No Man’s Land

Elizabeth Scarboro

It’s my thirty-first birthday and I’m sitting in Dr. Woo’s chair, gripping the armrest with my right hand, fingering my shirt hem with my left. I am finally getting that tooth worked on, the one on the lower left with the huge hole in it, where a filling fell out five years ago. I’m thinking about how more than once when Stephen and I would lie in bed at the end of the night, he’d try, between kisses, to convince me to go to the dentist. My tooth concerned him. The problem was, it didn’t hurt on a day-to-day basis. He advocated avoiding future pain.

I thought I wasn’t going to the dentist because the problem seemed trivial: my tooth versus his stomach tube, his lung transplant, his daily dealings with cystic fibrosis. He thought I was terrified of the dentist. I became indignant, then sleepy, in these conversations. Two years after his death, I have to admit he was right. His death takes the punch out of these kinds of admissions, strips them of their sheepishness and deep sighs. They are just tiny naked facts now, hair-thin blood vessels leading nowhere. He was thirty when he died; I have now officially outlasted him.

I close my eyes when the drilling begins. I tell myself that all I have to do is remain in this chair with my mouth open until Dr. Woo is done. I can pull this off for an hour. I think of Stephen, of the two weeks he spent—the last two weeks of his life it turned out—with his mouth held open by the ventilator. I felt badly then that he couldn’t talk, couldn’t drink or eat, but I never considered how uncomfortable it must have been to be unable to close his mouth. It’s just one of those things you expect to be able to do. It’s funny how much he communicated though, with his eyes, mouth, head, hands.

He was trying to tell us he was about to die, I think. He’d point emphatically to the upper corner of the room. “Out?” we’d ask. “You want to go out? Home? Not yet, soon though, we’ll take you home.” He’d shake his head: Try again. We were hopeless, not ready at all.

Dr. Woo tells me it’s over. I’m relieved to be able to shut my mouth and open it by my own free will, to say goodbye and step out of the chair and down the stairs and into the truck. The great thing about driving alone in the car is that no one can hear you. Many people, after someone dies, are quiet at home, sad in the grocery store, animated at work, and screaming their heads off in the car. The other option, besides screaming, involves conversation. I’ve asked around—many people, it turns out, talk to someone who’s died while they’re driving. At home these conversations are awkward, you feel self-conscious hearing your voice jet out into the empty space. But the car is the perfect place. It’s something about the motion of the car, the noise all around you, the fact that you are facing straight ahead. You stare at the road as you speak, and it’s easy to forget that the person sitting next to you is not actually there. You can appear like any other driver. Someone who pulls up beside you assumes you are singing along with the radio, talking on speaker-phone, reacting to a call-in guest.

I head slowly up Piedmont, meandering along with the rest of traffic. I’m not ready to go home, though, and so instead of turning left I climb the street to its dead end, find myself at the Oakland Mausoleum and Cemetery. As I enter the gates, it dawns on me that the cemetery might rival the car for the ideal place to talk to a dead person, even if he isn’t actually buried here.

Stephen loved cemeteries. We used to wander through the Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, passing by the gravestone of the man who invented anesthesia, the tomb of the founder of the Christian Scientists, a rich Bostonian’s large homage to his dog. Why didn’t I get Stephen a gravestone? He should have a place somewhere like this, in rolling grass hills, with other stones nearby, a place eerie and soothing and compelling, where I could imagine him sitting cross-legged, in his green shorts, quietly thinking.

Stephen’s ashes are at Kirby Cove under the Golden Gate Bridge, and near Mar Vista on the north coast, and in the Rocky
Mountains, and at the lake near his old house, and on the golf course with his dad’s. He is too spread out, and it’s my fault.

I’m sorry for all the ways I’ve messed up since Stephen died and while he was alive. I’m sorry that on the way to the hospital that last time I wouldn’t let him stop and get a Coke. I’m sorry I had that habit of balancing all discussions, how when he’d tell me about a fight he’d had with a friend I’d jump to explain the reasons why his friend might have done what he did.

Sometimes, my sister once told me, you just want someone on your side. Was I better to Stephen after she told me that? I don’t know. I hate that only he, only the two of us thinking together, could answer that question.

I drive slowly through the cemetery and for some reason I am picturing Gina, my new boyfriend’s sister. She’s twenty, and I’ve been looking at her lately, her dark flashing eyes, her skin smooth even after a night of no sleep. Stephen and I must have looked like that when all of this started, when we peered up at the doctors—a scared but united front.

I remember showing up at my friend Chris’s sublet in the Haight, after staying overnight in the hospital. Her housemates were older—wise thirty-year-olds, drinking coffee in the living room. They looked at me somberly, asked, are you okay? I was usually good at answering that question and it hit me that I was about to be less good at it. I didn’t know what to say except for “yeah,” which I would say for years to come and still return to sometimes. I did manage to think of something to add, which was, “Can I wash my face and get some water?” They jumped up, relieved to be able to do something.

Chris and I biked across the Golden Gate Bridge toward Marin, the wind pushing us forward, water surging below. After the ride home, I rented Harold and Maude from the video store and biked to the hospital. I wheeled the 11\textsuperscript{th} floor VCR into Stephen’s room and lay down next to him in his bed. He held me tight as we watched the movie, eventually drifting off to sleep. The nurses let us stay like that all night, squeezed together on the narrow hospital bed.

The cemetery is almost empty. I park the truck, and wander slowly through a trail of tombstones. I find a spot where there is no one in sight, and lie back in the grass. Since Stephen died this always feels best to me, lying in warm grass, the sky above me, him on my mind, my body sinking in and still. The sky isn’t big enough to encompass everything that was, or is, or will be, or would have been. We were maybe going to have kids. When we’d been younger, neither of us had wanted to, and this seemed lucky, since he’d been told he couldn’t. But then Stephen met a guy with CF who’d had a kid. We were twenty-six then, and without even thinking about it we broke loose from the future we’d had in our minds, jumped right into one where we had a family together. It was a great-sounding future. Complicated, yes, and far away, but great.

The day Stephen was going to die, a friend told me it was possible to extract sperm before death. It was a way to laugh at death, an absurd and inappropriate joke at the most serious of times, which I knew was what Stephen would have liked best about it, had he been conscious. I talked to the doctors. They were already doing everything invasive under the sun. They wanted so badly to get him back for me, they ached with it.

Dr. Golden brought me into a room full of hospital lawyers, this kind of thing being classic lawsuit material. I was nervous and worn; the lawyers were haughty and caffeinated, firing away their questions. Dr. Golden asked me if I was cold, and before I could answer he put his coat around my shoulders. The lawyers changed their tone when they spoke to me, granting me inadvertent respect now that I wore the white uniform with a stethoscope dangling from my pocket. Dr. Golden winked at me, satisfied.

I returned to Stephen and told him, guess what, we managed to horde a bit of life. Death thought it was going to come out of the game with everything.

A year or so later, I decided that the baby, the genetic combination of us, was not the way to go, that I had to figure out how to keep Stephen with me in a non-physical way. This seems
especially true now that I am in love with someone else. I never thought I would be in love again, for some reason at least not in the next seven years, but here I am.

It is not the kind of love that people conjure up for widowhood—coming on wise and slow and subtle, with the beauty of slight rain. I met Cullen playing soccer and within fifteen minutes of the game we’d crashed into each other, fighting to get to the ball, scraped our palms on the Astroturf to break our falls. Months later and it still feels the same way—nerve-wracking and right. When I can take the leap of faith to believe that the future exists, I want every bit of it. I want all the mundane and glorious things that people in love want. I want to wake up with Cullen, I want him to love my dog, I want a life with him, a family even.

But today I want both futures. I am gluttonous, so what? I want my life with Cullen and I want the child Stephen and I might have had. But I want our child only if Stephen can be here to raise him or her with me, and that’s not going to happen. He can’t come back. He is not coming back.

Does he miss me? Is there missing where he is? Is he in a particular place? For a while I was consumed with wondering where he was, if he was. Gradually I began to think that I was going about it in the wrong way, that where he was there was no such thing as time or place. It’s just not like that after death.

What is it like after death? Before Stephen died I thought it was nothing, it was decomposition. Do I think differently now because I need to, or because it’s true what Stephen said when his father died, that people don’t just disappear?

I wander through the grass, read dates on the gravestones, do the math. I have the thought that everyone seems to have for me but I rarely have myself: Why fifteen years for one person, thirty for Stephen, and eighty for someone else? Why eighty for so many and thirty for him? Why will I always now think of the years beyond thirty as extra? I will never understand and yet I still keep on living. It feels like a betrayal to Stephen, to us, sometimes, that I keep on waking up in the morning, eating breakfast.

I am starting to walk back to the truck when I notice a gravestone for Evans. It is newer, no names inscribed, just two markers below it, Charles and Caroline. I rub my hands over the stone, talking softly to myself. It’s okay to talk out loud here. It’s a cemetery; people know you might be a little insane when you visit. They don’t know how long it’s been since the person you loved died, or who that person was to you. It could have been ten years ago or yesterday—you are still given the same privileges of behavior. So I talk to him, holding my arms around my stomach, the way I do when I am talking to him from down here on earth, muttering and rambling.

I’m sorry, I am saying. I’m sorry you lay on the bed helpless, sorry people explained procedures but you had to endure them anyway. Sorry that even though I was with you, I didn’t know the half of it. Sorry that you appreciated your days more than anyone I know and that didn’t mean you got any more of them. Sorry that you’re not here, that I am, and the days are jetting forward. Sorry that I will get to have the days ahead of me. Sorry I am back to living now. Sorry I get to breathe and take the dog to the Marina and have sex. Sorry I am falling in love.

No one wants me to be sorry right now, I tell him. You want me not to be sorry, more steadily and deeply than anyone else. But, unlike anyone else, you can’t pretend that you don’t understand why my happiness is directly proportional to a particular sorrow, how the more I realize I’m here, the more I know that you’re not. There is no way, after what we had together, that life can keep me from its possibilities. Death is absolute, and in comparison, everything else can be messed with.

I know now why your sense of humor was so absurd. Life, from this angle, is funny. I plan to be amusing myself a lot. I am running again, writing, seeing our friends, just finished another year of teaching sixth grade. I am about to go learn Spanish in Mexico, which you know I always said I’d do. My sister will meet me there, and then Cullen. Life continues to be new and unknown, just like it was when you were here, only entirely different. I do finally look
forward to seeing what’s going to happen next. I miss you though, and soon I’ll drive back into Oakland, back to our house, and I’ll be returning to the foreign country I live in now, having come from this soft and overcast home.

The Healer

Nylah Lyman

For months, her determined hands coaxed the sickness up and out of my lungs until it came to rest, eventually, in her own—the same way lightning enters a house through an open circuit: silent, implacable, and no telling how it might exit again.