

A Small Mountain of Grief

Annemarie Coatney

There's a rather odd-looking mound in the back pasture of my family's home. A rounded landmark on an otherwise flat plane of earth, it looks like some haphazard mistake in the design of the landscape that has yet to be smoothed away. Throw in the fact that there is absolutely no living thing growing on it, in a place where something is growing on everything, and it seems even more strange. If I were superstitious, or even poetic, I'd tell you that the reason nothing grows on the little mountain is that Mother Nature is respecting the dead. I suppose the tiny romantic in my heart might even believe that a little. But the real reason nothing is growing on that small hill is that the earth is still too freshly overturned from the burial of my childhood friend.

He was born on the Grizzly Ranch in Park County, Wyoming, and named Pea Eye after a character from the movie *Lonesome Dove*. Having rusty, sorrel-colored fur; a white blaze on his forehead; two white stockings and a sock; and a white, heart-shaped patch of fur on his left hind leg, he was rather beautiful in his youth. Pictures of such a vibrant and healthy horse come into sharp contrast with my last images of him. A faded and patchy coat, the visible outline of ribs, and a head that seemed to perpetually sag towards the ground marked the passage of his thirty years on Earth. I suppose I should be grateful I got that long, but reason is the oil of sadness's water.

In the last five years of Pea Eye's life, I felt as if I heard my dad say, "He's not going to make it through the winter" every year. After having been wrong four times already, I no longer believed it to be true, even after my dad marked the spot of his burial. This decision to lay him to rest not ten feet from the corral where my dad had first taught me to trot did not include me—or rather, I did not include myself.

The day of the burial was set—again without my interjection—three weeks from the decision. It arrived in days. With it came my best human friend and her mother, the latter of which would serve as the vet. A hole had already been dug in the predesignated place and after my dad haltered Pea Eye and I haltered Junior, the horse who served as Pea Eye's only real day-to-day companion, we led them towards it. Seeing Pea Eye walk up to what would soon be his grave was the first

moment that I truly knew this would be the winter he didn't make it through.

The next series of events I heard as much as saw. The vet, like one of the Fates snipping a mortal's life thread, injected the lethal dose. After a few minutes, he began to sway and stumble. I moved Junior and myself out of the way. My dad and the vet guided his fall to the ground instead of into his coffin. The sound of his body hitting the ground told me they had succeeded. I turned around in time to see my dad take his hand off Pea Eye's neck, which had just finally gone still. He gestured for me to come over and say goodbye, but all of me that moved were my eyelids as they closed and the tears that still leaked through. I heard a snipping noise as my dad cut off parts of Pea Eye's tail. It would be the only part of him I'd ever see again.

I don't remember what happened between then and when I led Junior back to his stall. I don't remember when Pea Eye was laid into his grave and the little mountain was formed over his body. What I do remember is seeing my dad in front of the house and hugging him, though really, we were hugging each other. I don't think there's ever been another moment in my life where I've felt such a deep emotional understanding of another person. It was several minutes before we walked back inside, both with significantly more tears shed.

I bypassed the kitchen and folded myself into a chair by the living room window where I would later observe the oddity of the little mound. The food laid out in the last room had interested me little, but what I saw out of the window made me wish I had taken more notice.

Junior, having been let out of his stall, was running to-and-fro in the pasture, frantically searching for his friend. What little composure I'd gathered from my walk through the house dissipated in an instant. Having neither the strength nor the ability to communicate to him that Pea Eye was gone, I curled myself tighter in my seat and felt another little crack in my heart. It would be several more minutes before Junior stopped searching and I stopped crying.

When I had walked through and past the kitchen, I had not turned on the lights. But when I gathered the

fortitude to unfurl myself from the chair and walked back in, I found that someone else had. They now illuminated my best friend, who had been next to me as Pea Eye stumbled and fell to stillness; my mom, who

was putting the finishing touches on what I now realized was a collection of comfort foods; and my dad, who had just minutes before let me know I wasn't alone. △

Watching the Storm Pass By

Amelia Pope

My favorite season is summer.
Not for the weeds blooming flowers on the side of the road
or for the lightning bugs dancing all night
but for the thunderstorms.
When I was little, my grandpa taught me to count
between the booms and the flashes of light,
divide by five and I would always know where the storm was.
I could never keep count.
I always got lost staring at the dark clouds or wondering
where the lightning had struck,
and before I knew it the storm was gone,
leaving behind cool air, moist grass, and myself sitting
on a bench—
where I would sit for hours thinking about all the lighting I had saw.
Where did it strike?
Was anyone hurt?
What if that was us in the middle of the storm?
But soon my worries would be calmed by the weatherman on the 5 o'clock news,
who would use big words like *doppler radar* and *cold front*—
to tell us the bad weather was gone for the week.
So, I would wait until the next storm to practice counting in between the flashes and booms,
and then dividing by five.



As the Snow Falls

Alex Wallace

Second Place, Photography