

Variable Proximities

calculations of closeness | diagrams of distance

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**Abstract**

Variable Proximities  
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Does grief have data? Centralizing friendship, this work investigates love and loss through the search for, analysis of, and visualizations from the data embedded in grief. Situated in proximity, what would data science and the grieving process, seemingly incommensurate entities, reveal? Would grief come into relief or recess in such a paradigm? Mining archives collected over a 10-year friendship, the author conducts an intimate and vulnerable forensic investigation into a complex friendship, death, and grief. This work seeks to quantify the impact of friendship and loss and encourages the reader to consider their own relationships and grief through the lens of data and ephemerality.

# Variable Proximities

calculations of closeness | diagrams of distance

A grief story  
by Candace Whitney Morris



For Kelly  
(and for me)

“Inside the closeness was not a knowing we could hold



committed to the Nothing-in-between... (John Cage)”

-Lara Mimosa Montes, *Thresholds*

## Section I: Calculations and search terms [of closeness]

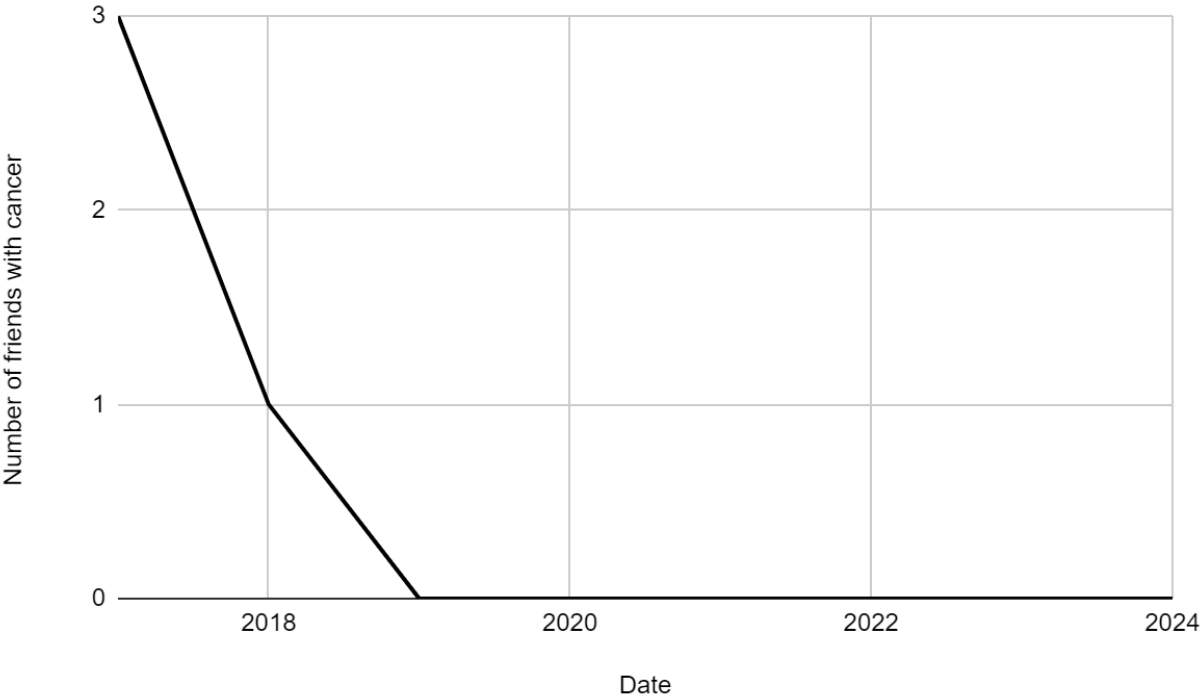
[Re]searching the moving toward.

In 2017, I had three friends with breast cancer.

Years later, at present, I have zero friends with breast cancer.

What happened to them?

If I plot it out, can I tell you more easily?



My best friend Kelly died in 2017. I loved her. She loved me.

[We both said so.]

But how can I know? How can anyone really know?

I feel the need to [re]prove it to (x). Solve for it.

if

1 = me

2 = her

Solve for x to find out who needs the proof.

$$\frac{(\cancel{1} + x)}{\cancel{1}} = \frac{2}{1}$$

$$x = \frac{2}{1}$$

$$x = \textcircled{1}$$

x=me.

I want to measure reciprocity. I collect the data of our friendship and attempt to develop an organizational system to answer a few questions.

- 1) Does grief have data? I know it's a nonlinear process, a feeling, an abstract emotion. But...
- 2) How do I know where I am in that nonlinear process?
- 3) How do I know if I am moving through it
- 4) or stuck in it?

I like to make data-driven decisions.

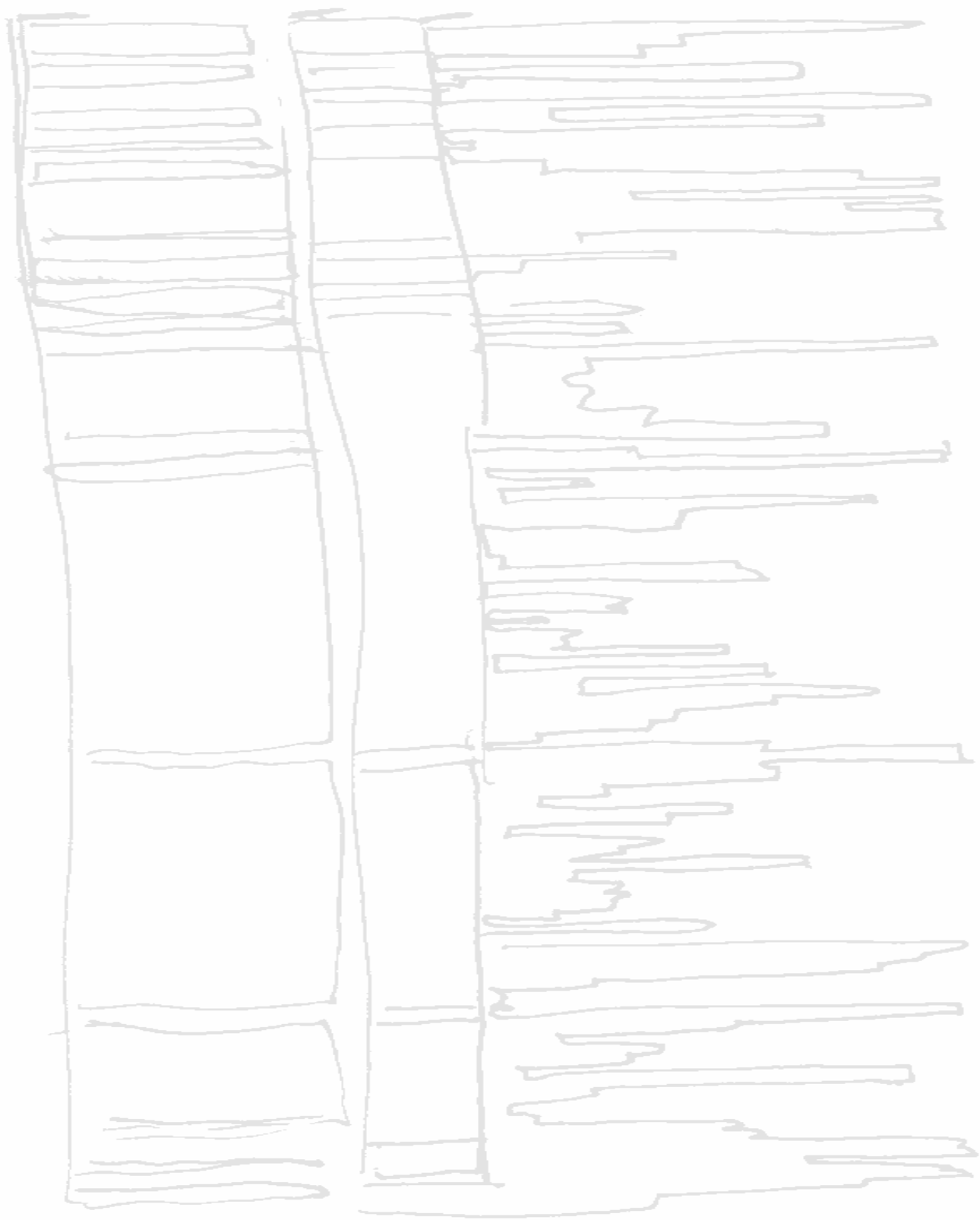
There must be a way to apply this to the grieving process.

Let's start at the beginning.

Gathering the data.

Then count it.

How many of everything did we have?



How to measure connection:

1. Time spent together, both quality and quantity as evidenced by sentiment and numerical analysis.
  - a. Qual: Mundane tasks, travel together, amount of time spent, recurrence of events, amount of day in communication
  - b. Quan: Deep conversations, tears, laughter, euphoria, memorable conversation conducive to learning about each other. Preference and hierarchical exclusion of one relationship over another.
2. Presence at significant life events: births, deaths, holidays, birthdays, weddings.
3. Residential proximities or exchange of correspondence due to residential distances.
4. An archive, measuring both amount, reciprocity, and intimacy: texts, letters, gifts.
5. A familiarity with the other's life: clothing, cars, siblings, parents, schedules, coworkers.
6. Third-party invalidation such as what her husband tells you about your friendship.
7. The title "best friend."
8. The last word: what your somewhat organized archives have to say on the matter.

## The Archive: An inventory

- Hundreds of thousands of words I'd written in Microsoft Word, Microsoft OneNote, Google Docs, and in handwritten journals about Kelly's death and my grief
- 22 journals from the time I met Kelly in 2008 to the day she died in 2017
- 32 handwritten letters from her; 16 handwritten letters from me
- 1000+ emails in Gmail
- Google calendar record of trips, dinners, brunches, hangouts, coffee dates, etc.
- 10 years of digital photos embedded with automatic metadata: facial recognition, time stamps, geo locations, F-stop, exposure, and ISO measures.
- 61 lines of Google chats
- 10 years of blogs, both hers, mine, and three other shared private blogs, plus comments on each of these blogs
- Hundreds of text messages
- Hundreds of Flickr, Facebook, and Instagram posts
- 20 birthdays
- 63 special events
- 12 trips
- 18 brunches
- 5 ladies' weekends
- The items given to me by her husband.
- The items not given to me by her husband.

When pressed, I can count these.

<b>Date range</b>	<b># of months</b>	<b># of pages</b>	<b># of entries</b>
July 2017-Nov 2017	4	220	45
Nov 2017-Dec 2019	25	220	91
Jan 2020-Oct 2020	10	220	92
Oct 2020-July 2021	9	220	118
July 2021-Jan 2022	6	220	102
Jan 2022-Sept 2022	8	220	138
Sept 2022-April 2023	7	220	122
April 2023-Nov 2023	7	220	111
Nov 2023-Current	6	220	58
<b>Totals</b>	<b>82 months</b>	<b>1980 pages</b>	<b>877 entries</b>

Grief Data Exhibit B: A table of my journal entries since Kelly died

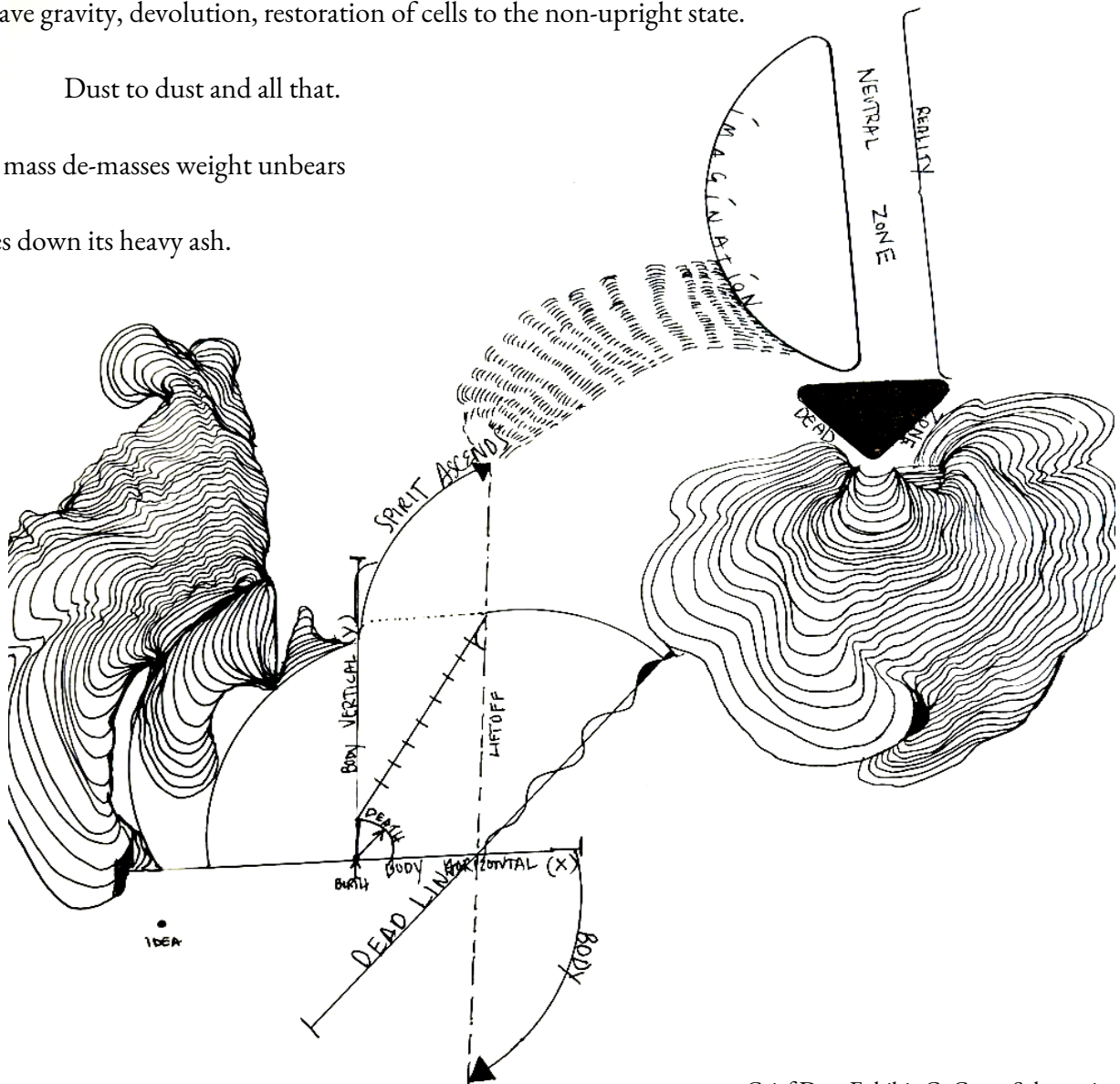
What do these numbered words say about us?

Since you died, I have 877 hand-written journal entries representing 1,980 pages, filling all 220 pages of nine black, hardcover Pentelic 8x10 sketchbooks. Just like you, sitting across from me at countless tables around the city, this table asks more questions than it answers:

1. How does the amount of writing compare to before you died?
2. If I wrote more after you died, does this mean your death is what helped me become a serious writer? To know this, I'd need to compare the amount of journal entries before you died so we can establish a baseline.
3. The data might be deceiving. For instance, 91 entries could be 3 pages per entry whereas 122 entries could represent only a few sentences each. This compels me, for accuracy's sake, to count every single word. Why? Things I did before you died compared to things I did after you died measure loss.
4. How many of those entries specifically mention you, your death, or my own grief?
5. This is absurd?
6. Am I a real writer?
7. How much longer will you be dead?

Why, when humans die  
do bodies go the way of the sun,  
Slipping down the axis  
behind the horizontal.  
Weighty and prone  
grave gravity, devolution, restoration of cells to the non-upright state.

Dust to dust and all that.  
as mass de-masses weight unbears  
lies down its heavy ash.



Grief Data Exhibit C: Grave Schematics

For the six weeks of active dying and the months after Kelly died, I was reduced to decaf. How many cups of coffee did we have together, I wonder. Impossible to know. Impossible to count.

What about coffee dates? Could I count these? I could consult my own archive and my own inadvertent data trail.

Our friendship began on March 17, 2007, and ended on July 14, 2017. These dates also coincided with the rise of smartphones, texting, app-stores, and social media. For this search, I could review bank statements for coffee shops from 2007-2017, cross-reference this against calendars, text messages, blog entries, journals, and meta-data from photos to find if Kelly was present.

I am archived enough and inclined to do this. But this search seems wild. Silly.

I should get clear on what I am looking for.

(x=me)

Another approach:

I could take an average of an estimate.

But I fear

lossiness, model collapse.

If you feed a model with an unclean data set

such as an average of a best guess based on unreliable information (memory)

then review that data (are memories data) again and again,

in proper FOIL order of operations

(first, outer, inner, last)

feeding a memory its own memory by revisiting the memory

well, then,

a model trained on its own data creates new data

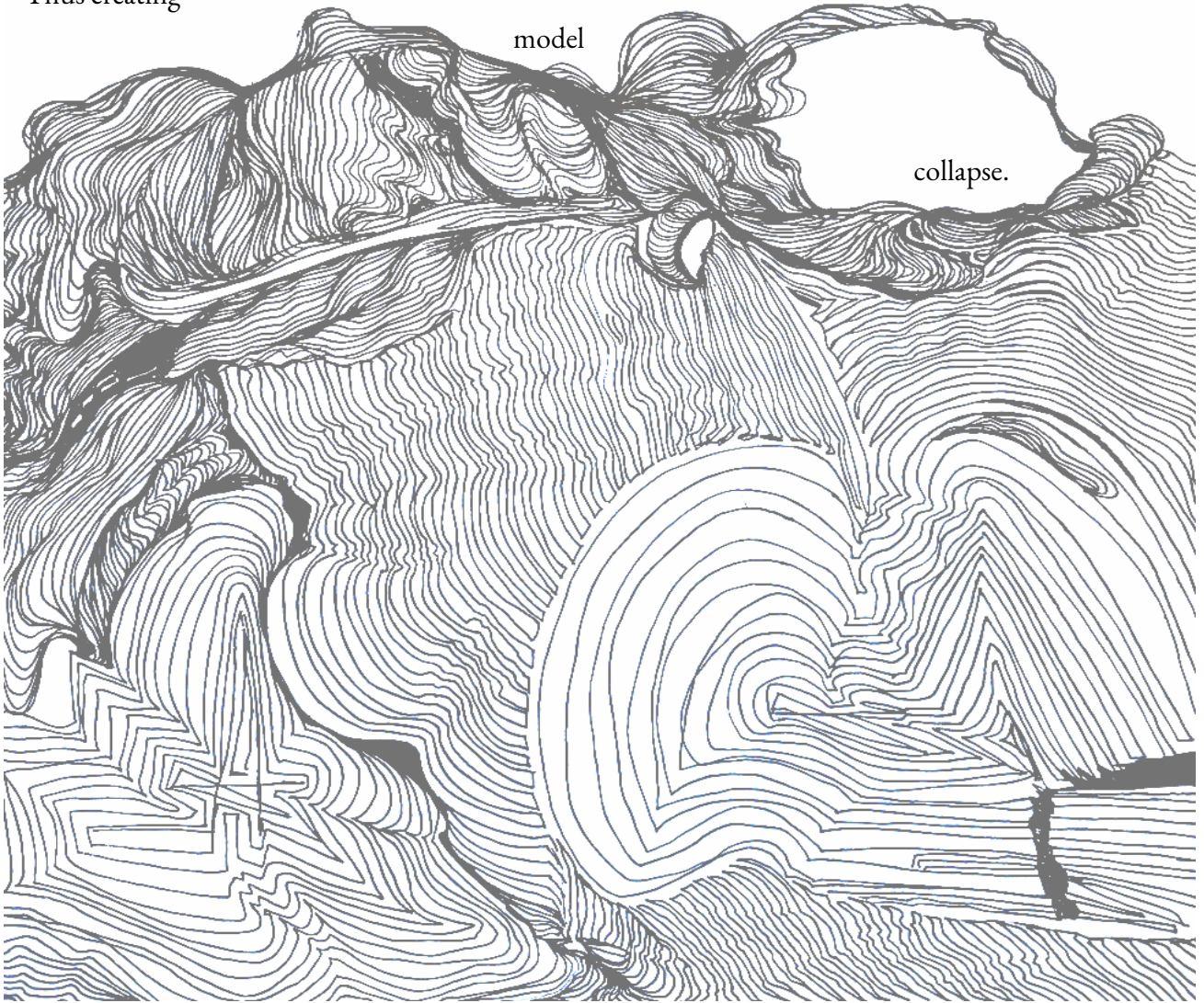
then feeds on that data

and then trains itself on its own data.

Thus creating

model

collapse.

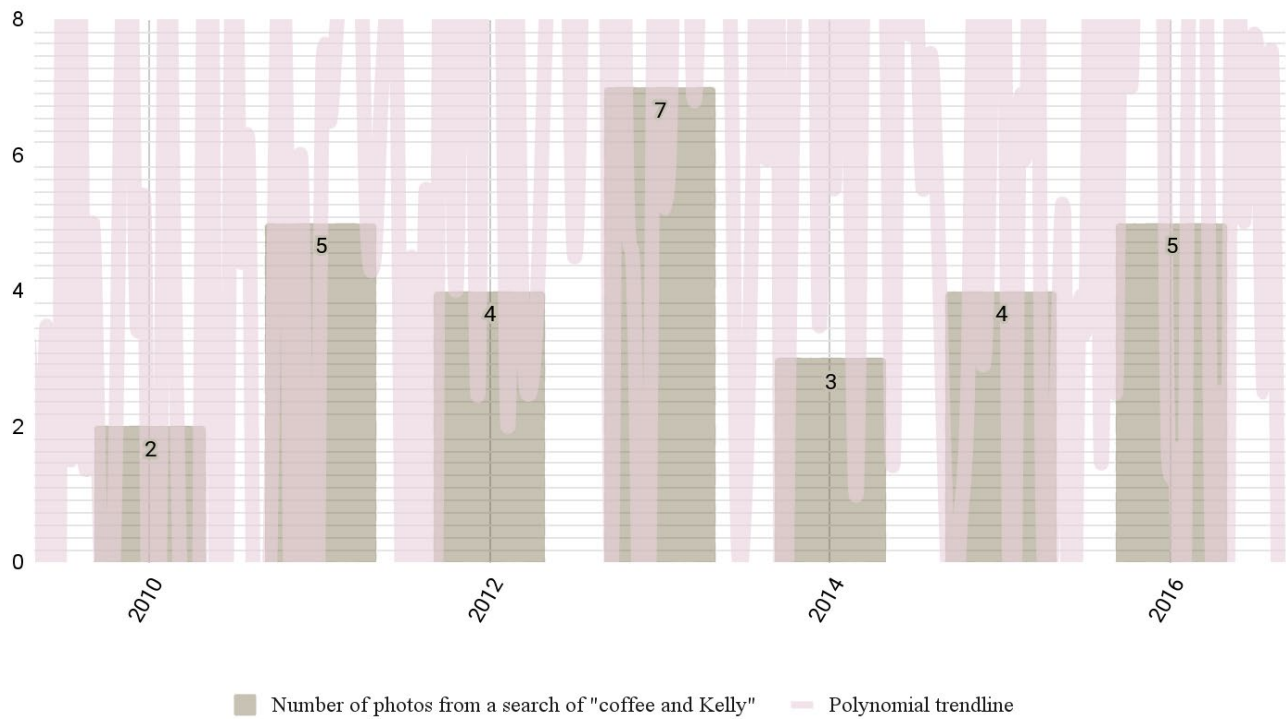


Grief Data Exhibit D: The places we've lived

Let's make this easier. Change the search terms.

I open the portal. I type into my Google photos archive two words as one search, "Coffee, Kelly." 71 photos return that have her face, but the beverage varies. It also returns martini glasses, wine goblets, teacups, coffee mugs and all manner of drinking receptacles. Many, many liquids brought us to the table. 71 photos could not capture the volume, but still, 71 is a number.

I plot this on a spreadsheet because this is concrete data, the year and the number of photos from that year. I then make a chart to examine and extract hidden insights.



Grief Data Exhibit E: Coffee Trendline

I am not satisfied. It's just that I know there were so many more coffee dates.

Like the time I was visiting her in California, and we sat in a coffee shop journaling and she spilled on my journal and signed it. Like the very last time 36 days before she died. Like the waiting in line at the Vivace coffee cart on Broadway while people ogled her chaotic chromatic outfits. Like the time Kelly stuck her finger in the foam of her cappuccino for the picture.

But because her face is missing, Google didn't pull her up in the results. Her face didn't trigger the algorithm; didn't make the query.

Those instances don't appear in the search results. And I feel like I should add them but it feels like cheating. I need clean data. My data is messy.

I am not satisfied.

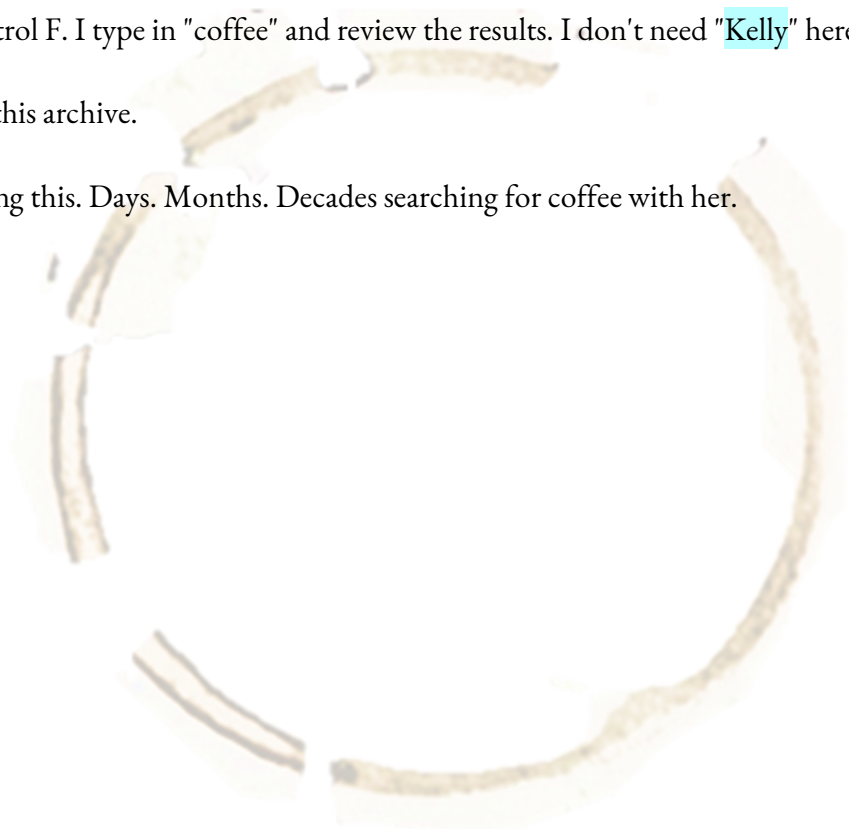


I fan the pages of my Pentalic journals; I am my own human search engine. I spend hours highlighting in teal any time I spot the word *Kelly*, but I tire of this. I wish I could Control F. bitch. This impulse—the one to Control F—reminds me of the digital archive I'd made in Microsoft OneNote.

I abandon my own skimming and open this 7-year-old digital notebook that I've kept since her death. Scribbles, timelines, thoughts, tables, lists, and writing I've collected about Kelly and I are all there in my OneNote, even a page I've titled, "data," where I've created timelines of our friendship, residences, cancer, and her death day. I've find the section I came her for, the photos of my journal pages. Years ago, I photographed several pages of my journal not only to back them up, but to search them for my own writing. To remind myself how I felt. I've already done this work without remembering.

Next to each photograph is a text box of handwritten words, therefore making each journal entry searchable with Control F. I type in "coffee" and review the results. I don't need "Kelly" here, the search for her is a given in this archive.

I will lose time doing this. Days. Months. Decades searching for coffee with her.



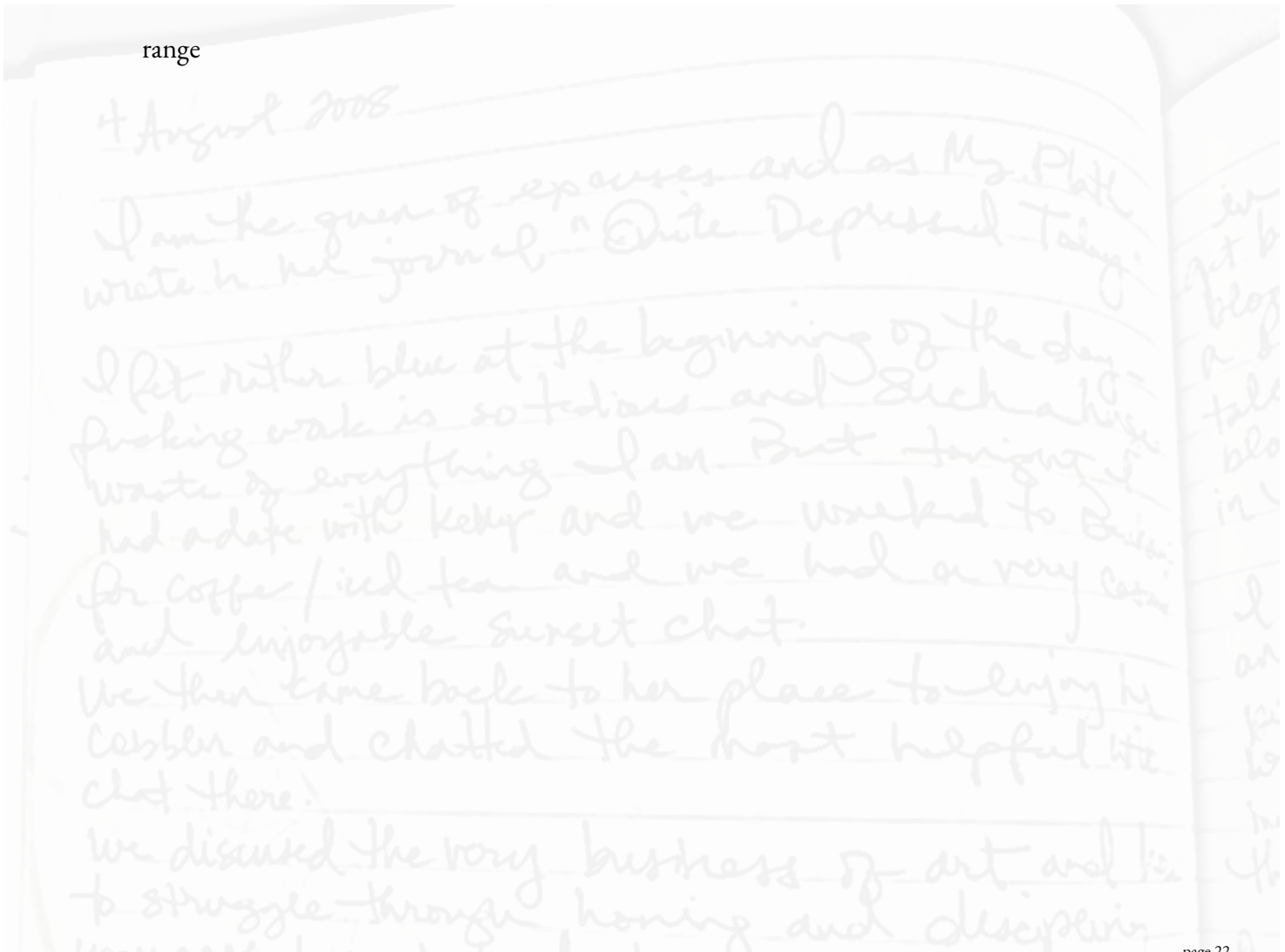
Archive: Pentalic Journal

First mention of Kelly.

August 4, 2008,

I felt rather blue at the beginning of the day—fucking work is so tedious and such a huge waste of everything I am. But tonight, I had a date with Kelly and we walked to Bauhaus for coffee / iced tea and we had a very casual but enjoyable sunset chat. We then came back to her place to enjoy her cobbler and chatted the most helpful little chat there. We discussed the very business of art and how to struggle through honing and disciplining yourself to work hard at your craft and still allow its free

range



Archive: Google photos.

April 6, 2010

Kelly goes to the restroom during a coffee date.

3505167397\_8dab1c270c\_b.jpg

0.8MP1024 × 768

Belle Epicurean Bakery, 4th Avenue



Archive: Pentalic Journal

August 10, 2010

Is this real? Are we still in Cali? We've stumbled into a Finnish spa and are completely transported to Europe. Magically, a live folk band plays. I accidentally put way too much cardamom in my latte and thus ruined it. As well as Kelly's. Oops. Later, we'll go to the hot tubs, but for now we're in a little wooden Cafe with ruined lattes and doing our nothings together. This is what I require in friends—what I've loved forever about Kelly—I can nap; I can talk or not talk; I can refresh myself as I would alone.

On the journal page, a stain from our coffee written in what looks like elementary school block print, Kelly's words in pencil. She'd leaned over and written me a message, upside down to her, facing me so I could read it. Also, a coffee ring.



I'm not finding what I am looking for. I've got more questions. Let's try a new data set. A new question.

In 10 years of friendship—3,772 days to be exact—how many times did I see her face? Absurd. There's no way to know. But I make myself. There has to be something to measure here.

**Step 1:**

**Objective:** Calculate how often you saw a friend over the course of your friendship, or hang time per year (HT/y).

→ 1: Pick a friend. (PF)

◆ =Kelly PF

→ 2: Estimate the number of hang times (HT) with your friend per week (HT/W)

◆ =3 HT/W

→ 3: Use that number to calculate the number of hang times (HT) per year (HT/Y)

◆  $(3*52w) = 156 \text{ HT/Y}$

→ 4: Use that number to calculate the number of hang times per year (HT/Y) over the duration of your relationship in years

◆  $=(3*52w)*10.5y = \boxed{1,638}$

**Result:** I hung out with Kelly an average of 1,638 times over the course of 10 years.



I wait

let the numbers run down my face

give s p a c e

to feel the impact

of the quantity

(nothing)

Maybe if I try another formula.

**Step 2:**

**Objective:** Estimate the number of hours during those hang times (HT) when you physically looked at the person's face, or in person face time hours (IPFTh).

→ 1. Estimate the average duration in hours (h) of each hang time (HT) instance (h/HT)

$$\blacklozenge = 4 \text{ h/HT}$$

→ 2. Using your answer, calculate hours (H) per hang time instance per week (h/HT/W)

$$\blacklozenge = 3 * 4 = 12 \text{ h/HT/W}$$

→ 3. Of the h/HT/W, estimate 50% of that time was spent actually looking directly at her face.

Recalculate the h/HT/W as face time (FT) hours (h) per week (W)

$$\begin{aligned} \blacklozenge &= 12 * (50\%) \\ &= 6 \text{ FT/h/W} \end{aligned}$$

→ 4. Assuming that answer is stable, use the number to calculate how many in person face time

hours (IPFTh) per year (y)

$$\begin{aligned} \blacklozenge &= 6 * 52 \\ \blacklozenge &= 312 \text{ IPFTh/y} \end{aligned}$$

→ 5. Using your answer, calculate how many in person face time hours (IPFTh) over the

duration of your relationship. Kelly and I knew each other for 10.5 years.

$$\blacklozenge = 312 * 10.5 = \boxed{3,267} \text{ IPFYh}$$

**Result:** I saw Kelly's face an average of 3, 267 times.



I am still not satisfied though it is a larger number and that seems like the intended outcome.

Maybe it's the negative space time I'm after.

I reach for this.

**Step 3:**

**Objective:** Estimate how many years of in person face time hours you have missed since your loved one died.

→ Step 1: Calculate how many years since your loved one died, or years since death (ysd)

◆ =7 ysd

→ Step 2: Using the answer from Step 2, #4, that gives you IPFTh/y, multiply by ysd

◆ =7\* 312=2,184 IPFTh missed, so far.

**Result:** I have missed an average of 2,184 in-person face time hours since she died.



While I stumble through this formula, my other women, Niki and Jess laugh downstairs in this house we're staying at for the weekend, marking our thirteenth ladies' weekend together. I check my spreadsheet. How many of those were there?

5 of 13 equals 27.8%.

27.8% finding witchy stores in route

27.8% lounging in kimonos

27.8% setting up altars

27.8% hot-tubbing for hours in your teal bikini

27.8% snacking on charcuterie boards

27.8% gorging on your tiny perfect chocolate chip cookies

27.8% pulling tarot decks

27.8% covering ourselves in essential oils

27.8% cleaning up to En Vouge

27.8% getting carsick on the way back

The reverse being

72.2% of ladies' weekends have happened without you

and that number can only go one way.



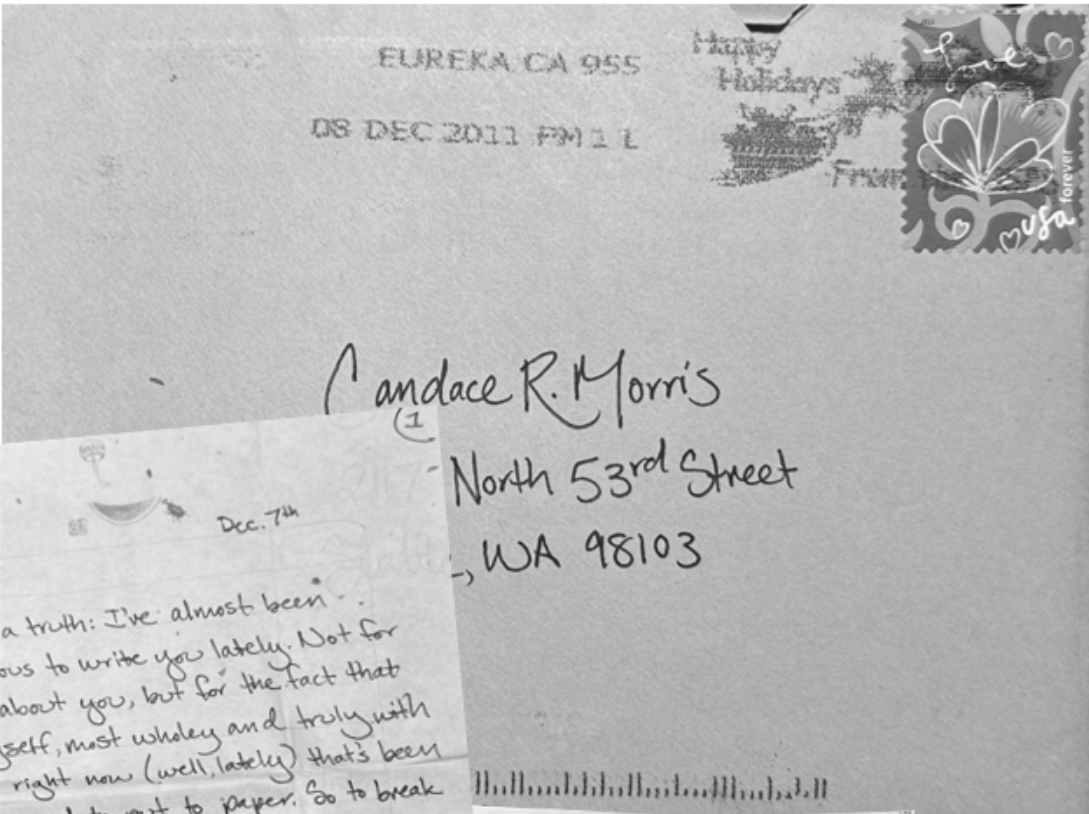
Grief Data Exhibit F: Graph of ladies' weekends

Even as I try to recall your face, I take for granted Jess and Niki's faces, their materiality, their physicality. I will see their faces when I go down to build them a fire. I will try to count how many times I look at their faces while Jessica takes hours during her turn to cook, while Niki keeps her company playing solitaire and pouring wine. Your women, laughing, nursing our lives, giving each other shit and support while trying to make the most of what we have left.

But we feel like a four-legged creature cut off tripod and cannot seem to recalibrate. You would have been laughing hardest.

You are always the something inside the nothing that's missing.

noth ( s o m e t h i n g ) i n g



Dec. 7th

Candace,

Here is a truth: I've almost been nervous to write you lately. Not for anything about you, but for the fact that I am myself, most wholely and truly with you and right now (well, lately) that's been a scary prospect to put to paper. So to break myself in, let's talk about some frivolous stuff, ok?

I decided to join the December Evenings photo group on flickr again this year, but this time, ONLY for a photographic exercise, not for community building (I know, how self-indulged!). I

about need to be working like the sun rises till I break, no rest. And then when takes a vacation and the worst cold I've had since, I feel like a child with fingers in my ears. I'm not, but it does seem like the whole world came crashing down on me. The worst that should be able, nervous in that ravine. Some days I'd sit at the top for not giving up. (and if you thought...)

That's your husband, Sean I'm right with you at our brain-umbilical addressance).

As well.

I had this dream last night that Helen asked me to hang out with at some distant swim club and then on the lawn. She was annoying the hell out of me, but kept insisting on giving me new clothes for each venue. I played along. That is, until I realized I was only hanging with me because I needed someone the could be kinder than. And so I said some words and hopped out of her. Able with all my shopping bags. Dig that, Heidi! The night has officially descended need another sweater, another lemon tea, and something hot near.

as you like coconuts. Always. Dreggs. my love, Kelly

Grief Data Exhibit G: A December letter



Grief Data Exhibit H: What remains when words are gone

I need more numbers to count down.

10 ||||| years

before you die, I notice you for the first time, even though we've met once before. But now, standing by the snack plate in a friend's kitchen where we're having a party—I really notice you. I notice you because we are wearing strangely similar outfits. Pastel-green dresses over ratty blue jeans. Your dress is cotton and fitted; mine vintage polyester and flowy. I note this...how this usually annoys me, but this time I like yours for you, and I like mine for me, and it's strange how much space is emanating off of you. We say nothing of it. I note this, too. Your restraint. Your self-preservation preserving me.

"What do you do,?" I ask.

"I don't have a job right now," you say.

Your husband, standing in the shadows behind you, steps up and proclaims what seems like more than just you and me even though we are the only ones listening. "What you do is not who you are." You look at each other and tear up.

"I am an artist." You say.

At first, I am annoyed by his interjection, but I don't know him, so maybe it's fine. But then I tear up, too. Because you ask me what I do and even though I don't do anything—I am currently unemployed—I get to talking about how the only place I feel wild and free is on the dance floor. Your eyes lock on every word I say. I can feel your attention's effect on me. Like a spotlight turned on, fading the crowd into the dark.

Like taking the stage.

I am artist  
an

9 ||||| years

before you die, Niki is about to move to New York City for grad school, so we plan one more ladies' hang. Four Cali girls living in Seattle, craving a beach day. The sun fades into twilight as it kisses your shoulders and long brown braids. You and Jessica sit, back to the water. I play with the camera and the light. You reach for a sweater and my camera to capture the color of Jessica's hair. We eat monstrous ice cream cones—two scoops! Our stomachs hurt afterward. We laughmoan the entire drive home. We feel so old. I'm 30. You are 28.



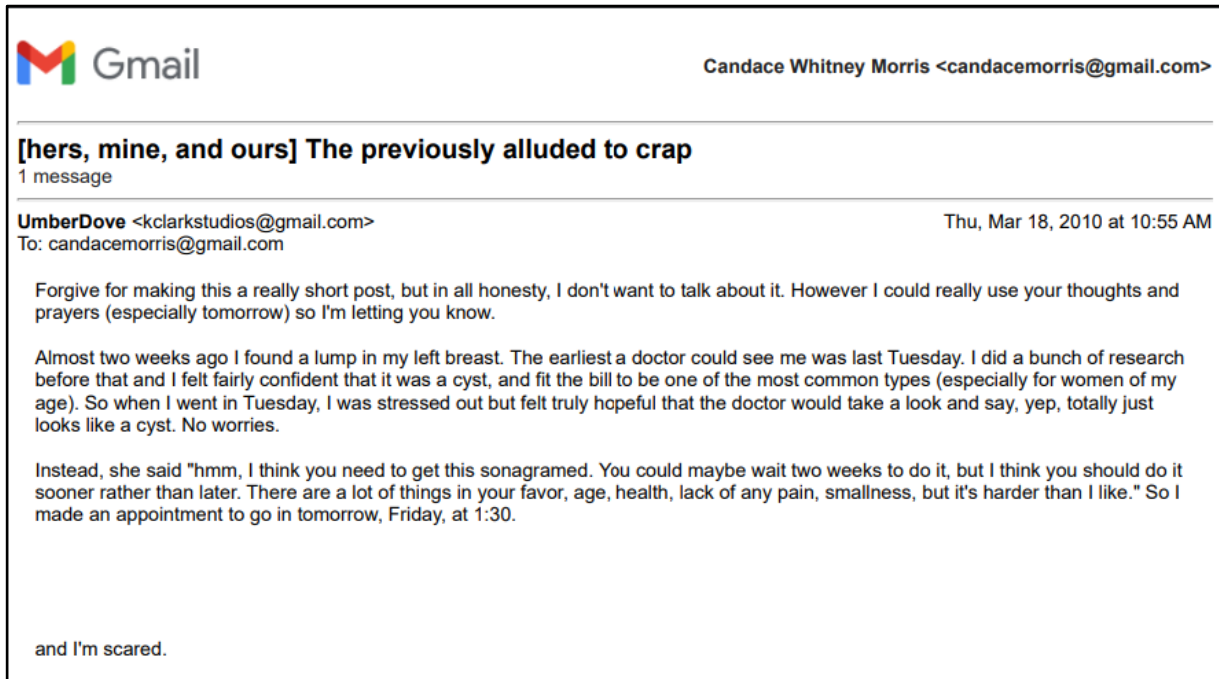
8 ||||| years

before you die, you wait in the lobby of the building on 5th and Pike where I work downtown. You don't make sense here, the way you look. You are on the way to your studio in Pioneer Square, walking from Capitol Hill, and you stop to pick me up for tea and crumpets in Pike's Place. You prop your DSLR camera on the lobby bench and set the timer. You get into position. I am heading down the escalator.



7 ||||| years

before you die, you find a lump. You don't tell me right away. You wait to see someone for a week—the soonest Planned Parenthood can get you in. You expect them to say, "It's nothing," but they don't. That's when you tell me. You tell me in our private blog. It arrives as an email.



(and) I'm | scared

6.5 ||||| years

before you die, you sit at my kitchen table, chemo-bald and emaciated. You and your husband just drove up from Humboldt. You make sweet potato ravioli with brown butter sauce and crispy sage. You teach me how to stuff and fold the pasta. We don't eat until 10 pm and I'm annoyed that we're eating so late.



6 ||||| years

before you die, you drive up to visit me in Seattle, and we're going out to Le Faux for a drag show. One of the queens is a former tenant of yours when you managed an apartment building on Capitol Hill. 115 steps from my apartment building on the same block. But we don't live there anymore. We get ready, exchanging makeup product recommendations, changing outfits, crying with laughter at the new chemo curl grow-out hairstyle nickname—the Hasselhoff. We nurse one very limey gin and tonic you've made us. You aren't really drinking anymore, not since chemo. I shudder off the sight of you just six months ago, a weakened hairless wonder. You're back, baby!



Candace,

May 18<sup>th</sup> 2012

Archive: Kelly's Correspondence

May 18th 2012

Candace,

There are cottonwood poofs in my coffee. We're sitting on the back deck in the sun, glorious sun, eating breakfast. I'm trying to soak up as much as I can before heading indoors for the day--it's a very work heavy weekend. This is always the case when either 1) the weather is tremendous and/or 2) I'm jonesing hard to be in the studio for 12-hour spurts. 4 more months.

So my far-sighted friend: I am off and trying to find my path. Honest recognition always eases my mind, and just addressing that I was anxious about being crushed by the weight of humanity (a.k.a. too many people, too much concrete) helped me look at it and say, "oh, ok, it'll be alright." Moving is a multifaceted thing for me right now.

I have no fucking idea what I'll do about health care up in WA. Here, the vast majority of everything I need (and am supposed to continue needing regularly: MRIs, mammograms, blood work, pills, etc.) gets covered by this section of Medical that I was eligible for. What if we can't afford it in WA, so I just stopped being screened? And then what? This terrifies me. Because people not being able to afford cancer care is real.

--side note: that shirt, the "there is nothing to be afraid of" one? Of course there is a TON of shit to be afraid of, and being a little scared keeps us wiser and safer. But all this??? (arrows to previous bullet) I'm drowning in it. Every single day I worry that I am giving myself cancer again, that it is growing unchecked and undiagnosed and then I worry that my worry is causing even more.

Also, I love that you balked at the shirt, because you are one of the very few people I'd want to sit down with and sort out that debate. So I suppose, gripping a phrase like that, repeating it as a mantra, well, it's a form of self-soothing.

I am ridiculously happy about my little veggie garden, all set up in containers for future mobility. Every morning when we let the dogs out I trot out front with them and begin the close examination of each pot. I truly am just a few years away from the crazy woman who putters around in a house robe and huge sunglasses, chatting with the chard and encouraging the tomatoes, the whole while cats wind around her legs. There is something about gardening that keeps me sane. Or makes me crazy. I'm not really sure which.

So I am writing again on the back deck (with now cold coffee) and this beautiful hummingbird in shades of cream and pumpkin just nearly flew into my breakfast. She looked as surprised as I was but hovered facing me for a second, then zipped off. Totemically, hummingbirds are tiny messengers, with the primary reminder of living out one's joy. Until we moved here, I had always felt neutral on them (kinda like they were too cliché, like the women who love seahorses because they're a horse, in the sea). But there are so many here and its impossible not to smile as they whir by. So I now love them.

Give my love to yourself first, then the extra to the fetus, ok?

Kelly

Give my love to yourself first, then  
the extra to the fetus, ok?

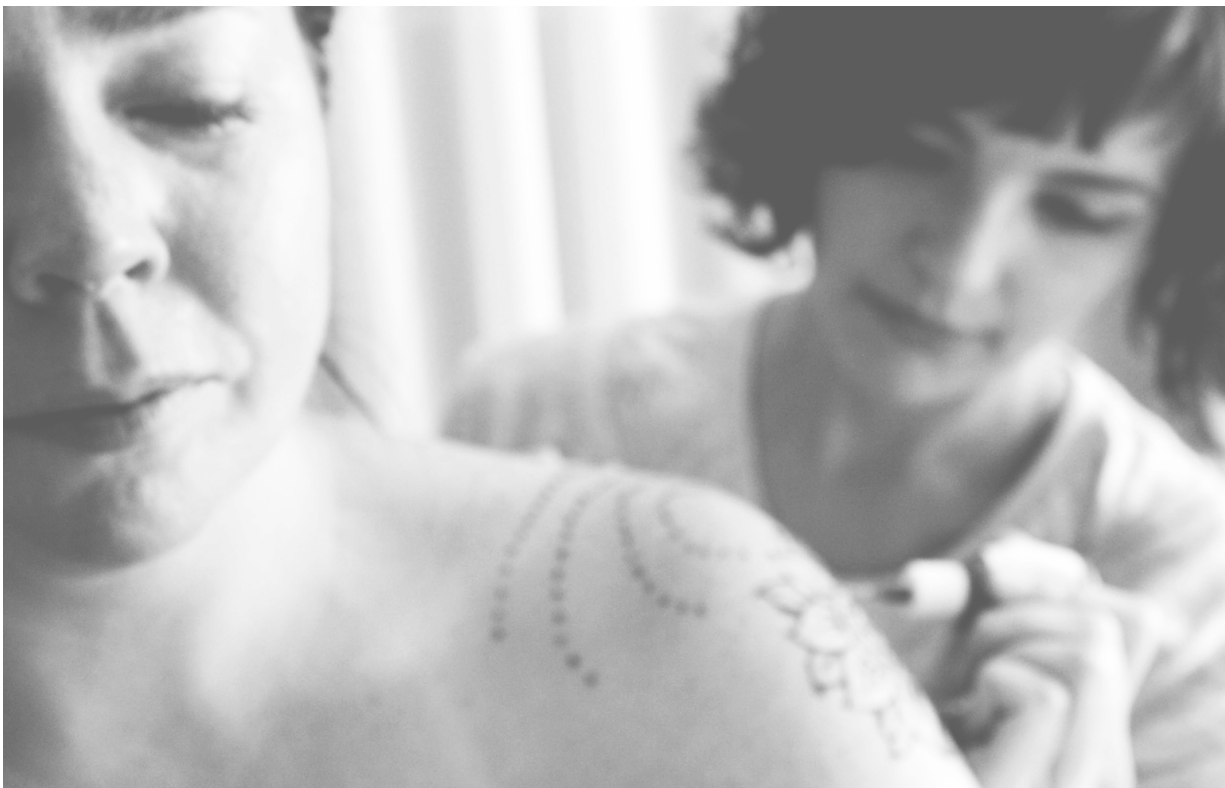
Kelly

nothing  $\geq$  something

where [ $x = (\textit{nothing}) \textit{ to be afraid (of)}$ ]

5 ||||| years

before you die, I sit in a hotel room with you, Joel, and Jess. Jess has been here in Redwood City, California, for the last three months nursing her mom through pancreatic cancer. Denise died six days ago. I am 30 weeks pregnant. I haven't seen you in seven months. I lurk behind my DSLR camera, taking this photo as you dot Jess' skin with henna, drawing the 1,000-petaled lotus for the memorial service tomorrow. I am not sure I've seen love so tenderly embodied like this between two friends. I can tell she really needed us, Dove. I wonder if you feel a relief to be caring for her instead of bearing up under the care of others. In fact, we've not really talked about cancer in a hot minute. (You just taught me what "in a hot minute" means. I'm still confused. Does it mean 'a second ago' or 'it's been a while'? We laugh a lot at this.) I've been meaning to get an update. You seem happy. I will ask you later.



4 |||| years

before you die, I finally get properly high after many failed fumbles with a pipe at parties in the previous year—the year it became legal. We are on our way to Ocean Shores, Washington, with you, Niki, and Jess when I jokingly ask who brought the weed. You and Jess looked at each other in the front seat of your Honda Civic, excited I asked, but then simultaneously defeated when you realize neither of you packed any pot. We decide we will have to bum it off of strangers; a mortifying prospect to me and Niki; a thrilling extroverted challenge for you and Jess.

We spend the weekend drug-profiling people.

"What about them?" I ask as we drive by two older-looking gray haired men sitting on the side of the road.

"Nah. Meth heads," you say. Laughter erupts in the car.

"What about those guys?" I nod to the two men our age at the fire pit next to us on the beach.

"Mmmm, not likely. I see cigarettes and cheap beer," Jess says.

"Saggy pants and ignorance, sure. No weed," you agree.

"There!" Jess points and our eyes follow her finger to four silhouettes roughly 50 feet in front of us, walking along the beach.

"Yes!" you agree. Neither of you explain why, but you and Jess jump up and perform some kind of social geometry, calculating your route to intersect with them very casually. Niki uses her binoculars to assess the situation, and after a few minutes of chit chat, you and Jess guide everyone back to our fire pit. Niki and I are nervous of these strangers, and take another swing of lukewarm rose

to fortify ourselves. You saunter up, smirk at me and then turn and offer snacks and wine to our guests.

Somehow you and Jess casually weave into the conversation that we're bummed to be on our weekend away with no weed. Eventually, they offer their pipe. You block the wind, and I fumble with lighting the bowl. I can't quite get it. You take over.

"Breathe in," you whisper to me.

Back at our cabin, you stand in the doorway giggling, "See! Getting high is not for all the times. Just some of the times!" We both find this hilarious.



3 ||| years

before you die, I drive 10 minutes north of Wallingford to Pinehurst to visit you for lunch. I bring B, and you take her to the garden to harvest cherry tomatoes for our salads. B starts preschool next week. Your broken back from the cancer recurrence is healing, and you just got news that your labs are looking more like a healthy human and less like a cancer patient. Chemo is off the table for now, and we are bursting with acidic, sun-kissed hope; like the strawberries grown in the carbon heat of your straw bales.



# ONE YEAR

---

January 15, 2015

One year ago, If you would have told me where I'd be sitting today, I'm not sure I would have believed you. One year ago I wrote a post here with halting words and shaking hands; today I write with strong fingers and a clear voice. And gratitude. Oh holy gratitude.



One year ago life looked so different. Days were marked in slow increments of physical progress: How long could I sit upright? Could I walk unassisted from the bed to the couch? What was the amount of breath I could pull into my lungs before pain took over? Could I make it through these treatments? Would I be able to create from any place other than my bed?

Christmas 2013 was a sober affair. After months of uncertainty, fear and pain unlike anything I've ever experienced, I received those dreaded words: The cancer had come back, spreading to bones. It felt terrible. It looked even worse. We gathered with friends, while lights twinkled and Bing crooned, but muting everything was the very real question of would I live another year? The thread that ties us to life was exposed for its terrible fragility and the stark reality of mortality stood in every doorway. I was so determined to live, but I also could not escape the knowledge that sometimes, it's not up to determination alone.

Christmas 2014 was a brilliant affair. This year, gathering with those same dear friends, on that same date, was the turning point I hadn't realized I was searching for. It was the overpowering climax of just how much one year can change a person. Just how different life can be. I had spent the Fall silently struggling with markers: "Last year when the leaves first turned yellow, I was in pain and so much fear. Last year when the wind storms came, I could no longer walk my dogs. Last year when we roasted turkey I could no longer drive. Last year when our neighbors put up lights I could no longer stand long enough to feed myself." I spent the Fall striding forward with great joy and momentum in my art, but constantly looking over my shoulder, wondering, waiting. Asking "can I trust this?" Until Christmas. Until I found myself remember that last year, all I could do was lay on her sofa, but this year, OH this holy year, I was dancing madly in the kitchen with my god-niece on my hip, shaking plastic maracas to "the wheels on the bus." Remembering that last year we were wondered if we would have to sell off everything and move in with family, to this year, holding brand new keys to our very first home. From wondering how I could create again, to deepening and broadening my art, to seeing my business grow in leaps and bounds. But perhaps more than anything, as I spun in that kitchen, I realized this: I had moved from fear to hope. To belief. To the big life. To living. Dear god, to living and living well. Amen and halleluia.

If you were to ask me to name a single element, a pivotal event of my life as I had lived it thus far, it would be this: The experience of collective intention and prayer. Last year at this time I was held unlike anything I've ever known. Feeling the potent magic and power of collective love and energy. I swear that has more to do with my healing than any needle I've been pierced with. And when I say "feel" I don't mean conceptually; I mean really, really feeling it. I mean skin prickling, heart slowing, muscles easing, bones regrowing one healthy cell at a time feeling it. It changed me, shifting some of those deep rooted trust issues, opened my eyes to the sheer power of us all. The raw energy of love is an experience I wish every soul on this planet could know. I think humanity would radically shift course if we each felt that kind of agape love, that kind of pure desire for healing. It changed me. And now, one year later I am made of water and sinew and bone and blood and love and golden light and great, great intention.

One year later I sit on my sofa, sipping the great trifecta of coffee, tea and water. Today I will take the pup out for a hike on the mountains I see from my living room window. I will unpack a few more cardboard boxes. I will finish painting the upper studio because this new life is so miraculous that our new house holds two studio spaces for me. I will light candles and smudge bundles and text friends and watch some absurdly salacious TV. And over all of it I tell you this: I will take joy everywhere I can find it. I will give gratitude for every breath. I will live for the living and pray that I find ways every day, to give back to all I've been given.

\* \* \*

- Umber

36 Comments · 26 Likes · Share

*tags /* cancer, healing, I am a fighter

2 || years

before you die, we raid Niki's designer sunglasses collection and ring in the new year. I don't have anything sparkly, so I borrow your spaghetti-strapped sequin tank top. You just bought a house out in North Bend, the farthest we've lived from each other in Washington. You didn't ask me to join you while looking at houses and didn't ask the group for help packing or moving. Something about your husband saying we are grown-ups now and don't need friends for that.

Is it just (x) or are things starting to feel



d i s t a n t

between us?

(x=me)

I check the archives to explain why I might not have toured homes with you or helped pack and move.

I have to figure out why in order to prove to (x) it wasn't what I fear it is.

All I can find in the archives,

All I can remember

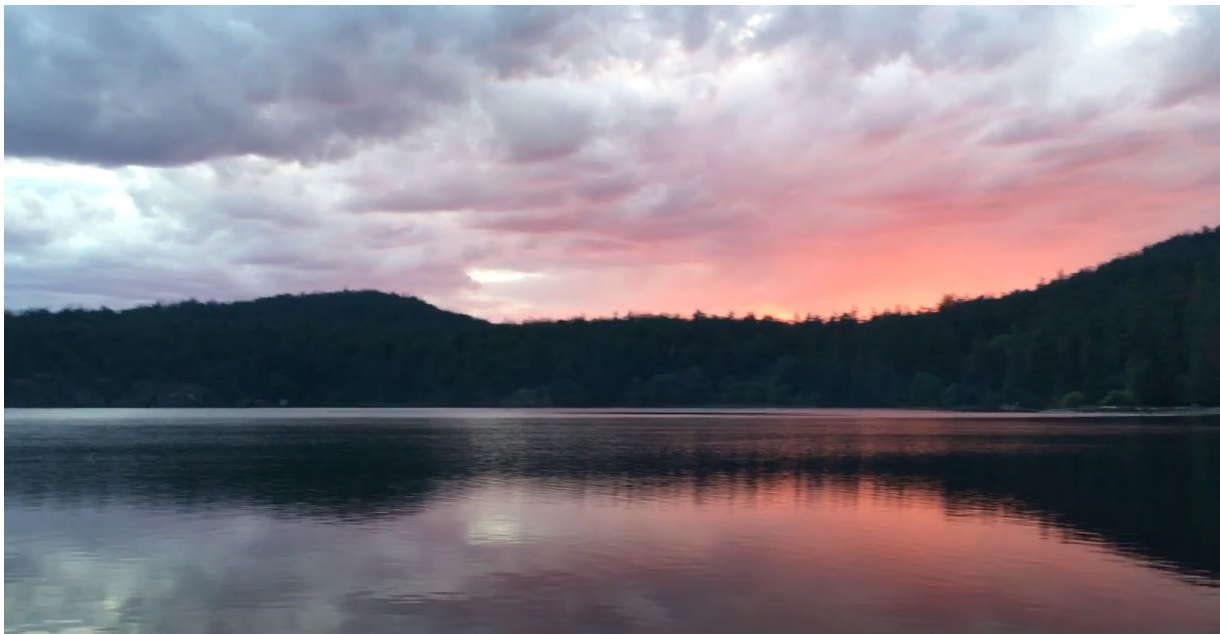
is that B had a bad flu.

All I know is I was sick with worry,

But I can't find you there.

1 | year

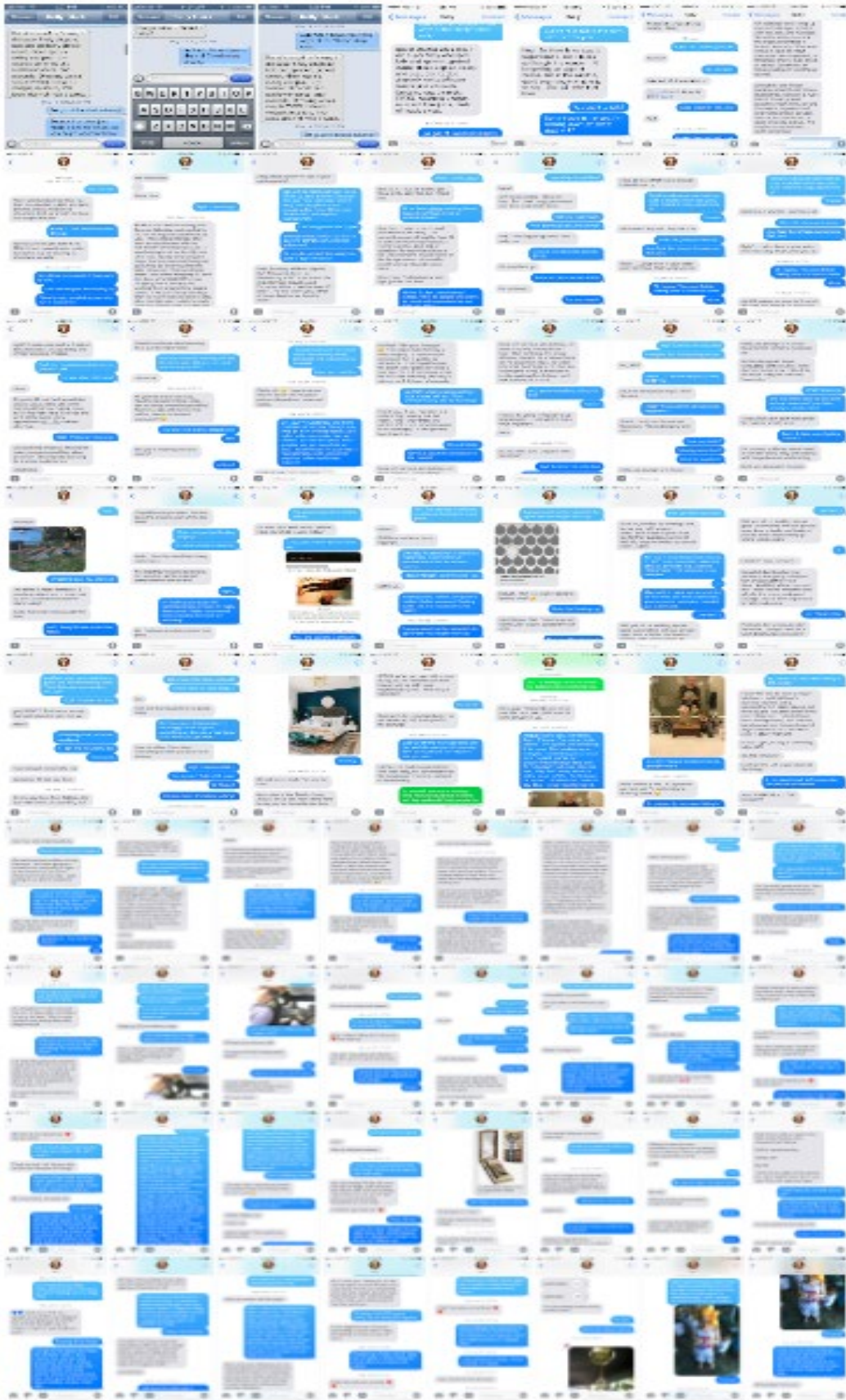
before you die, I have too much gin on a couples camping trip to Orcas Island, Washington. We watch the sunset. The group banter escalates, and I start to shut down. I turn to fill my drink, but sobs come instead. I rush off and shut myself up in the tent trailer. I can't stop crying. I feel so stupid and small. I fall down a pit of loathing. I am very far down, sobbing, my head resting on the table, face buried, eyes closed; I can't look at anyone or anything. I am in my own dark cave. Minutes or decades pass. Joel must have followed me in, now sits with his arm around me, silent. I hear the screen door open and shut. You lean over me and whisper in my ear. I can't make out what you are saying. In a few moments, the darkness doesn't feel so pervasive. More like a contained orb hanging from a branch of a Redwood.



11 iiiiiiiiii months

before you die, your husband posts a video on Facebook of you picking blueberries, popping as many in your mouth as make it into your basket as you dance a goofy jig. You text to see if I want to come to the u-pick and bring B, but she's at preschool, and I am working. Your cancer markers are finally lowering again. You are cleared for horseback riding for the first time in years. I text you to see where we should go eat for my birthday, our couples ritual. The summer stretches out before us.



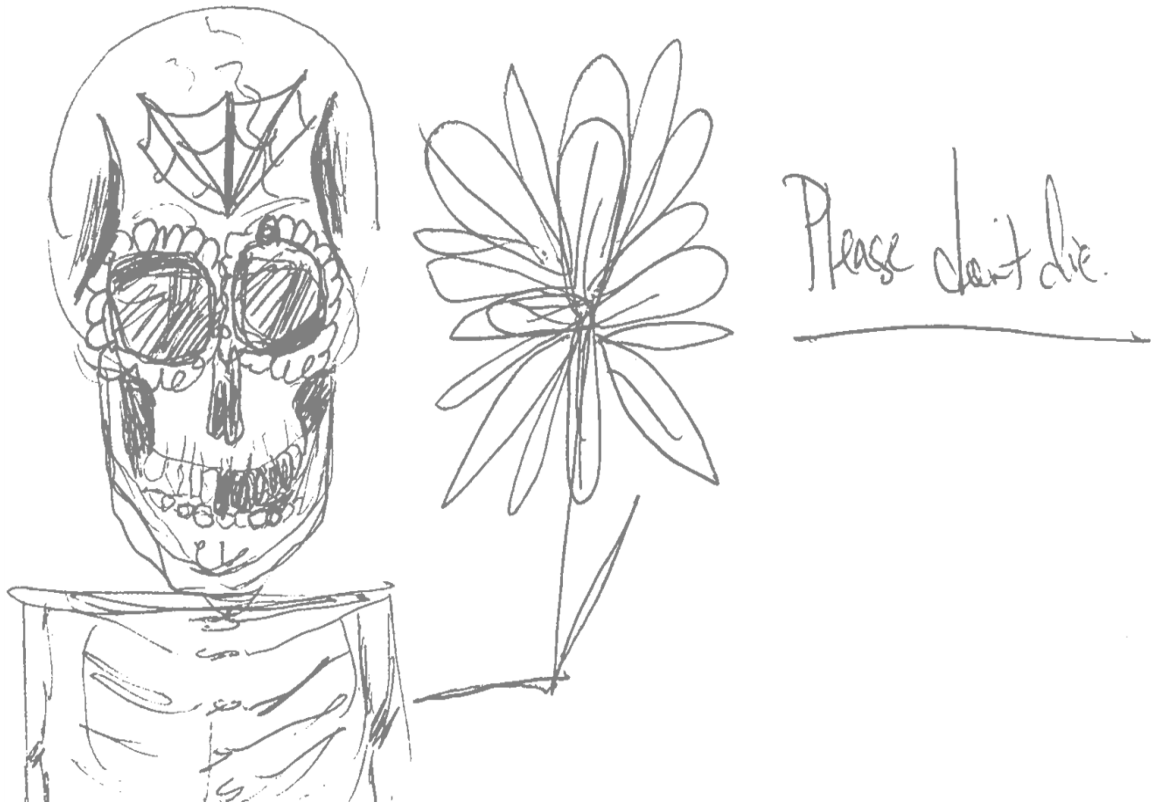


Grief Data Exhibit I: Text Quilt

Alternative title:  
Quick! Grab screen shots  
of all your texts  
before Apple "backs them up"  
but doesn't  
make it possible  
for you  
to access them  
unless you restore your phone  
to the update from years ago  
and lose all the living since then.

9 iiiiiiiii months

before you die, I sit in your house for our annual Día de los Muertos celebration, but this year, you are not faffing about hosting and serving up hearty stew in ceramic bowls. This time, you are in your bedroom, sick from your chemo infusion. You said to come over anyway, that it would be a comfort just knowing we were there, even if you couldn't be with the group. Allison and I do the traditional Catrina makeup; it's usually you and I painting our faces. She asked me if I thought you would be okay, but I sense the worst. There is a new cancer spot on your skull, and I am so angry that you are still dealing with this. Can this be happening? I draw a skull in my journal. Next to it, I write, "Please don't die."



## A MANIFESTO OF SORTS

---

January 26, 2017

I drink my coffee either black or the color of malted cream, thick with rice milk, a dollop of coconut oil and a scrape of vanilla bean pod. And I believe no coffee ever tastes as good as the one brewed outdoors.



I'm a sucker for lemonade stands, never able to drive past but forever skidding to a halt, digging in seat cushions for change, and buying whatever flavor of sketchy, corn syrup based tartness is begin sold. I rarely drink it, but I love me a young entrepreneur.

I have a mouth like a sailor and zero inclination to change.

There is no place I feel safer - physically, emotionally, energetically - than deep in the woods, with no one but my dogs by my side. There is no place I feel able to let down the carefully constructed guards than with the trees as my witness and sentinels.

4 iii months

before you die, you and I stand on the cliff of Doe Bay on Orcas Island, Washington, overlooking the Puget Sound, our bodies steam from just exiting the hot springs. We open our towels, wingspan to wingspan, and let our nakedness breathe in the sea air. We face the ocean in silence. The cliff is steep, the surf gently laps the little beach below. It's cold and pitch black, save for a tiny bit of Seattle's light peeking over the silhouette of the neighboring island, illuminating it from behind. How I crave these moments alone with you; your presence quiets my incessant social fatigue; your attention a reassurance of my lovability.

"That looks like Te Fiti, lying on her side," I say, pointing to an island backlit by distant city lights. You don't catch the reference. My 4-year-old has dictated my movie watching these days. You haven't seen the movie Moana yet, so I tell you how Te Fiti laid down on her side, her hips and breasts forming the island's silhouette.

You promise to watch it soon.

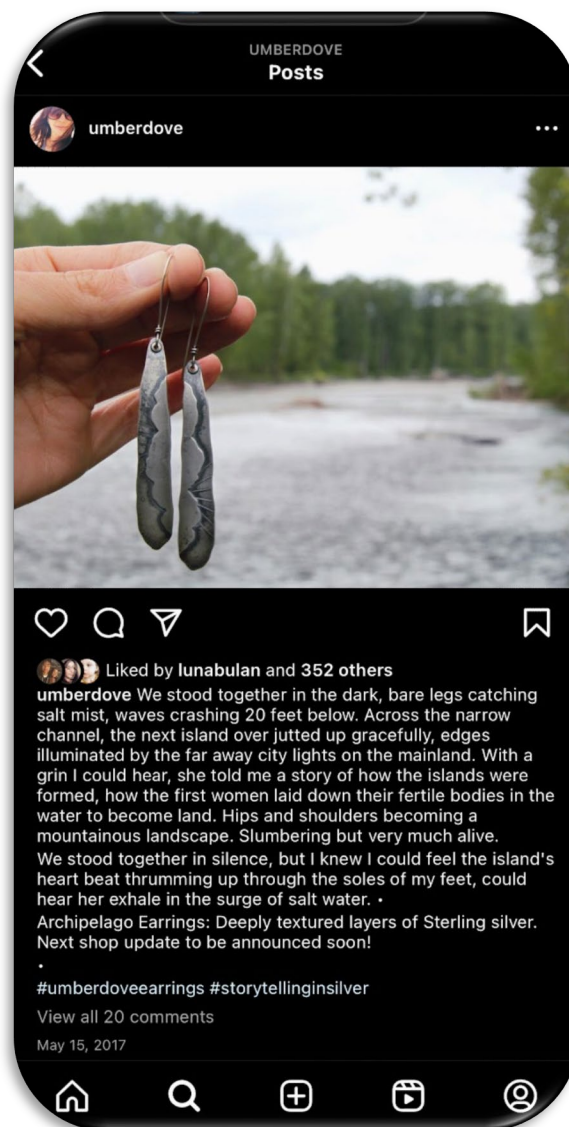
3 iii months

before you die, I sit next to you and your husband on a turbulent flight. You are passed out asleep on his shoulder during this red eye coming back from your first trip ever to Maui. He told me in confidence yesterday that you were scared this would be your only trip. Of course it's not, we agreed between us. She's being silly, our faces said. Joel and I switched rooms with you two so you could have the best room in the house, a view of the ocean. You don't order anything at your birthday brunch with the girls at a Frida-themed restaurant. Looking at you now, you seem small and vulnerable, and I note how strange it is to see you leaning on him in that way. Noting how much more there is to learn about you.



2 ii months

before you die, you post on Instagram about our Te Fiti moment at Doe Bay. I tear up privately when I read it from the shame of how much I need to see myself in your posts these days. You feel hard to reach, and I wonder if you are tired of me. Something feels off. I've already unfollowed you on Facebook for my own anxiety levels. I ponder texting you for assurances, but I chicken out.



7.....weeks

before you die, you stand on a chair in my new kitchen on moving day. We've just bought our first house. You insist we line the cabinets with paper before unpacking the dishes and mugs (always your job over our years of moving). Driving to buy the paper, you ask me Niki to accompany you to a soul retrieval next month. We sit in silence for a minute, baffled. What's soul retrieval? Then we all burst out laughing at ourselves and the spiritual shit we do now.

You walk back into the house, arms full of rolls of sticky paper, and stop to configure the furniture puzzle. You take a minute and then conduct the group; *Joel, push the couch to the back window, get a side table, now move the rug, put the chair over in this corner. Jess, hold that pronghorn there.*

"What do you think," you ask me as Jess holds the taxidermy in place. You always ask.

"Perfect."



6.....weeks

before you die, we are in a shaman's houseboat on Lake Union. The air is thick with smoke from burning sage, and I'm a bit nauseated by the summer heat and the rocking boat. This woman is cawing like a crow, and you lie on the carpet next to her. You asked me to come because I am the scribe and you want a record, so I write down every single thing you say, that the shaman sees. Niki's job is to keep you present and grounded. This is hard for you, we can tell you want to disembodily into the trance, deepen into the vision.

"Keep your eyes open," Niki gently nudges again and again, touching your arm tenderly. Your big brown eyes fix on her face.

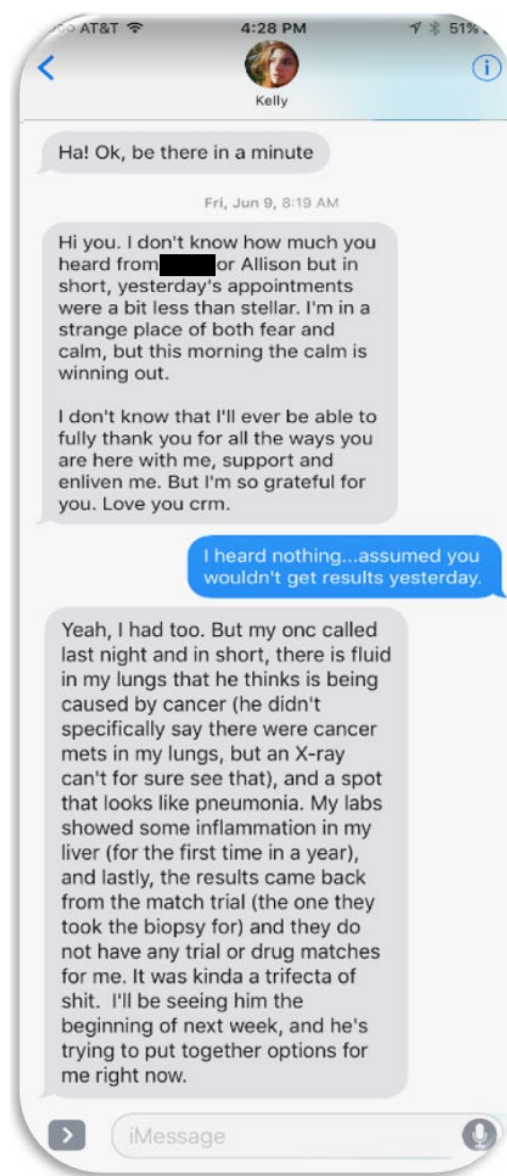
"Stay here, Kelly. Stay with us."

5.....weeks

before you die, you text me that the fluid in your lungs likely has mets. I am furious for you. Text you back all the right supportive things. Deep down, I'm cut that her friend and Allison know first. I feel like shit for feeling jealous and rejected at a time like this. But I am haunted by an unanswerable question:

When did I get

d  
e  
m  
o  
t  
d  
d



on the phone chain?

Archive: Microsoft OneNote

June 9, 2017

On a spontaneous coffee date with Kelly yesterday, she told me that she was on her way to get her lungs X-rayed, that they'd felt off since Maui. Well, this morning brought terrible news. Not only does she indeed have fluid in her lungs, but her oncologist also thinks it's due to cancer somehow. There is also a twinge of pneumonia. Also, there's a new spot of inflammation on her liver for the first time in over a year, and ALSO her liver biopsy came back and she's not a match for any of the trial drugs. Just a trifecta of shitty, shitty news.

I am sitting here at the Wayward coffee house. What does this mean? I feel panic, I want to DO something, but there is nothing to do but feel this, to let this wash over me.

The news isn't that Kelly is going to die, but that's the subtext we all hear. I am drinking decaf for fuck's sake. I can't breathe.

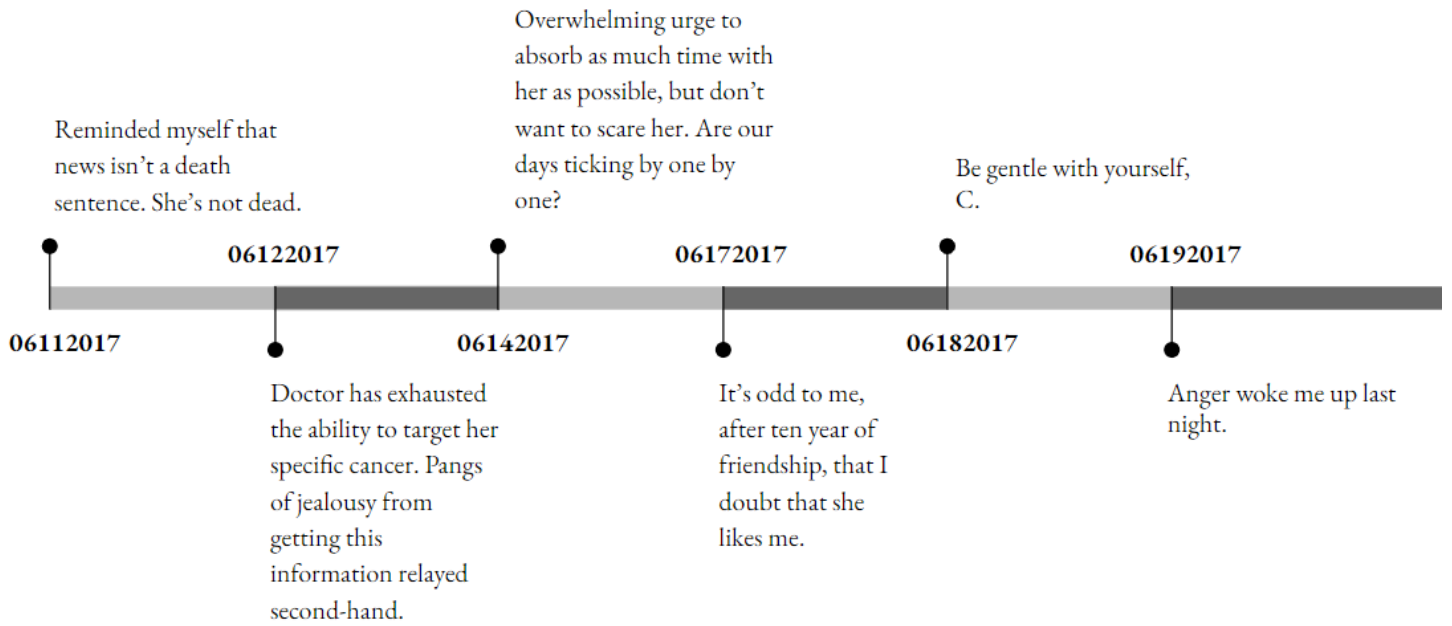
11 June 2017  
Archive: Pentalic Journal

11 June 2017

Kelly received awful news Friday (Thurs.) There is fluid in her lungs that we don't know is malignant plus a bit of pneumonia. They also found a new inflammation on her liver for the first time in a year. Plus, the trial for which she had a liver biopsy to see if she matched anything came back with zero matches.

The news has rippled through the group with alarming emotion. I went to brunch with Allison yesterday and she's in such a different place that it made me realize how hard this might become—to allow everyone to process as they need to. But by my interpretation of Allison's thoughts, she's acting as if it's a sure thing that Kelly is going to be dead this year—this month! I'm annoyed by that AND find no comfort in it. I guess a lot of my own processing is taking into account how it's going to make Kelly feel. She's not dead.

I was in shock for 5 or so hours, distracted and slow at everything. I felt recalibrated in the afternoon and reminded myself that the news isn't anything more than news, the next step in the journey, the new treatment we'll find, the next hope. Will we survive it? How will it change us?



4....weeks

before you die, we stand bare footed on the cold stone of our entryway, saying goodbye for the night.

You've lost a lot of weight and seem girded against some unknowable pain. Joel grabs you for a hug.

You let him hold you fiercely and hug him back with the little strength you can muster. You and Joel

are almost the same height—tall trees. Your husband and I look at each other with sad eyes as he

gathers your flip flops. Joel keeps holding you, and I'm about to tell him let go, you're hurting her, but

then I don't. The moment belongs to just you two. I watch and think about how much he loves you. I

know he's been bargaining with the devil, offering up the lives of other people in place of yours. You

two with your strong hands that can make something out of nothing, both born of the forest, happiest

when at the top of a tree or mountain or tromping through the woods alone, undetected, hidden from

sight.

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Whatever the  
fuck this is, we  
are doing it  
together.

She can't keep  
anything down,  
not even water.  
Her eyes aren't  
working  
together. She  
can't stand up.  
WTF is  
happening.

What is this  
place?

How the fuck  
do I get off this  
ride?

Any reality  
where Kelly is  
healthy and  
living her life is  
obliterated.

Finally,  
morphine.  
Though  
unbearable to  
see her so absent  
and reduced.

2 ..weeks

before you die, I watch you sob in front of me for the first time ever. I visit you at the hospital while you're getting yet another sudden infusion of IV fluids because you cannot seem to stay hydrated. I bring food: a BLT for your husband and a green juice for you. A hospital consultant comes in to talk about next steps, holding up a three-fold glossy pamphlet. I don't know what's happening or why she's saying the word hospice. She finally leaves. You suddenly sit up in your hospital bed and wave your arm around, lassoing the air above your head like a salty drag queen.

"This? This is all bullshit!" you exclaim.

We all laugh hard at this unexpected outburst. Then just as suddenly, you deflate, curl into your long legs, body starting to shake from sobs. I am stupefied. You don't do this, break down in front of me, make a scene, demand to be comforted, take up the emotional space in the room. So when you, my strong-as-a-Redwood friend, can't keep your unwavering optimism from breaching, when the fear of dying, so tightly coiled up inside like a cobra, strikes with precision and fury—that's when I feel the earth shift, and I sink onto the foot of your bed. He strokes your hair. I hold your feet. Tears fall in silence.

1 . week

before you die, I bring B with me during my scheduled visit. We've all signed up for slots of time; you've asked that someone be with you at all times. She and I walk down the hallway toward your bedroom when she stops, turns, and buries her tiny face in my skirt. I kneel down. *What is it?* She doesn't want to go in. *Why?* She doesn't know. I feel it too, but I say instead that *there isn't anything to be afraid of, Auntie Kelly isn't going to die today.* She runs in, crawls up on your lap, not careful about blocking your oxygen tube, and snuggles in. I'm worried she's hurting you. I almost make her move. I snap a photo instead.



3 "" days

before you die, I get a rare moment alone with you. It's our last conversation. I want to hold your needs higher than mine, but I am suffering for reassurances. My mind swirls with doubts, maybe you stopped loving me as much as I love you. Confused at myself for feeling so insecure. Do you even know I am here, crave my presence like you seem to crave others? Allsion said she got to talk to you about death—the first time you signal you might see it coming. Your friend said you asked her to extend her stay. But you ask nothing of me.

I feel like we are all vultures, swarming.

I sit beside you on the bed cautiously, pick up your limp, yellowing hand. You open your one good eye, see it's me and force out a weak greeting.

"So...what's new?"

"Oh, nothing much," I laugh at the absurd question, the one you ask me every time you sit down with me for coffee.

"The morphine...I was scared," you say. "But I had to do it...it feels good...to breathe...easier." Your words take what feels like forever to form and release. I hold my breath to give you space.

"It's not...what I...expected....it's like...getting hit...by a... truck."

I want to ask, *What? What isn't what you expected?* I want to ask *Death? Or morphine?* I want to ask, *what do you see?* I want to ask, *do you feel something coming? How do you want to go? Should we say goodbye? Who should take care of your art?* I want to ask so many questions now that the morphine

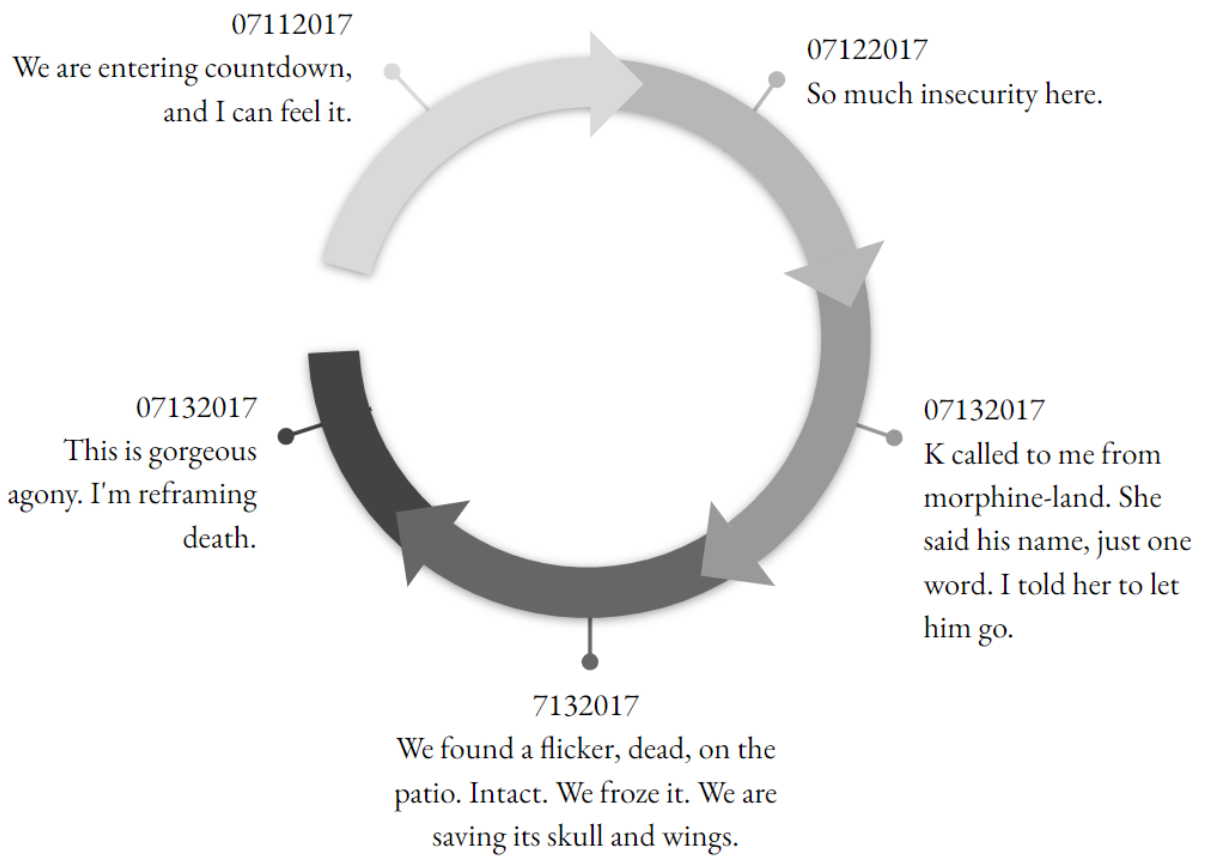
has made you comfortable enough to be with us for short stints. But I don't ask you any questions.

Instead, I whisper, after a noiseless few minutes,

"I can feel you wanting to say more."

I tuck your hair out of your face, adjust the oxygen tube curling around your ear. You nod, eyes closed.

"But don't," I say. "I already know."



2` hours

before you die, I wake up and instantly check my phone for any news about your night. I put on my glasses and see the text I've been dreading.

Sent two hours ago, at 5am, from your husband.

*Kelly had a rough night.*

*We've been up with her since*

*3 am trying to figure out*

*how to calm her. Hospice is*

*on the way. She is sleepy right now,*

*but has been struggling greatly to breathe.*

"No. no. no. no." I whisper and keep scrolling.

Another text sent at 6am:

*We may need a little assistance.*

*Call when available.*

"Shit," I wake up Joel and call your husband.

An hour later, we pick up your sisters from the airport, that's the assistance needed. I text your husband that we are on our way, but he does not respond.

The sun blinds me on I-90 as we drive east to your house. Your sisters don't know what kind of shape you are in, that you are on oxygen, yellowed, gaunt, gaspy, keeping only the left eye open for some unknown reason, and haven't eaten more than a square of avocado in two days. I am about to tell them when they ask us to stop at a grocery store—they want to cook for you. I text him again,

*Stopping at the store. Need anything?*

He does not respond.

In the grocery store parking lot, Joel and I wait in the car. His phone rings. I can't see who it is.

He answers and after several seconds and says "Okay." Then he hangs up.

"What?" I ask. "Who was that?"

"That was Allison. Kelly's dead."

My hand covers my mouth.

Her sisters walk out of the store.

Joel gets out to tell them.

I close my eyes.

I hear her baby sister scream.

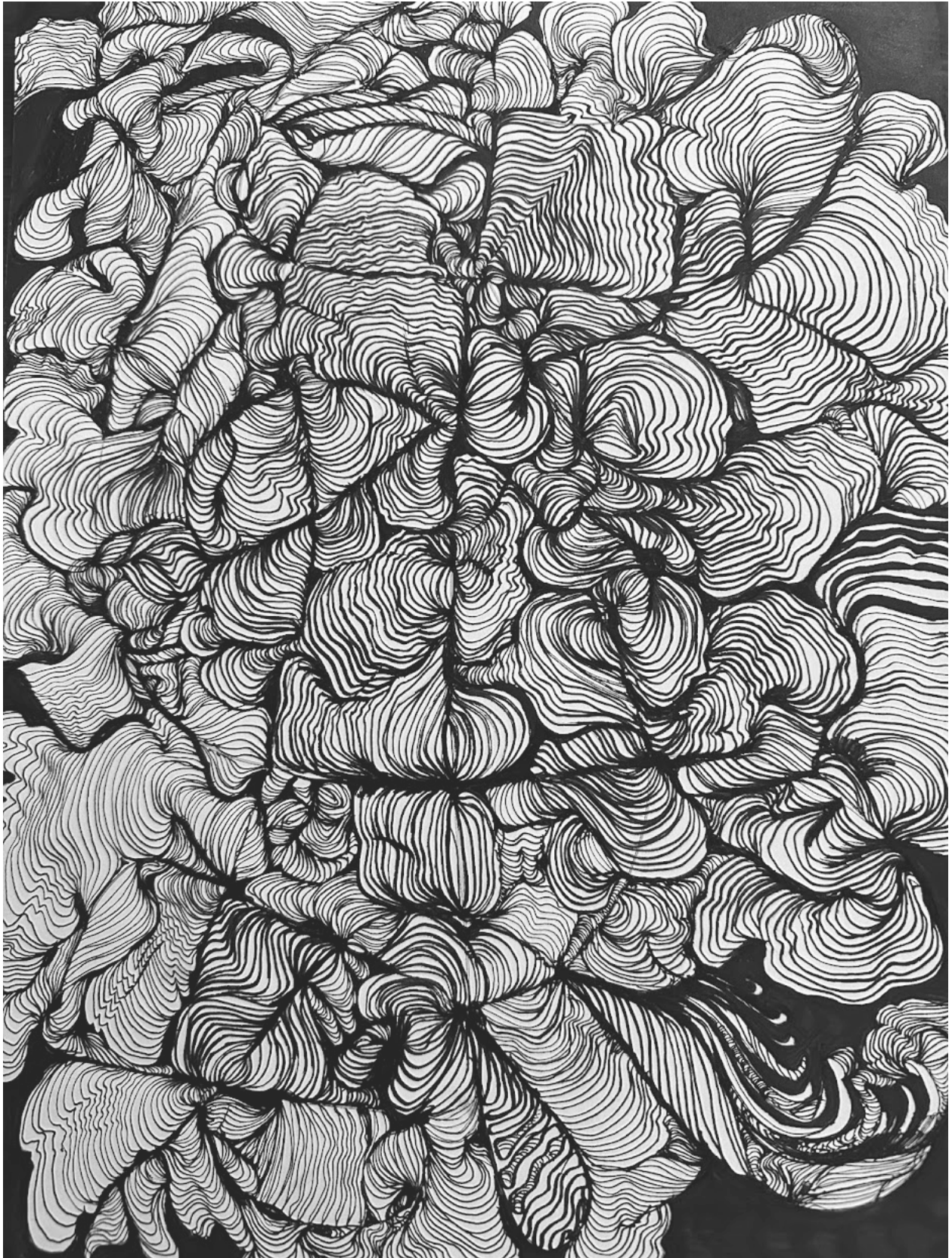
Day of: 07142017

Time of: 0938

Age of: 37

Latitude at time of: 47.49566000

Longitude at time of:-121.78678000



Grief Data Exhibit J: Variable Proximities

## Section II: Diagrams and maps [of distance]

[Re]searching the gathering s p a c e

nothing

(01101110 01101111 01110100 01101000 01101001 01101110 01100111)

survived

(01110011 01110101 01110010 01110110 01101001 01110110 01100101 01100100)

except

(01100101 01111000 01100011 01100101 01110000 01110100)

There was light, this painful light bouncing off the freeway into my eyes as we sped toward her house.

There was her driveway, then her dad, then her porch, then her front door, then her couch, then our friend, then her mom,  
then her husband, then her friend,  
then there was finally her.  
She was minutes gone.

There was me, climbing on the bed with her, wailing as I grabbed her face and said, “You did it. You did it. I’m so proud of you.” There was no memory of me wailing, someone told me later. There was only me, sky high from relief, buzzing close to pure universe, lying nearly on top of her, in awe of her. There was her, she’d done it on her own terms, with her people, in her home. There was the heady smell of lavender and frankincense oil we poured over her beautiful dead skin. There was a pool of oil in her belly button.

There was the mixing taste of salt tears and bourbon as we passed the bottle, washed her body, and sang together.

*Come with me, my love, to the sea, the sea of love.*

There was our own private ocean of grief, her closest gathered in the depths, pushing her body out to sea. There was no more not crying.

There was the off switch of the thrumming oxygen machine.

There was my 5-year-old, the next day, sitting on the newly vacant hospital bed sent by hospice care, playing with the mechanized head rest.



There was the medical supply company coming to pick it up.

nothing

01101110 01101111 01110100 01101000 01101001 01101110 01100111

survived

01110011 01110101 01110010 01110110 01101001 01110110 01100101 01100100

except

01100101 01111000 01100011 01100101 01110000 01110100

something

01110011 01101111 01101101 01100101 01110100 01101000 01101001 01101110 01100111

(inside the nothing)



Grief Map Exhibit A: Between the something and the nothing

I'm about to scream.

I'm sitting between her husband and Jess. We've thrown a party instead of a funeral, a death disco instead of a memorial. Some people were appalled at the name.

Another friend is at the microphone. Someone yells "fuck cancer." We are out of our minds with rage, we must find a way to work through the rage before it eats us alive. She tells us to fill our whiskeys and prepare for a collective scream. People shuffle uncomfortably.

We three instinctively grab our hands, tethering so we can succumb fully to the scream's promised purge. Holding tight, we inhale from the generous tank of grief, close our eyes, and scream. The room explodes with sound, reverberating off the high ceilings of the artist loft we rented on a sweltering August night.

Her widow's scream is a yell: hot, loud, low. Jess' more a howling moon cry. My scream escapes nearly soundless, but I feel ripped open as it exits my body, its origin a newly excavated place hollowed out by her death. Muddy water rises up my veins from that place, defying gravity and other rules of this dimension, it cores me in its course and escapes as a beast, jaw unhinged, throat and heart shredded by loss. A loss so fresh I can't fathom it, but one I'm forced to face; confusion as an out-of-body experience. But then, the escape of the scream slams me back into my bones.

I peel open my squeezed-shut eyes, now wet and leaking, the same way they watered after I criedpushed my daughter out of my body for hours, five years earlier. And just like the fresh tiny baby girl laid on my bare breasts instinctively sniffing out nourishment, death planted itself into my chest that night.

The screams resonated well after the voices stopped creating them. The tone reverberated our pain into a prayer. Anger turned into god. Loss made salvific.



Grief Map Exhibit B: Scream

Archive: Pentalic Journal

29 August 2017

Alas, alack. The anxiety continues to rise and seems to grow. This morning, I was up at 4am and finally fell back asleep at 6am, just trying to sit with the anxiety—yes asking why, but also letting it alone. Letting myself feel all the weight of things I'm carrying and seeing how much it really is and just wondering at myself. *Look at how strong you are and all you've endured this summer.* I'm feeling so edgy and tight and jealous and ugly toward everyone and edged out and still it hits at a message Kelly cannot assure me of.

Your husband, your friend, and Allison have created a trifecta of Umberdove's brand and continuation of her legacy and it just stings. Why did she never want to partner with me? Why was I excluded from the art world and why is your friend a part? I don't even know what she does exactly. At least twice today, I considered deleting Facebook from my phone or just unfollowing her. I guess there's some part of me that's so tired of your friend taking over every God damn thing. She knows everything and she needs us all to know it and I'm continually annoyed and triggered and hurt and pissed. It just is what it is. This contributes to me feeling like a terrible friend because we are so new, but I don't like her right now. Kelly told me, as I consulted her in a deck reading two nights ago, that it's okay. It's all okay. It's okay to keep myself open to it all, and I want to run away. But If I say, "Kelly asked me to take care of her husband," she'll say, "Kelly asked a lot of people to take care of him." If I post a "five things Friday" like Kelly used to, your friend will post, "As many things as I want Monday." It's like this massively toxic, insecure need to assure everyone that she had the corner on the Kelly market. Fuck that. She didn't, and everything in me wants to lay into her. I suspect it's not her, not

totally, but apparently she's the focus, or she's triggering my own insecurity of the same flavor. I'm so lost and Kelly always anchored me in this. Why should I feel like I should belong to all the Kelly business, I wasn't involved in it when she was alive. I feel perpetually hurt by that, but also—it is what it is. But then why is your friend now involved in all of it? The doling out of Kelly's items, getting close to Kelly's husband, now the business. Telling us all how Kelly was and is feeling about everything and truly it's too much. So yet again, maybe it's not anxiety. Maybe it's anger. I just want your friend to go back to her life and leave us alone. No, I want Kelly back to manage her. Don't fucking tell me what Kelly and I had.

If I try, I can see Kelly's eyes, pained, across the table, two coffees between us.

RAW. ANGRY. RIGHTEOUS. CRUEL.

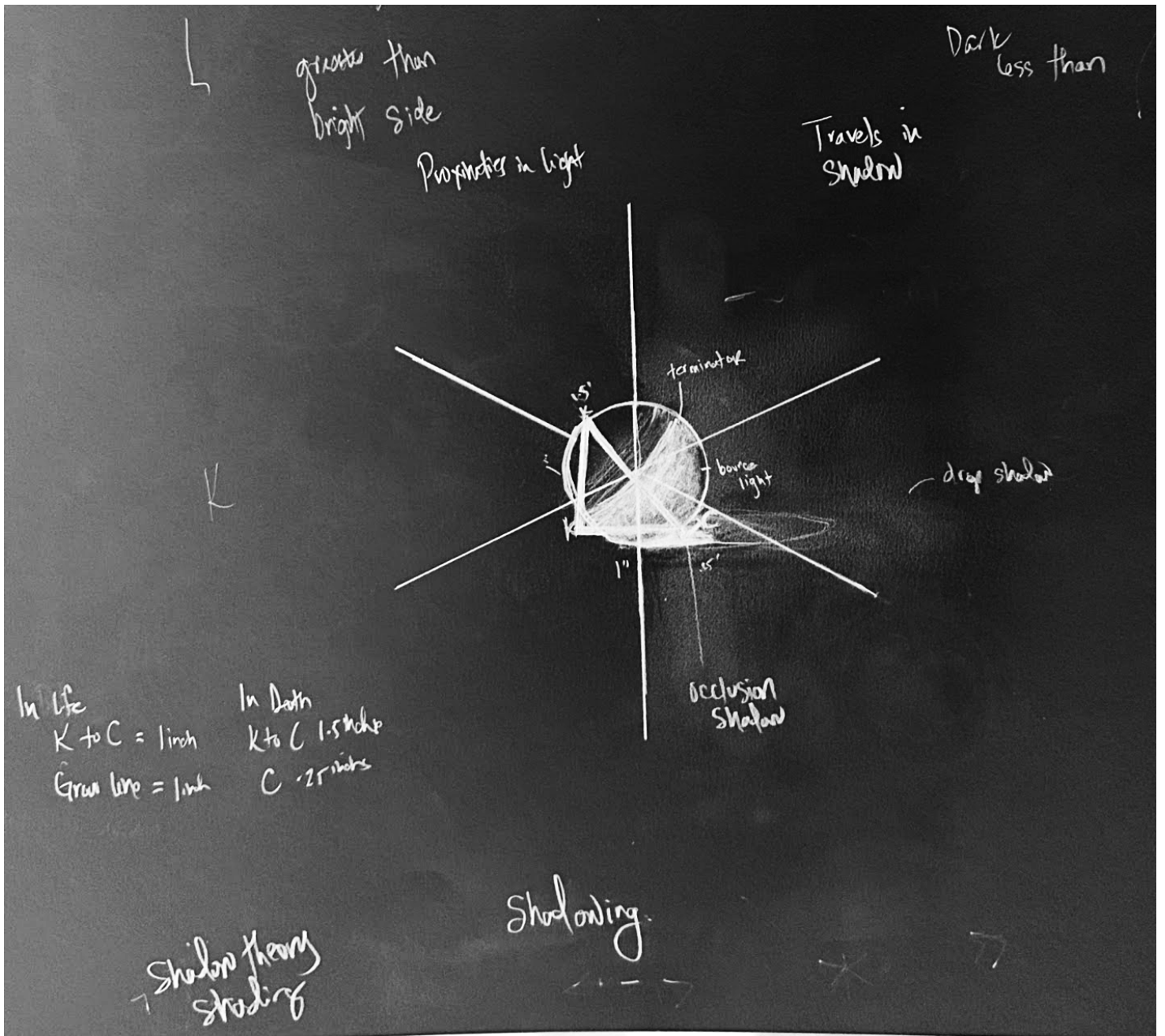
Did she truly love me? Did she pity me?

Oh, these words. I think I must be in tremendous pain. It's not grief today. It's heavy, heavy pain. Crying while holding a plank position. That's a first.

Archive: Microsoft OneNote

April 19, 2018

Either due to the way loss makes you feel so tired like there is frozen, heavy blood weighing down your limbs, or the way it makes you stupid like one permanent fog has settled into your thoughts, or the way you don't give a shit about anything anymore, or the way it wears masks like anxiety and you can't actually have a full cup of coffee or anything caffeinated anymore because you won't be able to breath which means you can't focus like you used to— for all these reasons and more, I still can't manage to unpack my new house which we bought seven weeks before Kelly died.



Grief Map Exhibit C: Studies in shadow

Archive: Microsoft OneNote

May 15, 2019

Kelly was my daily. The one to text about the best bed sheets she'd found under \$100. The one I saw every Wednesday for coffee and every Saturday for dinner with each other's husbands.

Whenever Kelly told the internet something that I didn't know first, I was hurt. When she was in California for the first bout of cancer, I would often get medical updates via her Instagram. It pricked me. I tried to be gracious, but I was really annoyed that she didn't send me a text first. I told myself that she's got a lot of people who want news, she can't communicate with everyone directly. But when I'd speak with her, I'd assure her always that she didn't need to take care of me, that it was okay to do these social media blasts, for her own self-care. She told me again and again how much she appreciated that about me, that I always advocated for her to do what's best for herself first. I couldn't go back on it now.

I bent and twisted my repression to create a space where Kelly felt safe, always. I did this because I love her, but I did this also to keep her.

Here was the latest post: *EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE OKAY* written in all caps on a nature-scene postcard, posted as a selfie. Big black camera lens faced the mirror, postcard taped onto the surface, and her, beanie covering chemo-bald head, sexy smirk, arms akimbo.

I immediately thought, *Wait, there's news?! A clean scan?* And then, bitter pain. Is she seriously telling her social media followers before she texts me?

Turns out. There wasn't any news; not a clean scan, just a cute selfie.

Positive tropes flooded the comment box, infuriating me, my own anger confusing me.

"Kick cancer's ass,"

"Love and light to you,"

"You're such a warrior,"

What was wrong with me to be mad at people sending well wishes to my best friend battling cancer?

Kelly was always generous with herself, even on social media. She made the women who bought her jewelry feel like they had found their family, responded to comments with authenticity, sending out their goods in beautiful little boxes and personal, hand-written notes. She did this with gripping storytelling; her writing could rip a reader's heart out. She wrote with such power, words accompanied by a stunning photo of light beaming through the trees or her own stunning face blurred-out behind a turquoise ring she set in silver. People caught wind of her magic and flocked to her like geese migrating home.

But if you knew Kelly in real life, you saw deeper into these pictures. *Oh, that's the freeway by her house or I was with her when she bought that scarf or that's the bezel she broke four times before successfully setting it in silver.* I'd see these hints, but I'd also look for clues of me.

I would leave comments in these long feeds, admittedly not just for Kelly's eyes, but to cleverly reveal to all those lurking women some detail that only she and I would know. Our mysterious love on

display for all those people who thought they knew her. Something inside me screamed to stake my small claim of Kelly's heart in public, possessing what they couldn't.

"I don't know about that postcard," I baited in the comment.

"We can never know the future."

She'd reward this bad behavior with a loving, intimate reply like,

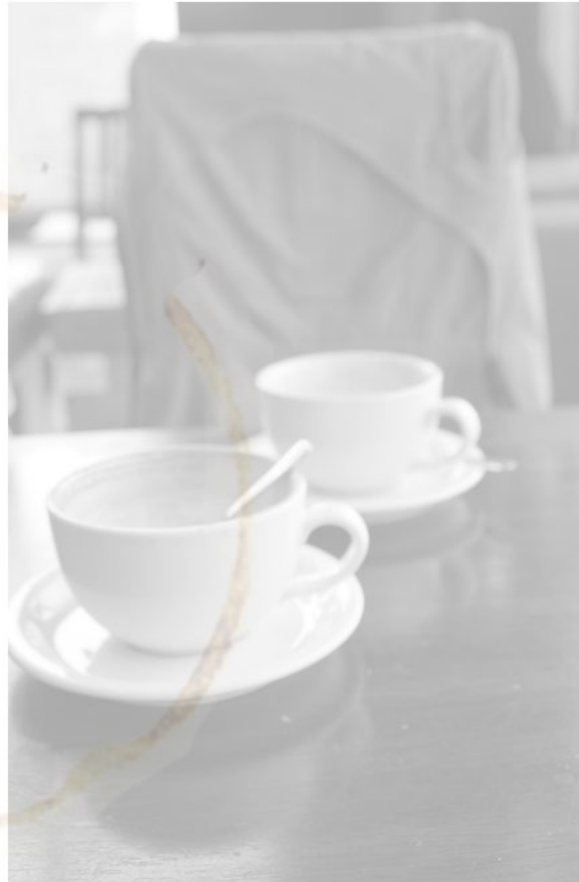
"I know you know."

There was always room for everyone. There was always room for me. I used to think that *EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE OKAY* postcard annoyed me because of its false claim, its bold-faced lie. But now I know the real problem I had with *EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE OKAY* is that it's true.

Archive: Microsoft OneNote

July 20, 2019:

I just want Kelly to pop in like she used to, interrupt the day, and demand I drop everything to grab a cup of coffee.

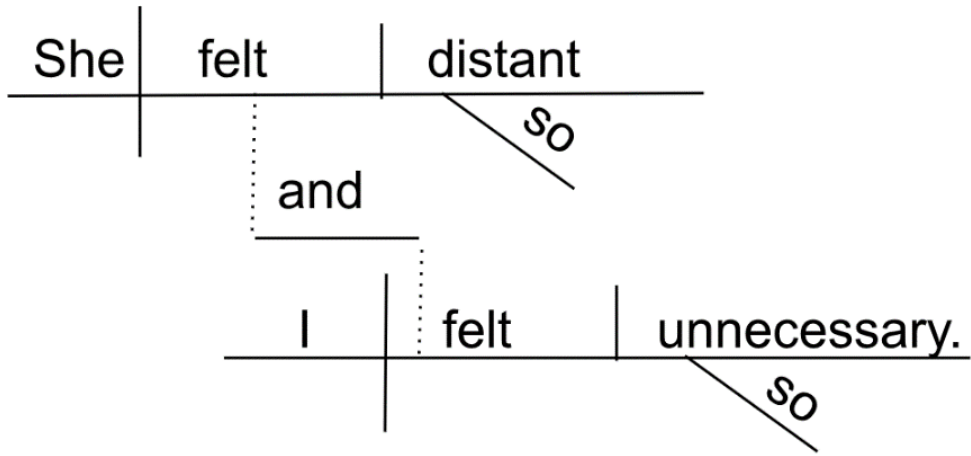


It's sinking in.

Staining the pages. As I comb through the archives of our life, collecting data, I remember it. I buried this feeling with her. This unchosen feeling.

Kelly endured three recurrences of cancer. During the first one, breast cancer, we were living long distances from each other, but I'd never felt closer. When the breast cancer moved to the bones, she had just moved back to Seattle, and I'd just become a mother, and that's when I slowly began to sense an uncomfortable distance. The third recurrence, the killer, lung and liver cancer, culminated in a six-week, round-the-clock care schedule that I'd help create, but when your friend arrived, was summarily pushed out of. Your, your friend, your husband, and her mother lived there together, forming a circle no one could penetrate unless you stopped your life and moved in. I could not do that, and this felt like punishment.

She felt so distant, and I felt so unnecessary.



Grief Diagram Exhibit A: Diagram in distance

When someone is dying, it's hardly the time to whine about needing reassurances of your friendship. But then the dying ended, the death began, and the roles reversed.

"I was prepared to help her die," your friend said to me through red eyes over Kelly's lifeless body.

"I am so not prepared for her to be dead," she teared up again.

"I assume you girls want some time with her," her husband said to me. I nodded without hesitation. When everyone had finally arrived and all the calls had been made, we gathered flowers and plants from her backyard, boiled them in a pot to create a fragrant cleansing water and used it to wash Kelly's body. We cleaned her nails, did her makeup, brushed her hair, and placed sage, ferns, bee balm, and hydrangea all over her naked body. We wept and sang and passed around the bourbon. When one woman fell to their knees in sobs, the other held the space and continued washing Kelly. We sang some more. Her mother cut a lock of Kelly's hair and placed it in a tiny bag as she walked out of the room. We poured expensive oils all over her skin, popped expensive champagne and gave her tastes, all the while we never stopped touching each other or Kelly. No one ever really stopped crying, and so crying became the new normal.

The day that Kelly died was one of the most beautiful days of my life. The loss had not yet set in, and the rejection I felt leading up to her death had vanished. We were all exhausted from worry, drunk on relief, and sick from the bourbon, anticipation, and surreal proximity to the precipice of our own deaths, all of it culminating into terrible beauty.



The days after her death returned the rejection back to me.

Once, I asked her about it, this feeling that I'd been demoted, unchosen. I finally worked up the courage one summer night as we sat across from each other at a tiny bistro table in a restaurant on Lake Union. A few drinks in, I told her I've been feeling like she doesn't need me anymore. I don't say the words but it's all over me, I am feeling replaced. She cuts me off, reaches across and grabs my hand, her forced reassurances sting.

(1) | (am) [redacted] replaced

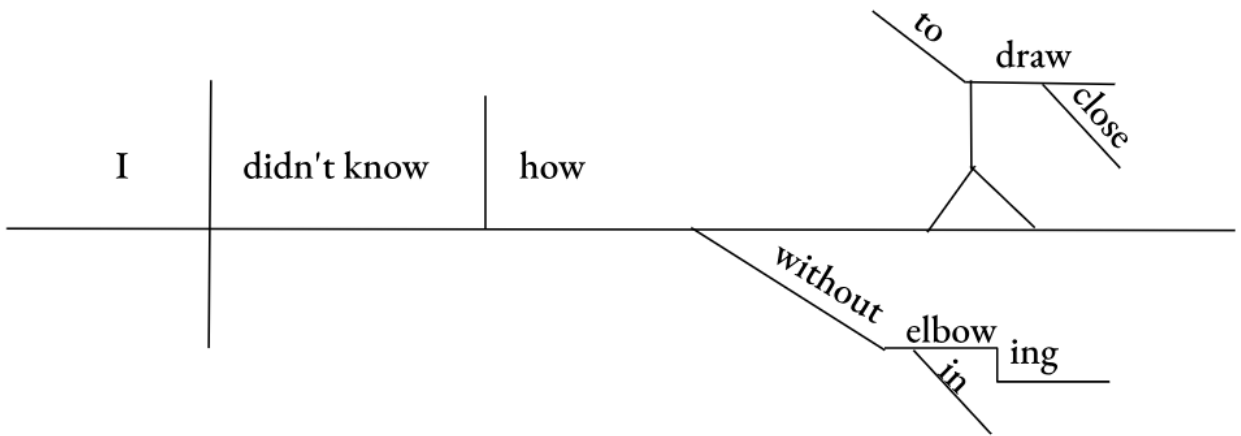
Grief Diagram Exhibit B: Erasure

Almost seven years after her death day, ten years after the conversation at the restaurant, I'd forgotten the intensity of the rejection, and how it held me hostage through her confusing, surreal dying, and how it recurred in massive doses the years afterward.

I can see clearly now how lost I was to my own pain, how this pain put me at the center of the experience, how humiliating this feels. While this woman I loved fiercely was scared to death for a decade as she faced down the greatest mystery known to man and then stepped gracefully into the profound transformation of physical death—here I sat, sulking stubborn in the corner, mired in jealousy.

*You are being too hard on yourself* I hear people say when I tell them this. *It's so understandable,* they say. It's true I was in excruciating pain. It's also true that I showed up for her in every possible way I could. It's just that I can't shake this feeling that I played the whole thing wrong...those last days of her life. My care for her was always to give her space. If she needed me, she would call. But this time, she couldn't speak. Others dove in. Dropped everything to be by her side.

I didn't know how to draw close without elbowing in.



Grief Diagram Exhibit C: Object of my own preposition

I still drag my bony hands through the silt of those last weeks and years, examining the smallest details to figure out what I could have done, should have done to not feel rejected. When this happened in the past, Kelly would come into my trailer and help me find my way back to the group.

In reality, the archives reveal that we were on diverging paths in life, or that it was a season of distance that we may or may not have come back from. It's just that only Kelly and I would know, but she died, and I was left to the whim of her husband and her friend to decide how close she and I were.

Her husband decided that the friend will divvy out Kelly's tarot decks, which meant of course the friend took the deck Kelly used the most, the Shadowscapes deck which was her very first deck, the deck I associated with her, the very same deck she used when she introduced me, Jess, and Niki to tarot seriously for the first time night in her Pinehurst home, well before Kelly had even met her friend. I didn't even like that deck, but it felt like another proof point her friend was trying to make. I loved the deck your friend said I could have, but the only reason she was in charge here was because your husband said so. I later bought a new Shadowscapes deck for myself, even if she'd not touched those exact cards, at last Kelly and I were sharing sight.

Her husband declared that the friend, Allision, and himself would be the trifecta continuing Kelly's business. This made logical sense to him, but it shut me out in a new way. I was losing my mind, was I not her best friend? Did he not think so? I was cursed into friend limbo, left to her husband's grief-stained, toxic dispensations of who was closest enough to Kelly to decide how her things and love were to be distributed.

I got a black plastic bag of her shoes.

I'm combing through the archive, searching for this feeling through trying to figure out where I was in time and space, using pictures, journals, blogs, conversations, and then cross referencing all of this with what she was doing and feeling and where she was in time and space...pictures, Instagram, blogs, private conversations—searching, I think, for where I went wrong. I retrace my steps through our love to see when exactly she chose to leave me behind, long before she died and her husband and her friend appropriated her voice.

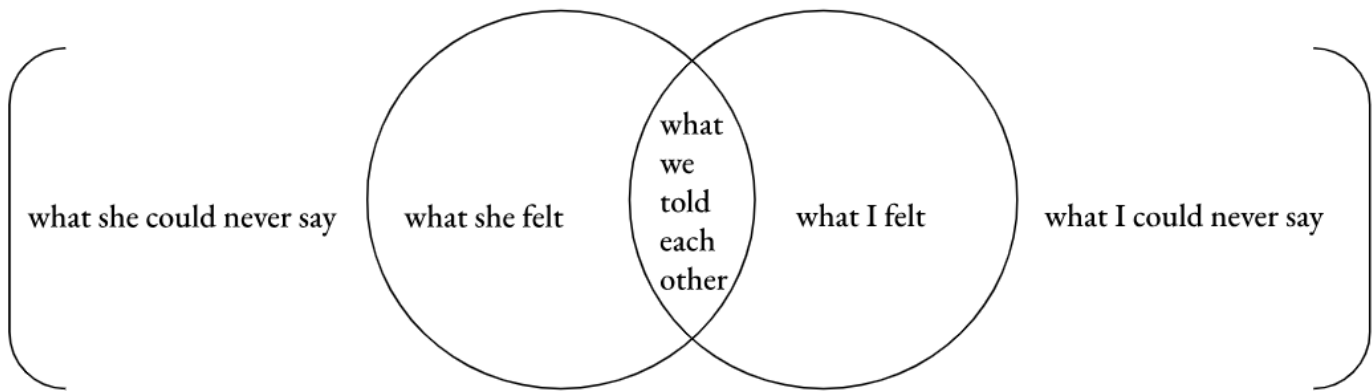
I scrutinize her in my journal, seeped in desperation, looking for proof of (x).



It's easier, when someone dies, to put together a story in your head that makes you feel closer and ignores everything hurtful thing that person did to you.

I'm seeing more and more how lost I was, how desperate I was to be reassured of closeness. I see how much she was withdrawing, see how scared she was, see how she couldn't articulate her fears with me.

She was so scared and I was so scared and we couldn't find a place to be scared together.



Grief Diagram Exhibit D: First, outer, inner, last

I overlap our archives and overlay our timelines, and I can see one thing objectively: My order of operations is off, and I am doing it again, using the devastation of others to bypass my own story. I am refusing to allow myself access to my own grief, permission to fully occupy my own experience.

I am talking myself out of saying the truth, the something inside the nothing. Instead, I tell myself to be quiet, that the only voice in the room should be Kelly's, that she was wracked with fear, that she was focused on growing her business, that she was distracting herself with frantic nonwestern interventions like mistletoe infusions, that her story was the only plot worth following.

Sometimes the nothing braces what cannot be said.

nothing

She didn't choose me to help her die. But she did choose me to help her live.

What we had was real, even if it was fading. Even without knowing how it would have changed with time.

I will never know.

This kills me.

nothing

nothing

What if that's okay.

Okay that it kills me.

Okay that I will never know my stack rank.

Okay that in every archive I find of hers I am searching for proof of that rank.

Okay that others might find this disgusting.

Okay that the only truth I have is that she loved me and I loved her.

Okay that I don't have to prove how close we were to write a whole book about her.

Okay to be exactly me, mourning her, exactly as I am.

Okay that I can't talk to her husband anymore.

Okay that he doesn't seem to notice or care.

Okay that he might pity people like me who are attached to her things.

Okay that I might never forgive him for sucking up all the grief in the room.

Okay that even if I felt unchosen,

nothing

I chose her.

In the closeness.

In the distance.

nothing

There's more something  
was off  
with me and Kelly.

There's more something  
to do  
with power.

nothing

When Kelly and I first became friends, she didn't know herself very well. She was running from deep psychic pain and childhood trauma. She'd not yet found a safe way to language the terror she'd endured as a little girl. One of the reasons she was drawn to me was my hard-won wisdom, birthed from years of therapy, and I could cut through her façade with "wisdom bombs," as she called them. I won her admiration and an important place in her heart. In this way, I held more power in the relationship. After cancer, things changed. She outgrew me. The power balance shifted. I confess that in my fear of being left behind, in my reaching every minute of every day to earn a love that cannot be lost—my own childhood damage—I'm keenly sensitive to who holds the power of abandonment in any relationship, of who likes who more, all too aware of the fucking mess my psyche has made of love and power.

nothing

There's more something  
the archive uncovered  
a crypt of bones on  
bones on  
bones  
crisscrossed  
housing  
rejection,

she caused.

nothing

to be? So I took Kerry lunch this  
ss. I have felt so hurt by her  
FB. Strange, really. But I think  
anytime I feel pain at her rejection  
I can change it. But there may

nothing

I am angry.

She hurt (x).

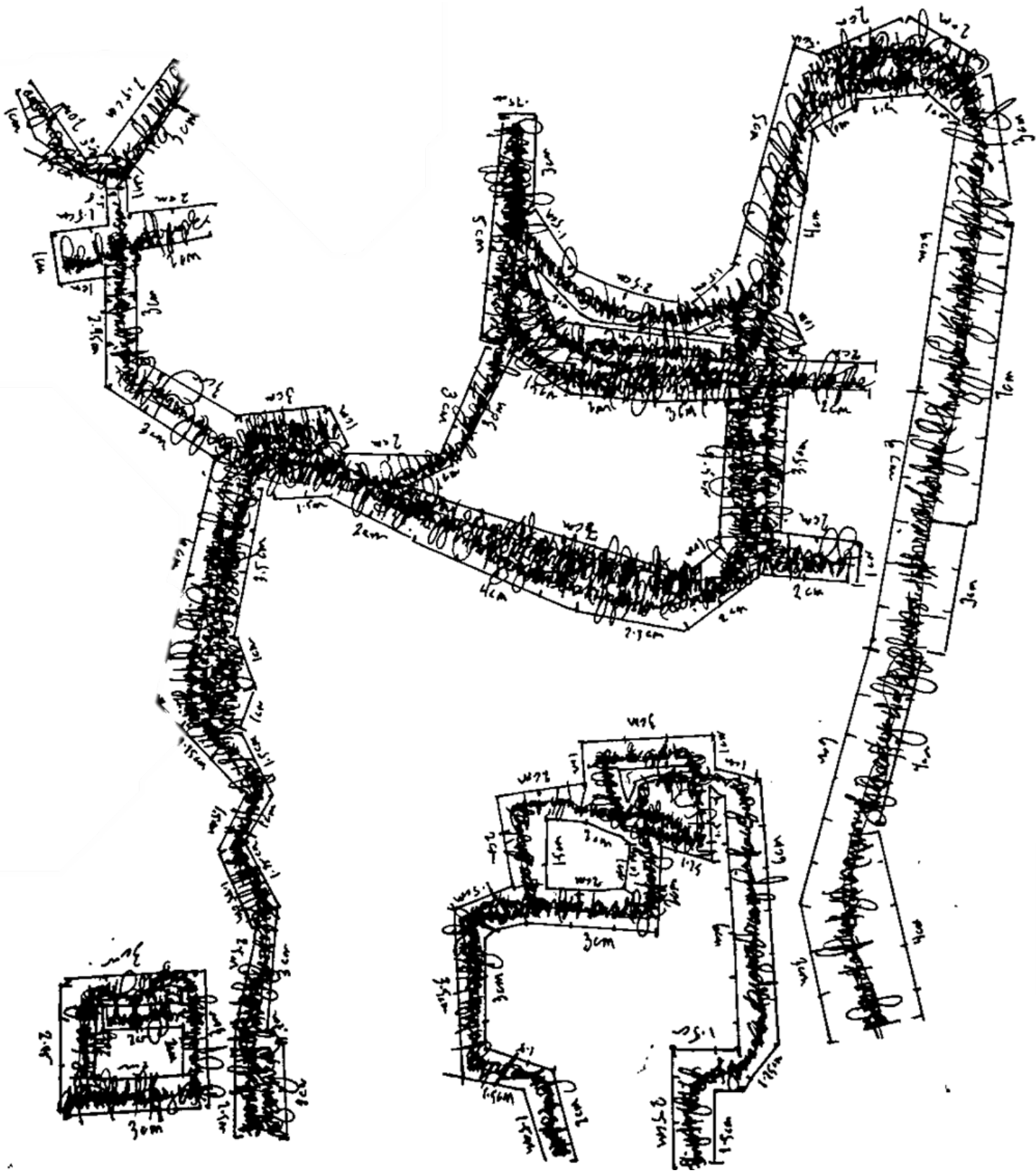
She did not

Could not

Would not

love (x) enough.

nothing

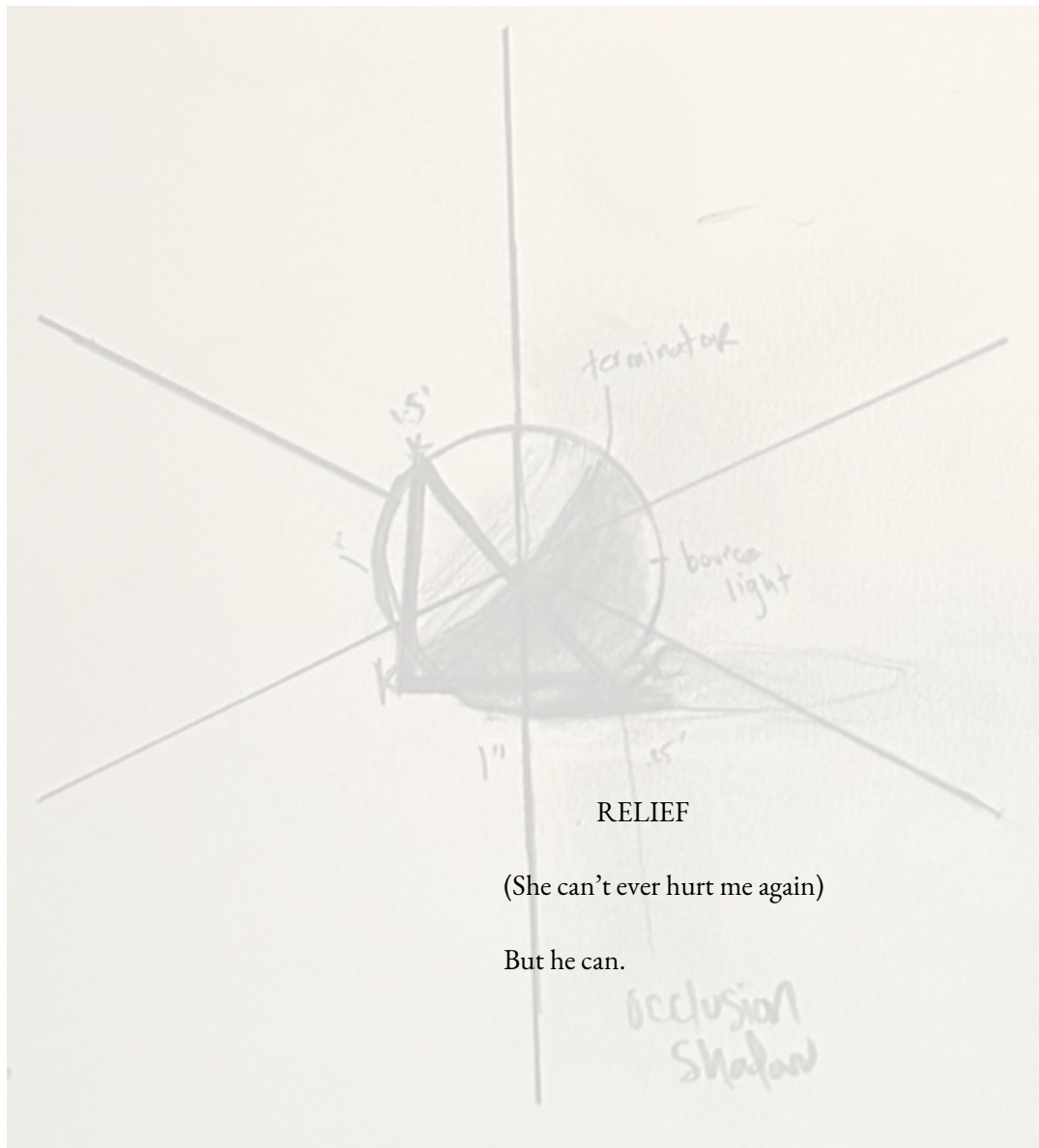


Grief Map Exhibit D: A scribble situational schematic representing Kelly's routes walking in my home  
 Alternative title, "All the anger I could never say"

Only the living get to work things out. She is not a whole, complicated, nuanced, evolving Kelly anymore. She is my memory, an inherently binary narrative that both solidifies and changes each time my mind touches it, stuck on repeat: *she didn't love you enough* instead of the privileged story of the living: *we're just going through a phase*. We will never grow together.

I stand in the shadows of memory.

In the occlusion shadow hides another shame.



Grief Map Exhibit C.2: Studies in shadow relief

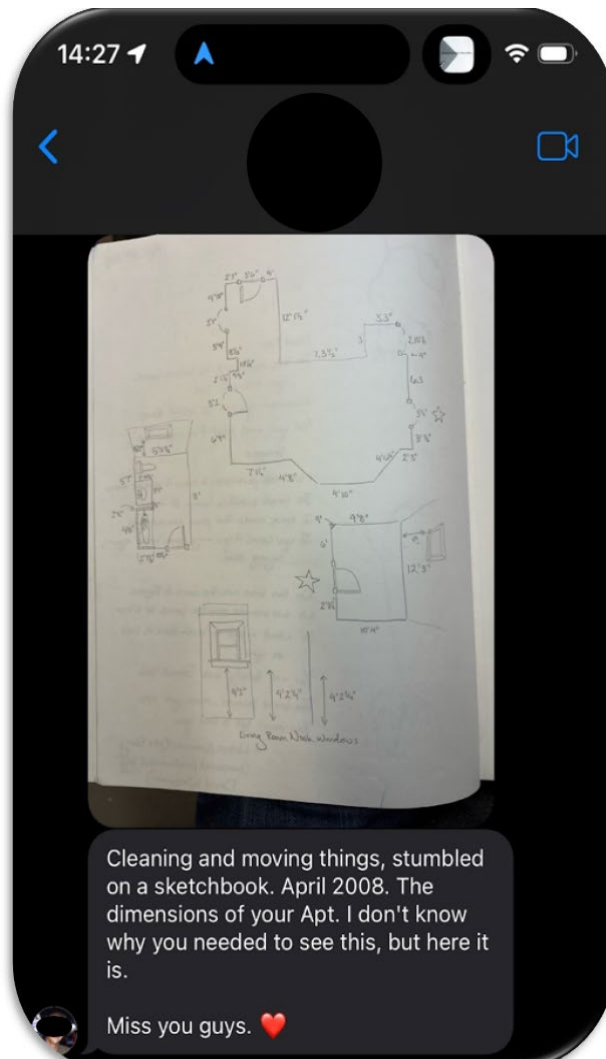
My relationship with her husband, though never ideal, soured in the years following her death. What was already complicated—he liked to troll; I couldn't help but react—became unbearable without Kelly to bring us together. For a decade, we saw each other almost weekly, sometimes daily. Now, I haven't spoken to or seen him in over two years.

As I tempt fate by unburying our shared history, I feel tectonic rumbling underneath me. I sense him moving toward me. I start to watch for him in my dreams, in my photos, in the archives. Dread steels my stomach. My therapist is tired of my bitching about him, though she would never say so. It's her tone, "Well, you know...I don't know about *him*, but you..." and we dance circles around this fire over and over.

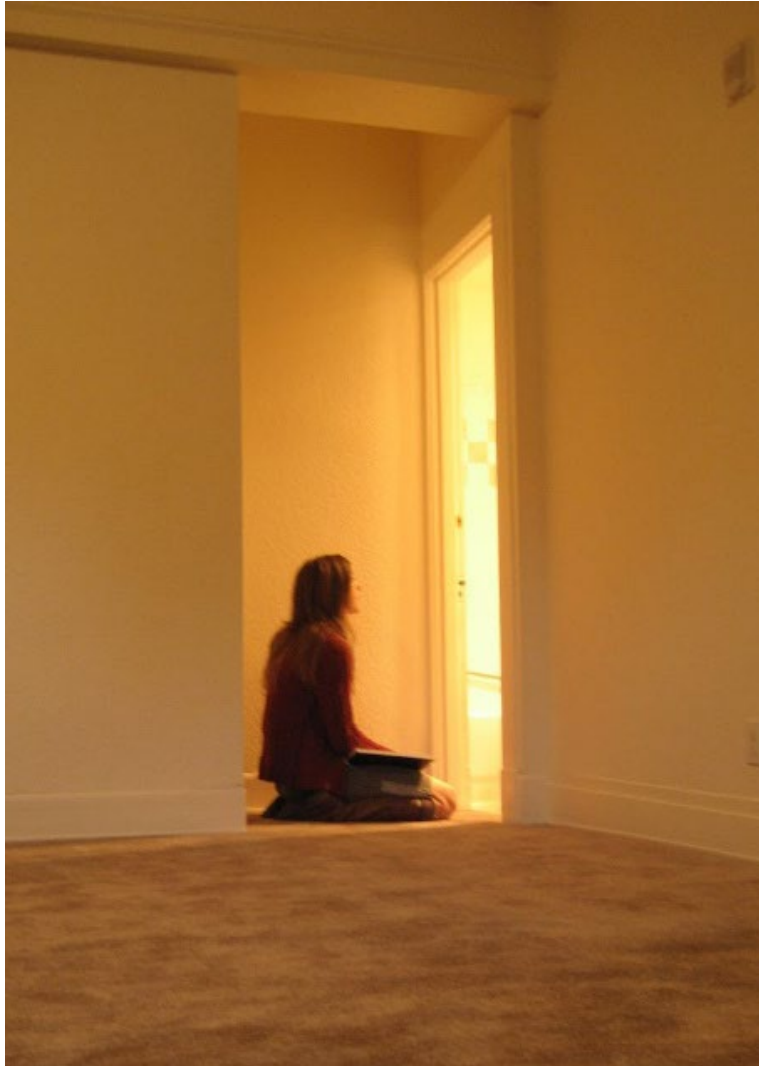
All I know is that our grief cannot be in the same room. So I closed that door.

I can feel him right behind it, about to knock.

Days later, a text from him.

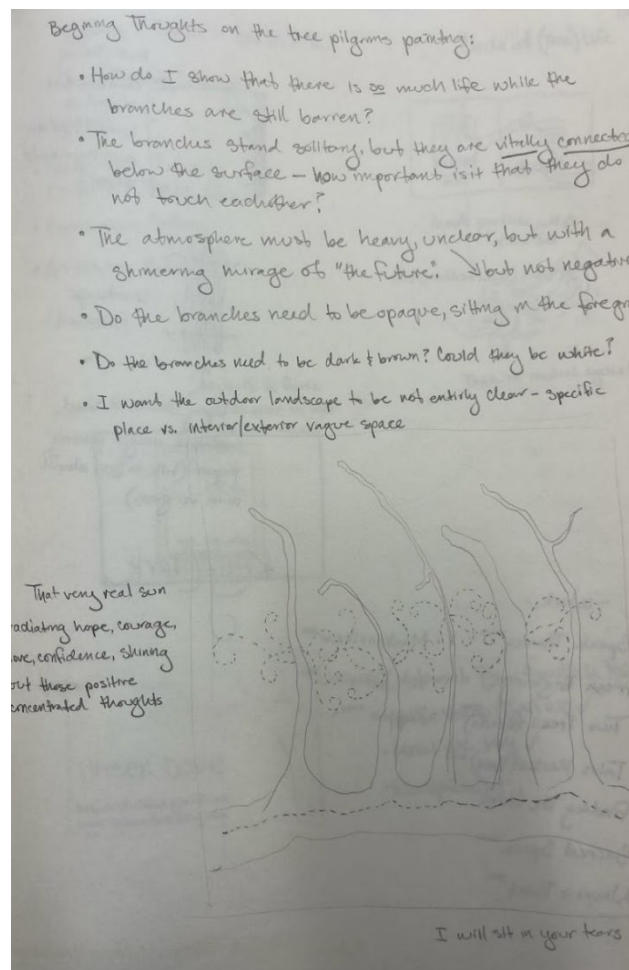


I cannot believe this. The wonder of this schematic, at the memory of her drawing it, of what the backside of the page says, this palimpsest of Kelly's words. I fear reengaging with him, but I respond politely. I thank him. I quickly locate within my archive the very photo I took of her drawing this schematic he's sharing.



*Of course you can pull these up instantly,* he texts.

A few minutes later, he sends another photo of her journal. This time, he's sharing the notes she wrote for a painting of hers that I bought in 2010. Kelly often used objects and shapes to represent people in her art, and this is the only canvas I know for sure has a symbol representing me. I want to ask him for a better photo of the page, one where his shadow does not occlude. But I am at his mercy. He's always there, casting.



Grief Map Exhibit D: Pilgrims, a schematic

Being the recipient of these gifted pages crushes my resolve, weakens my sharpness against him (h). I have to stay close if I want her (y) archive (a), her proof of life, if I want to find (x) in her remnants.

If I respond too quickly or dote too much, he may be turned off from sending more. If I show my real disgust or anger, it may lead to more conflict. I cannot lose myself again in his black hole. I calculate every move.

$$h^2 + y^2 = a^2$$

x does not fit.

A few minutes later, a final text:

*We should break bread soon. So much to catch up on.*

I do not respond.



Grief Map Exhibit E: Pilgrims, oil painting by Kelly Clark  
Purchased by me in 2010.  
Represented from right to left:  
Kelly's mother, Kelly, her dear friend Ti, Candace.

May 19, 2020

"Dance it out!" the waifish instructor yells from the blaring screen. Finally released from muscle-building repetition of the warm-up during this Covid-19 Zoom dance class, I nearly spring out of a lunge into the air. My face bloated and stinging with sweat, cheeks carrying their own pulse, I am, as instructed, dancing it out.

After several minutes of dancing normally, the movement gets weird. I feel it. I'm no longer dancing so much as flailing, shaking, vibrating. My arms become wild, scraggly branches with claws like a small garden mole suddenly clearing some sort of invisible pile of dirt blocking me. I know this dirt. This is grief.

As I angrily shove off anything in the way, I see her friend's face and push her out of my way. This isn't her path anymore. I am going to make it to Kelly today. Then more roadblocks. I see her husband. Fury fills my body as I claw at him, suddenly I'm so angry I cry and yell, dare to anyone else to might get in my way—locating a story in my body that I didn't know was there, hearing myself remember that first year, how I could not engage my grief on any level without first encountering her friend or her husband in my mind as they hurled imagined insults, condescension, and mocking comments meant to put me in place. *Your memory of Kelly is wrong, she never did that, never said that, would never want that. We knew her better.* They never said these things to me. My grief made monsters of their grief.

Tired of experiencing grief as mainly intellectual, I happily slash through the vapor of these two imagined threats, wondering how much of my grief still hides in my body, corporeally unknown to me yet. Does grief, like water, have volume? Is there a tank somewhere with a discreet amount of grief to metabolize? And if so, how much more grief do I have to work through? What is the quantity of grief I've been given? I cannot stomach *forever*. I just want Kelly to pop in spontaneously like she used to and urge me to ditch work, grab coffee, and spend the day thrifting.

I dig and dig in this shithole, praying desperately for clean air soon, but I only unearth more questions, younger questions: am I there yet? How much longer is she going to be dead?

Finally their faces dissipate into a sort of wispy smoke, I'm still dancing. Arms outstretched in a freestyle stroke, torso resting on bent knees, quads burning. The blaring music fades away, I hear and see only my own movement, blurring the lines of my body and time. I can finally engage my body's intelligence in this grieving, and for one gorgeous moment, I'm overcome by joy for the temporal nature of life, of the body, of music; the absolute now of the beat and the open channel I can become, the bridge between stuck and go.

Then I see the visage, the lanky specter I've fought for, the tall tree woman I've desperately sought an audience with, the reason I'm so intimate with grief. Kelly's frame gentles into the picture, her outline a moving, cooling vapor, a kind of steam quelling my heat.

Release washes me out to sea, leaving uncomplicated, pure, searing pain—pain free of enmeshment and codependency. The pain I'd always wanted. No one is here to correct my memories or put me in my rightful order. It's just me and Kelly, and I weep with ecstasy.



Then an unfamiliar impulse rises up inside, a deeper longing, an even gentler but tremendously more powerful desire.

I see something behind her, shimmering. I tilt my head sideways to glimpse past her. She's not the end, I'm very surprised by this. I check in with her, I am kneeling at her feet, supplicant and small. I look up, face wet with tears and sweat. Like always, Kelly is grinning. My neck strains and I try to angle—what *is* that behind her...that backlit glow hugging her frame on all sides? What has Kelly been eclipsing all this time, from the first day I met her? I have to know. But she's not stepping aside this time, not helping, not making it easy for me. Her mischievous eyes are daring me to push her out of the way, too.

*But you're not in my way* I plead.

*But I only just got here.* I weep.

*Let's go together* I bargain.

Kelly isn't budging.

I reluctantly close my eyes to, fully extend both arms, place my palms on her side body and push, softy at first, but there's no resistance, and I'm not sure where Kelly goes. Blinding light floods her absent shape, rushing in to fill the space she occupied. Then I get it.

This has never been about finding Kelly, not solely. This grief work—the years of planting seeds in this rich, fecund soil and praying they will grow in the sideways light of death and dying—this grief is mine. This is about finding me.

For the first time in a decade, I stop tracking her—even in the periphery.

(x=me)

# Epilogue

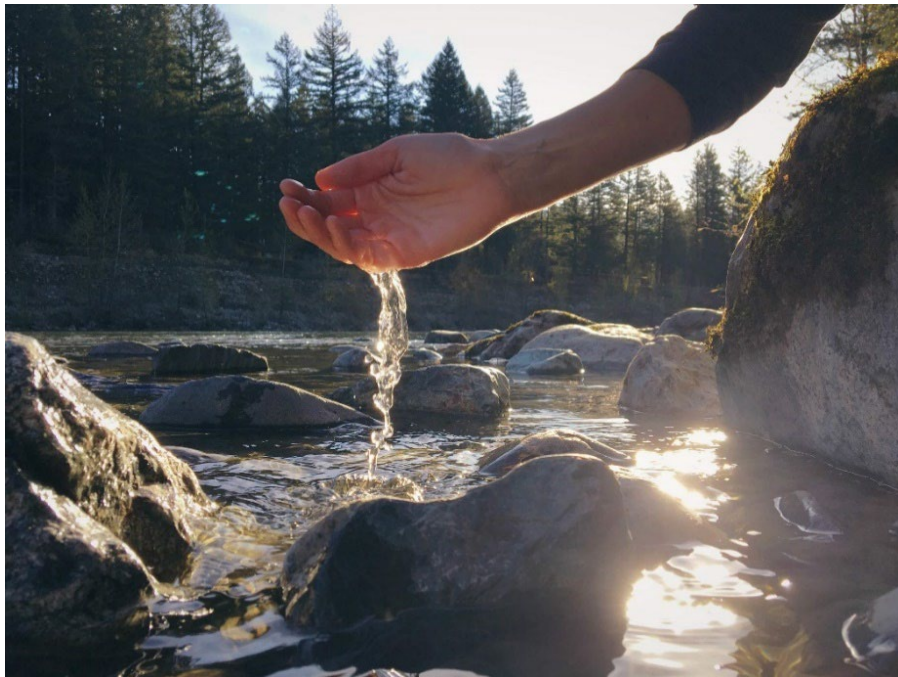
Archive: Kelly's blog

## GRACE AND FURY

March 31, 2016

*-Wherein shit gets real-*

In the mornings I go to the river. I find my footing in the spongy banks and the song of the varied thrush, in the bite of cold on fingertips and the groans of giant conifers. I am an internal processor; this I've come to recognize in the ebb and flow of sharing and silence. The river stones hold my truths while the water washes me clean, again and again, from the clamor of daily living. It is with such bravery we alight on this earth in these physical forms, folding up our stardust for one wild ride; at the river I feel my parts come together in peace and I can breathe once more.



*Image by Kelly Clark*

Here is a truth:

This month I allowed myself to feel deeply disappointed. Frustrated over not yet receiving the gold star marks of health on my medical paperwork. Fearful of the continuous rise in tumor markers and the confused looks in doctors' eyes as they peer into my face trying to find illness while I perch there looking like the peak of health. I've been sitting in that, experiencing the various levels from despondency to fury to hopelessness to grief. I don't often get that opportunity - correction - I have never taken the opportunity to move through those emotions, to allow myself to feel them, hear them, acknowledge their realness. It's warm and fuzzy and lovely to be happy, but the truth is, our capacity to experience joy is tempered sharply when under the surface lies a host of silenced emotions and unrecognized feelings. She tells me all the time: "We have to move through them in order to release them." This is work. So I flex my hands and close my eyes and invite the muted slivers of self to speak. Here is a truth:

I live a blissfully gorgeous life. Each week I spend hours, days even, hiking with my dogs in some of the most exquisite country on earth,

singing with the Muse and creating art in my light-filled studio, dancing around the kitchen with my loving husband, eating beautiful foods and visiting with dear friends. I also spend many hours each week in medical clinics being poked, prodded and scanned, discussing with doctors what's not working and what experimental treatment I should try next. Still other hours I spend wordlessly sitting on my bathroom floor, talking myself down from the threat of panic and hot tears, or wondering if it's foolish to make business plans when I don't know what the future months may hold.

You see, all of these things are true; none are diminished by any other. Part of my heart and soul work in this season—perhaps in this lifetime entirely—is the granting of permission to feel what I feel, wholly and deeply, no excuses, apologies or disclaimers. This means when I feel bliss, I'm all in. Heart petals unfurling, laughter bubbling up for no reason at all, soaking up joy like the California hillsides in spring. It also means when fear or anger arises, I try to give them space, to ask what the root issue is, if they just want to be seen, for me to ask in turn if they are helpful or even real. And if we're being honest, my optimistic personality finds this line of questioning terrifying, but I want to hear

the whispers of my body and spirit, to sink ever deeper into my own truths. And so I name them.

I feel full, blessed, grateful, excited by what is to come, by what I am about on this earth, by the ripples of love and goodness and inspiration

I seek to send out.

I recognize that there are cancerous cells in my body.

I allow that I am deeply sad for myself, for this wonderful physical home to my soul, for the sheer number of tissues and hours and tears that are shed devoted to surviving, thriving and fighting cancer.

I acknowledge the hot lump in the back of my throat, the Perfectionist and the Curator who have worked so hard to keep me safe, who worry deeply about transparency and inadequacy and what will happen if.

I see my childself, still worried that I am unloveable all on my own, without a rallying cause or a continuous supply of beauty.

I accept that I am loved. Loved well, loved deeply.

I am committed and open to the fact that my soul is a supergiant, that my light is important, my message vital.

I believe I hold the power of radical transformation. That my body is  
capable of great healing, and I am capable of writing my own  
manuscript.



*Image by Kelly Clark*

Here is a truth:

I have been thinking about Grace. Not a genteel, sweet grace nor a delicate, demure grace. But a grace that sways like tongues of flame. A grace that ripples in sunlight but holds the power to flood the land and displace mountains we thought would always be. A grace unencumbered.

When my oncologist looks at me with those sad brown eyes and says, "It's not working the way we hoped it would," I want to rise up and

roar with the power of every ancestor who has fought for their life. Do you not see how strong I am? Let me tell you this: I am fucking stronger than you could ever guess. I am scrappy, surefooted. I am playing for keeps. Understand this strength, and then come back to me with your thoughts. For I am a warrior; this is my birthright and name. I have embraced the sword-wielding goddess and the legion of shield-sisters. Each month I am better equipped to face the obstacles that arise. I have been speaking with Death and we are clear: this is not yet my time.

But then I remember grace. And I see that all this blessed armor, built to keep me safe, is too heavy to leap. I realize this: strength has nothing to do with armor I've built and everything to do with how I choose to live. You see, I know it will be alright. I know I am on path. I know my life is a holy prayer of redemption and a series of glorious mistakes and child-like joy for no reason, all wrapped up into one. I know I must shed the next layer of that which no longer serves, and lean into the raw fleshiness of my own authenticity.

And so I ask my anger, I ask my fear, I ask my childself, I ask my ancient wisdom, I ask my hands and feet and heart and bones: What do you need? What can we lay down, burn down, release completely,

release in droplets one at a time? I am willing to do the work. I am learning to do the rest. I am showing up, loosening the binds on my voice, ready to drip truth from my lips. And I am ready to leap, grace unencumbered."



*Image by Kelly Clark*

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# Variable Proximities | Poetic Statement

by Candace Whitney Morris

## Prologue

In college, I spent one rainy night in the off-limits "back 40" drinking cheap red wine from the bottle and passing around clove cigarettes with three people who would become loves of my life.

Soon after, one of those friends bought me a book that only those from that night in the back 40 would understand called, "The Scent of Cloves." It was a hardback old book with a yellowed dust jacket that I still have not read 25 years later. Reading it wasn't the point.

Over time, as we graduated and our lives rippled out from that night, this friend would visit me periodically. Years later, I was packing to move house, and when I picked up "Scent of Cloves," several little pieces of paper fell out. Each time my friend visited, he'd written a note and tucked it into the book when I wasn't looking, and I hadn't found them until now. I held these treasures in my hands, laughed and cried at each message and memory, and then immediately tucked them all back between the pages and packed the book away to put on a shelf in my new house. That book and those notes have followed me everywhere.

These notes — small time capsules of a friendship over many years — intrigued me beyond the sentiments or messages captured in their words. They were messages from his past self to my past self that were intended to be found in the future. I marveled at the surprise of stumbling into a non-digital archive that exists only in the shared space between two people — not online, not in keywords, not in hashtags, and sometimes not even in your own memory — but in a long-forgotten book on your shelf.

It was an unsearchable, uncatalogued, private archive, a Hansel-and-Gretel breadcrumb record of a relationship. It provided proof of love unbound by time and circumstance. This is the real proof I'm after: proof of closeness, proof of distance.

Whether we know it or not, we leave a digital trace of everything we do, write, look up...every picture is tagged, every place we go is recorded. When our interactions are reduced to binary language, it's these little notes, this type of information, this old way of archiving, commemorating, and then stumbling into the undiscoverable, disconnected by digital trace or search, that becomes a *new* old way to measure connection. This is a measure of magic for me, and indeed, the very *prima materia* for the alchemical process of creating art.

The archive becomes

material becomes

art becomes

proof of love.

To have proof you need data.

## **Brief: Grief and data**

My best friend died of cancer in 2017, just after she turned 37. *Variable Proximities: calculations of closeness | diagrams of distance* grew from my desire to make sense of the devastation of losing her. I wanted to give shape to my grief, get it out, write it down. If I could do that, what was once without form would now at least be contained in a discrete work and could possibly substantiate a crucial and complicated relationship. I tried to do this for 7 years: I attended dozens of writing classes and workshops and generated an unwieldy amount of words in an attempt to tell the story, amassing an archive of a friendship in the process. However, the resultant archive felt superfluous while I forced the story into an unsatisfying linear approach. It did not reveal anything to me. I just wanted something, anything, to measure our proximity to each other. And so I became obsessed with the need to prove something, but did not know what, nor to whom. All I was certain of was that proof requires data.

This work investigates love and loss through the search for and analysis of data belonging to grief and the grieving process. This investigation attempts to place grief and data, seemingly incommensurate entities, in proximity to each other through the medium of data visualizations — both those often reserved for data science such as maps, bar graphs, and pie charts, but also nontraditional forms such as sentence diagrams, visual poems, and asemic art.

Central to this work are pressing human questions of relationships: how do we measure a relationship's proximity and reciprocity? How do we measure closeness in friendships and belonging?

Moreover, why do we care or feel the need to ask these questions, to have evidence and proof of love that lasts longer than the relationship itself? (Does tangible evidence of love exist?)

In addition to the epistemology of human connection, which manifests as a forensic investigation into a friendship and its collected archival data over a 10-year period, this work includes themes of: grappling with what remains hidden and attempting to give it shape; the effects of death and its final punctuation upon a relationship; the author's self-actualization as an artist; and an interrogation of relational hierarchy.

During my MFA studies of Creative Writing and Poetics at the University of Washington Bothell, I found several guides, tools, and inspiration. In this case, the work called forth from me a documentary-style poetic: I became compelled to help the reader (and myself) see the relationship and the archive in a new way. In that attempt, I found no answers, but *data*.

In short, I collected and cataloged the archives into quantifiable information where possible, and where not possible, I created an abstract visual or prose poem to reveal a new and unexpected way of looking at the data belonging to the grieving process. More personally, this provided a new and unexpected way to tell my story, understand my loss, and grasp more concretely what we all lose in the inevitability of our loved ones dying and leaving us to rebuild our lives without them.

### **Approach: Big data**

I have worked in the corporate world for twenty years, ten of those in the tech industry. I know that the success of a business relies on data — not just on the numerical or symbolic representations of facts, but on the knowledge or insights that data brings to the surface. The ability to then extract knowledge and insight requires analysis and visualization. I am trained to see almost

everything in terms of data and information; a data-driven mindset affects my personal life and work, and I am not alone in that.

According to writer James Gleick, "every new medium transforms the nature of human thought."<sup>1</sup> Our brains have been rewired around data, just as they rewired from oral communication to written. Now, how we nurture friendships, find lovers, and invest in our community — all of this is largely done digitally.

The era of big data and information has indeed altered human consciousness, just as several technological advancements have done before: the printing press, the creation of the term *bit* to codify measuring information, the internet, personal computing, etc. As the world came online - an event that coincided with my late high school/early college years -our human information storage moved from oral and written traditions to sharable bits of information stored "in the cloud" (which is really just another computer somewhere in a data center). Computing had to keep pace with all of this information, or "big data," and society began to accept the norm of offloading our daily lives into storage. Companies needed to digitally transform their mechanisms of work from typewriters and paper memos to emails and chat rooms; to do that, they needed to answer their big data problem. Answer = more compute. More storage created the capacity for more information, and on and on it went.

"We can see now that information is what our world runs on," Gleick writes. And once I saw it, I could not stop seeing it: our phones track our locations, our photos automatically tag metadata for

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<sup>1</sup>James Gleick. *Information: A history, a theory, a flood* (Pantheon Books, March 1, 2011).

discoverability, and our bank purchases are stored and analyzed; even our relationships now possess massive bits of data, our bonding now done in binary code stored in a data center; all of our texts, Slacks, Discords, Facetimes, Instagram posts, restaurant visits, and maps are uploaded to the cloud.

We live, move and work in a data-driven culture. But how does this new world inform age-old social needs such as belonging? Can data answer how we know we are loved? And if so, with what measurement, what bit? Can we measure love and grief, and if so, how?

This thought gave me pause. Here I was trying to figure a way to wrap my head around my grief without satisfying results. It struck me that any other time I cannot make sense of something, I applied my data-driven mindset. So I asked myself — does grief have measurable data? I was thrilled to consider what grief data actually was and what it would reveal when analyzed. Would the grief come into relief or recess in such a paradigm? Could I use the principles of data science to organize my grief into something useful?

To start, I needed to ground myself in the field of data science. How is data defined? How does data differ from or interoperate with information, knowledge, and evidence? What are the various knowledge management systems applied to structure, analyze, and visualize that data?

Then I needed to collect and clarify my own data, ensuring I had the best *prima materia* to work with. What was the data of grief, and more specifically, what data did I have of *my* grief?

Then I had to clean up the data — make it usable, countable, viewable, consumable somehow. In many cases, there were no obvious data points, so the creation of those data points became their own artistic abstraction. However, once I had some data, I created a more solid scaffold to explore them than memory: a spreadsheet.

I was not sure if any of this would be possible, and therefore approached the work as an experimental forensic project. To keep the reader as intimate as possible throughout, I was determined to discover these things in real time by sharing my process, and building in multiple long pauses and white space to ponder. The more specific this process and its findings were, the more universal it could be, and therefore the more intimate the work could become. In this way, the reader might open their mind to discover the measures of their own intimacy and relationship information.

### Defining data

As the work came together, a central question needed to be addressed: What is the difference between data and information? How does data become knowledge? Is what I am collecting actually *data*? Or is it information, values, source material? And what is the relationship between these things?

I drew upon data scientist Olaf Damman's explanatory framework for some answers. Though Damann's expertise is applied to Public Health Informatics, I believe the definitions help clarify the transitional life cycle of the material I was working with.

Concept	What is it?	How produced?	By whom?	Goal?
<b>Data</b>	Numbers, Symbols, Text, Images, Sound recordings, Unit values	<b>Collected</b> from field research, database, measurements in experiments, from individuals, populations	Data Collector	Use as raw data or for information generation Storage, curation, retrieval
<b>Information</b>	Data in context	<b>Contextualization</b> by making data useful, and using them, for specific tasks	Informatician, informaticist, statistician, data scientist	Use as source for answering questions Storage, curation, retrieval
<b>Evidence</b>	Useful, contextualized information	<b>Comparison</b> with standards, reference values, reference information	Scientist, theoretician, philosopher Interventionist, policy maker	Use for analysis and hypothesis-testing to support claims/hypotheses and decision-making
<b>Knowledge</b>	Evidence-based, (predictive, testable, consistently successful) belief	<b>Consensus</b> based on reasoning and discussion		Justification

In my work, therefore:

01. *data* would become the numeric units that allowed me to count my relationship with Kelly (number of occurring events, metadata from the geolocations of various dwelling locations, etc);
02. *information* resulted from this data being contextualized by a friendship cut off by death;
03. *evidence* became the comparative and useful information extracted from that context in order to establish a hypothesis which became the ground floor for the:
04. *knowledge* or conceit of the work—the futility of extrapolating relational intimacy through absurd data such as the distances of our addresses or how many times we had coffee.

As for the process of how data becomes knowledge: data becomes information when in context, information becomes evidence only under the scrutiny of comparison, and finally evidence becomes proof or knowledge through testing what we think we know :

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<sup>2</sup> Olaf Damman. *Making Population Health Knowledge*, in *Causation in Population Health Informatics and Data Science*. (Switzerland: Springer Nature), 63-77.

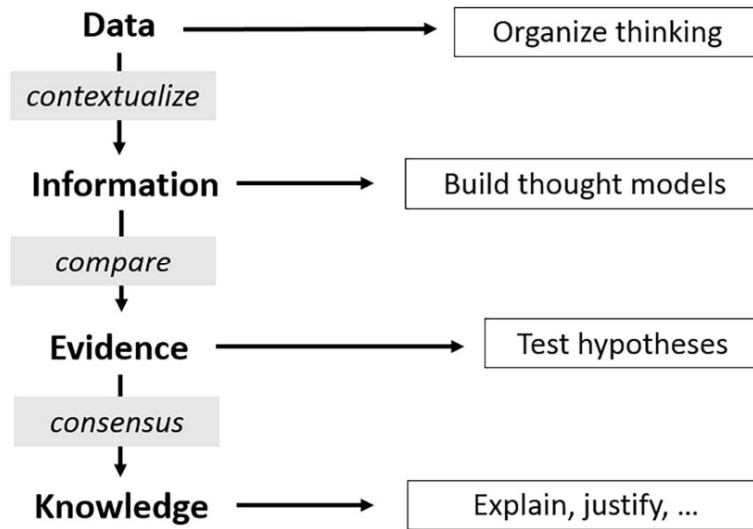


Table 2: Framework for the transition from data to knowledge <sup>3</sup>

The data of my friendship with Kelly— the tables, values, numbers, countable instances— could be an apt storytelling container, because the data remains cold, trapped its discrete boxes in the spreadsheet, sharing a wall with other imprisoned, adjacent values. Could this be enough to convey to the reader the chill of my own loss, not only because Kelly was gone, but because of new discoveries I found in the remnants of our complex relationship?

I stumbled on this conundrum when creating the formula and data for Facetime calculations. Eventually I found a number that could reasonably answer how many times I looked at her face in the course of our friendship - but so what? That number did not convey my devastation. What became more powerful was the application of context to that data, then the evidential treatment and comparison. So I extrapolated a trajectory: the number of hours I no longer get to see her face. This

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

became the proof of life and proof of loss—the true knowledge of grief. The abstract loss now had a number to structure it.

I was learning that you cannot have data until you decide what to track and how to best capture it.

## **The Archives**

### **A new identity: the artist archivist**

Through this time at UWB, I came to see and embrace myself as an *artist archivist*. My whole life I've kept meticulous records, organized my photos, stored and cataloged journals and letters, organized the spreadsheets I used for years of planning trips, etc. I never really knew why I was doing this, other than that I didn't want to forget, but I knew I loved it compulsively, that feeling of being lost in time as you comb through analog records of human lives. A good friend once told me she'd burned the journals she kept as a teenager, and I wanted to faint from the loss. (Imagine if Sylvia Plath or Frida Kahlo had burned their journals! So much of their identities and experiences—the tragedy of untreated postpartum depression; the understanding of pain and its relationship to color; the feminist themes and struggles of early 20th century artists who were women—were revealed by their own mouths rather than the patriarchal theorization of art historians.) We too easily forget where we've been, what we've gone through, how we became who we are today. We have no idea what our predecessors will make of our lives—it's my moral imperative to keep records for them to decide. So much wisdom is buried in those archives, and so much human progress is needlessly lost if we do not mine the gold from the treasure and tragedy of our personal and collective human histories.

## **Archiving as innate being**

I like to put things in order. I like to find things where I left them. I like to make sense of life by structuring it. I believe we all have that feeling when we look at the photographs on our smartphones and think, "I should really do something with these." But what we don't say is why. *Why* are we compelled to "do" something with archives? I believe the compulsion that drives this is our innate need to find and be found.

I spent hours in my 20s organizing photographs in my Windows explorer folders. Perhaps it started with my wedding album: I only had physical prints of my wedding in 2002. If they were lost, they would be irreplaceable. So we began to scan our photos and burn our VHS tapes to CD-ROMs. This was easy enough when all we had were physical pictures to scan. We eventually got a digital camera, and I took an interest in photography, taking my little Canon PowerShot with me everywhere I went. I taught myself via the sheer volume of photos that I took.

Then I met Kelly. Kelly had a fine arts degree and an eye for photography. She had a *serious* digital camera, a Canon DSLR that I borrowed often. For Christmas in 2009, my husband organized my friends and family to buy me my own camera, exactly the same model as Kelly's. That camera and I were inseparable. But in the digital era of photography, one does not need to be as economical with snapping photos as one does when the development of film is involved. Nonetheless I became an expert in photo storage and disk memory and spent hours reviewing, deleting, and organizing photographs at my desk.

As computer storage came online, I migrated all of our on-premises photo library to "the cloud," and at the same time, smartphone cameras were beginning to replace the fidelity of DSLR and had instant backup of photographs, so I didn't have to spend time uploading.

I was keeping records both as a buttress against memory loss and as a practical way of remembering my life. Soon I became known to my friends and family as "The Archivist." My life's information is cataloged into searchable information. When someone wonders, "Where was that place we stayed on vacation?" or "What did I wear to my 30th?" or "When was it that we first met each other?" I can pull up photos almost instantly using my digital tools. I could locate my own living. Beyond the practical recall of living, I had yet to discover that the archives were themselves fodder for art and my artistic identity.

### **Archiving as art-making**

In the first year of the MFA program, I was introduced to many artists who used archived material to create something new, specifically Jordan Able and Diana Khoi Nguyen.

In *Nishga*, writer Jordan Able's erasure techniques as applied to archival material both moved and inspired me to use ancestry.com and the only two photos I possessed of my paternal grandmother—a veritable stranger to me—to create a visual piece of work that conveyed that absence. Diana Khoi Nguyen's *Ghost Of* use of visual poetry to reshape and recur devastation through the use sparked a vision in me to apply text to photo in a profound new way for me. Allowed me a way to enter into the story.

In my time working on this thesis, I realized that my own archives were begging to be material for expressing my ideas, especially around grief, abandonment, absence, and loss. As I spent time deciding which portions of the Kelly archives to collect and mine, I began to see patterns and shapes. I started trying to create maps and connection points to put back together the story of our friendship—even just to tell myself the story of Kelly and the life we shared again.

This was a continuation of my work in Professor Amaranth Borsuk's class for which I created a chapbook, *Atlas: Maps to Connection*, wherein I used materials left behind by Kelly to create maps back to her. Throughout, several questions nagged me for answers: *Why was I doing this? What was I looking for? Why did I feel there was something unsaid there?*

Grieving is an endless abyss of remembering. Memory is the source of all grief—yet memory lacks solid ground. In memory's mind room, there are no footholds, no social agreements, no validation or corroboration—only projections, sand traps, and shadows. If the memory is buried in the psyche (a notably unclean and unstable source of truth), how can you trust your experience? The pursuit of the data became the revelation of the question. How could I trust that Kelly and I had something special? I needed to prove how close we were. Then I could really wrap my head around how much I'd lost, and how much I will forever continue to lose.

### **The material:**

I identified and worked with the following data sources:

- Hundreds of thousands of words I'd written in Microsoft Word, OneNote, and handwritten journals about Kelly's death and my grief

- 22 journals from the time I met Kelly in 2008 to the day she died in 2017
- 50 handwritten letters to each other
- 1000+ emails
- Calendar records of trips, dinners, brunches, hangouts, coffee dates, etc.
- 10 years of digital photos embedded with automatic metadata: facial recognition, time stamps, geo locations, f-stop, exposure, and ISO measures.
- 850 Google chats
- 10 years of blogs, both hers, mine, and three other shared private blogs, plus comments on each of these blogs
- Hundreds of text messages
- Flickr, Facebook, and Instagram posts
- The items I was given, items I sorted through and kept, and items purchased from her husband after she died:
  - 1 necklace
  - 1 pouch, hand-sewn by her, full of her drawing pencils
  - 1 case of her perfectly arranged colored pencils
  - 6 black garbage bags of her clothes and shoes
  - 10 boxes of her books
  - 1 ponytail palm plant
  - 1 mug
  - Home decor

- Several bottle of essential oils
- A tarot deck
- Leather tooling equipment
- A bag of rabbit pelts
- Two large canvas paintings
- Several small journals she had yet to use
- My letters to her, returned to me

### **Mining the archives**

During an MFA Salon reading, Professor Ted Hiebert astutely pointed out the seeming incommensurability of grief and data, and the work therefore struck him as a possible avoidance mechanism. I wondered if that were true: was I avoiding grief? Was I restructuring my experience into a knowledge management system to keep me from feeling loss? Was that part of my aim?

Even so, as I put together the work and consulted my own records to verify a memory or remind myself when something happened, I was increasingly relieved that I'd kept track of all of this ephemera, both analog and digital. Some of it had been gathered intentionally, such as photos. Other things had not been collected intentionally because they contained modes that tracked and stored themselves automatically, such as emails, chat records, and blog posts.

As I turned to mine this archive, I allowed myself to be led by one heuristic: discovery. I would not cut one search short in order to stay with a linear train of thought. If I encountered a pressing question or gap in our history, I allowed myself the pleasure of getting lost in the clues.

One such moment occurred when I could not recall the moment when Kelly first told me that she'd found a lump. I began to dig—here is a recount of that process:

1. Open Microsoft OneNote where I'd been compiling a timeline of our friendship which I started in 2018, one year after her death. I found a note next to the year 2010, "Kelly diagnosed with cancer sometime in March." I wanted to verify this using my archives, but was not sure how I could locate the specific date.
2. I opened Google photos, which automatically timestamps every photo (note: I automatically back up all my photos from my phone on to Google photos and have been doing so for years,, so the archive is a quick way for me to search what I was doing or where I was on a particular day) and I typed into the search bar "February 2010," and began scrolling through the year's photos for any clue. Nothing.
3. Maybe her public records contained a clue. I opened a new browser and navigated to Instagram (having removed the app from my phone due to increased anxiety after Covid-19) and scrolled through Kelly's posts. When did she begin posting about cancer publicly? I reach the end of all her posts and see that she started Instagram in 2012, several years after initial diagnosis. Nothing.
4. What were we doing in 2010 before starting Instagram? Blogging! I opened my old blog site and thanked the heavens for the easy filter on the sidebar so I could search the posts by year and month. There I see that from January 2010 to April 2010, I blogged 38 times. I clicked on the arrow to reveal the titles of each blog post, anything about Kelly's news? Nothing.

5. The blog research landed me on a site full of my own thoughts and memories, and I fell down deep into remembering what was going on in my life at the time, which was also very hard. I had hurried down to San Diego to help my sister who had just had a baby and was now getting a divorce. I ended up living there for over six weeks in a tiny, one-bedroom condo, essentially raising her newborn while she went to work. Kelly was sending me care encouraging packages and letters. Now I remember, Kelly got cancer right in the thick of it. I put the pieces together then. But still, nothing about the exact moment or mechanism of her news.
6. Maybe she told me in an email? I opened my Gmail and filter to only show results from her email address (she had two, I guessed which one). 900 emails returned. I filtered again and scrolled and scrolled and scrolled and stopped at February 2020. Reading through a few, I remembered that she'd not only been diagnosed with cancer, but that literally the day before, she'd moved back to California. Our emails were filled with encouragement, sadness, expressing what we'd become to each other in our daily interactions. It all came flooding back—the complicated way I'd felt about Kelly when living in proximity to her. We were both dreading the separation and sending emails and Google chats (which also return in the email result) all hours of the day. There was a lot of information to read through, and I laughed at her jokes, got distracted by other conversations we'd had. We'd newly started admitting how much we loved and relied on each other—in writing, to each other. I am seeing a friendship form on paper. Yet still, nothing about a lump.
7. Finally, I stumbled upon an email sent to me automatically from another blog we'd shared (and I remembered that, at one time, I had 5 different blogs). This one was a private blog

where only four friends, Kelly included, posted from 2008-2013. I found one from Kelly titled, "the previously alluded to crap," circa March 2010. I clicked on the email and it took me to the blog site (which, by the way, is still standing, still private, and I'd not realized it). I've not visited this site in 10 years or more. Yes, there it is. She was finally telling us that she'd found a lump two weeks prior, but figured it was nothing. But now she was scared for her sonogram the next day.

8. I opened a new tab in my browser, typed into a Google search, "March 2010 calendar," so I could count backward from March 18 to get the exact day she found the lump. Finally, yes. March 4—that would have been the day she found the lump but didn't say anything.

All of this, hours of searching, to verify when she found a lump. With each search, I cut myself open again with missing her, but was also intoxicated by the experience of finding myself as I searched for her. I was filled with gratitude for my past archiving practices. Even when it had felt so silly to do so, I kept blogging, journaling, creating and storing the content of our lives. I also took out a blank postcard and wrote to a friend immediately—convicted again about recording such moments in time.

As I walked through the memory clues, I walked through being with her.

This happened many times, sometimes without a clear goal. For example, I wondered if I could use the data of our various addresses to visualize our story. Maybe even a way to show a potential correlation of emotional proximity to physical proximity. But first, I had to find our addresses.

1. I opened my computer and OneNote, where I thought I'd kept this data, but I'd only collected the cities (but not addresses, darn it) where she lived. But I do at least know my own addresses, which I kept elsewhere.
2. I opened my Google Drive and searched for "our addresses," a record I created for my husband and I to recall every location where we've lived together. Nothing. Hmm. Could have sworn I have it somewhere. I tried again with the search, "residence" and yes, there it is.
3. I opened a new tab in my data excel spreadsheet and begin to copy paste my addresses into a table. I have only her general whereabouts, and I thought maybe it was enough to uncover a story about our proximity. So I started with mileage between our residences, but I couldn't identify one of her residences exactly. At first I guessed - roughly 10 miles, etc., but then I started to want exact addresses.
4. I started by consulting the return addresses on our paper correspondence, but doing this digitally because I'd already photographed all our letters as a failsafe if they were ever lost and posted them in OneNote. I opened the program and located the letters, but apparently I had not taken a picture of all of the envelopes, only the letters inside. I would need to fix that in the future.
5. But I remembered I DID take photos of these envelopes for a photo album, but hadn't put them here. I opened a new tab and went to the Google photos album I made, "Kelly's letters," and found the envelopes. I searched for the lost address, but then I remembered, damn, I sent letters to a P.O. box, not a physical address. But wait, I visited that house once, maybe I could see if Google maps tracked my location.

6. I opened Google maps, type in the city we visited. Nothing.
7. Then I remembered Google photos automatically geotags my locations, so I opened photos and typed in the name of the city where she lived, and yes! There was a photo of Joel and Kelly sitting in that house. I opened geotagged metadata and — there it was, the option "show this address in google maps." I clicked it, and there it was. I'd found the address so I could chart the mileage.
8. I repeated this process until I'd located the address of every place she'd lived in the ten years of our friendship.

Collecting and organizing this data became extremely time-consuming to do, and all of this was simply so I could get started mining the data for any kind of insights or visualizations I might want to create. This process led me to create "The Data": a Google Sheets file containing 26 different spreadsheets, filled with all sorts of quantifiable information about our lives: timelines, birthday dinners, ladies' brunches, blog posts, journal entries, numbers of photos, addresses, Google chats, etc.. And then I began to count.

Throughout the process, I was guided by the heuristic of the absurd. No matter how silly or impossible the situation or idea, I determined to identify any kind of number or measurement for every question that arose. I knew there was no way to know how many times Kelly sat at my kitchen table, but I promised myself the indulgence of trying to calculate it for the sake of the project and honoring the container wherein ideas incubate into art.

## The result and influences

The resulting work, *Variable Proximities: calculations of closeness | diagrams of distance* includes maps, sentence diagrams, timeliness, asemics, and other visualizations mined from my personal archives alongside personal essays that address my search for meaning after Kelly's death. Many artists inspired these choices; especially important among them is Renee Gladman, who creates abstract visuals such as asemic scribble situational "map." For this work in particular, I wanted to capture Kelly's tracks, the route she would have taken in my new home, purchased only weeks before she died. I created a route from memory and began to measure those distances. The idea here was to try and find proof of life, proof of connection, and ask the viewer to ponder what their own paths would look like on paper and if it prompted reflection, nostalgia, and meaning. I also knew I wanted to somehow address the painful interactions I've had with Kelly's husband—but I didn't feel they belonged to the world. So I began to scribble them out—all the things I never said to him, all the anger and pain scrawled over themselves so no one would ever read them, not even myself. The anger and words were held somehow by the safety of my home, buried in the tread of the route she would have taken throughout the rooms of my house.

For other visuals, I tapped into the power of doodling. I was influenced by the art of Kelly herself, who introduced me to intuitive doodling: you allow your hand to draw whatever shapes it finds pleasurable and then practice that shape over and over to build muscle memory. My psyche felt boundary-less when Kelly died, a kind of identity annihilation, and I had to go to the page to realize there were still borders for me. I could still fit somehow on this page. As I drew, I found the use of rulers and compasses represented a kind of landmass boundary, holding me in comfort, holding the

grief more precisely. As I drew, I layered and layered, and in places where I hated the work, I stayed with it and continued to create until I liked it. Often the lines I created were covered by the tool I used to draw them, so I had to proceed in trust. I would move the protractor by minute, imperceptible shifts and believed the shape was forming still. I tried this because in the previous section, I made big gestures, and wondered if I'd overreached, gone too outside of time or geometry.

Grief is both grand and granular. Questions in my mind go quiet, my hand performs the mapping, not my pain, not my head, not even my heart— just a body looking for another body through lines.

Other influences include: Alex Saum, whose digital work via a Google form helped me make a connection between the tools of technology we use all the time and repurposing them to create art; Verónica Gerber Bicecci for her work with Venn Diagrams appearing in the novel *Empty Set*; documentary poets such as Jenna Osman, Derek Beaulieu, and Phillip Metris who inspired me to apply erasure techniques to the archives (removing the words from a letter to leave only the punctuation or redacting text too important to leave out but too hard to write directly); and then visual poets and artists such as Cecilia Vicuña, John Cage, and Douglas Kearney, who showed me how to break up words and lines and rearrange words on the page into shapes that revealed new messages and complexities. Kearney explains, "If my writing makes a mess of things, it's not to flee understanding, but to map (mis-)understanding as a verb."<sup>4</sup> And especially visual poet Diana Khoi

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<sup>4</sup> Douglas Kearney. *Mess and Mess and*. 2011. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2011/01/mess>

Nguyen in *Ghosts Of* who broke open a way for me to visually give absence and grief a shape on the page.

Statistician Edward Tufte's work and expertise in data visualizations indirectly informed the work as well as his mother Virginia Tufte and her seminal influence on the practice of diagramming sentences as style.

As a whole, the work explores and exposes the inadequacy of grief data. Approaching relationships in formulas invites the reader to consider their own relationship with data and ephemerality. On its completion, I do not feel I have the answers to my questions, but I understand now why I needed to ask those questions and, more importantly, unearthed a new and profound way to recognize and release grief.