

## The Language of Grief: Autoethnographic Reflections of Loss in American Culture

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### Abstract

In *Disrupted Lives: How People Create Meaning in A Chaotic World*, Gay Becker explains what disruptions are and the imprints they leave on our lives. “In all societies, the course of life is structured by expectations about each phase of life, and meaning is assigned to specific life events and roles that accompany them. When expectations about the course of life are not met, people experience inner chaos and disruption. Such disruptions represent loss of the future. Restoring order to life necessitates reworking understandings of the self and the world, redefining the disruption and life itself”<sup>1</sup>. What is more chaotic and out of order from what we expect than the sudden loss of a child? The loss of one’s child is one of the most disruptive events that can occur in a person’s life, and many bereaved parents would agree that it is the ultimate disruption. Becker also states that “Studies of disrupted lives afford an opportunity to examine out of the ordinary life experiences for what they can tell us about cultural constructs that are taken for granted”<sup>2</sup>, such as the natural order of life and death or the culture of toxic positivity in the US that leads to the avoidance of negative emotions because people do not know how to respond to those who embody them<sup>3</sup>. Bereaved parents often find themselves ostracized, misunderstood, and pathologized. With an ethnographic lens and situating my grief in the context of disruption, I write about the struggles with belonging, identity, and meaning that parents experience after the sudden loss of a child and the ripple effects those crises have. Taking inspiration from Renato Rosaldo’s poetic and ethnographic account of grief in *The Day of Shelly’s Death*, I use poetry to both describe and unravel the grief of my own daughter’s death. I also integrate the accounts and experiences of other bereaved mothers using archival methods of data retrieved from blogs and other public forums to explore the ways in which culture and language interact with the grief from losing a child and the repercussions those interactions have on belonging, identity, and meaning for bereaved parents.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

To consider child bereavement to be a culture is an interesting idea because we, as an American society, typically think of all grief to be the same. For instance, there is this notion that grief is a linear process. Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, then finally, Acceptance have been deemed the clinical way in which the grieving process is supposed to occur, with *acceptance* being synonymous with moving on. It needs to be said that no one just moves on from losing a loved one, but that is particularly true for those of us who have lost a child. As the adage goes, *parents should not outlive their children*, or something along those lines, and it is true; losing a child defies the natural order of life and death. The dissonance between the clinical outlook on grief and the uniqueness of this particular loss have created a culture.

With any culture, there are bound to be cultural misunderstandings or offenses from those both outside and within the culture itself. Anthropologists seek to understand different cultural views and practices through ethnographic observation in order to combat the ethnocentrism and naive realism that can cause such misunderstandings or offenses. Whether one considers themselves to be a part of a certain culture or not, anyone can take an anthropological perspective to find both meaning within cultural beliefs and practices and what those beliefs and practices can reveal about how we relate to one another in society.

Therefore, with an ethnographic lens and situating my grief into the context of disruption, I write about the struggles with belonging, identity, and meaning that parents experience after the sudden loss of a child and the ripple effects those crises have. Taking inspiration from Renato Rosaldo's poetic and ethnographic account of grief in *The Day Of Shelly's Death*, I use poetry to both describe and unravel the grief of my own daughter's death. I also integrate the accounts and experiences of other bereaved mothers using archival methods of data retrieved from blogs and other public forums to explore the ways in which culture and language interact with the grief from losing a child and the repercussions those interactions have on belonging, identity, and meaning for bereaved parents.

## 1.1 BACKGROUND

On July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2018, my life became forever split into a *before* and *after* because that is the day that I got a phone call that is every parent's worst fear. Ellie, while she and her brother were staying at her father's house for the summer per our custody agreement, had climbed into the pool and drowned because my ex, without my knowledge, left our kids with a known drug addict who was—unsurprisingly—high on meth at the time. Ellie was in critical condition and was life-lined to Riley Children's Hospital. I can't even begin to describe the pain; the rage; the disbelief; and the fear. The flight to Indiana and the rush from the airport to the hospital are mostly a blur. When I arrived, the doctors told me that she had no brain activity and that there was nothing more they could do. I made the decision to take her off life support, and she died on July 12<sup>th</sup>, 2018. She was only 2 years old. She would have been turning 3 the following month.

I have not been the same since. Even though all responsible parties have been formally charged, and the woman with whom my ex left our children with that day was sentenced to 10 years in prison July 2022, I do not feel any closer to closure. My entire worldview was turned on its head, and I no longer feel safe. Parents are not supposed to bury their children. It goes against the natural order of things.

Since that horrific day, I always felt like I had to keep my grief at arm's length, only allowing myself to speak on in tangentially or in a mechanical fashion, in order to *survive* in this hollow place we call society. I mean, how could I be expected to continue school, work, or continue to raise the one child that was still alive *without* dissociating from my suffering as much as possible? Not to mention the culture of toxic positivity that is pervasive in the United States that makes people viscerally uncomfortable with the expression of negative emotions. Talk about children dying in an academically objective manner, everyone's fine, no discomfort. Sure, it's sad and tragic, but the manner in which we are discussing it provides enough distance to protect everyone from the magnitude of despair that the sudden death of a child can bring. Talk about children dying in a way that is personal, evocative, and palpable, and suddenly the atmosphere changes. People shift in their seats, darting their eyes to look at anything but you; all words except for variations of *I'm sorry* suddenly escape them; they stumble and stammer trying to come up with a platitude to alleviate their discomfort.

But I digress. The main point is that in order to cope with the normal expectations and stresses in my day-to-day life, I felt that it was necessary to pack up my grief into a box and store it in the back closet of my mind. Even my previous topic proposal of psychedelic healing rituals was a fruitless attempt to avoid confronting her sudden death—as if grief is a punch one must dodge to not feel the full strength of his fist, but even the most experienced fighters tire and are outmatched by the unyielding relentlessness of grief. But with a series of barriers and a well-defined deadline, the universe instead laughed at my hubris attempt to elude grief and constructed an alternative path that forces me to dig through that back closet, find that box, and open it.

Avoidance has always been a survival mechanism of mine, but I don't think I quite realized how much effort I have put into distancing myself from this grief until this project. Reading Renato Rosaldo's *The Day of Shelly's Death* transported me back to the suddenness of Ellie's death, the manner in which she died, and the aftermath of it all. I suddenly become overwhelmed with the intense, raw feelings of anguish, despair, and rage of that fateful 2018 summer. While I could rationally comprehend that writing about her death and my grief would be emotionally painful, I don't think I grasped the depth of it. How do I even begin to write about this? Where does this story even begin? I suppose I'll have to figure that out as I go.

## 1.2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In *Disrupted Lives: How People Create Meaning in A Chaotic World*, Gay Becker explains what disruptions are and the imprints they leave on our lives. "In all societies, the course of life is structured by expectations about each phase of life, and meaning is assigned to specific life events and roles that accompany them. When expectations about the course of life are not met, people experience inner chaos and disruption. Such disruptions represent loss of the

future. Restoring order to life necessitates reworking understandings of the self and the world, redefining the disruption and life itself<sup>1</sup>. What is more chaotic and out of order from what we expect than the sudden loss of a child? The loss of one's child is one of the most disruptive events that can occur in a person's life, and many bereaved parents would agree that it is the ultimate disruption. Becker also states that "Studies of disrupted lives afford an opportunity to examine out of the ordinary life experiences for what they can tell us about cultural constructs that are taken for granted"<sup>2</sup>, such as the natural order of life and death or the culture of toxic positivity in the US that leads us to avoid negative emotions because we don't know how to respond to those who embody them<sup>3</sup>. Ishan Sanjeev Upadhyay and colleagues define toxic positivity as "the overgeneralization of a positive state of mind that encourages using positivity to suppress and displace any acknowledgement of stress and negativity."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Lecompte-Van Poucke explains that those who perpetuate toxic positivity believe that suffering to be a consequence of poor attitude or moral failure.<sup>5</sup> Because of this widespread outlook, bereaved parents often find themselves ostracized, misunderstood, and pathologized. The way U.S. culture reacts to grief can be described with social constructionism, which adheres to the basic tenet that people "make their social and cultural worlds at the same time these worlds make them"<sup>6</sup>. In other words, societies institute social and cultural norms that establish, or construct, expectations for how people within said society behave, look, and interact. As a result, those who deviate from these expectations are labeled to call attention to the deviation. They are, as Mary Douglas would say, *marginal beings*. She explains that "if a person has no place in the social system and is therefore a marginal being"<sup>7</sup>. The reaction to these deviances can be observed in the way society treats and stereotypes those who have violated the constructed expectations.

A powerful social theory called Symbolic Interactionism also illuminates the social struggles of bereaved parents. In general, Symbolic Interactionism is a theory that seeks to understand the ways in which people's environment influences the way they choose to behave. In other words, how and why people try to control the way they are perceived by others. In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman introduces his theory called Dramaturgical theory. Dramaturgical theory argues that people are essentially actors, and the social world they interact with is their stage. On this stage, people, or actors, "perform" in their interaction with other people, or other actors. Goffman defines a performance as "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants"<sup>8</sup>. He also highlights the ways in which people try to control the way they are perceived is called impression management, and the primary motivation for practicing impression management is to avoid shame. Goffman found that "preventive practices are constantly employed to avoid these embarrassments", and that "corrective practices" are utilized when one has not successfully managed the impression they wanted to make<sup>9</sup>. Emily, a bereaved mother, writes on her blog *Just Playing House* about how grief affects social interactions: "It makes people around us uncomfortable. Hell, it makes us uncomfortable... so we just don't show it"<sup>10</sup>. We falsely assume that the grieving person is "better" or has made it to the acceptance stage of grief once the grieving person stops bringing it up. This is merely isolation disguised as moving on. In another blog post, Emily reveals how unsolicited advice from others made her judge her own grief: "It made me question everything I was doing and feel as if I was doing it all wrong. That made me more angry"<sup>11</sup>. Many commenters on this blog post shared similar sentiments. One commenter wrote: "I used to be very sociable and interactive with people. Since my son passed, I have become much more quiet and withdrawn"<sup>12</sup>. In another blog post, Emily writes about the expectation to *move on*: "It makes you feel like you are doing something wrong if you haven't stopped grieving after the first year. A false sense of pressure that life is just supposed to go back to the way it was before. You and everyone around you wonder why you can't just move on"<sup>13</sup>. Goffman's theories explain how people feel compelled to perform in social settings and underscores how powerful social norms are at influencing how we choose to behave. When society decides child death is a taboo conversation, it pushes any real discussion into the shadows, which forces bereaved parents back there too.

Stories of disruption are stories of difference and, oftentimes, isolation. "Disruption makes an individual feel different from others and can render social relationships uncomfortable and cumbersome"<sup>14</sup>. The truth is, people get uncomfortable with your grief, so they treat you differently or attempt to offer some platitude in a feigned attempt to lessen your pain. There is this Americanized idea that we must be happy to be healthy and vice-versa, that when someone is sad, they need to be cured. But grief is not equivalent to having a bad day, and therefore cannot be "fixed." In conjunction with these well-meaning platitudes, we also hear platitudes that are so blatantly insensitive, it is hard to think that they mean well. Some of the more shocking comments people have said to me are:

*you need to move on*

*you won't get better by being sad*

*I felt like my child died too when we found out she was disabled*

*I'm sorry I haven't done a better job of reaching out, it's just you losing Ellie has been really hard on me because I have a daughter.*

When I lost my daughter, I also lost several friends, including my best friend at the time, and if you talk to any bereaved parent, you will hear a similar story. People do not know what to do with us because we are walking, talking reminders that they too could suddenly lose a child. Being this reminder embodied is analogous to Mary Douglas' concept of *pollution* in *Purity and Danger*, where certain people are symbolically polluted by actions or circumstances that challenge the preconceived notions of social order<sup>15</sup>. People live under this false notion that the death of a child is something that happens to other people, or that if they are a good parent, they can prevent it from happening to them. I was one of these people. They always say, "I can't even imagine" but that is not true. They can, and they have. So, to prevent confronting that visceral realization, they dodge us, as if losing a child is contagious.

Becker states that "Studies of disrupted lives afford an opportunity to examine out of the ordinary life experiences for what they can tell us about cultural constructs that are taken for granted"<sup>16</sup>, such as the natural order of life and death or the culture of toxic positivity in the US that leads us to avoid negative emotions because we don't know how to respond to those who embody them.

### 1.3 METHODOLOGY

When one thinks of research in anthropology, they typically do not think of self-reflection or poetic inquiry. I believe most would think anthropological research is studying an unknown or unfamiliar group of people in an effort to make said group's culture more familiar, not just to anthropologists but to anyone who would later read their research, and rightfully so! However, the standard anthropological research praxis of venturing into and writing about the unfamiliar is not the only method worth engaging in, nor is it always the most effective.

Autoethnography is about as straight-forward as it sounds. With the prefix *auto-* meaning *self*, autoethnography is simply "the use of personal experience to examine and/or critique cultural experience"<sup>17</sup>. The interrogation of the ways in which cultural phenomena interact with the ethnographer's personal experience is what distinguishes an autoethnography from an autobiography. In addition, Stacy Holman Jones and colleagues also denote three more characteristics that differentiate autoethnography from other self-reflexive works: that it "[makes] contributions to existing research, [embraces] vulnerability with purpose, and [creates] a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response"<sup>18</sup>. Furthermore, Christopher Poulos asserts that "autoethnography is particularly well-suited to projects that involve direct participation by, and impact on, the researcher as a human actor in a scene or that involve personal memories, traumas, conflicts, observations, clues, and other experiences that need some unpacking"<sup>19</sup>. Jones and colleagues corroborate this as well, explaining that autoethnography can be useful in addressing understudied, personal, and sensitive topics<sup>20</sup>. And honestly, if the grief of a child suddenly dying doesn't meet these criteria, then I am not sure what does.

While it is true that grief in general is not understudied, the grief parents—particularly mothers—carry with them after a child dies is, in my opinion, understudied. While the few studies that are out there provide important information, such as bereaved parents having higher mortality rates than nonbereaved parents<sup>21</sup>, most were as clinical and impersonal as the hospital room Ellie died in. Take these two excerpts—the description of research and the conclusion—from a study by Hilka Laakso and Marita Paunonen-Ilmonen on maternal grief for example:

The purpose of the present study was to analyse the mother's grief and coping with grief following the death of a child. The study aimed to generate knowledge to understand the mother's grief, to support her in the situation following the child's death and to ease the mother's and the family's life. The objective was to analyse the manifestations, experiences and duration of maternal grief and to describe and assess how mothers cope with grief and understand the meaning of grief. The results of this study could be applied to health care education, in-service training, nursing practice and primary healthcare<sup>22</sup>.

The results indicated that mothers were not sufficiently heard in matters concerning the child, that they did not receive enough information and counselling, and that their contact with the hospital or health centre ended after the child's death. The quality of care could be improved by listening to the mothers and families affected by the death of a child. The lack of information and support experienced by mothers could be remedied by increasing the staff's knowledge, by improving collaboration and internal communication and by clarifying the division of labour and responsibility. Since attending to death and grieving people is a demanding task, the staff's professional skill should be continuously developed after post-basic education. Attention to the staff's knowledge and various supportive measures, such as clinical supervision, and proper staff ng and work environment would enhance their capacity to care for dying children and support grieving mothers.

Continuous self-assessment of work and mutual support would facilitate the staff's coping with this psychologically demanding and difficult task<sup>23</sup>.

I want to be clear that there is nothing *wrong* with this study. It was written with a specific audience and purpose in mind, but it *is* writing from a distance. There's no room for any emotion, and there is an expectation of objectivity. These expectations are routine in academia to prevent research from being biased, which is incredibly important in certain fields, especially in the hard sciences. However, such routine expectations have bled into the humanities and social sciences as well, as if certain experiences of the human condition can be rendered in through an objective lens. Our life is not an objective occurrence, but a human experience. When we place unbiased objectivity on such a pedestal, we are dismissing the invaluable contributions our emotional insights and personal experiences may bring.

## 1.4 STRUCTURE

The next section will be the poems in their entirety. Having the poems as a section in and of themselves and not woven into the academic discourse was purposefully decided to enable the reader to immerse themselves and, hopefully, gain an *insider* perspective on grieving the death of a child— even if it's only a glimpse. I did not want to dilute the emotion of the poems with academic objectivity. Following the poems section, I will examine my poems alongside the stories of other bereaved parents gathered from blogs, forum posts, and literary works. I, like Rosaldo, found experimenting mostly with free verse poetry to not just be the most effective style to convey the weight of grief, but it also seemed to be the only style that permitted me to recall and recount how everything unfolded without feeling like I was constantly balancing on the precipice of despair. In some of the poems I take on the perspectives of those around me.

## 2. POEMS

June 22, 2018

I read an NPR article  
about the Syrian boy  
who washed ashore

My heart is heavy  
a knot in my stomach

My own two kids are  
Away for the summer

“I can’t even imagine”  
I say

And soon,  
I won’t have to

Nick’s Regrets

A four hour drive  
to drop the kids off with their dad  
DNA versus hours logged

Their first summer with him  
Our first summer as just  
Me & Christian

The kids  
noise and mess  
chaos and stress

I couldn’t wait for them to go  
even if I love them as my own

I don’t hug them goodbye  
it will make it easier  
Wish I’d done it differently

Oh how I wish I’d done many things differently

Ground Zero

Child loss is often a catalyst  
for more disruption  
more trauma

Like a nuclear bomb  
a shockwave radiates out  
destroying all sense of order, progress, and hope  
within its radius  
where a dead child lies at the epicenter

Schism

Life  
once full of Joy and Laughter  
now divided  
into Before and After

An Accident?

“There was an accident” he says  
 voice trembling  
 Why?  
 Is it fear? Guilt?  
 Or something else?

*An accident?  
 What could he mean?*

In that moment  
 it’s as if the Earth stopped rotating  
 and the force of stopping  
 hits me in my chest

My knees buckle  
 The floor vanishes  
 from beneath my feet

I open my mouth to scream  
 but I am breathless

Wind knocked out of me

*An accident?  
 No.  
 Knocking a photo off the wall  
 is an accident  
 Spilling a glass of milk  
 is an accident*

*Letting a child  
 only two year old  
 play outside alone  
 with pool uncovered to  
 smoke meth*

*An accident?  
 No.*

The Nature of Probabilities

This  
           Isn’t  
                           Happening

Can’t Be.

I’ve already a lifetime of trauma  
                           behind me  
 I thought I was safe now  
                           statistically  
 but it seems  
 Trauma doesn’t follow  
                           probabilities  
 Feels like something’s cursed me

KJ 1

I watch helplessly as  
paramedics rhythmically pump  
My baby sister's chest

She'll be okay  
She just fell into the pool

Kenzie 1

It's dark; 9 PM  
My phone rings  
It's my sister  
I smile

I always love getting to talk with her  
But this time when I answer  
Things are different  
Panic  
Voice like an earthquake

*She drowned! Ellie drowned!*

Kenzie 2

I go to Ellie  
She's so cold  
I keep asking  
for more blankets  
but She's still so cold  
No matter how many

Doctors shine a light  
into Her pupils  
looking for a response  
Nothing happens

The clouds in Her eyes  
make the situation clear  
The gravity of this  
hits me like a freight train  
and holds me by Her side

Judgment

My sister's ex leaves Ellie's side  
To go out to eat with his dad  
It's just me now  
How can he leave Her like this  
The nurse comes in confused  
Where has Ellie's father gone  
We exchange glances  
It's in both our eyes



Christian Arrives

Her knees buckle  
unable to support the weight  
of seeing Ellie like this  
Her only Daughter

I've only known my sister  
as strong and brave

The terror in her eyes  
shakes my core

Her scream still haunts me

KJ 2

From one hospital to another  
More and more family come  
Police and doctors  
Keep wanting to talk to me  
Mommy arrives from North Carolina  
*What is she doing here*  
*Did she come because Ellie fell into the pool?*

Arrival

Through smells of antiseptic,  
sounds of beeping machines  
I walk past solemn faces  
into a room  
behind the curtain  
under cold, fluorescents  
lay my only Daughter

Her tiny body  
intubated, tubed, swollen  
I go to kiss her forehead  
Her skin  
rubbery, pale, cold

*Why is She so cold?*  
*She's not dead*

I smell Her hair  
Expecting strawberries  
not knowing  
Chlorine was lying in wait

KJ 3

Everyone is crying  
mommy and dad pull me aside  
They tell me that Ellie  
is going to die soon;  
It's time to say goodbye

We go to the room  
I see my baby sister  
I tell her I love Her;  
everything will be okay  
kiss her cheek, and  
say Goodbye

Kenzie's Regrets

Just one more weekend  
They would be coming for  
my daughter's birthday

I wanted more time  
didn't want to pester  
So I made myself smaller  
quieted my voice

Maybe if I could have  
found my voice  
Ellie wouldn't have  
lost Hers

July 12, 2018 1:02 PM

Two years old  
skin like December  
body limp  
tongue hanging out, grayed

orange fluid leaking  
bile and acid  
the stench  
stronger than the  
chlorine and antiseptic

The smell of death?

The beeping of machines  
persists  
While the thumping in her chests  
Echoes into the distance

Lies

Detectives tell me  
Karla was sober

Detectives tell me  
Ellie wanted water  
for flowers

Detectives tell me  
Karla said no

Detectives tell me  
KJ said water's  
In the pool

Detectives tell me  
Ellie was outside  
alone for 25 minutes

Detectives tell me  
It's no one's fault

The Decision to Cremate

I want to bring Ellie  
back to North Carolina  
Her home  
born and raised

Her dad protests  
says She should stay  
in Indiana  
a foreign land  
where She died

I have to stop myself  
From murdering  
this monster  
disguised as a man

Tokens from the Hospital

Recording of Her heartbeat  
cast of Her hand  
gifted in a white box

In the elevator  
a doctor tries to exchange pleasantries  
she doesn't know

*How are you guys doing today?*

*Everyone's sad because my sister just died*

KJ says matter-of-factly  
from the mouth of babes  
I don't think he understands

*I'm so sorry*  
the doctor mutters  
uncomfortably

At the Funeral Home

I see Her body  
presented on a table

Skin painted  
Eyes sewn shut  
Mouth closed tight  
Chest without rise and fall

We both died that day

Can't look at water the same

KJ 4

Mommy has been in bed  
for three days straight  
I don't understand  
why everyone is so sad

If we just take  
Ellie's picture  
To the *ofrenda*<sup>24</sup>  
We can see Her again

The Funeral Director

Upon the mother's arrival,  
I've readied the little girl's form  
to the best of my ability.  
But summer dresses aren't meant for funerals,  
and spaghetti straps can't conceal  
The black and purple hues of livor mortis.

The mother hyperventilates,  
and rushes to the restroom stall.

Before she has a chance to go  
And purchase a funeral dress.  
I offer my own daughter's white dress jacket,  
to shroud the bruises of death.

And I vow to wash Ellie's hair  
with Her favorite shampoo.  
It's the least I can do  
It's the least I can do

First therapy attempt

I desperately need help  
A specialist in child bereavement

A small woman with kind eyes  
Could be my grandma

I fill out the forms  
robotically

The woman with kind eyes  
calls me back

Her office is dimly lit  
warm, inviting

I sit in a bright, navy blue chair  
She wants to go over the questionnaire

She asks me questions I can no longer remember  
She cuts me off  
Stops me, interrupts me, corrects me

*You have such beautiful hair  
And your skin is so clear*

Who cares?  
I would disfigure myself  
to bring her back

My heart quickens  
Chest tightens  
Mind stirs

*Considering your history with depression  
And your current suicidal thoughts  
I don't believe you can do therapy  
Your emotional state is too bad at the moment  
It would be too risky  
I would recommend coming back in about a year*

My stomach drops  
Skin seethes  
Eyes well

Weakly, I stand  
Shuffle to the car  
KJ is still in his session  
I call Nick  
Wailing  
Begging him to come and get me

John, the new detective

I call the prosecutor's office  
Will charges be pressed?

A new detective  
He is grateful I called  
my contact info  
missing from the file

*The previous prosecutor said  
Not sufficient evidence  
for charges*

*Which is crazy to me  
Considering the meth  
In her system  
that she admitted to  
smoking that day*

I'm sorry,  
WHAT?!

Detectives told me  
Karla was sober

*They no longer work here  
The case has been reopened*

In Calc I

*You can't take a derivative  
before understanding limits*

She says

*It's like  
jumping in the deep end  
before learning to swim*

*You drown*

A shock waves through me  
Mind and body  
disconnect, dissociate  
Numbness envelopes me

I am pulled back to reality  
When she looks at me  
With realization in her eyes

"I'm so sorry" she says

KJ, You're Invited!

The invitation reads  
Innocently, but  
My heart sinks  
A pool party

The Crib

Pain lives behind white bars  
And sleeps on a pink pillow  
Eternally vacant

Sitting on a shelf

With Her bows  
And Her golden sparkle shoes  
A bumblebee backpack  
Colored with  
Pretty pinks and blues  
A sculpted hand reaching out  
Never to return  
Sitting on a shelf  
Sleeping in an urn<sup>25</sup>

I'm Sorry

“Everything happens for a reason; she would want you to be happy; remember the good times; I’m sorry; this will make you stronger; you’ll get stronger; you have to be strong; you’re so strong; I’m sorry; I don’t know how you do it; at least you have another child; I’ve lost someone too; sleeping all day won’t help; it’s been six months; I understand, I lost my dad; my mom; my friend; my sister; my dog; *you’re fucking dog?* you won’t get better by being sad; I’m sorry; I just don’t know what to say; find the silver lining; she’s in a better place; God needed her more than you; I feel like my child died too when we found out she was disabled; this is really hard on me since I have a daughter too; she was so beautiful; *No, she IS beautiful*; maybe it’s time you get rid of her things; if you think bad, you’ll feel bad; it’s been a year; you need to forgive; let it go; *But what about justice?* you need to move on for your son; you need be strong for your son; having another baby might help; I’m sorry, I just don’t want to say the wrong thing; God has a plan; I’m sorry I didn’t call; I didn’t want my happiness to overshadow your pain; time heals all wounds; you’d feel better if you just let go; move on; what’s wrong? you seemed to be doing fine lately; *you’re going to regret asking me that*; I’m sorry; we all feel this loss; we’re all hurting too; don’t get upset, they just don’t know what to say; they mean well; *No, it’s me that regrets telling you*; there are so many things to be thankful for; if your faith was stronger you wouldn’t feel so bad; at least you were blessed enough to have her; it’s been two years; I’m sorry for your loss; you need to forgive; try and find peace; *grief made me into a weapon and you tell me to find peace*; anger isn’t the answer; revenge isn’t the answer; *But what about justice?* I’m sorry; be thankful for those you still have in your life; just pray about it; trust God; I can’t even imagine; be thankful for the time you had with her; God doesn’t give us anything we can’t handle; I’m just so sorry; *Yeah, me too.*”

I am a hypocrite

She calls me into her office

Her sons fiancé died

Like a daughter to her

*What do I do?*

*How do I get through this*

All I can say is

I’m so sorry

And I realize

Who’s that precious little girl?

My lab partner asks

Seeing Ellie as my phone background

I tell her

*How old is she?*

An innocent question

An unexpected assault

*She’s two—was two*

*She died about a month before turning three*

The air around us becomes thick

*I’m so sorry*

We continue our lab

Silently

An Anonymous Post

Says I'm trauma dumping  
Says I should see a therapist

Wish I know who wrote it  
Then I could refer them to page 12  
And say:

*BEEN. THERE.*  
*DONE. THAT.*  
*Fucking bitch*

Instead, I drop the class and hide

In Calc II

Today's lesson

*Integrating Polar and Parametric Equations*

Familiar, yet

struggling to navigate

the hazy fog

clouding neural pathways

Suddenly surroundings slow

warping around me

trapping me like a ship in a bottle

I glance down to see

hives beginning to cover me

Imposter Syndrome

How can I say  
Everything falls into place  
Without the words unspoken  
Echoing in my ears

Did I get those scholarships  
Because of my scholarship?  
Or was it pity  
Taken upon my hardships

Tragic backstory poster child  
Where resilience is a virtue  
It sucks to be admired  
Because someone else hurt you

Feeling compelled by forces  
Beyond my comprehension  
To abandon my old thesis  
And follow artistic vision  
Is it the trauma or the talent  
Getting recognition?

A Multiverse of Sorrow

If there is a multiverse  
All my variants lost Ellie  
The pain is so deep  
that it ripples across space and time  
Rippling out so far  
That all other variant Christian's  
must feel it too

### 3. ANALYSIS

Humans are storytelling creatures. We construct narratives about our life experiences in order to make sense of the world around us, so it makes sense that we employ literary devices to process experiences. There are some experiences, tragedies, feelings that are ineffable. It is not that words are unable to capture these experiences, but objective, academic language does fail. So how do we as humans begin to describe the indescribable? How do we make the uncomfortable less taboo? How do we make the unfamiliar more familiar? Art. We use art to tell stories, through books, movies, television shows, paintings, etc., which allows people to experience another's perspective. The importance of having agency in telling our stories to the healing process is demonstrated in "The Deceased Child in the Psychic and Social Worlds of Bereaved Parents during the Resolution of Grief" where Dennis Klass explains how bereaved parents were able to find meaning and "rebuild their lives by telling, understanding, and reconstructing their life stories with a group of people whose stories were like theirs"<sup>26</sup>. While many bereaved parents in the study wrote and shared poetry about their experiences with the group, this study focused more on the community building aspects of grief support groups. Such support groups are impossible for most in the United States to find, forcing many bereaved parents to seek community in online spaces. Therefore, I am more interested in the ways in which art and story may help both personal healing for the bereaved parent and bridging the gap of understanding bereaved parents experience socially. Compelling art has the capacity to create empathy and understanding, particularly if the experience the art is exploring is something foreign to the audience. For those familiar with the story being told, art can provide a sense of validation when done right and with respect.

#### 3.1 METAPHORS

In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson assert that the usage of metaphors is not simply an aspect of language for literary and poetic purposes but "that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature"<sup>27</sup>. There are many metaphors used by bereaved parents to describe the experience of a child dying, such as the need to *rebuild their lives* seen in the previous paragraph. Other metaphors include describing grief as: *a journey one moves through* as opposed to *an affliction one gets over, a dream, and a new normal*. One of the more common metaphors I have noticed is how losing a child is like losing a critical part of oneself.

In his poem, "On My First Son," written in 1603 about the death of his son, Ben Jonson cried out in his poem, "O, could I lose all father now! For why,"<sup>28</sup> which exemplifies desperate confusion that so many grief stricken parents feel after losing a child. Parents that are forced to confront the paradox of a child's death preceding theirs is incomprehensible. When a child dies, parents often feel like a piece of them has been ripped away, a feeling that Jonson describes about his son as "child of my right hand, and joy"<sup>29</sup>. Ronaldo similarly compares the death of his wife Shelley to losing a limb and writes "what most sustained me gone"<sup>30</sup>. Parents not only view their children as a piece of them but as the best piece of them, as Jonson explains using a metaphor, "Here doth lie Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry"<sup>31</sup>. Jonson made poetry, and he also made his son which he regards as his most prized piece of work. In a study on support groups for bereaved parents, one parent described her grief as a "deep gash" that "will never heal"<sup>32</sup>. Children are the best part of humankind for they are innately pure, innocent, and full of love, life, and joy. They remind us of the best parts of human nature, and it is utterly unfair and devastating to parents, but also to all of humankind. I also use this metaphor of loss in one of my poems published in *The Rhapsodist*:

##### A Surgeon's Hymn

A Surgeon enters  
Cold, unemotional  
Scalpel in hand  
Easy, controllable.

Suction and stitch  
It's all a routine  
Surgeon and scalpel  
A proper machine

Going into V-Fib;



The heart is affected  
 The Organ and heart  
 Must be connected

Remember the protocols:  
 Begin the compressions  
 Shock the patient  
 Give epinephrine

This patient is hopeless  
 Can't seem to recover  
 As if the Organ was joy  
 And she, its Mother<sup>33</sup>

When you love someone deeply, it feels like they have become a part of you. It is therefore unsurprising that the loss of a body part is a common metaphor used by grieving people to attempt to convey the significance of their loss. Moreover, because grief is an ineffable form of suffering, people often seek metaphors that can give a physical embodiment to what they are experiencing emotionally.

However, metaphors can do more than help us conceptualize our reality. They also have the power to understand different realities or create new realities entirely. As Lakoff and Johnson explain:

New metaphors have the power to create a new reality. This can begin to happen when we start to comprehend our experience in terms of a metaphor, and it becomes a deeper reality when we begin to act in terms of it. If a new metaphor enters the conceptual system that we base our actions on, it will alter that conceptual system and the perceptions and actions that the system gives rise to. Much of cultural change arises from the introduction of new metaphorical concepts and the loss of old ones.<sup>34</sup>

Lakoff and Johnson give an example of this using the metaphors surrounding arguments. With the metaphor *argument is war*, it is easy to see how disagreements are viewed as *battles* to be *won*. However, they speculate how differently we may conceptualize disagreements if the metaphor *argument is a dance* was the prevailing metaphor in our language. Another example they offered was the metaphor *love is madness* versus the metaphor *love is a collaborative work of art*. These examples highlight the importance of metaphors in how we understand and relate to one another.

### 3.2 FORESHADOWING

Given the wide use of metaphors to share and make sense of our own life stories, I wondered whether other storytelling devices, primarily foreshadowing, were also used. Foreshadowing is a storytelling technique often used in fiction where the storyteller places hints about the future of the story. While foreshadowing is used because the storyteller already knows the future since they are the ones creating it, we cannot truly know what the future has in store for us. However, I began to ponder this idea after I noticed this in Rosaldo's poem "Midalya" where he recalls when he and Shelly were saying their farewells after living with Midalya for a year:

*She weeps, saying farewell, urging  
 us to be careful, her premonitions insisting  
 what she divines and I as yet do not know<sup>35</sup>*

This particular poem inspired the idea of other narrative techniques, beyond metaphors, people may use to make sense of extraordinary experiences. This poem also led me to recall a conversation I once had with my sister that stands out to me when I think about how Ellie's death may have been foreshadowed. She had recently given birth to her first child and was talking about how the death of one's child must be the worst pain imaginable.

"Yeah. If something happened to KJ, I'd kill myself," I said in agreement, "but having a child die when you have more than one would be worse, I think."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because then you can't kill yourself; you still have other children you have to find a way to go on for."

I found out I was pregnant with Ellie a few months later. It's as if I invoked some sort of spell. In that single sentence, it's as if I sealed our fate.

Why do we feel like we knew something was coming? While I'm sure it can be rationalized to hindsight and the ways in which we process our memories to generate and make sense of our personal narratives, it *feels* like something more profound. It almost feels as if the universe is cyclical and ever expanding; we follow these same paths, and the foreshadowing is just the memories of our past selves etched into our DNA. In private conversations, I have heard some bereaved parents sharing a similar sense of foreboding. However, aside from Rosaldo, I found few examples of this in public literature or research. Perhaps a future study on the various storytelling devices bereaved parents use to make sense of their personal grief stories may provide more insight?

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The death of a child is the most intense, life-altering form of grief. This grief is not only deeply painful, but it's disorienting. It does not just change a person; it completely demolishes them because parents are not supposed to bury their children. As I read through the sparse research on bereaved parents, I noticed the common reason given for the lack of studies was due to ethical concerns, and as noted earlier, when they are conducted, it is with an objective distance. I argue that poetic and artistic inquiries of child loss not only be more widely studied but also be encouraged as a potential modality of bereavement care. Not only can this help those of us trying to navigate through the chaos of child loss, but it can also provide providers and caregivers with a better understanding of bereavement as well. Lakoff and Johnson explain that better self-understanding can generate better mutual-understanding and vice versa and argue that "the search for appropriate personal metaphors that make sense of our lives"<sup>34</sup> is a core component of self-understanding.

All bereaved parents want is to have their pain validated and for their child to be acknowledged. I dread when the question "how many children do you have" comes up, not because it hurts too much knowing the follow up questions to "I have two" will lead to me explaining that one of my children was killed, but because of the uncomfortable silence, empty platitudes, and pity that inevitably follow. Yes, it hurts. It hurts like hell, but Ellie was a living, breathing, vibrant little girl, and she will always be my daughter. I love talking about her, even if talking about her makes me sad. I mean, of course it does, I miss her and would do anything to bring her back. It is insulting that sadness makes people so uncomfortable that they cannot even acknowledge her existence. Conversely, it also makes people uncomfortable if I am too happy. All I, and other bereaved parents want, is to be able to freely, without the pity and the platitudes, talk about our children and let whatever emotions that result from doing so be permitted to flow out organically. I hate having to strategize the mental and emotional possibilities of what talking about my daughter may invoke. It is a laborious request that puts the responsibility of regulating the emotions of others on me.

Regardless of whether this paper can help *others* better understand bereaved parents, for me, this project ended up transcending beyond anthropology; it allowed me to begin to actually process my grief. I found art and poetry to be useful tools in maneuvering through the chaos of grief, constructing a narrative, and reconstructing my sense of self. Because losing Ellie shattered all previously held beliefs about meaning, identity, purpose, consciousness, God, life after death, etc., I ended up writing way more poems than what can be found in this paper. I do not want to be misconstrued though. This project has not *healed* me; I do not think that can ever truly happen. What it did do though is *help*, which is more than four therapists and pharmaceutical drugs have been able to accomplish. This has become a project that I plan to continue for my own personal wellbeing, and I propose that similar progress could be made for other bereaved parents.

Upon Completion of This Paper

I sit outside  
Listening to the chimes sing and twang  
Under the gusty breath of the wind  
Trees swaying  
Yielding to the wind's power  
I notice  
Two fat bulbous bumblebees  
Marveling at how I came to existence  
Alongside such creatures  
Totally present  
Totally at peace  
Because here in nature  
I can feel her  
Living all around me  
In nature  
She breathes

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