

Grieving, bodily

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Suspension

*I've been treading water for some time.
The water is cold this side of the equinox,
though it held its heat for months.
I floated at first,
but now my legs have numbed
and heat is leaving me
I should kick, of course, to keep myself moving;
my mammalian body heat is regulated from inside
which means the water is the enemy
against whom I must fight*

*how abruptly I fell in to this place without ground
except a sea floor too deep to find;
the deck had felt secure and dry, its planks sun-warm;
the blow, your death, a crack to the skull,
and I was down
leveled gasping and wordless,
as you yourself were, in that sudden paroxysm
that sank you completely from my grasp
in some other ocean
in some other time*

*I tread the water because I do,
ever since our destinies diverged: you drank
the freezing salt, locked your muscles,
felt your blood cool, while I go on
in regular gasps, bobbing in the insulting sunlight.
I refuse to be heaved out yet, alive
on the hard beach of a changed world;
I can still float, I can kick a little longer: I choose this last place,
this vigil, this grey surge, this depth where
I had held you. In this place, the sea breathes*

In this place you are

My youngest daughter, Ruthie, died abruptly in her sleep at the age of 29. She had married ten years ago and lived far away, in central Mexico, where it was hard to get to her, and therefore all too easy to keep telling myself she was going to be all right, even when things that were happening to her were disturbing. She had been having small, partial-brain seizures for some months, which she had been told were a result of cutting back on alcohol and she was veering somewhat erratically on and off her anti-seizure medication because it often made her too sleepy to

function. The seizures caused her to clutch her arms and bruise them in her sleep, and when she was awake, they slurred her speech and buckled her knees. This was scary to hear about and terrifying to watch, which I did when I visited, eight weeks before she died. She saw doctors, and we talked about what to do. But through it all, I submerged a vague sense of terror below my awareness, as if I could keep Ruth safe by minimising the dangers, by willing her to survive and flourish. I had a sickening sense of foreboding way down deep, but most of the time I held it fiercely at bay. I somehow could not squarely face the possibility that she might actually *die*.

For one thing, she seemed so strong: from childhood she had pushed her body in so many ways. I'd been dazzled by her strength, her impulsive generosity, her physical daring. She had bounded across the gymnasium with one roundoff back handspring after another at age six, cheered her friends on obstacle courses in military school, and had gotten married and given birth to her kids, Caleb and Hannah, as an expatriate in Mexico. She was brave, enthusiastic, five foot eleven, irrepressible, empathic with everyone. She was, above all, so vibrantly alive. Her utter, tragic vulnerability had been so much more difficult for me to see.

On Friday night March 9th, 2018, I texted her before she went to sleep; she sent the emoticon with the blowing hearts, said "everything is fine, love you, talk tomorrow". Then at 6am the next morning, I found myself talking to ambulance personnel on the same phone, telling them over and over, in the full stupidity of shock, that I did not understand what they meant by "bronchial aspiration", unable to process anything they were saying to me until Ruthie's neighbor Adriana came to the phone, wailing that there had been nothing she could do, nothing she could do. When I heard Adriana's voice, the eerie, traumatising realisation began, numb and crazy and unending; but by then my daughter was gone.

From that moment, the very beginning of my deepest encounter with grief, the only way I can express what has happened to me is in physical terms, in terms of my body. It seems to me now that my body feels and suffers, often mutely, what is but can't be evaded. I've tried to evade uncertainty in my life, to dodge or ignore my vulnerability, to imagine I had some sort of control over loss; but it feels as though my body has silently been aware, all along, that death is a fact, and that suffering is inescapable. It somehow knew, implicitly, the limits of control. And it is the bodily



Ruth and her son Caleb.



Ruth and her daughter Hannah.

experience of grief that has been quietly insisting, these long months, that I assimilate truth that feels unbearable.

In the initial shock, I wrapped myself tightly around my other two daughters, Ruth's older sisters, craving their physical presence. The day we learned that Ruth had died, we went down to Mexico together. There we were confronted by a grieving process—Mexican and Catholic—that had already been set in motion all around us. It was Ruth's world, but alien to us, and at first this only added to the surreal quality of her death. Ruth was no longer in her body, so what was the point of setting up her casket in a funeral home for three days, backed by a thicket of flowers, with people keeping vigil night and day? Initially, it all felt intrusive and bizarre. But it was happening. The place was open at all hours. Mourners—friends—could come and go, have coffee, recite rosaries, sleep... and we did it with them.

The first night I stayed away. The second night, deeply moved by the way Ruth's ex-husband was unwilling to leave her body in the lonely stretch between midnight and dawn, I offered to take his place so that he could go home and get some sleep. In the end we both stayed, on either side of the coffin, stretched out on benches with a blanket, hearing each other's breathing and the crowing of roosters long before the sun came up. Time slowed. I began to wonder how I could have stayed away, or how I could ever leave. Before Ruth's body was cremated, even before the funeral mass, I began to feel held together by rituals I had borrowed and found myself performing in a bodily way. Rituals gave me time to orient myself a little to the cracking blow of death that had staggered me. Time to sit with her, suspended there with her, almost as if the world had stopped in honor of her dying. Time to feel her presence *physically*, even in absence.

Alone with the coffin, I lifted the heavy wooden lid and the transparent inner one so that there was nothing between my body and Ruth's. I stood there, appalled, transfixed, looking at her hands, her hair, her skin. Her birth had felt raw like this, though in an opposite sort of way: the contractions then,

and the shock now, overpowered thought. The world receded when I was in labour: there had been nothing but the two of us, the blundering dance of our bodies, the staggering effort of getting her born—an imperative and mutual cooperation in the face of calamity. Now she had died; we were separating body from body again, and I couldn't protect her, couldn't give her milk, couldn't hold her, and couldn't understand—but somehow birth and death seemed to have folded in on one another in an almost cellular way.

This struck me again after the funeral. They brought us the urn with Ruth's ashes, which we then had to take to the church's peaceful, sunny crypt. I touched the urn; it was shockingly warm—warm from the burning of her body! Warm from tiny specks of flaming embers in the ash. I pulled it to me and cradled it in my lap. I don't know how to understand this exactly, but I know I was moaning, trying to draw her remains back to my belly inside of which her little body had grown. Months later, when I at times felt numb, I would find that this was a way back to the grief that bound me to my daughter. If I went down on my hands and knees—a birthing position—in a place where I was alone, a deep, ragged, almost alien wailing would rise up right out of my belly. I would be consumed by it until it was done. And if I didn't seek out these encounters, a sort of dissociation would gradually set in, without tears, in a blank emotional place where I couldn't find Ruth. That was worse, so I had to find my way into and through the grief, not out of it. And there on my hands and knees, my body was the teacher.

I couldn't find her by thinking abstractly about how much I loved her, or by remembering happy times: it was as if she were preventing me from sentimentalising her, as if she were asking me to feel the whole reality of her life and her death, including the ways she had spun out of control, her struggles with self-esteem, my regrets. There could be no comfort that covered over reality: no shift to "she's better off now" and no remembering an idealised version of her life for the sake of comfort. The beautiful and terrible truths demanded

to be held side by side: her capacity to love, her utter and guileless generosity, and her boundless energy, right alongside her addictions, her demons, her fatigue and her fears. And this has felt, to me, much the way it feels to be struck down, physically, by sickness or injury. There is no evading it. It has happened; you are laid low until you heal, and you can only cooperate with the thing you want to refuse.

There are other ways in which I've experienced grief as a bodily thing. From early on, her physical body as I remembered it was my only real comfort. Sometimes it was as if she were just entering the room, by which I don't mean at all that I was communing directly with her spirit—or was I? It was more like hearing her come in, kick off her shoes, and flop on the couch, more like glimpsing from the corner of my eye how her earrings caught in her blonde hair, more like hearing her laugh from downstairs in the kitchen. I pored over audio recordings of her voice from months back, snatches of life she had filmed and narrated, showing me little things: stitches from Hannah's recent fall, or Caleb opening birthday presents. Seeing her body in motion and hearing the timbre of her voice brought her closer; it helped soothe the terrible sense of being catapulted out of reach, abruptly cut off from her presence.

Sometimes the need to be in contact with her physicality had a brutal edge. I asked for a copy of the twenty-some pages of the autopsy report that was mandated because of her sudden death. I studied the pictures, and carefully read the descriptions of what they did to her body. It was chilling and terrible, and hardly anyone I've told this to could understand why I would inflict such an experience on myself. It started with a desire for more information about how she died (ultimately it seems to have been a fluky result of a small partial seizure in her sleep: no drugs, no alcohol, no completely satisfying explanation). But it was also a compulsion not to abandon her, to stay by her body, and to know what it had gone through, as if I could hold her close by willing myself to look. There *she was*, on that metal table. The awful image of her brain temporarily set in a jar, which to my horror had occurred within hours, haunted me for weeks. But this contact with what was true, no matter how terrible, was contact with *her*, and that made me feel strangely better. I could cradle her like a stillborn. I could stay near.

And then there is the fact that in the twelve months since my daughter died, I have had one (small) physical thing after another go wrong. This has kept me from my own propensity for denial; it has forced me to slow down, to assimilate the grief, to hover in it, as I heal. I couldn't return to my prior "normal" energy or mood or even health, because my body would not allow it: I got severe plantar fasciitis, leg pain from ignoring the condition of my feet for too long, then several urinary tract infections and a two-month cough—by far the longest single respiratory infection of my life. Hardly ever sick before, and prone to ignore pain and illness of all kinds, I could scarcely bring myself to do anything for months. My

body was registering loss and sadness more honestly than my mind in some ways, and it would not be denied its voice. I had to submit and learn.

That voice demanded its own sort of body, and I began to write a cycle of poems, many of which express the experience of having to wait and assimilate grief on its own timetable. Writing poems felt deeply grounding. It gave me a feeling of connection to the whole reality of my experience, and their imagery is unintentionally but tellingly physical.

Pond Song

*I wait for something to change,
floating on my back in the sluggish pond
green with algae and slick with leaves.*

*The starlings are discussing me;
they land on a roof, then gust across the sky,
and I see how they are buoyed in air.*

*But I am not. My legs sink below my chest;
I am draped in rootless plants,
And the pond laps over me.*

*Come back, starlings. You swoop and twist
Up and up like bubbles in champagne
And beat like a heart in the heights—*

*throw me a line, stitch it to my breastbone
and lift me out;
bear me up like one of your young—*

*I could do it if my body were not so heavy;
I used to have the hollow bones, the lightness it takes
To swirl up and land on a tree as silently as snow.*

*Muscular fish were only a ripple below me then;
but now they feel flat and cold; they slap against my feet
as I inhabit this new place, leveled by a blow,*

waiting for something to change

The poems are incomplete; my grief is ongoing. I've lost my child, and missing her is pain that goes on and on. But grief has forced a shift in my experience. The old defenses of dissociation, and of believing I was invincible, did nothing to keep Ruth from dying. Her death turned out to be a fierce teacher, dealing me an effective blow, forcing me to assimilate the reality that I too was a helpless human being in a fragile body that could—and would—suffer and die. There is a mystery about this. The vulnerability of my life now seems to connect me to the grief of others. Walking with death very near, wounded this way, also makes me clear-eyed and paradoxically alive. I wish I could share it with Ruth, this bitter gift she left me with—but in some sense she must know. In some sense, now, she is the one giving birth to me. ■