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# The Poem as a Reservoir for Grief

## Tess Gallagher



Photo by Patricia Ellis

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As more and more of contemporary life is forced into the present or “now” moment, there seem to be fewer mechanisms which allow the past to be fully absorbed and lived once it has “happened.” It has become harder to experience grief since it is a retroactive emotion which requires subsequent returns to the loss over a period of time. For only through such returns may one hope for the very real gain of transforming losses of various kinds into meaningful contributions to our own becoming.

It is not simply release from sufferings we need, but understanding of loss and, beyond understanding, the need to feel, as in the word “mourning,” the ongoing accumulation of bodily and psychic communication which loss initiates in us. Here I am speaking not only of the loss one experiences in the death of a loved one, but also of those diminishment of being which become known gradually, as when child or parent or lover discovers piecemeal the signs of neglect and lost trust. Poems have long been a place where one could count on being allowed to feel, in a bodily sense, our connection to loss. I say *bodily* to emphasize the way poems act not only upon the mind and spirit, but also upon the emotions which then release the bodily signs of feeling—so that we weep, laugh, are brought to anger, feel loneliness or the comfort of companionship.

What often happens early on with a death or other incalculable loss, is that one has a feeling of shock which brings about an absence of feeling. We are cut off from our bodily entrance to the loss. We stand outside the loss and are pulled along into new experiences before we have had the chance to ask, “What can this mean?” We may feel a kind of guilt because *we have not felt enough*. This can cause even more avoidance of the grieving process, so that the integrative steps that might be taken to bring the loss into some meaningful consequence in our

lives are never attempted.

We have too, in this time of mass communication, the opposite cause of an inability to grieve—that one is asked to feel too much: We are asked to witness disasters claiming thousands of lives, numerous political atrocities, domestic brutalities, massacres in distant countries, and the rape around the corner. It is no wonder that a certain emotional unavailability has become a part of the modern temperament.

In such a world, poems allow a strictly private access to the grief-handling process, or, on another level, poems may bring one's loss into communion with other deaths and mythic elements which enlarge the view of the solitary death. It is as if the poem acted as a live-in church, and one might open the book of poems in order, through experiencing loss, to arrive at an approach to one's particular grief and thereby transform that grief.

The failure of professional counseling, including psychiatry, to provide a lasting solace and a spiritual resource for those who need to grieve reflects a failure of American societal attitudes in general. America is, perhaps, a country *almost* ready for grief, for the serious considerations and admissions, recognitions and healings of grief. I see the public and private reassessments of the Vietnam War as one of the recent signs of this new willingness and capacity. The building of the Vietnam War memorial restored, in a symbolic way, the memory of those Americans who died in that war. At present, there is the growing awareness of the possibility of nuclear holocaust, so that whole days are viciously intersected by fears of such proportion that we have few ways of addressing them. It is as if we have been propelled into a kind of before-the-fact mourning for the earth and life in general because our fears are so stupifying. It is a productive mourning, however, in that it has provided the energy to motivate many sectors of the country to take action against this threat.

**I**n my own considerations of grieving I have begun to wonder if the ramifications of an entire society's inability to grieve might be more central to our problems than we have yet been able to recognize. For instance, one might consider the high divorce rate and its possible relationship to various kinds of unexpressed grief. Then too the rise in other types of violence, especially against women and children, should be mentioned.

The divorce rate relates perhaps more particularly to the grieving of an entire sex, the grieving of women, who have come to value themselves in new ways, and who, in many cases, must eschew entire lives lived in the dominions of choices made by others. As a stopgap measure for these ruptures in domestic matters, counseling and being counseled have become practically a national pastime, a place for assessment and making changes. But counseling has not answered this deeper need of the individual to grieve because its motives are too future-oriented in the short term sense.

I am reminded of my own disappointment with marriage counseling when my second marriage was in a state of collapse. The counselor was sympathetic when I cried in the first session, but when I cried in the second and third sessions, she reverted to a very businesslike disapproval. I was not making "progress." I was not "forgetting" the attachments of the relationship quickly enough. I should have been able,

within the space of three weeks, to leave grief behind and plunge ahead into *My Own Life*. But my life had been so intricately defined in terms of the “other” that the grieving could not be accelerated as she would have liked. Counseling is often aimed at the practical—getting one to function *as though* the loss has been accommodated. And, of course, we do this . . . we act *as if we could* move on, and we do. But counseling or other “self-help” methods for handling grief often belong to what J. T. Fraser, in *Of Time, Passion, and Knowledge*, has aptly named “the business present.”

The business present, he says, “pays only lip service to past and future; its essence is the removal of tension associated with future and past, in sharp contrast to the tragic present with its wealth of temporal conflicts.”<sup>1</sup> Fraser explains that the tragic present “involves continuities and hidden necessities,” while the “business present is informed only of discontinuities, that is, of chance.”<sup>2</sup> When things happen to us only by chance we are not encouraged to search for meaning. Chance is its own meaning.

Self-help books exist to help the seeker package the problem and thereby allow a quick solution. They are the hamburger stands of the soul. We are all familiar with the questions, warnings, and promises of their titles: “Who Do You Think You Are,” “The Hazards of Being Male,” “How to Win Over Depression,” and “How Not to Make Love”!

Mass communication, unlike poetry, is aimed at the shrinking attention span. Its messages, according to Fraser, are engineered “to make the material digestible with minimal effort and with no effect other, or deeper, than the one desired by the financial sponsor.”<sup>3</sup> This describes how the business present wants to act upon language and consequently upon our lives. It wants to drive out the ambiguity of language which is the lifeblood of grief feeling and of poem making and reading. As Picasso once said, “A green parrot is also a green salad *and* a green parrot. He who makes it only a parrot diminishes its reality.”

So a diminishment of reality takes place when our experience is negotiated without ambiguity. What most often allows ambiguity to operate is an access to our past in a way which relives it in some fullness, so that it is not lost or left behind as dross but incorporated into the present.

What the business present encourages, as Fraser sees so acutely, is “the flight of the masses from the terror and *responsibility* of knowing time.”<sup>4</sup> (My italics.) When we are told to settle a loss account quickly, efficiently, this often involves placing the experience in the old-business file. We do this by relegating that experience to the past—the dead past. It was briefly relevant, but we must move on like good soldiers.

Poems, through ambiguity and the enrichments of images and metaphor, invite our returns. Poems partake of the tragic and recreated present, while the business present continues to focus entirely on the “now.” The time of the poem is multidirectional: It reaches richly into the past and forms linkages with the present and with other isolated pasts. The poem searches into the future. It reminds us of longings.

Poems restore our need to *become*, a capacity the modern self is in danger of losing. Fraser recognizes the tragic poet as “the free, time-roaming ambassador”<sup>5</sup> who assists in our becoming. The poem does not package or, like a trained seal, deliver the message. Its knowledge

1. J. T. Fraser, *Of Time, Passion, and Knowledge: Reflections on the Strategy of Existence* (New York: George Braziller, 1975), p. 416.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, p. 426.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, p. 420.

evolves. Its very ambiguities point to the individualistic character of the artistic expression itself. This ambiguity permits the spectator to insert details of his or her own, niches of perception left undetermined or open by the artist.

Poems often remake the grief-causing experience in terms of myth or analogy so that the unconscious and the conscious experiences of the speaker and the reader are enabled to meet. Myth mediates between the conscious and the unconscious minds. It moves from ego release to psychic and spiritual embrace.

**T**here are many poems one might turn to as examples of what I've been talking about—the elegies of Milton, Gray, Thomas, Yeats, Dickinson, Auden, the entire work of Rainier Maria Rilke, and poems by Akhmatova and Tsvetayeva and countless contemporary American women—some whose voices are almost entirely elegaic in tone: Bogan, Plath, Gluck, and Gregg. With so much to choose from, I don't introduce the poems I've selected with any sense of them as definitive except in their appeal to me at this writing for their particular ways of handling grief.

The first poem, by Galway Kinnell, typifies the power of many poets to move through the separations of grief into a state of embrace. His poem "Goodbye" begins with the death of his mother. Kinnell told me a fact outside the knowledge which the poem gives that might be useful: Much to his sorrow, he could not be at his mother's deathbed. The poem was written in order to absorb regret: "I swallow down the goodbyes I won't get to use." There is also the suggestion that there was unresolved anguish between mother and son in the line "whatever we are, she and I, we're nearly cured," as though the mother's death were some closing of that case. The act of writing the goodbye is perhaps what will afford the speaker the wholeness of cure.

### *Goodbye*

1

*My mother, poor woman, lies tonight  
in her last bed. It's snowing, for her, in her darkness.  
I swallow down the goodbyes I won't get to use,  
tasteless, with wretched mouth-water;  
whatever we are, she and I, we're nearly cured.*

*The night years ago when I walked away  
from that final class of junior high school students  
in Pittsburgh, the youngest of them ran  
after me down the dark street. "Goodbye!" she called,  
snow swirling across her face, tears falling.*

2

*Tears have kept on falling. History  
has taught them its slanted understanding  
of the human face. At each last embrace the dying give,  
the snow brings down its disintegrating curtain.  
The mind shreds the present, once the past is over.*

*In the Derry graveyard where only her longings sleep  
and armfuls of flowers go out in the drizzle  
the bodies not yet risen must lie nearly forever . . .  
"Sprouting good Irish grass," the graveskeeper blarneys,  
he can't help it, "a sprig of shamrock, if they were young."*

3

*In Pittsburgh tonight, those who were young  
will be less young, those who were old, more old, or more likely  
no more; and the streets where Syllest,  
fleetest of my darlings, caught up with me  
and hugged me and said goodbye, will be empty. Well,*

*one day the streets all over the world will be empty—  
already in heaven, listen, the golden cobblestones have fallen  
still—  
everyone's arms will be empty, everyone's mouth, the Derry earth.  
It is written in our hearts, the emptiness is all.  
That is how we have learned, the embrace is all.<sup>6</sup>*

6. Galway Kinnell, "Goodbye,"  
in *Selected Poems* (Boston:  
Houghton Mifflin, 1982), p. 135.  
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nell. Reprinted by permission of  
the publisher.

The time sense of the poem is actively making an arena to reexamine the loss of the mother. In the second stanza the poem suddenly shifts to "years ago" and the impulsive act of a student who runs after the poet in order to call out a furtive "goodbye." Her weeping and her calling after him enact the speaker's own wish for himself as regards his dying mother—that he could rush after, or to, her to say goodbye. The impassioned necessity and simple beauty of that act are impressed upon us through the superimposition of the past moment onto the present.

Part two of the poem moves the voice out of the personal realm into "history." The mother becomes "the dying." The snow in the poem is an emblem of separation, of "disintegrating," of loss of connection. But paradoxically, goodbye in the poem is given in order to *restore* the connection. The mind is seen to need the past, to wish to continue and complete it until the present is no longer needed. The present exists not for itself, as we often assume, but as the place to resolve the past. This means that the currency of the present is not as powerful as we often assume. It exists merely to facilitate the reliving of the past and, as Kinnell indicates, is "shredded" once the past is "over" or resolved. The present undergoes a reversal of importance here in accord with contemporary life modes which recommend the killing of the past in order to live in the "now." But ironically, once the past is dead, the "now" suffers a loss of consequence and is not fulfilled.

As Kinnell approaches in imagination the Derry graveyard where his mother is buried, it is her longings he addresses first, linking her to a future embodied as "armfuls of flowers" that "go out in the drizzle," as if they were candles whose light had been extinguished by the gradual and natural element of the weather—not downpour, but "drizzle" so we almost hear the hiss as the flames go out, each with its little radius of silence. The mother's body lies with "the bodies not yet risen," so the act of the poem is the raising of the mother (her death) into the human embrace. Her body is seen to return to the elements—in the graveskeeper's words, "sprouting good Irish grass." This physical



actuality coexists with the “nearly forever” which, at this point, brings together the temporal and atemporal.

Then we return with the speaker to Pittsburgh, the scene of the young student’s goodbye. But now the time span, the aging of the speaker and the student and those in the world at large, is acknowledged: “those who were young/will be less young, those who were old, more old, or more likely/no more.” The absence of that one caller who is now named tenderly “Syllest, /fleetest of my darlings” is experienced as streets which “will be” empty. It is an imaginative living of those streets since the speaker is not there except as he recalls the moment of Syllest’s catching up to him in streets where she no longer appears, as he also does not appear. Now the poet brings us physically closer to Syllest by allowing her to hug the speaker. We are moving closer to the longing for total embrace which impells the poem forward. Next, the speaker leaps from the emptying of particular and remembered streets to future streets: “One day the streets all over the world will be empty.” The word “empty” moves us from the streets to the emptiness of arms, and now “everyone” begins to include the speaker of the past *and* the present. “Everyone’s arms will be empty, everyone’s mouth, the Derry earth.” So at last, even the earth will be empty. The future exists as longing, but takes on a new palpability in the verbalization of it in the poem.

The end of the poem carries us into “our hearts,” which includes the reader, uniting the word “emptiness” with the word “all” so the loss becomes enlarged. “All” has become the hinge which brings emptiness and embrace into conjunction. The last lines embrace but also release. Emptiness has somehow been carried into a fullness which allows release by virtue of the embrace.

*It is written in our hearts, the emptiness is all.*

*That is how we have learned, the embrace is all.*

This completion is the speaker’s acknowledgment of the loss, having been able to bring together emptiness and embrace. Had Kinnell ended the poem on “the emptiness is all” we would have had an entirely different feeling, but by ending it as he does, we are gathered back *into* the all, enclosed. The necessity of the embrace has been reinstated. This perhaps allows the speaker to return that embrace Syllest gives him in the past and enables him to give the ungiven embrace to his dying mother, and finally to the “everyone” the poem admits at its close.

So it is the past which nourishes the present, which allows the resolution, the grieving for the death the speaker could not attend. There is an undercurrent too in the poem of the speaker’s own self-embrace. It is as though he also has had to say goodbye to that part of himself which died with his mother. He enters the “all” which is the union with others and with the earth and with the spirit of the lost one the poem has been seeking. A symbolic accompanying of the mother’s death does then finally occur.

**W**illiam Heyen’s poem “The Berries” moves not toward embrace so much as toward loss experienced as a joy let go. Heyen brings grief to the point of joy through the sacramental acts of the speaker, who carries the gift of a jar of jam to a friend whose father has died of cancer.

### *The Berries*

*My wife already there to comfort,  
I walked over icy roads  
to our neighbor who had lost her father.  
The hard winter starlight glittered, my breath  
formed ascending souls that disappeared,  
as he had, the eighty-year-old man  
who died of cancer.*

*In my left coat pocket, a jar  
of raspberry jam. . . . I remembered  
stepping into the drooping canes, the ripe  
raspberry odor. I remembered bending over,  
or kneeling, to get down under the leaves  
to hidden clusters. . . .*

*Then, and on my walk, and now, the summer berries  
made/make a redness in my mind. The jar  
presses light against my hip, weight  
to hand to the grieving woman. This gift  
to her, to me—being able to bear  
the summer's berry light like that, like this,  
over the ice . . .*

*When I was a boy, the Lord I talked to  
knew me. Where is He now? I seem to have  
lost Him, except for something  
in that winter air, something insisting on being  
there, and here—that summer's berries, that mind's  
light against my hip, myself kneeling again  
under the raspberry canes.<sup>7</sup>*

7. William Heyen, "The Berries," *Poetry* 139 (December 1981): 160. Copyright © 1981 by The Modern Poetry Association. Reprinted by permission of the author and the editor of *Poetry* magazine. "The Berries" has also appeared in Heyen's *Along This Water* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Tamarack Editions, 1983).

By the fourth line of the poem we are made aware of the vast spatial dimensions of the universe: "The hard winter starlight glittered." Then the speaker's own breath becomes the breath of "ascending souls," as though breath made them visible for that moment. This image is then connected with the particular death of the friend's father.

The picking of the raspberries, which the speaker is carrying as jam to comfort his bereaved friend, comes back to the speaker in rich, sensual terms. The berries "made/make a redness in my mind," and this enables them to continue as memory even as "the jar/presses light against my hip." The gift-giving becomes a gift to the self as well, in that the speaker is carrying, is the bearer of, the summer's *light*, and so in this act unites summer and winter. Earlier in the poem, the act of kneeling and the secret, hidden nature of the harvesting (which refers also to the death of the eighty-year-old father) have connected the natural act of harvesting with the painful loss of the loved one. These coexist in a new proximity in the poem, thereby transferring to the death the idea of ripeness, of readiness for harvest.

The union of summer and winter has been moved, in the last stanza, toward the recognition of distance between a childhood closeness



to “the Lord” and the adult loss of this spiritual closeness. So the loss of the friend has evolved into recognition of a loss of touch with God. But the winter air and the memory of summer light in the berries restore an ambiguous closeness to the divine. The poem closes with the act of kneeling, thereby suggesting a humbling of the speaker to the gift of the berries—and the death. The death of the friend has now been transformed, through an act of memory, into a richness that includes gift and childhood and harvest, as well as spiritual questioning. The emotional alchemy of this poem is a restoration of order, the sense of naturalness and rightness, of childlike simplicity before those absent presences of ripening berries, of one’s God, and of a recently lost loved one.

In a last example, Michael Burkard’s much less linear and narrative movement in the poem “Islands of Feeling” enacts the disconnective effects of loss in its very method. When under the pressures of business time we are seen to *endure* rather than *become*, time seems cut off from its temporality, its ongoing arrival. “It no longer passes,” Fraser has observed. “It no longer completes anything.”<sup>8</sup> As in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* we are marooned in a stagnant present. Having come forward without memory, we are simply prolonged. Similarly, in Burkard’s poem, we experience time cut off from its healing possibilities. The time unit of the poem is “the moment,” as in business time. We are made to feel the ways in which one moment is cut off irrevocably from other moments until each becomes “an island of feeling.”

8. Fraser, *Of Time, Passion, and Knowledge*, p. 419.

### *Islands of Feeling*

*Here are a few branches of  
those condescensions you never wanted  
me to speak of or mention,  
a few examples  
of how and when winter  
spoke with such heart that I alone*

*fell. For a moment  
no one else knew it. No one knew  
this one example that keeps you*

*at a door in my mind, speaking  
these feelings, these slight sharp blades  
which accompany  
speaking. O as you say:  
I do not want to hear of that.*

*Even though as another, my friend  
left me as he died and I walked  
toward a winter door today, sharply,  
then told myself to go back  
and walk again. Any given call  
that makes me walk has still  
this lonely return to my friend.*

*I love you as no other. I would fall  
asleep for you, as a few branches did,  
as any act sharpens  
a simple town,  
a simple place lighted, left on for you.  
Would I love as my friend  
stepped through a few doors?  
I would. These islands*

*condescend, come back to me—nothing  
except their heart  
and daily isolation  
speaks for me. With your visitation  
once I wanted  
every answer, the kind an island  
makes for me, a white reflection  
of smoke off some ledge, some  
view, which takes me by the hand,  
walks down. Another moment*

*would sharpen, slapping at  
such mind or deed. You bring to me  
an island  
of feeling. For that I cannot follow  
I love.<sup>9</sup>*

9. Michael Burkard, "Islands of Feeling," in *Ruby for Grief* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982), p. 45. Reprinted by permission of the University of Pittsburgh Press.

In the third stanza the "you" avoids reception: "O as you say: / I do not want to hear of that." The death of the friend (whether actual or emotional) is represented as "another." Is this the death of yet another loved one? Or does this mean that the speaker himself has been changed by the death *into* another? This is left ambiguous but does not, I think, injure our ability to understand the line intuitively. We know there is a "dying" of some sort taking place, the dying of a friend, and that the speaker is developing an attitude toward that dying, that loss. The poem does not encourage the reader to "connect" images too surely and instead rushes the syntax so as to dislocate that impulse to relieve tension with sequential assurances.

The poem begins to open up in the fourth stanza with an admission of love which is given in spite of "those condescensions you never wanted / me to speak of or mention." The speaker seems to volunteer the self more fully here, and this becomes one of those "islands of feeling" the reader clings to because it allows emotional access to events not comprehended in a narrative and factual sense, events which the writer does not "condescend" to offer because to do so would invite an understanding more palpable than the true isolations of "feelings."

As the speaker concludes, he brings the reader to an island of feeling he calls love. The poem releases its grief into the word "love" only when it acknowledges that the speaker cannot follow the loved one, the friend, the you. Love, then, seems to grow out of our inability to bridge one event, one feeling with another. So loving develops as a result of our island status, and not, as we normally assume, out of our coincidences with those we love or our accompaniments of them.

For Burkard, the moment keeps revising experience—"slapping

at/such mind or deed.” This means that one may connect or follow only secretly, through acts of the heart and mind which keep loss “at a door in my mind, speaking/these feelings, these slight sharp blades/which accompany/speaking.” *Speaking* is what joins the words in time and space, words so sharp in their time-slicing power they are represented as blades.

The ending of the poem gives one a sense of the loneliness of the word “love,” its isolations, but also its generosity, as though love happens as a result of loss rather than in a reciprocation of feelings: That is, I love *instead* of following because that is what is possible. Love becomes the only following the speaker can accomplish. Because of the completeness we associate with the word “love” it seems that love becomes almost *more* than following as the poem ends, so that the island affords a feeling which transcends the moment, the isolation of one person from another, or of the living from the dead, or of the speaker from the friend who makes a “visitation.”

There is a mixture of regret and longing at the end of the poem, as if love takes on what cannot be lived in the impossibility of “following.” Love paradoxically occurs in the absence of the loved one—“a lonely return.”

**I**began this consideration of poems as aids to our handling of grief by pointing out that poems allow imaginative returns to the causes, the emblems of loss—returns which often involve regret and longing toward a hoped-for embrace. The poem may also transform grief by placing it in relation to rituals or natural cycles such as harvesting, or the return the poem makes may simply lead to a more complete experiencing of the disintegrating aspects of loss, its refusals.

By concluding with Burkard’s view of our island status, I wish to return to the solitary and most often lonely act that the reading and writing of poems involve. It demands such huge leaps of faith and audacity as a writer to ask that one be followed, understood, felt—especially in the poetry of grief, because each loss is ultimately singular, an “only.”

Poems engage our imaginations and emotions in a way that is particularly needed now, if we are, in our national and personal identities, to move from a state of being *almost* ready for the serious work of grieving to a true state of readiness. For it is the experiencing of grief which allows us to value fully those events, those people who are irreplaceable, so that, as Burkard says, we “love them as no other.”

It is important that the inner nature of our beings be strengthened by the wisdoms of our grievings. The scientists may tinker, the politicians may instruct us in the various ploys of unconsciousness, the physicians may delay death awhile with yet another cure, but, until each individual maintains a responsible relationship to his or her own losses and changes, there will be no such thing as a hopeful future. For, as in the Taoist description of the wheel in terms of the strong, empty spaces between the spokes, one’s future depends not only on the visible spokes of the present, but also on those invisible elements from the past—those things we are missing, are grieving for, but have forgotten and left behind—so that they may be recovered as new meaning, new feeling.

It seems important that grieving not be separated from other aspects

of one's work toward a wholeness of being. It belongs there within the fabric of psychic, spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and intuitional perceptions through which we move. Because poems, as in no other way we use language, are able to carry the density of such a complex synthesis, they are the best and oldest forms we have for attending and absolving grief, for bringing it into a useful relationship to those things we are about to do toward a future.