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Mourning and creativity in Traveling with the Dead, a book of poems

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> John Bowlby writes that conditions required for healthy mourning in a young child are:
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> first, that he should have enjoyed a reasonably secure relationship with his parents prior to the loss; secondly, he be given prompt and accurate information about what has happened, be allowed to ask all sorts of questions and have them answered as honestly as possible, and be participant in family grieving including whatever funeral rites are decided on; and, thirdly, that he has the comforting presence of the surviving parent, or if that is not possible, of a known and trusted substitute, and an assurance that the relationship will continue (Bowlby, vol. 3, p. 276).

When I read this I was astonished at how clearly he stated conditions that were not met after the death of my parents when I was four. Furthermore, how my poems picked up on these needs in my own mourning or lack of mourning experience. In fact, the very words he uses, that parents often say, "As a stopgap a child may be told that father has gone on a trip" (vol. 3 270) appear in my work. In my poem "Dark Holes" I write, "It was my brother, not any of the grownups, who told me our parents had not gone on a long trip; they were dead" (TWD, 47).

The two things a child needs to know when a relative dies, Bowlby states, are that the dead parent will never return and that his body is buried in the ground or burned to ashes (271). Becker and Margolin (1967) describe a family where the children visit the cemetery, place flowers on the grave, watch relatives cry, without anyone mentioning their mother's death or funeral. This applies to my own case except I was not taken to either of my parents' funerals and did not visit the cemetery to see their graves until I was older. By that time I had figured out they had died. Missing this requisite information, poems such as "Dream of Mrs. Roosevelt" reenact the missing funeral and cemetery visits. The speaker descends into a mine and "like a blind woman/feeling the pit walls with my hands" encounters her dead parents who are "standing in the D.C. cold, drinking in/FDR's words like bathtub gin" (TWD, 13) Her descent into the mine is a going down into Hades to find her parents shades. The poem goes on to introduce others who have died "yellow stars, sewn onto their jackets" and incorporates familial loss with the Holocaust losses, broadening mourning to a wider context. This poem therefore can be considered a step toward maturity, moving from the perspective of the child left in ignorance of death to the adult who now faces its reality.

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Other poems are written entirely from the young child's perspective. In them I assume the consciousness of my brother and me, growing up with our aunt. In addressing a child's idea of death, Bowlby notes, "Very young children meet with examples of death, a dead mouse, a dead bird... what has happened? Is the creature asleep?" He suggests that from adults' explanations, the child develops his own ideas about death. With the loss of both of my parents, and with no explanation for their absence, the death of animals becomes part of a mourning process transferred from the missing unknown and unknowable parents onto other creatures.

This happens in "The Bird Funeral" as my brother and I perform funeral rites and bury a dead sparrow. The poem incorporates anger over the loss of loved ones, directed toward an inadequate mother substitute, by using the aunt's handkerchief to bury the bird and forcing the hated cousin, who still has a mother, to participate in the funeral rite:

> "Carrying the dead sparrow/in our aunt's lace handkerchief/we let cousin play gravedigger, wanting to make her a mourner/like us" (TWD, 21). In reference to the need for a trusted parent substitute, the poem "Keeper" clearly indicates the lack of a nurturing relation with my aunt that followed my parents' death in the lines, "I could have put you with the orphans/in St. Mary's, my aunt said" and continues to describe her lack of empathy, "At bedtime, inspecting my neck and ears/Her long Tomato Red nails scraped my skin./I asked her what it feels like to die. Lights off, she said (TWD, 22).

A question often asked me is if I remember my parents. The work of Piaget suggests a child is not capable of recalling and using his representational model of the world before the middle of the second year (429). Fagan (1973) presents evidence that an infant of five months shown the photo of a face for two minutes can recognize her when shown the photo two weeks later. Mahler observes (1966) it is only when a child is able to sustain short separations that we can credit him with the capacity to evoke mental representations of the missing mother. Bowlby concludes a child's capacity to recall his mother would be developing months in advance of his capacity to recall anyone else. This is because she has far greater emotional salience through sight, sound, smell and touch than anyone else (431) Therefore, he thinks that, in mourning, children retain an image of the absent mother and become attached to a new figure only gradually (437). None of these theorists address the absent father, regarding him as a source of fear to the young child. Margaret Mahler, however, has pointed out that girls without fathers tend to idealize them (1961).

How do I apply these clinical observations to my own case when I have few memories of my father who died at thirty-four in a car crash or my mother, who died at thirty-one of rheumatic fever five months later? Without such memories I invent my parents from objects I inherited: a baby grand Chickering piano. Black Knight Bavarian china. Hotel Conaught labels on a steamer trunk, my father's yellow convertible. I idealize them by using movies and movie stars to represent them; Rita Hayworth, Esther Williams, George Brent and Bette Davis in *Dark Victory* and perfumes like Arpege to create the smell and touch of the missing mother figure that Bowlby says is so important for recalling her.

These objects are prominent in the poems "Keeper", "Dolls", "Before the Camera", "Mother's Gown", "Petit Elegy", "Souvenir", but variations on the need to discover who the poet's parents really were, through their possessions, find their way into poems throughout the book. For example, in "Winter Palace," St. Petersburg," the speaker, while viewing the czar's family heirlooms, laments the lack of valued possessions that might lead her to know what her parents' marriage was like.

While my paper deals primarily with mourning, the issue of separation anxiety must also be addressed. Melanie Klein (1948b) believes that objective anxiety arises from "the child's complete dependence on the mother for the satisfaction of his needs." She thinks that anxiety and unconscious aggression often co-exist. Freud, in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, connects anxiety to the danger of losing the love-object. Therese Benedek, more recently, describes response to separations and bereavements during wartime as a trauma and concludes that "The universal response to separation is anxiety" Benedek, 1946:146).

To make the connection between my poems and theories of separation as inducing anxiety in which grief and mourning are present, I see creating them as a struggle to overcome the anxiety of the early deprivation of mothering and fathering. A difficult and possibly impossible task for a very young child who lacks the cognitive skills such as language, according to Piaget, in adulthood, through language, mourning can take place. The poems as artifacts are objects connecting a bereaved child to the lost parents. Aggression against a not-good-enough caretaker can now be expressed in words impossible to utter while growing up for fear of punishment which might lead to abandonment. Through re-creation of the lost parents, the child I was can be consoled.

Ultimately, however, a poem is not therapy, but art. As an artist I have felt free to fictionalize my parents from the few facts left to me. When I gave *Traveling with the Dead* to my brother, somewhat hesitantly for fear of how he might respond to the family portraits, including his, I told him to think of the poems as fiction. He responded by saying that the fiction amazed him but there was enough truth to hurt. Was my father a bootlegger? Yes. Was he Boss of the New Jersey Mob? No, but rather one of three partners. Did he sleep with a gun under his pillow? I don't know.

Through word choice, imagery, form, and a sense of history, the distance provided by artistic creation can be imposed on real losses to ease their pain. By placing my parents in the cultural context of Prohibition, using writers such as Isaac Babel and Marina Tsvetayeva as their stand-ins, political figures such as Mrs. Roosevelt to see them as living in a wider world, having my mother and father appear in places they may or may not have been to – London, St. Petersburg, Dublin and other locales – the mourning which I was unable to do as a child takes place. Fantasy and idealization mitigate anxiety at their absence.

But as poet, not as the child I was, I exaggerate, invent and embellish. Often formal verse, as in the poem "Romance," a villanelle, serves to constrain grief and to allow levity. In "Romance" the villanelle's repeated lines "Each year my father grows dimmer" and "leaving hardly a glimmer" achieves a kind of jauntiness at odds with the father's disappearance. We may or may not believe the poet when she says her father's memory is fading or even the line "Thank God that hurt is over." What I can say is that form and irony as in this poem can function defensively to keep the hurt at bay.

In demonstrating how the act of writing and putting a book of poems together as an aesthetic object to be read, held, and shown to others, can merge mourning and creativity, I'd like to talk about the cover. Selecting a photo of my parents in Sloppy Joe's, Havana, Cuba, circa 1935 that stood on our Chickering piano throughout my childhood, for the book jacket encompasses the grief, memory, and pleasure I received in the writing and publishing of *Traveling with the Dead*. The photograph, a daily reminder to me as a child that they had actually existed, was for me the most important artifact of their lives. The poem "Souvenir" describes and embellishes the photograph's setting. Here is the poem in its entirety:

Forever frozen
in Sloppy Joe's Havana,
my parents sip Cuba Libres.
Black hair pomaded and parted
in the middle, my father in white slacks,
navy-blue double breasted blazer
blows smoke clouds with his cigar.
Beside him my mother,
mink wrap around her shoulders,
a velvet cloche hiding
her profile,
stares into the future
that never comes.
In the background,
a man caught by the camera

hunches over the bar,
ice cubes melting in his drink.
I invent him
as go-between
for the gambling syndicate
and the Bureau of Internal Revenue,
my father as *el jefe*,
while my mother spills
her velvet words
from the frame. (TWD) 37

Lines from another poem "Exeunt" can be seen as a commentary on "Souvenir," summing up how through art, the lost can be regained. It takes place in Oxford where, appropriately for this essay, I was visiting while studying in a seminar on Freud's work:

Now in Oxford I find my way on strange streets –
Catte, St. Giles, Magdalen – hurrying along
university gravel with a don's confident step,
the dead in my invisible knapsack. (TWD 41)

Finally, when a reader recognizes his own experience or empathizes with my story, the creative act brings even more satisfaction by expanding the horizons of grief beyond my individual loss.