

## Children Writing Grief

By  
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If it is true, as Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote, “Childhood is the kingdom where no one dies that matters,” then for many of my students, the kingdom was vanquished early on. No matter where I traveled in fifteen years as writer-in-residence for a metropolitan school district – from tree-shaded classrooms in affluent neighborhoods to bullet-pocked trailers of the inner city – students wrote of loss. Sometimes grief broke classroom rules of decorum: once, it broke a window; once, a desk. But for most children, the act of writing seemed to order the chaos, to provide a place to house the raw emotion swirling in their heads and hearts.

When a poem struck me – by its language, rhythms, its surprising vision or depth of feeling – I asked the author if I could share it with others. No one ever said no. All seemed thrilled that I valued what they said and how they said it, and that I felt their work would be of interest to someone else. Occasionally a student asked that I not use her name: “I want to be that guy with the big A,” one little girl told me. (Many students, I found, were impressed by Anonymous, both his name and his prolific output. They always assumed he was male.) Some of my students opted for pen names, one boy employing the middle name of his dead brother. For this essay, I’ve chosen to identify the student poets only by first name and grade level, in part because of the personal nature of the work, and in part because this shorthand reminds us of the universality of what is being expressed. *Jane* could be anyone – my niece, your daughter.

In fact, there were many Janes; that is, for every example I’ve included, I read many that echoed the sentiment. What emerged from my reading of hundreds, then thousands, of these poems were not only the facts of singular lives but also the patterns beneath the facts, the myriad yet universal ways grief weaves its path through the lives of the young. I offer the work of my former students for two reasons: first, as a way of demonstrating how children approach the losses that are thrown their way; second, as *poems*, or sections of poems, in which children are speaking the truths of their lives, sometimes fluently, sometimes haltingly, but often with astonishing honesty and beauty.

Dylan Thomas asserted that “After the first death, there is no other,” but my students’ poems suggest that in many cases, a series of small deaths precede the large ones. By deeming these losses “small” I am not suggesting that they are trivial. I use “small” here only to distinguish these losses from the death of a close family member – a loss that appeared, in most of my students’ poems, to represent the zenith of grief. The “smaller” losses served as rehearsals, if you will. In waving goodbye to a friend, for instance, the children were practicing for the larger grief play.

*Separated*

*Red car rolling off,  
waving your hand  
like wiggling rubber.*

*Fog shadows behind  
the car. The engine  
sound is fading away.  
The sight of the car  
floats forward. Your  
shaking hand of  
rubber swiftly floats  
down.*

*Penelope, 5th grade*

*You can't get a friend back. I had one but I moved... When we picked those berries I would say we can make a blackberry pie and we did but the crust was hard but it tasted good. It was good while it lasted. Shea, 3rd grade*

Despite the sadness of separation, to some of the writers the memory of a lost friendship remained more sweet than bitter. After all, there are more friends where that one came from, as one boy told me, pointing beyond the classroom window to a playground crawling with possibilities. Replacing a parent, however, was another story. The losses engendered by divorce cut deeply, and the consequences were seldom bittersweet. Some children's expressions were powerfully direct, piercing in their brevity.

*My parents got divorced and my dad got me.  
Anonymous, 3rd grade*

*I am sad I am between Mom and Dad.  
Barry, 4th grade*

Other poems painted an entire world of loss, each "leaf" and "stump" echoing with an audible silence.

*You hear silence when you are  
thinking of how it was when your  
father was home to love you.  
I think of an old stump sitting  
in a field with wild flowers  
prancing around and laughing  
at it mockingly.  
A silent gentle breeze  
ruffling leaves.  
It is a road leading to  
a place far off.  
Pamela, 6th grade*

Sometimes, reading a child's poem, I could almost feel the child struggling to speak what T. S. Eliot called "the word within a word...swaddled with darkness" – to break through the silence. "We knock upon silence," a Chinese poet once wrote, "for an answering music." Some of my

students looked for solace in the music of rhyme or rhythm, as in this poem entitled “I am Sorry.”

*Today I cried.  
My sister sighed.  
For my mother tried  
Sweetly to say my dogs died.  
Matt, 3rd grade*

Some tried to sing the dead one back:

*I woke up in my grandfather's lap  
And I heard his leg go tap, tap, tap.  
He was singing a song to me,  
It was such a cozy place to be.  
Anitha, 4th grade*

A few children were so tongue-tied that they remained unable to tell their stories without appropriating the words of others, in the form of rhymes, songs, or prayers. When invited to write about his grandmother, who had been dead six months, Jeff, a sixth grader with a learning disability, produced this:

*God be in my hede  
And in my understandyng  
God be in my harte  
And in my thinkyng  
God be at myne end  
And in my departyng.*

In writing out a benediction he'd heard in church, Jeff was imitating adults who find comfort in the words of those we consider more eloquent than ourselves. Tombstones, for example, are carved with quotes by Shakespeare, Milton, or the biblical David: AIDS-quilt panels are stitched with contemporary poem fragments or song lyrics. For some survivors, even ad copy and singsong Hallmark clichés seem to offer relief, a safe holding pen for otherwise unrestrained emotion.

For others, the experience of grief is an opportunity for original expression, for giving voice to what had previously been mute. These are the natural poets in our midst, those who not only see the world in new ways, but translate these visions into words. In some students' poetry, grief broke out in startling music or in vivid images and colors. Crawford's poem seems to have been germinating within him, bursting forth at the first invitation to write about his loss.

*Silent tears*

*Silent tears, silent tears,  
Drink me up and swallow me down  
And lick your lips*

*And rub your stomach  
And ask your mom for more.  
But not too long ago  
Silent tears had petals in them.  
And they will choke you  
When you swallow them.  
Crawford, 4th grade*

His images reveal the intermingling of sorrow and joy, the human hunger for the memory-petals found within tears. To remain silent – to be unable, as many of us are, to “ask your mom” for permission to consume the grief – is another kind of death, as the poem suggests. In all my reading, in all my firsthand experience with death and loss, I’ve yet to find a truer image for grief than Crawford’s. Nor have I found an expression of loss more eloquent than the following poem, by another fourth-grade boy. Barry’s simple lyric captures the helplessness of being small; he even hints that the sky is blue because it shares in his mourning.

*The soft blue sky sounds sad. I wonder why I am small...So sad so sad are you mad are you sad can I be soft  
because we is changing we all ways change!*

Children aren’t the only ones who feel vulnerable in the face of loss. For adults, too, the changes that accompany loss are forces to be reckoned with. The death of a loved one breaks our accustomed world apart, knocks our inner hinges loose. If we are too brittle, we will break. If we are soft, malleable, open, we can shape-shift into new forms. Hollowed out, we are able to contain new worlds, but first we must be emptied. In many student poems, especially those of older students, sorrow found its expression in images of boundless skies, black holes, and voids.

*This feeling inside me  
Is like no hope,  
Or the little hope in you  
Is not feelible.  
It’s like being nowhere,  
Empty inside  
Like an empty house,  
A heart with nothing in it.  
Jeremy, 6th grade*

*I see my heart so vacant  
that the wind blows through it.  
Then I see you holding hands  
with the air.  
Then I see you gone.  
Mario, 9th grade*

Some authors attempted to fill this vacuum by creating a past they were left out of. In their poems, loss was measured not by what was once possessed or experienced, but by what was never known. Children are notoriously egocentric, and for some of my students it was nearly impossible to imagine a world independent of themselves. Let’s say a child has heard stories about a relative

who died before the child was born or before he got a chance to know her. This will not do; suddenly a big piece is missing, a connection lost, one that the child comes to see as vital. So the child writes the lost one into present life, imagining shared scenes or, in some cases, envisioning the relative's death. Often the child is portrayed as a caretaker or, in the very least, as personal historian. In the writing of such poems, the children seemed to be salvaging a past they never knew, reclaiming their lost place in history and emerging as the ones in power.

*The Aunt I Never Knew*

*In my mind I imagine  
me pushing her in a wheelchair  
with her face blooming like her name.  
Aunt Mary Lily  
I would say.  
yes Zach  
she would answer  
Please  
don't ever go away.  
Zachary, 5th grade*

*Great Granddad*

*The last things are hard  
Where gun fires like fire  
I can feel on my hand.  
We got his old army clothes  
With red blood like apples.  
He died on the day at Guam.  
We think he got lost  
In a Japan building.  
David, 4th grade*

Perhaps this act of imagination, writing oneself into another's story, represents another type of rehearsal for children – a relatively painless, bloodless method of practicing for death by borrowing the grief of a parent or older friend. In one of my own poems, death is personified as a kind of Mafia boss. At first we know him “by reputation only.” Later, he sends “messengers to do the small work: claws through the belly of the sparrow...colorless wings of dead moths.” This progression is not unlike the way my students became acquainted with death. After the child had absorbed the loss of a best friend, a neighborhood or school, a divorced parent's companionship, death started sending in the hit men. The loss of a pet was the first encounter many students had with physical death, and it affected them deeply, perhaps because the death was often witnessed firsthand.

*When I went to put his dropper to his lip,  
He would not move his thumb to sip.  
I tried to pet his curled body,  
And he didn't lick my finger.*

*I ran inside and tears fell from my eyes.  
I couldn't miss the bus,  
But I really didn't care if I did.  
Sarah, 4th grade*

Like adults, these grieving children responded with a wide range of anger, guilt, fascination, and sorrow. But unlike adults, who often deny the bodily details of the death, rushing quickly through the harsh memory to get to the other side, the children appeared unafraid to wade into the pain. “What other way is there?” their poems seemed to ask.

*Separation is the purring  
of my car in my ear  
when he died.  
The yellow autumn leaves  
were the color of his fur  
when they fall off the trees.  
It feels like a big part of  
you being taken out.  
Blair, 5th grade*

*In my mind  
I see my dog  
On the table,  
With the veterinarian  
Giving her a pill  
That will put her to sleep,  
With a smile on her face,  
And she is dying.  
Jason, 3rd grade*

And death kept drawing nearer, the distance dissolving little by little – from roadside park to veterinarian’s office to the child’s own house. For most of my students, the first family death was that of a grandparent or great-grandparent, and often the end had been preceded by a series of smaller deaths as the child witnessed the deterioration of an aging mind or body. It’s as if the child lost the loved one in installments, and thus began mourning months, sometimes years, in advance.

*Seeing my grandfather staggering with old age through the tall grassy field, seeing him walking wobbly without his cane, makes me want to cry knowing someday I'll never see him again. Cathy, 4th grade*

To hold onto the loved ones, the children often imagined them young again – wishing them back the way they were. Sometimes these wishes took the form of dreams.

*In my dream my grandmaw could run very fast. We would feel the wind on our faces. She would be healthy, we would fly. We would soar with the eagles! Ben, 4th grade*

## *Dreams*

*Grandma dreams of  
being soft and young  
Dancing in the nice warm winds  
over the trees and flowers again  
To sing aloud on a stage of soft hands  
To be her old age again...  
To wish away the tears of the past  
To tell her mother how much she loved her.  
That's what she would dream.  
Felicia, 5th grade*

When the end came, especially in the case of an elderly relative to whom the child was not strongly attached, the resulting poems often read like codas. Perhaps the scene had been rehearsed so many times, dreamed and imagined, written about, talked through, that the actual death was anti-climactic. Or perhaps the reportorial tone of some of these poems represented a defense against emotion. One third grader, Sophia, spent many lines of a long poem detailing how much she loved her aunt, listing the things they had done together – playing with Barbie dolls, frying chicken, singing. The death scene, however, was confined to two lines: *I rode in a lemo to her funarul. That's the end of my aunt.* Another child recalled the barest details and stated them matter-of-factly, like the narrator in a Dickinson poem who, at the instant of death, heard a fly buzz.

*I was at the hospital visiting my great-grandmother.  
It smelled like alcohol.  
Her face was pale with big blue eyes.  
Then she said good-bye.  
Shannon, 4th*

Other children dwelled a bit longer on the dead one, then quickly returned to the business of living.

*When my cousin died, I felt as if I wasn't one of the family anymore. Like I was the wide receiver on a football team, and I had just dropped my 19 touchdown pass. Then, I knew my aunt was suffering more than myself. One year later my aunt is getting married, and we are all almost over it. Josh, 3rd grade*

Dead is dead, life is now; aunts remarry, school starts up, we put one foot before the other. Like the survivors in one of Robert Frost's poems, since we are "not the one dead," we turn to our affairs. And what if the dead forget to be dead, try to stop our progress? Then, we, the living, set them straight:

*In my dream my great-grandfather old and wrinkly comes to see me, he says he will never leave again. I tell him great-grandma is getting married again he says no she is not, she loves great-grandpa better. Lindsey, 4th grade*

In many poems, however, the narrators did not move immediately back into their lives after the death of a loved one. Perhaps their attachments were stronger, or their grief timetable longer;

children vary as much as adults in the depth and duration of their mourning. Only one kind of childhood loss seemed without exception to evoke intense, nearly inconsolable pain. When death stole a sibling, the wave of grief broke hard, and its ripples were felt long afterward. No longer was death a species or a generation removed, something that happened only to pets or to old people. Now, suddenly, death was personal.

*Without my brother it's like a rain inside me that's flooding my eyes A desert  
with no one around A wave washing sand away swift and fast ... Amy, 7th grade*

### *My Brother*

*I wish he didn't have to go he made my heart soor and poor. He made me crumble up into an dried leaf. If he was  
to life today I would be an happy sun shine over the world. Why did you have to go.  
Kelly, 4th grade*

In cases where the sibling who died was an infant, the expression of grief took on special poignancy, as if the loss had happened too quickly to be absorbed. Months, sometimes years afterwards, the child reached back into memory, searching for details to hold onto.

*Her eyes glowing as she wiggled in her crib  
In her pink and white dress, ready for sleep.  
I miss her now.  
A cold swept her away like dust on the floor.  
Vanessa, 9th grade*

### *Natalie*

*I hated to lose  
A pretty little girl called  
Natalie.  
She perished at birth  
Without any pain,  
But she did leave a stain  
In our family photograph.  
Tony, 7th grade*

This notion – of the loved one leaving a stain of memory – ran through many of the poems. The children seemed to want to salvage whatever they could of the lost friend or relative, even if it meant recalling the most painful moments – the death scene, the last time they saw the loved one, or the moment they received the news of the death. Some, like sixth-grader Loula, wrote several versions of the same event as if, with each telling, the memory might become more bearable. Here is the fourth revision of Loula's poem:

*One windy night, dad told me my uncle died.  
My heart beat fast like wild horses thumping against the ground.  
Outside was a smell like the daisies on my grandmother's table on Easter day.  
My throat felt dry and guilty.*



*In my ear I could hear the wind blowing.  
I could hear the crackle of the leaves.  
The sky was as black as the jacket I was wearing.  
The moon shone so bright I could see a face in it.*

But in some cases, unfortunately – especially when the death was by suicide or homicide – the ending was not peaceful, or was missing entirely. Antoinette, a second grader, drew a picture of a valentine-heart floating over a river of blood (my younger students seldom distinguished between the heart as an organ and the heart as a doily cut-out, though when they wrote of pain, it was always the bodily heart that took the blows.) Below the picture Antoinette wrote these words, using one of the huge, thick pencils schools issue to children in the primary grades:

*I love myself because  
I am not dead.  
The blood comes from my heart  
because my dad got shot.*

Often these children seemed angry not only because the loved one died and left them alone but also because of the way the death occurred. Here, a fourth grader named Omeka rails against the violent end of her uncle:

*I am still mad at hem he did it for staying out lat...he was 24. he was my grandmoms oldest son...he was kill I did not want that to happen. But it did and I'm mad sometimes becuse I think of you..*

Omeka's switch from third person to second, from "he" to "you," is a switch that often occurred when my students wrote about death, as was the switch from past to present tense. These switches, which appeared to be unconscious, reveal as much about the nature of grief as do the images or details presented. More than mere grammatical lapses, the moves from "he" to "you," from "then" to "now," are moves toward intimacy and immediacy, and to correct them is to violate the truth of the children's stories. Once, while working in a fifth grade classroom, I overheard a well-meaning teacher pointing out what she perceived as an error in a child's paper. "Here," she said, "you've written 'My dog died on a rainy Sunday morning', but down here you say 'I love my dog.' You need to be consistent with your verb tense." "I am," the boy replied. "I still love my dog."

Omeka, near the end of her poem about her uncle, alternated swiftly between present and past, also employing another device often seen in the grief poems of children – repetition. In Omeka's case the repetition escalated into a kind of keening, a wailing not unlike that of mourners at a graveside:

*He is my untal o yes he is  
he was my best untol o yes he was  
But he dead o that the true  
o yes he dead*

In writing "he was," Omeka acknowledged the reality of the death, but the phrase "he is" reminds us that the lamentation was not yet over for her. It continued in memory, and the poem

was one way for Omeka to close the curtain on the event. One morning in class, a fourth grader named Sharon, expressing her anguish at never saying goodbye to her nineteen-year-old cousin, wrote an alternate ending to her death drama. After she had begun with *Oh No the day is gone I'm still all alone how could this be Otis not here with me never said good By* – she turned the page of her notebook and began writing furiously, nonstop, for the remainder of the class period. I watched, amazed, for Sharon was not a student known for what teachers call “staying on task.” Finally she waved me to her desk. “Read this,” she said. She had written several pages about a dream in which Otis had appeared. In the dream, her heart started beating fast. She smelled cologne; then she saw Otis. At this point, Sharon slipped into present tense, as most of my students did when recalling a dream, actual or invented. Otis turns up his music “like he youst to befor he died.” She says, “I thout you wher dead,” to which he answers, “I am and I am in colleg in heaven.” He takes her to heaven, where they see everybody, even God, who tells her to hug Otis, “becase it’s time for you to go.” She embraces him, all the while crying, “no pleas no.” But when she wakes up, she comes to school and (switching back to past tense) “got over it. It was the last time I will ever see him agin. The End.”

In almost all the poems that contained a revision of the death scene, the vehicle was a dream, which, as one sixth grader told me, “is a place you find in your sleep.” When this place was a traditional heaven, students seemed to take comfort in well-worn images.

*Haven in the ski*

*I think abot my gradfarther evin if he is in haven the ski was brat with havenly blue the clods are white and pofy the aire is frash and evrybody is free with gold wigs and white robse as thay toch the clods softly and whin you think abot haven you will fill light and for aver sleep in piec. Shaughnacie, 5th grade*

But in my experience, examples like Shaughnacie’s were rare. The dream scene in most of the poems was, not heavenly, but earthly and homely. Almost always, the child himself was beside the loved one, both engaged in some mundane activity.

*In my dream my grandmother is rocking me in her chair and she is happy to be alive and to be singing to me again.  
Thomas, 4<sup>th</sup> grade*

Unfortunately – or fortunately, depending on how one views the progress of recovery from grief – one requisite of a dream is that the dreamer eventually wakes. For some, this waking is a swift, clean transition, like the sensation of cold water being thrown in your face. For the fourth-grade girl who wrote the following poem, the boundary was less clear. I choose to name this crossing the transition between dream and *wakefulness* rather than between dream and *reality*, since the life of dreams can be as real as the life of waking.

*When I woke up and turn to my left  
I saw you and I walked right up to you  
You didn’t say anything I thought that you were a marige  
I stake my hand out to see if you were really there  
or if you were in thin air  
When I new that you were there I passed you  
while the breeze sweeps the sand and goes through the tree’s*

Like the biblical doubter, Thomas, who demanded to feel the risen Christ's wounds in order to know that he was real, the child reached out her hand. We are not told what the hand discovered, only that after the child reached out, she knew "that you were there." With this knowledge, she was free to "pass" the loved one, to move beyond the nightmare of death and its harsh waking, into another space. What remained of the loved one was the breeze: a soft, invisible force with the power to reshape its earthbound neighbors, sand and trees. For the children whose poems I have read and loved, this unseen power – call it nature, God, truth, art, or simply tears with petals in them – is as indisputable as it is mysterious. It weaves through their young lives, through their sufferings and joys, which turn out to be not so small after all. It is difficult to read these children's words and not celebrate the wisdom of the young in matters of the heart, their crazily sane methods of survival, and the imaginative ways they move from grief toward healing.

*The Spirit of my Granmother*

*In my dream  
I see my granmother  
Standing by the door  
Watching us play  
As we ride our bikes  
And she's singing a song  
I hear beautiful thunder booming  
And lightning flashing  
With her spirit upon us saying how beautiful  
Are the raindrops falling  
Chonte, 4th grade*