## *to Shoulder the Weight*

*originally published in the Mid-American Review Vol. XLIV 1&2 as an AWP Intro Journals award winner*

*Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.*
*Meanwhile the world goes on.*
*— Mary Oliver*

Carter was murdered on a surf-trip in Mexico, and most mornings, I lodge the pain in the corner. Not that day. That day I paced. Read a collection of poems Gyasi wrote for him that morning and couldn't sit still. Gyasi spoke of grief latched like a leech to skin, and I read his words until the letters jumbled. I paced and clutched my chest. I grabbed my hat and ended up on the pavement with shoes tied. I left my earbuds at home and tried to take things in: murmurs of old ladies walking crusty, white dogs; humming trucks; hopping crows; my heavy breathing and all.

A garage door opened, a front door shut, a plane scraped the clouds above. It all just kept moving. I counted neighbors, noted the sway of leaves, pulled the memories like teeth and cast them to the asphalt. Observation as bandage. Carter ran beside me. We didn't talk much, just counted together: one old man packing golf clubs into the back of a black SUV; one young man with a sleeve of tattoos by the elementary school; two children at his side, backpacks bouncing with their footsteps; one soiled, bloody tissue; one empty Ziplock with a brown residue—the breeze rustled it, but it didn't slip away. It will slip away. My feet pelted the concrete, and Carter told me to grab the breeze and ride it like a fucking bull. I'm not sure what he meant, but I laughed. It's weird the way you can still hear their voice. The way they could almost recount the whole thing like a joke.

Around the next bend, the ocean sprawled, and I heard a wail stab the open sky.

****

The first time I watched a mother grieve a dead child was when Colby took his life our sophomore year of high school. It might have been sometime before, but when I think back on all the moms I've seen in the aftermath of a lost child, her eyes find mine. Before he passed, her sunken eyes already held a weight. After he left, they fell deeper, and I imagined they plummeted to a place where she could find him somehow.

Time passed, and we brought her flowers and space to talk. That was the hope, but I imagine a group of teenage stoners could only offer so much. Those days we talked about the pain. We shared memories and sat in silence. We told stories, laughed, and cried, sitting at his gravestone on the bench his father made—two of Colby's old snowboards repurposed as a place to sit and mourn. The snow melted, and the wind picked up the way it always does when spring comes in Colorado. It came and went, and we stopped visiting Colby's mom. We'd sit at the bench smoking swishers at his plot beneath the dirt making crude jokes about the past. We swallowed our pain and left his mom to hold the weight alone. I wish I could say things played out different, but I still think about the nights with her. When someone asked what she wanted to talk about, her eyes looked up at us, those deep wells blown wide.

*Colby*, she said. *I always want to talk about Colby.*

****

The scream came from a woman my mother's age. The air felt constricted. I couldn't tell where it came from at first, so I kept running. But she took the same turn, and I heard her wail again behind me. I turned back and found her kneeling at a blue stucco wall like a little girl at her bedside to pray. She choked and convulsed. She screamed at the unknowable, and I just watched—frozen. Her yelps and cries followed no pattern, her right palm to the fold of her stomach as she heaved. Something in me wanted to comfort her. I wanted to say *I've been there—I'm with you,* but I stood in silence as she tumbled from the wall to the grass where she rested her head to the dirt and let her tears water the soil. Fourth of July flags waved in the broken breeze. It was just the two of us. I wanted to offer something, but what the hell could I do? A complete stranger watching her bare her soul to the quiet streets. Her on her walk; me on my run. She balled fists to the grass and howled again. Limbs outstretched, she was a body in worship out of place.

She lifted her head and rubbed swollen eyes before catching mine. She waved embarrassed, gave me a timid smile, shedding the first skin of grief. Strangers divided by a thin veil of niceties. Denying entropy.

*I'm okay*, she said. *I'm fine.*

****

There's a scene in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* where a mourning mother travels from some place far off to meet the novel's sage, Father Zossima. When the old monk asks her why she weeps, she recounts losing all four of her children and taking to the road. She left her husband behind, and the shame eats her alive. She longs to return, but the pain has undone her. The grief has sent her wandering alone.

Zossima listens as she lays her heart bare. She shares how the little ones just won't stay with them. The first three entered the world and left, and for reasons unknown to her, she hardly grieved at all. But when her little boy died just shy of three years old, she sees him everywhere. *It's my little boy that's tormenting me, father, my little boy,* she says. *I spread out everything that's left of his, every little thing, I look at it all, and I just howl.*

The monk listens to her keening before offering her the story of another mother, lost in the pain of her dead infant child. He tells her that the little ones in heaven stand indignant at the throne of God—'*You granted us life, Lord,' they say… 'and no sooner did we see it then You took it away from us.' And so fearlessly do they clamour and demand an answer that the Lord at once grants them the rank of angels.*

The mother listens and sighs, and I imagine her eyes downcast. She tells the old starets that her husband gave the same words, but the old story only twisted the knife. She tells Zossima she tries to find solace in the image of her little boy among the angels. She has no doubt her baby flies high above. She believes it in her bones, but still she grieves. *If only I could see him just for one little minute,* she begs—*hear him playing in the yard and running in as he used to and calling out in his little voice, 'Mamma, where are you?'... if only I could hear his little feet again, his little feet….*

I imagine the mother didn't know why she left her home. I imagine she only found herself on the road looking to the horizon. It's hard not to picture her at Zossima's feet, miles from home, desperate for some bandage for her open wound only to find the grief sank deeper with every step. *He's gone, father, he's gone,* she weeps, *and I'll never hear him again.*

****

Weeks later, I run the same route. Pass other women her age. Some wear joggers and fleeces, glasses and baseball caps—things she might wear. The faces jumble, but I often wonder if any of them are her. Was this her daily walk? Was it all she knew to do? Morning and mourning converge in routine and indignation—I know what it is to find your body tying tennis shoes, planting feet to asphalt, watching the sun dip low. When she gripped the stucco, and I watched her heave, I knew the walk gave no comfort. The familiar turned cold and stale. Wholly unfamiliar.

****

Days after Carter's death, we gathered at a local house to mourn with friends and students from the school where Carter volunteered. His parents joined, and when we met his mom she embraced us as if her own. Her hair was short, blonde, and curly, resting just above her shoulders. Her eyes sat behind glasses amidst crows feet and held the same mischievous glimmer as Carter's.

His father made food as we sat around the fire talking quietly, waiting for whatever formalities we could muster. When Carter's mom stood, our murmurs fell. *Thank you all for coming,* she said, hands folded by her heart. *I have no words for the love we've been offered—Carter… Carter talked so much of you all… I—I hope you know he loved you all so much…* her voice broke off and settled in the quiet.

The breeze rustled palms above, and we listened to the fire's small cracks between her words. Stars dotted above us, breaking the gloom of the San Diego summer sky. She stood there for some time, meeting our gazes and measuring her words, and I thought of Colby's mom. I thought of Dez's mom and Jonathan's—Noah's and Riley's. The way the memories pooled at their tongues, struggling to take form. Carter's mom asked for our stories, and we asked for hers. The silence turned to laughs and the laughs to cries and back to silence again.

****

In the novel, the mother kneels at the sage's feet. She pulls from her bosom her little boy's woven belt, offers it to the old monk as if to ask if he would share the pain for just a moment.

Zossima stands in silence; I see his eyes meet the dirt as she wails. He tells her that this is no new story, a tragedy of old—'*Rachel weeping for her children.'* I see the lines creasing his hands as they reach for her shoulder. When she lifts her head, there are tears sticky with snot and salt; his eyes just the same. *Be not comforted and weep,* he consoles. *Long will you continue to weep the great mourning of mothers, but in the end it will turn to quiet joy, and your bitter tears will be but tears of quiet tenderness, purifying the soul….*

I don't know what to do with these words—I don't know what childless future could be offered to a grieving mother. Loss divides lives in the binary of before and after, and there is no after—no matter how beautiful—that isn't salt in the wound.

****

Dostoevsky knew grief. He lost his parents before the age of eighteen, and he and his siblings survived on scraps under the Tsardom. After finding literary success, he was arrested for his affiliation with the Petrashevsky Circle in 1849. Sentenced to execution by firing squad, he lived with the looming threat of death only to be acquitted at the last second. He spent the next four years at a prison camp in Siberia, followed by six more in The Gulag. It was in this time that he developed epilepsy—a condition he feared passing on to his children.

When he was finally released, he had four children in his second marriage. His first child, Sonia, never lived past infancy. After her death, he wrote in a letter to a close friend, *And now they tell me, to console me, that I shall surely have other children. But where is Sonia? Where is the little creature for whom I would, believe me, gladly have suffered death upon the cross, if she could have remained alive?*

Not long after, his little boy, Aleksei, died just shy of three years old of an epileptic seizure.

****

When I first heard the news of Carter, we only knew he was missing. I ran with my head down and told myself he'd be found. "Death & Taxes" by Daniel Caesar shuffled as I ran. A simple message—everything ends, everything costs. You will die, and you will bring all you've carried

to the grave. I tried to imagine Carter coming home with a grin and a wild story, but the image only sent my insides turning. I tried not to cry, just kept moving my legs. “May 1st” by Beach Fossils played next. An upbeat song that I almost skipped before realizing it was May 2nd, and I guess something in me hoped for wisdom in its timing. *Sun goes down, time rolls on,* Dustin Payseur sang.

I pulled my earbuds out and sat on a curb for a while. A group of construction workers laughed; an old man in a safari hat crossed the street with a little dog; the birds chirped on a telephone line. I got up and walked to the cul-de-sac on El Mac Pl where I end all my runs. Lemonade sumac huddled over the field of an elementary school. I watched crows hop on the field in isolated synchronization. Beyond the school, the ocean carried motor boats, surfers, waves, and the expansive nothing.

Some days, the ocean’s horizon slices the sky clean. As far as I can see, there is an ending to this pain. Other days, there is only fog. The blue waves merely meld with gray. Most days, I can’t make sense of any of it, and all of them I’m only grasping for meaning. These images, patterns, memories, and stories—pieces to a puzzle no one asked me to solve. I feel helpless. The grief stretches like the ocean, and I try to ignore it and run. I ask it to stay at bay. But its waves crash and strip me bare. I’m left drowning like the woman at the stucco wall.

Running gives the illusion of moving forward. Running offers solace that the sun will rise and that it will set and we will reach our destination, but the simple fact is grief is nothing like this. The woman’s still heaving in the grass and I’m still watching, dumbfounded.

****

And now I lie in the dark, my eyes stuck on my room’s patterned off-white ceiling. Grief turns from oceans to lakes vast and still. The aching approaches like a deep thrum beneath the water, and I can hear Carter’s laugh from below—only in the quiet. Ice thaws and dams burst. His face rises fresh and unaltered. Black patterns dance on the ceiling like shadows on coarse rock.

Carter’s smile always hid a smirk—like he had pranked a friend and wanted you to join in on the fun. They found his body in a well with his two friends and an old rancher who had gone missing, presumed dead weeks before. Some joke turned open wound. It’s easy to wish I never heard the details. Sometimes I only see his body—cold and limp. Arms tight against his

sides or splayed awkwardly against the earth and other lifeless forms. The tattoo of the world on his left shoulder he meant to fill in for every trip, unfinished. The wound, infected.

His mom wanted us to know—to believe—that it was painless. That the life had gone quick out of him. That the shot rang clean, and he found his place above us. That he didn't lie there choking on his blood and breath. I hold her words close to me, but I don't know how to accept them. We veil ugly truths in niceties easier to swallow, but I don't want that kind of grief. I want the kind that sprawls its body out and wails. The kind that screams at the pain and protests.

****

The same year his son died in 1878, Dostoevsky began *The Brothers Karamazov.* He named the grieving mother's little boy after Aleksei. The ending to this small story within the novel always left me restive. I want to sit longer in the pain. The words of the old starets never felt right. Like they dressed the wound of loss in some hope gone cold.

But I think of Dostoevsky's little boy. I think of his little shoes and his little grave. I imagine the years of grief insurmountable. I see Dostoevsky pacing and sobbing, wanting only to see his little girl. To hold his little boy.

But he turned to the blank page.

He wrote of the mother and the old monk. He wrote of bloodshot eyes and weary souls; their tears becoming a prayer—something holy, something offered. When Doestoevsky died in 1881, they marked his grave with the novel's epigraph—a verse from the gospel of John: *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*

****

Dear ——,

I still see your body folded in. I still see you kneeling at the wall. It feels odd to say, but I felt like I knew you.

I can’t name what you’ve lost; I don’t know that you’ve lost anything at all, but I hope you can forgive my assumptions. It seemed as if the world had ended for you that day, and I knew that pain. I wanted to shoulder the weight.

So stand with me, let’s walk. One foot with me now. Now two, you’ve got it. Let’s run. This isn’t goodbye, this isn’t letting go. We’ll leave the tears behind for now, but meet me here tomorrow. Together we’ll kneel and pray. We’ll water the grass, and I promise: something new will grow.