough! What happens when the sand's all gone? A biodegradable silicon instead of concrete stairs? Soon the sand will be depleted, though some will see skull fragments flecked in the concrete, poking out of the concrete's wind-failed weight.

*My girlfriend bought sand back
from Florida—no one brings sand
back from the Mekong.*

Duffel Bags are Swelling in the Muddy Culvert

The duffel leaped up as a trout along the fish ladder.
It couldn't stop jiggling.

I hid his duffel behind the washing machine where it filled with mice. Later, since a son still lived at home, I decided I had to open the duffel to be sure we were safe.

His was military gray: No camouflage of dying oak leaves falling off the shoulder.
Or trout.
I stumbled on the duffel bag's wide berth. A man.

The duffel bag had a list of prescriptions and protocols, including better nutrition and listing schizophrenia, depression, loneliness. It was written on paper that was in three parts, white, yellow, pink. Someone had the first paper in white, the socket holes only partially ripped. What did the advice for better nutrition have to do with schizophrenia?

Some duffel bags are sliced with stars in white against black, smoke still rising like an overcast sky that wouldn't let the fireworks shift to their good side. I used to sleep next to him on his good side.

He said he could sleep anywhere, and he did, especially a culvert. Not even a doe could scent him out. He was stubborn. He did not have to sleep there. Perhaps he felt safer hiding with the migrating birds. His candle lantern kept him company. Sometimes our son and I would take our fishing lures on the pretense of looking for him in the culvert, hoping he wouldn't hide from us.

There is a biting deer fly on the screen right now, wanting out.

I could barely walk into the culvert without tripping along tall spinal column sides.
Marrow flowers.

He always said he knew where no one could ever find him, no wife, no son.

There are flies along the duffel bag, flies slipping into late-spring trillium as they are supposed to do as trillium's purple invites dung flies.

His duffel bag exploded as a cattail filled with incendiaries and carbon dioxide. It is easier to throw carbide at a fish ladder or culvert than a lure. Or patience.

Red sucker fish, coho salmon, black flag draped dragonflies are filled with carbide.

The cot in the basement holds a duffel bag,

his forgotten meds are in timed-out amber capsules,

and this casket is full as a duffel bag.

In My Medicine Bag: Two for One

A doe feeding on a molasses-sugared block
there are no ligature skids around the neck
as if sweet spots hammered in yellow bits and chunks
twined with a few knots to recall a phrase said in a second
that some of us out here leave for deer to feed on
and then he left I know he bedded down with the doe
by the excavated laundry tub PVC pipes cut but
then the culvert his duffel bag leaped as a dark trout
still usable in pieces and segments the doe licks
a worn silver loop on his ring finger
and checks out the feed accidentally thrown in
and he said he would live in the sky's blue acreage
I like to watch twilight for the deer assemblage
though I never believed him though he had a good snort
adding a brown hue to the white snowline
and browsed damn close to the bedroom window's wind chill
filling my medicine bag pinch of snow brush piles does

I have been lax since I haven't told you the news lately. I've been forgetting things lately, leaving the scissors after taping the plastic over your bedroom windows on the bed, leaving them there for days, then wondering where were the scissors? I put blueberries in my yogurt, then wondered why blueberries in the yogurt! I left the apples simmering in the crockpot for two days, odor of cloves and cinnamon better than vinegar and cleanser I was imbuing myself with, then finally it dawned on me, I had it on low. It's a miracle the apples didn't vaporize. Well, like you. I keep thinking all the forgetfulness is part of disremembering your memory, yet so unfair. Your presence is still in the seams of the bedroom floor: I swear I smell gunpowder from reloading. Thank goodness, no one walked through here with a sparkler! That super moon strikes a glow across the floor as if to catch it on fire, immolating the remnants. Is that why we grieve? We grieve the self we once were, and will be no more? Who said that self is gone? I still see myself the first day with you, a hawk's feather in my hair, wondering what you would say. I wondered what you would think about my hummingbird feather bracelet, and if you understood the meaning. Musk and resurrection in that deep-bellied ache. Well, you did. We decided if things didn't work out to go back to the river, light a candle and say goodbye. I haven't gone to the river yet. I did errands instead: a desk lamp from Home Depot, one that charges. Place the phone across the lamp like a plate, and it lights up, like a floating candle across a river. I could tell you more about my permanent feeling of loss, or maybe not? I found the tip of a hawk's feather for my hair today. When did I put it there?

*I never lit the candle.
Why bother
with a supermoon?*

I told the Supermoon before she finished her shuttlecocks of loss, there are words I cannot sound out anymore. 'Lures' are a kind of word I will not use anymore, nor PTSD, nor Mekong. Isn't it strange not to need a word like a panic attack? Artillery. Loas. Words plunge into a blackout: my brain where those words took me before a closed vault with stained glass, a shifting wind pushing out where the red ants climbed over a saint's foot. What words would she refrain from using: the red stem of a rape, forced against the porous line of a brick wall, reckless with thistle heads. Right now, a thistle head plunges downward right outside my window, the flower head bends its green into thick purple strands like a shaving brush. The last is a phrase I never use. My own body has done away with claymore mines, trip wires, pontoons, a lost & dead crew, jungle war, tropical foliage, rice shining in water, fetid dogs, Saigon girls mouthing instructions to G.I. Joes. Oh, especially the sound of helicopters, even returning home, look! Look! the terror of the sound bringing back the half-dressed and barefoot running to the back acre where no one is there except wild dogs, dark death of the evening not even poachers with their illegal shining lights for poaching. Can you blame me for not wanting your words anymore, as you are one passionate negation.

*Grief pushes the sound
out of our throats:
yet we fall with an inkling of the sound*

My biggest failure was not propping up the peach tree branch. And why did I plant only one? I recall dragging the root ball out of the feed store, and maneuvering it into my toy car, the car's roof trying not to indulge breaking a branch. People ahead of me in line kept turning around to look at her already in blossom. That was a risk also, buying a fruit tree already in blossom, mini spirals of clustered threads, and how would I get it in the ground when it was still early April, soil hardened. Even gravel trucks refused to deliver. No septic sludge removal also. If I had loved you more, would I have remembered to prop, strengthen the branch? I didn't know zilch about being an orchardist, or desire. I knew trees captured what I thought I couldn't have: the tallest branch reached the evening's constellations. Dog star. Moon acreage. The night dissolves the constellations when you'd think a clear breath without clouds would make them brighter. I apologize to the peach branch. I had no idea you were supposed to be propped up with a fence post, and believe me, there were hundreds piled up in the back after they removed all the wine grapes, ice wine. Grapes so clear they look like breath. If I had known more, I would have watered the tree before the freeze to make an insulating fog. If I had known branches break, I might not have bought the tree. It was a risk to plant a fruit tree despite fire blight, webbing tree caterpillars, invasive moths bright as taillights. I never listened to frost advisories before like skimming an obit. The peach tree was sinking in roots, settling in the back yard near the bait pile. I planted it for the deer browse, not us. I planted it hoping for a few peaches to grow for air to breathe on, not us. I didn't know I was to trim so that light sheltered through from each direction, so wherever I stood, constellations shine through each gap. The peaches that make it are small as roundworms, I exaggerate! When fireflies arrive to do their needlepoint, I check the tree. Do you want a progress report? It has lost the topmost branch, the crown, falling into the bait pile, but amber sap still collects above where the branch broke. Smooth as your forehead I can't forget looking at, wishing death was a lot louder. Your last breath left without any sound.

*Orchard breezes
noisier
than your last breath*

The Weather Up There Must Be Changing

The stray dog watched the boy at the grave site, as the boy spit on his hands, cleaning pigeon and geese poop off the headstone's letters. While rapping his knuckles on the stone, the boy thought he heard voices, whispers, sounds. Beat it dog, he said, but the dog, maybe a mix of coyote and wild unwanted dog, yapped away as if to the time of a torch light losing its battery life. Crows nearby also, and a raven perched on the draped cloth over the concrete urn. What took you so long? He thought he heard, I died in 2019, and you're finally here? I'm cleaning your grave; can't you feel it? The birds are here to comfort you, the voice below him said. You never stop talking, do you! Was it the dog carrying on, or the grave ghost simpering? He took deep breaths, held it as if under water, then released it slowly, the swirl of the crows still flying over the yakking dog having their own signage. What does the damn dog want? His father's dust buried exactly above his father's groin. A headstone with only the last name, incised, the hue of dark lures. Don't you feel my weight kneeling here? Such a little nook, but so noisy. Your bones were burnt to the size of pumpkin seeds! Who gave the last rites? Absolution? Everyone said your bones in the box kept singing, talking, yakking, jumping, bouncing as if Petrouchka in his red, white carnival apparel had arrived. It's hard to clean a headstone without Kleenex or hand sanitizer. No chance of sharing a beer, though there was a flask in the glove compartment, underage, back then. The fire doubly reflected into the river, where they waited for river coho, one line only because the father kept forgetting to buy the boy a fishing license. You still recall fishing in the night rain? The drops fell like signatures on a petition. His blanket kept spewing off; when he woke, his dad was gone, but the blanket still hot dogged around his feet. He liked being hot dogged, missed that extra tucking in, even the age he had become. Is it raining up there, like when nighttime fishing? Only a fog over the lake, evacuating. Why is the dog still pawing in the dirt? Crows fly above like baseball hats thrown in the air. Then the voice of the guy with the post hole digger, asking him to be sure to go to the office, and leave his address. "Go to the dogs," he said, "forever and forever, amen." "Hush, be polite," his dad murmured.

Grief is a bodyguard who refuses to be fired. Note the black-suited men & a middle-aged woman, all with ear buds accessorize a person they set limits around. They mill about like black lights, catching storm clouds from a skylight. They are always there: her periphery, until triggered. They are like boils on her legs she cannot eliminate. Each one a bottle tree she would like to shake off. Each one measures a similar size, the pointed looks go out in the same directions, & each has an assigned direction. They never rotate directions. This is what grief is, I repeat, a bodyguard. They never take off like a slow-motion pontoon. And at first you do not recognize they are present, but they are zebra mussels now in your bones so that you list, you become a spiral jetty without knowing. What's worse, they are beached, plaster cast around you, you cannot wish their presence away. They put your ear to theirs, so you must listen. But there is no sound. They always wear the same Men's Wearhouse suits. Without knowing it, you have become their espresso, their grief flavored Americano. Patty Hearst married hers, Princess Di's family charged hers with manslaughter. I need them like a misdiagnosis. Do I need to elucidate more? How grief piles on me like fat on a wooden chair. The sermon, text, voice mail, petunia outlined cards say get over it. Be happy. Endure. Grief is a construction—an ideology. Debone it! I work my body around it, telling myself to snap out of it, but then the bodyguards come again. They stand at attention around my bed. Get up. Start to breathe, follow us, at least start to look in the same direction. East, then all the four directions. We will work on you like a corpse that wants air.

Grief
names you
a minimalist

I sat outside last night on the pretense of reading my mail, but I was listening to the sound of acres of soy poured into a truck. Perhaps you would like to know the local farming news: white trucks are positioned along the back roads, the sound of back up warnings as if a bird that knows no other tune. I did not bother to watch soy's heavy viscosity fall into the truck. The sound of the pour as it swooshes into the bed is a quick waterfall, and then over. Why are the trucks always painted white when your ashes are greyish black? As if collecting spirits. Maybe you would also want to know that this year there was a mast for walnuts, almonds, acorns, chestnuts. Abundance. Who said wait and abundance will come? They must have lived through a mast season. When I walk barefoot, I am reminded of chestnut hull barbs and dried thistle spines. I keep wondering what your spirit might be like: Like an animal rescue dog napping at my feet while I write? Did you know that the Hubble finds the formation of new planets occurring in real time? Are you hanging out there? Perhaps you would like to know the weather forecasts from the Farmer's Almanac: more freezing rain. Perhaps you would like to know the doe sightings as they are a mast as well. I'm not supposed to have a bait pile because of chronic-wasting disease and TB, also ticks, the vet nagged me. Taper off. I would like to taper off my grieving, but I do not know how: my body wants the memory of your presence in a tangible away as if a mast. Good luck to that! All I want to hear is good morning, coffee? I walk out to the deer block, note how much is left. It is a good year if the corn tassels in the field nearby poke through, wash without will. The soy harvest must be good as there are many trucks along M-152, M-140, and county roads still gravel. After the harvest, I will trespass over to the soy field and see what is left for does and their yearlings, and for myself. Wait along the field where it breaks into a ravine shielded with deer flies, falling branches posed as if making longitude or latitude. Perhaps that's the way to think of your spirit right now: gleanings left for the ones who never light candles.

*On Google maps I find
M-152, M-140,
Mekong Delta—a mast of pain*

I drove along Dowagiac's back roads last week as the grief counselor instructed me to do though I nearly got the truck sidelined into the mud, wet heavy clay. I drove so slowly, bringing back each pause in our talk, as she told me to relive. I didn't get out to feel the trees' breath mixed with silence: I remembered the advice about trespassing. Who wouldn't want a weapon sighted at them as if an about to be dead doe, and all I was doing was letting the wind catch-all in my throat. Maybe that's what memory is without wanting to be toppled, leaf-crumbed and smoked. Yesterday, I made crisp, brown sugar like trout mud. Underside of a leaf. I could tell you about all the other adventures I had lately, fixing and cleaning. I learned how to install a toilet seat! Everything is plastic, even the screws. I'm glad I kept the outhouse! I cleaned the dust off the baseboards, soaked in with reloading gunpowder, blackening walnut hulls walked on while walking the dog, bits of broken glass from a photo frame swaying above. I made a dinner that looked as if I had raked leaves: apples, squash, whole wheat bread. Do you see and smell the leaves where you are? Walk in them to hear their sound? You were soundless anyway, reprimanding me I was too noisy in the woods, breaking off dried bittersweet, exploding tripwires. I wanted you to know where I was, so I didn't get lost; not to worry about me; now I see the does are silent despite their heaviness, their summer apple and corn weight furloughed into their breath. I know how to walk now, though it took a while. Pull off to where the road curves, leave a note on the window—be right back, please don't call the sheriff—and love what doesn't want to be remembered like leaves already passed on.

*A green flavored tobacco plug
I trip on in the garage—
memory tripwire*

The living look for the dead for about a month, you said. It's good because the spirit stays for thirty-one days, then let's go. I didn't believe a word of it. None of this nocturnal torrent about as believable as the ocean in a mason jar—still sounding. I found your text last month. Are you up yet? I'm awake. I still didn't believe it, but under the crab apple was the bowl left out for the doe with yellow-red fruit. I'm not the one who left it there.

*The story of his body
disappears—then apples
fall grapes, iced wine*

Back Acre

Lines of love, of grief, where I walk in the back acre overlap.

*

I have not been in the back acre since he died. Housebound, I pretend not to see the back acre when I look out my kitchen window, washing dishes, so I ignore it. That is not where I found the skulls—a hawk, a doe's jawbone, and took them back home to bury. Rose hip strands once caught my sleeve. I have no excuses as no winter snow pounds the weed hulls to low hanging seed pods, a constellation for the hungry. I need the exercise; I need the clarity of mind. I need to reduce the black waves of depression that fall unexplained. Prolonged bereavement, the EOB papers said. So why have I actively refused the back acre's premises: most of it is not my property, so I trespass beyond the section I own. But always the trail, remnant of the past, a trail I make in memory of bitter wind. I have not buried any of his ashes yet. I have not planned that far. But I should plan.

*

He used to throw short sticks up at the satellite dish to get it to work when iced with wet snow, to aim for the direction of the star link; years after his passing, kindling still on the roof, undisturbed by murmur of any kind. Birds fly as cudgels upwards, I once thought, soar to reach the Great Spirit, soar to give the eagle, he said, our daily tears. But when passing, no one shares our last breath, and why should they? Who delivers our last breath to the creator spirit, and why must we do it on our own?

*

In Nam, he cut a stick cut a few inches each day; when the stick fit in a palm, it was near the day to go home. My long-beaded earrings I bought from a grandmother at the pow wow, beaded with the four directions, I lose all the time.

*

Does the back acre exhale the last breath?

*

Someone backhoed a six-foot hole I did not see, and fall in. The hole a rectangle so exact a quilter mitered the corners. Enjoy the view, I thought, rabbit pellet droppings left as an offering in a deer's imprint.

*

Aside from perking the soil, there is no rationale for a rectangular hole at this location. On the flat and level field, far from apple, pear, and peach orchards still trimmed so the light reaches the spine, arced light over each branch equally. The owner dug up a fir. I can see him backhoeing the tree, pulling out the root ball, wrapping it up in burlap, and not bothering to fill the hole.

Fire in the hole.

*

I imagine from my kitchen window, piling coffee cups, where the hole is I fell.

*

My partner's ashes would not fill the hole.

*

She gave me a teaspoon of his ashes in a mini globe attached to a key chain where I could let them knock against my knee while driving. A dust dark-stained snow globe.

*

Fire in the hole.

*

I wonder if the hole ever filled.

*

I would not use the hole someone else backhoed for his ashes. I take my shovel to dig my hole for the key chain ash globe. Of course, it is clay. Didn't I see someone else digging in this, wanting the soil to perk? What did I expect? I can dig sideways to pull out grape vines, roots, composted leaves. Not even imprints of animal tracks. I push the shovel in further to hit a layer of rock, knock against debris from a farm: a rusted pipe, a milking machine still holding its blue multiple umbilical cords, glass bits, a rubber sole. I walk further, no sense disturbing the interred. I find the coyote den where I threw the apples, where there are several exits and entrances. It is unfair for him to rest with coyote pups, even if lured by fireflies to leap and attack their light triggering waves. Coyotes would sniff and curlicue into them, knock the snow globe around like a toy, cut their paws. An outhouse's remains, a shed with the roof mimicking a falling petal, I cannot decide where to bury. Am I making the right decision, burying him in the back acre? Where I loved and loved to walk, where we laid out extra apples for the deer bait to watch them coming in at twilight, naming them all?

*

I do not recall how much of the back acre I own, a trapezoid perpendicular to the house. It slopes to the southwest where a property marker unknowingly marks the coyote den, and the abandoned outhouse with the door disbarred swings open to the sunset. I once walked all along the acre to find the green property markers, topped off with orange flags. Who would buy ground that did not perk to dig a grave? I took the shovel with the tip knowing I would be scraping clay. Root bound soil, clavicles of need. I want to find a resting place. I scrape and scrape with my shovel, I might as well have brought a metal tablespoon to dig. I cannot get below the shoulder of dirt. I want to bury his ashes. I want the glass container with his ashes in winter submerged, a medicine flask. I once found a medicinal bottle so tightly closed it would not open.

*

You said you could not come up for air, after reading this. What do you think grief is, but a plunge without air for months, wondering where you are, back acre or kitchen washing dishes, looking out the window, getting the courage to walk to the back acre. Air like breath shudders in the branches, invites me there.

Apple Kiss

You used to slice an apple, a honey crisp, into half-moons, crescents, seed stars.

All afternoon I slept through apples not knowing your gift was there, a note, for you, kiddo.

Picking apples, we never picked the ones at our waist, a low sweet spot, nibbled by turkeys, wasps.

My turn. I slice an apple to find a wasp burrowed in its high sugar content, eat it. I am immediately dangerous.

Would you like to kiss me now with a stinger in my mouth?

I did. I did. My mouth is a killer-savior.

Did I really want to kiss you with my sweet apple breath?

If you taste too much muddy cider, I will add ginger, anise, peppercorn, cardamon.

Do I really want to bring you back with my citrusy linalool breath?

Do you recall throwing crab-apples in the Mekong?

I am kissing apples well. I put an apple in your fermenting skull, look forward to apple vinegar.

I put the left-over stem in a wine glass with a teaspoon of your ashes.

Last night I saw a shooting star, for the first time in years, in the Perseids, drift red silk.

I am not going to drink your dust in a wine glass.

I am an orchardist, after all. I know how to prune so sunlight hits the right places.

I moved your salt, your mineral block today. Spirit block, I watched since mid-summer. That was your passing, right? Now the usual news is just as bad, and I don't see the value of reporting it: Do you really care if the House Republicans fall apart? Or how many indictments greed accrues. Oh, and the apple u-pickers were nicer yesterday; they asked if they had seen me somewhere before, that's a good line, and then they forgot to pay for the second apple cider. I called them out on it. Honestly, it's just nickel and dimes to them, but to us it was feeding spirit blocks to the deer. Did I tell you they snort at me when I'm watching them, as if to say, please leave us alone. Let's eat in peace. Let us pass on in peace. Well, I haven't told you what I saw yet, and they never went for the spirit block, but surely its presence was a good sign, no? They came in as dark clouds broke up, about to rain, and then swooped around and above the tall yellow mullein. And to think I was going to pull all the mullein candle flowers out! Just because they are taking over, and I mean taking over everything—the clearance roses I had nurtured back, day lilies like sun rises blazing. Now I know you really don't care about flowers, but I do know you love the gifts of the spirit browsing by. Oh, you really want to hear about _____ after all? Indian summer is longer now thanks to climate change, and I know you like hearing the phrase “Indian summer”—we haven't purged all the phrases that made memories. So, I was so glad to see the bats above, like words coming back in cursive, signaling their flight without really intending to signal their passage; I waited and watched their passage until salt stars spilled into night.

*I sprinkle tobacco
over your spirit block—
the doe and I paw at the strands*

Acknowledgments:

“Blackberries,” *Dunes Review*.

“Apple Kiss”; “Grief Letter #5” was included without the title, beginning with the first line, “I have been lax today,” and “Ode to Swimming After a Long Hiatus”, *Bear River Review*.

“The Weather Up There Must Be Changing”, *Presence: A Journal of Catholic Thought*.

“Duffel Bags are Swelling in the Muddy Culvert,” *Passager*.