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**LICHEN 1**

**SEEING GHOSTS IN  
TIMES OF  
DISAPPEARANCE**

**L. PULMONARIA**

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Geraldo Lunas Campos  
Keith Porter Jr.  
Alex Pretti  
Renee Good

**JULY, 2026**

We are all grieving, different losses, at different times. We all know the emptiness, though. So listen through it. Don't let it harden you.

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Alex Pretti  
Renee Good

At the time I write this, these are the names of everyone killed by ICE in 2026 that we know of. Two names dance across our tongues when this subject comes up, the connection between grief, disappearance, migration. We know them. We remember them. I do not want to reproduce the pattern, where they are the intro and everyone else becomes the footnote, the dataset, the numbers.

This essay is for the many. It's about grief and legibility and race in the wreckage of a failing empire.

But grief, like so much of what makes us human, is both a deeply personal experience and something that ties us all together.

And both of those make it dangerous to established systems that run off our isolation and, simultaneously, the anti-privacy hellscape. Our grief, like everything, must become public, social, but only in regimented and surveilled ways, grief is policed. Our personal becomes public but we remain disconnected. Like a sanctioned march, circling a town square, while the sun rises and sets, and the war goes on.

The power of our grief, like our love for the living, is not in its shareability but its materiality.

When my wife, Oedipa died, I was afraid that I would have a hard time explaining to people why it broke me so much. I thought I'd have to justify my feelings, explain that what sounded like a three year relationship never legally formalized was actually a ten year partnership that kept shifting form and name, but never wavered in terms of closeness, or love, or need. I also thought I'd have to explain myself as a 29 year old widower. It's such a serious word. I worried if I even counted.

But it turns out, nobody questioned my grief. People welcomed me. Into the support group for people who lost partners. Into grief counseling. Back to work. People understood when I failed to uphold the same standards as before July 21<sup>st</sup> 2025. People excused my flakiness and my sombreness. People have been so gentle with me, so caring. I cannot thank everyone enough.

This is not about my dead wife, but their death shapes my perception of grief, how I read about and what I see with respect to how others in grief are treated. so it bears mentioning as a thread.

Sometimes I find myself in the corners of instagram dedicated to the dead, grief, and surviving. If I comment my own story, the worst it gets is ignored. But usually, it gets some kind of camaraderie. A moment of recognition, a held gaze, a connection, fleeting but deep, between people who know each others' pain.

Meanwhile. When my friends in Palestine post, they face harassment that I will not give additional voice to here. In the comments of posts commemorating those killed by ICE, those killed by cops, people are blamed for their own deaths, for the deaths of their loved ones, judged for loving people the state did not. This racism targeting those in grief is not new, it just metastasizes more rapidly through algorithms and digital media than physical distance.

When I lived in Chicago, we taught 1919 by Eve Ewing to our students. Reading, I caught myself wondering if we had the same landlord, as they had a neighborhood wide monopoly. I got that email, too, warning us about "rioters" in the wake of the dashcam footage of Laquan McDonald's

Why are Good and Pretti described as political assassinations and murder victims and martyrs, but not the rest of these people, all killed by political systems of oppression and dominance?

People will say it's a numbers issue, but this pattern has held from even the first few killings. Regardless, why and how have we let the numbers get so large? Why weren't there nationwide vigils and demos when the coroners ruled Nurul Amin Shah Alam and Daphy Michel's deaths homicides?

Because we normalize the undertow of Black and Brown and Indigenous death. We normalize the undertow of deaths of non-citizens. We normalize statistics and numbers and block them out.

Until we can't anymore.

Am I using the royal we? Or am I speaking directly to the other white people in the room? That slippage alone is worth calling attention to.

Grief isn't isolated, but it can be, especially here and now, isolating. Whose grief gets heard depends on who's listening. So we should, in our own grief or not, listen.

Grief could and should bring us together. Not in the sense only of relying on others for support but also in the sense of recognizing each other and the others we have lost. Knowing the real scope and scale of a life lost. A specific life. A whole universe of stars.

This is something those who face constant violence understand. Look to Palestine, where journalists report on the deaths of their own families, their coworkers, their neighbors, total strangers, and even themselves, all within the same breath. Each of us is everything to someone, and grief is love for a whole world within the dead person and beyond. The world they were becomes the world we fight for. The uprisings in 2014 and 2020 are an excellent example. Though both were responses to specific murders (Michael Brown and George Floyd) they quickly became representative of so many more. Names, faces, loved ones crying and speaking out. They blur together, a mass killing, a list without detail. Blur in the most bureaucratic, data driven formation. But blur, like grief, has many meanings. One way to counteract the blur of disappearance, obfuscation, forgetting, is to engage blur in the sense of Fred Moten, of collectivity.<sup>12</sup> In that many voices become a chorus, the chorus of those we've lost and the chorus calling out to them.<sup>13</sup> Think of Janelle Monáe's "Say Her Name (Hell You Talmbout)" 17 minutes of the names of Black women murdered by cops.<sup>14</sup> None of them is any smaller for being in the chorus. One way we honor the dead is by honoring community is by fighting for the living is by being together in love and rage. By living.

By recognizing each other. By calling it as it is, grief in blur. Grief in learning to live with the empty space between you and your lost loves, your faraway homeland, you and the self you were then, before, or there. Grief in manifold - not the same for all for all of us, not when some ghosts are disappeared, even in death. Grief mediated, racialized, caught up in rhetorics of scapegoating, nationalism, and fear

Grief in learning to live with the empty space between each other, here, between us. Grief called as it is. Grief made matter. Grief that we stop calling and listen.

Hear it.

Thinking on this element of grief, the fraught relationship between life and death, now and tomorrow, I cannot help but reflect on the deaths in action of anarchists Sara and Sandro. Normally I think of anarchism as ambivalent, if not adverse to a focus on futurity. But something in the way we haunt each other, lovingly, opens a doorway from the present fight of those gone before to the fight we carry on in their memory. As a *lcuni insuscettibili di ravvedimento* (a few incapable of reform) wrote in tribute to the fallen, "It is true that, as materialists, we might say that with death we cease to exist, and that our bodies become mere remains in which we no longer have any interest. In reality, this is not the case, because we continue to act even after death; the testimony we bore in life lives on. All those who have died for freedom in the past speak to us and support us on our journey towards the future. The bodies of dead anarchists thus take on meaning for their living comrades, for the ideas that define them and for the struggles they undertake (hence the state's attempt to seize them). This is why the expressions of grief, solidarity and complicity with Sara and Sandro are not only stronger than death, as has been written, but also stronger than political expediency, self-interest and prudence."<sup>8</sup>

I've been trying to explain why my grief over Oedipa's death feels inextricable from white nationalist context in which we live for longer than I've been trying to write this piece. Similarly, the corollary, why it feels so critical to situate grief as a weapon against white nationalism, rather than keep personal loss separate from the broader war against states and borders. Why the role of white people grieving should be to use our grief not to be louder than others, but to open the door to discussing the inequities of mediated memorials and to amplifying the voices of grieving racialized people, migrants, incarcerated people, the dispossessed and the disappeared.

And each time, I come to the same conclusion as a few incapable of reform, that "honouring the dead thus becomes a message above all for the living. An inviolable pact to continue on the path of radical emancipation."

To honor the dead, I draw them. I draw them in color, in life. As they were before. So I do a lot of looking up names, faces, stories. Consequently I've noticed some trends. This is not a thorough quantitative analysis, simply the experiences of my own circle of artist friends in the work we do.

Searching for overall information about people killed by ICE tends to be dominated by two names. Renee Good. Alex Pretti. Two white citizens. Across image search engines, pictures of their faces on signs and paste-ups, the vigils in their honor, the sites of their murders, covered in caution tape. Occasionally, someone else breaks through: a vigil for Silverio Villegas Gonzales, collages of photos of all those killed in the first few weeks of the year, a few pictures of two others killed, also citizens, Dr. Linda Davis and Keith Porter Jr. This is true for the news too, where most coverage highlights Good and Pretti through subtitles like "the high-profile killings of Minneapolis residents Alex Pretti and Renee Nicole Good are only two among many"<sup>9</sup> or "shootings of Alex Pretti and Renee Nicole Good are two of at least nine deaths related to immigration law enforcement in US."<sup>10</sup>

Even some articles that report on each death equitably when it comes to the text itself, show their bias towards white citizen victims in the images they use. For instance, American Immigration Council begins their article "6 Deaths in ICE Custody and 2 Fatal Shootings: A Horrific Start to 2026" with an image of a protest sign that reads "REMEMBER RENEE AND ALL ICE VICTIMS". Renee is written in two colors of marker, too.<sup>11</sup> One article, one, highlighted Ruben Ray Martinez.

murder being released.<sup>1</sup> None of the students in that class had been around long enough to have gotten that email, but how many others, like myself, white kids from privilege, gentrifying academics, had?

Instead of grief helping to undo the harms of a majority white institution in a majority black part of town, when several students were hit by stray gunfire (all across the city, no less), campus protesters called for increased policing on campus and throughout a neighborhood already home to the largest private police force in the world. A police force that had, only a few years prior, shot a Black student down the street in an eerily similar way to Laquan McDonald. Thankfully, he survived. When people pushed back, asking where the fuck all this concern about gun violence was when it was kids from the local high school getting shot, the university was silent, the protesters (as one can expect from pro-police demonstrators) were unconcerned with Black kids' deaths.

Lisa Marie Cacho explores the criminalization of Black survival in *Social Death* writing that to "transparently recognize a black man or a black woman as a "looter" is not equivalent to misrecognizing a hurricane victim as a criminal. Seeing a looter rather than a recognizing a victim does not emerge from an inability to conceive of certain people as entitled to personhood. This way of seeing emerges from the refusal to see them as such."<sup>2</sup>

Grief, too, is survival work. And, like how cops and the news report Black people finding sustenance in the wreckage of a hurricane as looting instead of survival, when a Black person is shot by the cops, the survivors' grief is a riot. Those who joke about it are tolerated, those who fight back are criminalized. White pigs murder Black men and Ferguson, Minneapolis, and Chicago "riot." ICE kidnaps, tortures, rapes, and kills, and resistance, protecting each other, is "terrorism."

But when Charlie Kirk dies, suddenly joking about grief is the cruelest matter, and no amount of pyrotechnics is problematic.

Why is some loss acceptable? Why is some recognized as tragedy and others as just how things are right now, as the law doing what it does, as if that's enough. Why does this college shut down campus for a Turning Point vigil but when students host vigils the cops clear them out and threaten participants with arrest? Why is my grief enough to get extensions and support when I miss meetings but students struggling with the grief of watching their families, friends, neighbors get disappeared, or the understandable fear of attending classes on a campus that is actively hostile to their safety and refuses even the barest gestures of protection against ICE are forced to try and justify and make legible a grief much bigger than themselves to that hostile institution or to take grade deductions based on perceived lack of participation?

Gloria Anzaldua writes about Coatlicue, goddess of the veil between life and death as an avatar of migration: "when my father died, my mother put blankets over the mirrors. Consciously, she had no idea why. Perhaps a part of her knew that a mirror is a door through which the soul may "pass" to the other side and she didn't want us to "accidentally" follow our father to the place where the souls of the dead live. The mirror is an ambivalent symbol. Not only does it reproduce images (the twins that stand for thesis and antithesis); it contains and absorbs them."<sup>3</sup> Coatlicue lives in the borderlands. In the messy spaces of both and. This expansive understanding of borders is deeply relevant in our present moment where whole communities of immigrants are grieving the dead

and disappeared, the collapse of what dreams for which perhaps they came here, the possibility of home, crumbling around them, or for that matter the lost homeland, the reality of dying across the border, being unable to rest with loved ones in the old family plot. The possibility of being swallowed by the state that disappears. This is so contrary to the dream of migration in all its possibility, in all its hope.

On this dream, Ocean Vuong writes "migration can be triggered by the angle of sunlight, indicating a change in season, temperature, plant life, and nourishment. Female monarchs lay eggs along the route. Every history has more than one thread, each thread a story of division. The journey takes four thousand eight hundred and thirty miles, or the length of this country. The monarchs that fly south will not make it back north. Each departure, then, is final. Only their children return; only the future revisits the past. What is a country but a borderless sentence, a life?"<sup>4</sup>

This question echoes across time and distance, how can a country be borderless? when it transcends nation/state/hood, the claws of governments and documents. When it becomes about place, beingness, memory, love, community. Is this the place where grief resides?

The borderlessness of life, too, echoes - this essay is called "a letter for my mother that she will never read".

This blurring across borders resonates throughout Vuong's writings. In "Amazon History of a Former Nail Salon Worker," Vuong writes about his mother's interactions with capitalism - in the form of Amazon purchases, contributions to the class warfare behemoth of OSHA violations and corporate homicide, and also her own former life as nail salon worker, as racialized laborer, spending earnings on supplies. And then on the trappings of cancer and pain. And then on a card she sends before her death. There's blur here, too. Are these packages ordered or simply searched, considered and cataloged by the nightmare machine. Is she a former worker because she's dead now, or did she quit at some point? Are these supplies for the nails of anyone in particular? For work or for herself too? Where do the person and the racialized laborer blur into one. And where does mother blur into son, purchasing an urn and a memorial frame in her name and her memory?

From July to July, the poem reads:

Jul.

Saviland Holographic Gold Nail Powder, 6 colors  
Nescafe Taster's Choice Instant Coffee  
Advil (ibuprofen), 4 pack  
PIXNOR Pedicure Double-Sided Callus Remover  
Bengay Medicated Cream, 3 pack

Jul.

Eternity Aluminum Urn, Dove and Rose engraved, small  
Perfect Memories picture frame, 8 x 11 in, black

Burt's Bees lip balm, Honey, 1 pc.<sup>5</sup>

The image of the migrant laborer, exploited, overworked, but at the same time, privileged, profiting.

Another poem from the same collection, Time is a Motherjings out.

Not Even

Once, at a party set on a rooftop in Brooklyn for an 'artsy  
vibe,' a young woman said, sipping her drink, You're so  
lucky. You're gay plus you get to write about war and stuff. I'm  
just white[Pause] I got nothing[Laughter, glasses clinking]

Because everyone knows yellow pain, pressed into American  
letters, turns to gold.

Our sorrow Midas touched. Napalm with a rainbow  
afterglow.

Unlike feelings, blood gets realer when you feel it.

It's been proven difficult to dance to machine-gun fire.

Still, my people made a rhythm this way. A way.

My people, so still, in the photographs, as corpses.

My failure was that I got used to it. I looked at us, mangled  
under the Timephotographer's shadow, and stopped  
thinking, get up, get up.

Vuong's pain is a selling point. Nobody expects me to write my trauma, my loss, my grief. I can, and I do, but only because without doing so it gets hard to breathe, or to think, or to write at all. When I do, people take it at face value. To be assumed to be pressing my pain into gold I would have to literally set off fireworks, like Erica Kirk. I am taken at face value - the perceived value of my white face reading this.

These misperceptions, categorizations, attempts to overwrite migrant life and death can never capture the butterflies in flight. Articulating how death and grief are core to migration, just as much as life, continuance, and collective futures, Vuong writes that "monarchs that survived the migration passed this message down to their children. The memory of family members lost from the initial winter was woven into their genes. What do we mean when we say survivor? Maybe a survivor is nothing but the last one to come home, the final monarch that lands on a branch already weighted with ghosts."<sup>7</sup>