

Countdown to Valentine's Day

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Who is counting?

– I am counting.

You are always counting.

– You have to ask me to stop.

You buried me the day after Valentine's day.

– You broke my heart.

All is forgiven.

– Nothing is forgotten.

Why are you still so angry?

– You left me again without goodbye.

Why won't you reciprocate?

– You can't have it your way all the time.

Do you ever miss me?

– I never thought you would ask.

Do you ever wonder why?

– If there is heaven, they were out of Absolut.

Why do you mock me now?

– You can't push me around anymore.

I only wanted you to laugh.

– Sometimes you hurt me.

No more running into trees.

– I am safely bored.

Will you run if I am not chasing you?

– I will be busy counting.

You are such a tedious nerd.

– Someone has to do your homework.

It is Valentine's day again soon.

– It is one day after, to be precise.

Eclipse

You used to be the moon and I used to be the sun.

We stared at the earth so far away from us – closer to you –
reality, mine so far away.

How could you hide from me so suddenly?

So easily?

So stubbornly?

When will you unhide from behind the earth?

The sun is lonely, moon.

Whole

I thought of you again today.
Sometimes I skip – forgive me.
Remembering only the good has gotten easy.
I still get angry for forgetting all the bad. I want all of
you.
It isn't you I learned to let go.
It is all me. Selfishly me.

Do you know how much of me I had to give away to keep you?

Falling Stars

When day comes too soon,
far away seems the big blue,
and the sun is igniting your soul.

When night falls too fast,
far away seems the milky way,
and the moon is a burning hole.

When void stagnates,
and nothing is visible,
and nothing is touching,

those days and nights, talk gently
those nights and days, hold tightly
for days and nights, watch closely

Out of the clear sky,
a quick re-entry.

Something is lit.

Everything is felt.
And then it is gone.

For Robin Williams, for everyone who faced the void and was consumed by it, and for those who still face the void, day or night, night and day.

Surviving (in) the absence of god



My grandmother would not approve of the title of my blog post. She has survived almost 94 years (give or take) believing in god and trying to find peace in this world through him. I grew up in a very religious environment that provided only superficial answers to dealing with hardship. With every loss I endured since childhood, it became more and more clear there was nobody coming to the rescue. I was lucky to have enough friends and family who provided me with love and helped me survive the absence of god. The harder times came later in life. I found myself in situations where nobody could help me survive the absence of god besides myself. If you believe that god is within us, maybe losing everything is what it takes to finding god. Maybe I have found what my godmother has been telling me for so many years.

Three years ago around this time, I received a phone call that I never thought would come. I had experienced significant grief before, but could not imagine this particular kind of grief. This was not like when you imagine what life would be like when your parents are no longer around. My first cousin and I were raised so close that I have few memories of any fun before I got to college without her. She was three years older than me. My brother was three years younger than me. We were a trio of trouble. We wore each others' clothes as hand-me downs and hated every moment of it. We loved each other and we fought each other. Our relationship was strained in later years and we drifted apart.

I fantasized of a future in which we would all somehow reconcile our grievances, most of which were not even ours, and just have fun together again. What a mistake that was. A fateful car accident on the coastal highway of Athens took her away in the middle of the night. I have spent the last three years learning how one can preserve their sanity faced with a mountain of regrets. I have almost convinced myself that the memories we made can stay alive even though we can't share them with each other anymore. After all, my grandmother continues to tell me stories of her brother whom she lost when she was very young. He is undeniably very much alive in her memory. Surviving the absence of god requires good storytelling, not in the form of denial, but in celebrating the truth about all that has happened, both the good and bad.

If I survive long enough, I too may find myself telling my grandchildren about the great aunt they never met, the one who confronted her fears head on and who was never afraid to live. If I believed in fate, I would tell them that somehow she knew her life would be short and that is why she lived with such a desire to try everything. But that would diminish my admiration in her passion for life. I would have to tell my grandchildren about the time the two of us confronted the tallest waves of Volos beach, her with her tube, me with my

floaties. Or the time she went skydiving and regretted it the moment she stepped out of the plane. Or the time I looked for her at Tinley Park for hours after a concert, steaming in anger after driving 80 miles to get her in a pre-cell phone era.

When the grandkids grow up some more, I may even tell them she could drink any man under the table and could dance for days, even without music. Or how I had to get a third piercing on my right ear out of guilt after wasting two hours at a parlor after midnight because she changed her mind on having her lip pierced before summer vacation. What I don't know is whether I could tell them than nobody survived the absence of god better than her. My grandmother finds comfort in believing that she will be with her brothers, sister and husband again after her death. Yet she holds onto life very dearly. She keeps telling me that she doesn't know why she is still alive. I think that if there is a god, he is not ready to give her what she wants yet. In the absence of a god here on earth and having to survive so much tragedy, we selfishly need her to hold on just a little longer. Maybe I am not ready to find god all on my own.

[Birthday Cake](#)



It has been hard to think about myself turning 34 without thinking you not turning 37 two months later. You were there for at least 20 of my birthdays. Maybe more. And you loved cake and milk.

[A Decade Lost](#)



It was the year 2000 at my birthday party. For 22 years, I am pretty sure we spent almost every birthday together. And then a decade was lost for nothing. And then you were lost, exactly 2 years ago. I am trying not to get lost in grief. I miss you holding me firmly—always.

[Standing Still While Moving](#)



February 11 marks the one-year anniversary of the passing of my first cousin, Kelly 'Kali' Doukas. Up to a month ago, I hadn't even realized that she passed away in February. I was pretty sure it was in April. While trying to work on my annual activity report, I noticed that there were two months I barely remembered anything about. Our brains are rather remarkable in their ability to suppress. I remember telling myself that I had neither time nor room for mourning. Apparently, I was pretty convincing.

I am learning how to mourn again. For Kelly and for others lost the past two years. For 21 years, Kelly defended me against my premature adulthood. We had both lost a lot, but she always knew how to keep on living. She was responsible for

almost every first-time experience I had to have in my life that my parents would have objected to. None of it hurt me. Most of it helped me. I always resented her for trying to make me have fun. I never thanked her for it. Our last encounter was harsh. Both of us would rather pretend it never happened. Unfortunately, it is burned in my memory like an ugly photograph.

Kelly was a gifted photographer. For someone who moved at the speed of light, I was amazed at how quickly she could capture images of profound beauty and inspiration without blurring. How could she notice anything while moving so fast? Her piercing blue eyes could stop traffic. In fact, they did so many times when we would go out for a night in the town. What was the last thing she saw when the lights went out? I wish I could have looked at those eyes one last time. She could stop time while staring at you, yet she moved so fast while the world stood still.

I wish I could stand still while moving to see what she saw. I wish I could see her see me one more time.

Integration

It has been some time since I posted. A lot of life changes the past few months. It takes time for the mind to make sense of change and as one gets older, processing happens slower and more privately than before. Deaths, separations, moves, births, rebirths, misery, sickness, happiness, vacations, losses, wins, celebrations – all part of life, sometimes all this occurs in bunches and life doesn't allow you to stand still when you want to.

It is hard to do what I do, be who I am and maintain privacy

about the hardest things. I believe in maintaining as much transparency as I can handle. Yet it is a bit of a luxury that this moment in time, I stand still before my blog, having survived this year, able to type again. It feels somewhat magical, somewhat right again. To write. In public. Again.

The past year and a half or so, my sanity has been maintained through meditating on quotes like this one:

*“Mental health ultimately means that an individual, through rich emotion affirming-encounters with living, has integrated his or her life in such a way that the emergent self-structures, deeply affective, can steer a satisfying, cognitive course through future emotional jungles of lived lives.”*Panksepp, J. (2009). *Brain Emotional Systems and Qualities of Mental Life: From Animal Models of Affect to Implications for Psychotherapeutics*. In D. Fosha, D. J. Siegel, & M. Solomon (Eds.), *The Healing Power of Emotion: Affective Neuroscience, Development & Clinical Practice* (p. 368). New York, New York, USA: W. W. Norton.

Integration happens through things that can and cannot be controlled. One can be surprised to feel the moment of integration after telling a story to a trusted friend or a stranger. Sometimes a memory emerges literally from the darkness of nowhere, dips itself through the hippocampus and comes through on the other side ready to be played back in broad daylight. This happens a number of ways but most often for me it comes from interacting with something or someone. Hopefully someone kind. Ideally, someone that cares. A word, an image, a sound, a touch may unexpectedly flip a switch in the brain. Some connection is made in the brain quite literally. It can be felt. It is chemistry and electricity. What we're made of is tangible.

The past few weeks a lot of chemistry has been jostled in my brain and body because of the illness of my female cat Lilith who is dying from cancer. Tonight, I may have to put her to sleep. “I don't believe in goodbyes” I wrote to her in the

letter that will be burned with her. Once that connection is made, it stays with you always – unless there is brain damage. So for now, nothing can take her away from me. It is just her body that will be gone forever.

Re: Your Untimely Departure

Dear Kelly,

It has been two months since Dad called to tell me that you were gone. He was very upset you know. He liked taking care of you whenever you were around. Do you still remember that summer he cooked for us gourmet food every day at the beach house? Or that time when we took him to a gay bar in Castro with Cat after having those delicious crepes? I hope you remember still. I wanted to let you know wherever you are that I am trying hard not to be sad. I am doing my best. But it just doesn't seem real that you left. When I wrote our grandfather's [obituary](#) three years ago it wasn't easy but it was something I could do. It was ok to let him go. He lived for almost a whole century. He didn't suffer. We lived him, through him, with him. He was always with us one way or another.

I don't know what to do with you sweetie. Why did you get into that car? Why? How do you expect me to accept this and move on? It just isn't possible. I could never let go of you, no matter what happened. So there will be no obituary for you from me. I just can't do it. It isn't acceptable. You lived a very full life but in haste, almost frantic with your travels and incredible appetite for fun. You really did have fun. But you always said you never wanted to get married, never wanted to have kids, never wanted to grow old. And we all smiled and

imagined you becoming old but not really aging, sipping your drink and dancing to Billy Idol and looking no different than you did when you were twenty-five even at ninety-seven like *Pappou*. He would have been a hundred years old this summer. You would have liked that.

Pappou's time came and he aged but he never got sick. We bid him farewell. It was our fantasy for you not to age, but this was not the way to go about preserving it. So forgive me if I am angry. Forgive me if I am sad. I am trying to be happy and enjoy my life, the one I really want to have. I want to get married. I want to have kids. I am growing old. And you aren't around. You haven't been around for awhile. You have been busy living in haste. And dying under the most extraordinary and unusual of circumstances. It is ok when it is on television. It is not ok when I have to forever imagine over and over the last few minutes of your death. Were you scared? Were you lonely? When will you tell me? In my mind, it just wasn't you. It couldn't be you. It will never be you. A case of mistaken identity perhaps. So no obituary *koukla*. Just keep partying.

Take care and I will see you sometime not too soon, but it is ok because I know you'll keep busy. You always have some place to go that is more exciting.

love,
M

[Absolut Kelly \(1975-2010\)](#)



*fierce and wild
sweet and gentle
wearing grandpa's baby blues
piercing, loving*

so much bravado
ready to pounce
hiding your true self
such strong, kind spirit

worthy of a hundred nicknames
amazon warrior princess
blond sensation
absolut kelly (so true)

but really, mostly,
unforgettable
uncomparable
a true original you were

catch you on the edge of the sun
riding your chariot of fire
red and black forever

in my heart, forever.

I will count to 100 now and when I turn around, it will be your turn. If you want me to keep going, just let me know. I will wait until it is my turn.