University of Sydney

Bernadette Brennan

Frameworks of grief: Narrative as an act of healing in contemporary memoir

Abstract
In his recent review of Joan Didion's Blue Nights *(2011), critic and writer Andrew Riemer admitted to feeling uneasy. While acknowledging that many readers would respond differently, he noted that reading about Didion's grief over the loss of her daughter made him feel 'like an intruder into very private sorrow'. Riemer questioned the ethics of writing about the death of a child for publication. Asserting that grief was essentially mute, he argued that Didion should have stayed silent in the face of her extraordinary losses. At a time when memoirs about bereavement and loss are enjoying unprecedented popularity, Riemer's suggestions raise important issues for writers and readers of memoir. In this article I offer close readings of two recent memoirs of bereavement, Virginia Lloyd's* The Young Widow's Book of Home Improvement *(2008a) and Maggie MacKellar's* When it Rains *(2010), in order to explore some of the narrative strategies at work and to suggest that it is the very act of writing, specifically of crafting and shaping a narrative for publication, that enacts healing.*
Keywords: memoir, grief, silence, healing

> As controversial as any evidence of shaping may be in a trauma text … part of what we must call healing lies in the assertion of creativity. The ability to write beyond the silencing meted out by trauma.
> – Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography* (2001)

In his recent review of Joan Didion's *Blue Nights* (2011), critic and writer Andrew Riemer admitted to feeling uneasy (Riemer 2011). While acknowledging that many readers would respond differently, he noted that reading about Didion's grief over the loss of her daughter – and earlier in *The Year of Magical Thinking* her husband – made him feel 'like an intruder into very private sorrow'. Riemer applauded Didion's courage. He appreciated that the act of writing about Quintana's and John's deaths may have been cathartic for her but ultimately he asserted: 'grief is essentially mute. Didion should have heeded Wittgenstein's advice to stay silent about those things that words cannot adequately capture' (Wittgenstein 2001: 33). At a time when memoir – particularly memoirs that relate experiences of bereavement, loss and trauma – is enjoying unprecedented popularity, Riemer's stance and conclusion warrant

interrogation. Should authors remain silent in the face of grief? Should private sorrow remain always private? Is there really no way language can be employed to articulate the experience of grief? And a further consideration, raised by Julian Barnes' review of Joyce Carol Oates' *A Widow's Story*, is whether 'autobiographical accounts of grief are unfalsifiable, and therefore unreviewable by any normal criteria' (Barnes 2011). In this article I want to tease out some possible answers to these questions through close readings of two recent memoirs of bereavement, Virginia Lloyd's *The Young Widow's Book of Home Improvement* (2008a) and Maggie MacKellar's *When it Rains* (2010). In so doing I seek to demonstrate not only that it is possible to analyse critically autobiographical accounts of grief but also, through an examination of various textual strategies at play, to show how and why the experience of grief may be, and may need to be, communicated.

In *A Grief Observed* the elderly CS Lewis, trying to reconcile his grief for his recently deceased wife writes that:

> bereavement is a universal and integral part of our experience of love. It follows marriage as normally as marriage follows courtship or as autumn follows summer. It is not a truncation of the process but one of its phases, not the interruption of the dance, but the next figure. (Lewis 1966: 43)

Both Virginia Lloyd and Maggie MacKellar were widowed in their early 30s. With doctorates in English Literature and History, respectively, both women turned to literature – as readers and then writers – in an attempt to comprehend their experience of grief. Lewis' tract affirmed for both that their experience was not unique, yet neither woman came to feel that their bereavement was a natural chapter in their married lives. MacKellar's husband died after a sudden, unexpected psychotic collapse. Lloyd's husband died from bone cancer. Death from cancer may seem to be less startlingly sudden but as Lloyd writes: 'We were just beginning our life together – the notion of an ending just didn't compute' (47).

When Lloyd fell in love with John, she was aware that he had cancer. Within a year they were married and, before friends and family gathered in their garden, vowed to weather whatever the future held for them. They were not to know that eleven months later John would die leaving Lloyd a widow. Her memoir demonstrates the unnatural, at times surreal, experience of losing one's spouse within the first year of marriage. In *The Young Widow's Book of Home Improvement* the 'newlywed newly widowed' (98) Lloyd outlines how she came to comprehend the 'notion of an ending'. In provocatively honest prose she traces her grieving process through three narrative strands: the romance of love and courtship; the brave and intimate story of hers and John's battle with terminal bone cancer; and the renovation and rebuilding of their house wracked with rising damp and collapsing around them. By interweaving these stories Lloyd constructs a narrative that mirrors her experience of grief, that marries mourning with joy and that insists John's death can only be approached within the context of their loved, shared life together.

The memoir opens with big Jim the Irishman assessing the house's rising damp. It is the worst case he has seen in a long time. It is extensive, even cancerous; 'invading' mould continues to spread 'like tumours' (3) through the house. Jim is appalled. He cannot understand how anyone could have let a home get this bad. Lloyd rehearses silently some possible responses – we didn't notice, it wasn't a priority – before admitting to her reader, and thereby establishing an intimate connection: '*We were too busy trying to stave off my husband's death from an excruciatingly painful form of secondary bone cancer*'

(5). That is the one answer she will not give Jim primarily because she does not want his sympathy or pity. Neither does she ask for ours. *The Young Widow's Book of Home Improvement* eschews sentimentality. Lloyd's ironic, often detached tone and tightly-structured prose are indicative of her need to control this story, and to control how she expresses her pain.

The house is a Victorian terrace in Sydney's inner west, the kind of house familiar to many readers and renowned for rising damp. At various points it is 'the house' and 'our home' but in the opening chapter it has become 'my home' (3); John is gone. While John is alive the crumbling house operates, at times, as a metaphor for his cancer-ravaged body. After his death it becomes both a canvas upon which Lloyd can paint her grief and a metaphor for herself, waterlogged with grief. The metaphor of the house provides Lloyd with a framework through which she can convey her trauma without undue self-indulgence or sentimentality. The story of the house's renovation is also the story of her recovery and renewal. For both the process is difficult, physically demanding and, most importantly, takes time. Unsurprisingly, we discover that 'of the two forms of damp, my grief proved to be the most persistent' (262), but the emphasis on renovation, of peeling back, drilling and drying out the bricks, gestures always towards some less painful future. By beginning with Jim, Lloyd signals that while there is looming loss and grief there is also the hope of restoration. Part One, 'Rising Damp', concludes thus:

> But the thought of all that trapped air being freed was marvellously appealing. I couldn't wait for Jim's team to start work. I wanted those holes drilled into the brickwork immediately. I could picture the damp air, captive for so long, escaping gratefully into the light. Drying from the inside out was exactly what was needed. For my house, and for me. (49)

The dialectic of inside/outside recurs in various guises throughout the text. The damage to the inside of the house is more pronounced than that to the outside. So too, Lloyd suffers deep, psychic pain while presenting a competent public exterior. Less obvious perhaps is the way the narrative, in its dance between intimacy and distance, demonstrates the gulf which exists between the private experience, and the public expression, of loss. Lloyd's description of her beloved jazz hints at her narrative strategy:

> My head and my heart have always found equal refuge in its combination of improvisation and harmonic structure. The music expresses freedom and constraint simultaneously; the freedom to improvise is in fact only created *through* the structures of melody and harmony that provide choices for the improvisation. (13)

In narrative terms Lloyd's 'melody and harmony' are structure and metaphor. By controlling them she is able to articulate something for which she has no training and for which there seems to be no guidance.

Lloyd emphasizes repeatedly that she is someone who needs to be organised and in control but she cannot control the spread of John's disease, his pain, or the amount of time they had together. They live by the mantra '*As normal as possible, for as long as possible*' but in their shared life, time is out of joint. They honeymoon months before their wedding. Near the end of John's life, time concertinas 'slowing down and speeding up at once, compressing' (148). Following his death, time becomes elastic. Lloyd wrests control of their shared time through her structure, bringing John back to life, reliving shared joyous

moments, and insisting always, that their story was about love and life as well as illness and death.

CS Lewis wrote *A Grief Observed* as a journal in the weeks immediately following his wife's death. Still in the early throes of wrenching grief he admits to being disgusted with himself for luxuriating in 'the bath of self-pity, the wallow, the loathsome sticky-sweet pleasure of … it' (6). The issue of self-pity also occupies Joan Didion in *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005). Didion, arguably more in more control of her narrative than Lewis, knows that 'no level [of self-pity] is acceptable to the world outside' (Brockes 2005). Lloyd appears to be of the Didion school. She appreciates that experiencing self-pity, and writing about it for public readership, are two very different propositions. The most blatant account of her self-pity appears early in the memoir. The flowers are 'newly dead like my husband' (13). Lloyd lies still in a bath allowing music to 'express fractions of my emotions: anguish, inertia, despair, isolation, longing, consternation, grief, heartbreak, loss, loneliness, sorrow, yearning' (13). How is it possible to express what she is feeling fully? Only perhaps by layering these 'fractions' of her emotions in a manner that suggests their cumulative weight. The writing in this section is bleak. The narrative voice, disengaged with the world, aches to be 'not-alive' (15). Short sentences abound: '*We*. It was as simple and as impossible as that' (12). Single line paragraphs reinforce the sense of flatness: 'Everything fights to survive, I thought. Even mould' (9). Unlike Lewis, Lloyd is writing some years after the events she recounts but she constructs these passages in a style that recaptures her lived experience of shock and depression in the early days of loss. Significantly, Lloyd never allows the narrative to dwell for too long in the dark recesses of her mourning. At this strategic moment she sweeps her reader out of the blackness and into the world where she and John first meet.

By the time Lloyd meets John she is thirty-two, single and living alone. After a series of failed relationships she had sought help from a psychotherapist and was amazed to discover how removed from others she had become. Having undergone a 'psychological revolution' so that 'her interior state now broadly matches the surface' (21), she is open to the possibility of a relationship with the gregarious John. His cancer doesn't faze her: 'Aromatherapy, psychotherapy, chemotherapy; it's no big deal I thought. People have chemotherapy all the time. He's getting treatment so he's getting better. That's what happens' (30). She moves in to John's house within days of their first kiss, but she struggles with the speed of their commitment. In their early months together they enjoy a fully satisfying sexual relationship but later John's pain precludes physical intimacy and Lloyd mourns that loss. These admissions lend authenticity to the relationship described. Elsewhere Lloyd's candour is more unsettling. When John suffers a pelvic fracture just days before the wedding and informs her he will now need crutches permanently, she is 'slightly irritated, as if he'd told me he had forgotten to take out the garbage… My first thought was how ungainly the crutches would look in our photographs. Everything was organised' (71). She lists off the neatly typed vows, the menu of finger food and the jazz quartet, before concluding: 'I was cranky. Crutches were not part of the plan… Crutches were ugly and obvious. Crutches would ruin everything' (71). Of course, the wedding is not ruined and Lloyd includes a beautiful wedding photograph, without crutches, as the book's coda so why does she deliberately reveal her ungracious response? Firstly, because it takes us back in time and bestows an immediacy on the narrative. Secondly, because it demonstrate her preparedness for unflattering self-revelation, thereby strengthening the memoir's credibility, and thirdly, because Lloyd knows, and her reader knows, how minor these irritations are in the bigger picture of John's illness and death.

Lloyd's seemingly unmediated honesty is a construct deployed throughout the memoir in order to control the narrative tone and to resist overly-empathic overtures to the reader. Consider, for example, the description of her behaviour in the days following John's death and at his funeral. The second section of 'Rising Damp' opens thus: 'The doorbell rang for the third time that morning. "If that's another bunch of flowers I am going to scream," I yelled' (7). The portrait of a widow infuriated by well-wishers' flowers does not play to the stereotype of a grieving wife. Or does it? Perhaps it is not so uncommon to rail at the inadequacy of flowers in the face of tremendous loss. In her memoir *private life public grief* Mary Delahunty comments: 'We hurry the funeral in a blur of busyness then leave the bereaved in a forest of florist-delivered flowers that need watering every day, to get on with it, whatever "it" is' (Delahunty 2012: 173). In any event Lloyd's inclusion of this scene, so early in the narrative, demonstrates a high level of trust in her reader. Later she returns to these days and admits much darker, more despairing, feelings but here she offers only a sense of frustration, impotency and seeming detachment from the world. Lloyd is awake to potential criticism that she may appear to be too distanced, too unemotional. She addresses this issue openly when she considers her inability to cry at John's funeral:

> Sometimes I worry that my domineering common sense curtails moments of great emotion. But at this moment, with my husband newly interred, I had had enough emotion. There was nothing I could express in this particular public that was not already written clearly on my face. (89)

Much of the detail of his funeral remains blurred. Feeling somewhat removed from the occasion Lloyd goes through the required motions but the funeral does not seem real: 'To me it felt like an official event that needed to be performed and completed' (84). She writes of the casket with its 'obligatory flowers', of the 'surprises' in the service, of the embarrassingly-demonstrative Italian neighbour wailing over John's coffin. Afterwards she receives embraces 'in the same way the Queen accepts bouquets of flowers' (86). The restrained, dispassionate prose captures powerfully Lloyd's state of shock. Only when she lays flowers upon John's coffin does the crushing unreality of her situation hit her:

> It didn't make sense that the dead body of my husband was lying inside that box, dressed as he had been on the day he married me not quite eleven months ago. It didn't make sense that I was standing beside it, wearing a black hat and a pink dress… None of it made sense, yet it was happening. I remember a feeling of slight concussion, that I was not actually there in the moment, but somewhere just behind it or in front of it. Not *in* it. Not actually *present* to fully experience the act of John's burial. But being *forced* to see it nonetheless. (88)

In addition to shock, Lloyd's disconnection from John's funeral can also be attributed, in part, to her unfamiliarity with Catholic tradition, but more crucially, to her lack of exposure to death. As a modern, middle-class intellectual, her knowledge of funerals is gleaned from Thomas Hardy novels.

The writing of John's funeral contrasts starkly with the narrative clarity, and the absolute being-in-the-moment, of John's death. For all Lloyd's distance she is prepared to expose extraordinarily intimate details of hers and John's lives together and, most powerfully, his death. She begins: 'There was something about John's last day that took on an epic quality, so that in my mind's eye it seems to have lasted an age' (232). So too the writing becomes quiet, time

slows: 'late afternoon drew into early evening', the sun dips 'below the horizon' (233), there 'was no point watching the clock' (236). Lloyd takes her reader through John's last hours and imbues them with a kind of sacredness. At the point where he is beyond pain she climbs onto the bed and cradles his body in a way previously denied to her. Yet even here, she provides respite from the intensity of the moment, admitting to needing the toilet. Again she gives preference to authenticity over sentimentality. She refuses to romanticise John's dying: 'Life was reduced to its most basic urges and commands: breathing, pissing, sleeping, dying' (236). At a time when increasingly fewer people in Western societies are afforded the privilege of being present at a loved one's death, Lloyd's gift, in inviting her reader into those private and powerful hours of John's last night, may be that at least some contemporary readers might have a more realistic idea of death and bereavement than that offered by Victorian novels. From the outset we know that John has died, and in the narrative will die, but the way in which Lloyd takes us into his epic, sacred journey into death, is masterful and brave.

Throughout the memoir the acuity of grief is modulated through a protective shield of ironic humour. Lloyd plays word games with the Rookwood necropolis, she likens securing burial plots with apartment hunting, and finds amusing grammatical errors etched into headstones. She is devastated to discover, a year after the event, that she emailed news of John's death in Comic Sans Serif font. It is perhaps more realistic than ironic that Lloyd, the rigorous editor intent on controlling language, discovers everything she writes about John in the days and weeks following his death – the email, his funeral notice, his epitaph – contains errors. Her repeated mistakes ask implicitly: How can one 'get it right' in the midst of grief? How does one convey the enormity of this experience? Before she lightens the narrative with the admission of the comic font, she captures the severity of her distress when, twelve hours after John's death, she composes that email:

> The extreme trauma I was in makes remembering these things feel like they happened to someone else. I can see her now, sitting at the keyboard, putting words together. The computer was a safe place for her. Much safer than the bed or the sofa or the back deck. The desktop was an environment she could control…The sentences came easily… The words respected her need to get them out quickly. She was reporting from a war-zone. She was in shell-shock. (34)

This reversion to the third-person is a common feature of trauma narratives. It operates to protect the vulnerable inner self from overly-public exposure. In her third-person incarnation Lloyd approaches grief by casting herself as a character in an unfolding drama.

Lloyd refers often to 'my personal drama' and litters the memoir with the lexicon of the stage. Positioning herself as the elevated lover (of courtly love poetry) she writes of an admirer thus: 'Upstage Left was looking to exit the drama of his own loveless marriage, and his stage directions indicated I was the answer to his prayers' (19). This liaison ends. She also leaves her boyfriend. We read: 'Within a few weeks both men had exited my stage, and I was once again alone upon it' (21). When John's hospital bed is moved into their bedroom it is 'now centre stage, and I occupied a front-row seat for his final act' (182). Lloyd's use of dramatic code escalates with John's death. She recounts the frenzied scene of hat buying in David Jones prior to Melbourne Cup day. In order to secure the shop assistant's help she tells her she needs a particular hat for her husband's funeral: '*My husband's funeral.* Such an elegant phrase. Brutally concise. I had seen that phrase in print before; I had heard

actors on stage and on screen use those words in that order' (82). The lived reality of articulating those words is actually harrowing and she collapses sobbing inconsolably but here is yet another example of how Lloyd's seemingly detached tone masks her deeply private pain. '[T]hose words in that order' is reminiscent of familiar catch phrases used in times of bereavement such as 'one day at a time', or 'one foot in front of another'. We get a sense of how carefully she has arranged these words in a particular order so as to tell her story as best she can.

Lloyd also frames her final conversation with John as a stage piece. She maps out the scene in the patient's dining room: 'It was no scene that I had ever imagined, let alone witnessed on television. I was one of two leading characters, but we had no script to guide us…we improvised' (227). Again there is a sense of unreality, of trying to capture in words something that refuses to be captured. The dramatic tropes are absent from the telling of John's death but they return. At his funeral she thinks of herself as a suitably 'appropriate melodramatic double of windswept Julie Christie in *Far From the Madding Crowd*…[because] a fictionalised version of myself was easier to imagine than the reality of my present' (83). Standing over his grave Lloyd 'felt like I was acting in someone else's drama. But at that moment… it struck me that this was no performance' (88).

She struggles on. When she returns to work she creates an '*edifice*' (101) for the comfort of her co-workers. She keeps '*performing*' (101):

> There I could dress up in my corporate costume, talk in the vocabulary of my employer…and daily play the part to which my name was professionally attached. Outside the make-believe of corporate life… I had no costume to wear, no official language to speak. The roles I used to play – wife, lover, best friend, companion, care-giver – were no longer available to me. I was an unemployed actor desperate for work. (150)

Her sense of self has been shattered profoundly yet in public she seems to be coping. In private, however, she spirals into blackness.

Lloyd describes the rawness of her grief where every nerve ending seems to be overexposed to the ravages of the world. The planes are too loud, the traffic too noisy. She functions as a kind of automaton, a wind-up doll who crumples in exhaustion and relief as soon as she is home behind closed doors. Lewis describes grief 'like a bomber circling round and dropping its bombs each time the circle brings it overhead' (36). 'In grief', he writes, 'nothing "stays put". One keeps emerging from a phase, but it always recurs. Round and round. Everything repeats' (1966: 49). Lloyd's – and as we shall see MacKellar's – experience of grief is similarly cyclic: 'At unexpected moments I found myself overpowered by a wave of grief that swamped without warning' (108). Her journal entry notes: 'Here I am, back at the beginning. Again' (216). The physicality of grief literally floors her:

> I dropped to the ground slumped as if the puppet strings I had relied on to hold me up had failed. One time my wailing was so energetic I propelled myself off the couch: my body couldn't contain the energy being expelled in grieving. (108)

Lloyd's façade of coping masks the painful disjunction she feels between her inner self and her public persona. There appears to be no outlet for her to signal her distress. In the days following John's death she loiters in a boutique determined to tell the sales assistant that John has died. She does not know

why she wants to tell this news to a stranger but later in the narrative she writes: 'I needed to know that other people understood I was not the same person I had been a few short weeks ago' (102). How does one bear witness to such loss in a world that speaks of grief in linear terms, expecting the bereaved to find 'closure' and 'move on' with their lives? In a devastating, yet no doubt familiar misunderstanding, she ventures out with a male companion to attend a concert at the Opera House. She encounters friends:

> 'Virginia! You look great!' Andrea exclaimed, beaming at me, her eyes wide.
> 'Oh! I do? Um…thank you,' I stammered, not knowing how to play her unexpected curve-ball. *Great*? I choked on the word as if it were gristle lodged in my throat… They seemed to be judging my state of mind based on whether or not I was wearing lipstick… I was shocked to realize she was wondering if he and I were *dating*. (132)

As she begins to receive more well-intentioned compliments Lloyd asserts the need to externalize her inner pain. She wants to be marked as '*other*', to have her own black armband, her own 'scarlet letter' that announces her history to the world. She seeks out a hairdresser:

> I wanted to be shorn like a sheep. Nothing soft, nothing sensuous. Nothing that would draw attention to my face, my figure, my existence. …My spiky razor-savaged haircut screamed at the world, as I could not: *I wish my hair would stop growing. I wish that I would stop breathing. Do not look at me. I am not to be looked at. I am alone. I want to be left alone*. (133)

Even external markings prove inadequate. Returning home she is dismayed and disgusted to find she continues to radiate youth and wellness.

Lloyd's body betrays her. In the first six months following John's death she 'yearned desperately not to be alive. I longed to be without consciousness, without sensation, without feeling' (13). Yet she is perplexed that at the same time as she craves nothingness her body is sexually charged:

> My body seemed to be at war with itself: I felt both physically spent and highly aroused. Even in my state of semiconsciousness I interpreted this surge in energy as primal – some kind of adrenalin-infused instinct, part of a 'fight or flight' response. On an intellectual and emotional level the sensation was disturbing to me; but somehow on a physical, instinctual level it made sense. (37)

Lloyd's experience is not uncommon. In her luminous essay 'Without Stars: A Small Essay on Grief', Gail Jones writes of the 'demonstrative physicality', the 'almost erotic embrace' that characterised her friend's funeral. Jones argues that 'mourning carries with it a peculiar promiscuity' precisely because '[g]rief connects dire emptiness and full-bodied intensity' (Jones 1998: 147). The challenge for the memoirist of grief is to find a way to express the complex interrelation between these two states.

When Joan Didion lost her husband she turned to the literature of grief and was surprised to find it 'remarkably spare'. In *The Year of Magical Thinking* she notes that CS Lewis' *A Grief Observed*, the 'occasional passage' from Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and poems such as Mathew Arnold's 'The Forsaken Merman' and WH Auden's 'Funeral Blues' from 'The Ascent of F6',

helped steady her. She writes: 'Beyond or below such abstracted representations of the pains and furies of grieving, there was a body of sub-literature, how-to guides for dealing with the condition, some 'practical, some 'inspirational', most of either useless' (2005: 45). Lloyd's experience is alarmingly similar. Her friend lends her a series of very 'simplistic' and unhelpful '*Women's Weekly*-style "User Guides to Grief"' (248). It is significant that Lloyd titles her memoir a *Book* rather than a *Guide of Home Improvement*. While she attempts, for her own sake, to try and make sense of her loss, at no stage does she attempt to offer explicit guidance in how to deal with bereavement. Yet the memoir, through its uncompromising honesty and unsentimental tone, does exactly that. In admitting her sense of inadequacy and guilt in the face of loss, in owning her unstable and at times uncontrollable emotions, and mapping out the gulf between public expectation and private need, Lloyd opens up a space for contemplation and dialogue, a space in which readers may find affirmation of their experience and come to more fully understand the experience of others. Part of Lloyd's motivation in writing was to provide a book that might speak to the very real experiences of her readers:

> I had never read about the sorts of things I endured in those weeks and months after John died, nor had I ever read about a woman widowed so soon, or so young. So I decided to try writing about some of my experiences. I would try to shape my scribbled notes and late-night confessions of grief and longing into a story both personal and universal. (Lloyd 2008b: 72)

It is precisely because Lloyd shapes her narrative with such restraint and artistry that her personal story of widowhood becomes a broader narrative about the vicissitudes of grief.

Significantly, reading about grief was not sufficient for Didion who found that the only way she could come to terms with her husband's death was to 'write my way out of it' (Brockes 2005). So too Lewis, though worried that his 'jottings' might be morbid, stressed his need to write about his loss: 'Do these notes merely aggravate that side of it? Merely confirm the monotonous, tread-mill march of the mind round one subject? But what am I to do? I must have some drug, and reading isn't a strong enough drug now. By writing it all down (all? – no: one thought in a hundred) I believe I get a little outside it' (1966:11). Lloyd also explains her drive for expression through narrative. For months after John's death she confessed her emotions to a dictaphone but there came a time when the need to speak publicly became imperative:

> Simply putting the words together in a way that told a story, rather than the dislocated and fragmented thoughts that existed on the scraps of paper around my house, was cathartic. It was liberating to tell complete strangers exactly what I had been thinking, rather than to sugarcoat or edit my thoughts for the audience of people who knew me best. (Lloyd 2008b: 72)

All three writers are adamant that the act of writing enabled, indeed was an essential step, in their healing.

Despite her facility with, and control of, language Lloyd has to accept that sometimes language is not able to express lived experience. Frustrated by the doctors' inability to classify and control John's pain, and by her own inability to make a material difference to it, she sets about researching the language of pain. She turns to Wittgenstein and is, predictably, disappointed. In the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) Wittgenstein analyses the problematic grammar of pain, specifically the way the expression, and the perception, of

pain is mediated by language that changes according to context. His writing affirms the impossibility of articulating effectively and honestly the experience of pain from one person to another. Lloyd refuses to accept that language is the sole means through which one comes to understand another. Wittgenstein seems to leave no room for intuition and empathy born of deep personal connection:

> If pain is beyond expression, is it necessarily beyond the capacity of an intimate observer to understand it? I thought of how many other experiences in life that are beyond expression – hearing a passage of music and being profoundly moved; or looking at my husband and knowing that the words 'I love you' are totally inadequate to convey exactly what I mean. But in attempting to write about grief, and about love, I suspect some experiences are beyond language. I think Wittgenstein assumes too much, asks too much, of words. (Wittgenstein 2001: 192)

Words fail Lloyd. She struggles to find the right epitaph for John but the reality is that: 'Trying to find the words for something for which there were none had proven too difficult' (201). Just as she had to learn the new language of home renovation, which replaced the Latinate medical terminology, now she needs to find a new language to convey her loss. She replaces her editor's pencil with an editor's scalpel as she dissects the inappropriate use of everyday language in extreme circumstances. She places the funeral industry in her sights:

> I couldn't believe how many concrete decisions were required of the next of kin. The grieving party. The bereaved. The widow. The words I would like included in the newspaper notice. The clothes I wanted John to be buried in. The floral arrangement I wanted on top of the casket… I didn't *want* any of it… I didn't want him to be buried at all. I wanted him to tell me where he was so I could collect him and bring him back home. (74-5)

She suffers a form of aphasia:

> I kept confusing my vocabulary. I said 'wedding' when I meant 'funeral'. It didn't happen once or twice. I had already said it to the priest, to a nurse and to my parents…My verbal confusion happened on a handful of occasions during this first meeting with the funeral director. I even substituted 'honeymoon' for 'burial' at one point… The two events had occurred within the space of a year, irrationally close to each other. It was too easy for my unconscious to connect the dots. (74-5)

Lloyd reinforces this confusion effectively through her structure interleaving hers and John's romance and wedding with John's death and funeral. For example, section 3 of 'Rising Damp' concludes with she and John finally together. They arrive at her apartment, charged with sexual tension and close the door. Lloyd says: 'I hope you're going to kiss me' (31). We turn the page and read: 'My unconscious philosophy – organise or perish – was in operation within hours of John's death' (32). After pages of decision making about burial plots, section 5 begins: 'Within three days of our first kiss, John presented me with my own set of keys' (41). This structure, as mentioned previously, achieves multiple purposes: it mirrors Lloyd's disorientation over the period of her courtship, marriage and widowhood; it allows the reader breathing spaces

so they are not overwhelmed by grief; it mirrors the cyclic nature of grief; and it demonstrates how structure can be employed to speak even when words seem to fail.

Maggie MacKellar also manipulates narrative structure as a means of representing her journey through the bewildering landscape of loss and mourning. As a young academic, pregnant with her second child and uncomplicatedly in love with her athletic husband, the boundaries of MacKellar's world seemed fairly secure. With her husband's sudden psychic disintegration and death, however, the foundations of that world shatter. MacKellar gives birth to a son, struggles to juggle single motherhood and an academic career, and, with her mother's help, learns to appreciate small moments of beauty amid the pain. Trusting her instincts she takes leave of absence from the Department of History at the University of Sydney and relocates herself and her children to her uncle's farm. Here '[t]ime is slower, less painful' (56). Through their engagement with the rhythms of farm life, healing becomes possible. Then her mother is diagnosed with an aggressive cancer and dies within twelve weeks: 'My body, suddenly, carries two stories of loss. I'm heavy with them, made cumbersome and slow' (4).

When It Rains tries to unravel and come to terms with these intertwined experiences of loss. The loss of MacKellar's mother is crushing but familiar; that of her husband darker, more violent. Despite her best efforts she cannot keep the different experiences of loss apart. The narratives weave around each other, interweave:

> My mother's hands were sixty-four years old, weathered, beautiful. They were soft and hard and they held no duplicity of emotion. They didn't love and hate. They were not tender and violent. They never offered me the world and handed me hell. They were constant: I miss them purely. (19)

The most significant marker of difference in MacKellar's response to these twinned losses is the way in which she identifies her grief for her mother as 'honest' (98) and pure against that for her husband, which is complex, 'subterranean' (4) and 'duplicitous' (107).

In 'The Laugh of the Medusa', Hélène Cixous commands: 'Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth' (Cixous 1975: 880). MacKellar heeds that call. One of the strikingly original and rewarding aspects of *When It Rains* is the way in which MacKellar writes of and through her body, which is at once the body of a lover, daughter and mother. Grief invades her body. Her muscles, bone and skin hold the memory of loss. In more hopeful moments she thinks she may be able to shed grief like a snake's skin but for much of the narrative grief feels like 'a skeleton shaping me from the inside out' (82). MacKellar comes close to capturing discursively the powerful, contradictory nature of grief in the following passage:

> My sorrow has arms and legs, fingers and toes. It has a mind and a heart: it bleeds and dies. It breathes and sobs; howls and laughs. It is full and it is empty. It is resilient and it is weak. I walk around in it. It is anger and rage. It has a memory but no name. It is ancient and outside time. It whimpers in the night like a small child. It is terrible and unapproachable. It is vulnerable and needs to be held. It is impenetrable, an armour that cannot be pierced. (60)

Significantly, she not only articulates how embodied grief feels she also identifies how that grief has the power to override rational thought, particularly as concerns her husband. Her mind rails against him for leaving her. She screams at him to stay away from her dreams yet all the while her body remembers, and craves, his soothing presence. Again and again MacKellar affirms how her body continued to function and to feel, almost in defiance of conscious thought:

> when he left me... Everything in my body stayed standing. My bone structure held me up. I found that, somehow, I could still walk. I could still talk. I could feel the warm sun on my face, the chill of the air on my skin. I still moved through the day, but my body and mind had disconnected. My arms wrapped my daughter up and held her. My body sheltered the tiny baby within me. My mind stalled. (136)

This feeling of disconnection is not uncommon in bereavement. Didion's term 'magical thinking' captures powerfully how it is possible for the bereaved to register at some rational level the truth of their situation while all the time refusing to comprehend the enormity or permanence of loss. Didion admits to being unable to think rationally after John's death. She writes of her 'disordered thinking' (35) and of her 'level of derangement' (37). Like MacKellar her body goes through the motions of daily life but the disconnect between thought and action is profound and unsettling.

In the throes of grief MacKellar's body has a mind of its own; it betrays her: 'Tears leaked from my eyes at the most unexpected moments. A hacking cough carried me through dreams of my mother's last days. My throat itched and burnt' (39). Perhaps her body's greatest betrayal is its overwhelming desire for her dead husband: 'My body misses him in a craven way. It's not tormented by deceit, by hope turned sour, as my mind is – my body simply desires. In this desire I am trapped, duplicitous. Duped by my own body' (107). MacKellar is uncertain about the protocols of grief. As she struggles to cope with the demands of work and motherhood she thinks, like Lloyd, that her friends and colleagues see a widow who is '*coping well*' (107). Like Lloyd, she too feels driven to mark her body as a public signifier of her pain. She wants to slice her breasts – markers of femininity, sexuality and motherhood – to show the world the depth of her pain: 'I want to take that sharpened flintstone and cut myself from breast to breast. I want everyone to see the scars and know that however they imagine loss to be, it's bigger, harder, higher and deeper' (147). This is not some self-indulgent rage suggesting that 'my pain is worse than your pain'. Rather what MacKellar does is acknowledge openly the intensity, uncontrollability and irrationality of grief. Having been unprepared for, and overwhelmed by, grief she seeks to warn her readers what they might be in for. Her direct tone, her emotional honesty and her unmasked anger foster a sense of unmediated connection between writer and reader. Consider, for instance, how she draws the reader into conversation through the raw intensity of the following lines: 'How dare he leave me? How dare he lie to me? I'm so angry I really wonder how he dared. Do other people mourn with anger and rage? Grief books say it is a "stage", but they never tell you your body burns with it, or how the anger scars' (46). MacKellar does. *When it Rains* is a 'grief book' that tells it like it is. MacKellar offers her readers an opportunity to be open to woundedness, to recognize in a Levinasian sense, the face of the other, our selves in the other and their suffering, and to bear witness to it.

For the sake of analysis I want to divide artificially the narrative strands in order to examine MacKellar's different experiences of loss. The story of her mother's death from cancer, while violent in its suddenness, is recognizable.

So too is the way in which the story of her mother's death also involves MacKellar's exploration of her identity as a daughter and as a woman who is herself a mother. We see similar concerns in Gabrielle Carey's *Waiting Room* (2009) and, to a lesser extent, Anne Summers' *The Lost Mother* (2009). Here, both in her mother's final days and after her death, MacKellar climbs onto her bed and clings intensely to a mother she cannot bear to relinquish:

> I wanted her so badly. I wanted to be her child, to feel her hand on my head, hear her voice. The desire to mould my body to hers, to warm her with my life, was irresistible. I lay on her body. Lay on her stiff corpse. Mother, still. Motherless. (65)

The moments in which she tends to her mother's body are beautiful and unashamedly honest. When she is called upon to wash her mother she is unprepared for such an intimate encounter. She cites Simone de Beauvoir's haunting passage from *A Very Easy Death* (1966) about her mother's dying body as a way of negotiating her similar 'unease at ministering to a body that felt as if it were mine' (33). Like de Beauvoir, MacKellar is also confronted by the violence of her physical distress. She writes of her body resorting to 'guerrilla tactics' (33), at war with her will, forcing her to rush from her mother's hospital room. She washes her mother's back:

> I didn't want to. I didn't want to love her in this way. I wasn't ready to help her as she died…I was shaken by the exchange between our bodies. In the cold feel of my mother's flesh I met myself, as if death already stood beside us both.
> I write these words and feel small, incredibly selfish, unable to be the person I'd always imagined myself capable of being. …
> Do you see I met myself and I was afraid? I was afraid my daughter would one day meet herself in me, and that there was no point in living, for time had already ordained my end. I stood and washed and wept, for her and for me and for she who follows. (32)

Her direct and open address to the reader at this most intimate, almost sacramental, moment builds a sense of unmediated rapport. So too does her willingness to acknowledge her self-doubts, feelings of inadequacy and fear.

MacKellar first narrates her mother's diagnosis in three simple sentences, set apart as a discrete paragraph for dramatic effect: 'My mother had been diagnosed for three weeks. She had nine more weeks to live. I worried about getting my research grant application in on time' (16). This reaction conveys less self-interest than shock and incomprehension. When the medical team offer 'experimental palliative care' (62) MacKellar and her brother agree that it would be unkind to prolong their mother's life in any way. She is in a lot of pain. Interestingly MacKellar, while knowing this is the right decision, doubts herself: 'Now I think my courage failed me. My husband's death had beaten me, in a way. I'd fought for his life and been defeated, effortlessly – cast aside by death – and I couldn't see the point in fighting anymore' (62). She is challenged by David Rieff who supported his mother Susan Sontag through rounds of painful, invasive, ultimately futile treatment until the moment of her death. Sontag refused to acknowledge that she was dying. She denied Rieff any chance to have the final conversations about life and death he later wished he could have had. In *Swimming in a Sea of Death* (2009) Reiff laments his failure of courage to confront his mother. Whereas Rieff never got to mention death to Sontag, MacKellar is the person who tells her mother what she has forgotten since morning ward rounds: that she is dying. In one of her most powerful addresses to the reader she invites us to contemplate how we might

approach such a task: ‘What are you meant to do in such a moment? Who are you meant to be? Mother to your mother? I looked at her and knew her soul had always searched for truth. It roared up between us. She would live six more weeks and never again would we have a moment that sacred’ (64). This is memoir at its best: honest, direct prose which gestures more towards universal than individual experience, and is deeply emotional while resisting excess sentimentality.

Of central concern to MacKellar is the perplexing question of why she experiences the two losses so differently. She writes of doing ‘normal things’ (111) after her mother’s death such as seeing a funeral director and organizing the funeral service. She could talk to friends and strangers about losing her mother because people knew how to react. The loss of her husband, however, ‘marks [her] as different’ (4). His is a ‘more silent … more savage’ (4), less approachable story. She admits that there are many ways to tell his story. Each has its own particular truth; each involves irreducible slippage. She tries to make sense of her husband’s story through fragmentary recollections, dreams and unanswerable questions. It is a story of enduring love and crippling pain.

MacKellar’s husband thrived on extreme outdoor adventures. As a newly married couple they set out on a romantic yet dangerously intense trek through the Alaskan mountains. The trip was a ‘shape-altering experience’ (8) physically and intellectually. Not only did MacKellar become athletically lean and strong, the shape of her perceptions about herself and her place in the world were molded by her sense of insignificance against the expansive, majestic landscape. In retrospect she acknowledges that perhaps the Alaskan landscape, where the ground literally falls away beneath one’s feet, might have been a portent of things to come. The analogy with their Alaskan experience offers one possible approach to her husband’s story. But the story of her world falling away beneath her and the profound shattering of her sense of identity as wife and mother is only part of a much larger narrative to do with mental illness and bereavement.

Writing some years after his death, MacKellar still has no coherent narrative with which to explain events or offer any neat conclusions. Her short staccato sentences reflect the continued fragmentary nature of her understanding of his illness and the downward spiral in which they were caught: ‘He’d hurl a chair, break a picture, throw a bowl of fruit. We were in a police car. In Emergency of a major hospital. In a locked and windowless room. In another hospital’ (24). Aware of her ethical responsibilities towards him and conscious of the impossibility of capturing discursively the truth of their relationship she asks: ‘How do I tell you about us? About him and me, I mean. How do I stitch a pattern where you might peek at what I had and what I lost?’ (43). A constructed narrative can at best allow us a ‘peek’. Yet this failure is not entirely due to the inadequacy of language to convey lived experience, MacKellar herself continues to wonder who her husband was and what was true or otherwise about their marriage. Again in fragmentary prose she demonstrates her confusion:

> You think you know someone. You are so sure of someone. Then, one morning there is this new thing. This new thing that is a very old thing. A thing that has been buried so deeply that the skeleton, when it appears, is prehistoric. It exists between the two of you – you and the person you thought you knew. It is dinosaur. It is a monster. You feel as though it eats you alive. One day he says, ‘This has happened before’. (43)

Only after ten years together does her husband admit that he has kept secret an earlier psychotic episode for which he was hospitalized. Even then she cannot ascertain the truth:

> 'They diagnosed me.'
> 'They never diagnosed me.'
> 'I walked out and never suffered from such a moment again.'
> 'Until we met I suffered from these episodes but never told anyone.'
> The contradictions darken the sun.
> I have been loved, cherished, celebrated and I have been deceived, manipulated and treated as less than nothing – all by the same person. (44)

MacKellar's husband is admitted to various psychiatric clinics. Despite her fierce love for him she admits to being disgusted by his manic suicidal behaviour and frustrated by his repeated escapes. Heavily pregnant and physically and mentally exhausted she retreats for a short time to her uncle's farm. In her absence he escapes yet again from a 'safe ward' and places himself in a dangerous position from which he cannot be rescued. MacKellar rehearses versions of his death: as a kind of heroic prince he sacrifices himself to protect his family from his madness; as a despised coward he gave up on his family and himself; or perhaps, she admits, the blame lies with her for not realizing the depths of his despair and for not being a sufficient reason for him to stay alive.

MacKellar never said a proper goodbye to her husband. She never found answers for the many questions suddenly raised about his life and their life together. Her memoir operates on one level as a continuing conversation with him. She enacts the kind of address identified by Paul de Man as the central trope of autobiography: the 'figure of prosopopeia, the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity which posits the possibility of the latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech' (de Man 1979: 75-76). This kind of reimagining and re-inscribing the voices of those who have gone before sits easily with MacKellar's work as a historian searching through archives, uncovering voices and experiences from the past, and giving them voice and presence in the here and now. She tries to work a similar manoeuvre with her husband. On their wedding anniversary, six months after his death, she writes to him telling him what has been happening in her life. Later she tells us that she writes the memoir 'in silence so that I can hear any defence he offers' (101), but all she hears is the 'empty echo of his absence' (101). Significantly, however, his silence does not equate neatly with his absence. Three years after his death he returns to her in charged, sexual dreams.

The motif of return shapes the narrative on multiple levels: return to the farm; to trauma; to adventurous young love; to absence; and, most powerfully, to desire. The epigraph of Cavafy's 'Return' celebrates how 'the memory of the body', or as MacKellar demonstrates, the body's memory, desires:

> Return often and take me (and he does)
> beloved sensation, return and take me –
> when the memory of the body awakens,
> and an old desire runs again through the blood;
> when the lips and the skin remember,
> and the hands feel as if they touch again.
>
> Return often and take me at night,
> When the lips and the skin remember…

MacKellar resists and succumbs to the return of her dead lover whom she recognizes in every cell of her body yet fights with her rational mind. She wonders why he has returned to her after years of absence. Perhaps the act of writing their story has returned him to her, excoriating her barely-patched wounds as a necessary step towards eventual healing. Perhaps she needs to resurrect him, to take him back into her life so she can work out some way to let him go.

MacKellar never saw her husband's body. She could not participate fully in his funeral, seeming rather to 'float some way above the crush of weeping people' (122). Even when he returns in dreams to her bed or is glimpsed disappearing through a crowd she never sees his face. Late in the memoir she recounts a dream from the night he died in which she, as an Orphic figure, dives down into his underworld and sees him one last time. Unlike Orpheus she understands the need to leave him there in peace and so turns and comes back to the world of the living without a backward glance. Unfortunately dream logic holds little sway in the real world and he continues to rise up and to possess her. MacKellar reaches a point where she needs to stop his return in order to regain control of her life and 'face a future without him' (46). She has to 'shed' herself of him, to 'peel him layer by layer, off my body' (46) and 'place him piece by painful piece on the ground' (47). She writes: 'I'm screaming as I do this. Can you hear me? It hurts so much to leave him behind' (46).

The time of these dream worlds and the now of narrative time interact to affirm yet again the truth of Lewis' observation that in grief 'nothing stays put'. Grief is cyclic and surprising, never *chrono*logical. The memoir opens with a familiar scene of the school swimming carnival. MacKellar's tone is punchy and relaxed. Ironically she boasts about her abilities as a timekeeper moments before she drops through and out of time while marshalling the Father's Race. We are told it is four years since her husband died but linear time has little meaning in this narrative of grief apart from marking the childrens' birthdays. Time, in *When it Rains*, is measured predominantly by seasons not clocks. Even MacKellar's university leave of absence is to finish at the end of summer.

MacKellar's doctoral thesis and subsequent book *Core of My Heart, My Country* (2004) explore how pioneer Australian and Canadian women survived by adapting to their environments. It is no surprise that she undergoes a gradual transformation through returning to the country, to a working farm attuned to the rhythms of nature. The farm feels the effects of climate vandalism but is also steeped in beauty. MacKellar recognizes aspects of her own predicament in the natural world: eventually the 'widowed' duck is taken into the fold; the blind ewe manages through intuition to accommodate herself to her surroundings; and the lonely lamb negotiates a path through solitude. Importantly, her children learn to displace sorrow and silence with an earthy reality. Farm life teaches them about the natural cycles of death and new life; treasured animals are killed, sometimes violently, but foals are born in the shimmering morning mist. The sheer beauty of this landscape begins a process of healing for MacKellar.

Like Lewis, MacKellar discovers that grief feels like fear. Whereas Lewis can write that he is 'not afraid, though the sensation is like being afraid' (5), MacKellar cannot separate her experiences of fear and grief: 'where does one start and the other end? I met them together and they are as difficult to separate as muscle from bone' (61). Having felt safe in her husband's arms, safe in the life they had constructed together, and safe in her identification as wife, mother, daughter and historian, she is now cast adrift. So too is her terrified daughter until farm duties, the responsibility and mastery of her horses, and country

freedom enable her to blossom. MacKellar captures Lottie's transformation poetically:

> If I had to describe my child's grief to you, I'd take a pencil and trace the shape of the tear in the fabric of herself. What you would see would not be a hole. It is not the empty space it once was, it would not have the shadow of an absence always leaning over her. I'm serious when I say it's the shape of a chook. It would also be the form of a pony. It would be an open sky above her; it would be rolling hills and dry creek beds. It would be the shape of here. Living away from the city has given her room to let her grief roll out. She has poured herself into the animals and into the land and sometimes she has lost and felt the pain again, but she is not so afraid. (151)

MacKellar's journey out from grief and fear is more complicated. As a historian and a scholar her instinctive response to her life crisis was to seek guidance, indeed answers, from books. Like Didion and Lloyd, she finds little comfort from the 'pyramids of words' (29) she reads. Forcing herself into unknown territory she turns to 'the ancients' (29) and is undone by Amphitryon's prescient understanding that Herakles will be forever defined by grief. MacKellar cites Ann Carson's introductory essay to *Grief Lessons: Four Plays by Euripides* (2006) in which Carson suggests that tragedy is such a vital art form because it operates to frame grief, thereby allowing its audience to experience vicariously trauma and darkness. Carson suggests that inside the safety of the frame of tragedy the violent expression of grief and rage can be played out without 'you or your kin having to die' (Carson 2006: 7). Nobody, writes Carson, wants to 'go down into the pits of yourself all alone' (2006: 7). Instead, we are drawn to stories in which actors sacrifice themselves and dive into our collective darkness. But MacKellar goes down into the pit of darkness alone. She learns that lived grief is not so easily containable. And it does not end within a set timeframe. There comes a point in her healing, however, when she decides consciously that she does not want to be defined by grief and she turns to writing as a form of release:

> For me it is the act of writing that unlocks the frame. I pin my tragedy onto paper and with the precision of an anatomist take a scalpel to separate memory from bone. Perhaps if I can peel the layers of skin from its torso, it will stop having the power of a dark shape in the night. By writing, I risk sacrificing my deepest intimacies, but by writing, I control the shape they become. (31)

Writing operates as an essential form of agency. Crucially that agency involves the crafting or the shaping of the story as a way of making sense of experience: 'Perhaps if I can shape the past, capture it for a moment, it will take a form I recognize' (32).

In electing to write a memoir MacKellar affirms her belief that narrative may be able to capture the truth of her experience but the process of composition is never straightforward: 'Fragments rise up. Words in straggling sentences trail their half meanings through the air' (7). MacKellar emphasizes the importance of crafting, narrative distance and almost forensic control when she revisits her earliest attempts at narrative:

> After he died, I sought clarity by writing in strict chronological order the events that led to his death. I took each day, sketched its beginning and end, recalled each mood, read into every

> silence some sort of message. I wanted to trace the trajectory of his breakdown, to look for clues about spaces into which I could have stepped and saved him…As I wrote, what emerged was not clarity, nor understanding, nor peace; what was left was a chaotic scrawl filled with pain. (4-5)

What was left was a personal journal not a highly literate and literary narrative. This insistence, by MacKellar and Lloyd, on the crafted nature of their memoirs is significant given that it was the thought of Didion 'buffing and polishing [her] self-conscious works of literary art for public consumption, for us the readers or perhaps voyeurs' (2011: 33) which troubled Riemer so deeply.

Late in the memoir MacKellar returns to Carson's question about why tragedy is so important as an art form and concludes:

> Her answer brings me up against my own terrible truth. Tragedy is important because it enables us to imagine our own reactions in a dark well of horror. It lets us watch others suffer. By watching, we are prepared. By watching, we place a frame around our world and pace its boundaries. We guard against unknown horrors that call us from beyond our walls. I watch so I might know, and write so I might be understood. (216)

MacKellar is attuned to the charge of voyeurism sometimes directed at readers of memoirs, particularly traumatic memoirs. In quoting Carson she raises the contentious issue about why we might watch someone else's suffering, and why we are drawn to read intimate accounts of pain and suffering. She cites Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) as a way into exploring why we seem to desire to be shocked by grief and carnage. In those essays Sontag investigates the power of photography to shock and to make some constructive difference in times of war and torture. Sontag identifies how viewers become immune to suffering thereby fuelling the need for more dramatic, more horrific images. She writes:

> But there is shame as well as shock in looking at the close-up of real horror. Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it – say, the surgeons at the military hospital where the photograph was taken – or those who could learn from it. The rest of us are voyeurs, whether or not we mean to be. (Sontag 2003: 37)

MacKellar worries over the implications of Sontag's reasoning, and Carson's reasoning, for herself as memoirist and 'voyeur in my own life' (216) and for her readers. But Sontag does not dismiss the ethical importance of photography in changing perceptions and actions, she questions our habituation to horror. She continues to celebrate cases such as performances of '*Chushingura*, probably the best known narrative in Japanese culture [which] continue to draw sobs from the audience as Lord Asano admires the beauty of the cherry blossoms on his way to where he must commit seppuku' (2003: 73). Sontag notes that audiences weep because they 'want to weep. Pathos, in the form of narrative, does not wear out' (2003: 73).

Sontag raises another interesting point for understanding the popularity and importance of memoirs of loss and suffering: that narrative, more forcefully than photographs, has the power to make us understand, has the power to 'haunt us' (2003: 80). And she affirms the importance of memory and

mourning: 'Remembering *is* an ethical act, has ethical value in and of itself. Memory is, achingly, the only relation we can have with the dead' (2003: 103). Through the act of writing about their lost loved ones Lloyd, MacKellar and Didion simultaneously reconnect with them and set them free. As bell hooks notes: 'The longing to tell one's story and the process of telling is symbolically a gesture of longing to recover the past in such a way that one experiences both a sense of reunion and a sense of release' (hooks 1998: 431).

According to Freud mourning, expected in the face of bereavement, should be overcome 'after a certain period of time' (Freud 2005: 204). Freud insists that the bereaved *must* work through or relive their memories of, and attachment to, the deceased in order to relinquish them, thereby severing their links with the dead in order to reconnect to the world of the living. Obviously, for Lloyd and MacKellar this schema of mourning, in which the bereaved is meant to progress through the stages of grief in a linear fashion along a prescribed timeline is deeply flawed. Crucially, their memoirs demonstrate how it is possible to enact a more creative, positive form of mourning; mourning as an ongoing creative work. In *The Work of Mourning* (2001), Derrida identifies the death of the other as a time of reading and thinking. Rather than curtail the process of mourning, Derrida insists that mourning never ends, that the conversation with the dead is ongoing. Rather than insist that the dead must be relinquished he suggests that we continue to engage with the dead who become part of who we are; the dead are held both 'in us' and 'beyond us' (Derrida 2001: 11). There is an important rider here. As Joan Kirkby explains, Derrida argues that 'we engage with [the dead] not in a private, secret, phobic, guilty internalising memory, but in *gedachtnis*, a thinking externalising memory that gives us over to writing and thought' (Kirkby 2006: 467).

Both Lloyd and MacKellar reach a point of equanimity as their narratives conclude. Lloyd, knowing that the rest of her life 'will always be with John, and without him' (262), has the confidence to leave her restored house and jet off to New York in search of what '*a rich and full* life might look like, feel like' (263). MacKellar's daughter is suddenly ready to scatter her father's ashes so with both children she returns to his beloved sea and releases him: 'He falls into beauty as the children…laugh and chase each other… I say goodbye. At last, I say goodbye' (219). Riemer is correct when he asserts that 'grief is essentially mute' but so often it is this need to say goodbye that drives writers to find some expression of their loss. In his beautiful poem 'A Scattering' Christopher Reid, trying to cope with the loss of his wife, writes of magnificent elephants scattering the 'picked clean' bones 'of their own kind': 'And their scattering has an air/of deliberate ritual, ancient and necessary' (Reid 2009: 38). So too we humans, who dwell in language, search continually for necessary ways to say farewell. In his eulogy for his great friend Emmanuel Levinas, Derrida demonstrates powerfully that language is always inadequate to the task of mourning. And yet he, like so many writers, continues to strive for expression because as he points out, part of our responsibility to those who have gone before us is to find a way to bid them '*à-Dieu. Adieu*' (2001: 209). In *The Young Widow's Book of Home Improvement* and *When it Rains*, and in *The Year of Magical Thinking* and *Blue Nights*, Lloyd, MacKellar and Didion demonstrate how we might achieve that goal.

Works cited

Barnes, J 2011 'For Sorrow There is no Remedy', *The New York Review of Books* (April 7): http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/apr/07/sorrow-there-no-remedy/ (accessed 27 January 2012) return to text

Brockes, E 2005 Interview with Joan Didion, *The Guardian*: http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2005/dec/16/biography.features (accessed 27 January 2012) return to text

Carey, G 2009 *Waiting Room: a memoir.* Melbourne: Scribe return to text

Carson, A 2006 'Tragedy: A Curious Art Form', in *Grief Lessons: Four Plays, Euripides* (trans A Carson). New York: New York Review Books, 7-9 return to text

Cixous, H 1975 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs* 1, 4 (Summer 1976) (trans K Cohen & P Cohen): 875-893 http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239 (accessed on January 27, 2012) return to text

De Beauvoir, S 1966 *A Very Easy Death* (trans P O'Brian). London: Andre Deutsch / Weidenfeld & Nicolson return to text

De Man, P 1979 'Autobiography as De-Facement', in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. New York: Columbia University Press: 67-8 return to text

Delahunty, M 2010 *Public life private grief: A memoir of political life and loss*. Melbourne: Hardie Grant Books return to text

Derrida, J 1989 *Memoires for Paul de Man* (trans C Lindsay, J Culler, E Cadava & P Kamuf). New York: Columbia University Press

Derrida , J 2001 'Adieu', in P-A Brault and M Naas (eds) *The Work of Mourning*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 200-209 return to text

Didion, J 2005 *The Year of Magical Thinking*. London: Fourth Estate return to text

Didion, J 2011 *Blue Nights*. New York: Alfred A Knopf return to text

Freud, S 2005, *1917* 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia* (trans S Whiteside). London: Penguin: 203-218 return to text

Gilmore, L 2001 *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press return to text

hooks, b 1998 'writing autobiography', in S Smith & J Watson (eds). *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press: 429-432 return to text

Jones, G 1998 'Without Stars: A Small Essay on Grief', *Heat* 7: 138-150 return to text

Kirkby, J 2006 '"Remembrance of the Future": Derrida on Mourning', *Social Semiotics* 16, 3: 461-472 return to text

Lewis, CS 1966, *1961 A Grief Observed*. London: Faber & Faber return to text

Lloyd, V 2008a *The Young Widow's Book of Home Improvement.* St Lucia: University of Queensland Press return to text

Lloyd, V 2008b 'With Compliments', *Vogue* (Australia) (May): 72 return to text

MacKellar, M 2010 *When It Rains: A Memoir*. North Sydney: Random House return to text

MacKellar, M 2004 *Core of My Heart, My Country: Women's Sense of Place and the Land in Australia and Canada*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press return to text

Reid, C 2009 *A Scattering*. Oxford: Areté return to text

Rieff, D 2009 *Swimming in a Sea of Death*: *A Son's Memoir*. New York: Simon & Schuster return to text

Riemer, A 2011 'Woman of constant sorrow', The *Sydney Morning Herald*. Spectrum (November 26-27): 32-33 return to text

Sontag, S 2003 *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux return to text

Summers, A 2009 *The Lost Mother: A Story of Art and Love*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press return to text

Wittgenstein, L 2001, *1953 Philosophical Investigations: The German Text, with a Revised English Translation* (trans GEM Anscombe). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing return to text

Bernadette Brennan is a Senior Lecturer in Australian Literature at the University of Sydney. In September 2011 she hosted the Narrative and Healing Symposium in which writers, bereavement counselors and palliative care physicians came together to discuss the relationship between narrative and healing. Her most recent publication is Brian Castro's Fiction: The Seductive Play of Language *(Cambria, 2008).*

TEXT
Vol 16 No 1 April 2012
http://www.textjournal.com.au
Editors: Nigel Krauth & Enza Gandolfo
Text@griffith.edu.au