

Landslide

In heartbreak, we gather. In loss, we seek space to reflect across a sea of both destruction and delight. In love, we yearn to feel the hand, hold the gaze, just one more moment.

We see a room filled with grief, and know we are not alone in the storms of mourning. We know we sit beside those who face the absence of partners and parents, children and friends, siblings and soulmates. We feel in the very air a library of lives, of hopes both fulfilled and shattered, dreams both realized and dashed, love that lives eternal or has faded. Or never was.

The poet Stuart Kestenbaum wrote,

The light snow started late last night
and continued all night long while I slept,
and could hear it occasionally enter my sleep,
where I dreamed my brother was alive again
and possessing the beauty of youth,
aware that he would be leaving again shortly
and that is the lesson of the snow falling
and of the seeds of death that are in everything that is born:
we are here for a moment of a story that is longer than all of us
and few of us remember,
the wind is blowing out of someplace we don't know,
and each moment contains rhythms within rhythms,
and if you discover some old piece of your own writing,
or an old photograph,
you may not remember that it was you
and even if it was once you,
it's not you now,
not this moment that the synapses fire
and your hands move to cover your face in a gesture
of grief and remembrance.

For all of us who have loved and lost, we know no one else really understands our grief. As each relationship is unique, so too is each path of mourning. We may share the same genre of loss, and yet its meaning is distinct. We in this room may even mourn the same person, yet it pains us differently. And were I to witness myself at this time last year, my grief today would not be shared even with my former self. We pilgrimage alone to this place of memory.

In Yizkor, we choose to make this pilgrimage together, noting that in the aloneness of our feelings we hold together in grief. We reach for the words, the scraps of writing, the photograph that reminds us in mourning, alone though we may feel, together we also exist. We see the gaping holes that have not, nor cannot be filled; and yet we see the profound ways presence is known in the smell of fabric, the

aroma of coffee, the feel of the pages of a book turning. Worlds have fallen apart, and yet the remnants linger. We feel the aftershocks of seismic loss, the landslides that buried hope with grief.

Weary and alone. So we find the great prophet Elijah. He sits beneath a bush in the desert, remembering and reflecting. Throughout his life, his words spoke truth to corruption, but left him separate and abandoned.

Elijah sets out to follow in the footsteps of those before him. He enters a cave in the mountain, and God's voice reverberates through every cell of his body. "Why are you here Elijah?" It was the question he kept failing to answer. The question he hoped God would answer for him. He feels his self-doubt, he feels his solitude, he feels his shame rise to the surface. God calls "Go out from this place Elijah, leave this space of darkness and protection, leave the safety and seclusion of these walls. Go out and stand on the mountain, exposed and aware. Go out." And so Elijah leaves the cave.

Suddenly, a great and mighty wind tears at him, trying to pull his purchase from the stone face. Rocks come loose and tumble down the mountain. Elijah wonders – is this wind the presence of God? The wind feels somehow familiar, and Elijah notices the tempest of his own spirit that he used to try to move the hearts of humanity. But God is not in the wind, Elijah realizes, nor is God in my inner storm. And the wind disappears.

And after the wind, an earthquake shakes the mountain. Elijah feels himself jerked from side to side, tossed like a helpless doll, powerless to the motions of the world itself. Elijah wonders – is this quake the presence of God? This force that reminds us of our own fragility, is this God? Elijah feels the pain and fear that now rises within himself, but again, Elijah realizes this is not the path of God. God is not in the quake. And so the mountain stops shaking.

The air and ground now still, Elijah looks up towards the top of the mountain. And suddenly it is raining fire. Flame erupts around him, scorching the beauty of the mountainside. In an instant, the world he knew is consumed in a reddish glow, as though the very universe itself was now blazed in a final death cry. Elijah tries to gaze into the fire, but he realizes again, God is not in the fire.

Elijah looks up again, but this time his upward gaze goes deep within himself. And he notices. He finally notices. God is not in the spaces of all that occupied his attention. Not in the tempests nor the disaster, not in the indignation nor the rage. And so, Elijah fell silent.

And in his silence, Elijah listens. He notices the embers of his fury, the quaking of his heart, the tempest of his spirit, and lets the silence carry it away. In stillness, Elijah listens. And he hears. *Kol d'mamah dakah* - the still, small voice, the soft whisper of silence. God speaks in the stillness. The same words, the same haunting question:

"Why are you here Elijah?" And Elijah feels the same words rise to his lips, somehow meaning something entirely different. I imagined the Sinai of Moses's tales, of lightening and trembling, the God of judgement and punishment. And here I stand, on hallowed ground, on the holy mountain. And now I see that God is in none of those things. Instead, God whispers to me in the stillness, in the silence. Awakening me to the spark there within me all along. My life is uncertain, yes. Loss is before me, yes. I am by myself, yes. But I am not alone.

And so God calls to Elijah again, calls to him out of the stillness in the storm. And Elijah rises.

This is the pilgrimage of this day. To leave our caves and bring our grief to this shared, sacred mountain of memory. To note the storms and winds, the quakes and slides, to remember the loss that changed everything. And to listen. To feel. To touch what comes next. For Elijah, the prophetic leader, it meant hearing beneath the surface of it all.

For Tallu Schuyler Quinn, the nonprofit leader, it meant hearing the movement of it all. Quinn spent her adult life working to alleviate hunger and inequality throughout the United States and abroad. Everything changed when she turned 40 and learned that she had stage IV glioblastoma. From denial to rage, she spun in the storms of Elijah's life. As a young mother, so many dreams came crashing to pieces. But she too stepped beyond the boundaries of her cave to listen deeply. In her words:

Deeply grieving my death is the obligation I have to this life I love. I will not shrink from the sadness I feel, but neither will I quit my imperfect praise. I crashed into life like a wave, and like all waves I will return to my source, the bigger body of life from which I was made. I do not know when the final pull and recede will happen, but it will for me and it will for you. Have I done all I was meant to do up here on the shore? Have I paid good attention? Did I adequately praise all there is to love?¹

That is the essential difficulty, both of living and of remembering: life goes on, but we, and our loved ones, do not. We spend a lifetime accruing the scraps of writing, the photographs, the moments of love. But along the way, we are bound by a path of infinite loss. For the very universe that unfolds into new life, new love, new dream is the same universe that demands death, rupture, and heartbreak as their precursors. As Kathryn Schulz captured:

It is true what people so often tell you in the face of hardship or heartache: life goes on. I have always liked that expression, hackneyed though it may be, for its refusal of easy consolation, for everything that it declines to say. It does not promise an end to pain, like "time heals all wounds"...It does not have the clean-slate undertones of "tomorrow is another day." It says only that things – good things, bad things, thing-things; it does not specify – will not stop happening. That is not so much a reassurance as a reminder: you will not just get to sit there for as long as you want, drinking your sorrow neat. Not only will your own emotions begin to distract you; sooner or later, the rest of the world will likewise resume asserting its many needs. Well before you feel you are ready, you will have to go to work and clean the kitchen and pay the phone bill...you will get mad about something unrelated, and laugh about something unrelated.²

This is part of what makes grief so terrifying. As life goes on, so do we. And in the inevitability of movement, we feel a loosening of the tethers that gave us definition. Like standing atop the mountain,

¹ Tallu Schuyler Quinn, *What We Wish Were True*, p. 32.

² *Lost & Found*, p. 231

amidst tempest and quake, fire and tumult, the most painful throes of grief give focus to our attention. As they fade, we fear our memory, our love, our anchor will as well.

Stephanie Lynn recalls sitting atop the Rocky Mountains in Aspen in 1974. She and her boyfriend were living in poverty, and she heard the screams of her disappointed parents and her own drowned dreams flood her mind.

I took my love, I took it down
I climbed a mountain and I turned around
And I saw my reflection in the snow-covered hills
'Til the landslide brought me down

Though she would change her name to Stevie, Stephanie Lynn Nicks recalls that moment on the mountain as the beginning of her faith, but not the end of her struggles. While Landslide would soon ascend as an emotional anthem to the nation, Nicks' life moved on in directions of both blessing and pain. But there on the mountain, she heard beneath the din of it all.

As the tumult of it all begins quiet, we are forced to face the deeper questions that had been drowned out. These are the questions of how memory transforms into legacy, how grief may move us to purpose.

Oh, mirror in the sky
What is love?
Can the child within my heart rise above?
Can I sail through the changin' ocean tides?
Can I handle the seasons of my life?

We pilgrimage together to this mountain of memory. We fear all that is changing, we who built lives around those we love and inevitably lose. We feel the tides of connection and separation, the ebb and flow of presence and absence. And here we let the feelings crest so we may listen beneath it all. To hear the voice of our loved ones. To feel the presence of God. To listen for the questions that move us to reflection. And to know that in the landslide of loss also lives our love.

Mirror in the sky
What is love?
...
If you see my reflection in the snow-covered hills
Well, the landslide brings it down