

[Dropping Ashes](#) [1]

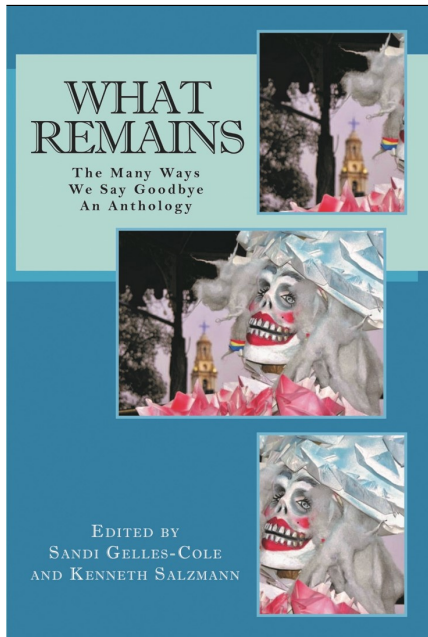
October 12, 2020 [Memoir](#) [2]

[Grief](#) [3]

[TW Reading Series](#) [4]

Essay by Bonnie Neubauer

My Soundtrack for Grief



Editor's Note: Bonnie Neubauer's piece highlights the heartbreaking aimlessness that often follows the loss of a partner. The piece, sorrowful and funny, was originally published as "Dust in the Wind" in the anthology *What Remains: The Many Ways We Say Goodbye* (Gelles-Cole Literary Enterprises, 2019).

We thank the editors for allowing us to share Bonnie's piece here as part of the TW Reading Series.

Dropping Ashes

Published on Talking Writing (<https://mail.talkingwriting.com>)



Dropping Ashes

I was initially fine with my husband's "no funeral" request. I spooned a portion of his ashes into a pouch for his sister, sealed a tiny amount into a locket for myself, stashed the funeral home bag in his closet, and shut the door.

As the weeks crawled by, I couldn't silence the part of my heart that wanted to honor Gil. Whenever I drove by places that had been meaningful in our relationship—the bakery where we got our wedding cake, the bookstore where we met, the dealership where we shopped for an RV—I thought how nice it would be if a part of Gil were there.

I hatched a plan, a ritual, that I named "Dropping Ashes." I approached it with the enthusiasm of a dog, marking our territory every chance I got, and the stealth of a graffiti artist, only "dropping" at night.

One of my first drops was outside a helicopter museum. Standing under an aircraft carrier in the dark, arm straight by my side, I subtly dropped ashes and spoke aloud, "When you chose this spot after 9-11 as our safe place to meet up, I felt protected. Since you died, I haven't felt safe anywhere. Knowing you are here, now, I feel a bit better. I miss you like crazy. I love you." I cried in my car for an hour.

A couple weeks later, I was driving aimlessly in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania, hoping a scenery change would soothe my grief. It had not, and the sun was starting to set. But I didn't want to go home. What was at home? A half-empty bed? Unfinished dreams?

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When Gil was dying, a hospice social worker said, “Bonnie, for Gil, home is where you are.” These were kind words when I momentarily contemplated renegeing on my promise to let him die at home. Now they stung. Where was home for me?

One of our pet expressions popped into my head: *It’s only a ride until we make our first U-turn—then it’s an adventure*. Not certain it would be an adventure without Gil in the car, I turned anyway. I immediately knew where to go and queued up Gil’s favorite ice cream parlor on the GPS. Only an hour out of the way—excellent news for someone who didn’t want to go home.

Without worry of getting caught because the shop was closed for the season, I dropped ashes directly under Gil’s favorite sign—a big, brightly lit milk carton.

Back in the car, one of our favorite road-trip songs played on the radio: “Two of Us” by the Beatles.

I yelled at the radio, “One of us. There’s no more two.”

The radio kept playing.

I shouted, “I don’t want to go home. There’s no home anymore.”

I banged the steering wheel until my palms hurt, but still not as much as my heart. Between the rain and my wet eyes, I could barely see anything on the winding road. I drove on, anger that had been boiling under the surface raging from my mouth.

“I hate you for dying. I hate that stupid twinkle in your eye that made me fall in love with you. I hate how you always made me laugh when I was sad. What am I supposed to do now? Tell me, big boy. I’m sad. I’m angry. I’m alone. If you’re out there, make me laugh. Please!”

The song changed. Kansas. “Dust in the Wind.”

“Gil?” I said hesitantly. “That’s a cheap shot. I’m not laughing.”

Truth be told, I was amused. “I’m giving you one more chance. One more song to make me laugh. Let’s see if you’re listening.”

When Kansas stopped singing, I sat up straight, eager to hear what Radio Gil would play. I was half-certain it would make me laugh and half-petrified I was actually talking to Gil through the radio.

The next song was “Alone Again (Naturally).” By none other than *Gilbert O’Sullivan*. A smile spread across my lips. I laughed. A genuine, audible laugh.

“You win, Gil. We’re going home. The two of us.”

That was the last time I dropped ashes. I had gotten what I had been craving, what funerals typically deliver: the chance to smile, laugh, cry, reminisce, and feel connected.

Art Information

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Bonnie Neubauer is a certified grief coach, certified funeral celebrant, and author of books on creative writing. She is also a lover of board games, word puzzles, and colorful socks. Bonnie is currently at work on a book that will include her poetry, art, and essays as well as exercises for others to express their grief creatively and to explore their own tools of resiliency.

For more information, visit [Bonnie Neubauer's website](#) [5].

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[1] <https://mail.talkingwriting.com/dropping-ashes>

[2] <https://mail.talkingwriting.com/talkingwriting-categories/memoir>

[3] <https://mail.talkingwriting.com/tw-channels-and-categories/grief>

[4] <https://mail.talkingwriting.com/tw-channels-and-categories/tw-reading-series>

[5] <https://www.bonnieneubauer.com/>