

Lee Anne Gallaway-Mitchell

Combustion

If you want to scatter someone's ashes in a body of water it helps to release the cremains with de-stemmed flowers. That way, your eyes have something to follow. Bright gerbera daisies are fine floaters and can be tracked the longest.

My anticipatory grief has its own research methods.

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I attend a conference on war the week after my dad requests hospice care. At the conference, a Vietnam Vet and I talk over coffee, and when he finds out my dad flew Hueys in the war, he gently touches my arm with his finger, asking, "Your dad still around?"

I hesitate. I can still answer yes. He holds his finger until I can give an affirmative. It stays there above my elbow for a beat longer than it should, a comfort.

My dad, now dying (and still) for as long as my seven-year-old daughter has been alive, told us years ago, "Just burn my ass up; throw me in a culvert."

But he also wants to be scattered in the Gulf of Mexico.

"Just take me to the coast."

My sisters, our mom, and I want pieces of him here and there, wherever we may live.

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In the past year, I've told my dad goodbye at least five *final* times.

One of these farewells he yelled at me over some small thing

then spat out, “Y’all better travel while you can. Don’t get fucking old.”

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Dad’s skin is dry; his cells slough off. I will eat them in the jars of salsa he canned right before being admitted to the hospital this last time. The tomatoes and peppers came from his garden, too, where he deposited his blood, his skin so thin it breaks. The blood thinner makes him bleed out in great drops and streams from the least cut, puncture, or scrape. Gardening has long been a bloodsport, but he keeps transplanting rose bushes and pruning them, too.

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Don’t we become all our dead? My dad lived life’s terror, fought through that body quake of inevitability for an entire year in Vietnam. A habit he couldn’t shake, of course he would pass it on, that feeling of being caught like a criminal in your own skin, looking at the scar on your forehead knowing you’ll carry it around to the end of your days. When my daughter fell and hit her head on a rock and that rupture of skin became a scar, I rubbed vitamin E oil on it for weeks. It didn’t make a damn. She’ll carry that mark to her forever, too. Sometimes I become so addled by grief I wonder at the wisdom of writing it in its pre-emptory stages. But shouldn’t there be a real-time accounting of what it means to mourn?

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In one of the last goodbyes, my dad motions me over to his car as he’s about to leave for dialysis.

“You know that .22 I gave Brad? I want to spend some time with it. Try to hit the side of a barn, you know?”

I nod my head. My dad pokes me in the arm, “Don’t forget!”

We give him the rifle during the next visit, but we forget to bring it back during this, what we imagine our last.

My sister later tells me, “Dad always gives you the best last words.”

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At the conference on war, I am around people who think about war as much as, hell, *more* than I do. My dad a combat veteran, my husband one, too. More questions than answers for those of us who ponder: “Are there limits to how we can share the burden of war?” These questions linger a few days later as I watch my dad and listen to him talk.

Dad hands us jars of his salsa in what I am sure will be the last time, the day after I attend the conference on war.

He cautions, “Make sure to leave enough for your mama. Debbie’ll need some, too, when I am gone.”

Dad asks my husband about the explosion in his US Air Force fighter jet the week before, about the auxiliary engine that blew the fuck up, the vaporized hydraulic fluid—the worst carcinogen in the airplane—filling the cockpit and his lungs, about documenting damage done to plane and body. Just in case.

Dad examines a jar of pickled cherry tomatoes spiked with chiltepins and hands it over with a promise: “It’ll light your ass up.”

Lee Anne Gallaway-Mitchell grew up working on a family farm in Lockney, TX. Her essays and poems can be found in [Bat City Review](#), [Iron Horse Literary Review](#), [0-Dark-Thirty](#), and [terrain.org](#), among others. She is an MFA candidate in creative writing at the University of Arizona.