

Post-its | ELIZABETH HEALD

1.

THE APPLES FROM OUR JONATHAN TREES are bagged up in the shower of the guest bathroom. We keep them there because the temperature is right for ripening and that room goes unused up until the holidays, when the children come back with their families. By that time the apples are usually gone, used up in a flurry of your baking and canning. This year the apples remain where they are. The children have already come and gone. We didn't know what to do with the apples so we moved them back and forth between the shower and the sink as needed.

I feel bad for the apples, waiting for you to carve them into something cinnamon and sweet. I go in and sit with them a while, talk to them about your way with spices. I tell them about all your recipes stuffed into a four-inch black binder. I explain your intentions to organize. I describe your processes for canning and preserving as I detail the possibilities for what they might have become. Fritters, pies, pudding, butter, strudels, sauce.

The apples are in awe. I imagine they are saluting.

2.

I stare out the window and absorb the peripheral. I drink cold coffee from my mug that says DAD. I think of the span of our lifetime; good moments, bad moments, and moments we simply passed through, consumed by the plainness of breathing.

Smoke escapes our neighbors' chimneys as if the insides of their houses are exhaling. It's late autumn and the squirrels in our yard are busy flinging themselves from one narrow limb to the next. Your favorite mornings were just like this one, both dogs leaning into your knees, all three of you focused on tree branches bowed by bodies close to weightlessness.

3.

Desolation is compounded by laundry; your unwashed things in a white wicker hamper, the contents smelling like you. I walk circles around the house with this

basket full of clothes thinking to put them in the fireplace, burn them into incense. Fill the whole house with the hint of you.

In the laundry room, I stare at the washing machine like it has a face. I consult its knobs and buttons as though they are parts of a watch.

“Is it time, now, to wash them?” I ask.

The machine doesn’t answer and I think perhaps I’ve been too vague. I inform the machine that it’s the last time it will ever get to wash these clothes. The washer remains obtuse. Knowing sentiment can be confusing, I take its silence as a hesitation. I continue my rounds of the house, carrying the hamper like a child in cradle.

4.

The dogs sit in the backyard, befuddled. They want to be let in, but I won’t do it. They only look for you.

5.

Our retirement translated into an abundance of domestic tasks, and every countertop and corner of this house accommodates one of your projects. Silver scissors peek out of your sewing kit left out on the kitchen table. There are spools of thread bundled beside them, like plump colorful children, hopeful that they will evolve into something larger than a filament or strand. Pins are aligned in a printed fabric, holding the tissue paper of a pattern in place. Your sewing machine stands beside them with its proud admiral face gazing at me. The machine is a patient work friend waiting for your fingers to thread its metal bobbins. Its foot pedal anticipates the press of your toes.

I pass by and whisper, “Don’t hold your breath.”

I say the same to the chairs awaiting re-upholstery in the dining room, the wine-cork tack board in the hall glue-gunned three-fourths down with corks, the baby books, the Kerr jars awaiting your dill pickles and jams.

I make a mental note to take things on, all the tasks you didn’t finish.

6.

I peruse the grocery list tacked to the refrigerator with a magnetic ladybug.

We need light bulbs and unsalted butter. We need the three-bean mix from Costco and the empty plastic jug stands on the counter as proof. We also need Scotch tape and for some reason pomegranates.

I find lists like this all over the house on scraps of paper and Post-its. I spend time examining the loop of your *Ls* and the arc of your *As*. I put a Post-it of my own beside each list you left behind and next to each marooned possession. The house is a rainbow of three-by-three squares in neon pink and yellow, green, orange and bright white.

I am making a list of my own: Things I do in the event of your loss.

7.

There is a photograph of you. I found it in a box in your closet and all it needs is the right frame. I have the place marked on the wall where I will hang it. It is a photograph of you before I knew you, dressed up for your Senior Prom. It portrays the youth I'd forgotten, an image nearly erased by the day in and day out of living and time passing.

There are other pictures in the box, hundreds of them in yellow and white Kodak envelopes. I plan to pin them up around this first one. I plan on making every wall in our house a collage, a wallpaper of pictures to suffuse this house with you and you. And you.

8.

The children came to the hospital as you lay dying. We shared our disbelief as we stroked your hair and kissed your forehead, your cheeks around the tubes. We had solemn conversations with the doctors. Feigning comprehension, we waited in the family hospital suite at the ICU until they told us you were gone. The person who had occupied the room before us left a mountain of See's candy wrappers under the couch. These were what I focused on when the doctors came and talked to us about the parts of you they could use.

We left the hospital without you, went home and ordered pizza that none of us could eat. We stared at empty spaces once occupied by you.

9.

They took your kidneys and your liver. They even took your eyes.

10.

Your eyes were brown. Your hair was brown run through with silver. Everything about you has shifted to *was*.

Is and *was* are cunning words. You never realize how they'll define you.

11.

The box on the fireplace mantel is five by five by seven. Those are your new dimensions. The container seems stark and I worry you feel naked, so I take your yellow nightgown out of the hamper and drape it over the box. The cardboard corners are too narrow to hold the spaghetti straps and the fabric pools around the container in a silky yellow lake. This makes me miss your shoulders. Thinking of your shoulders makes me miss your arms.

I set the hamper on the couch and extract the garments one by one. I pull your grey trouser socks on over my hands so they reach up to my elbows like opera gloves. I wear your blue jeans like a scarf. I pretend we're having a night out on the town, you and I.

Sitting beside the hamper on the couch I turn the television on to snowy channels and imagine there are heavy women singing.

12.

Holding the remote, I am reminded that a discussion is overdue. No doubt it's wondering about your truant fingers. I tell the remote, "She had beautiful hands." Then I say, "Of course you know that. I don't have to tell you." The remote is stoic, a diminutive companion, dressed at all times in funeral black.

Together, we flip through the channels until we come to something you would hate. Turning the volume up as high as it goes, we're hoping this wakes your spirit. We're hoping you show up mad.

13.

I withdraw more garments from your hamper. I wear a dickey like a hat. I wrap white underpants around both wrists like bracelets. I leave the garments on as I reheat a square of lasagna from the many casseroles that are stacking up.

I pretend I'm at a fancy place to eat. The maître d' asks about wine selections and I tell him I don't drink because of a heart condition. "It's called sadness," I say. "It's like breathing in cold air even when there's sun."

The maître d' is speechless. And really the maître d' is our goldfish, Sally. I assign her more personality than she deserves. Since you've gone, all she does is hover between a mound of obsidian and a ceramic treasure chest, eyes following me wherever I go.

14.

At the dining table I carry on a conversation with your pink sweater fitted over the back of the chair where you always sat. The discussion is awkward, neither of us knowing what to say without you there. You were the catalyst between us.

I tell your pink sweater about the way I found you. I pull it off the chair, hold it to my chest, and break the news gently between bites of lasagna. “I found her on the bathroom floor,” I say. “Unconscious.”

It wants to know what you were wearing. I pause for effect and say, “Bathrobe.”

The sweater takes it hard. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I feel like someone in this house should be on the same page I am. I’m tired of being the only one. “It was an aneurysm,” I say. I tell the sweater, “I thought you should know.”

The sweater takes a minute to recover and then asks me the obvious. It wants to know why your socks are on my arms. Flummoxed by the question, I refit the sweater over the back of your chair. I can tell it feels put off.

15.

I visit the bathroom and stand in the exact spot where I found you. I take your bathrobe from the hamper. It’s still in the plastic bag sent home from the hospital. Removing it, I lay it down in the shape of you. It occurs to me that I lied to your pink sweater. I told it *I* found you, but the dogs were the ones who got there first. Otto with his nose in your hair and Éclair curled up at the bend in your waist. You were alive but unconscious. I lost count of the number of times I cried your name. More than seventeen? Less than three hundred? It frightened the dogs, my shouting. They huddled in a corner and shook.

16.

Your jar of night cream was left open on the counter, the lid right there beside the container, the mark of your fingers swooshed through the balm. The top layer is caked now, like a dry desert lake. I don’t put the lid back on because it would make it seem closed off. Your toothbrush is beside it and I like to think they are companions, that they will help each other through. They need each other now in ways they never imagined. They will miss your face and mouth.

One of your bras is hanging on the shower curtain rod. It holds the shape of

you and I find that I am jealous. I take hold of the bra and pull it off the rod slowly. I reassign it as a belt. The paunch of my belly hangs over the two C-sized cups.

17.

I remove your brown cords from the hamper. There is a hot sauce stain on the thigh. I tell the trousers how Mexican food was your favorite. I tell them about the purple scarf you wore to dinner on our honeymoon forty years ago in Puerto Vallarta. I say, "Purple was her best color. People turned to stare."

The trousers respond by saying, "Those jeans are not that sort of scarf." And I remember that your blue jeans swaddle my neck. It would make you crazy that I'm wearing them. You would tell me to pull myself together. But *together* is an elusive word. All of a sudden it leaves you.

18.

I know you wouldn't approve but I have decorated the jasmine plant with your earrings and I have strung your necklaces through the ficus leaves. The arms of the aralia tree bow under the weight of your bracelets. Soon this whole house will jangle with ornaments. I plan to take the fans out of the attic and turn them on the bangled leaves to increase the clanging, so this house might resemble a wind chime of the things you left behind.

19.

The hamper is half-empty now. I've left a trail of your laundry, a repurposed path of clothes around the house so I will know the places I've been and the possessions with whom I've touched base. I make a nest on the couch with the clothes that are remaining and curl up like a bird in your sweaters, your khakis, your knits. I tuck myself in, beak to chest, and sleep.

I have a dream you are unconscious on the bathroom floor. I have a dream of you eating pot roast across from me at our kitchen table. I have a dream of you holding our grandchildren. I have a dream of you at parties and our children's weddings. I have a dream of you with your feet tucked beneath you on the couch. I have a dream of you in childbirth, at our wedding, and the first time I saw you at the card stacks in the university library.

When I wake up, the sun is setting. Blue sky, scattered clouds, slight breeze; the day's weather report settles into peach and yellow, gold and red. The dogs are scratching at the back door. Without the sun the air has turned cold.

20.

The children have promised to come on the weekends, take turns leaving their families to check in and help me get through. They don't like the idea of me living alone. Their expressions tell stories of how they'll get me out of this house. Convince me to move closer to one of them or the other. When they come to check in I'll take your jewelry off the plants, gather the laundry, demote the maître d' back down to fish. I'll remove the opera socks, the jeans-as-scarf, the bra-as-belt. I'll peel all the Post-its off the walls and tuck them in a drawer.

But for now this house is ours. For now this house still has you in it and so I'll carry on in senseless fashion until I'm convinced or exhausted by your void.

21.

With my opera sock hands I turn the handle on the back door and the dogs come bounding in. The chill of autumn wags off their tails, and they immediately begin to circle the house in search of you. This is their habit since your passing, but this time I believe I've appeased them with the scattered laundry. So long as they are satisfied with scent, they will find you in the kitchen, in the garage and in the den. They'll find you in our bedroom and in the bedrooms our children moved out of and we no longer use. I put your yoga pants in with the apples in the guest bathroom. A pair of navy blue tights is balled up beside the printer in the den. Your red sweatshirt is in the cupboard under the sink. Noses to carpet, it is the game of it that soothes them. In this way I will break it to them slowly. The fact that we have outlasted you and that our hearts have kept beating beyond yours, that our eyes still seek out the sky and follow the squirrels.