

27 and 24

By Monica Nguyen

'27 years around the sun' some might say,
But what of all the days you did not want to stay,
What of all the nights we forgot to pray.

Your picture stands on a window facing north.
Your smile forever shining forth,
Capturing a moment you knew your worth.

When I think to clear your frame of dust,
I worry that my memory has turned to rust,
Blurring moments I should learn to trust.

Although I may gaze at your face,
My mind has no words to fill the space,
So a simple greeting I offer in place.

Yet your altar is adorned with many an orchid,
The company that missing you afforded,
Our care of them keeping our grief sorted.

In the season that our farewells were sent,
We decided that we would still fast for Lent,
And each year we still strive to repent.

A house of three is hardly a crowd,
We try to recall your laughter booming loud,
I wonder if in us you can be proud.

Without you I became an adult,
Without you who I wished to consult,
I question if I achieved the right result.

I was first inspired to write this poem after we discussed Victoria Chang's work, *Obit*, in class. It was very intriguing how she described the juxtaposition between grief and grieving, the end of her "My Mother's Teeth" poem where she talks about grief as a verb versus a noun, which is very apparent when she alludes to the senses she experiences with the physical items of her mother (Chang, 2020). I wanted to reflect on my own grieving process for my older brother who passed in 2020. I couldn't bring myself to deliver a eulogy for him at the time, so this is my elegy of sorts almost five years later, 24 lines about my brother who passed away at 27, and here I am now at 24. I start with the noun of his altar photo, but this evolves into my thoughts about the guilt I feel, my fear that I do a disservice to his memory, by not talking to him or about him enough. Halfway through my poem, I start to recognize that I share my grief with my parents, seeing the layers in how we hold space for both my brother and ourselves. We originally bought orchids to decorate my brother's altar, but it has also been a very healing hobby to learn how to connect with nature by caring for them, and I've bonded a lot with my father over this new hobby. And while we are not as in tune with Catholicism as we used to be, we still practice Lent because it falls around the anniversary of my brother's passing, and we find that it is a good way to recenter and renew some form of faith and connection to that particular community. Lastly, I take note of the fact that I made it through the first part of my 20s, but not without thinking of my brother through it all.

As to how this piece relates to connection, affiliation and community, I believe that it conceptualizes the complexity and lasting effects that something such as someone's death can have, it is not an isolated event or procedure that we fully recover from. There's no shortcut to finish grieving, it's a lifelong process of coping, accepting and adapting to all the aftermath. It can be easy for healthcare providers or other professionals to be on the outside looking in for difficult scenarios such as grieving families, offering very superficial condolences if at all. However, practicing narrative competence can reduce some of that divide in seeing and understanding the full stories of patient relationships with life, death and everything in between. This fosters connection for care that is truly patient-centered, considering the context of their positionality in every aspect of their care. As professionals, we can start by examining our own positionality, as we are also people with affiliations and community. As of late, I have been very intentional in acknowledging that my lived experiences have played a part in how I show up to school and work, and that my strongest assets lie in my identity as a female, first generation student from a low-income, Chinese-Vietnamese immigrant family. I am very much affiliated with the communities that I want to contribute to as a public health professional, which means I have all the more reason to be critical about the implications of my work and check my privileges. The professionals I will collaborate with may not be as similarly aligned with the communities in question, but that does not excuse them from their responsibility in developing narrative competence.

Reference List

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Change, V. (n.d.). *In Their Own Words: Victoria Chang on "Obit"*. Poetry Society of America.

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