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Living in stories: creative nonfiction as an effective genre for writing about death and bereavement

Abstract
Through the telling of stories and interaction with listener or audience, we give structure to our experience and create order and meaning. Written narrative is, therefore, a medium well suited to exploring the experience of death and bereavement. 'We live in stories, not statistics,' Gilbert says (2002: 223). Parents' stories of their children's deaths serve the same purpose as parents' stories of their living children's ongoing lives. Writing about the death of one's child is a way not only to continue bonds and help other bereaved parents, but also a way to allow the 'wounded storyteller' to give voice to the dead and facilitate catharsis in the teller. Utilising the techniques of creative nonfiction to write such a story, the writer can create a compelling narrative that allows writer and reader to enter 'the space of the story for the other' (Frank 1995: 18).
This paper discusses the human affinity with story telling and the reasons the bereaved write their stories. It also defines the genre of creative nonfiction and outlines the history of its development. Finally it examines four creative nonfiction texts that have influenced my own writing on the topic of parental bereavement.

When my daughter, Rebecca, died of cancer at the age of 23, I had no words to describe this cataclysmic event. Though I am a writer and a teacher of writing, words failed me. It hurt to be inside my skin. It hurt to breathe. It hurt to hear laughter. The silence of my own home, the green beauty of my garden, the quiet paddocks, the river and the mountains provided no refuge. They were empty spaces that reverberated with Rebecca's absence. This new territory was so bleached of colour, so arid and alien, so lacking in anything recognisable, that I had no language to negotiate my way through it. And I could form no response to comments such as, 'Gosh, you're coping so well. I don't know how you do it. Now if this had happened to *my* child …'

I turned to books on grieving to see if the words of others who had travelled this road before me could help me make sense of the landscape. On the shelves of bookshops and libraries, I found books on infant death, child death, sudden violent teenage death and adult death, but there was very little on the death of a young adult child from cancer. As I worked my way through academic literature, books by grief counsellors, psychologists, clergymen and bereaved parents, I found the reason for this dearth of information. Cancer in young adults is extremely rare. In Britain in 1999, only 0.5 per cent of cancer registrations were for teenagers and young adults (Birch, Alston, Quinn &

Kelsey 2003). In the academic literature on death from cancer, only Grinyer's work (2002; 2003; 2006a; 2006b) focuses on *young* adults.

Clinical studies on grieving held no more meaning for me than did books by grief counsellors and psychologists who had not buried their own child. Where the clinical language of academic studies can be impenetrable to bereaved parents, personal experience stories can help them recognise milestones in their own grief journey (Duder 1998; Frank 1995; Holloway 1990). Grinyer's 2002 study, an analysis of narratives by parents of 18 to 25-year-olds with cancer, examines how it feels for parents to live through what Knapp calls 'the ultimate tragedy' (Knapp 1986: 14). These studies, along with books by bereaved parents, became for me an important part of what Frank refers to as the process of 'reconstructing [one's] own map' (1995: 17) and in what Schnell calls 'the cellular structure of my grief' (Schnell 2000: 15). However, not only bereaved parents, but others in the wider community can benefit from such stories, as David Clark, Professor of Medical Sociology at the University of Lancaster indicates in his foreword to Grant's memoir about the death of her young adult son from cancer:

> [It] will no doubt be read by parents who have had similar experiences. Certainly it should be read by health and social care professionals working in oncology and with those who are dying. Pastors, priests, teachers, counsellors and many others will find it has something to offer them as they go about their work. Ultimately though, this is a book for anyone to read. (Clark, in Grant 2005: 10)

Human beings seem to have a natural affinity for storytelling. Doris Lessing, on hearing she had won the Nobel Prize for Literature at the age of 88, explained her drive to write thus: 'Narrative is hardwired into our consciousness' (in McCrum 2007). Through the telling of stories and interaction with listener or audience, we give structure to our experience and create order and meaning. McAdams (1993) draws on research in developmental, social and clinical psychology to show how humans create stories throughout their lifetimes. He attributes this storymaking impulse to the human urge to make sense of and find meaning in crises by assimilating them into personal myths. Gilbert (2002) describes the process of mythmaking as circular. While the stories are a means of establishing a structure for our lives, that which we perceive as our reality establishes a structure for our stories. Such mythmaking begins in adolescence and is part of the psychosocial task of adulthood in forming identity. McAdams (1993) asserts that people *are* the stories and that the stories we create about ourselves constantly evolve as a way of maintaining identity and accommodating our changing view of the world.

Gilbert argues that narrative is a medium well suited to exploring the experience of death and bereavement. 'We live in stories, not statistics,' she says (2002: 223). The terminal diagnosis or death of one's child needs to be assimilated into the changed life story and worldview of the parents (Grinyer 2006b). This is consistent with Addison's explanation for the book she wrote about her son's death from cancer: 'These stories are my attempt to incorporate my memories of Charlie's suffering and death within the bigger picture of our shared family life and to chart a path through to inner peace, and the restoration of family harmony' (Addison 2001: 2).

Parents' stories of their children's deaths serve the same purpose as their stories of their living children's ongoing lives (Grinyer 2006b). As Clabburn says, in describing his relationship with his living daughter and his dead son:

> I've loved my son and daughter equally, learned from both equally and will continue to love and learn from them. I'm not looking for 'closure'. I'm looking for Tom to stay with me in a way that allows me to smile as well as mourn. (Clabburn 2007: 5)

Writing about the death of one's child is a way not only to continue bonds, but also to allow the 'wounded storyteller' (Frank 1995) to give voice to the dead. Parents in Grinyer's study (2002) were motivated to write their stories to facilitate catharsis in themselves, to honour their children, and to help others faced with the same situation. Storytelling has power, which may be used as a tool to help the bereaved construct a new reality. Morgan expresses it thus: 'We may not know what we think or feel until we have heard ourselves saying it' (cited Riches & Dawson 2000: 186). Through stories we can make sense of the past, understand how the present came into being and predict what is likely to occur in the future.

After Isabel Allende finished writing *Paula* (1995), the journal she kept while her daughter was dying, she lost her desire to write fiction. Four years later, she could not shake off her grief: 'It lives on forever, just below the skin' (Allende 2008: 114). A friend advised her that there was no such thing as writer's block. It was just that the well had run dry and needed to be refilled. Allende learned that she could refill the word well by travelling to different places:

> My imagination wakens when I leave my familiar surroundings and confront other ways of life, different people, languages I don't understand, when I'm exposed to unforeseen vicissitudes. I can tell the well is filling because my dreams become more active. The images and stories I accumulate on the trip are transformed into vivid dreams. (Allende 2008: 208)

This rang true for me. A year after our daughter's death, my husband and I travelled to the Arabian Gulf. As I began living and working in Oman and writing about the Omani people and landscape, my dreams returned. At the end of a year in Oman, I was able to write a few short stories that incorporated aspects of my grief. At this stage, unlike Allende, I found fiction easier to manage than a factual narrative.

The way each individual deals with grief is unique. A parent, whose young adult daughter with cancer hanged herself from a tree in the garden, told me that she forced herself to walk past that tree every day for five years until it held no more horror for her. While my research into parental bereavement contributed to the way I 'reconstruct[ed] [my] own map' (Frank 1995: 17), writing my story enabled me to 'walk past the tree'. Writing about a traumatic event does not 'disappear on the breath' (Bolton et al 2003: 97) the way talking about it does. The process of writing brings clarification to the writer and creates a reflecting place that allows the writer space to negotiate between inner and outer realities.

Where does one start to describe the death of one's child, the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual exhaustion of grieving, and the long, slow process of learning to live with such a loss? Allende, in comparing the birth of her grandchild and the death of her daughter, says, 'Once again I experienced the epiphany I had the day Andrea was born and the unforgettable night you left us forever. Birth and death, Paula, are so similar … sacred and mysterious moments' (2008: 41). A friend similarly described the birth of her first grandchild. 'First there's the waiting. And the feeling of time suspended. Something calm, quiet and sacred. Birth and death are so similar …' This element of suspended time was something I understood, but I was not sure how

I could capture it in a factual narrative. How could such a narrative delineate the sense of colour draining from the sky, the feeling of the earth holding its breath? How accurate could I be without sounding either detached or maudlin? While I pondered these questions, I began writing the exegetical component of my thesis. The focus on academic theories of grief and the language of bereavement created the distance I needed and postponed the moment when I would need to 'look at the tree'.

At this point, I came across Christopher Noël's memoir *In the unlikely event of a water landing* (2005). It traces Noël's grief after the death of his fiancée, Brigid, in a car crash, and his attempts to come to terms with it. He includes extracts from his diary, from Brigid's journal, his mother's journal that she kept when he was a child, letters from Brigid and letters he wrote to people involved with the crash scene. He describes the rituals and mementos he and Brigid's family and friends build to keep her memory alive, while his grief seems to be 'a quiet, endless bleeding out my eyeholes' (2005: 25):

> Everything seems lacquered over with grey. Sometimes I force myself out of this apartment and have fun; but it only seems to splash off me like water off a hunk of clay. Beautiful days I resent and feel either oppressed by or just simply distant from. These fall colours look like flat photographs to me. Actually, that's how all seasons seem - backdrop pictures and a wind machine. This one's certainly better than spring, when everything else is coming back to life. I'm actually looking forward to the deathly charcoals of November. (2005: 73)

Reading this reminded me that at the end of the first winter after my daughter's death, I wanted to push the new green shoots back into the ground, to delay the return of the sun, to stop the cherry blossom frothing the trees, and to silence the newborn lambs. The shimmering light of spring reinforced the fact that the world had not stopped turning, and this knowledge was shocking.

Noël's description of his weeping while horseriding is unsentimental and raw:

> It's not until we break into a canter that I start to weep and even then it's not the good kind that others hear. My whole torso has become a chamber for weeping; it's the sound of me sometimes, sometimes Brigid, but mostly just an anonymous weeping, and a keening, as though to represent the way any soul ought to carry on, though mine never does. (2005: 159)

My empathy with Noël's description of his lamenting was later rendered into my own work thus:

> In the middle of a sentence I was left directionless, wordless, skinless, stripped back to the bone. I screamed. And screamed and screamed and screamed and screamed and screamed. The screaming turned into wailing and the wailing turned into a sound I'd never heard before. I found out later the word for it was keening. The keening went on and on until there was no more breath.

When Noël goes scuba diving, he follows the dive master into a dark underwater cave. The beauty of a school of fish thrills him. 'For a moment, I'm beat, I'm just flinched, humble, happy, all my shadows found and flashed away' (2005: 175). He tries another more challenging dive to confront his fear of the water. While there, he takes out Brigid's favourite shirt that he has brought with

him and releases it to the sea. 'The two stones that I've tied into the left sleeve work like charms. I watch it going away from me, a mossy clump led by that sleeve into the dense, enclosing violet. And then, before it's entirely gone, I stop looking' (2005: 195).

After this trip, he finds his grief has still not abated. 'These five months, since my last night in Belize, I have tried without succeeding to crawl out of the shadow and start weaving life again, feel at home in the ordinary daylight' (2005: 210). He studies the police photos of the accident and meets the nurse who tended Brigid to find out every detail of what happened while she was dying. This, for Noël, is the equivalent of 'walking past the tree' and only then is he able to accept the reality of Brigid's death. He contrasts CS Lewis's spiritual experience of his dead wife with his own lack of such an experience, but concludes that 'it's through language that I can do my best for Brigid, to reach her, to let her reach me; she'd do the same if we traded places' (2005: 231).

Noël's writing, with its weaving of factual information, dialogue, flashback, metaphor and imagery, was for me, a far more powerful evocation of grief than the models proposed by researchers such as Bowlby and Parkes (1970), Kavanaugh (1974), Kübler-Ross (1970), and Worden (1982) with their emphasis on stages to be worked through until the goal of detachment and reinvestment was reached. As Walter (1999) points out, while those models may be useful in working with grieving spouses or relatives, they are not appropriate for bereaved parents for whom it is impossible to detach and reinvest.

Noël's writing was my introduction to the possibilities of creative nonfiction in writing about grief. This term acknowledges a genre that is neither fiction nor traditional nonfiction. Creative nonfiction, using the techniques normally associated with fiction, presents facts in a creative way (Gutkind 2001). However, though the label is relatively new - it was first used officially in 1983, in the application form for the National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship, to distinguish between traditional journalism and the personal essay (Gutkind 2001) - the genre has a long history. The journalism of Daniel Defoe, Charles Dickens, Jack London and George Orwell, the memoirs of Ernest Hemingway and the cultural critiques of James Baldwin are all examples of literary nonfiction (Forché & Gerard 2001). In the 1960s, writers such as Norman Mailer and Truman Capote pushed genre boundaries by introducing fictional techniques into their nonfiction writing. In 1979, Mailer published *The executioner's song*, a nonfiction novel on the life and death of convicted murderer Gary Gilmore, for which Mailer was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. By the 1970s, Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese and Lillian Ross were publishing essays in *The New Yorker*, which, along with other work by Mailer, Rex Reed, Terry Southern and Hunter S Thompson, were labelled 'new journalism'.

New journalism metamorphosed through a variety of names, including literary nonfiction, factual fiction, documentary narrative, and literature of actuality (Forché & Gerard 2001; Gutkind 2001). It then became used as a label to describe the book-length works of the 1990s by writers such as Gay Talese and Tom Wolfe (Gutkind, Cahill & Skloot 2001). The categories of contemporary writing that can be classified as creative nonfiction are memoir, nature writing, personal essay, travel writing, critical essay and literary journalism. The common elements that run through them all are a flexibility of form that can cross genres, veracity, literary approaches to nonfiction and the personal voice (Root & Steinberg 1999).

After finishing Noël's book I re-read a letter from my aunt, written on 15 January 1991, after her only son, Maurice, the cousin I grew up with, had died from colon cancer. My aunt had nursed her husband and sister - my mother -

through cancer, and she was a volunteer visitor at a local hospice. A believer in spiritualism, she was also one of the most down-to-earth women I have ever known. When I lived in Brazil, I dreamed that the deceased female members of our family surrounded her as she lay ill in bed. I wrote to her to say I was anxious about her. She replied that she had indeed been close to death and had woken on the operating table with a conviction of being surrounded by her family in spirit.

Rebecca resembled Maurice. When he died, she was 12. I thought many times as she was growing up that I hoped she did not resemble him too closely. When she was diagnosed with appendix cancer, I dreamt he came to see me. I told him how angry I was that my child had cancer at the age of 22. He simply smiled and invited me to dance with him.

Thinking about my aunt and my cousin, I remembered my mother's opposition to her sister's beliefs in spiritualism. Though I had been interested in the topic when I was young and had attended spiritualist meetings with my aunt, I did not intend to pursue that path after Rebecca died. However, subsequent experiences taught me that the spiritual dimension to grieving is as real as the physical, emotional and mental dimensions. My decision to incorporate some of my own spiritual experiences in my narrative were made on the basis that these were indeed *my* experiences. Subjective, yes, but to leave them out would be to tell only part of the story.

The subjective is not only allowed in creative nonfiction, says Gutkind (2001), but encouraged. Through the personal voice, a universal viewpoint can be illuminated, he says. This universal viewpoint is illustrated in Joan Didion's *The year of magical thinking* (2006) in which Didion describes the sudden death of John Dunne, her husband of 40 years, and her first year of bereavement. The book details the way Didion coped with her shock and disbelief while struggling with medical bureaucracy and at the same time being aware that her sick daughter might die too. Finding the self-help books on bereavement useless, she researched the clinical literature to find out all she could about why her husband had died and why her daughter had become ill. Consequently, her book is full of medical detail:

> The way I write is who I am, or have become, yet this is a case in which I wish I had, instead of words and their rhythms, a cutting room, equipped with an Avid, a digital system on which I could touch a key and collapse the sequence of time, show you simultaneously all the frames of memory that come to me now, let you pick the takes, the marginally different expressions, the variant readings of the same lines. This is a case in which I need more than words to find the meaning. This is a case in which I need whatever it is I think or believe to be penetrable, if only for myself. (Didion 2006: 8)

Didion's obsessive piecing together of the events that led to Dunne's death, her fiercely protective managing of her daughter's medical treatment and her inability to find meaning in words, are summed up in her statement that 'grief turns out to be a place none of us know until it happens' (Didion 2006: 188). Her stark, uncompromising prose refutes Wolcott's claim that creative nonfiction is either 'navel-gazing' or a 'sickly transfusion' of fiction and nonfiction (Wolcott 1997: 90).

Didion's repetitive use of the phrase 'this is a case' conveys her sense of trying to stay in control, as her life begins to spin out of control. My own use of the

device is to convey the sense of shocked detachment that allowed me to function immediately following Rebecca's death:

> I stroked Rebecca's still warm face.
> All the treatment.
> All the prayers.
> All leading to this.
> She left when we weren't looking.
> She slipped out of the world as easily as she'd slipped into it.
> No drama.
> No fuss. She was born. She lived. She died. Rebecca has died.
> Rebecca is dead.

Many books that have been marketed as 'fiction' are hybrids of fact and fiction. Erica Jong refers to them, in an article in the *New York Times*, as 'slide-forms' (Jong 1985). However, such hybrid works are not creative nonfiction. Roorbach (2001: 80) makes the point that even when fiction is autobiographical and memoir is fictional, the two genres are very different artforms in terms of writer intention and reader expectation.

Helen Garner's novel *The spare room* (2008) describes the frustrations and exhaustion of caring for a friend who is dying of cancer and who, in refusing to accept this fact, spends her time chasing alternative therapies. In an interview with Kerry O'Brien, Garner acknowledges that this book drew heavily on her own experience. However, by calling it fiction, she says, she was able to invent and 'free myself of the contract that you would normally have with a reader if it was nonfiction' (in O'Brien 2008).

In fiction, facts may be entirely made up, and snippets from the author's memory may be embellished. In creative nonfiction, facts should not be falsified and the writer is not concealed behind a fictional character (Gutkind 2001: 175). Nonetheless, fact is not necessarily the same as truth. Memoir might be said to be truth-based, but memories of people, places and conversations are selective and subjective. As Hampl puts it: 'even legal documents are only valiant attempts to consign the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, to paper. Even they remain versions' (Hampl 1999: 303). Roorbach adds that our memories, imperfect though they may be, make us what we are, and that in writing memoir, it is the memory of the truth that is presented, as opposed to only verifiable facts (2001: 79-81). The 'creative' in creative nonfiction does not refer to the invention of facts, but to how those facts are presented.

The catalyst for Australian writer Susan Addison in writing *Mother lode: Stories of home life and home death* (2001) was the death of her 19-year-old son, Charlie, from a brain tumour in 1995. Addison chronicles the 18 months of family life from Charlie's diagnosis to his death. There are stories of Charlie's life while growing up, the reactions to his diagnosis, dealings with health professionals, and the stories his mother 'swaddled him in' as he was dying, as she had when he was a child. Addison refers to these stories as 'Before Tumour' and 'After Tumour', and she repeated them at Charlie's funeral. 'I read his stories to the mourners in a grief-anaesthetised trance, my rib cage wrenched open, my wounds raw, my heart pulsing. At one with all mammals who suckle their young and thrash about when separated' (Addison 2001: 14). There are also stories about the deaths of Charlie's grandparents and the comparison of death at the end of a long productive life with one that occurs when adult life has hardly begun.

At his memorial service she says, 'My tears seep. This is not what I sent him off for, all those summers, with his cricket kit and lunch. Replay, this partisan

spectator demands. This game's not fair. He deserves to play on' (Addison 2001: 56). Her despair at his dying is expressed in 'That it should come to this. This body I breastfed and nourished' (Addison 2001: 65). Her writing, unlike the objective reporting of non-literary nonfiction, exemplifies what Gutkind (1997), Roorbach (2001), and Root and Steinberg (1999) refer to as allowing the reader to live the experience:

> My body is heavy with stillness, my arms lie limp, hands cupped in my lap, feet grounded on floor … My son is still too, a skeletal body lying at home. The still centre of his own making … Time has little meaning for him. He slips out of our shared time and explores eternity. (Addison 2001: 69)

Addison describes how her hopes for Charlie's recovery turned to hopes for a peaceful death for him when that was all she had left to give him. 'Like weaning him from breastfeeding, I came to believe that, mother and child, we'd both agreed to let go of our bond' (Addison 2001: 86).

When she confronts the moment of Charlie's death she has no words. 'The moment has come that my mind refused to imagine. I have been pushed on stage without my lines. I am empty of words and emotion. Absence of breath. The labouring mechanism of Charlie's body shuts down' (Addison 2001: 92).

The timing of Charlie's death is significant for her as it is the same time she used to collect him from school and the time mothers take their children safely home: 'My child has been absorbed into eternal silence. I am still here; that is the mystery. I exist in this life and from this moment onwards, Charlie is unreachable' (Addison 2001: 93).

The significance of time and having to let go her child, expressed in Addison's work, influenced the way I described a dream I had while camping on a beach in Oman on Christmas Day. The dream was about a friend who had died at the age of 20:

> The dream shakes me awake. I want to slide back to kaleidoscopes and spinning tops. The sleigh and the snowman. I toss and turn and turn and toss. It's the hour when babies slip into the world and old people slip out of it, and sometimes those in between. Chris murmurs, deep inside dreams of his own. The sky is packed with stars swollen to fat blobs of light. They are so close I reach up to see if I can touch one. *Rebecca at seven stretching up to the top of the Christmas tree with her cut-out star.* I walk into the waves with my baby in my arms. And set her adrift on the sea. A bird flies low overhead.

In Addison's mind, her son becomes the fast-growing wattle that pushes so much energy into exuberant growth and vivid flowers that it dies young. However, where she has consoling images, Charlie's father experiences disturbing dreams. The release from the intense caring for their son and readying themselves for the next crisis plunges the parents into a vacuum after his death. In describing this, Addison slips into the third person, creating a distance between herself and the enormity of her grief:

> During the final weeks of the son's life, the focus of the family's world had shrunk to just the sickbed … in those bed-bound days they'd dreamt of the freedom to drive far from the city, out of reach of doctors and hospitals. In grief, they found 'escape' just one more reminder: they were no longer needed. (Addison 2001: 102)

Finding solace in everyday routines, Addison and her husband were able to function again. 'Lean inwards,' the mother nudged the father. 'We'll prop each other upright and stumble forward together' (Addison 2001: 106). She laments the fact that the natural order was reversed and that Charlie's parents and grandparents had had to attend his funeral service. 'The unthinkable, the unimaginable happened and the world would never seem predictable again' (Addison 2001: 102).

English writer Sue Grant's *Standing on his own two feet* (2005) describes the trajectory of her son Alexander's osteosarcoma and his death two years later. The family lived in Germany, but Alexander decided he wanted to study at Warwick University in England. At the end of his first term he came home, emaciated and in pain. A rare and aggressive form of bone cancer was diagnosed. Grant writes about the months of treatment, surgery, a remission, and Alexander going back to university. However, the cancer returned and this time there was no possibility of further treatment. She describes how they were determined that he should die at home, against the advice of doctors and friends. They warned her how emotionally draining it would be to care for him at home and warned her to think of herself and her family. She says:

> So I thought of myself, my son and the rest of the family. And I brought him home. There wasn't much more to consider. That he wouldn't have to die in hospital was a promise we made him when he was first diagnosed with cancer. Only then we didn't - couldn't believe it would actually happen to our child. (Grant 2005: 11)

A home care nurse brought the daily infusion bottles, the oxygen, and monitored the morphine pump. They had a hospital bed and re-organised the living room to accommodate it. The technical challenges were overcome. When friends asked if there was anything they could do she asked them to treat the family normally and to ring rather than wait to be rung. She also pleaded that they not be left alone to deal with the situation they were in:

> I dreamt of crowds of well-wishers who would miraculously turn up at the front door brandishing dusters and armed with a large cake… within a short space of time everything would gleam and we would all sit down, tired but cheerful for coffee and cake. If I had had the courage to ask for this kind of help I'm sure people would have obliged. But I was too embarrassed to say anything. So nothing changed. (Grant 2005: 67)

As Alexander's chemotherapy began, his hair fell out and he asked the nurse to shave his head. This was the moment Grant was dreading. 'Nothing symbolised cancer more realistically to me than the sight of hairless children. Now mine was about to join their ranks' (Grant 2005: 58). As his condition deteriorated, she thought of him in his volunteer work, driving handicapped patients in a mini-bus every day, from Hamburg to Denmark. Alexander who, Grant says, had voted in a general election and shaved everyday, now lay helplessly on his back waiting for his mother to change his dressings.

She describes the skeletal figures with bald heads and big questioning eyes in the cancer ward of the hospital and the horror of seeing her son:

> When I walked into Alexander's room the following morning, it was to witness the by now familiar scene of a pile of bones with a skull protruding from the bed covers, a room dark and silent apart from the monotonous droning of the infusion pump, the

> bowls at the side of the bed overflowing with vomit. At least the pain had eased somewhat. (Grant 2005: 79)

After the treatment, Alexander went into remission and Grant says people could not understand why she did not immerse herself in pleasurable activities once again. 'Everything was fine now, wasn't it? How could I describe this immobilising exhaustion and the fear of a possible relapse?' (Grant 2005: 116).

When Alexander did relapse she says, 'While I sobbed brokenly, he stroked me calmly and composedly. His broad neck. Shoulders and arms strong and muscular. His skin warm. I thought of the day when it would be cold to the touch' (Grant 2005: 132).

When Alexander refused further treatment, the family decided to make the most of the time they had left together and to focus more on life than on death. However, Grant also wondered on which day her son would die. She came home from shopping one afternoon and found a dead blackbird on the doorstep, which she took as a symbol of impending death. Soon after, Alexander railed against dying when he had so much he still wanted to do, books to read, a new relationship, writing a research paper on artificial intelligence, feeling the wind in his face while driving. The following day he changed his mind and said he had had enough. Soon after came the day when:

> Uli checked Alexander's pulse. It was still flickering - just. And then, very quietly and very peacefully, it stopped. It was 6.30 in the morning. We turned all the machines off, lit the candle and sat around him, holding his hands and stroking his lovely blond hair until the sun rose in the east on that freezing but sunny 23 January. (Grant 2005: 166)

After Alexander's death, Grant did not want to return to her teaching job. She turned, instead, to writing, first contributing to and editing articles for magazines on bereavement and then working as a freelance journalist:

> I discovered a handful of word fragments and found I could stick them together to form chains. Some of them fell apart again immediately but others held and they constituted the first makeshift footbridge. I began to write small provisional bridges (articles for the regional newspaper, which then grew into air bridges (articles for publications abroad) and eventually evolved into a load-carrying suspension bridge - this book. (Grant 2005: 169)

The personal voice, scene setting, dialogue, layering, tense shifts, flashbacks, metaphor and simile are all literary devices commonly used in fiction, and they are used to great effect in Noël's, Didion's, Addison's and Grant's memoirs on grief. In these books, however, they are used to illuminate fact, as distinct from using fiction to enhance fact or using fact to enhance fiction.

While reading these four memoirs, I felt as Schnell did when she describes her reaction to some of the books she found on grief: '[I] went beyond simple identification, to a literary critical appreciation of the way language was working in these powerful pieces of writing' (2000: 4). As Amy Dillard (1999) found after writing poetry for 15 years, creative nonfiction can:

> carry meaning in its structures, and like poetry, can tolerate all sorts of figurative language as well as alliteration and even rhyme. The range of rhythms is larger and grander than it is in poetry and it can handle discursive ideas and plain information

> as well as character and story. It can do everything. I felt I had switched from a single reed instrument to a full orchestra. (Dillard 1999: 278)

This approach to nonfiction convinced me it was the right mode in which to write the creative component of my thesis. The next decision was where to begin. Rebecca was not defined by her death. She was a major part of my life for 23 years and she will continue to be a major part of my life until my life ends. I wanted, therefore, to incorporate her living and breathing personality into the narrative. Some of the people who loved her most and some of those who supported us most during her illness and death were friends we made in Brazil when Rebecca, my husband and I lived there for one year. In this country, Rebecca blossomed from a shy teenager into a confident young woman. I decided, therefore, to open the story in Brazil and to draw it to a close in Brazil with our return there two years after Rebecca's death.

I re-read all the letters I wrote to my family while we lived in Brazil, as well as letters to and from our Brazilian friends when we returned to New Zealand. Then there were the letters to and from friends and family about Rebecca's cancer diagnosis, the course of her illness, and her death. By the time I had finished those letters I was able to open the book in which Rebecca's friends and lecturers from the Art and Design School had written their thoughts about her. Then I could tackle the cards and letters we had received after her funeral. Finally, I read the stories and essays Rebecca had written for her sixth form New Zealand correspondence school course while we were living in Brazil. These all served to create a context for my narrative, though in the end, the only extracts I inserted directly were from Rebecca's stories and letters. In this way, her own words, her voice, her sense of humour and her unique way of viewing the world speak for themselves.

Only after I had written the section on our lives in Brazil could I 'face the tree' squarely and write about Rebecca's death and its aftermath. In writing about the placing of her ashes under a rowan tree in our garden, I wanted to convey a sense of the beauty and stillness of the environment and the stillness within ourselves, shattered by the shock of what we were doing. I also wanted to incorporate something of Rebecca's appearance and personality in the scene. The blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl, who rode a horse and studied art and Celtic mythology, was now ashes in my hand. The juxtaposition is meant to be shocking, but it is also intended to show the strength of Rebecca's character in the 'pure grit' analogy:

> Chris puts the green box on the earth next to the rowan tree. 'Rowan, protector of young women,' Rebecca had said, filing sketches for her Celtic Goddess project. We reach into the box and take a handful of ashes. A truck hurtles down the gravel road, shattering the stillness, sending up clouds of dust. There's no wind yet, but later there'll be gusts, scattering red and gold leaves around my garden. We need to say her name, but we have no breath. I form its shape in silence. Let her name float on the wind. Let it drift like mist around the verandah posts, under the eaves of the house, in and out of the trees and bushes, over the paddocks where the sheep graze, down the road to the river, where the Alps shine against a brilliant blue, where the tracks are covered in orange poppies and wild purple lupins, where the air is filled with the humming of bees and the songs of larks, and the striking of hooves on stone. And the girl on the horse turns. She flicks back her long blonde hair. And looks at you with eyes as blue as the sky. The ashes slip through our

> fingers to the roots of the rowan. I wonder why they're called ashes. They're not. They're grit. Pure grit.

While focusing outward on the academic discourse that informed my exegesis, the incubating narrative grew and took shape, nurtured by more discoveries than I had originally imagined. It was time to crack open the shell. It was time for it to hatch. It was time for me to groom its feathers and steady it for flight. It was time for it to perch on that tree and sing alone.

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