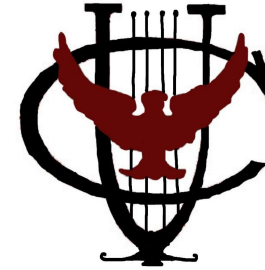


The Lyre of the Phoenix

Volume III

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A Note from the Editor

Firstly, I want to thank everyone who submitted a piece of writing or a photo because I understand that you possibly could have submitted a small piece of yourself, ultimately waiting to hear if it was worthy enough to be included. Right before meeting with prospective English and Creative Writing students and their families this past November, I was told that I was going to be the editor for this journal. The first words that came out of my mouth were “Are you being serious right now?” Everyone laughed and congratulated me. Although, I was internally panicking because I was going in blind. I have never helped edit or publish a literary journal before. However, soon enough, the flier was put out in the beginning of February, and I watched the inbox- waiting for something to happen. It wasn’t until spring break that submissions started rolling in and my mind started racing with the possibilities of what this journal could mean to me, the contributors, and Cumberland University. Surely enough, I trudged through the stack of submissions and picked which ones spoke to me in a way that reminded me of the great authors that I read daily for my English classes, yet still contain a new voice- a new perspective. In this edition, my goal was to connect the voices of students to our community. Not everything is meant to be hidden in a notebook or an unnamed file. With that being said, choosing which submissions that were going to be included was probably one of the hardest things about editing this journal. I didn’t expect polished novels that were worthy of a Pulitzer Prize or poetry that were as complex as Eliots; however, I did expect a certain level of intrigue as well as sophistication. I believe this is exactly what I got. Finally, I want to thank Dr. Rex for allowing me to take this project head on and helping me explore the world of publishing.

Sydney Griffin



Memoir



Going, Going, Gone
by
Kendal Plumlee

Someone died in the bedroom next to mine.

It was the sixth of November and I woke up to the rhythmic hum of an oxygen machine. I shared a wall with the room my Grandad was dying in, my wrought iron headboard pressed against it, and I felt like I was in that room even when I wasn't. I could hear everything—the ebb and flow of voices, the heavy steps of hospice nurses on the hardwood, a shrill ring of the doorbell from family members coming and going.

One thing I remember about the six days he was on hospice was the noise. From the time the sun came up in the mornings to set in the afternoons, there was noise. When I came out of my bedroom each day, there was a nurse to check his vitals, a health aide giving him a sponge bath, a grief counselor to coach us through the inevitable—always *someone* in the house besides the four who lived there: our pastor, his younger sister, cousins, grandchildren, great-grandchildren... The house was alive in the midst of death.

I hated it. I think I quietly hoped for the inevitable to *just happen*, like ripping a bandaid off a fresh wound so we could start our healing and life would settle. I wonder if that makes me a bad person, a bad granddaughter. I still wonder.

The day he died I put my makeup on. We were expecting a few people to come over—my aunt, uncle, cousins, one of his

sisters, so I put makeup on. It wasn't then, but now it's weird to me that I thought I needed to do that—like anyone cared if I had blush and mascara on or not; I think maybe I was holding onto anything normal because *nothing* about my life had been normal for two weeks.

I was sitting on Mema's bed when they came in. Legs crossed and cradling a pillow to my chest, I watched the five of them turn the corner and step from hardwood to carpet. I was quiet as they took him in, his frail body pale and more bones than fat, his face long, gaunt, and drooping; he looked fragile, breakable—so unlike the way we knew him before this. They'd seen him in the hospital a day or two prior, so it shouldn't have been shocking but I think it was. In the hospital we all had a dash of hope left that he would recover from his fall and the brain bleed, but now he was lying in a bed provided to us by hospice. People didn't see life past hospice.

He was dying. We all knew it.

My aunt touched his feet through the plaid blanket, tears pouring down her cheeks. My cousin and her young daughters crowded the side of his bed, talking in soft voices and petting his limp hand. They were around seven and nine years old which I thought was a little too young to be exposed to something like this. I still think they were too young to see someone on their death bed but they aren't my kids and that's none of my business.

A nurse came shortly after they left. She was petite and older with a gentle, compassionate demeanor and delivered the news as softly as she could. She called it Cheyne-Stokes; I heard death

rattle. That's what they call Cheyne-Stokes—the death rattle.

The night it started was the night he died.

I had a headache that night so I was in bed by nine o'clock. I still had my bedside lamp on and it casted a warm creamsicle orange glow over my room. For a while I laid there under my blanket, staring at the ceiling or the wall across from my bed, unable to close my eyes and doze off. The entire day I'd had this feeling that *it* would happen before the clock clicked over to midnight, turning over a new day, so I laid there with bated breath and listened, waiting for it to unfold.

And it did.

Through the wall I heard a raised voice, my dad's, and the urgency in it told me all I needed to know. I threw back the blanket and was out the door in a second, my heart lodged in my throat as I stepped out in the hallway. I had no time to brace myself for what I was going to see, what death was going to look like, and I wished I would've because I was *not* prepared for what I saw when my feet hit the threshold of his room.

It was the color of his skin that made my blood run ice cold. He was the color of a sheet of paper with no ounce of blood or *life* in his cheeks. He was still breathing—albeit very broken and spaced out breaths—but it looked like he was already gone.

I was also rattled by his eyes. They were open extremely wide, wider than I'd ever seen them, and staring up into the air past us. If I ever had any doubts about the existence of God and angels, I don't after watching him die because I **know** with absolute certainty he was seeing something divine—something

greater and higher than anything we could ever imagine.

“Is the angel coming after you, honey?”

That's what Mema asked him as she held his hand and watched as the love of her life since eighteen was taken from her. I'll never forget it.

The next few costly minutes were a blur as my dad ushered me around the bed and I touched Grandad's hand, leaning over him and drinking him in for one of the last times for a long, long time. *I love you, I love you, I love you* poured out of my mouth because he had to know; I desperately needed him to know because I did—*do*.

He was one of the most precious things I will ever have.

Grandad, I hope you're cheering me on in Heaven. I hope I'm making you proud. I hope I'm studying the Bible enough like you always wanted me to. I hope you're singing Bluegrass music and playing the banjo and fishing with a Smoky Mountains hat on. I *know* you're where you always wanted to be.

I'll see you soon, okay?



“Spirit of Halloween” by G. C. Brune



A Reckoning with Reality
by
MacKenzie France

Calloused feet hit the ground early that Sunday morning. Dark dreams had taunted her mind and teased her body with high heart rates and excessive moisture dribbling down her face and skin. She gripped the edge of her bed, staring mindlessly at an oddly shaped chip in the paint on her door frame. One big breath in, 'I am okay,' one shaky sigh out, 'I am safe,' as if these words could twist the fabric of her mind until every drop of dream was erased. Affirmations became like a broken record on repeat in her head. She started to try a different tactic and imagined an eraser sliding across her mind, taking every single scratchy line of darkness with it. Nothing was working. Nothing was helping calm down the screaming in her mind and the drumming of her heart.

Lifting her weight off of her bed, her feet appeared to have their own ideas of where she should go and what she should do to escape. Every weightless article of clothing she pulled on felt like a shield to the humid chill her shared apartment seemed to have at times like these. Times when the mind and the images it recalled were scarier than the present reality. Neatly placing her previous garments into her laundry basket, she yanked and tied on the shoes that would push her into a high that brought relief to her mind and body. Mind and heart still competing in a seemingly never-ending race, she decided to insert her body into this competition the minute she stepped into the breath-catching winter air. Murky fog

and dimly lit streets seemed to reflect what her current mental state looked like. Any minute she expected to turn a corner and face replicas and renditions of shadows she had left behind.

The familiar rush of adrenaline riveted through her body as she progressed her pace into the morning fog. She could feel every muscle slowly move in an intricate design in order to supply the body with what it needed. The burn of the tissues surrounding her ankles seemed to be the one reminder that not all dreams are imaginary, fake, and never to exist in the world of flesh and bone. Pumping her arms harder, her legs seemed to understand what her heart desired at that moment, go faster and forget. The incline of her path signaled that she had almost made it to the three-mile marker from her apartment and the halfway point between her and the rest of the world. The sun was just making its way over the quiet streets and quaint apartment buildings when the echo of repetitive thuds silenced abruptly.

Pupils dilated and airways seemed to shut themselves off from the world in retreat as she spotted what should have been a comforting image of a loving couple exchanging goodbyes. The hard lump in her throat grew, and her jaws seemed to crush themselves with every passing moment she watched. She mindlessly took the rubberband on her wrist, drawing it back and letting it snap back to place, increasing both the speed and the force gradually. Tears pricked her eyes and begged her to fall as she watched this smiling woman hold the hand of her husband. She winced in pain and sucked air in through gritted teeth as the man hugged his wife tightly, smiling menacingly. Her stomach seemed

to ignite with fire as the man raised a broken beer bottle from behind his well-pressed suit. Before she could catch the words from escaping her tongue, the simple command of “STOP” burst out with no remorse for slumbering neighbors. The couple jumped and stared at her in confusion. The world lost its stability for a moment as she turned and stumbled over her own feet, realizing there was never a bottle at all. Flashes skidded across her vision of what once was. Every new tear that emerged from her body seemed to yank those memories back into the forefront of her mind until, finally, she was immersed and found herself running just like she did ten years ago.

She couldn't bare to spend one more minute in that dusty trailer any longer. Rust covered every inch of the abandoned trailer the nice old lady who baked cookies every Saturday used to live in. She died many years ago and no one ever moved back in. It wasn't until the children she gave cookies to grew up and became reckless teenagers did anyone step foot in that place again. It was known as the hot box to all the local trailer park rats, at least that is what the adults used to call the stragging teenagers who had no real home, no real family, no real place to belong. The hot box kids found a family with each other. As hormones raged, the older they got, however, some found more than that, including her. She found Jax.

Jax was the type of guy everyone loved. He had all of the best ideas, knew all of the 'fun' people, and he was older than everyone so he supplied all the things the hot box was known for: drugs, alcohol, and lots of memories. He was charming yet the

hot box kids knew he had a bit of a temper. However, no one said anything because they looked up to him and he protected them. He would handle any police, any bully, and any toxic parent that stumbled around. She fell for the kind, protective, charming Jax. She did not fall for the raging alcoholic with a sensitive temper and will to take what he wanted.

That night was like any other for the hot box kids. A party so loud the neighbors, the ones that were sober at least, complained and cussed. Their protests fell short of the kids' ears, just like every time before. And just like every time before, the cops were called, Jax handled it, the party raged on. Shots were poured, the music grew both louder in volume and quieter in the background as the number of people doubled and the interactions flourished. Bodies were everywhere. Many gathered outside playing beer pong on the makeshift table from two plastic bins and a thin wooden plank. Others were crowded inside forcing through each other to get more ignition for their own fire, whatever that may be. She was making her way around to everyone. She was always a social butterfly, never meeting a stranger. She thrived in environments like this, especially with the touch of liquid confidence tunneling through her veins faster and faster. It made her tongue numb and cheeks flush but those were the feelings she had craved back then.

She had always been his social butterfly and he liked it, for the most part, until he reached that point where he despised it. He despised it so much that it made him stop his hosting and fun and sit in that moldy velvet rocking chair taken from inside. The

slashes on the chair were only mere marks representing every past rage-filled night. The cushions inside had been picked out by both the literal rats and him as he let his thoughts sear in his mind like a steak in a bubbling pan. With every new piece of cushion he pulled out and every new gash he made, he seemed to turn the very things he loved about her into something new he hated. Her smile that left him starstruck turned into a knowing smirk as if she intended to hurt him. Her eyes he bathed in turned to scantrons of every other male body. Her heart and personality that made him giddy turned to facades as a means to attract others. And lastly, her body that he caressed, kissed, and loved, turned into the very flirtation device meant to embarrass him.

This was usually the moment in the night when he would go off for a walk alone or distract himself with his friends, but that night, a walk seemed like too much effort and his friends seemed unappealing. His one target laughed at him, ridiculed him, and called him everything his mother used to in her own drunken stupor. She spotted him in that chair, slashing those holes, and mumbling those words to himself like he always did this time of the night. He only ever did this every weekend, but she knew he was just a hurt animal that loved her and cared for so many of her loved ones including her twin brother, Luka. The one thing about hurt animals though, they bite and attack.

Preparing herself to take care of him and go through her normal routine of reassurance and apologies for things she did not do, her smile faltered and the metaphorical ball and chain were latched back on. She sat on his lap, like every time before.

She kissed him and stroked his head, like every time before. She whispered in his ear, like every time before. This time seemed different though. His mood was like a stone wall, hard in place, unbudging. He grabbed her harder than ever before. His eyes showed more hatred than ever before. His body drug hers behind him faster than ever before. The force of the pull, the dizziness of the alcohol, and the haphazardly thrown empty cans and bottles all mixed for a terrifying storm causing her to stumble and she watched as the lightning cracked in his eyes.

The next few moments were hard to remember, her body protecting her from the inevitable. The hit followed by the screams of hatred followed by the pleading followed by the very thing she never wanted. The very thing she never asked for. Usually, this would tire him out. Usually, he would just drift off into his drunken coma and leave her alone to cry herself to sleep wrapped in his arms. This time, the storm did not die out. It grew like two hurricanes dancing. His fists were relentless that night and all she could remember feeling was pain, but not from the repetitive blows. Pain from his broken promise. **'He said he would never be like her father.'** Pain from lies he told. **'He said last time was the last time.'** Pain from her own mind. **'What had she done to make him so angry... this must be her fault.'** Her mind did that silly thing again where it took her away to someplace safe and autopilot was engaged until everything went dark. When it finally did, she got that much-needed relief. The relief she yearned for. The relief she did not think she deserved. She remembered waking up and seeing Luka

standing across the room and Jax opposite of him with a broken beer bottle in his hand. They were yelling at each other, both boys pointing at her every so often, then one would swing at the other, and so on until the tension was too much. Jax was on top of Luka, beer bottle raised, intentions of malice, until...

"Lorelei... what are you looking at? What's going on in that big red head of yours? His calming voice brought her out of that cruel nightmare of a memory.

"Nothing Luka..." she managed to plaster a soft smile on her face as she finished unlacing her running shoes, "Nothing important."



After the Virus
by
Leonydes Matis

When this is all over I will take that hug
I will take it from you, like it or not
Before all this, I never thought I wouldn't see you again
Or anything at all
My school, bus driver, friends
My teachers, and family
Nothing
So I will take that hug from your time and time again

When all this is over I'll be ten times as tall as before
With all the sleep I got indoors
Soon I'll be able to touch the sky without using my tippy toes
Ready to grab the stars and bring light to this world
Up, Up, Up we go so when this is all over
We can have a picnic on the moon where no virus can get us

When All this is over I will be braver
Braver to talk to strangers—employees of everyday stores
I won't feel myself shake when I go up to read
Or start to sweat when I feel the pressure on me
I will be brave in these lands
Roaming free, as when this is all over, life will be a breeze

When this is all over I will care more for others
My heart will be out to them
As I have the ability to help
I will not judge them if they cry or call for help
I will be the one to keep them safe
And the one to make sure everyone is housed and clothed

When this is all over I'll live my life like the end of the world
Every choice I make my life depends on
I will talk to everyone I meet
Become friends with people and animals on the Earth
To learn new skills like boxing and scuba diving
I will become the Jack of all trades when this is all over

When this is all over, it will be over
People will be more understanding
They will know what it's like to be thrown down
But when this is all over people will be throwing parties left and right
Rejoicing they are alive
When this is all over I hope people see
How important life is and how much everyday people mean a lot to me



Internalized
by
Evin Ross

A thousand missed opportunities that is what became.
You denied what's inside
You told others you were fine but it was all a lie
You told people to speak their truth keep their head up high
But you denied what's inside
You reside inside.



Wax
by
Molly Smith

I can feel my girlhood slipping away from me,
it's dripping off my skin like candle wax off a burning wick.

I no longer look for four leaf clovers in a soccer field,
Or hold a Sour Patch Kid in my mouth like it's my last meal.

Every morning I pray for something to reconcile myself
to that gap-toothed smile, grape soda-stained lips.

The wonder of who I would turn out to be
and finding,
20 years later,
a rather disappointing answer

You mean I never went to space? Never tamed a wolf?
The dragon I thought I would ride to classes looks
suspiciously like a Nissan.

There are moments, however,
when I feel I could reach into the night sky,
pluck a shimmering star,
and place it in my mouth like a Sour Patch Kid.

Moments when the sun warms the hairs on my skin
and I'm skipping stones on the shining surface of the Fox river.

The candle wax that drips off my skin doesn't evaporate.

It hardens into a smooth stone,
which I spin between my fingers,
clenching my fist around.

I will not let go of my girlhood.



Time Loss
by
Ruby Pauly

Hospitals are time voids. The ER waiting room, near
midnight, feels hollow and surreal; the people huddled together—
or, worse, the poor lonely souls that have to curl inwards for any
trace of solace—mumble quietly, tensely. When you go back to see
who you were waiting on, the clock on the wall above the shelves of
emergency equipment (breathing tubes, syringes, needles, detritus
packaging of materials used to get the person you're visiting
stable...ish) seems to skip ahead in increments of twenty, thirty,
sixty minutes. Instead of ticking, the minute hand's motion is
punctuated by the labored breath of the person in the ER bed. Her
mouth is open; each breath feels as though it could be her last.
There's a red scrape on the right side of her forehead, beneath
which a light bruise is beginning to show. She is unconscious, her
hands and feet move incessantly; she touches the spot on her
forehead. The doctors and nurses say she likely feels the pressure
of the hematoma, pressing against the back of her brain.

You're eating dinner when your boyfriend walks in, telling you the news. The lights seem over-bright, and what he's telling you doesn't set in immediately. You two had just been having a minor argument, eating dinner in separate rooms, and now he tells you he got a call from his grandmother's nursing home. You blink in shock as you stand up. 'Do we need to go to the ER?' as you ask it, it feels like a ridiculous question. He affirms, but says we should finish eating.

As you hurry to finish, scarfing down the chicken patty you'd just cooked, you're glad and disappointed it's Thursday. The last day of classes for the week, and also the time you'll need to start working on the next pile of homework. Not to mention, if this was a big thing, your weekly Dungeons and Dragons campaigns would be canceled. You push these thoughts from your mind, deciding not to worry about it until necessary.

You finish eating and get ready, then, on the way to the hospital, you try to remain optimistic—even as your boyfriend does not. He's talking about everything: what he knows happened, that she was changing her clothes when she fell, that she should have had someone with her when she did that but she was too stubborn, what we might have to do with her stuff, whether to call the two other family members. I say, 'let's not put her in the grave yet.' This gets him to stop, but he still doesn't look hopeful.

You've been in too many hospitals. The feel of them is encompassing and you involuntarily swear a vow of silence for the duration of your stay. The quiet reigns; every twitch, groan, and

breath a gunshot in the night. You see a doctor some twenty to thirty minutes after arrival—it's impossible to know the time—before you see the patient. A nurse brings you to a side room; the walls are beige and blank, like your mind; there's a painting of a foggy landscape, and an espresso machine across from where you sit on a small couch: weirdly conflicting messages. Your boyfriend is unable to sit, and instead paces. He says that this is the same room they took him to when his mom died; these rooms mean bad news.

Your optimism starts to run dry. Was this the end, after all? It was so sudden. Little do you know, there are about thirty-six million seniors who fall yearly, and thirty-two thousand of those result in death.¹ You're pondering whether to keep hope or not when a doctor comes in. He shakes your hand, and you feel out of place—you're not technically family. He asks your relations to her, before zeroing in on your boyfriend. He lays out the situation. 'Ms. Reeves,' he says, 'is not looking good. We sent her up for an MRI. In these situations, people have low chances, and with her comorbidities it's not ideal.'

So much for your optimism.

The doctor says, 'She's got a bleed from hitting her head that's putting pressure on her brain—you'll see the bruising when you're allowed back to see her.' He looks serious. 'She's not a good candidate for neuro . . . and she's already DNR.' Your boyfriend

¹"Keep on Your Feet-Preventing Older Adult Falls." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, December 16, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/features/older-adult-falls/index.html#:~:text=About%2036%20million%20falls%20are,departments%20for%20a%20fall%20injury>.

nods, taking this all in; he looks downcast, but is handling the news maturely. He asks, ‘Out of a hundred, what odds do you give her?’ The doctor takes no time in his reply. ‘A one.’

What does it feel like to die?

You wonder this, a day later, sitting on the stiff, blue sofa in Ms. Reeves’s hospital room. The view outside is pitch black, with a sprinkling of commercial and domestic lights below. Inside, half the lights are off, only because neither you nor your boyfriend could figure out how to turn the rest off. There’s a tv on the right wall, turned to the animal planet channel as that was deemed least inappropriate, with the sound turned up enough to dull the sound of her gurgling breathing. The nurses have come in a few times, but no one seems able to do anything about the fluid in Carolyn’s lungs. Your boyfriend says it sounds like Cheyne Stokes.² You aren’t sure that you agree, but you don’t know enough about dying to say anything. The only other times you’ve been near a dying person were when two of your own grandparents passed away. The nearest memory, about a year ago, haunts you; you try not to think about it and stop imagining Carolyn as your own grandma, who you never got to say goodbye to.

You return to your book, trying to slog through the inhuman amount of reading assigned this week. Huckleberry Finn does little to distract you from the sound of her breathing. Maybe this is what death feels like.

Over the rest of the weekend, you try to keep visiting Carolyn, both out of concern for your boyfriend, and guilt. You think of your own hospital visits, remembering the joke you made to your boyfriend that usually your trips to the ER were with you in the bed. Those experiences make you realize, now, that no one should be left alone in a hospital room.

On the way to the hospital one morning, you and your boyfriend begin to crack, like ice cubes suddenly plunged into a hot beverage. The somberness of the nights before can only last so long, and before you know it the dark jokes surface. Both of you start talking about how Carolyn’s nursing home friends would feel about her dying. You mimic an old man’s wheezy voice and say, ‘Well that old Carolyn, it serves her right—she stole my cup’a ice cream one time!’ You both start laughing; your boyfriend goes for it, too. ‘Yeah, that Carolyn, always cheatin’ at bingo. Glad to have her gone.’ As you’re turning into the visitor’s parking lot, you make another, albeit darker one. ‘She done escaped after all. I look forward to the day I get outta this hell hole, too.’

You park, and get out of the car, laughing at yourselves. The shroud of tension eases up until you reach her room on the 5th floor. The rest of the weekend is punctuated by short, hour-long visits to the hospital, late-night restaurant stops, and the struggle to keep up with classes. You decide to wait to text your mother about what’s going on; she would only make this harder, you think.

The weekend has passed now. Your boyfriend is beginning to get worried about the cost of letting her sit in a hospital bed for so long. The nurses haven’t been doing much for her, beyond

²Rudrappa M, Modi P, Bollu PC. Cheyne Stokes Respirations. [Updated 2022 Aug 1]. In: StatPearls [Internet]. Treasure Island (FL): StatPearls Publishing; 2022 Jan-. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK448165/>

“comfort care” like giving her morphine and anti-seizure medication. Everyone has given up on her. You’re going to bed Sunday night after visiting her one last time, wondering how far into the week this will last. The thought of it stretching on until next weekend makes you worry—between work and classes, your boyfriend will be left alone, and you want to be there for him. You wonder what her funeral might be like; will the vultures come down from the rafters? Memories of several years ago, of your memaw passing, make you tense up. Would it turn into a legal battle, where everyone is trying to pick apart the vestiges and dignity of the one who passed? You try not to think about it, and feel bad for hoping Carolyn lets go soon.

In the middle of the night, at 4:30 AM, your boyfriend gets a call. He hurries to get out of bed, grabs his phone, and walks into another room to answer. You’re half-asleep, trying to hear what’s being said, but it’s too garbled. You half-hope it’s just his uncle, calling at an obscene time of the night to ask for updates. Anxiety wakes you further, and when he comes back it’s the news you expected. You both sit on the edge of the bed, you with your arm around him, staring at the floor. He talks about what’s going to have to happen next. This whole event was something his family had been waiting to happen for a decade, so he says he feels relieved. Few people had had much of a connection with Carolyn in her last years, himself included. You barely knew her, having met her in person maybe a dozen times over the year you’d been dating; you knew you had no connection, either, but still felt the loss.

Grieving in people varies. In your boyfriend, it doesn’t last long; he says this is because the last several people he had lost he had no true connection with. In you, though, it lingers. Your grandparents died late 2021, a mere week apart, and even now the sorrow still hits you. Hard. Your boyfriend doesn’t really understand this, and instead of feeling upset at being misunderstood, you feel sorrow for him. You know there are five stages of grief,³ and everyone has their own steps to either stepping through them, or around them. You think that your boyfriend has become proficient at reaching the acceptance stage. You, on the other hand, always seem to dance between depression and acceptance. Letting go is not something you think you can do; letting go, to you, means to forget. And god help you if you forget anything about the two wonderful people you lost.



“Coffee with Steam” by G.C. Brune

³“Five Stages of Grief.” Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, October 6, 2022. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_stages_of_grief.



Why I Love Books

When I was eight, my father decided that we should go to Cairo. I didn't know the real reason – something about Jordan not having a Mexican embassy – but I didn't care. I was going to the land of the Sphinx!

Cairo was the largest city I had ever been in that I could remember at that point. It was loud, dusty, and wonderful! The streets teeming with traffic, people on bikes, on foot, and on donkeys, taxis all honking at us – trying to get the attention of the obvious foreigners with their bottomless wallets and inability to speak Arabic. Ha! I could speak Arabic, but I was only eight, so no one paid me any attention.

There was the man selling bread from the pile stacked high on his head. When one fell from its floury height and landed on the ground, I was sure that he would throw it away. But, no, he carefully bent down – never losing his balance nor any of the thousand other flat loaves of bread on his head – picked up the wayward loaf and returned it to the pile. Intrigued, I watched him approach some tourist in flashy clothes and a loud voice. That fallen piece of bread was the one he sold to the tourist – authentic grit and all.

There was the woman with rows of gold coins across her forehead, in bright cotton and linen clothes selling cups of strong, sweet tea outside the hotel. Tea in small glasses – steaming hot – in the Egyptian spring time. The tea made me smile – in glasses instead of cups, her customers using the wire handles stacked up on the edge of her tray, while the unwitting tourists burned their fingers trying to look so authentic. I could see her eyes laughing at the foolish tourists. I gave her my few coins and she slid a glass of hot amber ambrosia toward me. I thanked her in Arabic and she proceeded to tell me all of the gossip about the local fruit sellers, jewelers, and taxi drivers, which ones to avoid, which ones to use, and that my mother must be very happy having a boy with bright red hair who could speak Arabic so well.

My favourite, however, was the carpet seller who offered my father 13 camels for my sister's hand in marriage – a good deal he should have taken in my opinion. His shop was right inside the main entrance to the Grand Souk –

kind of like American malls but without the branding, air conditioning, or food courts – handmade carpets from Iran, Afghanistan, and Iraq in silk, cashmere, and wool, in swirling patterns of reds, blacks, and greens. We were looking at the carpets from Iran – although he called them Persian so as not to offend the Americans in his shop. My father – who did not speak Arabic – asked me how much a certain rug he liked was and I looked at the shop keeper. We made a deal, he sold my father that rug for half the asking price. Then he made THE offer.

Thirteen camels. Even I knew that was a good price. I mean, she was kind of an old maid at 21. Especially when he started the bidding at just six. I got him all the way up to thirteen. My father really should have taken that deal. But none of that is why I love books.

Yes, we went to Giza and wandered through the Great Pyramid. At that point, tourists were still allowed to go into the pyramid itself. The walls of the entrance chamber were rough and smooth at the same time with the heat of the Egyptian desert completely gone within three feet of solid stone.

Seeing the Grand Pyramid up close and in person makes all thoughts of alien construction disappear. The marks from the cutting tools are still in the stone and if you listen closely, you can hear the voices of the people who built these places. But nothing prepares you for the main chamber. Forty-five paces, three ladders – that look like Cleopatra IX herself could have used – and one claustrophobia induced panic attack – my mother's not mine – and we were in the chamber where the pharaoh once rested. Long since plundered, this tomb stands empty too, but the walls hold secrets. All the movies in the world cannot compare to the real thing. Especially the 3000 year old graffiti – Killroy was here indeed.

There was the old Cairo museum where we saw the untold heaps of funeral goods that had escaped the ancient tomb robbers and the clutches of their greedy European followers to rest in the modern tomb robbers' glass cases. Jewelry, furniture, toys, and utensils all following the same patterns as the one we saw just yesterday on sale. They all tell the story of this oldest of human civilizations. I look at the statues and wonder why all of the actors we

use to depict these people are white people when the ancient Egyptians were clearly people of multiple colours.

The art is amazing, the stuff is amazing, but the mummies. Oh, the mummies. In their glass cases, their very curly hair, eyebrows, eyelashes, and fingernails still visible. They each had a name. They were someone's husband, daughter, sister, or son. Wives and lovers, but now they are on display for all the world to see. Part grotesque, part fascinating.

But none of that is why I love books.

We went on a river cruise on the Nile on a sail powered boat unchanged in design since they were painted on the tombs I had crawled through the previous day. We stopped at a small church on the east bank of the river. It was the church built on the site where Joseph had fled to with his wife and infant son to avoid Herod's murderous touch. The monk was delighted to speak to an foreign child trying out his Arabic and he sat me up on his big desk and started pulling out scrolls.

He was an old man, dark skin with white thready beard. He smelled of sweet tea and sheep wool. I remember his hands – withered with age, but like a delicate dancer across the stage, bristling with life as he pulled the calf skin from its silver tube.

“This is the Book of Ester,” he said. “It was copied out 1800 years ago. Written on skin from a yearling calf. The ink from a mix of soot, honey, and wax.”

I breathed in the air from 1800 years. My eyes grew wide as I recognized some of the symbols carefully etched on the surface.

“Do you want to touch it?” His smile told me that I had not misheard him. My eyes grew even wider as he pointed the way.

I stretched out the middle finger of my right hand to touch the ancient parchment. Electricity surged through me as I outlined the words written so long ago. The texture change from the multicoloured ink of the illuminated margins, to the blank space, to the text of the heroic Jewish queen risking her life to save her people. It was a brief encounter with 18 centuries of space and time. But it made me. And that is why I love books.