Kissing the Bread: The Power of Language in Facing Grief

INTRODUCTION

I have chosen a select number of poets and writers to see how they use language to resolve the problem of grief in regard to the search for meaning, the importance of memory, the ways that lead to transformation and healing. In particular I explore tools they use: metaphor, simile, image, sound and music.

The idea around which to shape this paper came from a 1967 lecture entitled, “A Poem is a Walk,” by A.R. Ammons¹. In this lecture, Ammons speaks of the power of poetry: “I can’t tell you where a poem comes from, what it is, or what it is for, nor can I tell any other person. The reason I can’t tell you is that the purpose of a poem is to go beyond telling, to be recognized by burning.” If it is true that a poem is to be recognized by burning, then poets must reveal the fire of their grief through language that burns, and also, I would argue, that brings balance out of chaos and meaning, that transforms and heals.

This work rose out of my own burning need for meaning. In May of 2005, my husband of thirty-five years succumbed to cancer after months of illness. This loss, though expected, was far beyond any idea I had had about death. It seemed at the time, the end of my own life as well as his. I could find no solace in spite of knowing others had survived feelings of abandonment and despair and gone on to lead productive lives.
Loss is part of the human condition. How we deal with grief is crucial. Many persons lose hope and succumb to a life of bitterness, inertia, or despair. Yet, because we have tools of language that can help restore meaning and balance after a major loss, it is possible to survive and become transformed in ways that give hope and life once again.

Throughout the centuries, poets and writers have turned to their craft during times of grief. Muriel Rukeyser spoke of grief in a way which struck me powerfully: “I don’t believe that poetry can save the world. I do believe that the forces in us wish to share something of our experience by turning it into something and giving it to somebody: that is poetry. That is some kind of saving thing, and as far as my life is concerned, poetry has saved me again and again.” I took great solace in these words as I turned to poetry for my own survival.
1. The Search for Meaning After Loss

No matter how many times death is experienced, it leaves the survivor lonely and afraid. The self knows and must face not only the death of a loved one but one’s own death as well. It feels abandoned. How do poets help to once again find meaning and grounding when a loved one dies? Perhaps by putting language around the experience so that it can be realized, understood and accepted.

In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion says, “Grief, when it comes, is nothing we expect it to be . . . what I felt was sadness, loneliness (the loneliness of the abandoned child) . . . regret for time gone by, for things unsaid, for my inability to share or even in any real way to acknowledge, at the end, the pain and helplessness and physical humiliation . . . endured” (26). For a while there is a dull sheen over all that one sees and feels. Even though the early days of grieving are intense, when family and friends are close, there remains a chasm no one can comprehend.

Didion believes that in the absence following death, we confront the reality of meaninglessness. Out of meaninglessness, comes self-pity. Though most animals do not express self-pity, apparently some do. Much has been written about geese and how they search for a lost mate until they become disoriented and die. Dolphins refuse to eat after a mate dies. It is easy for us humans to indulge in aloneness. All connections have been broken. There is no possibility of a response. We are left with the constant question, Who am I now? as well as with the need to reconnect with others in some meaningful way. To name the experiences helps to regain control, to move from chaos to wholeness, to find balance in life once again.
C.S. Lewis, in *A Grief Observed*, says, “When reality smashes my dreams to bits, I mope and snarl while the first shock lasts, then patiently I start putting it together again” (38). Lewis believes we set up a mythical house of cards and when it falls, we have to go about rebuilding something less fragile. He wonders if this restored faith will end up being another house of cards: “Why should the thought or idea I had a week ago be any more trustworthy than the better thoughts I have now?” (38) and “Whether there was anything but imagination in the faith, or anything but egoism in the love, God knows. I don’t” (41). He asks, “Was it my own frantic need that slammed it (the door) in my face? The time when there is nothing at all in your soul except a cry for help may be just the time when God cannot give it: you are like the drowning man who can’t be helped because he clutches and grabs. Perhaps our own cries make us deaf to a voice we wanted to hear” (46). These are the words of a man who cries out to understand as he faces the death of his beloved. Perhaps as Lewis says, “After all, you must have a capacity to receive, or even omnipotence can’t give. Perhaps your own passion temporarily destroys the capacity to receive” (46). In my own case, I know that deep emotions can cripple the capacity to receive yet, over time, moderate stability returns.

In the course of *A Grief Observed*, Lewis comes to understand that until he can put his thoughts into words, he will be trapped in himself. So many of our thoughts, feelings and actions had the loved one as object. “Now that target is gone”, says Lewis. “I keep on through habit fitting an arrow to the string, then I remember and have to lay the bow down” (47).

Naomi Shihab Nye’s poems deal on another level with the war in Lebanon, disasters in Syria, brutal occupations and conflicts between Palestine and Israel. In her
introduction to 19 Varieties of Gazelle, she writes: “We need poetry for nourishment and for noticing, for the way language and imagery reach comfortably into experience, holding and connecting it more successfully than any news channel could name” (xvi).

In “The Tray”(105), Nye uses the language of every day to express the communal aspect of grief.

Even on a sorrowing day
the little white cups without handles
would appear
filled with steaming hot tea
in a circle on the tray,
and whatever we were able
to say or not say,
the tray would be passed,
we would sip
in silence,
it was another way
lips could be speaking together,
opening on the hot rim,
swallowing in unison. (1-14)

It is here, in the routines of life that Nye finds peace and self-transcendence.

I have used the works of Joan Didion, C. S. Lewis, and Naomi Shihab Nye, to discuss the struggle poets and writers undergo to express in prose as well as narrative and lyric verse, the difficulties and confusion experienced by loss. Lewis and Didion speak of the unending absence that follows death, that emptiness that fills the one left behind with fear and apprehension, with meaningless in all of life. In the above poem, Nye also speaks of the unending absence as those sorrowing pass the tray and sip in silence. With connections lost, the grieved become self-absorbed. Each of the writers mentioned above writes from experience, each expresses words and feelings, silence and actions that help
bring about transformation. It is through language that poets and other writers help themselves and others to move into a deeper reality, a deeper and more alive sense of self.
II. The Place of Memory in the Grieving Process

One of the first lessons an infant learns is that what goes out of sight does not cease to exist. While loved ones “go out of sight” in death, there still remains the essence of who they were as they lived on this earth. The mind and body remember the tastes, smells, sounds, sights and feelings that were shared with the beloved and in that sense the one who dies lives on with us.

Jane Hirshfield, in *Nine Gates*, Chapter Eight, speaks of poetry as a “Vessel of Remembrance” (176). She uses this phrase to express the power of memory. Without its flow there would be nothing to connect one moment to the next. In “Cabin” (90) from *The Lives of the Heart*, Hirshsfield expresses this sense of memory:

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The window casements
crack,
too empty even to
be lonely.

A small grief
really,
only big enough for one.

Now it stands
like the actor in No Zeami wrote of—

His secret is having
something he knows but does not say.

He is old,
he has almost forgotten

what has been broken.
It will not be kissed away. (6-20)
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Memories cannot be “kissed away.” Memories of loved ones follow us to our own deaths but language, by highlighting the essentials, helps them live on.
C. S. Lewis reminds us that “There are moments most unexpectedly, when something inside me tries to assure me that I don’t really mind so much . . . then comes a sudden jab of red-hot memory and all this ‘common sense’ vanishes like an ant in the mouth of a furnace” (3-4). He goes on to say: “We are taken out of ourselves by the loved one while she is here. Then comes the tragic figure of the dance in which we must learn to be still taken out of ourselves though the bodily presence is withdrawn, to love the very Her, and not fall back to loving our past, or our memory, or our sorrow, or our relief from sorrow, or our own love” (50).

The author searches for a touchstone for his grief. “All reality is iconoclastic. The earthly beloved even in this life, incessantly triumphs over your mere idea of her. And you want her to, you want her with all her resistance, all her faults, all her unexpectedness. . . . And this, not an image of memory, is what we are to love still, after she is dead” (66).

Lewis raises a question for all of us: “Why should the desperate imaginings of a man dazed . . . be especially reliable?” (39). Thus we are caught in both past and present, in memories that can no longer be created. We learn hope despite the return from time to time of painful memories. The mind has an enormous capacity to mend and survive.

Lewis continues to probe what memory can do. He knows he cannot know or change anything about her but discovers that in the moment he mourns his wife least, he remembers her best.

It is in the early stages of loss that memories flood the soul like a torrent. Grief subsides when memories find a more peaceful place in the healing process.
Some poems live in the moment where memories are made and shaped, the only space between “nows” that tick away to make up our lives. In *Constance*, Jane Kenyon in “The Stroller” (8), remembers as a child, a friend of her mother’s who “was different from the others” by cigarette and perfume smells, and the sight of Dachshunds. She speaks of how everything is connected, how people save the things they remember when someone loves them. She remembers the wounds, the pain that comes with loving.

In *The Boat of Quiet Hours*, Kenyon also reflects on her deep sadness and an awareness of the passing of all things. In “At the Town Dump” (14), the poet remembers her old neighbor, thin from cancer, helping her when her car is stuck:

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Saved,
I saw his small body in the rearview mirror
get smaller as he waves.
A boy pokes with a stick at a burned out sofa cushion . . .
He brings the insides
out with clear delight. (13-18)
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In the last stanza, the poet is harvesting the last “bug-riddled remains” (20) of her garden. She ends with: “I offer it to oblivion / with the rest of what was mine” (23-24). Her grief seems matter of fact. Yet clearly she feels deeply the eventual loss of her neighbor small as her summer garden as she remembers the people and things she encounters every day, knowing they will not last.

In certain cultures, stories were passed orally through the ages. In more modern cultures, the written word preserves the past. In his forward to *Breathing Room*, Peter Davison tells the reader, “The past is where we are from. It is what we are most of. To remember is to keep things that have already happened from sliding into oblivion” (iv). In “Glittering Trout” (34), Davison comes to understand the power of memory:
The rueful eyes, cornflower blue,
     of my dead wife, smiling. The dull refusal
of a keyboard as it withholds the true pitch or the just
word. The fierce ache of
fury at being opposed.

Finally, I float on the surface of my remembered
millpond. My senses stoop
to catch poems without bait,
glittering trout. (17-25)

By wakening the senses, memory in poems can lead us from where we were to
where we must go. Through language, the poet is able to link past with present, to face
the reality that, at least in the imagination, loved ones live, and our connection with them
remains intact. Davison holds in his memory poems to sustain him when times are
difficult, so as to have something to offer to others. As in the above poem, Davison has
let go of that “fury at being opposed” (21). Now pain humbles him and he sees with new
eyes.

In Rivers of Salt, Shirley Kaufman looks back but also forward. In “Notes to My
Daughters” (29), she says, “One day I’ll look up at the hills / and they won’t be there.
Lately / I think about my death. It keeps me connected to the world” (32). She grieves
not only for individuals but for the many who suffer from the tragedy of war in the
Mideast. In “Yahrzeit” (35), she writes:

    I wish I could find him
    in the small flame, startled
    and happy, reeling his catch in
    playing the big ones.
    Whatever he knew about loss
    he never told me. (13-18)
Her memories fill her with awe, determination and hope. In “Wild Flowers” (63), she says:

And I’m down on my knees in the clover
where nothing has changed
or slipped through our fingers, still
looking for luck. (17-20)

The poet remembers her childhood joy at being in the midst of nature. She is on the other side of that world but knows the beauty of the flowers, the insects, and sun goes on. She believes in “looking for luck.”

In *Without*, Donald Hall honors the memory of his wife, Jane Kenyon, in the many poems he wrote at the farmhouse where they lived and where he continues to live. In “Song for Lucy” (6), he also writes about his mother whose love never leaves him. He remembers how the love he had for her as a young boy flowed to his wife: “She (his mother), nursed so well, I loved being sick” and “Love was her enterprise” (6-7). It was this dual love and the memory of it that helped carry him through the dark and grief-filled days of Jane’s illness and death.

It seems important in grieving that memory must include going beyond the idea of the beloved. I concur with Madeleine L’Engle in her introduction to Lewis: “In the end, what shines through the last pages of his journal is an affirmation of love, his love for Joy and hers for him and that love is in the context of God’s love. . . .” (xvii). It is this richness of love that leads to growth, the memories that lead to transformation, and then to healing.

In summary, Jane Hirshfield, C. S. Lewis, Jane Kenyon, Peter Davison, Shirley Kaufman and Donald Hall, provide insights about the place of memory in the grief process. It follows the need to make meaning, that we go back into memory to bring
once again a balance to our lives. After all, without memory there is no past. It is that part of the self that grounds us in the present and propels us into the future. For the one who grieves, a constant retelling of the past is essential for health and stability. Language is the bridge. Poets and other writers bring it alive to make the world dance once again.
III. The Language of Grief: Metaphor, Simile and other Poetic Tools

The most natural way to know and be known by others is to tell a story. But stories in poetry are more than chronologies. Gregory Orr, in *Poetry as Survival*, states that “in prose narrative, ‘more is more’ because the goal is often to establish the complex richness and variety of the world of experience. In lyric story, ‘less is more.’ Everything that does not add to the intended dramatization is stripped away and meaning is compressed into action and detail that reveal significance” (95). The poet keeps only what highlights the central focus. Metaphors, similes, and images can help keep this focus intact.

We can see this in Joseph Stroud’s *Country of Light*. In “Stitching the Woe Shirt” (95), he begins with the word “inconsolable.” He cannot directly name his pain. No word can name what grief means. Sorrow, to Stroud, is an ax. He uses the metaphor of prophet as one who might read the future by opening a body. It’s as if “god reached in and scattered her across time” (5). He repeats “inconsolable” to reiterate his own grief at the loss of his wife. Stroud uses threads as metaphors of anguish and desolation. The poem itself is a needle. That is the task of the poet: to say as much as possible with as few words as possible; thus, in eight lines Stroud uses needle and thread to make contact with his own reality. Through the ‘stitches’ of each word, he eventually finds resolution.

The brief poem, “Coat of Many Colors” (91), also demonstrates compressed language. The metaphor of death weaving a coat is powerful.

Death is sewing buttons, the coat is nearly done, soon I will put on that robe of fire, I’ll wrap myself in the sun, then all the words will blaze,
and scatter into ash, when I become
undone, when I am no one. (1-6)

The speaker in the poem appears to be addressing himself but the words may also refer to one left behind, who becomes undone, who becomes no one. The robe of fire must be worn. What follows is the obliteration of all that was. Yet, by reconstructing our history, poetry can bring with it a certain equilibrium to mind and body. The act of writing a poem may take us out of the self only for moments but, over time, the restructuring of ourselves through writing give us new life.

In “Wintering” (50), Stroud wakens to white trees and silence on an October morning. He seems to have no definite plans for the day. He thinks of the words of Yang: “The mountains are chilled by a cold sun. Autumn light trickles into my poem” (16-18). He thinks of the poem that has been eluding him and says:

All winter I’ll let the poem burn
within me, tempering each word
in silence, in the winter sun
forging my life, honing my spirit
in the country of light. (24-28)

The poet spends time in silence, drawing as if from a well all the words he will need to forge a new life. He uses the poem burning within him to “hone” the poem’s images.

Another poet who speaks eloquently of grief is Pablo Neruda. He grieves for himself but also for his countrymen and his friends Frederico Garcia Lorca and Salvador Allende, who died at the hands of assassins. Neruda shared with both men, his political views of freedom and respect for the working class. He used the language of poetry to
win the hearts and minds of the people in the great struggle against fascism. In *The Sea and the Bells*, he expresses his resignation—and hope near the end of his life.

A red glow lingered on the horizon
like a thin strip of flag
flying above the sea.
Later the color blue invaded the sky
until everything filled with blue,
because that is every day’s task,
the blue bread of every day. (109)

Yet in his poem, “It Happens” (75), he is aware that “nobody was standing there / and nobody entered, sat down in a chair / and passed the time with me, nobody” (2-4). Neruda experiences a deep sense of the absence that entered him, “like a man enters his own house” (6). The metaphors of emptiness are skillfully woven.

. . . and I was satisfied with non-being:
an emptiness open to everything.

Nobody questioned me, saying nothing,
and I answered without seeing or speaking.

Such a spacious and specific interview! (7-11)

Questions no longer concern Neruda, not even his own words, now that he has gone beyond grief into the peace of “a spacious and specific interview!” In other words, it is when he is empty of himself that he becomes the self he struggled all his life to become. His language which seems contradictory, expresses perfectly how his life finally becomes fully transparent and when he knows as he is known, grief no longer has power over him.

Jack Gilbert, in *The Great Fires*, uses the metaphor of a dog to cope with the loss of his deceased wife, Michiko. In the poem, “Alone,” he says:

It is strange that she has returned
as somebody’s dalmatian. I meet
the man walking her on a leash
almost every week. He says good morning
and I stoop down to calm her.

... Sometimes she is tethered
on their lawn when I go by. If nobody
is around, I sit on the grass. When she
finally quiets, she puts her head in my lap
and we watch each other’s eyes as I whisper
in her soft ears. She cares nothing about
the mystery. She likes it best when
I touch her head and tell her small
things about my days and our friends.
This makes her happy the way it always did. (4-8, 10-19)

Thus, through his poetic imagination and his use of metaphor, Gilbert finds a
certain resolution to his grief.

The last poem in his book, “Almost Happy” (90), signifies change—perhaps not a
complete transformation, but something near to it: “Loneliness gets closer and closer. /
He drinks hot tea and sings off-key” (4-5). Then the metaphor enters the poem with:
“This train ain’t a going-home train, this train. He repeats this line again and ends with,
This train ain’t a going-home train, ‘cause ‘my home’s on a gone-away train. That
train.” (6-9)

Besides metaphor, repetition adds emphasis to what has been said. In the last line
of the poem, the poet seems to break through, to let go in a transition to something new.
It is a fitting ending to the book—a poem of hope.

The use of metaphor can allow the resolution of conflict, even beyond what the
poet consciously intends. But in the case of grief, sometimes not all the meanings of the
symbols used emerge. Rather, they remain in the symbol (object) and continue to
maintain mystery. When that happens, explanation and understanding do not prevail.
In “Nothing Lasts” (42), from *Given Sugar Given Salt*, Jane Hirshfield uses a skipping rope’s two ends as metaphors of grief and hope, “twin daughters of impatience. One wears a dress of wool, the other of cotton” (7-8). One end of the rope, the metaphor of grief, is bitter and attends each loss, the other, “a promise of consolation” (4). Neither the bitterness nor the consolation is lasting. The skipping rope’s end, the twin of impatience, is temporary. Hirshfield says the unsayable.

In the same book, “Ladder” (47) speaks of a man who “tips back the chair, all evening” (1) and makes small indentations like ladder steps which over the years have marred the floor. “Mostly the mouth says one thing, the thighs and knees / say another, the floor hears a third” (5-6). Yet, the poet says, within us there are no ladders. The things known through the senses and the longings we experience are not different. “They twist on the stem of the heart like ripening grapes” (9). Though her poems are complex, through her use of metaphor, Hirshfield is able to bring the objects of everyday life into magnified existence. Said another way, when one grieves, meanings may have many layers despite the words that pretend to make them specific.

Tess Gallagher’s “Black Valentine” (33), from *Moon Crossing Bridge*, uses hair to speak to the many ways she grieves for her beloved husband. “We’re silent so peace wraps over us like Bernice’s hair shaken out across the heavens” (13-15). Hair expresses safety. “I spread my hair like a tent over us / to make safety wear its twin heads, one to face death / the other blasted so piteously by love” (21-23). And at the same time, it remains itself. The poet remembers:

Eleven years I’ve cut
his hair and even now, this last time, we hide
fear to save pleasure
as bulwark. (17-19)
It is the human experience in the face of death to savor pleasure. It is not denial but a protection of the self against the reality of the pain of loss.

Finally, in the title poem of Moon Crossing Bridge, Gallagher uses a bridge to give meaning to emotion and to resolve conflict. As she stands by the river when the moon is high, her focus is not on the moon but on the light it reflects that carries her beloved “on that span of brightness” (8). She uses the bridge as witness, “to let the water stay the water / and the incongruities of the moon to chart / that joining I was certain of” (11-13). Finally, the poet becomes the bridge over which she travels.

Ellen Bryant Voigt’s book, Kyrie, is written in blank verse sonnets recalling the pandemic influenza of 1918. Twenty-five million deaths worldwide and half a million in the United States alone. Though grief is the overall tone of the book, Voigt’s testimonies of each voice rise above it. Her untitled stories are told with quiet strength and bold frankness as in the following poem when a mother dies (18).

To be brought from the bright schoolyard into the house:

to stand by her bed like an animal stunned in the pen:

against the grid of the quilt, her hand seems

stitched to the cuff of its sleeve—although he wants

most urgently the hand to stroke his head,

although he thinks he could kneel down

that it would need to travel only inches

to brush like a breath his flushed cheek,

he doesn’t stir: all his resolve,

all his resources go to watching her,

her mouth, her hair a pillow of blackened ferns—

he means to match her stillness bone for bone.

Nearby he hears the younger children cry,

and his aunts, like careless thieves, out in the kitchen. (1-14)

The language succeeds through simile and metaphor which allow the reader to enter the experience more fully by objectifying feelings. In the first line, the boy is taken out of the brightness of his day, of his youth, and faces, perhaps for the first time, the
darkness of death. In the second line, “to stand by her bed like an animal stunned in the pen” makes use of the power of simile. In lines 4 through 8, the boy wants his mother to stroke his head. He thinks if he kneels down he would be close enough for her hand. “to brush like a breath her flushed cheek” (8). He longs for one last touch from the mother he loves, and whom he knows loves him in return. Emotion builds as the boy realizes his mother is dying. His focus is on her mouth and his effort to remain as still as she.

In lines 3 and 4, the poet uses metaphor: “against the grid of the quilt, her hand seems / stitched to the cuff of its sleeve—.” While the hand is not stitched to the cuff of a sleeve, it appears to be, “against the grid of the quilt.” What is significant here is that reality is becoming blurred, the sleeve thus functioning as a metaphor for the fact that the mother will soon become a memory. And again: “her hair a pillow of blackened ferns—” (11). Her hair is not like a pillow of blackened ferns but is a pillow of blackened ferns.

While Voigt’s blank verse sonnets do not include a specific rhyming scheme, her lines do contain iambic pentameter, internal rhyming and alliteration to create a musical quality in each poem. There is also stability in the same form throughout the book as if to maintain some control in such an intolerable and uncontrolled situation.

Voigt often uses alliteration to enhance the poem and add music. For instance,: in the first two lines we see the words “brought,” “bright,” and “bed.” In line 5; “hand” and “head,” in lines 11 and 12 the words “mouth,” “means,” “match,” and finally, in lines 13 and 14, “cry,” “careless” and “kitchen.”
The poems in *Kyrie* speak of the deaths of people of all ages; of the unborn, of babies and children, husbands and wives. Even doctors died as they cared for the sick despite grief. Yet people went on with their lives. Voigt brings the plague into focus.

In *The Painted Bed*, a series of grief poems, published eight years after Jane Kenyon’s death, Donald Hall does “Deathwork.” We do not know exactly when the poems were written, whether shortly after her death, or years later. Regardless, they seem to indicate the healing process as Hall continues to tell his stories. In “Ardor” (39), he says:

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Now I no longer
address the wall covered
with many photographs,
nor call her “you”
in a poem. She recedes
into the granite museum
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Still, he longs for “the woman of different faces / who makes metaphors / and chops onions” (16-19).

Part I expresses the deepest grief in the book. In “Kill the Day” (3), Hall mentions the second, third, and fourth years after Jane’s death. With each poem he does the work he must do to bring about transformation. The experience of loss has changed him forever. How? No one can fully comprehend the inner workings of the soul, yet Hall’s language flowing out of Hall’s imagination makes something new. He owns his grief. He does battle with it, slays its dragons and gradually learns to befriend it. He begins “Kill the Day”:

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When he rose from the painted bed, he alternated or cycled
from dedicated hatred through gaiety and inflation
to the vacancy of breathing in-out, in-and-out.
He wakened daily to the prospect of nothingness
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in the day’s house that like all houses was mortuary.  
He slept on the fornicating bed of the last breath. (15-20)

In these lines, the poet experiences the hatred and anger of grief, the imbalance of 
highs and lows. No matter where he goes, all houses are “mortuary.” His efforts to salve 
the pain of loss through sexual promiscuity leads only to “nothingness” as he rises to face 
each day. In his sounds and rhythms, including the visual rhythm of the lines, his simile 
of house as mortuary, and the metaphor of painted bed as a place of separation, Hall 
makes his inner conflict concrete. He goes on to express his brokenness in the following 
lines:

There was nothing to do, and nothing required doing.  
Her vanishing constructed a blue synagogue  
in a universe without solace or a task for doing.  
He imagined that on shelves of his workroom’s end  
lay stacked two hundred and sixty-seven tiny  
corpses, bodies of her body, porcelain mannequins.  
In this dream or story he had neglected to bury them,  
it was something still to do, something to be done. (87-94)

Here he reflects on a dream in which his love has vanished and all that remains is 
a “blue synagogue” representing a cold empty place in his world (universe) where there is 
no comfort nor reason for living. He imagines Kenyon’s body as “tiny corpses,” 
“porcelain mannequins.” How does one survive such desolation? How many poems will 
it take to feel whole again?

Hall grieves not only for his beloved, but for the aging process itself. In the 
following lines (6), he is aware that his age in itself represents a major loss. He says:

He had imagined an old man  
alone in this white house, looking in the mirror.  
Looking in the mirror now, he was old and alone.  
He felt solitude’s relief and intolerably lonely.  
He envied whatever felt nothing. He envied oak
sills and the green hill rising and the boulder  
by the side of the road and his dead love rotting (104-110)

The steady rhythm of these sixteen, ten line stanzas may be the way Hall wanted to express a dirge since his moods and actions remained relatively constant during these months and years of grieving. Although the tone of these one hundred and sixty lines seems almost despairing, Hall does not despair. In his truthfulness, in the very language of loss and love, lies healing.

In Parts Two and Three, Hall reconstructs his life word by word like a man who has lost everything in a tsunami and begins to rebuild. Though he may never feel fully whole again, he survives in his love poems in Part Four, especially the last line of “Affirmation.” “Let us stifle under mud at the pond’s edge / and affirm that it is fitting / and delicious to lose everything” (23-25). He comes to terms with both his griefs: the death of Jane and growing old.

In “Her Garden” (43), Hall repeats “let it go” twice in each of the three stanzas of the poem. To “let go” is one of the main tasks of the griever. In the poem, the poet must let go of his dead wife’s garden. He must let go of the bird watching he and his wife did together. He must let go of her flowers and the weeds that take over, of the moss that covers the bricks she laid in patterns. He must let go of the tall stems of holly fading back, “dwindling in loss” (21). By repeating the words “let it go,” the poet finds a certain measure of solace, of release from his grief. Gregory Orr echoes this device in *Poetry as Survival*, in which he compares repetition to “a woven raft of sound on which the self floats above the floodwaters of chaos” (106).

The one who grieves finds consolation in loss told over and over, such as the words repeated as in the above poem. Repetition is recognized even in the variation of
sounds and rhythms. In music we find the fugue, as a musical form consisting essentially of a main theme repeated with minor variations beneath the continuing first statement.

In the poem on the Holocaust, “Death Fugue” by Paul Celan, we have a good example of a tragic repeated theme and the variety of sounds and rhythms throughout the lines. The theme: “Black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown / we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night / we drink it and drink it” (1-3). The repetitive sounds of “m”, “d”, “n”, the rhythms of the music and the power of the language, carry the poem from line to line in a way that holds the reader’s attention. Celan perfects the work with refrains and recurring motifs, alliteration and internal rhyme. “Death Fugue” is a powerful poem of grief beyond imagining. In all the horrors of the holocaust; those who dig their own graves, those whose bodies will rise as smoke in the air, still hold in their last strands of memory, the beautiful hair of the beloved. The poet uses all his poetic skills to make this one of the most memorable of poems.

In my own grief poems, I present the tension of disorder as a heron that bobs on a cedar branch, causing me to briefly focus on the magnitude and beauty of the bird. Then the bird flies away and I fall again into my grief (disorder). Though the bird in the tree is only a temporary relief from grief, it is a stepping stone to healing.

I wrote poems of shock and loss before and after my husband’s death. In the following poem written a week before his death, I use the metaphor of gray scarves for clouds covering the sun, the image of linen draping an altar:

Clouds keep their vigil—
gray scarves cover the sun
the way linen drapes an altar.
Nothing breaks through
but silence.
The rain may last for days.
Even the moon must wait.
The flight of the kingfisher can’t
be timed. Yet light will open
on tendrils of moss,
on spirals of fern,
*And I shall know as I am known.*

A poem written after hearing the doctor announce a final timeline was perhaps the focal point of grief for both my husband and me.

We rock each other, try
to find our place in the mystery,
stunned by the blunt hammer
of reality.
*Three to six months to live*
into the fullness
of who we are.

Somewhere in the dark,
in the whirling vortex,
a voice strains to be heard . . .

The “blunt hammer” of reality strikes forcefully. The whirling vortex of confusion and sadness images the darkness we feel and must live with. It is the reality of life that mystery will always remain in symbols, and yet the poems began to ground me, to bring a measure of stability to my life.

In this section I have used the writings of Gregory Orr, Joseph Stroud, Pablo Neruda, Jack Gilbert, Jane Hirshfield, Tess Gallagher, Ellen Bryant Voigt, Donald Hall, and Paul Celan to explore how poets use the tools of language to make sense of grief and to open up avenues for transformation and healing. I have included several of my own poems to see how they might parallel the work of the poets mentioned above.
IV. The Language of Transformation and Healing

Grief takes us to wander the experiences of everyday realities at the edge of the world we have known. It is during these nights and days of wandering, in the solitude of not knowing the future that we begin to get a glimpse of where grief may be leading.

Susan Ludvigson’s *Trinity* contains a group of untitled poems in Section II: Letters Back: God Responds to Emily Dickinson. One of the grief poems begins with, “Daughter, you need not say anything . . .” (1-2). Emily cannot see the beauty of her garden though she planted every flower there. God says to her, “Now, you might as well be blind” (10-11). It is as if Emily has lost a great love and can find nothing to replace it. It is as if, in deep grief, she sees her world through gray mist, color gone from her vision. For the moment, she cannot see the other side of grief. She “might as well be blind.” In her blindness, something new is being born. Yet, she is reminded that

You will recover.  
Color will impress itself  
on your skin again...  
petals and leaves  
will fall to your face  
and shoulders, and you  
will close your eyes  
from too much pleasure. (12-19)

As with all grief, recovery does not happen quickly. Words remain frozen in the mind and in the pen of the writer who remembers the details of loss. Emily, deep in her grief, cannot return to writing. It seems as if Emily is temporarily caught in despair, that she feels she may never write again. Though this is a typical response to grief, Emily is reminded that she will find joy when she is ready to pick up her pen and begin to write once more. It is when she enters into the creative work to which she must respond that
she finds herself rising out of the deep night of grief. In her patience, she will find new meaning through writing.

Jane Hirshfield, in her poem from *The Lives of the Heart*, “Lion and Angel Dividing the Maple Between Them” (102), discovers and expresses grief by letting go.

Even the “affections will equally be devoured” (11). Like the leaf, we are what we are. There seems very little drama about dying. In reality though, the unknown is frightening. Yet fear has its limitations even though “we go ankle deep / into that carnage, lifting first one, then another part up to the light” (12-14). It is placing one foot in front of the other, the determination every day to make something of the rest of our lives when the world as we knew it comes crashing down. In Hirshfield’s words:

> As if it we were looking for something simple.  
> As if what we wanted  
> were not the thing that falls. (15-17)

The poem ends on a thread of hope that there is something beyond that which falls, something that will return in a new season.

The edges of simplicity and complexity remain confusing for the one who grieves. And yet “the Lion and the Angel are one visitation” (2-3). Therefore, with the passage of time we come to accept what we did not know could be accepted. It is this reconciliation of opposites that poems—and lives—strive to achieve.

Jane Kenyon rallies from her grief she feels during the serious illness of her husband, Donald Hall, but worries that she will no longer be safe. She does not tell him how she feels as they drive home. The inability to speak, of no longer feeling safe when one loses a spouse, has the potential for depression. Yet Kenyon remains optimistic. In “Dutch Interiors” (21) from *Otherwise*, Kenyon browses through an art gallery and finds
humor “in the play of light on cutlery” (8-9). Besides art on the life of Christ, she seems almost elated at paintings about ordinary people: the merchant’s wife, dipping “her quill into India ink / with an air of cautious pleasure” (17-18). She seems to find certain solace in language and beyond poetry, finds her interest in paintings and other people to divert her feelings from grief toward acceptance and healing. In “The Suitor” (50) from Otherwise, Kenyon speaks again about joy in her life: “For months this feeling / has been coming closer, stopping / for short visits, like a timid suitor” (9-11).

There is solace in the repetitions of incantation. In Still Another Day, XXIII, Neruda writes:

> From below, the new sun collects its swords
> and wave by wave light up the horizon
> breaking over its dominion
> . . .
> the sea below dies and agonizes
> is born and dies and dies,
> is born and dies and is born. (9-11) (16-18)

These words represent the ebb and flow of grief, the small increments toward healing, the falling back and the beginning again. Neruda is determined never to give up, to continue moving forward though no future may be in sight. In XXV, Neruda says, “My reason survived bitter weather, / I surrender to the sea my calcareous heart” (12-13).

Sandra Gilbert’s husband died on February 11, 1991. The poems in Ghost Volcano were written in memory of him. The book is written in nine parts, five titled “Widow’s Walk.” In Part One which consists of a single poem, “October 6, 1991: Seattle, Looking for Mount Rainier” (17), Gilbert remembers how the mountain hides behind mists and how the sun exposes its snowy flanks in all their splendor. She revisits flying over the mountain after her husband’s death. The mountain’s rocks and crevices
appear as her husband’s face, “frozen in reproach” (18). It takes only a short time to pass over the mountain in a small plane but the time seemed much longer. She had a feeling she was falling

into that hissing crevice, the lanes of ice
where I knew you wandered shivering
even in your Irish sweater, your old blue parka.
No end to the scowl of the mountain that was you,
no end to the screech of the Valkyrie,
dragging you past the ledges of light
into yourself. (25-31).

Gilbert reveals the poet’s inability to bring warmth to her husband who still wanders, waiting to be conducted to Valhalla, that mystical place among the gods. He seems to wander away from her. She imagines he feels as grieved at losing her as she feels at losing him. It’s as if he is being taken reluctantly into a light that fills him, a place she cannot follow. Then the plane passes over the mountain and she leaves, “distance in our innocent goodbye” (29). She sees the mountain as a mirage on the horizon and calls it a “ghost volcano” where sometimes the mountain is seen, sometimes not. This poem sets the tone for the entire book. The poems are elegies: lament and praise for her beloved.

“Kissing the Bread” (21) is a poem written in five parts which consists of a Jewish tradition passed on in the family by her grandmother. The bread was kissed before being thrown away. No one kept “the food of someone else’s Sabbath” (4-5). Kissing the bread was a connection to all the major events of life as well as the every day hellos and goodbyes. In Part Four, the bread becomes her beloved whose body is not eternal and to whom she must bid goodbye. In Part Five (25), the poet speaks of her mother’s humble kiss, the kiss of guilt and the kiss of dread.
What will I do, challah,  
*pumpernickel, rye, baguette, sweet white,  
thick black, when you  
are gone? (5-8)

Kissing the bread seemed consonant with an awareness at every moment of the goodness of life. The poet cannot imagine life without her beloved. She grieves at this final goodbye.

The “Widow’s Walk” poems are given titles of dates and places as in “October 26, 1991: Outside Saratoga Springs” (29). Here the poet remembers small incidents:

Sun cooks a small polluted pond  
you’ll never see, coated with curled-up  
leaves the local sculptor wants to use  
as models for his “floating baskets” (5-8).

In lines 23-24, she remembers: “Your eyes are gone that might have loved / the last quick lights in the Berkshire trees.” It is in the incidental objects and happenings that the grieving remember, the almost imperceptible actions: a shift of eyes, a tone of voice, an acknowledgment of what the deceased loved. Gilbert must live from moment to moment. She does not know, nor can she imagine how she will move out of grief. Her grief continues in the poem “December 21, 1991: Berkeley Solstice” (31) as the moon seems to dare me  
to reach, to try to touch,  
as if by touching I might enter  
that famous tube of light  
through which the near-dead pass into—  
into what they cannot know” (8-12).

Yet, despite all her efforts she cannot find consolation. She knows she cannot enter the place where her beloved has gone. Though the book she is reading says, “The light is kind” . . . “The light is good”(13-14), she remains in the darkness:
O you who have entered
the faithless tunnel,

you are farther away
than that small moon. (21-24)

Part eight of *Ghost Volcano* consists of a poem of hope, “Calla Lilies” (103), as

the “cream, pale foreigners, / crane their long green necks, green bodies, / over irises,
wild grasses, poppies.” After the darkness, the lilies begin to bloom. The poet continues:

But then the stones
softened, the gates of the cold unlocked.
Something began to lift them, something began
a steep crawl up the slope of shadow.

Now, bland and open in their bridal satin,
they extrude gold tongues, gold phalluses
into a warmth that loves them back,
and sway and bow in the Easter breeze.

Imperturbable as cream,
they have forgotten the wrists and ribs of the dead
from whose pallet they have risen. (12-22)

This is not just a poem of hope. It’s a poem of Resurrection. Sandra Gilbert has
moved through her grief and is able to see her way out of darkness. She goes on with her
life. The book begins and ends with a single poem, a journey from death into life.

In *The Blessing*, Gregory Orr speaks for the one who grieves. He believes the
thing that makes life worth living again is to reconnect to the world. To do that, one
needs to risk spinning threads of a new life until they form a home the self can inhabit.

A major turning point for Orr was a visit to a village in which former English
teacher, Mrs. Irving, introduced him to the works David Smith. In a field on Smith’s
estate stood almost three hundred of his sculptures. These figures consisted of rusting
industrial steel—stacked moons and triangles of brushed aluminum welded in an almost
infinite variety of intersecting planes and forms. Though these were abstract pieces, Orr had a sense they all made some urgent obscure reference to the human figure. As he wandered through this field, he began to understand that “each welded presence seemed to say: this is art’s way of fighting . . . not to do battle, but to concentrate emphatic being in an object” (207). He realized that the figures were alive in their power and certainty of shapes, their calmness, their contradictions, their urgencies, as if they were ghosts of human figures. “And each shape said: Let’s live. Let’s endure. Let us even exult that we have survived. Here is my blessing. Not with a blowtorch and sheet metal, but with pen and pencil. With a page and what words could conjure on it” (208).

It’s important to recognize that grief is part of the human condition which must be faced and, over time, accepted. The poets mentioned in this section, Susan Ludvigson, Jane Hirshfield, Jane Kenyon, Pablo Neruda, Sandra M. Gilbert and Gregory Orr, have much to offer of transformation and healing in brief instances, each building upon the one before. Poets can help us learn to “kiss the bread” of each day, to drink from the well of words, knowing the food and drink of joy and sorrow feed and quench our thirst for peace in ways we could not imagine, knowing that death is the door that leads to final transformation.
Notes

1 *Epoch*, Vo. XVIII. No. 1 Fall 1966 (114-19)


3 Commentary Archive. Vol. 19, March 1955. No. 3. Translated by Clement Greenberg
Works Cited


---. *Otherwise*. Saint Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf, 1996

---. *The Boat of Quiet Hours*. Saint Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf, 1986


Stroud, Joseph: *Country of Light*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon, 2004

What is new in Kissing the Bread is the poet's romance with mathematical metaphors, as found in the section of poems titled "When She Was Kissed by the Mathematician," where Gilbert aims for "the smaller infinity, the kind you can count/ and maybe comprehend." The small-scale ambition, familiarity of subject matter and repetitive registers in play might frustrate those picking up Gilbert for the first time, but those looking for some honest looks into a poetic life that continues to be lived with integrity will find them here. Bread was never thrown away. Bread is a symbol of the unity of humanity; it is a symbol of God’s love for you, the God who feeds you. When it gets stale, what do moms and grandmas do with the bread? They soak it in milk, make it into a cake, they do something with it. Bread is never thrown away. Pope Francis on Mary’s Yes. For us as well there is a salvation history made of yeses and nos. Mesut Ozil kissed a piece of bread and touched it to his head after it was thrown at him by Atletico Madrid. Credit: News Group Newspapers Ltd. It is against Muslim and Turkish culture to waste any food so Ozil kissed the bread and touched it to his head before carefully placing it on the ground. The gesture was a mark of gratitude and thanks for being given the food. Ozil's reaction brought a huge cheer from the away fans who had thrown the bread.