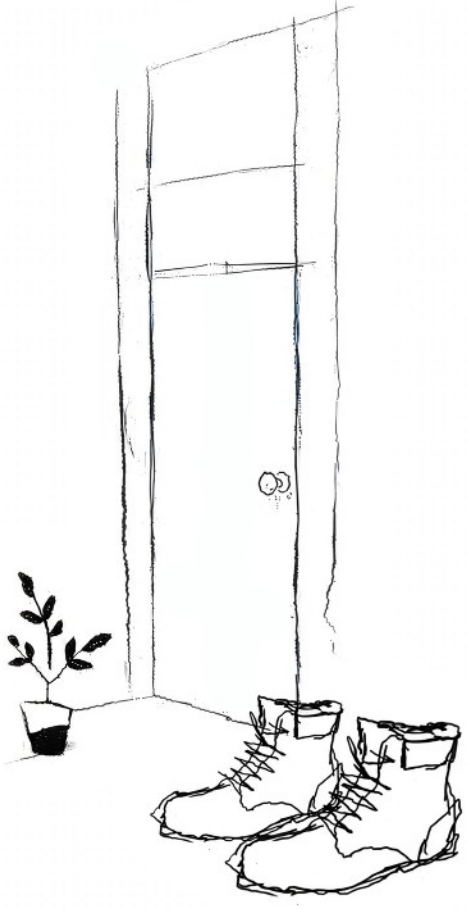
What Remains: Elegies



David Jibson

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This is a work of poetry. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is used with intention, in service of memory and elegy.

Cover design by David Jibson

First Edition

Published by 3rd Wednesday Press, Ann Arbor

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Foreword

Loss shows up in ordinary things. A doorway. A drawer. A shelf that still holds what it held before.

These poems don't try to express what loss feels like. They set an object in front of you and leave it there. A watch. A pair of boots. A wallet with one card in it. The object does the work.

What makes a poem an elegy isn't subject matter alone. It's a particular emotional stance: the speaker reckoning with absence. Something that was present is no longer, and the poem is the act of reckoning.

What remains is the acknowledgment of loss, some attempt to look at it clearly, and, sometimes, not always, a form of survival.

Most of the time what's left isn't the person. It's what’s left behind, worn into a shape by years of use.

Look at the shape long enough and you'll understand what it holds.

David Jibson

Walnut Street

I don’t recall a single walnut tree
on Walnut Street in the small town
where I grew up. I do remember
how it glittered in the sun
with the bits of ground nacre
from an old button factory
that punched out round blanks
for the buttons of military uniforms.

The factory closed after the war
and, at about the time I was born,
Walnut Street became the location
of my father’s small construction company
where I once spent a whole summer
digging in the street with a stick
for the pearls my father told me
must be buried there.
I believed him right up until
the day the street was paved over.

Deadbolt

I leave the porch light on
for someone who always comes home
through the kitchen door.

Boots by the mat,
mud dry in the tread.
I lie in bed listening

for the click of the deadbolt
she never forgets,
but it doesn’t come.

The storm door is still bent
and rattles in the wind.

It Won't Be Long

Gary's at the table, still in his pajamas.
Izzy sets a plate in front of him;
toast, an egg. He dips the toast,
eats, can't keep any weight on him.
He talks about the Coast Guard a long time ago.

He touches two bronze medals
pinned to his shirt.
Says only a handful of men
have been to both poles.
That's how he got them.

He tells me the medals will go in the box
with his ashes. Says
it won't be long.
Izzy knows it too.

I sit there, listening,
try to think of something
I'd put in my own box.

Legacy

I looked at your Facebook today.
There you were holding
that Hummel figurine
you always kept on the shelf
near the window.
Eighty-one friends.
I went through each of them.

Three months ago
Myrna left *Happy Birthday,*
hope you're doing great!

She doesn't know
and I can't tell her.
No one knows your password.

‘52 Chevy Styleline in Black

Photo of my mother on main street
standing beside her cab, dress cinched at the waist,
hair pinned back. The Chevy's hood curves
in front of her, chrome grille grinning,
TAXI sign perched like a hat.

Some days I would stand on the rear seat,
so I could see out the windows,
sitting down and sliding over
when we picked up a passenger.

Perhaps she’s waiting on old “Ma” Sparr,
to come out from the beauty parlor
smelling of lilacs and peroxide,
ready to tell her, “You look beautiful, Ma.”

Monday

I'm in the basement again
folding your laundry.
It will always be your laundry
because that's how we did things:

your laundry to fold,
my trash to take out,
your dog to feed,
my car to wash,
your garden to plant,
my garden to weed.

At the bottom of the basket,
the last of the towels
embroidered "hers".

The Windmill

My father and his brother, Lloyd.
Dad's arm around his shoulder,
Lloyd's arm around dad's waist,
white shirts, sleeves
rolled above the elbows,
young men in their twenties,
in front of the old farmhouse back when
they were still speaking to each other.

After both were gone I asked my mother why.
She said she didn't know, so I asked her again.
"Something to do with a windmill," she said
"That's all he ever told me."
The eyes in the photograph
tell me nothing.

This Old House

I still think about the long crack
across the dining room ceiling,
the piece of siding that didn't match,
the field stone foundation
that will never tire of holding it up.

It was a good house.
Built to last
Too cold in winter.
Too hot in summer.
Not many ghosts —
only the ones we left behind.

On the Way to Aida

I went to see my grandfather
the day before Marcie's wedding.
I knew he wouldn't remember my name,
but hoped that he still remembered
how to tie a bow tie.

Standing behind me in front of a mirror
in the physical therapy room,
spotted hands carefully adjusted the uneven lengths,
crossed the long side over,
pulling it through the neck loop,
then folded the short side to make a bow
and held it where the sides overlapped.

He paused there, taking a minute to remember
to fold the long side into a bow,
and pull its folded end through the tie's loop,
gently tugging the ends to make a perfect knot.

“There you go Dickie, my boy.
All ready for the opera.”
I looked to the aide.
She only shrugged.

Leaving Nirvana

No one waits on the porch tonight,
but somewhere down the road
you'll turn your back
on the fallow west field
before the sun's gone down.

Go on and tell yourself
you'll come back and kiss
what's left goodbye
before you leave for good.

Put it in gear. Say farewell
to this empty little town.
Stop along the one paved road,
look back and watch
as the sun's final hour
sets fire to every roof.

Boots

Snow fell in sheets,
tucked us in softly
while the gutters ran black
with the melt of December.

We were children
eating snow from spoons
in no hurry to grow
past the hour
the porch light came on.

There was a day
I caught a feather of that light
etching grooves
into the first morning
that my father's boots
were not by the door.

The Art of River Swimming

The river's low.
Deadheads and sandbars showing
where nothing showed last year.

Around a bend, before the creek joins,
was the farm where my mother was born.
What's left are a few stones
from the foundation
and a lilac bush that still blooms.

We pull the canoe up
on a sand bar and eat there.
It's where grandmother taught us
to move with the current
and read the surface
for what's underneath.

We look for blackberries
where the corn crib once stood.
They haven't come back
the last couple of years.

My Sister and I Buy Green Tomatoes

We walked the Lake Erie shore for an hour.
No beach glass.
Stopped for coffee at a place that looked like Starbucks.

“Why now?” she said.
“I’m getting too old to make the drive,” I said.
“And you already are.”

In a run-down part of Erie
we saw a vegetable stand
set up on broken pavement.
Green tomatoes in a crate.

“No fried food,” she said.
“We can bake them,” I said.
“Not the same, but close.”

That night I made the tomatoes.
We split a bottle of Iron City.

“I think this is it,” she said.
“This is it what?”
“The last time we’ll see each other.”

“I hope not,” I said. “But you never know.”
“I think I know,” she said.
Looking into her face
I saw she was right.

Elegy For Ex-lovers

Sometimes I think there were too many.
Other times too few.
I've lost track of most of them—
the living, the dead, the ones in between.

A few show up in dreams.
We say things we didn't say back then.
Nights on damp sheets.
Breath coming back slow.
The repeated tick of the stylus on vinyl.
Both of us quiet,
not sure what comes next.

Champagne

(a Sijo)

On the night I was born,
my father bought two bottles of champagne.
He drank one and saved one to drink with me
when I turned twenty-one.
He didn't know that champagne wouldn't keep that long —
nor would he.

A Blue Dress

Birthday or an anniversary?
I don't remember,
but I do recall the royal blue dress,
so unlike everything else in her closet,
and how it stood out
in the Kodachrome snapshots
even after they had faded.

It was the only time
I saw that dress
and I remember
the orchid corsage
that decorated her left shoulder.

Seeing it again; dazzling
blue on a wooden hanger
in the back of her closet
in a clear plastic bag
from Pretty-Quick Cleaners,
I wonder if she could still wear it
or if it's too much
for a funeral.

Spiral

One day you will trim me from your life
and paste me onto an empty page
in one of those spiral notebooks
of which you are so fond.

You'll carry that with you for a while
but it will find its way into the bottom drawer
of an extra dresser among other memories
you cannot bring yourself to throw away.

An Uncertain Elegy

I don't know how to elegize my sister,
the middle one, whose life
was a series of tragedies
we don't talk about—
the sister for whom death
came, I think, as a relief
to herself, and to everyone.

She liked True Confessions
and Modern Romances
when she could still read.

She always remembered my birthday,
and, near the end, that was almost
the only thing she did remember.
That’s what stays with me.

Elegy For Hazel

Hazel, not Rosie, she reminded me
as she told how, during the war,
she'd moved up from Kentucky
to work in the plant at Willow Run
making B-24 Liberators
for Henry Ford and Franklin Roosevelt.

She was quick to mention
she had nothing to do with rivets,
working with a crew of women
installing wiring harnesses
in the giant bombers,
twenty or more planes in a day.

The work was complex
but the tools were simple, wire cutters,
strippers, screwdrivers, pliers.
The hours were long but it was good pay
for a woman little more than a girl
and educated only to the seventh grade.

It was in the plant she learned
the fine arts of factory work;
drinking, smoking, swearing,
throwing dice. "Went in a sparrow —
came out an eagle," is how she put it,
sitting at her kitchen table on a summer night
sipping clear liquid from Mason jar.

The Falls in Winter

The famous Niagara mist had frozen
so solidly it couldn't be scraped away,
so we sat hunkered together in the car,
shivering with the dampness, listening

to Sarah Vaughan while we waited
for the defrosters to slowly do their work,
while we talked about the long drive ahead,
over the Rainbow Bridge into New York

then to Connecticut, and how we thought
that the motel room in Ontario
was overpriced until we realized
that we paid in Canadian dollars.

Forty years after our last trip together
I still see your lashes glistening with frost.

Elegy For Howard

My father died years before
I ever wrote anything down.
I never wrote him an elegy.

He left me an old Plymouth,
cement tools in the trunk,
a Timex on a leather band,
a wallet, and my mother.

I ran the Plymouth into the ground.
The watch quit a few months later.
My mother died a few years after that.

The hand-tooled wallet was one
his friend Squirt made.
Inside the wallet was just one thing—
an expired Moose Membership card
from Lodge 263.
I carried the wallet
until the lacing gave out.
I never knew Squirt's real name.
Maybe he didn't have one.

Now all I have is this elegy.

The Last Door

My mother, near the end,
kept looking at the far corner of a room
with no door in it, and said,
“I have to go now,”
the way I used to excuse myself
from the dinner table.

I think she saw a threshold
and wasn’t afraid of it
the way I would be,
watching from this side,
holding open a door
that wasn’t there.

Acknowledgements:

Elegy For Hazel was published in *Making Waves*.

A Blue Dress was published in *Poetry Leaves*.

Champagne was published by *The Sijong Cultural Society*.

The Falls in Winter and *Leaving Nirvana* were published in *Ephemeral Elegies*.

Monday, Elegy For Ex-lovers and *My Sister and I Buy Green Tomatoes* were published in Eunoia Review.

About the Author

"I'm drawn to the places where documentation thins out, where a landscape holds traces of something no longer visible. Much of my writing begins with a fragment—an old photograph, a journal entry, a rumor, a contradiction—and grows outward into narrative or lyric form."

— David Jibson

David Jibson is the editor of 3rd Wednesday Magazine, board member of the Poetry Society of Michigan and events coordinator for The Crazy Wisdom Poetry Circle in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He is retired from a long career in Social Work, most recently with a non-profit Hospice agency.

You can see much of his work at davidkjibson.com and much of it is available free because he values readers over book sales.