

Grief Work: I'm almost ready to feel better

When I was nineteen I restrained, on an imbalanced slab of stainless-steel, the first dog I was to help euthanize. I remember his penis warm and sedate against my arm. I remember tightening my body on top of his as my coworker injected the euthanasia solution: the string of blue, artificial seed pearls circulating through the cephalic vein. I felt his heart pump then not pump, heard his agonal sigh, felt his body slump, lifted my body from his when the bladder began its steady evacuation of piss. As a veterinary technician at a municipal animal shelter, I would continue administering this process for years.

In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion observes: “One way in which grief gets hidden is that death now occurs largely offstage.” My career in shelter medicine owes its origin to the professionalization of death, a profession that hinges on the purposeful obfuscation of death, and of administering the process offstage. But what is the psychic price of the workers who labor offstage? What becomes of their trauma if no one in the audience is aware of their trauma? The poetry books I have collected and continue to collect provide me a framework for how to write about my grief frankly, but to render my experience in such a way that, as Carl Phillips says, “not merely transcribes experience but transforms it.” Reading as a writer also holds me accountable: I cannot move on with my life without facing what it is I am trying to leave behind.

Euthanasia was reserved not only for the terminally ill or elderly patient; it was elected also for the neonate kitten, the healthy pit, the pregnant opossum, the injured bat, the surrendered shepherd. My days started with a stapled list of patients I was expected to euthanize, and my days ended by being asked to euthanize the unweaned and injured animals that would come in that same day. A lot has changed in my hometown shelter practices since I have left, but what has been slower to change has been my relationship to the personal trauma and grief I've accumulated over the seven years of working in shelter medicine. I coped with

my grief by burying my grief, by avoiding feeling or assessing what it was I was feeling. Patty Seyburn challenged my way of thinking about grief by introducing humor into the first poem of her book that traverses the death of her mother: “In heaven, there are two / of everything,, in case / one breaks.” Seyburn’s conceptual levity (two bodies, two commas!) widened the lens of what I allowed into my view when I first began thinking about writing through my experience at the shelter. I encountered her as a professor when I was an undergraduate at California State University, Long Beach, and she permitted me to notice the pedantic as much as the dramatic, to record the ludic along with the tragic.

What binds writers together is our obsessions: Why do we keep returning to the same scenes, words, images? Why can’t we look away? In the poem “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus,” Mary Jo Bang addresses herself in relation to her son’s death: “To keep going on. And how can it be / That this means nothing to anyone but me now.” I wept the first time I read this poem. I wept for the speaker who wrote those lines, and for the reflection I saw of myself within those lines: a mind enraptured in the circuitous and obsessive nature of grief that leads back to what can no longer be changed. In “A Sonata for Four Hands,” Mary Jo Bang asks her deceased son, “Why are you not where you belong?” This simple question was one I asked of my patients, even as I recognized that the How and Why of their disappearance traced back to me.

I used to wonder: if I was trying to keep myself alive, why was I trying to do so through writing? I used to be unable to imagine what the story I would tell myself in order to live would look like—if I could in fact tell such a story accurately. I doubted I would even survive its telling. I do not think poetry has physically saved me, but I think that it has spiritually redeemed me. Poetry has given me comrades that beckon me from each page to emerge from the ostensible silence that grief and trauma once bound me to. Poets engaged in grief work in my library are: Brian Teare, D.A. Powell, Marie Howe, and Mark Bibbins. Their voices remind me that that which does not move through me ends up defining me.

Diana Khoi Nguyen engages with her brother's death in *Ghost Of*, whom, before dying, cut himself out of all the family photos. By using those same photos in her book, Nguyen attends to her grief on both a personal and poetic level: she fills in the gaps her brother left, echoes his formlessness with language. Her language physically embodies her grief on the page, stopping the reader's breath in the spaces left for her brother's silhouette. Out of her documentary poetics emerge formally powerful nonce forms. Diana is a poet who makes me feel less lonely—her work rewires behaviors I used to call derangements into estrangements, reroutes the pathological to obsessive. Her obsessive engagement with her grief work permits me to be selfish with mine, even when it isolates me from the present tense.

“Veterinary medicine,” a coworker once told me, “is the only medical field where one is expected to bring life into this world and expected to take life out.” While true, I permitted this thought to bloom into a kind of self-protective, self-righteous maxim that fueled my anguish and anger. At the shelter, I operated within a kind of time where life was literally and continually contested. I did not have time for anything else, least of all my own living. I was the person for whom a self-imposed sense of independence and resilience mattered. When confronted with emergency I was able to reason and respond. When a distraught animal owner cried or spewed death threats at me, I maintained my composure, networked them with outside resources, explained policy, and made protocol digestible. I did these things because what I did or did not do mattered, how I responded to emergency mattered. The work mattered. I did the work. I mattered.

In Max Ritvo's posthumous collection of poems, *The Final Voicemails*, a chronically ill speaker assesses the story of his life in “My Bathtub Pal:” “And it's not even the pain foremost, / it is the story of me in pain that is paining me.” Ritvo's speaker grieves the future trajectory of his personal history in his art practice, as well as in his social and familial presence. When I first read this poem, I was nearing the end of my career at the shelter and finishing up my long stint of undergraduate studies. It felt like I was being led to a new way of thinking about

how I scripted myself in my own life. Max was no longer able to change the story of his life on the page, but I was. I wanted to be alive and I wanted to be remembered for being a poet who celebrated life as much as I grieved for it.

The voices within the library I have collected and continue to collect teach me how to engage with my past in the present tense—they impel the responsibility of reckoning with myself and my history back onto me. Only now do I realize that my internalized sense of urgency and independence was not only incredibly false but inadequately shielded me from the trauma I sustained and would continue to sustain as a result of my work. The work. My work. I could neither protect nor heal myself from it. Thinking myself independent of my grief ceased to help me. Not only was my independent nature useless in this regard, it actively impeded my recovery. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, in *Dictee*, writes: “Why resurrect it all now. From the Past. History, The old wound. The past emotions all over again. To confess to relive the same folly. To name it now so as not to repeat history in oblivion.” I want to name the wound so that the wound will be historicized. I want the wound to scar.

Whatever omnipresent mood it was that saturated me during my time at the shelter—some combination of distress, hopelessness, confusion, guilt and anger—whatever physiological and psychological effects it had on me, I can only hope to trace its outline, locate its center, but what I hope for most is to synthesize it. The collection of poems I am working on in the Writing Program at Washington University in St. Louis attempt to do just that. Grief has become a formal and creative “problem” for me to “solve” on the page. What once dulled me now propels me. What once silenced me now emotes through me. The truth is: I loved my patients, yet I could not prevent them from dying without understanding. I write now to eclipse understanding.

Sample Bibliography

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