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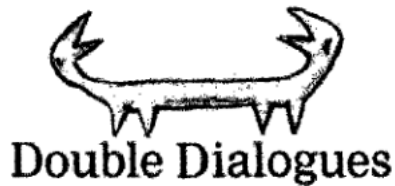
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Breath & Elegy: Moments of Grief and Art

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Dear Annette,

I'm approaching you about a collaborative visual arts and creative writing project that I wish to initiate.

I've written a memoir, *Midnight Water* (2004a), just published. It's about the drowning of my father and brother, eleven years ago, in an irrigation channel in country Victoria. I chose to set the narrative in one day, the day of the drownings. In making that structural decision, I had to leave out material that I want to use in other pieces of work.

One such story that I must tell is inspired by the grieving time my younger sister and I shared in the years following our losses. My sister witnessed the drownings. I see visions of her, running over and over along the banks of the channel, unable to help, the currents too perilous. Not long afterwards she moved north, a long way north, to live in a flat perched on a spit of land overlooking an estuary and a beach. I too moved to a flat. Mine was near a beach in Melbourne, but with no sea view. Between these places we wrote letters to each other. She started to make paper, setting up her implements in her backyard, moving through the long rituals of papermaking, and then she wrote her letters on the paper she had made. In her letters, she repeated her processes, detailing to me how to make paper. And we wrote to one another of our grief. We shared the sharpest facets of our grief, the darkest moments and the lightest, as though we had an unspoken pact. I found myself visualising the rituals she was undertaking, the drawing out of the reconstituted paper from her deep, cool vessels of water.

I keep seeing this story as a visual image even as I see and hear it in words. So, I am seeking collaboration. I would like a visual artist to interpret the story in a visual form.

In my mind I keep scrolling out words associated with the project. Grief. Trauma. Loss. Ritual. Elegy. Performance. And that hoary word: healing. I think I dislike the word because of the image it brings to my mind; a skin inscribed with a smooth, satiny scar. A

closed aperture. My grief is not like that, nor would I wish it to be. An aperture can be a wound. It can also be a window. It can be a threshold.

Julia Kristeva writes: "beware of still waters and overly-obedient children" (1989, p. 50). A smooth scar can rupture, particularly when it is a scar on the skin of the psyche.

In Kristevan terms, it is not the dead person who is grieved, who is the object of sorrow. She writes:

When I say that the object of my grief is less the village, the mother, or the lover that I miss here and now than the blurred representation that I keep and put together in the darkroom of what thus becomes my psychic tomb, this at once locates my ill-being in the imagination (1989, p. 61).

Kristeva toys with the Western "obsession with conveyability" (1989, p. 67); the metaphysical "discourse of the pain that is stated and relived on account of that very statement" (1989, p. 61).

In my work thus far, I have valued the notion not so much of statement, but of enunciation, and of the significance of taking moments to carry out elegiac acts (even though elegy may not be the only form or intention for any given work). Acts of elegy tend to be beautiful, and I use that word while keeping in mind that beauty and terror can be flip sides of an entity. I took the title of my book, *Midnight Water*, from a fragment of the poem "Five Bells" by Kenneth Slessor:

Where have you gone? The tide is over you,
The turn of midnight waters over you,
As Time is over you, and mystery,
And memory, the flood that does not flow (1984, p. 277).

The phrase "midnight water," for me, describes the essence of the sublime: that which is beautiful and yet terrible in its power, that which approaches and even transcends the limits of experience and expression. The title *Midnight Water*, then, is in my mind a metaphor for grief at its worst and at its best.

I count as acts of art those moments of grief such as the papermaking and the letter writing, but also other moments, such as when my sister walked along the banks of the channel where our family members drowned, leaving a posy of flowers picked from a garden. I count a day when I walked across sand dunes to rip-torn waves, stumbling over a paper-fragile seagull's skull that shattered under my step, to write in the sand, to wait for communication from the dead, furious at the silence apart from the noise of waves and wind. It may be the absorption in purposes other than art that gives these acts their complexity and freshness as rituals.

And I read Kristeva and come to this:

Westerners are convinced they can convey the mother - they believe in her, to be sure, but in order to convey her, that is, to betray her, transpose her, be free of her. Such melancholy persons triumph over the sadness at being separated from

the loved object through an unbelievable effort to master signs in order to have them correspond to primal, unnameable, traumatic experience (1989, p. 61).

I recognise parts of my experience - my condition - in this theory. But I'm seeking possibilities for the elegiac act that is not only about obsession, but about a kind of euphoria. I'm looking to a euphoria that is about functioning in life without being overwhelmed by despair or joy, or perhaps indeed being overwhelmed, immersed, and still functioning, even thriving.

Leigh Gilmore's study, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (2001), focuses on works of autobiography that exist (stylistically, thematically, or otherwise) at the boundaries of recognised categories of autobiography. But Kristeva writes: "if all the fashions of naming it are allowable, does not the Thing postulated in itself become dissolved in the thousand and one ways of naming it?" (1989, p. 68). And, she continues, "The initial belief in conveyance becomes changed into a belief in stylistic performance for which the near side of the text, its other, primal as it might be, is less important than the success of the text itself" (1989, p. 68). So, an elegiac act, for instance, distances the subject even further from the object of grief? This certainly connects with well-established theories of memory and the roles of creativity in remembering. It also relates to quite commonplace statements made in memoir-writing texts. For example, Annie Dillard writes:

Don't hope in a memoir to preserve your memories. If you prize your memories as they are, by all means avoid - eschew - writing a memoir. Because it is a certain way to lose them. After you've written, you can no longer remember anything but the writing. However true you make that writing, you've created a monster. This has happened to me many, many times, because I'm willing to turn events into pieces of paper. After I've written about any experience, my memories - those elusive, fragmentary patches of color and feeling - are gone; they've been replaced by the work (cited in Rainer, 1997, p. 102).

Is the act of elegising, then, essentially about creativity? Perhaps it is less about attempts to heal and salve, and more about rupture, and the disturbance of something like Kristeva's Western notions of conveyability. In elegy, then, memory is not as relevant as remembrance, as narrative, dialogue, performance; death is less relevant than life for the bereaved, immersed in ongoing virtual dialogues with the deceased. The stories of grief are not so much conveyed as created and recreated.

Dear Gaylene,

At the age of seventeen, during my first week of nursing, I had my first encounter with death. We had been talking, the patient and I, and I was in process of feeding him when life trickled from his body. I was aghast. That emotion stayed with me as I later entered the room with great fear in my heart to "lay out" the body of this man with whom I had been chatting such a short time before. What would I find? How would I handle it? What did it mean, here one moment, gone the next; the breath now gone from this man who had carried love, work and sorrow in his being? The relief, when I started to wash and prepare his body for his family to see, was overwhelming. He was gone and with it his

breath. The empty shell of his physical body was all that remained. I felt a tenderness and honour at being able to perform this human ritual on this now empty skin, to which I still talked, as I remembered the warmth of our conversation and his presence. The effect of this experience on me was profound, yet it was his family, not I, who shared the pain of grief at his loss. Whilst the inexpressible pain of grief waited for me in the later folds of my life, this vivid memory of life departing with breath from the body, gave some form to my existential sorrow. Breath departed and with it, his voice. My breath and voice speak now of the memory of his existence, yet my words provide only the framework to articulate the silence that surrounds him.

I now recognise that just as I had performed this ritualistic act as an act of human compassion, so also might the person or people who made two Ethiopian Body scrolls, today framed and hung vertically behind glass in the National Library of Australia. The aged parchment on which words were written so long ago, now looks like curled strips of skin. These 'healing scrolls' were once laid across a sick person's body in the belief that somehow the sound of the human voice carrying words and their meaning would pass between this artefact made by human hands to the body in pain.

Throughout history, individual and collective voices have been raised to pray for the dead or dying through the chanting or the recitation of texts. Likewise, prayer flags with words written on fabric, have been thought to release the 'voice' with the breath of the wind into the void or to the 'Other.' These performances of language are acted out through the body and voices of the living, and expressed through the making and sharing of material or verbal artefacts.

As breath departs the body, death leaves a 'wound' on the bereaved.
Breath: inhaling, exhaling, sharply, softly, slowly.
Stopping the breath: gagging the mouth, stilling the tongue.
Silencing the larynx and vocal chords - organs of speech
Opening the mouth, body cry, whole body shudder.
Sounds, not words, issue forth from somewhere deep within the body.

In her book, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry describes how the inexpressibility of pain creates a 'split' between body and voice. Speech is shattered and the subject finds themselves in a space of "sounds anterior to learned language" (1987, p. 54). The silence caused by grief has been described by Freud as Melancholia or "Blocked mourning" (Saltzman, 1999, p. 76). However, when writing on this subject and Anselm Kiefer's paintings of melancholia and loss, Lisa Saltzman notes:

Of course, the paradoxical nature of melancholia, its being at once a subjective disposition that threatens an individual with incapacitating sadness and at the same time a contemplative disposition that allows for a sophisticated insight and creativity, is embedded in its very conception (1999. p.152, n. 1).

Whilst Scarry explains how pain shatters or unmakes the unity of the subject and its world, she also argues that creative practice can express and remake that world. In the creative process of making visible or articulating the pain, the individual momentarily projects the wound of grief away from the body, allowing human compassion to be shared through an artefact of individual and collective grief.

But how can the bereaved share the suffering or articulate the pain that plunges them into silence: body without voice. This is truly the place of silence, but can silence speak, or rather can we speak or articulate silence?

Amando Maggi tells the story of the Florentine mystic Saint Maria Maddalena de Pazzi (1566-1607) who, through her performances of spoken language, gestures, exclamations, whisperings, trembling, screams and silences, attempted at once to evoke then silence the Word, by re-enacting the death of God (1997; pp. 110-126). Maggi explains that in the nun's attempt to "give the Word a body/voice" she speaks in many different voices, but "She acts herself exclusively as a body in pain" (1997, pp. 113 & 115). He compares the non-didactic intent of Maria's monologues to that of the contemporary artist Linda Montano in her video performance, *Mitchell's Death* (1978). Although separated by the centuries, Maggi suggests that:

Both Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi and Linda Montano perform a death and are performed in their 'silencing' voices. Both of them speak in order to originate silence. Silence does have a 'story,' a plot which is secondary to the act of 'giving life' to silence itself. A Litany is a speech with no silences that only articulates silence (1997, p. 117).

I am suggesting that the voice of the bereaved, silenced by the wound of grief, has an alternative avenue for their 'silent' speech through an embodied performance of language, found in the acts of sounding and writing as drawing or inscription.

Dear Annette,

The story of the two sisters is written. I'm reluctant to categorise it as fiction or non-fiction. It is a story. Its title is: The sea-blue background.

And you've told me about your painting, and the particular shade of blue that you made, that seemed to belong to this painting: this story, perhaps. You've described the vessels of text, and I think of them as vessels fat and pregnant with story.

But I also want to trace back a little and enjoy remembering meeting you in person. I travelled along the coast, we met, and went to your studio. As soon as I entered the space, I was struck by my reaction to the paintings on your walls and your work bench. The smell of the oils was overwhelming, but delicate, still: lemony. I saw the deep, dark blues in many of your works: colours that have obsessed me throughout my life. My chest contracted at the sight of some of your paintings. I have never had such a visceral response to art as I had that afternoon. I could not read the text, nor did I need to, or even desire to, which is saying a lot for a writer. I felt I could intuit its meaning, or at least the meaning I saw in it, drank of it.

You locked up the studio and we went to a cafe by a wild corner of sea crashing in on rocks, a slight rain, grey sky, traces of thunder. Inside we drank tea and I lay the page proofs of my book *Midnight Water* between us on the table and we looked at the pretty way the typesetter had arranged the chapter headings and margins. We spoke of art

and grief. As time passed I was distracted by a scene unfurling on the other side of the cafe windows. A large marquee had been erected, and fire torches had been poked into the sand outside the marquee. Drums - tribal kinds of drums, tom toms, maybe - had been set up inside, and a knot of people stood near the entrance, greeting those who approached. Some people wept, and some hugged one another long and tight. These people were gathering for a memorial service. As we spoke of our experiences of grief and planned our artworks, these strangers to us created their own performances of grief.

Gilmore writes:

Something of a consensus has already developed that takes trauma as unrepresentable to assert that trauma is beyond language in some crucial way, that language fails in the face of trauma, and that trauma mocks language and confronts it with its insufficiency (Gilmore 2001; p. 6).

This is in line with Kristeva's work in *Black Sun*. But Gilmore goes on to discuss the paradoxes of concepts of language and trauma, stating another view that 'swings to the other extreme to claim that without language, experience is nothing' (Gilmore 2001; p. 7). I am reminded of the recently published *Precarious Life: The Powers of Violence of Mourning* (2004), by Judith Butler. She writes of constructed hierarchies of grief. If a person does not fit into an appropriate space in the hierarchy - say, in the case of dead Iraqis, or, for example, those who have died of AIDS - then their lives are 'unthinkable and ungrievable' (ibid, p. xiv). Butler asks: if a life is unable to be grieved, then can it be said to have existed (ibid)? Processes of loss and grief create space, create remembrance, and create and recreate the historical and continuing existence of the bereaved.

Effective writing is often discussed in terms of focusing on specific, evocative details rather than on abstractions and generalisations. Telling story will be most effective in creating a language of trauma, or a language powerful and gentle enough for any experience, when it is used with subtlety: when a story is told in all its fine, delicate details, rather than in attempts to describe abstract emotions of trauma. Then, the power of trauma may shine through and be palpable in the very way it is created but not necessarily named. Just as I intuit the power of the narratives in your paintings, Annette, I know that tapping into intuitive space is what can make a piece of writing affective.

Perhaps a moment of loss cannot be conveyed or re-membered. But from that moment, the ongoing processes and ever-altering instances of grief can be recognised and ritualised. Such performances can be like breeze through the prayer flags you have mentioned to me.

Grief, even the seemingly private, seemingly small grief of a private citizen, can affect a community, can possibly even have global effects. Those effects are increased as grief is enunciated through narrative, through performativity. Judith Butler writes:

What grief displays [...] is the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the

self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control (Butler 2004; p. 23).

Butler expresses the way that narrating a loss is always breaking down in process: 'I tell a story about the relations I choose, only to expose, somewhere along the way, the way I am gripped and undone by those very relations. My narrative falters, as it must' (ibid). Perhaps it is in such a faltering that the grieving subject - and by extension the grieving community - can move on to create and recreate itself. In the faltering there is recognition of disruption: of the wound that need not be depicted with a deceptively smooth layer of scar tissue. Narration, performance, various acts of ritual, of artifice: moments of grief and art, can have effect. But the kind of effect cannot be guaranteed. That effect may cure, or it may just as easily kill if the effect is overwhelming enough for some. I'll end my letter with a quote from my story :The sea-blue background:

She drew out the last journal and gently lifted a corner of its waxed tissue paper wrapping. The last journal had a deep sea blue background. Even looking at that sea-blue space around the pages waiting to be filled with her words, she thought, could kill and soothe, kill and soothe (Perry 2004b; p. 6).

Dear Gaylene,

I am a visual artist. I use the image of words as a visual image of the voice, writing or inscription as an embodied act of speaking, a physical performance of language. Progressively, I find myself 'speaking' through writing directly onto the surface or skin of the canvas. Because of their visual nature and illegibility, my scripts hover between sound and silence, breaching or articulating the 'silent', non-verbal spaces surrounding words and their meaning.

Over several years I developed two forms of scripts derived from alphabetic writing to give 'voice' to my experience, as a woman, of silence. The cryptic appearance of this writing gave me a freedom I had never experienced in my paintings before. The letters illegibility or 'silence' allowed me to speak freely without fear of censure and to use both verbal and visual languages as a singular channel for my expression. The first script was developed during my PhD research, 'Women's Silence: In the Space of Words and Images' (2002). I recognised this as a form of speech from medieval nuns' work with words and images in illuminated manuscripts. For this script I drew the spaces in and around words to draw attention to the 'silence' held within written or spoken language.

The second script grew directly out of my acute awareness of the frailty of human existence, of life and death. Within a twenty-four hour period, I had lost a child to suicide and my daughter had undergone an emergency Caesarean delivery of a new grandchild. The urgency to express my grief and loss, and the joy of new life and love, brought about a change in the image of my writing. My previous form of script did not allow for the speed I needed to bring speech, feeling and thought together, to write without pause using words to move beyond words, to a silent space and image of 'felt'

knowledge. A rapid and unbroken outpouring of intimate thoughts and feelings became possible through minute illegible continuous-cursive writing. Time and space, the self and other are absorbed into this embodied practice. It is an act that can move you out of silence into a space where you can speak and be heard through 'making' and the materialisation of your voice.

This continuous script also resonated with my memory of the ritual recitation of texts by nuns from a silent religious order with whom I stayed in a thirteenth century abbey in England. This religious community of women were committed to lives of silence. However, they left small folded notes in specifically appointed places so that they could communicate with each other, 'silently'. They called these their 'Talking Notes'. Gaylene, you write of the intimacy felt by the two sisters in your story, when they spoke in words and ink and paper. And of their visualising, handling and unwrapping the letters, the journals they sent to each other, tender material objects wrought by love and a desire to share their experience of grief through the ritual process of making. You tell of how these sisters attempted to give their breath of aliveness to the dead or dying, to beguile or will them back, by sounding in their imagination and by low humming. How they dreamt of receiving letters from the dead, and considered writing back to them, breathing, giving voice to the space of silence, which separates the dead and living. I have copied your words intermingled with my breath, thoughts and emotions, your story of love and loss is now re-inscribed on un-stretched canvas, as a shared skin of human sentience - a silvery trace of sound. I think of this collaborative piece of work as a type of body scroll.

Historically, grief and its expression through ritual practices of mourning enables a rite of passage for both those (some would believe) who have departed this physical world and those left behind.

Directed against the isolating aversiveness of pain, mental and material culture assumes the sharability of sentience. It holds within itself the universal salutation of Amnesty's whispered 'Corragio!' It passes on the password of Isaiah's ancient artisans - 'Take courage!' (Scarry 1987; p. 326).

Perhaps it is precisely because we cannot 'name' that we make, utter, enunciate and falter, as we walk through the spaces of sound and silence to grieve. Through the production of art a meaning-making artefact is created for private and public mourning, which allows an acknowledgement of both Eros and Thanatos, which are inseparable to the well being of the psyche. I believe that from within the silence created by both the inexpressibility of pain caused by grief and the social silencing of this abject subject, can be drawn a creative structure, a ritualistic process and space, that moves us beyond the cleavage of body from voice.

breath
sound and silence
making
speaking, writing, drawing,
words and their spaces
touch, brush and pen
surface, yielding, softness, wetness, tears
line, colours, space, sensation

listening, memory
body and voice

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