

that which remains

remnants of *you* are scattered throughout my life.

in a box on the closet floor: a composition titled “power prayers for your life” – for all the times i may (or may not) pray – it’s honestly kind of conceited, to assume such a thing as religion in a person. on my desk: a small circular container presenting a beach scene (sand, tiny rocks, seashells, a fake plant, a piece of wood, and a clear bottle: a paper rolled up inside with the date written on it). hung on the wall: a key – i’m not sure if it’s real; it may not even open anything. on top of the coffee maker: an alligator’s head with one eye visible, the other popped back into its skull. next to it: the world i was given just before he who gave it to me fell down the stairs. on the bar in the kitchen: a clock made of wood. on mum’s bedside table: *the book*.

mum got a small urn with a lighthouse scene painted on it at the funeral. i believe she keeps it in her room. so death is not only figuratively placed throughout the house – barely noticeable, like the tiny pieces of confetti my grandma used to put in my birthday cards – but literal remnants of it are here, as well.

i can’t compare *you* to a summer’s day because shakespeare already beat me to that (and nobody likes plagiarism), but i do tend to compare the way *you* died with my struggles in faith. i think my religion might’ve left my mind when *you* left my life.

and i despise the fact that *you*, somehow, are everywhere and nowhere all at once now. it didn’t feel like this with any of the others.

people try so hard to prove that something exists beyond us. or rather, beyond our deaths. a biblical maximalist and archeologist named eilat mazar is said to have found the oldest proof of religion: a 3,000 year old inscription called the ophel pithos. to any christian, that’s proof enough. why isn’t it for me?

i remember when my uncle died.

mum came into the room. she sat on the bed next to me. “i have something to tell you,” she said softly. she had a weird look in her eyes; an unrecognizable look of genuine sadness, but also one of fear. i hadn’t seen a lot of sadness before the age of five. i stayed quiet. she took a deep breath and said, “your uncle earl passed away.” she said something after that, though i don’t remember exactly what it was. something about *heaven*; something about *god*. but i stayed stuck on the words “passed away” for a minute or two, trying to comprehend their true meaning. i didn’t acknowledge whether or not *god* had anything to do with it. i just knew that my uncle wasn’t going to be around anymore.

and **that was it.**

no further emotion was needed to be shown for the uncle nobody knew.

a few tears might've dropped from my mother's eyes, but mine stayed dry. i didn't really care, honestly. we lived in alaska and my uncle lived in texas. i didn't remember him well; i didn't talk to him much. it wasn't a big loss for me.

but i remember when *you* died.

my sister and i were in the kitchen. it was just after 7 am. mum looked at us, her eyes puffy from crying. "i have something to tell you," she said softly. "your pawpaw passed away really, really early in the morning." i was only sad for a split second; barely even long enough to cry about it.

after that came the funeral, the talk of *god*, the exchanging of gifts, and the expressions of last wishes.

"it's pawpaw's old *bible*" nana said, handing *the book* to mum. i remember thinking she needed it. when nana turned and gave me the "power prayers for your life" book, i remember thinking i didn't need it. this was the last thing i needed.

but i smiled and nodded politely. i let a quiet "thank you" escape my lips.

i've gotten quite good at thank-yous. the funeral was full of them. it was full of people *you* knew and i didn't.

the book mentions having a church family. *you* were always big on that. the people of the church; the people of *god* were connected to *you* in a way that a "sinner" never could be. perhaps i'm a sinner incapable of repenting, then, because i didn't really understand what *you* had to do with the actual funeral itself. i must not be connected to *you* close enough to fully comprehend such pretentiously religious ways.

"he was a good man, very dear to me," one woman said, shaking a hand that was connected to my arm but didn't actually belong to me, "he's gone to be with *jesus*."

smile and nod. "thank you."

"i'm so sorry for your loss," a man said with tears welling up in the corners of his eyes, "he's in *god*'s glorious kingdom, now." it honestly pissed me off a little, the way everybody was suddenly so openly christian. everybody was suddenly so confident in the fact that *you* existed and that i believed in *you*. nobody asked me if i thought people went to heaven, they just told me that they did.

but what if they didn't?

smile and nod. "thank you."

word in *the book* is that "...*the lord searches all hearts and understands all the intent of the thoughts.*" or at least, that's what 1 chronicles 28:9 nkjv presumes. which makes me wonder: if, when i claim that *you* died, am i talking about my grandfather...or my faith in *you, god*?

colossians likes to preach at me often. "*make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. remember, the lord forgave you, so you must forgive others.*"

but forgiveness is hard to give to someone who doesn't realize that they're doing anything wrong. religion is narcissistic like that; it's easy to throw at people's faces but difficult to handle when it's thrown at yours.

i could've told that woman that i didn't believe her. i could've told that man that he was wrong. i could've said that *you* don't exist. but what good would it have done? (after all, how am i to convince somebody of something that i don't even fully believe, myself.)

the easier way out is just to smile and nod, give a little "thank you" when they're done stuffing their own religious opinions down my throat, even if i disagree with them.

in fact, i've gotten so good at thank-yous and pretending to feel what everybody wants me to feel, that i've almost learned how to avoid my own emotions altogether, including guilt.

so now i'm going to confess something.

something i have yet to tell anyone. i have kept this secret for a couple of years now, left it sitting in the pit of my stomach, much like a stone, but it carries no weight over me. i have no guilt for the following action:

i helped cover up a murder.

i was fifteen and already kind of sad.

dad was in the garage, minding his own business; doing whatever men do in garages mid-summer. my sister and i were in the living room. suddenly we hear the garage door swing open and dad calls our names. i follow my sister to the garage and dad rushes us to step out and close the door. then we see the bird.

it was *beautiful*: with beady black eyes, green feathers on its backside, a red neck, and an off-white color that faded into grey stretching from its chest to its stomach.

it was flying around, hitting the windows in a desperate attempt to find its way back outside. it slammed into the ceiling a few times and we all watched it. just for a moment. my sister asked how we were going to get it back outside. dad said he'd leave the garage door open so it can find its way out again. then my sister and i went back into the house.

half an hour goes by and i get a text message from my dad. he tells me to come to the garage by myself. when i get out there, he says he "fucked up" and i ask him how.

he killed the bird.

he didn't mean to.

but it couldn't find its way back out. he wanted to help it. he thought he could catch it in a large cardboard box and then point the opening of the box towards the sky, so as to gently guide the bird in the correct direction. but when he tried to capture it, he missed and hit the bird with the edge of the box.

"...i just heard a thump as it fell into the box," he told me, "and i was like, fuuuuuck." i look up and see a very small, very faint stain on the ceiling: the crime scene.

i won't go into the gory details, but the bird eventually ended up back outside. it was left on the side of the road, where it would look as though it was hit by a passing car.

and **that was it.**

there was no further emotion needed to be shown for the beautiful bird that was now a pile of feathers and dried blood.

in ephesians 4:25-32, *the book* mentions doing honest work. this was not honest.

but for some reason, seeing the bird dead on the side of the road filled me with more sadness than i knew was possible for one little person to have. it made me realize how odd it is that some of the deceased still have a name after dying while others don't. certain things get to keep their titles, whereas others, perhaps the things we already knew wouldn't last for very long, just fade into the back of our minds until we no longer associate their memory with any of the stages of grief.

matthew 5:4 assures me that "*blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*" but i don't remember much comfort outside of dull sentences that felt more like a pain in my side than a way to soothe my mind.

i still refer to my grandfather in death the same as i did in life. he stayed a human, a being. i didn't degrade him down into some old *thing* that is now gone; now lost – lost in the same way that i lost track of true time before i realized that the wooden clock on the counter was wrong.

but my uncle doesn't really have a name anymore. the bird doesn't have a name anymore. i am even slowly forgetting the name that *you* are supposed to have.

i find it funny how atheists tend to believe science comes before religion, but religious folks tend to believe their religion comes before science.

as if they always contradict each other. i do not understand this thought.

all i know is that i relate more to a man named stephen meyer. he is a scientist who makes a living out of what he believes in. he was raised in a religious family, but has claimed to not have been truly religious until he was in college, where he found his own personal way into faith.

he is a scientist that believes in *god*. a man who believes in both fact and possible fiction and allows them to do more than contradict each other.

what if what someone believes in is what determines their next destination after dying?

i've also discovered that some things die quickly, whereas others don't.

the dog didn't die quickly. the dog died slowly and in pain.

the dog died not that long before *you* did. i remember the way it sounded. it let out shrill yelps that echoed around the trees in the dark and made their way through the walls and into the house. the noises started at around ten that night. the first ones were quick, sharp sounds. by eleven, they were long howls. the sounds seemed to peak at about eleven thirty. then they stopped. i thought it was over. i almost fell asleep. until eleven forty-five rolled around and the

dog started yelping again. i heard short bursts of whines that made me want to stuff my head under the pillow. i don't remember exactly when they stopped; it didn't matter.

the dog was dead.

the next morning at breakfast, nana tells me that the dog had "crawled to about the same place that the dog's father [who had died years before] did."

and **that was it.**

there was no further emotion needed to be shown for the dog.

the book talks a lot about death. it talks a lot about mourning. but it also talks a lot about going to *god* or *jesus* about the emotions that come alongside these things.

but how am i supposed to talk to *you* if i don't feel like *you* are here?

you are not here because *you* died quietly and painlessly.

you didn't slam into the ceiling and make a scene the way the hummingbird did.

you didn't yelp throughout the night and keep me awake the way the dog did.

no. instead:

- *you* slipped slowly into the back of my head – the same way the alligator's eye popped into the back of its skull – until *you* were no longer really existent to me.
- *you* fell down the stairs the way my grandfather did after he put the world in the palm of my hand – *you* allowed someone to give me "everything" but let me feel as though i had nothing because anything can be taken away in an instant.
- *you* embodied yourself in *the one book* that i will doubtfully ever finish reading.

you are the key that is hanging on my wall – the one that i have no clue whether or not opens anything – because, just like the key, i do not know if *you* are real.

in *the book*, "remnants" means "that which remains." it is talking about the final, small group of those on earth who are still true followers of *god*. it first appears in jeremiah 39-40.

and in isaiah 1:9 *the book* says: "except the lord had left us a remnant — if god, by his infinite power and goodness, had not restrained our enemies, and reserved some of us, we should have been as Sodom — the whole nation of us had been utterly cut off, as the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were."

"reserved some of us," it says. is that what we are? leftovers? the last ones standing? how could that mean anything?

i'm slowly realizing that somewhere along the way, *you* were a constantly changing form, but with each change, *you* became more and more distant. *you* started as a short talk between mother and daughter in a bedroom when i was five. that's where i heard of *you* for the first time. *you*, – again, like confetti from my birthday cards – were scattered here and there for the next ten

years or so, perhaps so i didn't forget about *you*? then *you* escalated into a hummingbird by the time i was fifteen. by seventeen, *you* were a dying dog.

the last and final change happened when *you* fell back into old patterns: at the funeral. *you* were back to being disguised as short conversations that i couldn't find any meaning in...and that is how *you* lost me.