Shay’s Lantern

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My short story explores the ways in which people deal with illness and the grief and suffering that inevitably follows. Stories are often told linearly according to Freitag’s triangle. The order of the narrative according to Freitag’s triangle is as follows: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. Linear narratives, however, are limited to one point of view and time. I chose to employ the modular style, which is a nonlinear narrative technique that breaks from chronological order and set place. Through the modular style, I was able to put emphasis on the most essential memories of the protagonist. Not every moment of their time together is shown, but those moments that are shown help to build the characters’ relationship. The story begins at the annual Lantern Floating ceremony, but when combined, the scenes span a great deal of time.

I was inspired to write this piece after educating myself about the serious effects of heart conditions. Diseases, both known and unknown, can take a tremendous toll on the affected people, families, and friends. I aim to start a conversation about health issues, as well as the unique practices of remembering loved ones who have passed away in Hawai’i. Specifically, I cite the Lantern Floating ceremony held annually on Memorial Day. While Memorial Day honors people who have fallen in service of our country, many people in Hawai’i acknowledge the passing of their loved ones as well.

According to Lantern Floating Hawai’i’s website, the first Lantern Floating Hawai’i ceremony was in 1999, officiated by her Holiness Shinso Ito, Head Priest of Shinnyo-en. The event was originally held at Ke’ehi Lagoon, but since 2002, it has been held at Ala Moana Beach Park. The event contains many elements, beginning with individual lanterns (with three sides available for writing) being distributed on the event day for people to personally place the lantern in the water. The ceremony commences once the pū, a Hawaiian conch shell, is sounded; taiko drums offer a prayer for peace and harmony; the oli, a Hawaiian chant, is performed to prepare people for what’s to come; and hula, a visual portrayal of song and chant, is danced. Next, the six large main lanterns are carried onto stage, which carry prayers for every living thing; community leaders come together to signify their unity through the light of harmony; Her Holiness Shinso Ito offers a blessing of all; food and water is offered; water petals are strewn; Shomyo, a fusion of tradition Buddhist and Western chant, is performed; and a bell is rung to signify that the lanterns are to be floated. People who have
That night, I watched lanterns bobbing in the water. A tea light candle on a bamboo base was enclosed within walls of paper, rising and falling. Words written in black ink along its sides blended into the night. I tried to imagine the letters—the hook of a “g,” the curl of an “s,” or the dot on an “i”—but I couldn't piece them together.

There were thousands, floating alongside one another, each holding a message from a person or a family for a loved one who'd passed. The connection was short, infrequent in the way that a fluorescent lightbulb flickered out. The lanterns were surrounded by flower petals, ranging from red to white to orange; it was a brief glimpse of brighter colors between the dip of waves so dark that I mistook them for black.

And the longer I watched the lanterns, the more unreachable they seemed. No one could touch the words or take them back. They sent them away, and even though I knew after the night was long over, volunteers would pluck them from the ocean, I wanted to believe that their words would get lost in the pull of the tide.

Shay used to tell me that the reality of the recycled lanterns was better; we were connected through those lanterns—all the grieving souls. They recycled the bases and reused what parts they could for the ceremony every year. He said each lantern carried my words, their words, and the words that were yet to come.

The first time I met Shay, we were in middle school. I was waiting for my dad to pick me up by the sidewalk, but the sun was beating down on my head and sweat was trickling down my body. I decided to retreat to the grass in search for some shade, and then I saw him.

He was sitting between the extended roots of a monkey pod tree with his legs spread out wide. He was in my history and science classes, but he spent a lot of time in the nurse's office, so I didn't know him very well. But I knew that he was never without a baseball cap; he was wearing that and a small smile.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

He raised his eyebrows, then held up his hand to reveal a single used match. I glanced down at the root of the tree pushing through the dirt and saw a box of matches next to him. He told me they weren't his, but our science teacher's. She'd dropped it when she saw him coming towards her.

I told him he shouldn't hold onto it or someone would think it was his.

He grinned. “Don't worry, I'm not going to start a fire.”

I eyed the match carefully, and in response, he tossed the box of matches to me. I caught it clumsily. It was then that I realized that it was empty.

“Want this one?” he asked, holding up his hand.

I shook my head. “It’s just a light.”

We did everything together. We met each other in the hall and walked to class, complaining about our latest assignment or joking about something our teacher said. We ate lunch across from each other so often that my friends grew used to having him around. And we hung out after school outside a gas station that smelled of garbage someone had forgotten to take out, sharing a soda and a bag of li hing mui gummy worms.

Sometimes, I think of Shay under the floodlights. Everything on the field was brighter—the flecks of dirt on bases, jungle green grass stains on pants, and bleach white spots on batting helmets. The aluminum stands were cold to the touch, but I'd stolen Shay's jacket for warmth.

Our high school's team was winning, but I only knew this because I kept checking the scoreboard. I mostly liked to watch Shay. Whenever someone struck...
out, he screwed his face up so that his nose crinkled and his eyebrows mashed together. If someone got a hit, he celebrated with a discreet fist pump.

He didn't play for our baseball team, but when he would lean forward as if he were waiting for his turn to bat, I thought he would've made a great student athlete. I pictured him in the dugout, fingers hooked onto the fence and face pressed close in concentration.

Sometimes, he turned to face me. I greeted him with a poor imitation of his facial expressions, and he laughed goodheartedly. He reminded me that he couldn't help what he looked like.

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I didn't know the physical reason for why Shay couldn't always do things, but I knew it had to do with the amount he exerted himself. If we were walking, he stopped intermittently to catch his breath. He never participated in P.E., and if anyone challenged him to a race, he accepted but only sloped along after them. When I asked him if he was okay, he pointed to his heart and nodded.

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On weekends and some week nights, Shay came over to my house. The first time he crossed the threshold of our front door, I thought my mom's jaw would never close shut. My dad stared hard at Shay throughout dinner, but by the time all the dishes had been washed and put away with Shay's help, my dad looked considerably more relaxed.

They got used to Shay's presence quickly. They came home to find us sitting in the kitchen on the bar stools, working on our homework. Or we were on the couch in the living room with the dim light of the television shifting and changing in front of us from one commercial to the next. Sometimes, my parents sat down in the living room with us.

Shay and my dad liked to leave the television on sports games—basketball, football, or baseball. They talked endlessly about who deserved more playing time or who was blowing their chance at higher prospects.

My mom and I didn't share that joy, but it was nice to see the two men getting along well.

It was a little different when I went over to Shay's house. His mom and dad greeted me with open arms immediately. They filled my plate extra high with food and repeatedly told me how nice it was to have a friend of Shay's over. But out of the corner of my eye, I saw his mom glance at me with worry.

I never mentioned the look on his mom's face to Shay because I figured he'd seen it.

He tried to help out at home, but his mom preferred to have him sit and rest. His dad didn't seem to share the same level of worry, but he didn't pick fights with his wife either. Shay's mom did most of the clean-up under the fluorescent lightbulbs installed in their kitchen; she only conceded to let me help after I'd been over two nights in a row and Shay's dad had insisted she let me.

His mom was washing, and I was drying when she cleared her throat and said, “Dear, you know that Shay has a... well, um—”

I took a soapy plate from her, letting my hand linger over hers. “I know.”

Her eyes softened and she returned to the next plate. “Of course.”

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I typed in heart conditions in the search bar on the internet. Websites advertising superfoods as the cure to heart disease and fatigue popped up. The words “heart disease” and “cardiovascular” appeared beside “symptoms, causes, and treatments.” When I read the most commonly asked questions, everyone wanted to know the types and definition. But I couldn't read on, so I closed the tab.

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When we were in college, Shay and I went to the lookout where waves crashed against rocks and tourists meandered towards blowholes unheeding. He waited until the sun set and told me ghost stories. They were never so scary that I lay in bed unable to fall asleep, but they were always tragic. They were usually about a loved one who got stuck between one life and the next because Shay posited that life was like that.

He told me a story about a German shepherd named Lucy once. Lucy died of the tumor that formed on her neck before she could die of old age. Her owner, Johnny, sobbed at her makeshift funeral and refused to remove her bed from the living room. I asked Shay what Johnny looked like, and he said long and lanky like him.

“So, one day, Johnny’s sitting at home. His parents are out to dinner with people from work. And then, he hears a noise. Like the sound of the gate creeping open,” Shay said. “Johnny sits up, looks around, wondering what made that noise.”

“And?” I prompted.

“And Johnny has these glass sliding doors, you know,
so he can see outside. He thinks he sees a shadow crossing the yard, getting near him. And then he hears it.”

“Hears what?” I whispered.

Shay pulled out a flashlight, and pointed it in my face. I groaned, shading my eyes with my hand. “Shay!”

“Lucy. He hears Lucy barking and the next thing he knows, the shadow is being dragged backwards. The stranger is gone. So, Johnny runs outside, calling her name.”

“But she's not there,” I finished.

“No,” he continued. “Not physically.”

He let all his stories end like that. The sound of waves roared in the background and his flashlight clicked off. It wasn't overly dramatic or anything; it was a painless fading out. White noise.

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Once, I asked Shay if he believed in ghosts, and he told me no. He believed in spirits, in the idea that a person's spirit stayed with their loved ones long after they were gone. I think the idea appealed to him because he was afraid of leaving everyone too soon. So, when the large, black moth landed on his shoulder, I playfully asked him if this creature was one of them. He said yes.

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When Shay had his first stroke, my mom and dad knocked on my bedroom door. I was lying there with the lights off, and it was a starless night. I told them to come in, and my mom pushed the door open gently, peeking her head through the gap.

Her expression was soft, gentle, and every step she took towards me was a hesitant one. My dad, on the other hand, looked hard. His hands were tucked into his pockets and a deep frown creased his face.

“Honey,” my mom said.

I stared at them. “What happened?”

“Honey,” my mom repeated.

My dad placed a hand on my mom's shoulder, and looked me in the eye. “Shay's parents called. He's stable, but he's in the hospital. He had a stroke.”

“No,” I said quietly.

My mom sat down on my bed and pulled me close to her. She gave me one of the tightest hugs she'd ever given me before, while my dad patted my leg and told me it would be okay. They promised me we'd go to the hospital first thing in the morning. But in that moment, I didn't think he'd recover.

Shay didn't tell me much about it afterwards, only that he'd been at home in his kitchen when it happened. His parents rushed him to the hospital before calling mine. I visited him every single day until my parents tugged at my shirt because visiting hours were over.

We watched baseball on the little television in the corner of his room. He kept up a running commentary until he got tired. I think it was to make me feel better more than it was for his entertainment. They were mostly reruns.

In exchange, I told him ghost stories. The only ones that came to mind were the ones he'd told me, so I had to borrow a book from the library. I refused to admit that I didn't know them by heart though. They ended up being long, winding, and probably inaccurate stories.

But Shay never complained, and I left, promising to come back the next day. I went home to my bedroom and lay there with all the lights off. Eventually, when sleep wouldn't come, I sat up and opened the window in my room as far as it could go.

There was moonlight at least.

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When I found out that Shay's parents were making funeral plans, I cried. I couldn't understand how they could think about caskets or flowers so prematurely. He had one stroke, not two. My mom patted me on the head and told me that it was just a precaution. But my dad was honest. He said that we never knew what was going to happen, and his parents wanted to feel prepared.

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The next stroke came, and he recovered again. It was positive for a while. He kept talking about going home and taking me to a real baseball game.

But he needed surgery, and there was another surgery after that. There were too many complications. Our parents took turns crying, but no one cried louder than his mom. When things quieted, my hand was the one that Shay held, as if I was the one in pain.

Once, I watched the lantern floating ceremony on television with him. The camera panned away from the individuals letting go of their lanterns, zooming out until we could see them all.

He turned to me and pressed his lips against my forehead. I remembered looking from him to the lantern and back to him. I was thinking about the tea light burning inside the lantern. How much time did it have before it burned out?

Shay grabbed my hand and pointed towards a single lantern drifting apart from the rest and said, “That might be mine.”
When Shay died, I decided that I liked the world a little darker. I kept the lights in my room off and didn't like going outside during the day. If I was reading or in a room by myself, my mom would pause by the doorway, flip the light switch on, and then tell me things would get better. I told her that reality was tragic, but in my head, I heard Shay saying, *Why? Because we die? We all die. I just died sooner rather than later.*

Even now, I wished that I was at home, watching the lantern floating ceremony from the comfort of my own bed. If I was, I'd be able to see all of the lights and the people that night. Maybe I'd be able to tell if they all felt the way I did. But if I was at home, Shay would probably still be alive.

I squeezed his lantern in my hands tight.

The woman in front of me had released her lantern long ago, and now, she was turning away. She started past me, and then stopped, staring at the lantern. She squeezed my shoulder and then said, “Let it go, hon.”

I stared at her, helpless. “How?”

She placed her hands over mine, and I found comfort in the warmth of her touch.

“How is it?” she asked quietly.

I began to cry, soft sobs that I couldn't stop from coming out of my mouth. The woman made hushing sounds and continued to hold my hands in hers. She told me it might help to say his name.

“Shay,” I choked out.

She repeated his name, and then released my hands.

When I thought of Shay, I thought of lights—tiny blips of light in the sky, lamps on my bedside table, and flashlights that blinked rapidly if you clicked the right button.

**Works Cited**