

# On (Writing) Families

## Autoethnographies of Presence and Absence, Love and Loss

Jonathan Wyatt and Tony E. Adams (Eds.)

*SensePublishers*

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Autoethnographies of Presence and Absence,  
Love and Loss

*Edited by*

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SENSE PUBLISHERS  
ROTTERDAM / BOSTON / TAIPEI

A C.I.P. record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-94-6209-620-2 (paperback)

ISBN 978-94-6209-621-9 (hardback)

ISBN 978-94-6209-622-6 (e-book)

Published by: Sense Publishers,  
P.O. Box 21858, 3001 AW Rotterdam, The Netherlands  
<https://www.sensepublishers.com/>

*Printed on acid-free paper*

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to the contributors of this collection—without them, this book would not exist. Their enthusiasm, openness and all-round brilliance have been wonderful to work with. We would also like to thank Tony Colon for his help with editing this manuscript, and to Peter de Liefde for his support as well as the opportunity and honor to publish with Sense Publishers.

### *Jonathan*

I thank the various people around me who have (whether they know it or not) helped sustain me during mine and Tony's work on this book over the past two years. Their contributions to my life, as well as to this collaborative enterprise, are incalculable. Tony gets the first mention. He has to. His consistently cheerful, perceptive, encouraging, smart, efficient presence makes it such a pleasure working with him. (Let's do it again soon, Tony.) Above all, my thanks go to Tessa Wyatt for bearing with this and with me; and to Holly and Joe Wyatt. You make this work meaningful. Really, you do. Finally, I am full of gratitude to my family of origin: Anne, Simon, Nicola, and—my late father—Paul Wyatt. I'm so glad you're there. Here.

### *Tony*

I am grateful to many others for their support of my life and work, especially Brett Aldridge, Mitch Allen, Nilanjana Bardhan, Christopher Birdsong, Derek Bolen, Robin Boylorn, Jay Brower, Marcy Chvasta, Ken Cissna, Norm Denzin, Rachel Dubrofsky, Craig Engstrom, Brian Flowers, Brad Gangnon, Craig Gingrich-Philbrook, Jonny Gray, Andrew Herrmann, Kim Kline, Lenore Langsdorf, Patricia Leavy, Michael LeVan, Jimmie Manning, Michaela Meyer, Nicole Neuman, Mark Neumann, Ron Pelias, Sandy Pensoneau-Conway, Carl Ratner, Jillian Tullis, John Warren, and Jules Wight. I appreciate my students and colleagues at Northeastern Illinois University, including Wilfredo Alvarez, Anna Antaramian, Katrina Bell-Jordan, Bernard Brommel, Rodney Higginbotham, Kristen Hunt, Alan Mace, Nancy McVittie, Cyndi Moran, Seung-Hwan Mun, Shayne Pepper, Nanette Potee, Edie Rubinowitz, and Angie Sweigart-Gallagher. I would also like to thank Stacy Holman Jones for her motivation and loving ability to cultivate my writing-self, Keith Berry for informing every facet of my life, Art Bochner for teaching me about love, fatherhood, and family life, and Carolyn Ellis for the courage to reframe my past (her mentorship inspired "Ties that Bind, Ties that Scar," the concluding chapter of this collection). I thank my stepfather, Michael Rome, and my parents, Phil Adams and Sheri Rome, for their dedication and support especially when I am distant and cantankerous, and I thank Jonathan Wyatt for joining me on this book-editing adventure—if you can tolerate me again, I look

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

forward to our next project. And, of course, I thank Gerardo (Jerry) Moreno for loving me through many days and nights of breathing, reading, writing, and editing.

JONATHAN WYATT AND TONY E. ADAMS

## INTRODUCTION

I (Jonathan) am writing time away. Café Lucano, on Edinburgh's George IV Bridge, serves excellent coffee and the servers are patient with me. At a nearby table, visitors to the city talk about plans for the day. A few people sit alone reading, writing, or playing with their smart phones. One man, in his mid-thirties, watches traffic pass. He is still, unhurried, content.

A bell rings at the hatch to my left and the server approaches, comments to the chef in Italian, laughs, collects breakfasts, and carries them past me—the bacon roll smells good—to a young woman and her mother.

In three weeks, my eighty-something mother will visit us from her home in Godalming, a town southwest of London, as long as the infection she is fighting is defeated. It will be her first and probably only visit: soon, she says, she will not feel up to it. She will fly. I will collect her and deliver her to the homely hotel we've found in the New Town district and, from there, we will have the weekend to introduce her to the city's historical delights. She does not walk far these days so we will wheel her up and down Edinburgh's plentiful, unforgiving hills. She will not be able to climb the stairs to our rented third floor flat, though she is determined that she will.

We will seek out restaurants that serve the plain food she can eat, find drives that she will enjoy, and plan a schedule flexible enough to take account of her varying energy patterns. Perhaps, as we sit wrapped up by the beach at Portobello, we will talk about my father and wonder if he would have swum in the bracing water. At the end of the weekend, she will fly home and I will again worry that it was unkind of me to move us so far away. And I will speculate about what she feels but does not say.

\*

I imagine Tony sitting with me. I wish he were here, differently present. We could pore over these beautiful chapters together, be at this table with this book, whose title we have now settled on: *On (Writing) Families: Autoethnographies of Presence and Absence, Love and Loss*.<sup>1</sup>

Tony and I met at the annual International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry in Urbana-Champaign, USA, in 2007, soon after I had read Tony's poignant writing about his father (Adams, 2006). Our contact that year spawned a series of annual panels on sons and fathers at the conference as well as "On (Writing) Fathers," a special issue of *Qualitative Inquiry* devoted to father-son writings (Wyatt & Adams, 2012). The collection contributed to our understanding of father-son

relationships as well as the ways in which “fathers accompany us through our lives” (p. 119).

However, while we focused on father-son writings, we missed many other relationships. “Where are the daughters?” one person asked. “Do any of the writers say anything about mothers?” asked another. We then arrived at this book—a sequel of sorts—that included a variety of relational accounts. We do include a few more stories of fathers and sons (Bolen; Gingrich-Philbrook; Herrmann; Mather), but also stories of fathers and daughters (Boylorn; Rowe; Holman Jones; Speedy), mothers and sons (Freeman), daughters and mothers (Allegranti; Douglas; Harris; Leavy), and more comprehensive accounts of parents, children, and familial experience (Bondi; Jonsdottir; Tamas; Wright). Throughout, contributors complicate what family means and how families are lived and, like the father-son journal issue, illustrate the ways in which our roles as parents, as children, and as family members “remain meaningful, both through and beyond life” (Wyatt & Adams, 2012, p. 119).

\*

Last weekend I walked amongst the Pentland Hills, just south of Edinburgh. My route took me first to an ancient fort, which, to my untrained eye, seemed a series of attractive grass mounds. From there I wandered along the stone road that skirted an army firing range covered in barbed wire and hectoring red-letter warnings. Relieved to leave this area, I strayed from the undulating track to join a steep path towards a minor peak. Shifting from the certainty of compacted stones onto the intricate doubt of a weaving trail through rocks, moss, and earth, I found myself walking into and with the stories in this collection.

After some minutes, I paused to catch my breath; the climb felt steep and I’m out of hill-walking practice. I looked west to where the hills stretched towards Glasgow, and I felt immersed in these essays’ sense of place and how each takes the reader into the sensuality of presence. I could picture the home where Mark Freeman visits his mother, its dayroom where he sits beside her slumped figure, seeking to make contact. I sensed the dust—which I imagined to be red—thrown into the air, and then to the ground, and then to the air again, of Mort Mather’s father’s departing jeep. I was in the garage of Derek Bolen’s house, surrounded by his father’s work-in-progress. I became full of his father in that space, and awash with sadness that he was not as present as Derek wanted him to be. I was with Jeannie Wright arguing with her father, inhaling his cigarette smoke, seeing him in dreams. I rode in Patricia Leavy’s car with her daughter, listening to Katy Perry, and I found myself on the steps of Robin Boylorn’s childhood home, searching for her father, willing him into view.

(These days, more than I have for years, I search for my father in Edinburgh. I glimpse him in the gait of a limping man, in a shock of white hair through planes of shop glass, his flown laugh reaching me from the corner of a room. Edinburgh and our top floor flat is my first home that he never knew.)

Recovered, I pressed on and up. A man on a bike, jolting tentatively down the slope, passed me without greeting, then a friendlier walker, for whose smile I was grateful. At the cliff top I looked northeast over Edinburgh's suburbs and the crags of Arthur's Seat. There, in that glimpse, were the settings of these stories: Jane Speedy, lying on a cliff, cracking the crossword with her dad; the stoop of Anne Harris' mother's house where Harris waits and waits and waits; watching Beatrice Allegranti performing capoeira, her mother looking on; the dream-sharing kitchens of Gunnhildur Una Jonsdottir's stories of her mother and daughter; the kitchen table at which Stacy Holman Jones read the phone book aloud to her dad; and the haunting presence of Liz Bondi's father's homeland. Pausing on and atop that Edinburgh hillside, I was in each of these places; they were—and they remain—in me. The spatial, writes Massey (2005), enables “new relations-to-each-other of previously disparate trajectories” (p. 41).

As I made a quarter-turn to my left, I could identify Fife across the seemingly still waters of the Firth of Forth. The Pentlands, on which I stood, are small hills, but after twenty-five years of Oxford's relative plane, I felt on top of the world.

\*

The chapters in this collection call me to bring “the person I think of loosely as ‘me’”—to use Craig Gingrich-Philbrook's exquisite phrase—to this page. They find a way inside me; they call me; they invite me to make connections. The chapters show me what parents, children, and families can mean, not in any sentimental sense, but rather how they matter even if we wish that they didn't. The chapters respond to Della Pollock's (2009) call for the creative work of “writing, critique, and embodiment, conjoined in the possibility of making a different history, of making our most intimate histories differently” (p. 646), and they illustrate how family stories can orient us to “identity, a sense of place, and the meaning of life” (Sterk & Deakins, 2012, p. xiii).

My awareness of their palpable sense of place prompts me to consider these chapters' crafting—their art. I am struck by variations in style and form: how textual distinctions carry the narratives differently, how authors write from various perspectives, how one author offers a chapter in “fragments”—short, snapshot sections that speak perhaps of stuttering, hesitant relating and that show writing's provisionality—and another who takes a more direct narrative line. Sophie Tamas writes in the present tense in numbered sections that provide peeks—some brief, some longer—into her experience: a phone conversation with her mother, tending to her ailing grandfather, supper with her parents, her eldest child returning home. Kitrina Douglas offers an extended narrative, in the here-and-now, of a crisis in her past professional sporting career and her mother's part in supporting her through leaving this career; she follows the account with theoretical reflections on how we might understand the experience. Desirée Rowe dwells retrospectively on the meanings of her father's tattoo, a photograph of which hangs in her office; her writing is almost a meditation. Mort Mather's stories of his relationship with his father provide an affecting, gentle sequence of narratives that shift between early

childhood, young adulthood, and now, and Jane Speedy moves between vivid, touching stories, tinted with humour, of her father's last illness and tales of her early memories of being with him.

Hence, too, the authors work differently with time. Some take us back and forth between now and then: Craig Gingrich-Philbrook begins with an uneasy here-and-now experience before, as a knowing narrator, taking us back to where the experience began. Derek Bolen holds us steady alongside him as he explains his experiences and then bears us into the immediacy of past moments and episodes. Liz Bondi and Robin Boylorn move between the past and the present tense, taking us close to experience then drawing us back. These authors take us with them on journeys between "what happened" and "how it is now." Others, like Rowe and Freeman, in a sense stand still, showing us "there and then" retrospectively, or, like Tamas, carry us with them through the continuous present, the past being glimpsed through the interactions of the here and now, family histories passed, casually, between writer and reader.

"Narrative," Mark Freeman (1998) has written elsewhere, "grows out of the very temporal conditions of our existence" (p. 47), and these essays, inevitably perhaps in a book about family relationships, foreground our temporality and mortality: what can and cannot be hoped for in our remaining (physical) time together, what can and cannot be regretted or forgiven, what is lost or has never been found or will never be. Beatrice Allegranti ponders the "temporal mourning" of her late mother's birthday, moving between addressing her mother ("I dreamt of you last night") and writing obliquely of her mother's history and its link with her own: "We carry our ancestral, genetic line, other bodies, others' stories, in our body." Jonsdottir crafts tender accounts of illness and vulnerability, both hers and across generations, and of how hands reach out to help. Andrew Herrmann wonders about "living [his] father's unfinished narrative"; his father is probably alive, yet unknown and out-of-touch. Wright offers us the rawness of her recent loss, viewed through the prism of her attachment to—and the politics of—a treasured artefact.

All of the authors also make great play of the presence-absence dialectic: presence, as indicated by attention to and time with others (Bolen; Douglas; Leavy; Tamas), acknowledgment and recognition (Freeman), being bound by/to genetics and biology (Allegranti; Harris; Herrmann), and by shared experiences, memories, and artifacts (Bondi; Rowe; Wright); absence, as indicated by leaving, dying, and disappearing (Boylorn; Herrmann; Harris; Mather; Speedy), of failing bodies (Freeman; Holman Jones), of being physically apart, separated by distance (Tamas), and of nonexistent genetic connections that cultivate and perpetuate erroneous assumptions and expectations of kinship and commitment (Allegranti; Harris; Herrmann). Presence and absence entangled, informing our biological and social experiences of/as families as well as about what family is (not) and how we should (not) be together.

Inseparable from and layered with the presence-absence dialectic is the interaction between love and loss. As evidenced in many of the essays, there is a sense of wanting to be present, a being with constitutive of love; as Allegranti aptly

notes, “It’s the everyday being-together activities that make up a life, and a loving-in-action” (also see Douglas). There is love, marked by infatuation and dedication, of wanting to be so very close but a love simultaneously constituted by loss, marked by struggles and stumbles in talk, touch, and time spent together. There is love, indicated by commitment, and loss, indicated by confusion about who parents, children, and families are, or have ever been (Boylorn; Herrmann; Rowe). At times, reciprocated and unconditional love shines (Bolen; Bondi; Douglas; Freeman; Leavy); at other times, this love quickly turns to loss, to conditional exchanges and refusals of recognition (Allegranti; Harris; Herrmann). Love, marked by respect, of saying or writing to family members (Speedy); loss, marked by what a person could not say because of fear or circumstance (Bolen; Jonsdottir; Mather). Love, in moments of bliss and content, and loss in longing for unachievable certainties and truths (Bondi; Herrmann), in mourning the failures and inadequacies of others (Boylorn; Harris), in missing previous, absent versions of parents (Freeman; Holman Jones; Wright), and in wishes that the conditions of families could have been otherwise.

\*

What I’ve written here feels both too much and too little. Too much, in that I worry that I’ve given away more about the chapters than I should; too little because there’s so much more to tell about this collection’s delights. Perhaps such doubt is part of this introduction-writing process. I’ll just add some final exhortations then, before I gather my belongings, return to the office, and write to Tony: Savor the essays, one-by-one. Absorb them, live with them. Walk hills with them. Drink with them in busy cafés as you gaze at the traffic or eat bacon rolls. See what they call forth in and from you.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Autoethnography is a research method that uses personal experience to describe—and sometimes critique—cultural beliefs, experiences, and practices. Autoethnographers engage in laborious and nuanced self-reflection—typically referred to as “reflexivity”—in order to identify and interrogate the intersections between self and society and to show “people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 111). Autoethnographers try to balance methodological rigor, emotion, and creativity, and they write with an attention toward improving personal/social life. For comprehensive accounts of autoethnography, see Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (forthcoming), Ellis (2004, 2009), Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011), Ellis and Bochner (2000), Holman Jones (2005), Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis (2013), Muncey (2010), Poulos (2013), Short, Turner, and Grant (2013), and Sikes (2013).

In this collection, writers use autoethnography to describe—and sometimes critique—their experiences as parents, children, and families. They use creativity, emotion, and rigorous reflexivity in order to show their processes of “figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their [familial] struggles” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 111).

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MORT MATHER

## FATHERLY LOVE

AT THIRTEEN

Dad left today. Cubby and I watched him check the oil and water in the jeep which he does just about every time before he leaves for anywhere. When he was done, he put his hand on my shoulder and said, “Well son, this is it; I’m on my way. Take care of your mother. Be good.” Then he got into the jeep.

The jeep started right up. It always did. He takes good care of it and knows how to fix anything that goes wrong. The jeep turned right out of the yard. Cubby and I watched it go past the barn and the cherry trees starting to kick up dust but there was no dust as he passed the Webber’s because the road truck puts down oil on the road in front of houses when the road gets dry and dusty. After it passed the Webber’s the jeep started to kick up dust again an’ then, as it went down hill, it was like it was sinking into the earth until all we could see was the dust. We just stood there watching until we couldn’t hear the motor anymore and the dust settled and then we stood there some more. I guess I kept thinking that he would come back. I didn’t cry or anything. After a while I got some stones and sat on the bank an’ threw them across the road at a tree. I’m not a good thrower so I didn’t hit the tree very often.

Then Mom came out of the house and sat down next to me and put her arm around me and we both just sat and then she asked me if I wanted a piece of pie. Now there’s a dumb question; she’s a super pie maker and I knew it would be a cherry pie because I picked the cherries.

EARLIER THAT YEAR

It was raining the day Dad told me he was leaving. We were hanging out in the wagon shed. I was sorting out nuts an’ bolts an’ washers of which there are lots that were there when we first moved to the farm when I was five. They are in cans mostly, coffee cans and tobacco cans, lined up on a beam on the wall and I guess people just put them in the cans to have them handy when they needed a bolt for something though they weren’t new. Some were rusty and some were greasy but there weren’t any bent ones or ones with messed up threads. I use them whenever I need to. I made a cart out of some scraps of wood and some wheels that came off of something and the bolts came in handy for doing that, especially the U-bolts, and I had one bolt that went down through the center of the riding board and into the center of the board that I attached the front wheels to with two U-bolts. I put the bolt through a couple of washers between the two boards and I could sit on the

MORT MATHER

riding board with my feet on the steering board and make it go in the direction I wanted.

Dad was changing the oil in the jeep. He was always very careful to get the top of the oil can clean before he pushed in the spout. He said dirt was the biggest enemy of an engine. You see, the pistons move up and down in the engine in like a tunnel only really tight and the oil keeps the pistons from rubbing on the tunnels but if the oil is dirty instead of being smooth it's like sandpaper and it wears out the pistons and then the oil gets into the combustion chamber and burns and that's why some cars and trucks have a lot of smoke coming out of their exhaust pipes.

When he was done he stood in the door of the wagon shed looking out at the rain and wiping his hands with a rag. It wasn't raining very hard but it was kinda chilly so you wouldn't want ta actually do anything outside. I went and stood beside him and he told me he was going West and never coming back East. Well, I thought that was OK because I liked it out West with the mountains and waterfalls and all but then he said that I wasn't coming with him; that I was to stay with my mother, he said. I asked him why Mom wasn't going West and he said he didn't love her anymore and just then Mom came running out of the house screaming and crying and saying "Don't! Oh, please don't." And she saw us and she just fell down in the wet grass and was sobbing; and then I saw that I was crying too. I didn't even know it. And Dad just stood there and so did I. I didn't know what to do. And then Mom got up and went back into the house.

I turned my face away so Dad wouldn't see I was crying and I wiped my face with my sleeve. I kinda expected Dad to put his hand on my shoulder or something but he didn't. He just stood there. Cubby was there sitting beside me and I went down and hugged him and that felt good.

I stood up and brushed off my knees and we stood there some more and then I asked him why I couldn't go with him and he said he didn't love me anymore either and my eyes started to get wet again so I just kicked him and ran into the house.

Mom was sitting at the kitchen table with her head resting on her arms. She looked up when she heard the door bang and her eyes and nose were all red and she turned on the chair and held out her arms. I ran to her and we held each other and she kept saying, "I'm sorry" over and over and hugging me. I was sorry too but I wasn't sure what I was sorry about.

#### FIVE YEARS LATER

The bus slowed at midnight, the time the bus was due in Jacob Lake. I picked up my bag with the clothes I would wear for the next couple of months and moved to the front. It was dark everywhere except for the headlights; no house lights, no cars or trucks, just the road. Then the headlights picked up a building with a gas pump out front and then the sign on the building "Jacob Lake Trading Post" and then I saw the jeep. Dad got out of the jeep and came toward me as the bus pulled away.

"You've grown quite a bit," he said as he took my bag.

“Yep. I guess.” What else should I say? So have you? You look good? How are you doing? We got in the jeep and he congratulated me on graduating from high school and asked how my trip had been. I told him about the plane ride to Chicago and the bus to Flagstaff and spending the day walking around Flagstaff until the bus to Salt Lake City left. It all seemed quite boring. He told me it would take about an hour on this dirt road before we came to the turn off for the fire lookout tower he manned and where he lived all summer until the first snow.

We didn’t really have much to say. It was awkward.

My mind was churning around my desire to get my parents back together. I blurted, “I think Mom still loves you.” I hadn’t intended to say that so soon, maybe not at all but he wasn’t saying anything. He seemed to savor that but then he told me I had a brother and sister.

A brother and a sister? The headlights bounced along the road ahead and reflected off the trees close by both sides. The letters I’d gotten over the past five years; not that many but still; a brother and a sister? How did that happen? Well, I know how it happens but ...

“Does Grandma know?” I visited my grandmother and grandfather several times a year. Usually my mother and I drove down to Philadelphia for the day and once a year I would take the bus and stay for several days, time spent mostly reading the funny papers my grandmother saved for me all year long. Dad was their only child, born nine months after they were married, and, it seemed, the focus of the rest of my grandmother’s life.

“No. No one back East knows. You can spread the word or not as you wish.”

It turns out his passion for painting western landscapes was not the only reason he left the East. He left my mother and me and the East for another woman, someone he worked with in New York. When he drove away five years ago he headed for the train station before turning west. My half brother was three and my half sister eighteen months.

When the first snow came to the Kaibab Forest the tower was closed until fire danger returned next year. Five of us, Dad driving, his second wife, Betty and I squeezed into the passenger seat and half-brother Davy and half-sister Lisa tucked into cracks and crevasses in the load behind the seats. We were headed for San Francisco where I would catch a plane back East and join the Coast Guard for four years; my father would check in with a gallery that was handling his paintings in the hope there would be some money for them. It was a scenic trip including Bryce, Zion National Park where we spent more than a week hiking, Death Valley, Mt. Whitney and Lake Tahoe.

#### EIGHT YEARS LATER

On my last Easter break before graduating from the University of Wisconsin I took another trip to see my father. A friend and I headed for Oak Creek Canyon south of Flagstaff where he was staying for the winter. My half-brother Davy was now eleven and he had four sisters, the last two were twins. No surprises this time as I had been kept up to date with letters, artwork and pictures from my half-siblings

and their mother. My friend Jay, Davy, my father and I hiked into the Grand Canyon for four days. Jay and my father hit it off wonderfully talking philosophy whenever they had an opportunity. Jay wrote with a brown pen because nothing was black and white. Argh. On the third day we were sprawled out recuperating from a strenuous morning in a shelter where the Bright Angel Trail starts snaking up from the river to a campground on the tonto—a broad platform between the inner gorge and the rest of the colorful canyon walls. We had finished lunch when something set me off. I grabbed my pack and headed up the trail alone. Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit, enough, more than enough bullshit, enough to last a lifetime and then, suddenly, I was no longer tired, the pack on my back more like wings than weight. I spun around in the trail taking pictures of the incredible beauty all around me. The hike was all up hill but I felt no gravitational pull. I was as close to flying as I will likely ever be. When I got to the campground I dropped my pack on the first picnic table and headed out onto the tonto, a 3-mile trail taking me to the edge of the inner gorge. I had only one frame left in my camera which I reserved for the sunset. When I got back to the campground dinner was ready. I was hungry but overwhelmingly filled with joy. I seriously considered a round trip to the canyon rim that night to get film. Was my joy some sort of bonding with the magnificent Canyon or severing a bond with my father? No matter!

#### ANOTHER FIVE YEARS

At 32 my stage managing career was going well. I had visited my father in Big Sur, California a couple of years before. Now I was in California again with my bride hoping to hook up with him so they could meet.

The VW bug had served us well getting around Los Angeles. I had hired Barbara as wardrobe mistress for live performances of the *Play of Daniel* and the *Play of Herod* with New York Pro Musica. Job over, we started our honeymoon. We were headed for Paradise; that is General Delivery, Paradise, Arizona, the last address I had for my father. I had written that I would come to him wherever he was and I asked him for directions. Receiving none I called my Grandmother but she didn't have more up-to-date information. The postmaster directed us to a house where he thought they might have been but he suspected they had left though they left no forwarding address.

Released from the mission of trying to introduce my wife to my father we set off exploring the beauty of the southwest which included passing through Zion where we spent a day. Barbara and I hiked in to Emerald Pools and on the return loop came to the Lady Mountain trail head, an amazing trail I had hiked with my stepmother fourteen years ago. Barbara went back to the car while I climbed fast to get as high as possible before it got too dark for a safe return. When I opened a log book part way up the trail my heart gave a leap. The last people to hike this trail, four months before, were my father and five half-siblings.

\*

Nearly two years later my father and wife met for the first and last time when we learned that my stepmother had died of cancer in Minnesota where her family lived; that on her death bed she told her family to get the children away from my father; and that he had kidnapped one of them and taken off with all five feeling that he was a fugitive. We also learned that while we were looking for them in Paradise they were in Mexico and that Davy and one of the twins had been taken by riptide and drowned. The bodies were never found.

We caught up with my father and three half-sisters in Big Spring, Arkansas and lived in their tent village for a couple of days. We learned that Davy had been communicating with a friend of the family regularly until his death and my father had sent a last “letter” to this friend in Davy’s handwriting, a fiction piece Davy had written about going to Planet X, the idea conveyed being that Davy was going to Planet X and would not be heard from again.

I expressed concern that this person should be allowed to know the fate of a family he had been close to for many years (he had been around most of the times I visited). I convinced my father to give me Bob’s address and I assured him I would not reveal the family’s whereabouts. I wrote to Bob using the address given. He never responded. Instead I got a letter from my father telling me that he had gone to Planet X.

I exploded with every expletive I had become adept at using while in the service. “That’s it, I’m done with you.” Yeah, well, that’s the old “you can’t fire me, I quit” routine but when I told my mother this story with perhaps a few expletives deleted she told me that the only time she and my father fought was when he told her he was going to tell me he was leaving because he didn’t love me anymore.

\*

Recollections can be dicey. I have in more recent times questioned if I really kicked my father. I do believe my mother’s recollection, however I give her tremendous credit for never having a bad word for my father until I unleashed all the anger that might have been pent up in her all those years.

That was the last time I saw my father. There were times when I mused about what I would do if he turned up at my door needing help. I never came across an answer. I’m glad I never had to.

Barbara and I were watching a television movie of a son working for his father in construction. The father was harder on his son than on any of his other workers to the extent the other workers tried to get him to ease up but he loved his son and was just putting him through fire to make him stronger. In the end they hugged and I sobbed uncontrollably for several minutes. Barbara held me as I tried to bring myself under control and finally I choked out, “All I wanted was a hug.”

*Mort Mather*  
*Organic Farmer/Independent Scholar*



STACY HOLMAN JONES

## ALWAYS STRANGE

*Transforming Loss*

It's not as if an "I" exists independently over here and then simply loses a "you" over there, especially if the attachment to "you" is part of what composes who "I" am ... I have lost "you" only to discover that "I" have gone missing as well.

—Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (2004, p. 22)

She seemed utterly alone, the silence and darkness impenetrable forever. She fought down panic until she heard her father's voice coming to her very faintly.

—Madeline L'Engle, *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962, p. 167)

### WHAT MATTERS

*She had been so certain that the moment she found her father everything would be all right. Everything would be settled.*<sup>1</sup>

My father and I are watching college football. Well, he is watching college football and I am reading and keeping an eye on the television. Every now and again I ask a question, trying to keep myself in the game.

We are sitting in the living room of the house I am renovating from just this side of wrecked, just this side of despair.

We are sitting in the living room of the only house I could afford in the neighborhood where my old house—the house I shared with my now ex-husband and daughter—sits. I am renovating this house, my house, so that my daughter and I might start a new life that resembles, however modestly, the old one.

My father is here to help me with the renovation. On the few occasions he has visited me without my mother along, he has come to work: on the kitchen, on the yard, on the windows, on the porch. And today, as we take a break from our renovation of my life, I want to talk. I want to ask him something, but I am afraid.

"Dad," I begin, feeling clumsy but determined. "We've not talked about me being gay. I feel like we should ... What do you think about it?"

My heart is pounding. Why is it so hard to get the words out? I watch him. He studies the screen.

“I don’t understand it,” he begins, his eyes fixed on the blur of grass and uniforms. “I don’t think it’s right. But it’s your decision and I want you to be happy.”

“I *am* happy, Dad.”

“That’s all that matters.”

I wait, but he doesn’t speak. I try again. “Is there anything else you want to say?”

“No. As long as you’re happy, your mother and I are happy.”

Not wanting to push him, but also not wanting this stiff discomfort, I say, “Okay. I’m glad to know that. But if there’s ever anything else, or if you want to talk some more . . .”

Halftime begins and my father changes the channel, looking for another game.

I return to the book lying open in my hands, to my racing mind and beating heart, to my self, looking for another chance, another choice.<sup>2</sup> I feel the chasm deepen between us, feel our relationship unraveling as we retreat into ourselves. Though who am I without him? My ability to *be* implicates my father in me. My own foreignness to myself is the source of my connection to him. I cannot know or understand myself—fully, or ever—because who I am includes traces of him.<sup>3</sup> Traces of mis-understanding, mis-recognition. Traces of protection and dismissal.<sup>4</sup> Traces of *not right*. My confession<sup>5</sup>—the words “I am gay” as a manifestation of my desires, my choices, my self—puts me at risk of losing him.<sup>6</sup> Of losing what it is in my father, what it is in me, that I cannot reach, know, or name.

#### DEPENDS ON WHO YOU ASK

*There was no question, despite the change in him, that he was her father.*<sup>7</sup>

Since my father visited me in Tampa, I have been afraid to see him, afraid to talk with him. After that visit—after my failed attempt to talk with my father about my sexuality, my choices, my self—everything changed. *He* changed. He had another heart attack (his third) and needed open heart surgery (his second). And then he had a stroke in the recovery room after surgery. A *stroke* a year after he’d been in Tampa, strong and sure, helping me renovate my house and my life. A stroke and then the emergency surgery to repair a perforated bowel, the fall in rehab, the colostomy bag, the partially paralyzed left arm and leg, the emptiness in his eyes and speech.

\*

He’d emerged from open-heart surgery groggy and testy. He’d grumbled that he felt like a horse was sitting on his chest. But he was alive and the surgery to clear the blocked artery had been a success. My mother, relieved and exhausted, went home to feed the dogs. I stayed behind so I could see my father during the last 10-minute visiting session permitted until morning. I returned to my perch in the bone-

aching cold of the waiting room, though just a few minutes into my wait, the intensive care nurse approached. “Can I sneak in early?” I asked hopefully.

“In a bit, yes. I’m afraid, though, that there’s been a change in your father’s condition.”

“What do you mean? He was just awake, and complaining.”

“He’s had a stroke. I’m not sure how significant. They’re going to take him downstairs for some tests.”

The panicked feeling I’d carried all day flooded my body anew. “Can I see him?”

“Yes, but only for a minute.”

\*

I walk into the room and my father’s eyes open. He gives me a lop-sided smile that turns into a grimace.

“You okay?”

He raises his right hand and makes the motion of writing. I retrieve the pen and small pad from the bedside table. I put the pen in his hand and rest the paper on the bed. Dad writes, “Chest crushed. Hard to breathe.” Two nurses enter the room. “We’re going to take your Dad downstairs now. You can see him in the morning when visiting hours resume at nine. We’ll take good care of him.”

I take the pen and paper from my father and squeeze his hand. The nurses push the bed toward the door, then bang it hard against the door frame. “Please be careful with him!” I call out. “Dad, don’t worry. I’ll see you soon.” I stand alone in the room, machines blinking silently around me. Chest crushed, hard to breathe. I lift the receiver of the bedside phone and wait for my mother’s voice on the other end of the line.

\*

I stay with my father in the hospital for several days. There’s a clear and sure line that demarcates my father before and after the stroke. Before: active, opinionated, capable, kind, a caretaker, body in the grip of unrelenting heart disease. After: dependent, depressed, unable to use his left arm or leg, forgetful in the immediate but a keen memory of the past, mind unsure of the structure and strictures of time, language, and talk.<sup>8</sup> My bedside vigil had to end, though. I needed to return home to my daughter and my work. I call my mother every day to talk about my father, until she tells me that my calls aren’t necessary. “There’s just nothing new to tell you,” she says.

Once my father is released from the hospital and sent home, I call him—every few days at first, then every few weeks, then less. Our brief and stilted conversations center on how he’s feeling and his rehabilitation, though occasionally our exchanges turn to other things. My father’s talk is uncensored;<sup>9</sup> he says whatever comes into his mind. Sometimes his talk is funny, as when he needles my mother about her repeated promises that “dinner will be ready in 15

minutes.” Sometimes his talk is openly emotional, as when he tells me how much he loves the new puppy my mother brought home. Sometimes his talk is disarming and cutting, as when he informs me that a boy I went to high school with has died. While I express my shock and sadness, I can hear my mother correcting my father in the background. “What?” Dad says to her. “Oh.”

“Nevermind,” he says to me.

“Nevermind what?”

“Mom says Sam didn’t die. He’s *gay*.”

I exhale. “Oh. That’s a relief.”

Dad says, “Depends on who you ask.”

I don’t say anything.

I don’t say what I am thinking: Who counts as human? Whose lives count *as lives*? What makes for a grievable life?<sup>10</sup>

And my father doesn’t say what he is thinking, either. What counts as a loss of life? What counts as a loss of self? He is still alive, still an aging and ill white man, still my father. I am still alive, still—now, though not always—gay, still his daughter. We have both experienced a radical shift in the flow of our identities;<sup>11</sup> we may wish to recreate our selves as if we were there all along,<sup>12</sup> though to do so we must be fully human to one another. Our losses and grief must *count*—to ourselves, to each other, and to the world. Though the kinds of losses—of people and selves and relationships—that we can acknowledge and avow as loss *depend*. They depend on who you ask. After all, if someone is lost, and that person is not someone (or *somebody*), then what and where is the loss, and how does mourning take place?<sup>13</sup>

#### ALWAYS STRANGE

*She realized with a flooding horror that she could see him ... but her father could not ... see her. She looked at him in panic, his eyes were the same steady blue that she remembered.*<sup>14</sup>

During another phone conversation, my father asks how my daughter and I like living in the renovated house. I tell him, “We’re getting used to it,” and my father says, “Does the baby know you’re a queer?” using a word his grandmother—my great grandmother—and not he, at least not before the stroke—would have used.

“Yes, Dad. The *baby* is seven and she knows I’m gay.”

“You can’t be a *gay*. You were married for 15 years for christsakes.”

“Twelve.”

“Twelve what?”

“I was married for twelve ... never mind. Yes, the baby knows I’m gay,” I say, then revise. “Knows I’m queer.”

“Gay. Queer. Whatever you call yourselves these days. Your mother and I should have known.”

“Should have known what?”

“Should have known about you.”

“How could you have known? I didn’t know—who or what I am, who or what I love. I still don’t.”

“Well, we knew one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“We knew you were strange. *You* were always strange.”

“And what would *you* know about being strange?”

My father laughs. “A hellava lot. All these braces and bags and metal? You should see me. I look like a monster.”

“Thank goodness you are a lovable monster.”

My father doesn’t say anything. And I don’t say what I am thinking: that since the change, since the shifts in our identities and our relationship, we have been asking each other to see us for who and what we are, as we always have been, as we were, *before*.<sup>15</sup> Though I am trying to know that when we ask for this kind of recognition, we petition the future *in relation* to each other.<sup>16</sup> In the asking, familiar stories become strange and we rewrite our losses.<sup>17</sup> In the asking, we instigate a transformation, having already become something new.<sup>18</sup>

#### A WRINKLE IN TIME

*Don’t be afraid to be afraid ... That is all we can do.*<sup>19</sup>

I visit my parents in the stifling July heat. I haven’t been home in a while. During the visit, my father makes a series of attempts to connect with my 10-year-old daughter. He finds a beach volleyball game on television and they watch together. He asks if she plays beach volleyball. He asks if she can spike the ball. He asks if she dives into the sand. She says, “Yes” and “Sometimes” and “Of course.” Each time she answers, my daughter looks away from the game and over at my father. She holds his gaze for only a moment, then shifts her eyes back to the set.

My father isn’t watching the game. He is watching her. His questioning stops, though his gaze remains fixed, steady. After several moments, my daughter looks up from the game and over at my father. She gets up from the couch and moves to stand next to my father’s recliner. She shifts her hip and leg up onto the armrest and leans her weight into my father’s shoulder. He pats her knee with his braced left hand. He lets his eyes settle on the blur of sand and uniforms.

Later that evening, I ask my mother if Dad is still reading. While reading was a struggle, my father had kept at it, unable to give up the civil war histories and pulp westerns he loved before the stroke. Mom says he doesn’t want to read anymore. She tries to get him interested in books, but he never makes it past the first few pages. My father says reading takes too much concentration. She pushes, he refuses. She lets it go.

\*

My mother’s words about my father’s refusal to read make me anxious, panicky. Not long after the stroke, I helped my father with one of his occupational therapy assignments: looking up a series of business names in the yellow pages and noting

their phone numbers on a worksheet, an activity designed to strengthen cognitive sorting and sequencing capabilities diminished by stroke. I waited at the kitchen table while my father struggled to look up the entries and record the numbers in the correct order, sometimes confusing the phone numbers, other times confusing the sequence of the alphabet.

My mind flashed to this same scene, 30 years earlier. My father and I sat at the kitchen table. I struggled to remember my times tables. My father waited impatiently. He could do complex math in his sleep, while I couldn't seem to fix even the simplest operations in my memory. I looked at the problems on the page and the numbers danced before my eyes. My father insisted that I stay at the table until I finished every last problem. "Finish it now. Don't leave it until later," he'd say.

That day at the kitchen table, I urged my father to keep looking up names and numbers in the phone book.

"Only three more!" I said, forcing a smile.

My father closed the phone book and pushed it away with his working right hand. "I'm tired honey. Let's finish it later."

"Don't you want to finish it now?" I pushed.

He reached for his cane. "No. I don't need the phone number of a lawn mower repair guy. Hell, I can't even use the lawn mower."

I didn't say anything. I let him go.

I think now about how loss hits us in waves.<sup>20</sup> From our earliest moments we are taught to begin each endeavor, including grieving, with an aim, a project, a plan. What we don't teach ourselves, or others, is how easily these aims, projects, and plans can change, evaporate, and create a suddenly present absence. How easily we are frustrated, felled. How we are suddenly exhausted but do not know why.

\*

I don't want to let reading go. I don't want to let my father go. After dinner, my father uses his cane to make the short trip from the dining room to his recliner and begins watching a baseball game on television. My mother and I do the dishes. "I have an idea," I say.

"What's that?" Mom asks.

My daughter has a list of books to read over the summer and I've resolved to help her work on building her reading comprehension. I seize on an opportunity to include my father, to help him return to reading and strengthen his relationship with my daughter. "What if I send Dad the next book on our summer reading list? Dad could read it and they could talk about the story. It would encourage them both to read and would give them something to talk about. They could talk every few days."

"That would be great," Mom says. "But I don't know if Dad will stick with it. He gets so frustrated."

“I don’t think the book will be too challenging—it’s on the incoming 5<sup>th</sup> grade summer reading list. If Dad thought he were helping with her homework, I bet he’d do it.”

“It’s worth a try. Send the book.”

\*

A week later, my father calls me. “I’m not sure what you want me to do with this book,” he says.

“I need your help. I was hoping you’d read a book on her summer reading list and then talk to her about the story. You’d be helping with her homework.

“You never liked me helping *you* with *your* homework.”

“I passed all my math classes, didn’t I?”

“Well sure. I could do math.”

“You could read too! So, will you help her out?”

“I’ll try honey.”

\*

My daughter reads the first few chapters of *A Wrinkle in Time*, a story about a brilliant scientist father who goes missing and the strange and stubborn daughter who sets out to find him. She calls my father. She listens while he talks. She says “Ya,” “Okay,” “Sure.” She holds the phone out to me. “Grandpa wants to talk to you.”

“Hi Dad, how are you?”

“Not too good.”

“No? What’s not too good?”

“I can’t help with this book, honey.”

“You can’t?”

“No. I’ve read the first chapter several times, but I can’t remember what happens.”

“Oh, Dad, that’s okay.”

“My brain just doesn’t work as well as it used to.”

“I’ve read that first chapter and it’s confusing.”

“It’s not confusing for you, but it is for me. I used to be able to read anything, but now I can’t. Tell her I won’t be able to help with her homework.”

“Don’t worry, Dad. I can help her. I’ve never read *A Wrinkle in Time*, and I should.

“I’m sorry.”

“No, *I’m sorry*. I didn’t mean for this to be a frustrating experience for you.”

“I just don’t read much anymore. But honey?”

“Yes?”

“Make sure she finishes that book.”

“I’ll make sure she finishes it. We both will.”

\*

My daughter enjoys *A Wrinkle in Time*, particularly the character Charles Wallace, who sees, knows, and understands what Meg, the daughter in search of her father, cannot.

I enjoy the story too, particularly the story of Mr. Murry, Meg's father. What intrigues me most about this story is not his character—Mr. Murry, the person—but instead the idea of his being lost. Where he went and why remain a mystery for most of the story; something is hiding in the loss of him, something is lost within the recesses of this loss.<sup>21</sup> When he is found, Mr. Murry is nearly unrecognizable, and yet Meg doesn't question that he is her father, despite his having changed, despite his inability to right everything wrong in the world.<sup>22</sup> Instead, Meg forgives him<sup>23</sup>—and herself—for wanting to both disavow and control who she and her father are and what they mean together.<sup>24</sup> I close the book lying open in my hands. There is losing; and there is the transformative effect of loss. Neither can be planned or charted.<sup>25</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> L'Engle (1962, p. 171).

<sup>2</sup> Butler (2004, p. 26): "There is bound to be some experience of humiliation for adults, who think that they are exercising judgment in matters of love, to reflect upon the fact that, as infants and young children, they loved their parents or other primary others in absolute and uncritical ways—and that something of that pattern lives on in their adult relationships."

<sup>3</sup> Butler (2004, p. 46): "I find that my very formation implicates the other in me, that my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others. I am not fully known to myself, because part of what I am is the enigmatic traces of others."

<sup>4</sup> Adams (2012, p. 194). My father's words to me are both protective—it's your decision, I want you to be happy, that's all that matters—and dismissive—I don't understand it, I don't think it's right. Like Adams, I "long for a more engaging response. I want him to comment on my sexuality, to recognize and respect it. But I say nothing."

<sup>5</sup> Butler (2005, pp. 112-113): "Foucault reads confession as an act of speech in which the subject 'publishes [her]self,' gives [her]self in words ... as a way of making the self appear for another."

<sup>6</sup> Butler (2004, p. 20): "Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments ...."

<sup>7</sup> L'Engle (1962, p. 160).

<sup>8</sup> Stroke Association (2012, pp. 1-2): The physical changes created as a result of stroke include weakness and paralysis, loss of balance, muscle stiffness and pain, changes in physical sensitivity, and difficulties speaking and swallowing. In addition to these physical effects, strokes also have cognitive, emotional, and relational impacts. Mukherjee, Levin, and Heller (2006, p. 26) note that these effects include depression and anxiety, changes in identity and personality, changes in social roles and family dynamics, social isolation, and communication difficulties.

<sup>9</sup> Mukherjee, Levin, and Heller (2006, p. 28): Stroke often affects the executive functions of the brain, including "cognitive control, cognitive set-shifting, and sequencing a series of events."

<sup>10</sup> Butler (2004, p. 20).

<sup>11</sup> Mukherjee, Levin, and Heller (2006, p. 28): Comments about changes in identity post-stroke are telling, in terms of not only my father's experience of self post-stroke, but also my own experience of self post-coming out and of my relationship with my father post-stroke *and* post coming-out: "A common experience after brain injury is a radical break in the flow of identity, often due to the loss of skills or activities that were profoundly intertwined with the individual's sense of self .... Accepting the loss of identities that were previously crucial to one's sense of self and inventing new ones that provide satisfaction and fulfillment are key to adjustment."

<sup>12</sup> Butler (2004, p. 27): “I may wish to reconstitute my ‘self’ as if it were there all along, a tacit ego with acumen from the start; but to do so would be to deny the various forms of rapture and subjection that formed the condition of my emergence as an individual being and that continue to haunt my adult sense of self with whatever anxiety and longing I may now feel.”

<sup>13</sup> Butler (2004, p. 32).

<sup>14</sup> L’Engle (1962, pp. 165-166).

<sup>15</sup> Butler (2004, p. 44): “When we recognize another, or when we ask for recognition for ourselves, we are not asking for an Other to see us as we are, as we already are, as we always have been, as we were constituted prior to the encounter itself.”

<sup>16</sup> Butler (2004, p. 44): “Instead, in the asking, in the petition, we have already become something new, since we are constituted by virtue of the address .... To ask for recognition, or to offer it, is precisely not to ask for recognition for what one already is. It is to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the other.”

<sup>17</sup> Wyatt (2012, p. 165): “Familiar stories become strange. Loss written and rewritten.”

<sup>18</sup> Butler (2004, p. 44).

<sup>19</sup> L’Engle (1962, p. 221).

<sup>20</sup> Butler (2004, p. 21): “I think one is hit by waves, that one starts out the day with an aim, a project, a plan, and finds oneself foiled. One finds oneself fallen. One is exhausted but one does know why.”

<sup>21</sup> Butler (2004, pp. 21-22): “Freud reminded us that when we lose someone, we do not always know what it is *in* that person that has been lost. So when one loses, one is also faced with something enigmatic: something is hiding in the loss, something is lost within the recesses of loss.”

<sup>22</sup> L’Engle (1962, pp. 174-176): “She had been so certain that at the moment she found her father everything would be all right. Everything would be settled .... Her father had been found but had not made everything all right. Instead everything was worse than ever, and her adored father was bearded and thin and white and not omnipotent at all.”

<sup>23</sup> L’Engle (1962, p. 220): “At last she turned to her father. ‘I’m—I’m sorry Father ... I wanted you to do it all for me. I wanted everything to be all easy and simple.’”

<sup>24</sup> Butler (2004, p. 28): “Let us return to the issue of grief, to the moments in which one undergoes something outside one’s control and finds that one is beside oneself, not at one with oneself. Perhaps we can say that grief contains the possibility of apprehending a mode of dispossession that is fundamental to who I am ... we are, from the start and by virtue of being a bodily being, already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that our not our own.”

<sup>25</sup> Butler (2004, p. 21).

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