

## Some Melancholic Musings About the Slow Intimacy of Grief: '(M)y Story Always Arrives Late'

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### ABSTRACT

In this article I argue that while intimacy has to do with getting to know the other and showing what you know, the acknowledgment of not knowing and the insistence on forever wondering about the other, their impact on you, and your connection with them, is crucial. Intimacy then is about continuous processes of paying attention and getting to know as there always is more to know. This knowing may be impossible to show. I argue that during the process of grieving the elegy is an example of showing the not-knowing. I discuss this argument by presenting three individual elegies. In a postscript, the work of Judith Butler and Diana Fuss is used to argue that as social scientists, our work is to write elegies for the so-called ungrievables, those who typically are not known and not shown.

**Keywords:** intimacy, grief, mourning, melancholia, elegy

### INTRODUCTION

#### Some Melancholic Musings About the Slow Intimacy of Grief: '(M)y Story Always Arrives Late' <sup>1</sup>

It was my first autopsy . . .

Then he took out the large and heavy heart, with its right side hypertrophied, and documented its weight in grams. I found myself strangely disappointed. There was nothing else to see. No hidden place, unexplored and unexplorable, no impenetrable small black box, hidden in all these wiggly intestines. It was undeniable, Mr. Baker had completely disappeared. Autopsied, his body was nothing more than a suit of clothes lying disregarded in the corner. . . I did tuck away in the back of my mind the image of his body as a crumpled suit of clothes, abandoned in the corner of the white room. (Sweet, 2013: 10)

Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And finally, what makes for a grievable life? (Butler, 2004: 20)

'You put together two things that have not been put together before,' it begins, 'and the world is changed.' (Barnes, 2013: 8)

'The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference.' (Wiesel, 1986)

### THREE ELEGIES

One way of posing the question of who 'we' are in these times of war is by asking whose lives are considered valuable, whose lives are mourned, and whose lives are considered ungrievable. . . An ungrievable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has never been lived, that is, it has never counted as life at all. (Butler, 2010: 38)

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<sup>1</sup> Butler (2005: 27).

### The Grievable Life of Mr. X

Why does the earth grieve  
When violets appear? (Neruda, 1970)

I want to give thanks . . .  
. . . For Frances Haslam, who begged her children's pardon  
For dying so slowly,  
For the minutes that precede sleep,  
For sleep and death,  
Those two hidden treasures. (Borges, 1998)

I am waiting for a patient. The waiting room smells like Dettol and sweat and Cup-a-Soup. There are twelve people waiting with me. Some people are watching the TV in the right-hand corner. Others are staring at the walls. The walls are covered in posters and notices. Recipes for *toe neus* (blocked nose) and *rehidrasie* (rehydration). Big, black, handmade signs with arrows indicate *Rehidrasiehoekie* (Rehydration corner). Against the wall is a pine table with a plastic cloth and plastic flowers. Infant scale. Another table with three wooden boxes: *Kondome. Pos. Voorstelle* (Condoms. Mail. Suggestions). A white cardboard doctor's jacket, which serves as a brochure stand. The brochures are all about TB.

A man in the fourth row gets up slowly. He coughs violently and stumbles over the green plastic chair next to him. In the process, he knocks over a few more chairs. He lands on the green melamine floor and lies still. The other patients watch him. The cardboard doctor's jacket does not move. The nurses laugh in the kitchen where they are having tea. The man stirs. I get up and fetch a nurse.

The nurse kneels at the man's side and feels his pulse. She puts her hand over her mouth. 'Dead,' she says. 'He just died.'

My patient never turns up.  
It is spring in the valley.

### The Grievable Life of Lettie

Lettie, sick with AIDS, is referred to me by the clinic nurse. My clinical notes start with the poem 'Report from the Hospital' by Wisława Szymborska (1998: 95):

We used matches to draw lots: who would visit him  
And I lost. I got up from our table.  
Visiting hours were just about to start.  
When I said hello he didn't say a word.  
I tried to take his hand – he pulled it back  
Like a hungry dog that won't give up its bone  
He seemed embarrassed about dying.  
What do you say to someone like that?  
Our eyes never met, like in a faked photograph.  
He didn't care if I stayed or left.  
He didn't ask about anyone from our table.  
Not you, Barry. Or you, Larry. Or you, Harry.  
My head started aching. Who's dying on whom?  
I went on about modern medicine and three violets in a jar.  
I talked about the sun and faded out.  
It's a good thing they have stairs to run down.  
It's a good thing they have gates to let you out.  
It's a good thing you're all waiting at our table.  
The hospital smell makes me sick.

Lettie is 42 years old. She carries her head low, mouth slightly open, white tongue, body visibly shivering, big jacket, slippers, small, bare, brown ankles, sweatpants that are too short and too red and too bright for everything else. I ask her why she is here. She says that she is cold and tired. She cannot eat, has not been able to keep food down for almost a month. I say to her that she looks sick. Is she sick? 'I came with a lift. I stay in Factory Street.' Is she in bed all the time? 'I get up a little. If the sun shines, I get up. Then I sit in the front room. The lying down works on my sides.'

She does not look at me. Her head stays low. I open her file. The last inscription in her files reads:

Make appointment with Lou-Marié.

1. Prepare client for death.
2. Talk to her about gratitude. She has a supportive family.
3. Repentance about promiscuous life.

Before that the list of most recent physical symptoms:

Complaint of bad cough. Vomiting. Productive cough. Yellow bile. No appetite. Temperature: 39.4 °C. Weight: 50 kg. Respiration: bilateral crepitis. Candidas in mouth. Referred to hospital with pneumonia. Admitted Emergency Unit.

I ask to be excused and go next door to find the sister. I tell her that the client referred to me seems very ill, too ill to do a session with me. 'Oh yes, Lettie,' she says. 'Her count is 92, too low for treatment. It went down overnight. Such a pity. She comes from such a good family. There is always a *vrot kolletjie* [rotten spot]. I will come and look at her; we probably will have to hospitalise her again.' Behind the nurse's desk, beneath a poster advertising female condoms, a handmade poster with a picture of a nurse's cap and a stethoscope: 'Save one life, you're a hero, save a 100 lives, you're a nurse.'

I go back to Lettie. '*Vrot kolletjie*'. I put one of the clinic blankets around her shoulders. I wait for the nurse. In the meantime, I do what I usually do – I ask questions. History. Her father was a builder and her mother a housewife. She is the youngest of nine children, seven brothers and one sister. It is the sister she is staying with in Factory Street. Her own children are 25, 12, and 8. The younger two live with their father in Worcester. The oldest son is a cabinet maker and 'my girl works at Kekkel en Kraai. They take care of me, the children.'

She struggles to talk, I struggle to listen. I watch the movements of her white tongue. She says she got divorced four years ago. Her ex-husband initiated the divorce. 'And Lettie, do you have someone new?'

'I now have a boy, Koos Swart. He is also positive'. Her sentences are short. She is not interested in the conversation.

*Three violets in a jar.*

She is still trembling. 'I am just tired and I can't get warm.'

So much for the history.

'To get a history is to get the longitudinal information,' I teach my university psychology students. 'The Mental Status Exam is the cross-sectional picture. Both kinds of information inform the diagnosis and the formulation, and ultimately the treatment plan.' I think about what I will write down for Lettie's mental status exam:

Affect: Blunted (disturbance in affect manifested by severe reduction in the intensity of externalised feeling tone).

Motor behaviour: Anergia.

Disturbances in speech: Poverty of speech (restriction in the amount of speech used; replies may be monosyllabic). Non-spontaneous speech (verbal responses given only when asked or spoken to directly, no self-initiation of speech).

Levels of memory: Immediate, recent and remote intact. Cruelly so, it seems.

Insight (ability to understand the true cause and meaning of a situation – such as a set of symptoms): Impaired.

*Who is dying on whom?*

There will be no diagnosis. No formulation. And certainly, no treatment plan. I tell her that she seems very sick and that the sister will examine her, but she will most probably be hospitalised. Her face changes for the first time during the session: 'The last time I went to the hospital, I sat there, waiting, for six hours. Later, I was lying in the corridor, crying. It was so cold. I don't want to go.'

*It's a good thing they have gates to let you out.*

I do not know what happened to Lettie. I never saw her again.

### **The Grievable Life of My Mother**

My mother was hospitalised in the spring of 2021, after a stroke. It was October. She died on 10 December in a care centre, in a sombre hospital bed overlooking a parking lot and a face-brick building. The only living thing we could see from those sad windows was a very lean dog on a chain in the parking lot. My brothers and I were there when she died on that bed in that room, witnesses to the last desperate and strange breath. I was holding both her hands.

I read the 'Small elegy to my mother' at her memorial on the front stoep of my house on a harsh February morning in 2022:

My mother likes trees. Yellow wood trees. Fever trees. Stinkhoutbome. Drolpeerbome. Milkwood trees. Cherry trees. Even sometimes non-indigenous trees like guava trees, considered to be politically incorrect trees by serious South African gardeners.

My mother plants trees.

She plants trees everywhere she goes.

All four of my mother's children also plant trees wherever they go, because although we did not inherit much from my mother, we all inherited her love for trees. And her love for people who love trees. Some of us even married tree-lovers.

My mother nurses her trees.

Not in any sentimental way, of sentimentality you could never accuse my mother.

No, her care looks different.

She makes gardens for her trees.

She watches and watches her trees.

She wonders about her trees.

She thinks about her trees.

She is curious about her trees.

She certainly is worried about her trees.

She thinks trees are quite threatened and that she has to do something to protect them.

My mother does not fight easily, but she will fight about trees. She will fight for the right to have a tree, she will fight against anything that she thought may inhibit the growth of her trees, she will fight about the fact that a tree must be pruned and also about how it has to be pruned.

She has a deadly glint in her eye when she has pruning shears in her hands.

But even she is a ruthless pruner and, later in life, pruning instructor, my mother never believes that a tree is dead.

I think I see something green, she would say. Let's give it a few weeks and see.

As child I woke up with the sound of water, my mother with a hose-pipe in the garden. If I think back, I think that my mother and her hose-pipe is probably the sound of a tree growing.

What makes trees grow is someone watching them, looking at them. My mother watched her trees. She tried to know what was going on with her trees. She really cared about what happened to her trees.

She also wanted everyone else to look at her trees. Where-ever you visited her (even when she lived in a flat in the main street of Kuilsrivier), you always had to go and look at the trees. You have not visited her if you have not looked at the trees.

Apart from trees there were a few other things my mother likes. Coffee. Ice cream. Cheese sandwiches. Figs. Bach. Mahler. Schubert. Sleeping.

She also likes stones. Rocks. But that was maybe because she was always looking for stones to put in her garden. Stones go with trees.

She likes walking. But she walked only where the trees were.

She likes her paintings, maybe they don't have much to do with trees, although she had a whole wall of tree paintings.

She likes books very much, but books definitely come from trees.

She was a librarian and of course liked libraries, and a library certainly has everything to do with trees. A library is a massive collection of chopped up pulped processed typed on and finally classified trees.

My dear father, he called himself the *reus van Groenberg*, the giant of Green Mountain – go figure – often mumbled under his breath that my mother liked her library more than she liked him.

As kids we were afraid he was probably right.

My mother also does like us, her family, I think. I am not quite sure what us and our father have in common with trees, but when I am with my mother I think I know how it feels to be a tree.

I don't know why my mother likes trees. I don't think she herself knows. But I think she sees something when she looks at trees.

Your mother, my father always said, is a very clever woman.

I ended my elegy with Philip Larkin's (2014: 124) poem 'The Trees'.

The trees are coming into leaf  
Like something almost being said;  
The recent buds relax and spread,  
Their greenness is a kind of grief.

Is it that they are born again  
And we grow old? No, they die too,  
Their yearly trick of looking new  
Is written down in rings of grain.

Yet still the unresting castles thresh  
In fullgrown thickness every May.  
Last year is dead, they seem to say,  
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh

## ELEGY AND THE SHOWING AND KNOWING OF SLOW INTIMACY

Recently, I was part of a team of feminist scholars hosting a conference with the theme of Slow Intimacy.<sup>2</sup> In the Call for Papers we attempted to describe what we mean with the theme Slow Intimacy:

The verb 'to intimate' refers to the action of showing what you know. The noun 'intimacy' refers to an interaction in which a person knows something and then shows that they know and what they know to another. This intimate interaction can be with a person, other living things, inanimate objects, or the planet. The adjective 'intimate' refers to that what is known or those who know and are known, those who show and get shown. The knowing or familiarity associated with intimacy can be cognitive emotional or both and is often embodied. In intimate interactions you can show, manifest, or perform the knowing in different ways: through language, art, music, physical actions, often involving skills and bodily habits... Both knowing and showing can be explicit or implicit, conscious or unconscious. Intimate knowing can manifest as a showing that has the potential to be immensely powerful, ranging from showings that are nurturing and loving to showings that are cruel and destructive... We seek to explore processes of knowing and showing that are subtle and nuanced, complex, multi-layered, and intricate. We also aim to explore the processes of knowing and showing associated with slow intimacy: Who gets to know and who gets to show? In what conditions are knowing and showing possible? How

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<sup>2</sup> Conference hosted at Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Studies (STIAS) between 12 and 14 October 2022. Convened by Professor Amanda Gouws (SARChi Chair in Gender Politics at Stellenbosch University) and by Professor Lou-Marié Kruger (Department of Psychology, Stellenbosch University).

is intimacy tied to power and how is it informed or shaped by larger societal processes (political, social, economic)?

As a team of conference organisers, we thus claimed that to be intimate is to know something and to show what you know. Intimate relationships are about showing what you know. Slow intimacy is about subtle and complex ways of knowing and slow ways of showing.

Subsequent to reading all the conference submissions I am thinking differently about slow intimacy. I think that maybe intimacy is about the acknowledgment of not knowing and the insistence on forever wondering about the other, their impact on you, and your connection with them. The fact that there is always more to know and that it may be impossible to show.

I got to think that perhaps the most profound example of slow intimacy, ironically, is an elegy. An elegy is a ritual, a song or a text commemorating human mortality (Fuss, 2013). A written elegy is a text of serious reflection, a lament for the dead or the lost, a song of sorrow, a poem of mourning or melancholy. Fuss (2013: 4) reflects on how literary critics tend to read modern elegy as a poetics of melancholia, “a despondent and dispirited body of verse that refuses all forms of substitution, transcendence, or redemption”. She cites Ramazani as saying: ‘the modern elegist tends not to achieve but to resist consolation, not to override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss.’ Ramazani very consciously uses the phrase ‘melancholic mourning’ to describe an elegy, thereby taking care not to oppose mourning and melancholia in the traditional Freudian sense.<sup>3</sup>

Different from a eulogy, an elegy is not a praise poem or speech, it is a very careful and self-reflective consideration about the person, the relationship, or the thing that has been lost, what has been lost for the lamenting person, and what has been lost for the world. In the words of Fuss, (2013: 6): ‘Elegiac utterances were provoked by the loss of what one desired and the desire for what one lost.’

The poet or person performing/writing the elegy also includes in their work how they feel about the loss, and what the loss is like for them personally, it is a way of exploring loss. It is about the hurt, the wound. It is the howl of grief. The person or the thing remains dead, but the feeling is alive. An elegy is an attempt at intimacy when intimacy in the real world has been lost. An elegy is not about the dead or lost person, it is about the relationship between the mourner and the mourned. It is about the loss of the dead person, but it is also about the parts of ourselves (who we were with the dead person) that we lost or think we lost. It is about relationships.

‘You put together two things that have not been put together before,’ Julian Barnes writes in his novel *Levels of Life* (2013), ‘and the world is changed. People may not notice at the time, but that doesn’t matter.’ (3). ‘...sometimes it works,’ he says, ‘and the world is changed’. ‘Then, at some point, sooner or later, for this reason, or that, one of them is taken away. And what is taken away is greater than the sum of what was there. This may not seem mathematically possible, but it is emotionally possible’ (67).

Because every relationship is unique, no one’s grief is the same. Barnes cites E. M. Forster: “‘One death may explain itself, but it throws no light upon another.’” So grief in turn becomes unimaginable, not just its length and depth, but its tone and texture, its deceptions and false dawns, its recidivism’ (69).

In an elegy, we try to capture the uniqueness of the loss for ourselves. ‘Grief,’ Barnes says, ‘like death, is banal and unique’ (70).

## KNOWING: OF GRIEF, MOURNING AND MELANCHOLIA

‘I did already know that only the old words would do: death, grief, sorrow, sadness, heartbreak.’ (Barnes, 2013: 71)

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<sup>3</sup> Jahan Ramazani (1994), *Poetry of Mourning: The modern elegy from Hardy to Heaney*, xi.  
Freud makes the distinction between mourning and melancholia:

In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself. (Freud, 1989: 586)

Freud further explains melancholia:

An object-choice, an attachment of the libido to a particular person, had at one time existed; then, owing to a real slight or disappointment coming from this loved person, the object-relationship was shattered. The result was not the normal one of a withdrawal of the libido from this object and a displacement of it on to a new one, but something different ... an identification of the ego with the abandoned object ... object-loss was transformed into ego-loss. (Freud, 1989: 586)

I did not know the man who died in the waiting room at all.

The woman who was slowly dying in the clinic consulting room was my patient. I knew her from her file.

The woman who died in the hospital bed was my mother. It was a very close and some would say intimate relationship, but I don't know how well I really knew her.

In these elegies the questions are the same: Who are you? Who were you? Who am I with you? What do I know about you? What was our relationship about? What can I show about what I know? How can I show what I know?

I think I have tried to figure out the strange being who was my mother since I was very young. I watched her, wondered about her, worried about her. She did the same for me, I think. I wondered about myself as a daughter. I wondered about the mother-daughter relationship. Much later on I realised that this kind of curiosity and wondering and contemplating became the basis of everything I do. It became the basis of my work as therapist, as academic researcher, as teacher, as supervisor, as friend, as mother.

No wonder that in all my academic research I have focused on motherhood, long before I became a mother myself and long before I met the mothers of the valleys that I work in. I obsessively read all the thinkers who theorised motherhood, people such as Dorothy Dinnerstein, Nancy Chodorow, Audry Lorde, bell hooks, Julia Kristeva.

Julia Kristeva writes:

For a woman, the call of the mother . . . troubles the word: it generates hallucinations, voice, 'madness' . . . It is a fragile envelope, incapable of staving off the irruption of this conflict, of the love which had bound the little girl to her mother, and which then, like black lava, had lain in wait for her all along the path of her desperate attempts to identify with the symbolic paternal order. (1986: 145)

I think what Kristeva is alluding to is the fact that what is often thought of as the most intimate of relationships, the mother-daughter bond, is indicative of the fact that intimacy is perhaps not about knowing, definitely not about understanding, it does not belong in the world of the rational. Intimacy is black lava, madness, fluidity, fragility, desperation, conflict, strangeness, queerness – that which often cannot be captured in words, in language. Kristeva would say the mother-daughter relationship, or then intimacy, does not belong in the paternal order.

Intimacy is then perhaps not about knowing and showing, it is about giving oneself over to the idea of not knowing, never knowing fully, always in suspense, always wondering, always a little bit mad.

Teju Cole (2023) writes in a New York Times article about watching the play *Agamemnon* in Greece over the summer, saying that the Greeks help us to think about grief. He cites Ted Hughes' translation of a chorus piece from the play:

Where is right and wrong  
In this nightmare?  
Each becomes the ghost of the other.  
Each is driven mad  
By the ghost of the other.  
Who can reason it out?

If we can never know, it means that the most important thing in our relationships with ourselves, with others, and with the world is to keep on paying attention, to never stop watching and wondering. The elegy is about a wondering and curious gaze on what was there, the person that was there, the self that was there, and the connection (or non-connection) that was there.

Freud considered psychoanalysis to be the cure of love, love demonstrated through 'the evenly-suspended attention' (Freud, 1912: 111). Donald Winnicott (1967) writes about the mother's holding and the mother's gaze. Wilfred Bion (1962) describes maternal reverie as the stance of curiosity and attentiveness (focusing on the other without memory or desire) and speaking from the heart and mind. This 'psychological state of receptivity', psychoanalyst Thomas Ogden says, involves a 'to-and-fro of experiencing and reflecting, of listening and introspection, of reverie and interpretation' (Ogden, 1997: 594). He cites the novelist Henry James: 'Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue.' (as cited in Ogden, 1997: 567). For Ogden, our receptivity must be:

. . . for the stuff of ordinary life – the day-to-day concerns that accrue in the process of being alive as a human being . . . the lives and the world that the lives inhabit . . . [they are about] people: people working, thinking about things, falling in love, taking naps . . . [about] the habit of the world, its strange ordinariness, its ordinary strangeness . . . our ruminations, daydreams, fantasies, bodily sensations, fleeting perceptions, images emerging from states of half-sleep, tunes and phrases that run through our minds, and so on. (Ogden, 1997: 568)

So in intimacy the commitment is to pay attention. To indulge not knowing. Recognise the strangeness. Giving oneself over to the profound suspense of not knowing and then not ever being able to show exactly.

In South African author Ingrid Winterbach's (2021) latest novel, her main character reads Anne Carson. The narrator then wonders about her husband.

And then she (Carson) asks, who is this man? The more she observes him, the less she knows.

Who is this man, I wonder, sharing my bed, by day so light, but when sleeping at night as heavy as a stone. (A stone not a fish, we are drought-stricken.) And then he wakes up in the morning with no recollection of how sheerly he has recently plumbed in depths. (His head still attached to his body, unlike that of Nat Turner's master's body.). I gaze into his eyes by day and I don't have the slightest idea. I regard his bare limbs before he gets into bed and I don't have any idea.

Don't stop too soon, the father of the narrator in the Marias trilogy, *Your face tomorrow*, told his young son. The father always pushed the child to go further. Yes, and what else? he would ask.

When I think of God, I want to ask him things. Help me to dive into the depths like the women in the East diving for pearls. (Winterbach, 2021: 21)

Judith Butler ties the state of not knowing to desire:

As we ask to know the Other or ask that the Other say, finally, who he or she is, it will be important not to expect an answer that will ever satisfy. By not pursuing satisfaction, and by letting the question remain open, even enduring, we let the Other live, since life might be understood as precisely that which exceeds any account we may try to give of it. If letting the Other live is part of a new definition of recognition, then this version of recognition would be one that is based less on knowledge than on an apprehension of its limits. In a sense, the ethical stance consists in asking the question, 'Who are you?', and continuing to ask the question without any expectation of a full or final answer. This Other to whom I pose this question will not be captured by any answer that might arrive to satisfy the question. So if there is, in the question, a desire for recognition, this will be a desire which is under an obligation to keep itself alive as desire, and not to resolve itself through satisfaction. 'Oh, now I know who you are': At this moment, I cease to address you, or to be addressed by you. (Butler, 2005: 24)

She implies that when one thinks one fully knows, intimacy may be over.

She further emphasises how acknowledging and understanding the limits of fully knowing and being in a constant state of wonder means that we have to remain both humble and generous:

In other words, do we know in an unqualified way that acknowledgment is always qualified? Is the first kind of knowing qualified by the qualification that it knows? This would have to be the case, for to acknowledge one's own opacity or that of another does not transform opacity into transparency. To know the limits of acknowledgment is a self-limiting act and, as a result, to experience the limits of knowing itself. This can, by the way, constitute a disposition of humility, and of generosity, since I will need to be forgiven for what I cannot fully know, what I could not have fully known, and I will be under a similar obligation to offer forgiveness to others who are also constituted in partial opacity to themselves. (Butler, 2005: 28)

Who is this woman who was my mother, I ask? Who is this woman in the consulting room in the clinic? Who is this man in the waiting room?

And who am I for them or with them?

I wonder. And will keep on wondering.

## **SHOWING: REPRESENTING GETTING TO KNOW**

Things that give you heart are rare enough, better note them in your head when you find them and not forget. (Barry, 2016: 138)

I realize as I write this that I do not want to finish this account. Nor did I want to finish this year. The craziness is receding but no clarity is taking its place. I look for resolution and find none. (Didion, 2005: 224-225)



Of all the intellectual surprises my little book on elegy afforded me, this was the biggest: a book I thought was about dying quietly evolved into a book about surviving. The story of this subtle shift – a nearly imperceptible movement from loss to love – names the very work of elegy, a poetics of loss that does not so much mark the end of love as put a name to love. (Fuss, 2013: ix)

If intimacy is about being in a state of wondering or wonderment, how do we show what we know and do not know? How do we represent the wonder of not knowing and the process of getting to know?

‘Speaking is impossible,’ writes Derrida (1986) when his friend Paul de Man dies, ‘but so too would be silence or absence or a refusal to share one’s sadness’ (5). Rob Nixon claims that ‘in a world permeated by insidious unspectacular violence ... writing can make the unapparent appear, rendering it tangible by humanizing drawn out calamities inaccessible to the human senses’ (Nixon, 2011: 8).

If we don’t really know, the showing is complicated, even impossible. We never know exactly how to show the not-knowing. The showing often is in the inadvertent, the implicit, the pre-verbal, the coincidental. In the elegies cited above: the summoning of a nurse, a blanket around the shoulders, driving someone to the hospital, writing an elegy that is more clumsy poem than prose.

An elegy by definition is the attempt of showing the not-knowing. ‘Despite their differences’, Fuss (2013: 2-3) says, ‘all dying modern poems have one important thing in common: all choose speech over speechlessness, utterance over silence’. Insisting on giving voice to the voiceless, these elegies all imagine death or absence by offering fantastical fictions in lyric form.

What then do I know and do not know and how do I show it or fail to show it?

How do I speak about my mother, about Lettie, about Mr. X? How do I show something about our relationship or non-relationship? How do I as psychologist and ethnographer write about the lives of others and myself?

Anthropologist Michael Jackson reassuringly writes about how he ‘scribbled notes, gathering glimpses into what it meant to be a stranger in a world where so much was unfamiliar and forbidding’ (Jackson, 2011: 190). He cites Habermas’ notion of the ‘purposeless journeys’, the necessity to abandon ‘the search for the real or the essential, replacing it with an effort to give voice to the multitude of agents involved in the production of culture...any culture... resists final summation...could never be pinned down or fully known’ (Jackson, 2011: 190). Jackson asserts that ‘Ethnography provides a method whereby the occluded, denigrated, masked dimensions of our common humanity may be recovered, not through thought alone but through practical engagement with others in the world...’ Jackson says that this movement is not away from the empirical but toward it, and ‘entails a radicalization of the empirical as encompassing what is illuminated as well as what lies in the shadow, the fluid as well as the fixed, the transitive as well as the intransitive, the verbal as well as the nonverbal, the personal as well as the transpersonal, the worldly as well as the extra-wordly’ (Jackson, 2011: 191).

The stories we tell are always tentative, incomplete, open to interpretation and re-tellings.

McKittrick in her recent book, *Dear Science*, talks about how difficult it is to write stories about what we think we know.

Telling, sharing, listening to, and hearing stories are relational and interdisciplinary acts that are animated by all sorts of people, places, narrative devices, theoretical queries, plots. The process is sustained by invention and wonder. The story has no answers. Indeed, the story cannot tell itself without our willingness to imagine what it cannot tell. The story asks that we live with what cannot be explained. (McKittrick, 2020: 6-7)

Remembering is slow, Milan Kundera (1996) says. Forgetting is fast.

Judith Butler (2005: 27) laments about the slowness of the writing process:

And it means that my story always arrives late. I am always recuperating, reconstructing, even as I produce myself differently in the very act of telling. My account of myself is partial, haunted by that for which I have no definitive story. I cannot explain exactly why I have emerged in this way, and my efforts at narrative reconstruction are always undergoing revision. There is that in me and of me for which I can give no account.

So how then to show what we know and what we do not know? Sina Queyras said in her elegy to Sylvia Plath, which she titled ‘Water, water everywhere’:

I am not interested in what Bourdieu, or Kristeva, has to say about grief. I don’t want a grid, I want arms. I don’t want a theory; I want the poem inside me. I want the poem to unfurl like a thousand monks chanting inside me. I want the poem to skewer me, to catapult me into the clouds. I want to sink into

the rhythm of your weeping, I want to say, my grief is turning and I have no way to remain still. (Queyras, 2014)

Back then to the poets. As Larkin (2014) indicates in his tree poem, the poem that I read at my mother's memorial, in intimacy there always is the potential of something restless, something thick, something moving, something novel, something new, something green, something strange and maybe even a little queer.

I will be writing about my mother and Lettie and Mr. X and people like them forever, always arriving late with the story, looking for arms rather than words.

James Woods (2023), in a recent *New Yorker* article about George Elliot, writes about her 'remarkably beautiful and tender epigraph for the last chapter—the marriage coda—of "Daniel Deronda"':

In the chequered area of human experience, the seasons are all mingled as in the golden age: fruit and blossom hang together; in the same moment the sickle is reaping and the seed is sprinkled; one tends the green cluster and another treads the wine-press. Nay, in each of our lives harvest and spring-time are continually one, until Death himself gathers us and sows us anew in his invisible fields. (693)

She published these words in 1876.

Here is Larkin (2014) again in 'An Arundel tomb':

Above their scrap of history,  
Only an attitude remains:  
Time has transfigured them into  
Untruth. The stone fidelity  
They hardly meant has come to be  
Their final blazon, and to prove  
Our almost-instinct almost true:  
What will survive of us is love.

## POSTSCRIPT: '(M)Y STORY ALWAYS ARRIVES LATE'

Without grievability there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life. Instead, 'there is a life that never have been lived,' sustained by no regard, not testimony and ungrrieved when lost... Grievability precedes and makes possible the apprehension for the living being as living, exposed to non-life from the start. (Butler, 2015)

Yet it does seem the case that the cataclysmic cultural changes ushered in by modern warfare, technology, and communications have ratcheted up the ethical burden of elegy; poetry now appears accountable to a whole range of losses that appear at least as traumatic as the loss of any individual human life. In no small degree, the ethical task of the modern elegy is to determine what indeed ethics might mean in a world that appears to have lost its ethos, its "principle of human duty." (Fuss, 2013: 6)

The space, at once empty and populated, of all those words without a language which allow the person who lends an ear to hear a muffled voice from below history, the stubborn murmuring of a language which seems to speak quite by itself, without a speaking subject and without an interlocutor, huddled in on itself, a lump in its throat, breaking down before it has achieved any formulation and lapsing back into the silence from which it was never separated. (Foucault, 1961: 200)

And it means that my story always arrives late, Judith Butler states.

In my musings about the slow intimacy of grief and elegies I become thoroughly stuck. Unable to complete the paper.

While I am trying to finish this paper a close friend's life partner dies after a long and harrowing illness. I walk with her on the mountain. I see her constant grief, I see it manifesting sometimes in anger, sometimes in sadness, but always in a persistent wonder about what it is, what it was, who he was, who she was with him and who she is without him.

How do I dare to write about grief.

I also am stuck because I cannot link my melancholic musings about grief and my elegies to the political. I know that politics are always lurking somewhere in all the relationships that I wonder about, think about and write

about. And I know, as always when writing, what is not on the page is as important as what is on the page. The grievable is on my page, the un-grievable is not.

Let Butler and the un-grievables go, the first reviewer of my paper insists. This paper can just be about your mother. But I can't let Butler go.

Butler implores us to think about grief in a different way. For Butler grievable lives are lives that are recognised as worthy of mourning after they are lost, because they are already recognised and valued as lives. Ungrievable lives, Butler argues, are those lives 'that cannot be lost, and cannot be destroyed, because they already inhabit a lost and destroyed zone; they are, ontologically, and from the start, already lost and destroyed, which means that when they are destroyed in war, nothing is destroyed' (Butler, 2010: xix).

My mother was a white middle-class woman: mother, gardener, reader, teacher, librarian, wife, lover. My big brother writes a eulogy for the local paper:

Mkhoma, Nyassaland: 4 February 1935-Stellenbosch: 20 December 2021

*Kinders en kleinkinders neem met swaar harte afskeid van 'n sonderlinge vrou. Geliefde onderrwyser, biblioteker, tuineir, vireindin, dogter, suster, ouma, ma en lewensmaat. Mens van baie liefdes: see, berge, stap, bome, stories, prent, musiek – en die Reus van Groenberg. Leser op heuwels. Ons sien deur jou oë.*

Children and grandchildren with heavy hearts bid farewell to an inimitable woman. Beloved teacher, librarian, gardener, friend, daughter, sister, grandmother, mother and partner. Person of many loves: sea, mountains, walking, trees, stones, stories, pictures, music – and the Giant of Green Mountain. Reader on hills. We see through your eyes.

But was her life recognised in a South Africa governed by white male patriarchy? Is she grievable? Lettie and Mr. X, black and poor, how un-grievable they seem in the Butlerian sense of the word.

Three precarious lives. Grievable? Ungrievable?

Perhaps mourned by their loved ones, but precarious in the larger scheme of things.

Slowly trying to get to know and then to show.

Nathan Trantraal (La Vita, 2014), South African author and poet, in an interview, describes how poverty means that people almost become accustomed to death and loss.

Because poverty and struggle necessarily mean that people process things at a hyper-accelerated speed. I know of a family where the whole family, except one sister, died in one year, I know of brothers who all were shot within a year or a few months. The people who stay behind move on, accept it as a normal part of a painful life, not acknowledging that it mostly is a painful existence. It is like fantasy and reality that, with time, melt into each other.<sup>4</sup>

Remembering is slow, forgetting is fast.

Can those people with precarious lives become more grievable if we pay attention to their lives and try to get to know them? In my mind that is exactly what my work as psychologist and researcher entails.

Slowly trying to get to know and then to show.

Fuss (2013: 6-7) writes:

I am attracted to elegies precisely because of their investment in reparation, resuscitation, and reclamation, their earnest attempt to buoy the living by holding on to the dead. The literary genre of choice in times of personal and national crisis, elegy taps into the binding energies of both eros and logos to offer up the poetic equivalent of a human life preserver. 'Let Love clasp Grief/ lest both be drowned,' Tennyson sorrowfully intones in an elegy for his beloved Arthur Hallam, 133 cantos long and 17 years in the making. Enfolding the dead in its lyrical embrace, In Memoriam, a poem of both 'calm despair and wild unrest,' he shows not just how elegy might be ethical but how ethics might be elegiac. In his critical study of ethical mourning, R. Clifton Spargo helpfully notes that ethics and elegy share two important features: both typically view every death as an injustice, and both routinely make themselves

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<sup>4</sup> The original Afrikaans text is as follows:

Ek wiet vanne familie waa die hele familie behalwe die een suste in een jaa dood gegaan 'et, ek wiet van klomp broes wie 'n jaa offe paa maande ytmekaa doodgeskiet was. Die mense wat agebly move and, accept 'it as 'n normal part vanne painful life, sonne om te acknowledge meeste vannie tyd dat 'it 'n painful existence is. Is soes fantasy en reality wat seamlessly begin melt met tyd.

vulnerable to the fate of the other... I would go even farther, for in a very real sense ethics is elegy: speaking, acting, and surviving in the face of loss, no matter how irretrievable those losses may be.

Teju Cole (2023) in the *New York Times*, writing about the lives lost when migrants try to cross the border from Turkey to Greece, says the following:

The Evros River is often deadly for those who try to cross there. Some cannot swim or find themselves caught in sudden currents. Some are shot at by the Greek border police; others make it across the river only to die of injuries or hypothermia. The bodies are sometimes retrieved only weeks later, in advanced stages of decomposition. Those who die in the Evros region are taken to Alexandroupolis, the Greek city closest to the border. There, at the University Hospital of Alexandroupolis, Dr. Pavlos Pavlidis assumes responsibility for them. Pavlidis has been involved in this work for over 20 years and has carried out more than 500 autopsies. He and his team try to determine the cause of death and identify the bodies. In coordination with human rights organizations, they notify the bereaved families, when that is possible. Often, it is not possible, in part because many of those who undertake these journeys, to avoid complications if they're caught, do not carry identifying documents. When all attempts to match the dead with their names have been exhausted, Pavlidis sends the bodies to a small village called Sidiro, about an hour's drive north of Alexandroupolis, in a part of Greece that is home to the once substantial but now small Ottoman Greek Muslim population.

The unidentified bodies are washed by the women of the village. Under the reasonable assumption that these dead are from a Muslim background — many of those crossing the Evros River originate from Afghanistan, Syria, Pakistan and Bangladesh — the village imam conducts burial rites for them.

Cole's lament is as follows:

I had a sense that I was there in the cemetery on behalf of others, those who would have wished to be there, if only they knew that this was where their loved ones had ended up. I am not religious. I have no prayers to recite. But in that cemetery of persons once known, I performed a ceremony of farewell: I breathed in the spring air, I listened to the rustle of vegetation, I felt the grass underfoot, I looked across the landscape in the bright but tender afternoon light, and at the farms, the village and the forested slopes. It was a vision of peace and even of consolation.

His lament brings to mind George Eliot's narrator in *Middlemarch*:

If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heartbeat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. (Eliot, 1871: 199)

And then, while thinking about grief and grievability there is a story that is reported worldwide, the story of a 'tragedy at 80 Albert Street' that 'struck some of South Africa's poorest'. The Wall Street Journal (2023) reports:

Crouching on a fifth-story ledge, Yandisa Mngandi pulled his son to his chest and eyed the flames that were devouring 80 Albert Street and the warren of dwellings inside. 'If I die, maybe my baby will survive if I take the blow,' he thought, before jumping into the darkness.

Seconds earlier, his wife had made the leap, and right behind him, he assumed, was their 16-year-old, Melita, a stepdaughter whom Mngandi was proud to be raising like his own.

Landing feet first on the ground, Mngandi felt his right leg crack. His son seemed OK, and there was his wife, dazed, but alive. But there was no sign of Melita. The 10th-grader had turned back to fetch some blankets, to use as ropes to shorten the terrifying distance to the bottom.

On the third floor, Cynthia Nkosi awoke with a start, pungent black smoke swirling inside her small room's cardboard walls. Nkosi grabbed her sleeping daughter and strapped the two-year-old to her back using the sheet of the small bed they shared. She opened the window, said a prayer and jumped.

Nkosi landed, miraculously unhurt. For a second there was silence, then the girl, still tied to her mother's back, began to cry. 'At least she's alive,' Nkosi thought. Above, she saw flames in the window she had jumped from just moments ago.

In horror, she watched her neighbors tumbling from the floors above. Some were on fire, their bodies leaving a trail of light and smoke as they fell. Others clutched pieces of luggage, desperate to save a few belongings as tragedy struck a community that already got by on next to nothing.

At least 77 people died in the fire in downtown Johannesburg in the early hours of Thursday morning, all of them black and among the poorest in the sprawling metropolis christened the City of Gold by its white founders a century and a half ago. (Steinhauser *et al.*, 2023)

Grievable un-grievable lives.

Fuss (2013: 8) claims that the ethical wagers of modern elegy may loom largest in the smallest elegy ever written, ‘an exquisitely painful poem’ by W. S. Merwin, where he ‘(i)n just six devastating monosyllables, voices the lament behind every modern mourning poem: Why write an elegy when the beloved is no longer here to read it?’ The poem reads as follows:

Who would I show it to

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My story arrived too late.

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