

the patience of grief

Lio Patrick

When I was fourteen, my uncle Bear was killed by his friend, a man I never met, in a drug dispute.

I am fortunate enough to say it was my first encounter with death. I didn't know what to do, how to understand. I didn't think it was real at all. He was not dead. For long after the funeral, I did not believe in death. I absolutely did not believe that anyone could die.

My uncle was twenty-one. I have officially lived longer than him. A few years ago, before I turned twenty-one, I began to think a lot more about his funeral, as if it had finally dawned on me. While some lighter feelings float, grief settles at the bottom. Details washed back up after so long in the deep: conversations, people laughing and crying at the same time, my suit-adorned father, who did not speak the entire day, and whom I had not lived with for at least six years. With deep embarrassment, I recalled the pair of funeral home workers staring at me as I had a panic attack on the bench next to the front door. I'd written a melodramatic poem that I wanted to put in his casket, but had lost my nerve and asked my mother to place it inside instead. I couldn't look at him, and when I did I couldn't see him. After they closed the casket, we were given permanent markers to write final farewells across the wood. Now I can appreciate the sentiment. Back then all I could think about was my proximity to a dead man. My mind blanked and I spelled "remember" wrong. Somewhere in the ground, there is a wooden box with the word "rember" shakily crossed out.

It was funny, and yes, I do mean that kind of funny. Before we drove to the funeral home, Bear's father kept telling jokes and yelling obscenities. There was cake, which was called "better than sex," but which my pious aunt rebranded "better than video games" for my brothers and me. In the funeral home, we sat next to one of our favorite cousins as he related sensational stories about his brother. We all saw so little of each other. We celebrated way before we cried.

Only a few months before, when one cousin told a different uncle that he was her favorite, he thanked her but said, "It's not like I have much competition. I mean, *Bear*?" At the funeral, he was a pallbearer, the first to grab the box, one of the few who understood just how much it weighed.

What I mean to say is that we never know who it will be, and when. This is a reminder, however insufficient the words are at reaching over a wall of incommunicable feeling.

I don't know at what point I knew that Bear was dead. It wasn't when I felt the first step down into panic as I approached a full coffin, an open coffin, and was not able to see or breathe. It wasn't as his brothers lowered him into the ground, as his sister said with visible breath, "Of course it's only when we're out-

side freezing that I start crying.” It took years of not seeing him at holidays and of hearing about what it would be like if he were there. During some of those years I wanted to be like him, even though I still didn’t altogether comprehend what that meant. I never spoke a word to any of my family about it. I don’t know how many of them felt it too. We never know.

My immediate family stopped going to see most of Bear’s side of the family years ago, for various reasons. Other people have been born, others have gotten hurt or sick, others too have gone away forever. There are so many things and so many people to think about. I can’t regret the fact that I don’t remember them all.