Brooke Davis

Catching the light: Finding words for grief with Lewis, Didion and Woolf

Abstract

*When my dad said, 'You're going to get some very bad news here, so you have to prepare yourself,' I began to understand the word grief. For most of the 20th century, grief was categorised by stage models and binaries, and described as a process that eventually ends. Philosopher Thomas Attig, however, contributes to a "new wave" of grief theory that dismisses these interpretations as reductive. He describes grief as a process of 'relearning the world of our experience'. As I go about doing just that, 'relearning the world' without my mother in it, I rely on Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Virginia Woolf's life and work, and CS Lewis's *A Grief Observed* to show me the way. I find a common thread in the feeling of being pushed to the social margins when grieving. I ask, where is the space for grief, if – as Philippe Ariès has suggested – Western culture subscribes to a 'social obligation' to strive for happiness? With the help of these three writers from three different eras, I learn that grief does not, in fact, end; and suggest that, as grieving writers, we may have access to a culturally accepted space for grief that the general population does not.*

Keywords: grief, death, writing practice

The first dead body I saw was my mother's. This wasn't as dramatic as it sounds – I was at the place where you expected to see dead bodies, and I knew it was going to happen – but it was dramatic enough for me. It was a small room, her coffin propped up in the middle, flowers strategically placed in all corners of the room. Her eyes were closed, white satin framing her body and climbing her skin. I remember thinking her wrinkles were missing. Someone else's make-up and her shirt buttoned right up to her neck and her downturned lips (I'd never seen her lips do that). Her body devoid of all the lumps and folds and lines I'd known. The mood lighting too; how it all formed some sort of grotesque retail display.

That word: *grief*. It is a word I never needed until I did, and then it wasn't enough. It had always felt so far away from me – all black veils and drawn curtains and hushed tones – and the word just sank, vaguely and without effort, into a part of the universe I wasn't interested in. And when it did catapult itself into my life, I spent days looking at it, willing myself to understand it like the inner workings of a clock.

I began writing, as we sometimes do, trying to find words for events that seem beyond them. A character appeared; a seven year-old redhead named Millie

Bird. When I let her loose on the page, she asked all the questions I didn't know how to answer.

Millie's dog Rambo - named this because of a fur colouration that made him appear bandana-clad - was her Very First Dead Thing. She found him by the side of the road on a morning when the sky seemed to be falling. Fog circled his broken shape like a ghost. His jaw and eyes were wide open, as if mid-bark. His left hind leg pointed in a direction it normally didn't. The fog lifted around them, the clouds gathered in the sky, and she wondered if he was turning into rain.

It was only when she dragged Rambo up to the house in her school bag that her mother thought to tell her how the world worked.

You see, love, he's gone to a better place, her mother shrieked at her while vacuuming the lounge room.

A better place?

What? Yes, heaven, love, haven't you heard of it? Don't they teach you anything in that bloody school? Lift your legs! It's Doggy Heaven, where there's eternal dog biscuits and they can poop wherever they please. Okay, legs down. I said, legs down! And they poop, I don't know, dog biscuits, so all they do is poop and eat dog biscuits, and run around and eat the other dogs' poop. Which are actually dog biscuits.

Millie took a moment. *Why would they waste time here, then?*

What? Well, they, um, have to earn it. They have to stay here until they get voted over to a better place. Like Doggy Survivor.

So, is Rambo on another planet?

Well, yes. Sort of. I mean - you really haven't heard of heaven? How God sits up in the clouds and Satan's all underground and everything?

Can I get to Rambo's new planet?

Her mother switched off the vacuum cleaner, and looked squarely at Millie. *Only if you have a spaceship. Do you have a spaceship?*

Millie looked at her feet. *No.*

Well, you can't get to Rambo's new planet then.

The next day, Millie discovered that Rambo was most definitely not on a new planet and was, in fact, in their backyard. Buried half-heartedly under the Sunday Telegraph, Millie carefully lifted the newspaper and saw Rambo, but not-Rambo; a Rambo shrunk and eaten and wasting away. She snuck out every night from then on, to be with him while his body went from something into nothing.

The old man crossing the road had been her Second Dead Thing. After the car hit him, she watched him fly through the air and thought she saw him smile. His hat landed atop the stop sign and his walking stick danced around the lamppost. And then it had been his body, cracking against the curb. She pushed her way through all the legs and exclamation points to kneel beside his face. She looked deeply into his eyes. He looked back at her like he was only a drawing. She ran her fingers over his wrinkles and wondered what each one had been used for.

She was then lifted off him and told to cover her eyes, *Because there are some things children shouldn't see*. And as she wandered home the long way, she thought it might be time to ask her dad about People Heaven.

You see, squirt, there's Heaven, and then there's Hell. Hell is where they send all the bad people, like criminals and con-artists and parking inspectors. And Heaven is where they send all the good people, like you and me and that nice blonde from Masterchef.

What happens when you get there?

In Heaven, you hang out with God and Jimi Hendrix, and you get to eat donuts whenever you want. In Hell, you have to. Uh. Do the Macarena. Forever. To that Grease Megamix.

Where do you go if you're good and bad?

What? I don't know. Ikea?

Will you help me make a spaceship, Dad?

Hang on, squirt, can we finish this next ad-break?

It was then she noticed that everything was dying around her. Bugs and oranges and Christmas trees and houses and mailboxes and train rides and textas and candles and old people and young people and people in between. But before she had time to think about it, she was adding number three to her Book of Dead Things. In extra-big, extra-red, extra-bold letters: *My dad*.

Like Millie, and a lot of Western children I suspect, my Very First Dead Thing was Bree, our family dog. I was away at the time and never saw her body. I have never felt connected to that undulation in the ground beyond Nan's lemon tree. There was Francesca, a loud and toothy friend I had when we lived in America. We were back in Australia when my parents led me into my room and closed the door behind them. *Her heart stopped*, Mum said, and cried. I waited until they left the room and cried too. I don't know where I learnt to be ashamed to cry. In my journal, I wrote, *When someone dies, it feels like you have pins and needles*. I have no idea what this means, and I doubt I did then either, but I do remember trying to manufacture sadness; I do remember the guilt for not feeling enough. I was nine, I already had a new best friend, and Francesca had become this vague blob in my head that didn't mean anything anymore.

I read *Bridge To Terabithia* (Paterson 1987) over and over again, and cried every time Leslie died. I'm not sure why I so enthusiastically subjected myself to this feeling. As I grew older, I cried watching the news of people dying in far-away places. Three of my grandparents died, in that inevitable way the elderly must. I cried at their funerals, and at other times, behind doors and under covers, but I was crying for them, and not for me; crying at old age, at the way life is, at how things don't stay the same.

There was distance, always, between me and all this grief: by species, geography, age, comprehension, by medium of representation.

But then, on 27 January 2006, my Mum on the front page of the newspaper for all the wrong reasons: Freak Gate Crush Death in capitals. Letters so thick, so black; death so close it could have been me.

That word: grief. It is a word that has been forced on me, but it is a word that I have chosen to bring closer to me. Robert Neimeyer, with a nod to Freud, says that, for most of the twentieth century in Western culture, bereavement was understood 'as a process of "letting go" of one's attachment to the deceased person, "moving on" with one's life, and gradually "recovering" from the depression occasioned by the loss so as to permit a return to "normal" behaviour' (Neimeyer 2002: 2). Here, grief is an experience that you endure, and then it ends. As the literature on loss grew, he says, 'this modern conceptualisation of grief was gradually expanded to detail...both "complicated" and "uncomplicated" bereavement, and the presumed stages through which it would be "resolved" ' (2). These stages, or stage models as they are commonly referred to in the literature – this idea that grief could be universally experienced as unfolding in a specific sequence of phases – was popularised in the 1970s by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's (2003: 9) work on death and dying. She described Denial and Isolation, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance as the emotions one experienced when diagnosed with a terminal illness. Models like this 'began to dominate the Western cultural perspective on bereavement' (Hagman 2002: 16) because, Neimeyer says, they were 'associated with recovery' from grief, or closure on grief, offering 'an apparently authoritative road map through the turbulent emotional terrain' of grief (Neimeyer 2002: 2-3). This way of looking at grief 'became accepted as nothing short of the truth' (Hagman 2002: 16).

It makes sense to me, to want to classify grief in this neat way, because don't we like order? Isn't that why we get so much pleasure out of narrative? These stage models remind me of a narrative arc: beginning, middle, end; act one, act two, act three; set-up, confrontation, resolution. We do like to put labels on things, to shelve them in easily accessible containers, to put them in handy little books priced \$19.95. It's about comfort. More specifically, perhaps, it's about control.

But as we move further into the 21st century, we start to see a backlash against this neat compartmentalisation of the experience of grief; the emergence of a "new wave", one that embraces the disorder of grief. Pat Jalland, for example, author of *Australian Ways of Death: Changing Ways of Grieving in 20th Century Australia*, says that psychologists have 'modified this early theoretical "stage" model', arguing that 'the final stage of "acceptance" of death had often been interpreted too rigidly to mean "closure" or detachment from the dead person' (Jalland 2005: 355). The philosopher Thomas Attig, another contributor to this "new wave", says, 'Grieving is nearly always complicated – "nearly" because sometimes we grieve moderately for someone who was not particularly close...nearly "always" because, ordinarily, grieving involves nothing less than relearning the world of our experience' (Attig 2002: 33). And this is where I caught the light: at 'relearning the world'.

‘Relearning the world’ began for me at the Ho Chi Minh airport in Vietnam, when my Dad’s voice said over the phone, ‘Now you’re going to get some very bad news here, so you have to prepare yourself.’ It was my Dad’s voice, but it wasn’t my Dad, because he wasn’t supposed to say those kinds of things to me, and his voice had never sounded like that. And then the blur that followed: the lady at the check-in counter who said, so very bluntly, ‘What is the matter with you?’ And my discovery that, despite all my best efforts and expectations, I couldn’t say, ‘I just found out my Mum died,’ without crying. The man sitting next to me on the plane who said, ‘Have a cold do you?’ The CNN ad that kept appearing on the screen, ‘By the time this plane lands, the world will be a different place.’ The little boy who gave his Mum hell on the plane ride, and how much it startled me to realise that from now on I will notice mothers and their children. The circle of family that I fell into when I arrived at Melbourne airport; how seeing them made it suddenly very real. The front page of the newspaper with a picture of my Mum’s car and that horrifying white sheet next to it. Waking up that first morning without Mum and having to remember, again. The physicality of it, how my body was very much involved in this, how it was not just something of the mind. Having breakfast every morning with my brothers on the verandah of my mother’s house, taking time to share our dreams or nightmares, to cry, to laugh, to be silent together; I believe this is what saved me. Writing messages to Mum in the sand at the beach with my brothers on her birthday. We wrote them in really big letters, out of some sort of hope or instinct. How I constantly felt like someone else was speaking out of my mouth. How we didn’t know who to ask about getting rid of the pollen stains on the carpet. Finding a loving, adjective-heavy letter from me in amongst Mum’s things; the great, sobbing relief and the words I said over and over: ‘she knew.’ How the funeral came and went, and the flowers stopped coming, the casseroles stopped appearing, and no one visited anymore, and the quietness of it all was so loud.

Later, I would come across a line from Yeats in an Irish museum that would remind me of these early moments: ‘All is changed, changed utterly: a terrible beauty is born.’

In the beginning my grief made the world a television screen. It came upon me suddenly, this feeling that I was outside of everything and looking in; that I was somehow invisible to the people in the television. It gave me a most curious feeling of infallibility, coupled with an utter vulnerability. The glass eventually – shattered? Smashed? Broke? There was nothing that dramatic, that clear; nothing that metaphorically neat. It was more like a fading away; a barely perceptible slinking back onto the other side of the screen.

French philosopher Georges Bataille might call this a moment of ‘disintoxication’: ‘a brief awakening from the “projects” of love and work that function...like “narcotics” to help us repress the consciousness of our own mortality’ (Bataille 1988: ii). Virginia Woolf would say that I had experienced a ‘moment of being’ (cited in Schulkind 1990: 21). Where the individual is ordinarily cut off from “reality”, she says, there are ‘rare moments [when one] receives a shock’ (cited in Schulkind 1990: 21). Lynn Davidman in *Motherloss* describes experiences such as these as a ‘biographical disruption’ (Davidman 2000: 7), a break in the middle of a life story, causing someone’s narrative to depart from the traditional, linear life story most other people can tell, or, perhaps, for whatever reason (film, technology, hospitals, Western comforts), most people *expect*. My life was not to follow the linear structure that I assumed it would; the one in which I was married when I was supposed to, I got that book deal when I was supposed to, and people died when they were supposed to. My Mum’s death signalled a new Beginning, a new Middle, a new End. Like ‘relearning the world’, these phrases – disintoxication, a moment of

being, a biographical disruption – felt closer to my experience of grief than the word grief ever could.

There were other things to notice: things I could do, and couldn't do. There wasn't anyone who specifically informed me of these social limitations, it was just instinct. I wasn't supposed to cry in the middle of the supermarket. I wasn't supposed to say that my Mum had *died* or was *dead*; I had to use skeletal phrases like *passed away* or *gone*. It seemed incredibly at odds with the way my Mum's death was so brutally and succinctly worded in the newspaper – Freak Gate Crush Death – as if there were different rules for the words you say and the words you write. I wasn't supposed to enjoy driving around in the car Mum died in. I loved, and still love, how close she was when I drove it. I had to park Mum's car at least two blocks away whenever I was visiting friends and family, because, as a family friend informed me, 'People don't want to see the dent.' The anger that rose in me at this; I wanted to scream, 'But I'm her daughter, and if I have to see this dent written on everything that's ever existed and will exist, then so do all of you.' I wasn't supposed to request a copy of the autopsy, and pore over it. I wasn't supposed to ask to talk to the police about what happened. When the police officer showed me the statement from the man who had tried to save my Mum, and photos of the scene of the accident, he said, with a kind of wide-eyed breathlessness, 'I haven't included the other photos.' I realised two things at this point: that photos of my Mum, dead, existed somewhere; and that this man was frightened I would ask to see them. I could see all these Not-Supposed-To's on the faces of people around me; people who were overwhelmingly kind and supportive, but who told me with a flicker of their eyes that there were things I simply could not do.

Jules Renard said, 'It is when faced with death that we turn most bookish,' (1925, cited in Barnes 2009: 38) and, accordingly, it was at this point that I endeavoured to get answers the only way I knew how. I wanted to know that other people had blazed the trail before me. I longed for the shared experience. I dismissed the psychoanalytical books, the sociological, the psychological, the self-help (I would, of course, dissect them all in detail later) and made a beeline for the area in which I felt most comfortable: the books by people who I knew could write. There were three writers in particular whom I relied on at this time, and it is these three writers from three different time periods – Virginia Woolf, CS Lewis and Joan Didion – from whom I have learnt and continue to learn so very much.

Published in 1961, CS Lewis's *A Grief Observed* consists of notes from a journal he kept while grieving for the loss of his wife. It reads like a grief chart of sorts, plotting the process of his grief over an unspecified period of time in an emotional, honest and lyrical account. From Lewis, I quickly learnt that this Television-Screen Grief and Not-Supposed-To Grief – this feeling of being disconnected, of being on the margins, of being marginalised more specifically – is not unusual in the bereaved. The title itself, *A Grief Observed*, suggests a different version of this Television-Screen Grief, as if he is outside of his own grief, and bearing witness to it. He writes of an 'invisible blanket between the world and me' (Lewis 1961: 5), that eventually lifts without a 'sudden, striking, and emotional transition', but rather 'like the warming of a room or the coming of daylight. When you first notice them they have already been going on for some time' (52). Lewis also writes about the unexpected feeling of being marginalised, socially, by his grief.

An odd by-product of my loss is that I'm aware of being an embarrassment to everyone I meet. At work, at the club, in the street, I see people, as they approach me, trying to make up

their minds whether they'll 'say something about it' or not. I hate if they do, and if they don't. (Lewis 1961: 11)

And later, 'Perhaps the bereaved ought to be isolated in special settlements like lepers' (Lewis 1961: 11). Poet and theorist Sandra Gilbert, author of *Wrongful Death* (1997), a memoir detailing the death of her husband in a botched operation, writes of her delight in stumbling across this passage by Lewis, as she, too, felt a 'strangely muffled sense of *wrongness*', a 'mystifying oppression' (Gilbert 2007: xx), a 'persistent, barely conscious feeling that...in [her] sorrow [she] represented a serious social problem to everyone except [her] circle of intimates' (xix). This 'set of social and intellectual commandments "forbidding mourning"', Gilbert says, was the driving force in her desire to write about it, 'to assert [her] grief, to name and claim [her] sorrow' (xx).

The most intriguing thing about this is the gap that begins to appear between that written on the page and that in the social realm. Gilbert talks of a 'new, multifaceted attention to death and bereavement' (xxi) taking place across fiction and non-fiction – and it is certainly my experience that there is no shortage of books on the subject of grief. Yet, there is still this 'persistent, barely conscious feeling' experienced by the bereaved that they 'ought to be isolated in special settlements'. Western culture does not appear to have difficulty in digesting mediated representations of grief, but it is when you *are* the representation of grief in a social setting that the expression of grief becomes problematic. I can write it, but I cannot speak it. This brings new meaning to Ariès' claim that, in contemporary Western culture, there is a 'social obligation' not to be sad, and to only be happy (Ariès 1974: 94) ; perhaps this 'obligation' does not apply to the written word. Perhaps, as writers, we have access to a cultural space that the general population does not.

Joan Didion also writes about this 'set of social and intellectual commandments' in *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), a memoir that describes the year in which her daughter fell severely ill and her husband died of a heart attack (Didion's daughter would also die after the book was published; Didion, however, refused to revise the book). When she arrives at the funeral home to prepare for her husband's funeral, she is 'so determined to avoid any inappropriate response (tears, anger, helpless laughter at the Oz-like hush) that [she] had shut down all response' (Didion 2005: 18). It would be considered culturally and socially appropriate to cry within these walls of the funeral home – it would even be something the staff might expect – but Didion is so unsure of her new position within the culture, and so acutely aware of these 'commandments', these unspoken rules, that she is reluctant to let herself react at all. Later, when Didion turns to books to dissect her newfound experience of grieving – because 'in time of trouble, [she] had been trained since childhood, read, learn...go to the literature' (2005: 44) – she finds a scientific book that documents the most frequent immediate responses to death: ' "Subjectively," ' she quotes, "survivors may feel like they are wrapped in a cocoon or blanket; to others they may look as though they are holding up well"' (46). She refers to a comment that a paramedic had made about her at the time of her husband's death: 'Here, then, we had the "pretty cool customer" effect' (46).

Didion's memoir exemplifies this 'cool customer effect', in its analytically distant and emotionally restrained writing style, and in the way the work often reads like a literature review. It is obvious that Didion has read widely on grief, hospitals, memory, autopsies, and death. Like me, was she interested in those who had blazed the trail before her? Or is there something more to this: the idea of information as control? Didion is also careful to note dates, days and

times for every movement, thought and gesture. This is in contrast to Lewis's version, where we are very much lost and floundering in the temporal sense, not unlike the feeling of grief itself. Why does Didion see this to be important? Perhaps if she can assign a narrative arc to her experience, she can create some sort of order out of this unsettling disorder.

The intersection between the title of the book and her approach to the grieving experience is, however, perhaps the most revealing part of Didion's memoir. Magical thinking refers to the 'belief (especially characteristic of early childhood and of many mental illnesses) that thoughts, wishes, or special but causally irrelevant actions can cause or influence external events' (Oxford University Press 2009). We see these moments of magical thinking peppered throughout her rational thoughts, such as the time she refuses to donate her husband's clothing and organs because 'how could he come back if they took his organs, how could he come back if he had no shoes?' (Didion 2005: 41) Here is an irrational, unscientific and childlike idea coupled with an analytically detached style, the instinct to intellectualise, and the need to control. It was at this precise intersection that I learnt about the difficulty in labelling, controlling, or even defining grief; that grief, sometimes, cannot be intellectualised.

The writing of the memoir, for Didion, is very much a process of 'relearning the world':

This is my attempt to make sense of the ... weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I had ever had about death, about illness, about probability and luck, about good fortune and bad, about marriage and children and memory, about grief, about the ways in which people do and do not deal with the fact that life ends, about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself. (Didion 2005: 6-7)

Part of my own process of 'relearning the world' is writing my own grief, like Lewis and Didion, but in a fictional form. Virginia Woolf says that this is something she did in *To the Lighthouse* (1927). In *A Sketch of the Past*, a memoir by Woolf, she describes *To the Lighthouse* as an elegy for the mother she lost when she was just thirteen years old. 'I did what psychoanalysts do for their patients,' she writes. 'I expressed some very long and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest' (Woolf 1990: 90). But just how much did she "lay to rest"? Literary critics, such as Mark Spilka in *Virginia Woolf's Quarrel With Grieving* (1980), have long claimed that Woolf's work and life was indicative of her constant state of pathological (or "complicated") grieving, and that the quality of her life and work was diminished because of her inability to grieve in an "uncomplicated" (or "normal") way. Tammy Clewell, however, in *A Consolation Refused: Virginia Woolf, the Great War, and Modernist Mourning* (2004), says that this way of reading Woolf's fiction, 'as a case history of neurotic grief' (Clewell 2004: 198), has now ended. Critics now say that her unresolved grief was not the cause of her illness – that she was in fact an undiagnosed manic depressive – and that her work contributed to a 'positive reinvention of mourning' and a redefinition of the grieving process as an ongoing experience (198). 'Her textual practice of endless mourning,' Clewell writes, 'compels us to refuse consolation, sustain grief, and accept the responsibility of the difficult task of remembering' (199). Either way you look at it, her life and work demonstrate the sheer complexity of grief work (Attig's notion that 'all grief is nearly always complicated'), and that grief does not end. Most important of all, however, is that Woolf used the writing of fiction as a space to grieve.

Clewell also posits that it is precisely this ‘persistent attachment to the lost object’ that represents this approach to grief ‘not as a debilitating form of melancholia, but as a creative and productive engagement with the past’ (Clewell 2009: 7). Woolf, Clewell says, recognised that her ‘novels might step in and provide a kind of shared mourning practice ... for a culture bereft of viable expressions of grief ... by creating a social space and shared language for grief’ (2009: 13).

What does this all mean for me, as a grieving subject, writing a novel about grief? That I am “allowed” to keep my Mum close and ‘sustain grief’? That this may even help my creative practice (is this the ‘terrible beauty’ that Yeats was talking about)? That I can use the writing of a novel as a space to grieve at a time when social expectations make these spaces difficult to find? Perhaps, but there is something more to this than just my own grief. Louise DeSalvo says:

Woolf needed an audience to listen to the testimony she made about her life, to witness and validate the meaning she had made of her experience, to let her know that she was not alone. Only with an audience, Woolf believed, can we transcend the limits of the self, can we understand our life’s true meaning. As Maya Angelou has said, through writing, the “I” becomes “we”. (DeSalvo 1999: 209)

As I write this novel, I become increasingly aware that it is, like Clewell says, ‘creating a social space and shared language for grief’. Not, of course, in the way Clewell intends when referring to Woolf – as a revolutionary figure in the field of grief in Western culture – but in a much humbler way that is about me, and the connections I am able to make with other people. In social settings, the very idea of my novel feels like a matchstick in my hand, and, once struck, flares up – colourfully and warmly. A person will begin a conversation with the ritual question, ‘What is your novel about?’ and end up relaying long, teary stories about their own experiences of grief. We begin as two “I”s, and then become “we”. It seems we want to speak grief, but we don’t know how. Or perhaps we don’t know when. It is in this way that my novel works as a shared site for the expression of grief, and as a way of making connections between that written on the page and that spoken in social settings. In writing this novel, I’ve come to realise how speakable grief really is; that, perhaps, all I needed to do was speak it in the first place.

Agatha Pantha is another character who enabled me to speak my grief, and is a part of my novel *Lost and Found*. If Millie tries to find out the answers for me, Agatha does not want to know the questions exist. An eighty-two year-old woman, she has not left her house since the day her husband died, seven years ago.

Agatha’s first clue that her husband was ageing came when she saw the hair in his ears, waving in the wind like the hands of drowning men. She watched on helplessly as hair began to disappear from one place on his body and reappear in others. Second was a stroke that made him lose feeling in his left leg. He had to hold onto his thigh and pull it alongside him when he walked.

Hop, draaaaag. Hop, draaaaag. Hop, draaaaag.

Third was the plastic catheter he took to keeping on his bedside table at night-time. Consequently, Agatha’s mornings began

with the soft splash of her husband's urine rising up the sides of it as he dragged himself to the toilet.

Hop, splash, draaag, splash. Hop, splash, draaag, splash.

One morning she realised the orange juice made the same noise as she carried it to the breakfast table. She couldn't bring herself to buy it again.

Fourth was the development of a fat deposit that reached from his chin to the bottom of his neck like a pelican gullet. Every word he uttered was punctuated by this soundless tremble of flesh, crescendo-ing out from his face the louder he spoke. It wobbled at her day and night, as permanent a fixture in her life as the sun. And, like the sun, she could only just bare to squint at it.

It was around this point that she stopped talking to her husband. She grunted, sighed, nodded, pointed, elbowed, but never spoke. It wasn't malicious. She just had nothing left to say. They had covered their likes, dislikes, differences, similarities, height, weight, shoe size. They had spent forty-five years having arguments, sharing opinions, discussing just how one might go about winning The Price Is Right. She could now, with a startling accuracy, predict what he would say, think, do, wear and eat. What she did have left to say – like *get it yourself* – was easily achievable by gesture. So they ate together, slept together, sat together, breathed together – but had never been further apart.

When her husband died, neighbours suddenly dropped by unannounced, appearing on her doorstep from behind huge, hulking casseroles full of dead animals, and pity. Their children carried slabs of coconut slice and looked put out. They all set up camp in her kitchen, like they were running a political campaign. They appeared in her hallway, her bedroom, and her bathroom, as if they could walk through walls, cocking their heads to one side, and clawing at her. They talked to her with their face only centimetres away from hers. *I understand*, they all said, because Susie/Fido/Henry died last year/last week/ten years ago because he/it/she had lung cancer/was hit by a car/wasn't really dead but was dead to her because he was living with a twenty-six year-old on the Gold Coast.

Why are there twenty-seven bunches of flowers in my sunroom? she asked on one of her frequent wanderings from room to room. No one answered. The flowers were elaborate explosions of things, like bouquets of fireworks, frozen in time.

Phillip Stone from number six gave her a cup of tea she didn't want and placed a hand on her shoulder. He had never touched her before.

Let it out, Agatha, he said.

The heat of his palm made her skin prickle unpleasantly beneath the fabric of her blouse. *I don't have a cat, if that's what you're getting at*, she replied.

You're in denial, Kim Lim from number thirty-two said. Their noses almost touched. *Don't be afraid to express your sadness*, she added. Agatha smelt coconut slice on her breath.

She caught Frances Pollop from number 113 in her wardrobe, wielding a tape gun in the air like a chainsaw. Ron's clothes exploded out of boxes all over the floor. Agatha and Frances locked eyes. The tape gun wobbled a little above Frances's head. After a good full minute, Agatha turned and walked out, closing the bedroom door behind her.

And then, just as suddenly, they all vanished. They left behind crock-pots, strange smells, and the loudness of silence. Through the window, Agatha watched them walk out of her gate, across the street and down the road to their houses. The lights in their windows were like pupils. Their mailboxes like periscopes. Even the flowers in their front yards seemed to be gathered around in a circle, whispering to each other.

She left the lights off. The boxes of her husband's clothes had been pushed flush against the wall in the hallway. Even in the darkness, she could see SALVOS written on each one in black texta. Each letter had been traced and re-traced over and over. Sticky-tape was wrapped ferociously around the centre of each box.

The phone rang in the kitchen. Her answering machine clicked on. *You've reached Agatha Pantha*, it said, in someone else's voice. *Please leave a message*. The absence of his name felt like falling off a cliff.

Agatha? another voice said. *Are you there?*

She didn't know the answer to that.

Agatha stood in her bedroom and stared at her husband's slippers. It was what she did now, just walked around and stood in rooms. She felt it then, something trying to clamber its way out of her throat. Agatha held onto the bedpost and swallowed over and over again until it went away. *It's all this talk*, she said to her husband's slippers. *They're talking me into it*.

She sat on the bed and cupped her knees with her hands. *How do you get old without letting sadness become everything?* Her mother had been young once, with her easy limbs and pretty fingers, but then she had saddened, and shrunk. The ends of her sentences began to tremble, and she seemed to be always holding her breath.

Agatha's relatives had called this *grief*. They didn't say the word out loud, but mouthed it, as if it was blasphemy. Agatha, a fully grown and married woman at this point, opinions of her own beginning to gather steam in her head, thought the word vague. Cartoonish. Most of all, she thought her mother's state was something you could avoid, like side-stepping a puddle on the street.

At the time, Agatha hadn't realised she was looking into the future. That her mother was her, that soon Agatha would be

her. Wasn't evolution about being better than your mother? Agatha did not feel better than her mother. She could see her mother in her now, in her spotted hands, in the Death Lines that marked her face, in the varicose veins running up her legs like tree roots. She felt this sickening inevitability about the whole thing. Like to become her mother was the meaning of everything.

So Agatha stood in the kitchen and opened the fridge. Light flooded the room. Arms of meatloaf and finger sandwiches and pink cupcakes topped with nipple cherries lined the shelves. One by one, she removed all the casseroles. She stormed them out of her house, and upended them on the footpath. Chicken stock and carrot and gravy and onion and hunks of beef splashed satisfyingly on her shins. She gathered up a load of lamingtons in her arms and launched them from her doorway. They landed in her rosebushes, on the windscreens of parked cars, at the foot of nearby mailboxes. She hurled a three-tiered sponge cake over her head like a soccer throw-in. It separated in the air, and red jam splattered thick on her driveway. She lined the sandwiches up along the top of her small brick fence. With both arms out, she walked the length of it, feeling the sandwiches crush under her feet. Slices of cucumber squirted out the sides.

She washed the Tupperware, the casserole dishes, and the old ice-cream buckets, the water in the sink rising high as she thrashed about. She dried them with violent flourishes. And then she stacked them, one on top of the other, in her driveway. There was a sadness to the soft sway of it that Agatha tried to ignore.

She wrote a cardboard sign to place beside it. THANKYOU FOR YOUR KINDNESS, it read, in big, dark letters. She traced and re-traced the letters. BUT I DO NOT REQUIRE IT.

She added, in smaller letters: Also, I Don't Care For Coconut.

She stood on her doorstep and blinked through the sweat on her eyelids. She ate a potato bake straight from a pyrex dish with her fingers, and surveyed what she had done. Was it art? Or was it war? She had never understood either, but as she watched the river of food in the gutter flow down the street, she thought perhaps it might be both.

The lights from the homes around her flicked on and off, like warning signals. She pushed a fistful of potato and cheese into her mouth. She sensed the street tensing. *I'm expressing my sadness, Kim Lim!* she yelled into the night, flecks of potato bake flying. She slammed the front door behind her, and locked it. She locked the back door. She locked the windows. She closed all the curtains. *I'm turning the television on now!* she yelled, and she did, shadows skitting all over the walls. She turned the volume up as high as it could go. White noise filled the room. She dragged a chair to the front window and sat down, leaning forward. She pulled back the curtain so she could see out into the street. *Ksssshhhh*, said the television in

the background. The sun was coming up. *I can't wait to see their faces!* she yelled. Yelling seemed to help.

That word: *grief*. In bringing it closer to me – trying to catch the light with it – I have found the word is not enough. But there are other words, always. Relearning the world. A moment of being. Disintoxication. A biographical disruption. Complicated. Uncomplicated. An invisible blanket. A television screen. A cocoon. Individual. Shared. Never-never-ending.

Nearing the end of his memoir, Lewis finds the word ‘sorrow’ to be appropriate when talking about the endlessness of his grief:

I thought I could describe a state; make a map of sorrow. Sorrow, however, turns out to be not a state but a process. It needs not a map but a history, and if I don't stop writing that history at some quite arbitrary point, there's no reason why I should ever stop. There is something new to be chronicled every day. (Lewis 1961: 50)

Grief is not neat like a narrative arc. It does not end; it is not “resolved”. It does not follow a checklist of emotions from beginning to end. It is not one thing, or the other thing; it is lots of things. And to say that binaries and stage models are reductive approaches to the grief process is not new; there is, in fact, an entire body of theory devoted to this very notion. But the process of grief is new to me, and it is new to me every day. Every day I learn something about grief, from myself, from my writing, from others, from everything around me. In Lewis's emotional and lyrical account, I learnt that he, too, felt socially marginalised; that he, too, felt disconnected from a world he once knew. And to experience this kind of connection with a devout Christian man, living in England in an historical period removed from my own, says something profound about the notion of grief; that, despite all I have said, there is an underlying universality to its experience. In Didion's analytical and emotionally restrained memoir I recognised a shared instinct and need to intellectualise the process of grieving. In the study of Woolf I began to understand grief as an ongoing experience – as such I was able to relieve myself of the pressure to “get over it” – and I learnt how the writing of fiction could be used as a space to grieve. From all three, I learnt about the complexity, individuality *and* universality of grief; that in feeling marginalised, I was actually enduring a shared experience; that, perhaps, in a culture that puts limits on the spaces for grief, I am lucky to feel comfortable with the blank page. There are lines drawn on the air between us, these three writers and I.

There is no neat closure; it does not end. As I go about ‘relearning the world of [my] experience’, driving my Mum's car around with the dent in the side, chronicling the adventures of Agatha and Millie, I will move back and forth and up and down and over and sideways through different stages of grief for as long as I'm allowed to be here. Like Woolf, Lewis and Didion, I am beginning to understand that grief is now, simply, a part of everything I do, everything I say, everything I write. Everything I am.

Works cited

Ariès, P 1974 *Western attitudes toward death: From the Middle Ages to the present*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, London return to text

Attig, T 2002 ‘Relearning the world: making and finding meanings’, in R Neimeyer (ed), *Meaning reconstruction and the experience of loss*, American Psychological Association,

Washington DC: 33-53 return to text

Barnes, J 2009 *Nothing To Be Frightened Of*, Vintage Books, London return to text

Bataille, G 1988 *Inner Experience*, State University of New York Press, Albany NY return to text

Clewell, T 2004 'A consolation refused: Virginia Woolf, the great war, and modernist mourning', *Modern Fiction Studies* 50: 197-223 return to text

Clewell, T 2009 *Mourning, Modernism, Postmodernism*, Palgrave Macmillan, London return to text

Davidman, L 2000 *Motherloss*, University of California Press, Los Angeles return to text

DeSalvo, L 1999 *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives*, The Women's Press, London return to text

Didion, J 2005 *The year of magical thinking*, Harper Perennial, London return to text

Gilbert, S 1997 *Wrongful death: A memoir*, WW Norton, New York return to text

Gilbert, S 2007 *Death's door: Modern dying and the ways we grieve*, WW Norton, New York return to text

Hagman, G 2002 'Beyond decathexis: Toward a new psychoanalytic understanding and treatment of mourning', in R. Neimeyer (ed), *Meaning reconstruction and the experience of loss*, American Psychological Association, Washington DC: 13-31 return to text

Jalland, P 2005 *Australian Ways of Death: Changing Ways of Grieving in 20th Century Australia*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney return to text

Kübler-Ross, E 2003 *On death and dying*, Scribner, New York return to text

Lewis, CS 1961 *A grief observed*, Faber and Faber, London return to text

Lindemann, E 1944 'The symptomatology and management of acute grief', *American journal of psychiatry* 10: 141-48

Neimeyer, R (ed) 2002 *Meaning reconstruction and the experience of loss*, American Psychological Association, Washington DC return to text

Oxford University Press 2009 *Oxford English dictionary* [online], available at: <http://dictionary.oed.com.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/entrance.dtl> (accessed 25 September 2009) return to text

Paterson, K 1987 *Bridge to Terabithia*, Harper Trophy, New York return to text

Schulkind, J 1990 *Virginia Woolf: Moments of Being* 2nd edn, Grafton Books, London return to text

Spilka, M 1980 *Virginia Woolf's quarrel with grieving*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln NA return to text

Woolf, V 1927 *To the lighthouse*, Penguin, London return to text

Woolf, V 1990 [1939] 'A sketch of the past', in J Schulkind (ed) *Virginia Woolf: Moments of Being*, Grafton Books, London: 72-173 return to text

Brooke Davis has worked as a travel writer, editor, and bookseller. She completed her Honours degree at the University of Canberra, winning the Allen & Unwin Prize for Prose Fiction, the Verandah Prose Prize, and the University Medal. Currently, she teaches short fiction at Curtin University of

Technology in WA, where she is completing her DCA (Creative Writing). During her time there, she has received the 2009 Bobbie Cullen Memorial Award for Women Writers, the 2009 AAWP Prize for Best Postgraduate Paper, and the 2011 Postgraduate Queensland Writing Prize. She is writing a novel titled Lost & Found.

TEXT

Vol 16 No 2 October 2012

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

Editors: Nigel Krauth, Kevin Brophy & Enza Gandolfo

text@textjournal.com.au