

# Love's lifetime

inspirations from josh



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# what is this?

This year marks eight since Josh died. The week between August 22<sup>nd</sup> (his death day) and August 26<sup>th</sup> (his birthday) is a big one for me and his close friends and family. Each time August approaches I wonder what will come up for me. This year what came up is **this little booklet of songs and reflections on our relationship**. I don't fully understand it, but I know that I need to share it and that maybe you need to receive it.

In these pages you'll find the words that are passing through me in this moment, as well as lyrics and links to the music that Josh's life and death have inspired in me:

1. **vulnerability - window pane**
2. **presence - rest of**
3. **surrender - hold your hand**
4. **gratitude - josh's gratitude journal**
5. **love - love's lifetime**

I've also included some of my past writings that attempt to get at Josh's essence:

- **obituary**
- **eulogy**

**May his memory be not only for a blessing,  
but a call to action to love fully,  
fight hard and laugh often**

Find all of the songs here:

**<https://michalpearl.bandcamp.com/album/loves-lifetime>**

# vulnerability

When Josh and I started to hang out, he was six months post stem cell transplant. For many reasons, including the obvious, I was hesitant to date him, but was enjoying our connection and appreciated the wisdom that his illness afforded him. One day we were at his place, sitting in the tiny makeshift recording studio that overlooked an expanse of blackberry tangles and I suggested we write a song together.

“What about?” he asked.

“Well, what has this experience been like for you? What’s it like to go through such intense cancer treatment?” I asked back, expecting to hear about the pain and trauma of all of the chemo and radiation he had endured.

“People say such stupid shit. Like, this too shall pass - I mean, how do they know that??”

And so, I listened to all the quips and cliches that he had been subjected to over the years of treatment for acute lymphoblastic leukemia. All of it, as was his way, was shared with care and humor and understanding for the people around him who just didn’t know how to relate to someone in the prime of his life facing such dicey odds.

What emerged is the song, **Window Pane**, which he absolutely loved. And after a few more weeks of “should I/ shouldn’t I” and flying back to the east coast for the funeral of a close family friend who died in a car accident, I decided that no relationship has a guarantee. I allowed myself to sink into his embrace. He was known for being a good hugger.

# window pane

Looking out the window pane  
Watching on the falling rain  
Just heard that it came back again  
Shit

I can handle all those therapies  
But it's the shit that people say to me  
I really can do without it

[CHORUS]

I sure appreciate your concern  
Your visit and your call  
But sometimes it's better to say  
Nothing at all

What am I supposed to say  
In response to your cliché  
How do you know that this too shall pass?  
I don't need to hear it any longer  
That what doesn't kill me's gonna make me stronger  
For advice I know who to ask

It's a bit too late to prevent  
Not sure kombucha's gonna make a dent  
I'll cut out processed food afterwards  
Can't we all just be real  
If you mean it I'll tell you how I feel  
But it sounds like you're just saying words

Looking out the window pane  
Watching on the falling rain  
Just heard that it came back again

# presence

The summer after Josh and I met, I was in Montréal for my annual summer solstice visit and also the wedding of dear friends. The ceremony was outdoors in a hip, industrial, up-and-coming part of town and the couple invited everyone to pretend like it was pre-smartphone era and truly turn off our phones. “Don’t worry, we’ve hired a photographer,” they promised.

A few months earlier, Josh had relapsed. When he told me, he gave me an out and made sure I knew what I was getting into. At that point I was in it - I had decided to open myself up to love. He insisted we go on a getaway before he started back on treatment and we shared a romantic weekend on one of the charming San Juan Islands together. I had no idea what I was getting into.

I cried when my friends said their vows and declared that they would spend the rest of their lives together. They were the kind of couple that you believed when they said it - high school sweethearts who were so kind to one another, so thoughtful about their relationship and how they would grow together. I recently visited them and their two amazing kids.

After the wedding I stayed at a friend’s place outside the city - a cozy cabin-vibe near a lake. While my friend was at work, I picked up the guitar that was lying around. The line from my friends’ vows kept playing in my head... rest of our lives...rest of our lives... I got the call from Josh that the most recent treatment hadn’t worked, so he’d be flying to the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, MD for a novel immunotherapy trial. I would meet him there.

I cried. What kind of relationship is this? How do I even think about it? This is not an “imaging the rest of our lives together” kind of thing. But I needed something to hold onto...rest of our lives...rest of. And the song, **Rest Of**, revealed itself. It continues to guide me to this day.

[\*\*https://michalpearl.bandcamp.com/track/rest-of\*\*](https://michalpearl.bandcamp.com/track/rest-of)

# rest of

The first time we met you said you're happier than before  
That by doing so much less you are living so much more  
I want to spend the rest of, I want to spend the rest of,  
I want to spend the rest of...

You do as you say and you say as you do  
You put everything away when I am with you  
I want to spend the rest of, I want to spend the rest of,  
I want to spend the rest of...

The best that you can is more than enough  
For me to understand the depth of your love  
I want to spend the rest of, I want to spend the rest of,  
I want to spend the rest of...

Through tears and through laughter we don't need a vow  
To see our happily after is happening now  
I want to spend the rest of, I want to spend the rest of,  
I want to spend the rest of this moment with you

And maybe one day we will look back and find  
What we have created one moment at a time  
I want to spend the rest of, I want to spend the rest of,  
I want to spend the rest of this moment with you

# surrender

“SURRENDER TO UNCERTAINTY” I wrote in thick Sharpie on a light purple travel yoga mat before rolling it up and heading to my down-to-earth local studio in South Seattle. I signed up for a month pass and planned to show up every day.

The clinical trial at the NIH blessed Josh with a robust remission that allowed him to rebuild his strength and immune system. He started driving for a rideshare app and relished in the amusing, quirky, interesting and sometimes downright ridiculous stories the experience generated. One evening I was at his place and he took me to a meeting nearby with other drivers who were trying to organize with the Teamsters. As a seasoned community organizer, he loved being back in a fight for something other than beating cancer.

Often, he would arrange his rides to be able to stop by my place in the evening and stay with me while I was going to bed. I remember seeing him there next to me as my eyelids got too heavy to stay open and I free-falled into sleep as he let himself out. I wondered if that’s what death would feel like.

My purchase of the month yoga studio pass came in the wake of a challenging moment in Josh’s cancer situation. We were two years out from the first relapse since we met and his doctors were not projecting confidence in the remaining options for treatment. I had no idea how to process this, so I decided to just show up every day to a familiar practice. I didn’t know where it would take me, but I had experienced before that a yoga mat can become a surfboard in life’s choppy waters. I had few words during that whole experience and funneled all of them into the song, **Hold Your Hand**.

Everyone considered it a miracle that a last ditch standard chemotherapy put him into remission again and a maintenance dose kept him free of disease so that we could take a road trip a few months later to see friends and family in Phoenix.

**<https://michalpearl.bandcamp.com/track/hold-your-hand>**

# hold your hand

**When it's hard to meet life's demands**

**I will hold your hand**

**When it sure is different that what we had planned**

**I will hold your hand**

**When there's nothing left to understand**

**I will hold your hand**

**When it's hard to meet life's demands**

**When it sure is different that what we had planned**

**When there's nothing left to understand**

**I will hold your hand**

**Because when I hold your hand**

**When it's me and you**

**When I hold your hand**

**You're holding my hand, too**

# gratitude

At some point Josh's oncologist suggested that he keep a gratitude journal. I was vaguely aware of this at the time and never saw it until a year after he died when I brought some of his things with me on a solo retreat in a yurt on one of the islands outside of Seattle.

The journal was short lived, but he kept up the practice of sharing his gratitudes with me before bed until very close to his death, which was almost two years after his doctors suggested hospice and four years after we met. We'd lie in bed together and hold hands and share gratitudes. He'd wait until I drifted off and then left to do his night owl thing in the other room before medicating and vaping himself to sleep.

The last few months were hard and the last few days were the hardest I've ever experienced. I am so grateful that I insisted that we update his Advanced Directives before things really went south and that I had a blueprint to work from while we were in the hospital and after he died. No one wants to contemplate their own death, especially a young person. It's pretty absurd if you think about it. But it was such a gift to me to know that I could honor his wishes as best I could.

In the year after he died, I joined his family and friends in Seattle, Phoenix and Nashville to plant his remains with saplings. He wanted the people he loved to have a place to come to remember him. Each of these ceremonies were so meaningful and I got to hear new stories about this community organizer musician with a heart of gold that I fell in love with.

Josh never wanted hospice. He wanted to fight to the end. And I was still processing my shell shock a year later. Reading his gratitude journal on the floor of that yurt I was struck by how much I featured in it. I could feel his love start to surface through my pain and grief. Like Window Pane, the first song we wrote together, I wove the fabric of his words through the loom of my guitar strings into **Josh's Gratitude Journal**.

**<https://michalpearl.bandcamp.com/track/joshs-gratitude-journal>**

# josh's gratitude journal

I'm grateful for a place to stay warm quiet and secure  
For waking up feeling okay, why who could ask for more?  
I'm grateful for the rainy days, NPR, BBC news  
I'm grateful, my love, for waking up with you

I'm grateful for my family, my neighbors and my friends  
For a voice in my community, for those who always lend  
Their password to Xfinity, to Amazon, Hulu  
I'm grateful, my love, to watch funny stuff with you

I'm grateful for being home, all the people who help out  
Drive me around and get me stoned, support me through this bout  
I'm grateful I feel calm tonight and finished my to-dos  
I'm grateful, my love, for cuddling with you

I'm grateful to get through to someone when I call  
Morning coffee, daily pooping, indoor plumbing, that's not all  
I'm grateful for my oatmeal, for bananas and pizza and juice  
I'm grateful when you cook for me, love, I'm grateful for you

I'm grateful when my friends come by to hang out and play games  
Music, hugs and getting high all help with the pain  
I'm grateful for clean water, for my hat, for being a Jew  
But most of all, my love, I'm grateful for you  
Most of all, my love, I'm grateful for you  
Most of all, my love, I'm grateful for you

# love

During that first deathaversary yurt retreat, I also wrote a draft of a song called Love's Lifetime. I've never recorded it or shared it in all these years since then. It wasn't ready yet. I wasn't ready yet.

The further away I get from Josh's death, the more deeply I understand the gift of his love in my life. With August approaching this year, I felt a pull toward completion. I felt ready to finish **Love's Lifetime** and to share these five songs he inspired in me.

Even though I had moved back to Philly nearly two years ago, I still had a small box of Josh's things stored in Seattle. While I was visiting, a friend voiced that she wanted go to Golden Gardens to burn some things that belonged to her relative who had passed recently. "Oh", I said, "that's where Josh and I had our first date. I guess that's what we're doing then."

So on one of the last nights I was in town, we showed up on the beach and found all of the fire pits occupied. On that first date back in August 2013, Josh was impressed that I got us invited to join in around the fire to stay warm in the chilly late summer evening. This time, I approached a couple and asked if we could join them, adding for full disclosure, "we're here to burn things of people who've passed."

"That's why we're here, too."

We all recognized the cosmic confluence as we sorted through papers and shared stories and hoped that this fire could be a blessing for our world. We stayed until the very end and then jumped into the water. I felt lighter. I felt love.

**I'm not sure what the question is, but I know that the answer is love.**

**<https://michalpearl.bandcamp.com/track/loves-lifetime>**

# love's lifetime

We lived love's lifetime in just those  
few long years  
You made it safe to open my heart, to  
face my fears  
You always told me you loved me very  
much  
And when you'd hold me, I felt it in  
your touch

## [CHORUS]

How do I say I miss you  
Living on your memory  
How do I say sorry  
Not always kind as I could be  
How do I say thank you  
For giving me your love so pure  
How do I say I love you  
Don't need words anymore

You taught me to slow down, enjoy  
life's simple pleasures  
How to face the challenge with grace  
and measure  
You always showed me you loved me  
very much  
And when we strolled you'd find  
sweet ways to touch

You taught me the minor chords add  
depth, it's better bittersweet  
You showed me what laughter's for,  
not take life so seriously  
I will always know you loved me very  
much  
My heart continues to grow in the  
absence of your touch

Like Romeo and Juliet we know the  
ending from the start  
A life lived without regret is one lived  
with a full heart

I know for certain, you made it safe to  
open my heart  
You were not a burden, you were  
grace and measure  
I know for certain, you gave me your  
love so pure  
You were not a burden, you showed  
me what laughter's for  
I know for certain, I'll always love you  
very much.

# obituary

Surrounded by friends, family and great tunes, Joshua Phillip Watler (z"l), 35, finally kicked cancer on Tuesday August 22, 2017. With the cancer threatening to grow beyond his body to terrorize innocent people and workers' rights, Josh sacrificed his own life to save the rest of us.

This was not his first demonstration of such bravery. Josh devoted much of his adult life to empowering everyday folks to find their voice and speak truth to power. In 2006, he and Arizona ACORN led to victory the campaign to increase the state's minimum wage and establish automatic indexing, giving Arizona's lowest-wage earners an automatic, legally mandated raise every single year. As the founder and executive director of Organization United for Reform (OUR) Washington, he inspired members to take direct action against the banks at the height of the mortgage crisis, leading to the Foreclosure Fairness Act in 2011, which continues to offer Washington homeowners a path to keep their house.

Raised in Nashville, TN by Jeannie (z"l), a strong single Jewish mother of three, Josh learned humility, respect, resilience and the value of hard work. These qualities served him well not only in community organizing, but in a music career spanning 20+ years, three cities and five bands. According to one bandmate, "Josh can flat-out play guitar." He switched to hammered dulcimer in recent years, playing weekly for patients and staff at Highline Cancer Center and with his lovey of four years, Michal.

Along with his loving family, the Komisar clan, Josh is survived by countless people who love him very much, are inspired by him and whose lives are better having known him. May his memory be not only for a blessing, but a call to action to love fully, fight hard and laugh often.

# eulogy

A friend told me recently that she never felt like Josh was sick, that she never pitied him. And when I thought about this more, I realized that we don't pity the stories of avalanche survivors or that guy who sawed off his arm to get out from under a boulder. Josh thrived on hope and built his last years on each sliver of opportunity and sheer endurance. When his doctors suggested hospice a year and a half ago, Josh was offended. "Do you think the survivors of Auschwitz were asked to stop fighting and focus on their quality of life?"

And to Josh, he had a good quality of life. He gave his gratitude each night for a warm cozy home, plenty of things to play with, enough food to share with our friendlings who came by, and no evidence of leukemia until there was. He could certainly do without the pain, but he also knew that the pain made the simple pleasures more poignant.

He took his losses in stride and brought me along for the ride. When we couldn't go for hikes, we could walk up and down our block hand in hand sharing how our day went. When we couldn't perform out together, we could force anyone visiting to listen to us play. When we couldn't have dance parties in the living room, we could lay in bed holding hands and watch a movie or listen to music. Sometimes he would hold my hand tenderly and then make a fart noise with it and whisper, "I'm gay" into my ear. And he was laughing so hard I couldn't help but join him.

He flipped the script when it came to meeting with his medical team. His mission at each visit was to make the provider laugh, or at least smile. He gave them nick-names: Gins, Cass, Chaimbo, Little Potato...it goes on. Needless to say, he was a fan favorite at Highline, SCCA and UW. He hated when people called him lucky. He would correct them and say that he is fortunate. We play a part in creating good fortune by treating others with respect and creating meaningful relationships so that they're there for us when we need them.

When people told him this isn't fair, he replied by saying "it's just as fair as anything else." He'd ask "what's next" rather than "why me." And so, no, we don't pity these people who show true courage in the face of impossible situations, we wonder if we could be half as brave. And Josh inspires us to be.