

What we leave behind

Erin Bolens

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Erin Bolens is a poet and performer whose poetry show 'What we leave behind'¹ explores our relationship with loss, legacy and funeral buffets.

*Today's the day.
They've hired a car for you,
blacked out windows and everything
as if you're a celebrity. Or a criminal.
There are flowers everywhere, music on standby
and there will be one hell of a buffet.
Everyone is here.
Well, probably the ones you'd guess.
The ones you pictured in your mind.
You did picture this didn't you?
I do that sometimes.
There is an array of colours.
Your aunt has gone with navy,
she said you wouldn't have wanted her to buy anything
especially.
Dave, Dogless-Dave from round the corner,
always has a lead but never a dog?
Well Dogless-Dave has bought black crocs for the occasion
and no one has ever seen him so smart.
Janet wears black, from head to toe actually,
but only because she has every day since the divorce,
but no one mentions that anymore.
You look lovely Janet, no really nice, very flattering.
Your mates all have purple socks on,
because well, you remember sock-gate.
They all file in,
leaving their breath in the little porch with the umbrellas.
And there you are. In the middle,
ready for the party you never planned.*

I have always written in some form or other. The first poems I actually remember writing are those I scribbled after my dad, Steve Stephens, died when I was eleven. The one I read at his burial was called 'Daddy is dead and I don't know what to say about that'. I don't remember thinking I was writing for me, I was too practical for that, I felt like I was doing something that needed to be done. I had created a job for myself and set about completing it. After that year I didn't write for a long time. There was some maudlin heartache stuff

in my teens (that will never see the light of day for everyone's good) but never anything about my dad, or death or grief until poetry became a much bigger part of my life, much later on.

When you experience death at a young age it can cast a shadow of mortality that you are always aware of at the edge of your peripheral vision. You grow up fast and end up burying the bits of grief that are hard to process or understand inside yourself. It's a survival mechanism but it doesn't last forever; you dig it out eventually and try to make sense of it with an adult's perspective.

Memory, already a complicated thing, becomes even more delicate and tangled and precious when interwoven with grief. As life without a person in it carries on, I think we subconsciously seek support to help colour in the outlines of that person we have in our memories. We find this support in photographs, conversations with people who knew them and also in things they liked, made or owned.

I am really fascinated by how objects become laden with meaning. The house I grew up in was always full of things collected, inherited, treasured. Everything I scribbled found its way onto the walls, every bit of papier-mâché would be displayed until it had absolutely decayed. There were so many photos, books, bits of cloth, wire, and wood that might be useful for 'makes' or 'just in case', and so on.



Erin says 'The mismatched work of the stitched patchwork makes me so glad. A different quilt, of different clothes, would have meant a different dad'. Erin performing 'What we leave behind'.

After my dad died, everything of his became sacred in a way I've been never been completely comfortable with. Shopping lists, clothes, cards, broken glasses, presents-significant only because of death. We kept them because they were familiar. We saw him in them, these stepping stones

¹ A text version of the show, along with related poems, will be available in Spring 2018. More information at erinbolens.com/whatweleavebehind

to nowhere. I don't like clutter but I still struggle to throw things out. I worry that I am either betraying someone who has died or betraying someone who will be left when I die. Keeping my relatives' things makes sense but the idea of someone saving one of my shopping lists seems incredible. I would never want someone to feel like they were throwing my memory away through things. I don't feel like that is possible. But still the clear outs are long and drawn out.



'I hold your life in a box and begin to unpick it'.

This type of internal dialogue was what led to the first stages of my poetry show. The research and writing process initiated some brilliant, bittersweet conversations that so often get buried in our chests. We need to get better at creating those chats so we don't end up burying parts of ourselves alongside those we love.



Erin and her Dad.

*The guests are leaving now,
scattering themselves back across the country like
dandelions.*

*Janet cling films the sandwiches but bins the salad –
no one needs limp lettuce when they're grieving.
She wraps a piece of Battenberg and puts it in her bag
for later.*

*It was your favourite and you wouldn't want to waste it
but she knows if she ate it now she would hardly taste it.
Dogless-Dave takes a couple of cocktail sausages home
out of habit,*

saving them for the dog he buried years ago.

There are cards everywhere.

*It could have been a christening,
if you didn't know.*

*Sorry and beautiful waft through the air
like Febreze, masking the odour of that which goes
unsaid.*

I've been to fourteen funerals so far. The majority were before I was eighteen. My oldest friend's dad died less than two years after mine, they were also good friends. Family friends, relatives both close and distant – they kept disappearing and I grew to expect it. As I amble towards the end of my twenties, that number doesn't seem so many, but in my teens I felt like I was revising for GCSE funeral studies without having actually signed up for the course. The funerals I have attended have been incredibly varied, informed by different beliefs, interests, generations, careers and relationships, just like the people they were celebrating. As I talked to more and more people about these things, I realised that we all have a little box of grief we keep under the bed. The contents may differ greatly but they're all there and sometimes it is really useful to have a look at them with others, finding comfort in the similarities, laughing at the differences.



Erin performing 'What we leave behind' at The Roundhouse theatre, London, 2017. © Cesare di Giglio.

I think that grief, like memory, is a shapeshifter. It is not a coat you are given when someone dies that you eventually grow out of; it evolves with you. You may wear it less or in a



Celebrating my dad's birthday with two things we both loved - being outdoors and eating cake.

different way as time passes, but it is a wardrobe staple nonetheless. My relationship with the show, grief, people who have died and their things changes all the time. For me, writing has been a tangible, practical way of looking at what's going on in my head and heart and trying to make sense of it. 'What we leave behind' is where I keep my grief coat. I hope

it celebrates the lives of those who have died and those of us left behind – for carrying on, in whatever form that might be, when those we have loved become boxes of stuff.

*Maybe, out of everyone I know
I'll have the cruel task of being the last.
Since being small, I've dreaded that.
Understanding death as a child
is a bit like realising Father Christmas isn't real, again.
Magic disappears as you are smacked around your forming skull
with the realisation that this is not the end of it.
If there's no Santa; there can't be a tooth fairy either,
or gnomes in the garden, or a bunny at Easter.
It is the pricking of your thumbs that tells you
there is more to come.
More funerals. More deaths. More watching last breaths.
You realise too soon you are in death's waiting room
with everyone you love and
this is just the beginning of pain. ■*