

Narrative Medicine

It bothered me when people at the hospital
misunderstood my husband's story. They asked
why he didn't treat the diabetes he'd never had,
heart condition he'd just learned about, how long

his kidney had been weak, why his leg wound—
only a few days old, inflicted by a wheelchair
steered too fast—wasn't completely healed.

I didn't speak for him unless he asked me to,

but when he was worn out with pain, same questions
every shift, I tried to outline facts and not frustrations.
Because I wasn't always there—because sometimes
he was scared and confused—I couldn't stop the staff

from hearing what they wanted to, like when
the discharge nurse asked *Who takes care of you
at home?* and thought his answer meant more
than just recently. By then he'd been admitted

three times in three weeks. He couldn't walk
without support, eat food he had to chew, manage
the toilet on his own. Even though I wanted him
in rehab rather than at home, I also wanted to explain:

In our regular life, he didn't need a caregiver.
Even worse was when family and friends I told
about his death insisted he'd expected it. Their evidence
was in the packages he'd sent: his mother's bible,

stepdad's knife, souvenirs from his fraternity, stacks
of labeled photographs, a piece of goalpost painted
Tiger gold. It seemed unkind to argue that in June,
we'd moved to our fourth state in fourteen years,

and we knew we weren't having kids to pass our keepsakes to. Before we left Wisconsin, I recycled all our wedding cards, gave my dress to Goodwill. He spent hours sifting boxes untouched in the five years since Nebraska. In Rhode Island, his desk was a mess of maps, menus, plans to shop for furniture, visit the Viking rock he'd read about, take the train to Boston and New York.

When the doctors recommended high-risk surgery, he was afraid but said he wasn't giving up, would rather live on disability than not at all. Then doctors changed their minds and he died anyway.

I understand why people who weren't there want to believe that he'd accepted and prepared—because it hurts them less than what I saw unfold: In just over a month, his minor illness became serious, then critical, then grave, then ended in the worst possible way. I'm sure his doctors have a version, too—that he was very sick and should've been in their care sooner, that his outcome was unavoidable though they did everything they could. For all the questions my husband was asked when he was ill, there are things I'll never know: Whether he really thought—before he got so sick or after—that he was going to die. If he decided not to mention it or said it in a way I failed to hear. If he thought his silence was protecting me and if in fact it was. If there's one true story of his death and whether it's the one I tell.