Grief (w)rites: Composing loss in the composition classroom

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GRIEF (W)RITES: COMPOSING LOSS IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

BY

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DISSERTATION

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in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of

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in
English

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This dissertation has been examined and approved.

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DEDICATION

To Paul, whose love and support made my work meaningful and possible
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing this dissertation as a result of, and also in the face of, grief was necessary and rewarding, but also often emotionally and intellectually difficult. Before the death of my significant other, Paul, I had fancied myself an independent scholar who cherished solitary study and writing. I had also regarded myself as an independent woman who enjoyed friendship but prided myself on not relying on others. Paul's illness and death changed all of that. It is perhaps cliched to say that, as a result of my loss, I learned to value people, companionship, community, and collaboration in ways I had not previously thought possible. But this is entirely true. With this in mind, then, I would like to thank the following people:

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION ................................................................................................................................iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ............................................................................................................. iv
ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................................... viii

INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................................................... 1
I. THE GRIEVING LIFE: (DE)COMPOSING COMMUNITIES IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM ................................................................. 9
Personal Effects ............................................................................................................................... 9
Effecting the Political: Emotion and the Body Politic ................................................................. 21
Grounds of Compassion and Grounds of Loss: Nuancing the Territory ........................................ 27
Grief Goes to School: Intellectualizing Loss and the Use of Loss in Intellectual Spaces ............ 31
Composure and Discomposure: The Composition of Emotion .................................................... 35
Collapsing from Grief: The Body and Breakdown ...................................................................... 40
There Are No Words: Teaching (non)Response and the Life of Encrypted Memory .............. 58

II. LOSS EMBODIED, LOSS IN THEORY ................................................................................. 66
Bodies of Grief: The Narration of Personal Effects ...................................................................... 66
Grieving in Theory (What the Teacher Learned in School) ......................................................... 81
Don’t Ruin My Exams: Lessons in Theory .................................................................................... 92
Walking the Path: Embodying Theory .......................................................................................... 95
Privately Public: Grief Goes to School ........................................................................................ 104
The Ashes That Would Not Fit: (In)Forming Loss, Contextualizing Death ......................... 109

III. “A TESTIMONY OF CONVERSATIONS” ........................................................................... 113
“The Concrete Sentence:” A Dialogue Begins ............................................................................. 113
When Death Knocks, How Do We Answer? ................................................................................ 140
Teachers Writing Loss: Understanding and Responding ........................................................... 145

IV. DANGER AND HOPE: DIALOGUES IN GRIEF ............................................................... 150
Grief Narration as Response ......................................................................................................... 150
‘The Accident”: The Relational Experience of Grieving ............................................................. 155
Coming Undone (under)Cutting Grief and the Disruption of Coverage .................................... 187
Responding in Kind: A Teacher Confronts Grief ........................................................................ 191

V. MOTHER LOSS IMAGINED AND THE “PLACEMENT” OF FIRST YEAR STUDENTS .... 196
Separation and Re-enactment: Putting Students in Their Place ................................................. 196
Mothers on the Verge: Separation, Loss, and Indirect Grief ...................................................... 203
“Family Day”: Reconstructing Mother(’s) Loss .......................................................................... 212
“The People We Overlook:” Students on the Verge ................................................................. 216
Enacting “Placement:” Implications for the Composition Classroom ...................................... 221
A Brief Epilogue .......................................................................................................................... 229

LIST OF WORKS CITED ........................................................................................................... 230
APPENDIX (IRB form) .............................................................................................................. 235

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This dissertation studies first-year college student essays about grief, loss and death. It begins with the author's own narrative of grief and moves on to explore the complications of revealing grief in an academic context, discussing the personal and political implications of doing so. The dissertation argues that narratives of grief in composition classrooms are often part of a larger dialogue among both students and teachers, and that often these narratives are written as kinds of responses to one another. It explores the relationship between these kinds of dialogues and elegies written by nineteenth century women, which invite reciprocation and response rather than definitive closure. The author suggests that these dialogues are essential to not just writing, but also to grieving and healing, and argues that engaging and encouraging dialogues of grief in the composition classroom, while risky, also engenders hope. She further argues that teachers of college writing, when reading student grief narratives, think of "placement" not so much in terms of the testing and slotting students into various levels of writing courses, but rather as a way of defining students' emotional and psychological positions as they first enter college and the writing classroom. Finally, she suggests ways of opening up rhetorical spaces in composition classrooms for relational and responsive narrations of grief and loss.
INTRODUCTION

I think it is the nature of grief and the way I personally deal with loss and death, that—when I initially began writing this study—I took a circuitous route to its core. Grief for me, as for many people, is, like writing itself, not linear, but rather recursive; often it is undecipherable and indefinable. Grief constitutes, and is underscored by, the complexities of what Dan Bar-On calls “feeling-facts,” which are registered in the body and the unconscious, but often “indescribable and undiscussable” (95). “Language,” Bar-On argues, “is a sequential, time-consuming and attention-demanding activity. We have seen that feelings are not necessarily so. They may be simultaneous, chaotic, flowing into different directions and unconscious” (105).

Yet since writing is also a matter of ordering, composing, and communicating, I must work here to articulate throughout my project both feelings and facts. This kind of articulation was missing from earlier drafts. Readers of those drafts asked the same questions and wanted particular answers: “What specifically is your project about? We know it’s about grief and your losses and your students’ losses, but you need to tell the reader what you are doing. Can you state it at the very beginning?”

This introduction, then, is a map of the writing and studying of grief. Foremost and primarily, what readers will find in the pages that follow is a study of student grief narratives, those papers that students in many first-year composition classes write, usually in response to personal narrative assignments. These papers deal with death, grief and loss in a variety of ways: most often they discuss the deaths of grandparents, parents, siblings or friends. Sometimes, though, the “deaths” they discuss are figurative, what-if reflections on losing a parent, particularly a mother. In this book, I study both kinds of papers—those about “real” losses and those about losses imagined. As I will show, the two are often the same.

As I struggled for the language to label and talk about these essays, I decided that I
would simply call them "grief narratives." This label gives me and my readers a kind of handle to hold onto. The label is also important as it pulls together the various essays I have chosen into a kind of genre, a body of work that needs to be studied. But how did I choose this body of work? What does it mean to gather together papers that are similar and yet different, to find the themes and issues that unite them?

Initially, I had planned to collect as many grief narratives from students as I could. I had, in fact, been asking students for their permission to copy these kinds of essays for several years, even before I decided to study and write about them. Later, when colleagues heard about my project, they also began to copy and give me essays from their classes. Soon I had several folders of these papers, and I envisioned getting a special file cabinet for them, and even began picturing a kind of archive-in-the-making.

Eventually, though, I felt that there was something wrong with this method of data collection, at least in terms of the kind of study I wished to do. As I sat down and began reading these essays, I found myself using different colored pens and markers to underscore sentences and passages that revealed particular recurring phrases, words, and images. I worked too hard to make these papers conform to these patterns. Soon I was reading these papers for what I expected to find rather than for what they were actually saying.

But there was also something else unsettling about this approach. It seemed incredibly impersonal. As I read and marked and sorted and categorized dozens and dozens of grief narratives written by students I had never known, I felt myself removed from not just the context of the study as I had envisioned it, but also the real contexts of grief itself. I couldn't put faces to the narratives I had set out to study. This bothered me.

Consequently, I decided that I would select from my collection of grief narratives only those written by students in my classes, and those essays that I kept revisiting—or that kept revisiting me. These were the essays that would, like memories of the departed, haunt me, their words and sentences and passages floating through my mind.

As a result, all but one of the papers I use in this study were written by my own
students. Having evolved out of writing assignments I gave in my own classes (the assignment was to write a personal narrative about a significant moment in their lives), I observed these papers revised in relation to each other, in dialogue with one another, and functioning as parts of a relational whole. Rather than study patterns in fifty or so papers from students whom I had never met, then, I have focused in this study on, and have analyzed in some depth, seven papers, six of which were written by students I know.

All six of these latter papers were written during the academic year of 1998-1999 in two of my First Year Seminars at Boston College. Boston College is a private Catholic university whose students are generally (although certainly not always) from middle to upper middle class backgrounds. Aside from the general student population breakdown as designated by the university itself, however, I do not have specific demographic information about the particular students who wrote the papers included in this study. Indeed, whatever assumptions I may have made regarding the class and economic status of these students, I have inferred entirely from the writers' papers themselves.

Of the seven students whose papers I study in this project, all of them were eighteen years old at the time they were enrolled in first-year writing classes. One student is an Asian American female, one is a Hispanic female, three are white females, and two are white males. While I certainly address issues of ethnicity, race and gender in this study, I do so only generally and in relation to representations of grief and grief perspectives, and not necessarily in specific reference to the students' papers themselves.

In discussing grief and the often traumatic loss-events students experience, I include a paper written by a male student who witnessed, as an eight-year-old in Illinois, a shooting incident in his school. In relation to this, I briefly discuss the Columbine High School shooting that took place in 1999 in Littleton, Colorado, and my own niece's reaction to that particular shooting. I think it is important to note, however, and in a respectful manner that should by no means erase or dismiss the pain of the Columbine High tragedy as both victims and survivors experienced it, that gun violence has been commonplace for
many years in other than white middle-class neighborhoods and schools, and that the grief students from these neighborhoods and schools experience is almost always ignored by the largely white main-stream media. Since I have worked almost entirely with my own students’ papers, however, I did not have access to (nor did I seek out) writing from students in other neighborhoods and schools.

The one paper that was not written by my one of my own students was given to me by a good friend and colleague. Written by “Angie,” (I have used pseudonyms for all the student writers represented in this project), a student in my friend’s first year English class, this paper “spoke” to me on a very deep and personal level. The story of a girl’s vexed relationship with her alcoholic grandfather, the essay was also my story, a reflection of my life with my own alcoholic “significant other.” Indeed, an important component of this study is the weaving of my own stories of loss into those of my students. I do this to show the ways in which student experiences and the experiences of their teachers exist not separately, but contingently. I call this kind of enmeshing of experiences “entanglement,” a term that implies not so much entrapment as the tight and often unconscious entwining of seemingly separate narratives and experiences. Throughout my study, I suggest that our responses to student grief narratives are underscored by the personal effects of our own losses, and that it is only through the acknowledging of these effects, by striving to bring them into conscious life and light, that we may respond more fully, effectively, and humanely to student writing, that we may learn how to teach not only responsively, but also relationally.

I also use a variety of texts from a variety of disciplines to help me not only understand my students’ papers, but also to appreciate the complexity of loss and grief as they affect both our personal and academic lives—how these two lives, when underscored by loss, cannot be separate. Among these texts are essays and books by composition theorists, psychologists, sociologists, journalists, and trauma theorists. At times I also incorporate anecdotal evidence and observations, pieces of discussions I hear at conferences, for example, or stories of losses told to me by colleagues and other teachers. Finally, I refer
widely to novels, essays and poems whose subject matter addresses grief. In the depths of my own grief, I have found sustenance and comfort in these kinds of texts.

When I discuss my own grief, I refer most particularly to the loss of my significant other of fifteen years, Paul Neeman. This study is a direct result of his death. After he died, I found it difficult to compartmentalize and keep my grieving life separate from my academic life. Thus, I chose a project that allowed the merging of the two. In many ways I feel that I had no choice, as grief and loss were already becoming a part of my daily teaching life. Consequently, this study, while rooted in student narratives, also explores the consequences of our own bleeding, the seepage of our own personal effects into the classes we teach. The more I wrote about my own losses in relation to my students, I recalled other losses—the deaths of my father and mother—and decided to weave them into my text as well.

Because it is characterized by "feeling-facts" rather than abstract facts, my project is a qualitative study. It makes no pretense at quantitative sorting and analysis of ideas. Indeed, it calls to question ways of knowing and being in the academy that remain solely rooted in abstract facts and methodologies. By its very nature, it calls to question how we know, act, and learn in relation to our students, our work, our peers, and the academy itself. It challenges the separation of personal from academic life, and those elements of academic culture that prohibit humane and compassionate interaction not only between teachers and their students, but also teachers and their peers.

Most of all, this study aims to reveal and honor the richness of first-year student narratives and the complex positions and perspectives of their authors. It challenges those who dismiss grief narratives to read them with an eye towards complexity rather than deficiency. To this end, it shows how the various strategies and discourses students use in narrating grief are rooted in a variety of contexts—cultural, historical, and literary.

Except for the occasional exchange with a student in conference, I did not interview or talk to students about their work. Rather I read their texts through the lenses of my own
experience, and in "consultation" with the theorists and writers whose work I read. Thus, since I do not necessarily know what my students intended when they wrote their papers, I can only infer the meanings of their texts.

My decision not to interview students or discuss their texts with them in length was a conscious methodological choice on my part. I chose this approach for two reasons. First—while I am intensely interested in what students think before, during, and after they write—my study aims to uncover the many layers of entanglement and response we, as teachers, experience as we read student papers away from our students and often in the isolated contexts of home or office. Second, I also regard the student papers I study as literature itself, equal in status to other kinds of grief literature—essays, poems, novels, memoirs, and short stories—those literary texts scholars study not with an eye for authorial intention, but rather with a focus on language and meaning. With this latter declaration, I do not claim that students who write about grief do so with the conscious level of experience and craft of professional and/or canonical writers, nor that composition classes should function in the same way as literature classes. I am arguing instead that student papers about grief reveal a level of complexity that renders them as challenging and interesting as certain literary texts.

In reading student papers this way, I risk projecting (and probably do project) my own experiences, values, and perspectives onto the writing I study. Therefore, I have tried throughout to consciously address this kind of projection. Such projection, I believe, constitutes the (un)conscious performance of my own entanglement with student grief that I describe above. Aware of this kind of entanglement, I work throughout the study to position myself and my experiences in relation to my students, their critics, and the philosophies and experiences of other writers and theorists.

Chapter One, The Grieving Life: (De)Composing Communities in the Writing Classroom," lays out the theoretical framework of the project. It begins with my own narrative of grief and moves on to explore the complications of revealing grief in an academic context,
discussing the personal and political implications of doing so. It also summarizes debates about personal writing in the academic classroom, and then answers in detail critics of personal writing and of grief writing in particular.

Chapter Two, "Loss Embodied, Loss In Theory," performs what the title suggests. It does so, first, by bringing into sharp relief my own grief experiences in relation to a student's. In this chapter, I use Angie's narrative about her grandfather's alcoholism and death to show the interrelatedness of my own experiences with students'. Thus, the chapter embodies grief and loss by weaving together the stories of two alcoholics, my significant other, Paul, and the student's grandfather. In doing so, it explores the complicated grief that occurs as the result of their deaths. This imbrication of my experiences with the student's aims to show the conscious and unconscious entanglement of grief in writing classrooms. The chapter also theorizes grief and its complicated treatment, manifestation, and reception in academic contexts as a whole. It purposely embeds the summary of theories within the contexts of embodied grief as my student and I narrate it. The chapter goes on to challenge the notion that theory is divorced from living, and advocates the use of theory to enrich our understanding of embodied grief.

Chapter Three, "A Testimony of Conversations," studies in depth the grief narrative of Janet, a student in my first year writing class. Her narrative deals with the death of her grandfather. The chapter shows the complexities of the narrative, even as such narratives are often viewed by critics as simplistic. It also sets up Janet's essay as the first part of a dialogue in grief, one that continues with Erika's paper, a paper which I study extensively in Chapter IV. The chapter argues that narratives of grief in composition classrooms are often part of a larger dialogue among students, and that often these narratives are written as kinds of responses to one another.

Chapter Four, "Danger and Hope: Dialogues in Grief," shows how Erika, the author of the paper that is the focus of this chapter, changes her topic and revises her essay in response to Janet's. The chapter explores the relationship between this kind of responsive...
"conversation" in writing classrooms and elegies written by some nineteenth century women, elegies that invited reciprocation and response rather than definitive closure. The chapter also explores the issue of complicated mourning as it is manifested in Erika's paper, and shows the complex ways in which Erika's paper negotiates distance between death itself and the way the student represents death in her writing. The chapter argues that such negotiation is essential to not just writing, but also to grieving and healing. It suggests that engaging and encouraging dialogues of grief in the composition classroom, while risky, also engender hope.

Chapter Five, "Mother Loss Imagined and the Placement of First Year Students," uses Patricia Sullivan's study of student representations of parents to discuss papers about mother loss. While the essays I examined in previous chapters dealt with the death of male figures, this chapter studies not the "real" death of mothers, but rather the students' conscious or unconscious fears of mother loss. The four student papers that I study in this chapter bring the mother figure and fear of her abandonment to the forefront, even as they sometimes deny that figure and also the anxieties that surround it. The chapter suggests that the writing of figurative mother loss is no coincidence, but rather symbolic of the actual positions of students in the first-year writing classroom, standing as they do on the cusp between family and home, mother and the academy. It suggests that we think of student "placement" not so much in terms of the testing and slotting of students into various levels of writing courses, but rather as a way of defining students' emotional and psychological positions, and of recognizing the separation and loss such placement involves. Finally, the chapter suggests ways of opening up rhetorical spaces in our classrooms for relational and responsive narrations of loss.
CHAPTER I.

THE GRIEVING LIFE: (DE)COMPOSING COMMUNITIES
IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

Personal Effects

There is a beach near Portsmouth, New Hampshire that I refer to as my office-by-the
sea. When spring arrives at the end of a long academic term, I descend from my unventilated
quarters on the top floor of the English Department building, and drive to this spot to read
student papers. One warm morning recently, as I parked my car and ruffled through my
stack of essays, I thought I saw my deceased partner in the figure of a man walking lei­
surely out to the end of the wharf, legs slightly bowed, his curly black hair disturbed by a
scuttling wind. He wore the blue shorts and plaid, short-sleeved shirt that the nurses had
sheared open and removed on the operating table in the emergency room, and that I later
carried to the car with me in a plastic bag tagged with his name. “His personal effects,” the
nurse manager had said to me as he handed them over.

Effects. Meaning results, something that arises from a determined and fixed cause;
visibility and certainty, tangibility and remains; that which is physically left over, residual;
referring to traces, the blood-soaked signifier of the body abandoned, of the intellect and
spirit dissipated, of the wound itself and the memory that wounds. Perpetually linked to the
person, the personal. Paradoxically and superficially, it is also a clean term implying a
clean wound, like “collateral damage,” a phrase spoken most often in news reports about the
NATO bombing of Kosovo, and meaning the death and destruction that results from a
calculated, misplaced (another irony; another oxymoron) missile. A thoroughly cleansed
term, “personal effects” points to, but stands opposite, “personal affects,” calling attention
to sterility by both erasing and embracing emotion, evoking and denying the body and the person.

Just weeks after my partner's death in the summer of 1997, I confided to a good friend about a recent onslaught of coincidences that had rendered Paul extraordinarily present in what seemed the most ordinary of terms. I told her about the man with the thick dark hair on the bus who wore a shirt identical to his. I described the pickup truck behind me on the highway after the memorial service, with the letters P-A-U-L (a towing service? a mechanic?) stenciled across the hood. I told her about the scent of his newly-washed hair at night when my window was open and the wind carried a chorus of crickets and summer into my room. "He wants me to remember him," I concluded. "Maybe it's not about you remembering him," she replied, "maybe it's about him remembering you."

I both liked and feared this idea. I approved of, on the one hand, the image of grief as dialectical, reciprocal, a wire of communication between the living and the dead. In its inclination to reside in living bodies and situations, grief in this sense seemed public, transactional, and even amicable. On the other hand, such a notion of death and memory violently reversed dominant cultural paradigms of bereavement, making recall the property of the departed rather than the living. Because it conjured images of a supernatural mindfulness, this concept had chilling implications: that living memory was out-of-control, while "dead memory" prevailed.

It is true, though. I have no control over memory, living or dead, conscious or unconscious. I have no control over its painful embodiment, the manifestation of Paul's "personal effects." Memory, and the emptiness and sadness that accompany it, inevitably seep into the classrooms where I teach and learn. "Memories cannot," as Paula Salvio writes, "be fully contained by consciousness; rather they slip beneath the surface of conscious life and register in our dreams, a smell, the sound of a voice, a phantom touch" (Salvio:13). An image in a student's essay, an expression on a colleague's face, a word from someone passing in the hallway — at any given time any of these may evoke
Paul's essence and the trauma I associate with it. "A classroom," Salvio asserts, "is often assumed to hide, in its darkest recesses and forgotten margins all the horrors that are felt in the wake of death and illness, fears and phobias. What is at stake when these emotions return with intensity to haunt the imaginations of those who have struggled to render spaces to protect their health and happiness" (Salvio 2:15)?

I am no stranger to this question, nor to the hauntings of past experiences, the eruptions of memory and the distress of uneasy forgetting. A woman who began her schooling as a nontraditional undergraduate over a decade ago, some twenty years older than most of my peers, I have lived the bulk of my academic career, and the five years preceding it, in Paul's company. I have shared his strength and received his support when he was manifestly healthy, and I have lived with the horrifying vicissitudes of his disease when he was not. I am, in short, accustomed to both the disruption of my psychic, emotional, and intellectual space, and the concealment of that disruption within the sanctioned deadlines and discourses of the classroom, the symbols and rituals of scholarship that serve to simultaneously erase the effects of trauma and to "efface the affective body" (Salvio 1:7).

In the second semester of my doctorate program in 1994, I was teaching first-year composition and attending my own classes, when Paul — a long-time recovered alcoholic — succumbed so violently to his addiction that the man I had known for fifteen years as whole (whole-some) literally de-composed, fragmented, before my very eyes. Spending hours in the hospital (and, later, a nursing home), I witnessed the symptoms and effects of his disease: the bleeding, the bloating, the discolored skin, the hair textured like straw, and the trembling hands gesturing emptily towards no one. Interspersed with these visits — or, rather, superimposed onto the bodily fragments themselves — were my academic deadlines, my participation in classroom discussions, my required attention to scholarly theories, and the grading of students' papers.

Situated at the intersection of the body and its disembodiment, I was also in a crisis of association and dis-association. By absenting myself from the University on weekends
and "off-hours," I was able to witness and testify to the body in distress. As an associate of the University itself, however, I felt paradoxically compelled to dis-associate, to contain the body (his/ mine) in silence. Speaking or writing that body, I knew, invited an even more acute disassociation, one related to the disenfranchised grief I was experiencing and the cultural impulse to dismiss the alcoholic's body and to deny his pain. In my long relationship with my alcoholic partner, in fact, I had learned only too well the limits set on disease in our larger culture, the types of illnesses designated as worthy of compassion and those judged merely contemptible; those granted the space for articulation, and those "not deemed grievable by our culture" (Salvio 1:25).

Three years ago, just weeks after Paul died, I confided to my class that I was in the midst of a personal crisis, that a "relative" of mine had recently passed away. After class, a young man, whom I had considered surly and even resistant, gently separated the two assignments my students had turned in that day into neat piles on my desk, while I talked with a cluster of his classmates. When the student had finished sorting, he paused briefly at my side and told me how sorry he was to hear about my relative. At our next conference he brought me a personal narrative about his mother's death, and while we discussed the paper, we also shared the commonplaces of grief: "I'm sorry you had to go through that;" "Words can't describe...;" "It must have been terrible...."

This story is not so remarkable, except that it functions for me as a kind of layered metaphor, one that is useful to deploy here in relation to grief, literacy, and the academy in which students (and I) write. On the most simple level, the student resists in this scenario the stereotype of the so-called slacker generation, commonly imaged as self-absorbed and unempathetic. Caring as his gesture may be, however, the student also functions as a transgressive element in the college classroom and the academy as a whole. That is, by relinquishing one sphere for another — the academic for the personal, the spectator for the participant, the silent ground of grief for the common ground of articulation — he consciously crosses the boundary from the traditionally sanctioned discourses of the academy.
to his own (and my) articulated experience.

By virtue of his position as a first-year college student, moreover, he manifests the "always already" condition of loss that characterizes and constitutes the very core and being of most (not all) college-bound students. Positioned on the threshold between childhood and adulthood, family and faculty, the student's loss of mother, while ineluctably "real," also engages the interminable, incomprehensible, and inconsolable condition of what it means to be human. Occupying a kind of limbo, in other words, the student reenacts, in some figurative sense at least, the primal drama of separation and loss, and thus functions in, and as, a site of cultural and psychological trauma.

By the same token, as a doctoral student, a new teacher, and a woman in the academy, I too occupy a liminal space, one that is underscored explicitly not only by the profession I have entered, but also by the position of that profession within the academy and the English department with which it is associated. As a compositionist, the kind of work I do consists largely of the education of first year students in writing courses. Usually required of all entering students, the programs in which I teach these students, by virtue of their status as entrance courses into Literature and their answerability to their departments and the University as a whole, are required to become the harsh mediators between home and school, mother and "culture," delivering students over to the Law and the Word despite the body of women who predominantly teach these courses.

As Susan Miller asserts, "the composition teacher consciously and unconsciously initiates students into the culture's discourse on language...[and] students, institutions, and the public...expect even the most inexperienced composition teacher to criticize and 'correct' them in settings entirely removed from the academy" (138-39). In their seemingly naturalized propensity to "correct," in other words, writing programs and their teachers are seen as logical enforcers of language-as-law, doorways onto masculinized "culture," liminal structures that replicate in character what Lynn Worsham calls "the primal estrangement." Furthermore, their large constituency of first-year students who come to the institu-
tion from home, leaving the "mother" language for the official discourses of the university, enhances their image as enforcers of academic Language and Law.

What I share with my students, then, is a kind of delineating sphere between not only origin and departure, but also between departure and arrival — the vehicle of composition itself as a way into, or arrival at, proper academic sites of discourse. Because of my position as a first year writing teacher, moreover, I dwell — even more permanently than my students themselves — within the "always already" realm of loss, standing on the threshold between pre-writing and "real" writing, the personal effects of the student's home life, and the concealment (the after-effects) of that life in academic culture. This relationship with the first year student is considerably complicated by the role I play as enforcer of the word and law, and by my impulse to resist or minimize that role — to, in effect, honor my experiences and those of my students even as I tend to the discourses of the academy.

My intent in sharing my own experiences of loss here, and my obvious linking of these experiences with my students' and their writing, is not only to recognize "the ways in which our lives are contingent rather than identical or radically different from one another" (Salvio 2:7); but also to take up the question of memory, forgetting, and the role of the personal in the classroom, in pedagogy, and in the university as a whole. With this intent, I bring to this project and the classroom it represents (the space in which I am classified and embodied as both student and teacher), the personal effects of memory, the unspoken traumas rooted in our bodies, and the manifestations of those bodies through personal experience — the traces and signifiers, in other words, that haunt the imagination and the curricula we espouse.

To be haunted, of course, means to be tracked down and plagued, spooked, unsettled, embodied, disembodied, and re-embodied in relation to the one who is gone and/or the sphere of traumatic experience; it means to return again and again to the haunt itself, the loss or death that is the site and basis for the haunting. Haunt as site, then, is always revisited and revised, resituated and re-seen. Calling for perpetual return, the haunt moti-
vates and demands rites of revisititation, the unconscious and repetitive activities of circling and spiraling back, the recursive itinerary of mourning and memory. Such a notion of haunting is not much different from the activity of writing itself. Evoking the uncanny, both the haunt and its embodiment in writing dwell in the intersection of the familiar with the unfamiliar, the merging of surprise with recognition, "the uneasy coexistence," as Ronald Schleifer says, "between depth and surface, the mysterious and the ordinary, the sense and non-sense of life and death" (231).

This notion of haunting, one that imagines loss not only as process and site, but also as a space of recursive mourning and re-cognition, became acutely apparent to me, when — after a short and very private hiatus following Paul’s death — I re-entered the classroom and the textual spaces of my students’ narratives and lives. To any teacher of first year composition, it is no surprise that a writing curriculum like mine, one which invites personal writing (along with, or as a component of, academic writing), yields a number of essays about deaths and traumatic experiences, including not only papers focused on the loss of family members and friends, but also narratives that — although not overtly referring to death — nevertheless signify through tone, word choice and syntax a kind of melancholia, or what Julia Kristeva might call abjection.

Abjection in this sense "constitutes," as Lynn Worsham writes, "the pedagogic situation that sets in motion the primordial estrangement which haunts the future subject" (Worsham 131). This notion of abjection points directly and repeatedly to the Freudian model of Oedipal violence and separation, in which the human subject (always masculine in Freud’s original model, but extended throughout my discussion to include the feminine as well) disengages himself by means of a violent struggle from the maternal and aligns himself within the sphere of the Father. This latter term also recalls the Lacanian notion of the human subject wrenched from the maternal body and his/her induction into the realm of the Symbolic, or language itself. In both cases, the abject subject, haunted by loss, repeatedly revisits the site of separation — the haunt itself — through his/her unconscious words.
and acts.

I use these terms in this chapter and elsewhere not necessarily to encapsulate my experience and those of my students in strictly psychoanalytic terms, but rather to enact throughout my discussion the model of separation and estrangement that I believe under­scores the multiple and complicated levels of loss and grief that comprise both student narratives and my responses to them. Abjection as seepage, in fact — a kind of sluggish yet volatile stream moving beneath the surface of words, texts, and classroom interactions— has the potential to set into motion for teachers a kind of crisis, one that brings to the forefront of reading and writing not just the incessant and recursive reconstruction of loss, but also the personal traces of our own grief, or the “primordial estrangement that haunts” our lives and work.

During the summer semester in which Paul died, for instance, I experienced uncanny feelings of estrangement and recognition, the notion of being both wrenched from and unavoidably returned to the site of mourning, the haunt itself. I was teaching a first-year writing class, and as student grief narratives made their way across my desk and into my home, I found myself revisiting old haunts even as (because) I graded and assessed these papers. In the process of evaluating them, I discovered that what had previously struck me as mundane and clichéd now seemed moving and powerful. Conversely, what had once appeared to me as powerful and “deep” now seemed impotent and superficial. Once detached from my students’ losses and lives, I now found myself saddened by, angered by, and sometimes even resistant to, not so much my students’ renditions of loss as my subjection to those renditions, my forced return to melancholic spaces and memories, my recognition of and reconnoitering with these sites and images through the often formu­laic or sentimental images my students used. As I sat in my small studio apartment late at night, poring over essays that elegized, eulogized, and memorialized, I was at once transfixed and restless, simultaneously sympathetic and dismissive. I was, in short, headed towards a pedagogical crisis.
In her essay, “Education and Crisis,” Shoshana Felman, describing a literature course constructed around the testimonies of Holocaust victims, talks about the responsibility to, and difficulty of, teaching literature and language in the AIDS, post-Holocaust, and post-Vietnam era. According to Felman, the kinds of crises that can occur in a classroom through confronting, witnessing, and writing about loss and trauma are transformative opportunities, and a natural function of teaching that does more than simply transmit “a passive knowledge” (53). In this context, Felman writes:

I would venture to propose, today, that teaching in itself, teaching as such takes place precisely only through a crisis: if teaching does not hit upon some sort of crisis, if it does not encounter either the vulnerability or the explosiveness of a (explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps not truly taught: it has perhaps passed on some facts, passed on some information and some documents, with which the students or the audience — the recipients — can for instance do what people during the occurrence of the Holocaust precisely did with information that kept coming forth but that no one could recognize, and that no one could therefore truly learn, read, or put to use. (53)

Not for an instant would I equate my experiences as a Catholic-raised, American-born, white middle-class woman, nor the experiences of a good many of my largely white (upper) middle-class Christian students, with the experiences of Holocaust victims, or other victims of racial and ethnic hatred and persecution. I would, instead, like to call attention to Felman’s notion of crisis and re-cognition, signaling as it does processes of re-thinking, re-vising, and revisiting.

Throughout her work, in fact, Felman speaks about pedagogic crisis in the same terms as I sensed my own crisis when returning to the classroom; she sees it, in other words, as not so much a breaking down as a revisitation, a traversing of old ground rather than a process that simply ends in paralysis or disintegration. Compelled to reconnoiter again and again with the strange-familiar landscape of loss, the teacher and class in crisis are forced not only to reconceptualize their own losses, but also to reorient themselves — often radically and violently — in relation to the losses of others and the language that attempts to describe those losses.

17
Needless to say, this crisis of (re)orientation — engaging as it does the moment of primordial estrangement, the return to the death-land, and the revision of personal and pedagogical relationships — can be threatening and treacherous. The evocation of the teacher’s losses through the texts and behaviors of her students, not to mention their own revisitation of “lost ground,” creates a threshold of temporary yet shaky stasis, on which teachers and students linger suspended between kinship and alienation: a dialogic community with the potential for transformation on the one hand, or, on the other, a fragmented and silenced community on the edge of breakdown and dispersal. They can, in other words, go either way, achieving coherence and understanding through the project of listening and articulating, or — misunderstanding, resisting, or dismissing the significance of crisis — function only in dis-connection.

For Felman, the pedagogical crisis, like psychoanalysis itself, depends on the dialogic activities of witnessing and testifying. In this sense, good teaching invites crisis. Indeed, as Felman declares, “[t]here is, a parallel between this kind of teaching (and its reliance on the testimonial process) and psychoanalysis and its reliance on the psychoanalytic process....Both this kind of teaching and psychoanalysis are interested not merely in new information, but, primarily,” Felman concludes, “in the capacity of their recipients to transform themselves in function of the newness of that information” (53). Most importantly, this transformation occurs through not just listening, but also articulating and writing.

It was this need to articulate and make sense of my loss, to both witness it and testify to it — through writing and teaching — that finally propelled me into my study of student grief narratives. In the process of coming to terms with loss, I was forced to acknowledge the complicated terrain on which I was embarking — both in terms of my life and work, and how death-loss in general was treated and contextualized in the academy and especially within the field of composition. From a personal standpoint, I hesitated talking with colleagues about my grief and my recognition of mourning and abjection in student papers. I
feared that, in doing so, I would be perceived as having been, as the director of the Counseling services at the University where I now teach says, "pulled out of role." What he means by this is the inappropriate intrusion of teacher into the personal lives of her students, and vice versa; being pulled out of role also implies a consciousness of what constitutes academic roles, thus suggesting conscious control over knowing, acting, and being.

I have no doubt whatsoever that this director, a competent and compassionate psychiatrist, also understands the unconscious leveling of boundaries and diminishing of control inherent in both mourning and teaching, especially when the latter is so intrinsically linked with student words and texts. Indeed, his strict distinguishing of roles in the pedagogical sense can be seen here as a kind of caution against — or a warning to be aware of — unconscious grief, the kind of grief that drives the subject of loss (both the teacher who mourns; and mourning itself as subject) out of the private into the public sphere, from personal grief to an acting out of loss in the classroom.

It goes without saying, perhaps, that such a warning is quite rightly bound up in the concern of most teachers, administrators and mental health workers for the student. Professionals who work with students fear, in other words, the kind of damage students may incur as a result of a teacher who not only encroaches on the student's space, but also superimposes and projects onto student consciousness and texts what might be his or her own vexed consciousness. This dread of the collapse between the emotional lives of students and teachers, and the inappropriate conflation of the personal with the academic, underscores, I believe, the criticisms not only of personal writing in composition classrooms, but also and especially writing that is emotionally disclosing and explicit, particularly as it concerns death, grief, trauma, and loss. Rooted, ostensibly at least, in concern for the well-being of both students and teachers, as well as in the legitimate preoccupation with the proper role of writing and writing teachers in the academy, these kinds of concerns need to be taken seriously.

"Crisis," for example, especially as Felman uses the word in connection with "pedagogy," carries negative connotations for some teachers. Whereas Felman sees a pedagogical
crisis as a requirement of good teaching, a difficult yet transformative moment in the life of a class, crisis for others may evoke images of breakdowns and miscommunication, something to be avoided rather than courted. When, for example, I use the term “crisis” to talk with colleagues about the intersection of grief with my teaching life and my students’ texts, the responses I receive are decidedly mixed, ranging from mild concern to serious consternation. Knowing that I have recently experienced a crisis of loss, and that I want, as a result, to take on the project of studying student grief narratives, many of my colleagues have expressed concern for my emotional and mental well-being. While a few of them have confronted me directly with their fears, others have discussed the issue away from me over coffee in cafes and living rooms. I become aware of their worries only through hearsay and certain hints: facial expressions and body language rather than confrontational words whenever I broach the subject of student grief narratives and the writing (riting) of grief.

Such covert kinds of responses, I believe, reveal the discomfort many of us feel when confronting grief and loss, whether our own or someone else’s. The words and mode of address, and even the recipient of address, are difficult to locate in these cases. Very few of us, in other words, have not ourselves experienced serious losses: deaths of family members or friends, or even psychic or physical wounding and trauma. The ways we may respond to a colleague who has had these experiences, then, are imbricated and implicated in our own cultural, familial, and personal attitudes towards loss and grief display, as well as in our unconscious incorporations of loss experiences — the taking into ourselves the lost bodies and beings of those whom we have loved.

When gauging personal, academic and critical reaction to student grief narratives, then, I have found it not just helpful, but also necessary, to take into consideration the complex motives behind these responses. Critics’ arguments against grief disclosure, for example, while sometimes too quickly dismissive of students and their lives — cannot necessarily be positioned adversarially and in stark contrast to arguments in favor of personal writing. On the contrary, such arguments should, I believe, be acknowledged for the com-
plexities they bring to the issues at stake in the debate, and the way they enrich not just
discussions about the personal narrative, but about personal writing itself. What critics
bring to the discussion, in other words, are their own personal effects, the personal and
psychic traces of their own losses and haunts. This is not at all to say that such critics are
mere dupes who are dumbly unaware of the psychic and emotional significance of their
words, and whose arguments, cloaked in scholarly rhetoric, are nothing more than naive
and transparent testimonies to their own losses. Rather, it is to say that their very arguments
and the often adamant stances they take against personal disclosure attest to the power and
volatility of loss, and the dangers of visiting “lost ground” — not to mention the subterra­
nean nature of such ground.

**Effecting the Political: Emotion and the Body Politic**

Lost ground and the land mines that characterize it are not only emotional and psy­
chological; they are also political. Critics of what I call deep disclosure, those who claim
for themselves — and champion in student texts — pure objectivity, may be, as many
compositionists have pointed out, merely revealing their own political situatedness as aca­
demics bound to institutional cultures, and thus covering over with their resistance to so­
called subjective writing their own subjectivities. Other critics of emotional writing, how­
ever, not only position themselves very visibly within the academy, but also locate them­
selves politically — and *subjectively* — in relation to the dominant culture, revealing as
they do so their very specific cultural, familial, and personal backgrounds. These critics
bring to the critique of emotional disclosure in the classroom an examination of power
relationships located in the academy and writing pedagogy itself.

Thomas Helscher, for example, discusses the ways in which the impulse to bend the
conventions and forms of academic writing to incorporate personal disclosure in composition
classrooms might actually reinforce rather than subvert racist, hegemonic discourses and
positions. “If genres constitute subjects,” he writes, “specifically the professional subject of
the academy, what do African American and other marginal professionals risk by turning

21

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genre on its head? Or what does white hegemony gain by doing so in the name of disrupting academic conventions?” (29). Likewise, Lisa Delpit, who decries the dichotomizing debate between process and so-called skills oriented theorists, cautions writing teachers who are “advocates of any progressive movement, to enter into dialogue with teachers of color, who may not share their enthusiasm about so-called new, liberal, or progressive ideas” (23). While she does not denounce the notion of emotional disclosure per se, she reminds us that “[if] you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier” (24). Do not, in other words, hand all students of all backgrounds and cultures a processing pedagogy that favors deep disclosure when it is riskier for the student who has not had the cultural grounding in the discourses and conventions of power (e.g. academic discourse) to disclose and subvert academic rules than for those who have already internalized and naturalized those rules.

In this sense, both Helscher and Delpit echo and reinforce the arguments of David Bartholomae and other proponents of academic discourse in the composition classroom. It is well known among composition scholars, for example, that Bartholomae advocates a writing pedagogy that requires students to “extend themselves...into the commonplaces, set phrases, rituals and gestures, habits of mind, tricks of persuasion, obligatory conclusions and necessary connections” that are the characteristics of academic writing and knowing (120). “Student writing,” Bartholomae asserts, “is situated in a heavily populated textual space in an institution where power is unequally distributed” (122). It is this caution against the undergirding of invisible but omnipresent power relationships that repeats itself not only in Helscher, Delpit’s and Bartholomae’s arguments, but also in the arguments of feminist scholars who write about the dangers of deep disclosure and emotion in the classroom.

Lynn Worsham, for example, while denouncing a “radical pedagogy [that] organizes and limits the vocabulary of emotion” and “teaches an inability to adequately apprehend and name [our] affective lives,” nevertheless warns that uncritical feminist approaches that embrace a “nurturing” pedagogy as a way to recover affective space, grounded as they
are in the primal mother/child bond and the threat of separation, are approaches to pedagogy based on coercion and threat. In this context, Worsham writes, “pedagogies, such as maternal nurturing, can themselves mask violence,” because such pedagogies “threaten withdrawal of affection” (125), imbuing the teacher with a powerfully dominant and even frightening presence in her classroom.

But it is not only concern for students that informs Worsham’s arguments; it is also her concern for female teachers. Like Madeleine Grumet, Worsham calls attention to the political and gendered dimensions of traditional writing pedagogy, the masking of those elements in an increasingly feminized profession and the appearance of nurturing that often accompanies it. Here Worsham, like Grumet, uncovers the underlying ideological agenda that informs traditional pedagogy. While Grumet asserts, for example, that “the paternal project of curriculum is to claim the child,” and the “maternal project... is to relinquish” her/him to “the language, the rules, the games, and the names of the fathers”(21), Worsham extends Grumet’s argument to explain how the violent relinquishing of the child is obscured by nurturing pedagogy. “The ideology of nurturance,” she writes, “is a key example of the mystificatory violence of pedagogic work.... The structure of unequal exchange disempowers women at the same time that it teaches women to think that their moral and epistemic power consists in their greater capacity for love and nurturance” (130). Real radical change in pedagogy and curriculum, on the other hand, would, Worsham concludes, undermine “the social conditions of psychic matriarchy” set up when women mother (127).

All of these arguments point directly to the complication of emotional disclosure in the classroom and its relationship to, and construction by, ideology, politics, and power. Few critics would deny, for instance that women are implicated differently from men in deeply emotional texts and the ways they are expected to respond to them. These differences are made even more pronounced by factors such as race and age. A young, black woman who invites and responds to disclosures of grief in an all-white classroom undertakes a very different kind of project from that of her older, white male colleague, who very
likely will not face the possibility of racist and sexist resistance. In the same context, a graduate student who must respond to traumatic texts and renditions of loss finds herself on more tenuous ground than her composition director, an established and tenured faculty member whose position of power allows her/him more authority in the negotiation of emotionally weighted texts.

Since, as Worsham suggests, “emotion is socially produced and organized,” linked as it often is to “negatively valued categories, pedagogy deploys emotion to secure the ideological subordination of women and minorities” (127).

Making clear the problematic positioning of teachers whose gender, age, and/or race inform or undermine pedagogical authority, Michelle Payne echoes Grumet and Worsham when she describes the resistance of male students to expressivist writing courses taught by female teachers. Speaking from her personal experiences as a young doctoral student, Payne, while never disavowing her commitment to expressivist and personal writing, nevertheless explains her ambivalence about enacting such an agenda in her own writing classroom. Male students, in particular, she implies, are likely to view process writing and the discourses of disclosure as nonacademic, nonrigorous, and nonauthoritative. In addition, she claims, the process of “nurturance” that accompanies such teaching may reinforce — as Worsham points out — women’s traditional and familial positions as self-sacrificing mother figures whose power is limited in the language/Symbolic world. To this extent, Payne writes of her own experiences:

Having been my brothers’ caretaker from the time I was ten, I was nurturing, responsible, and adept in creating nonthreatening environments. I had been responsible for everyone’s feelings and fearful of their anger and displeasure, so I became a chameleon, trying to prevent ‘unpleasant’ situations by understanding everyone’s point of view and reading everyone’s mind. The last thing I wanted to do was to put myself in a position of responsibility that carried overt power and authority. (“Rend[er]ing” 106)

In discussing her own role as caretaker in her family, as a kind of maternal figure in relation...
to "her men," Payne refers to the often inextricable linking of women with so-called nonau-thoratative and nonacademic issues of affect, the historical, stereotypical (now debunked but tenacious) coupling of emotional excess with women's hysteria, and women's traditional roles as family caretakers—and, by default— their roles as tenders of the dead and dying. Here and elsewhere in her work, while Payne clearly advocates personal writing in the composition classroom, she nevertheless presents and examines with respect and skill the difficult questions critics raise about such writing.

While pointing in general to the complex nature of expressivism and emotional disclosure, these critiques, as Payne summarizes them, underscore, I believe, the very particular and complicated character of grief-writing and grief response. Locating their impetus in social practice as well as in abstract theories, such debates concern themselves with the political webs that comprise and constrain emotions, texts, teachers, and students. Preoccupied with both pedagogy and practice, they point to the actual lives and persons of students and teachers— their affective and physical, as well as their intellectual and political presences in the classroom. Doing so, these critical perspectives signify the dilemma of emotionally embodied prose and response, the contradictions of writing that— simultaneously close to, and dis-closed from, the body (from the living and the dead)— not only resists dis-embodiment, but speaks to the tangible risks of embodiment itself.

Such risks, critics of grief disclosure argue, plague any (and all) classrooms where unequal distribution of power prevails, especially when and where the teacher functions as the privileged recipient of personal disclosures while refraining from disclosure him or herself. Even when teachers assume a more reciprocal and democratic stance in relation to their students (responding to disclosure with disclosure), the teacher's role as grader, disciplinarian, and institutional representative, critics argue, invariably skews the economy of "confession" and disclosure, so that students who disclose emotional content (and context) risk not just censure but also invasion of private and personal space. First year students who are eager to please the teacher and "make the grade," in other words, are not adequately
savvy about institutional coercion and structures, do not have the wherewithal or institutional capital to resist demands for disclosure, and are unaware of the consequences of such disclosure. Female students in classes with male teachers, moreover, and/or students of color in predominantly white classes, may be particularly disadvantaged when teachers request disclosure.

As Payne summarizes such arguments, she writes, "Students and their essays on these subjects are characterized as threatening to the order and purpose of academic values as well as weak and in need of both discipline and protection. Ultimately," Payne says, "the teacher's power is [seen by critics of personal writing as] being preserved in this discourse on emotion, the student is being disciplined into her subordinate power position, and the larger structures of power in our culture are reinscribed" (Bodily 3). Tom Newkirk joins Payne with his own synopsis of these arguments: "Recently," Newkirk asserts, "critics of the personal essay have objected that students' privacy is invaded when they are expected to disclose," and that such writing "forces us to assume a role of therapist"(19), a role for which we are not, these critics argue, prepared and that also imbues the teacher with a dangerous power.

I bring these arguments and issues to the forefront of my study because I want to lay the groundwork here for a nonbinary, multi-layered examination of grief and grief narration in student writing and writing pedagogy. By attending to these arguments, I hope that, later, as I delineate my own stance in favor of student grief narration, I may lend depth to the issues rather than set up and perpetuate already existing and often simplistic oppositions. My point here, is to complicate rather than to pontificate, to respond thoughtfully to critics of disclosure and emotion in student writing, and to acknowledge the complex issues they point to. While I remain committed to the value of grief-disclosure in the classroom, I will incorporate into my analysis the vexing issues these critics raise.
Grounds for Compassion and Grounds of Loss: Nuancing the Territory

As a white woman implicated in the inscription of whiteness, and the privileges that accompany it, onto the institutional and academic spaces in which I teach, I find it difficult and perhaps arrogant to respond to arguments forwarded by educators of color when talking about the problems of genre-bending and personal disclosure, and the resistance white educators have shown when (not) responding to the concerns of critics and students of color. Nevertheless, as I feel (as would, no doubt, these critics themselves) that individuals cannot speak entirely for groups, I’d like respectfully to posit next to these critics’ arguments differing perspectives about the role of emotional disclosure in writing courses, some of which already inform these critics’ own arguments. In this way, I hope to avoid what Newkirk, as a part of his panel presentation at the 2000 CCCC, calls the essentialism to which we subscribe when we uncritically accept arguments that people of nondominant cultures are not oriented or acquiescent to personal disclosure. As bell hooks points out, in fact, “[i]f experience is already invoked in the classroom as a way of knowing that co-exists in a nonhierarchical way with other ways of knowing, then it lessens the possibility that it can be used to silence” (84). And while Lisa Delpit, as I have shown, cautions strongly against the misuse of “liberal” expressivist pedagogies, she also advocates for thoughtful and empathetic pedagogical strategies, reminding us that “the actual practice of good teachers of all colors typically incorporates a range of pedagogical orientations” (24). Such strategies may encourage, among other modes of expression, personal and emotional disclosure.

I do not wish to negate entirely the assertions some of these critics have made about the dangers of unexamined emotional disclosure and so-called nonacademic genres; I am aware, as Elizabeth Spelman observes, that deeply rooted racist assumptions inform the discrepancy between the way white people regard grief and grief experienced by people of color. A good example of this is the media attention directed towards the Columbine High School shootings, as opposed to the lack of attention given to the violence that occurs in poverty stricken schools and neighborhoods where the population might consist mainly of
nonwhites. These assumptions define, as Spelman says, "whose suffering comes to be regarded as tragic and whose does not" (6).

I am also sensitive to the complicated issue of compassion when it comes to judging grief, and the fine line between compassion that consoles and compassion that discriminates, ignores or condescends. To this latter end, Spelman writes:

Our lives are littered with judgments about suffering: Whether someone is suffering, how much someone hurts, how much attention her suffering should get, how much attention one can give without suffering too much oneself, whose suffering should get attention first, whose suffering might be good for them, whose suffering isn't as bad as they think, who deserves to suffer, who doesn’t. (2)

What Spelman seems to delineate here is an economy of grief and compassion, one that allows and allots to individuals degrees of emotion and response. These judgments about suffering are based in ideologies and assumptions about race, gender and class. Linked to these assumptions, the quality and intensity of compassion towards, and judgment of, victims of loss depend to a great extent on which cultural category the victim falls into.

The issues at stake in the negotiation of compassion, then, are always weighted by ideological attitudes, and such attitudes, as Spelman and others suggest, may just as often foster a condescending pity and mastering voyeurism as an authentic connection to another's pain. Deborah McDowell, for example, analyzes the ways print and television media treat the street-violence deaths of black youths, and points to the proliferation of images of grieving mothers and even the corpses of the young black victims themselves. While in the nineteenth century post-mortem photographs were once the property of homes and private spaces, nowadays, McDowell observes, "post-mortems [of deceased black young men] have migrated from the walls of the family parlor and the pages of photo albums to the front pages of newspapers and mass-circulation magazines" (156). With this observation, McDowell alerts us to the ways in which these images make white viewers "feel good" about themselves. Because these images elicit sympathy, in other words, the white viewer feels that he or she, just by gazing upon and acknowledging them, is not only doing some-
thing for the black families who grieve, but also addressing the problem of racism and poverty associated with these violent deaths. Such feel-right attitudes, Spelman says, make objects rather than agents of the victims and their families.

Rendering victims passive in this fashion means the empowerment of the white middle and upper class viewer rather than of the black urban families towards whom the images supposedly gesture. Indeed, the repetition of such images creates for the white viewer a kind of fatalistic attitude towards the death of black youth, especially young black males. Such deaths, McDowell claims, become both naturalized and denaturalized in these images — naturalized in the sense that viewers expect them to happen to this particular group of people, and denaturalized in that these images of dead youth challenge the white viewer's conceptions of a "normal" life span. Consequently, as McDowell concludes, "these images can be and are easily left behind, the force and weight of their repetition producing, at best, 'helpless outrage,' at worst, the awful sense that the only thing that can be done in the face of this wanton loss of life and wasted youth is to save the life that is your own" (171)

It is in this context that loss and death are appropriated and projected — not onto the victims of loss — but rather onto the viewer him or herself. Once in the public realm, in other words, private experiences are subject to violent interpretation, co-option, and distortion, as readers/listeners/viewers — consuming rather than witnessing, incorporating rather than attending (to) — essentially replace the victim's story with their own. Thus, "feeling for others in their suffering," as Spelman argues, "can simply be a way of asserting authority over them to the extent that such feeling leaves no room for them to have a view about what their suffering means, or what the most appropriate response to it is" (70). Appropriating rather than appropriate, such responses construct grief and loss not only along a continuum of power relationships, but also within the context of ideological and material positions — that is, the economic, political, and racial conditions and circumstances of both the viewer and the imaged subject.
I use this notion of visual imagery not to suggest that these post-mortem photographs and student essays are virtually the same, but rather to show the ways media culture and its representations are emblematic of broader ideological positions and assumptions, ones that govern the way teachers and students both interpret experiences of loss. In the sense that both the images McDowell describes, and the responses of teachers that I describe later in this chapter, both speak to acts of appropriation, they intersect along political and cultural lines. Thus the dynamics of the viewer and imaged are replicated — to some significant degree at least — in the relationship between teacher, student, and the student’s essay, particularly when teachers appropriate or diminish the losses students suffer.

When teachers are not sufficiently aware of the basis of their own responses to loss narration, for example — that is, when they have not addressed the continuing and explosive impact of loss on both their private and teaching lives — they have difficulty separating (or perhaps consciously connecting) their personal experience from (to) those of their students. During staff meeting discussions of difficult student essays, for example, it has become clear to me that while many teachers exhibit self-awareness in the ways they wrestle with the disclosure of their own experiences in relation to their students, some teachers obliterate student experiences altogether when they use student narrations of loss to talk overwhelmingly about their own. When this happens, I am reminded of first-year students who, when asked to write responses to literature dealing with topics of death and grief, respond with narrations of personal loss without referring once to the texts they have read and the experiences of the characters or narrators of those texts.

Let me interject here that I do not believe that teachers who appropriate student losses act out of malevolent and selfish motivations, nor that they consciously plot to co-opt another’s loss. Rather, their responses are further indication of what I wish to argue throughout this project — and that is that our relationship to student narrations of loss, and loss itself, need constantly be contextualized — psychoanalytically as well as politically, ideologically, and personally. I also want to add that, in referring to McDowell, Spelman and other
scholars here, I am very much aware that these scholars discuss degrees of suffering to which few students whose loss narrations I have read could possibly relate. Spelman’s and McDowell’s analyses of grief, loss, and suffering, for example, arise from contexts of racism and political persecution, and not from the life-contexts of many of my white middle or upper class students who usually write about their first experiences with mortality: grandparents’ deaths, parents’ cancers, fatal car accidents, and deaths of pets. To not acknowledge this would be to do the same kind of appropriating of experience against which these critics warn.

At the same time, I wish to extract from these critics’ theories not the wholesale contexts in which they are rooted, but rather their ways of conceptualizing loss while refusing to reduce, contain, or dichotomize its role in our lives. Given the political and cultural situatedness of grief, these scholars are right to seek the ideological bases for disclosing and responding to classroom narrations of grief and loss. Indeed, all of these scholars, while assuming different stances towards personal and emotional disclosure, would most certainly welcome, as do I, an analysis of discourse relationships and classroom power dynamics that speaks to the inequities inherent in these structures. That being said, however, while these perspectives should govern the ways in which we evaluate and invite deep disclosure in composition assignments, and while they should also make us think seriously about the implications of such disclosure, they cannot negate in and of themselves the emotions and consequences of student grief and our interpretation of grief experiences. Nor should they foreclose entirely on the possibility of compassion. Rather they should complicate discussions about loss, compassion, and the pedagogical implications of loss narrations.

**Grief Goes to School: Intellectualizing Loss and the Use of Loss in Intellectual Spaces**

That such discussions are indeed complicated is particularly evident in the manner in which these same scholars marshal forth deeply textured and non-binary positions when examining emotional narration in academic contexts. As I have noted above, for example, Delpit does not argue for the elimination of personal disclosure in the classroom; rather she
denounces white educators who think they know what's best for all youth, even when many black students, parents and scholars tell them differently. Thomas Helscher as well, although he cautions against the outright dismantling of all generic boundaries, does not — like David Bartholomae and others of the social constructivist camp — privilege academic over so-called expressivist discourses. And bell hooks in particular resists dichotomized models of personal narration versus academic discourse when she encourages not only the incorporation of personal disclosure in the classroom, but also its positioning alongside other "ways of knowing."

Lynn Worsham too, while she stands against the kind of nurturing pedagogy that puts female teachers at risk and that also reinforces traditional pedagogic structures, has at the heart of her argument the notion of "educating emotion." "Primary pedagogic work," Worsham writes, "mystifies emotions as a personal and private matter and conceals the fact that emotions are prevailing forms of social life, that personal life always takes shape in social and cultural terms" (127). "My specific concern," Worsham asserts, "is that the new commitment to pedagogy may redeploy key distinctions that mystify the work of decolonization — in particular, the distinctions between public and private and between reason and emotion" (123). Indeed, what Worsham does here is to question the trend of analyses that, in opening up to view the political and social constructions of pedagogies and pedagogical histories, actually reinscribe the dualities that feminism and other political movements have worked so hard to undo, particularly the binary oppositions between the personal and the public, between emotion and reason. Thus, while Worsham acknowledges the "liberal" intent inherent in these analyses, the push towards politicizing institutional structures and examining the ideological platforms on which they stand, she also notes that such analyses, in coopting particular strategies that appear rooted in feminist ideologies (the nurturing classroom, for example), actually obscure inequities and reinscribe and perpetuate what she calls pedagogic violence.

Despite her stress on violence, however, Worsham not only foregrounds emotion, but also
validates its presence and use in the classroom. Like Payne, moreover, she collapses the boundaries between affect and reason, calling for an analysis of pedagogy that contextualizes emotion politically, socially and academically. Most important, perhaps, she calls for the "education of emotion," implying both a curriculum and pedagogy that not only encompass emotion, but also call attention to the position and development of emotion, both in individual and institutional contexts.

In the same context, Payne writes:

When critics link personal writing...with emotion, expressivist pedagogies, and liberal humanist ideology, they may point out how beliefs about emotion supports unified and individuated selves, but they seem implicitly to reinforce the belief that emotions are outside culture, untouched by ideology, not subject to critical reflection, and able to render people vulnerable. When it comes to emotion, social construction theories seem not to apply. (Bodily, 11)

Here Payne goes to the heart of the "problem" of emotion in academic contexts: emotion, say those who would eliminate it in student writing, operates outside of intellectual contexts, is solely of the body, and therefore cannot be subject to analysis. As my reading of student papers will show, however, narrations of loss and the emotions attached to them, characterized as they are by their multiple functions and discourses as well as their dialogic nature, are replete with opportunities not just for enrichment of writing but also for analysis. By remapping this area of scholarship, I hope to extend the idea of "emotional education" to the function of grief in academic contexts and particularly in student narratives, and also to explore how education itself is bound up in emotion. While contextualizing grief in terms of its political, social and familial relationships, I wish also to reveal its positioning in the ruptured spaces between violence and nurturance (as Worsham describes it, for example), and between ignorance (ignoring; willfully not knowing) and attending (being attentive and listening deeply to; being present for). Residing within the boundaries between discourses, on the line that separates so-called academic from personal writing, grief-centered emotion is rooted in, between, and throughout both "sides," destabilizing binaries and thus lending
complication and instability to arguments both for and against its inclusion in academic contexts. In short, writing from the affect (the language of grief) is also writing from the intellect; such writing resides and moves along a trajectory of analysis and feeling. Functioning liminally and transitionally, linking rather than separating body and academy, experiential yet tangible, grief lends itself to, arises from, and shapes historical, political, and cultural contexts.

A recent news story on CNN, for example, highlights the ways in which grief is imbricated in, rather than distilled from, these contexts. This broadcast focused on the 30th anniversary of the Kent State University shootings, during which several students were killed by National Guardsmen. The show featured Gerry Lewis, a professor of sociology at the University who had been a young, newly hired faculty member at the time of the protests. A witness to the shootings, Lewis talked about his compulsive revisitation, a kind of repetitive pilgrimage to both the memory of the deaths and the actual physical sites where they occurred. As he discussed the deaths the viewer sensed a reopening and revisioning of Lewis’s grief, as his voice broke and tears interrupted his analysis. Here we saw the continuous filtering of loss from the personal site of the wound to its academic context, particularly as it manifested itself in the course Lewis currently teaches about the protests, the shootings, and the war itself. “Professor Lewis,” one of his students observed, “is emotionally connected to his course.”

Being emotionally connected via loss and grief to intellectual work, navigating a transitional space originating in trauma and ending in language, Sherry Graden, like Lewis, also links affect to intellect. While the story she tells is one of sexual abuse as well as the complications of death and loss, the grief she experiences becomes for her the place of revisitation and breakdown (breakthrough). “Before I could begin the difficult task of negotiating the androcentric domain of academic discourse and argument,” Graden says, “I first had to come to voice by reconstructing myself — in part by writing through the pain, the silence, the anger, and the fear” (141). Graden’s personal reconstruction occurred in a so-
called expressivist writing classroom where personal experience and the narration of emotion were not denounced as nonacademic. Rather, since such disclosures were represented as appropriate to the academy and intellectual work, they functioned for Graden as a connection to other kinds of academic writing.

While Graden’s example seems to situate the writing of emotion on the lowest rung of the discourse ladder, a place that — because of its proximity to the body and the affect — precedes rather than informs or is coterminous with academic discourse, in reality, hers is a prime example of how emotion motivates and shapes all kinds of writing, academic and otherwise. It also shows the close link of the affect to cognitive development and language use, the body and memory at work with the intellect. In this fashion, disclosure uncovers a wound and opens a vein not just into memory and experience, but also into writing itself, as personal experience flows from one discourse to the next, from the discomposure of the body and affect to the composing processes of the writing classroom and of the individual students who comprise it.

It is this link between, rather than the separation of, affect and intellect that interests me. As with Lewis and Graden, for me too the tough issues of emotional disclosure remain close to home yet close to my teaching, close to my body yet also close to my intellectual work. They underline not only this project, but the project of living, and having lived, during the (writing) course of loss and grief.

Composure and Discomposure: The Composition of Emotion

During Paul’s prolonged illness, I knew that my colleagues and teaching superiors would (and did) respond with sympathy and understanding to any disclosures I might share with them; they would (and did) accommodate me in any way possible as far as attending my classes and teaching were concerned. Nevertheless, in some deep physical and emotional sense, I felt disconnected from my academic surroundings. The more pervasive this feeling, the more tightly and mutely I held onto impending loss and the details of anticipatory grief. Revealing these details, I believed, would jeopardize not only my momentum...

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and place in my graduate program, but also the way my professors and colleagues regarded me. On some deeper level, too, I intuited a fundamental split between affective and intellectual issues — not simply, or even solely, in the academy — but also, and especially, in my teaching and my own scholarly writing. Broaching emotional disclosure threatened for me a severe transgression of academic boundaries, not to mention a fragmentation of my sense of an academic self, a disintegration of identity that could only, I believed, result in intellectual paralysis.

Somewhat paradoxically, however, I also sensed at this time that my teaching space, the composition classroom itself, was a haven for me, a busy and vibrant territory away from hospitals, deteriorating bodies, and the odors of sickrooms. It was as a teacher in the classroom, in fact, that I felt protected from the persistent pressure of crisis and the personal effects attendant upon it. Part of this was due to the work involved in the course itself. That semester I had undertaken a special team teaching project with a colleague, organizing with her a writing course based on a sustained semester-long critique of television and related media. While occupied in developing the course, I felt a sense of purpose and community, an important feeling of being situated well outside of the caretaking spaces I was used to occupying.

But beyond this, the oasis effect of this particular composition classroom—detached and almost tranquilizing—arose largely, I believe, from the content of the curriculum, the kinds of discussions we facilitated, and our students’ writing. Ironically for me, while I was experiencing a sort of violent rupture between my personal and academic life, and while I yearned for a space in which the two might intersect, the class I had helped construct had little room in it for personal narration, neither on my part nor our students’. On the contrary, while our students analyzed newscasts, sports discourse, advertisements, sitcoms, and dramas, they wrote largely from so-called objective positions. While a small number incorporated personal experiences into their analyses, most wrote and observed along and across the surface of personal experience, writing instead essays that critiqued, evaluated, or ar-
gued. Most of their genre choices, I knew, arose from the theme of the class and from within the constraints of that theme.

Despite these constraints, we and our students were, by and large, content with the course, at least in the beginning. They, for example, thought it a novelty that television shows were their primary texts; for our part, we found it a novelty—especially in our expressivist based writing program—not to be overwhelmed with personal essays. In some unconscious sense, I think, I was even grateful that I didn’t have to deal with such texts, since most of my energy at that time was consumed in the sublimation of my own personal concerns. Eventually, though, we began to get restless. One by one, as our students trickled into our offices for conferences, they asked if they might have a reprieve from the visual-based material and the analysis-directed papers that had comprised the course thus far; they complained that they didn’t have anything more to write about. They wanted, they said, to write about subjects that interested them and topics that mattered to them. They felt stuck in writing about the "same old things." Besides, they argued, they knew of students in other first year writing classes who got to write about "personal stuff."

It was at this time that my colleague and I realized that we had reached a kind of impasse with our students. While we tried to help them find ways to incorporate personal experience into their essays, they perceived the cultural studies focus of the course as limiting what they could include. As the impasse grew greater, a certain passivity, even resistance, set in among our students. I noticed this one Monday morning when, detached and numb, I sat in a corner desk while my colleague tried to facilitate a discussion. I had just returned that weekend from a hospital visit to Paul, one characterized by vials and tubes and the incessant comings and goings of doctors and nurses with bad news. "The prognosis is not good," they had announced. As I watched our students, their faces set in stony resistance, their bodies slumped in their chairs, their arms folded, their pens idle on top of their desks, I repeated those words to myself: "The prognosis is not good."

That week, nearly three-fourths through the semester, we permitted our students to
write at least one essay on a topic and in a genre of their choice. Not all students chose to
write personal narratives. Most, however, did. The subject matter of these pieces ranged
widely. Even those papers about sports experiences, however, had a melancholy tone to
them, as students wrote about injuries that had put an end to their sports aspirations, had
somehow permanently marred their bodies, or had scarred their youths. And, of course,
there were those papers — several of them — about a grandparent’s death, the suicide of a
friend, a parent’s struggle with cancer, and the loss of a childhood friend in a car accident.

My response to this sudden onslaught of personal disclosure was mixed. It’s not as
though I had never had these sorts of papers before in my writing classes. I had, in fact,
always invited, and advocated for, personal writing in my composition courses. While I had
certainly not limited my students to such essays, and while I had never coerced anyone to
write deeply disclosing papers, I had nevertheless assigned the personal narrative as one of
several writing assignments each semester. Consequently, I had had my share of confer­
ences about illness, deaths, and trauma. Until this particular class, and these particular
papers, however, I had never consciously confronted my students’ losses concurrently with
my own. Before this class, the issues at stake — that is, the debates about the ethics and
discomfitsures of disclosure—had been little more to me than remote questions, intellectual
grist for the compositionists’ mill. Now, however, I had run head-on into a pedagogical
危机 characterized by discomposure.

I use the term discomposure here (and throughout my study) in its primary sense, as
it refers to discomfiture and a sense of being unsettled. I also rely here on its relationship to
“composition” and the multiple meanings suggested by the words “compose,” and “de­
compose.” In one sense, then, I use the word to simultaneously indicate and stand opposite
the act of composing, the process of pulling oneself together at the moment of grief. In
another sense, I want the word to point directly to the act of writing — that is, composition
in the face of loss, or the process of composing grief. Finally, I also intend the word to
signify meanings in relation to death and dying, denoting not just the discomposure of the
grief-stricken, but also the discomposure and decomposition of physical bodies and the bodies of writing that refer to them.

Later in my work, for example, I will look at the discomposure and decomposition that occurs in student narratives about deaths of family members and friends, the disintegration and discomfort of "self" and "selves" that occur in those narratives, and the fragmenting and merging (or morphing, as my students say) of those selves with others, and sometimes even with the departed figures themselves. For now, though, I want to think about discomposure not just in relation to students’ writing but also in relation to the ways and reasons we as teachers receive or reject loss-narration. What happens, in other words, when we do so? What do we contain and what do we release? What, in short, are the consequences of our responses?

During the semester of Paul’s illness (and my trying to come to terms with its terminal nature), I was made uncomfortably aware of my own (non) responses only when I experienced both a crisis and a kind of breakdown; failing to admit my students' losses, I also had not admitted my own. Although my intentions were good and my planning impeccable (the better to dissuade me from looking loss in the face), I recall now only a feeling of disembodiment and a detachment from grief and emotion that kept me separated from the pulsebeat of the classroom. I don’t mean that my students learned nothing; nor that the highly analytical papers they wrote were not useful. But these essays lacked at that time a certain embodiment and a particular consciousness. So did I. Indeed, in order to finally "wake into consciousness" (Caruth 23), I had to be pushed not so much to the edge as to the boundaries, to those territorial points, in other words, where repression and memory meet and the body and intellect merge — a point of both de-compressure and de-composure.

For me, then, discomposure means a confrontation between my personal and academic life; it means the discomfort I sense at the traces of seepage between my own life and my students’ lives, and vice versa. Most of all, it means revisitation and recovery — not just a return to the site of haunting (or—as Salvio puts it — the “ghost-effects” of loss), nor
simply a recovery of memory — but rather a revival of myself as both teacher and person, and the incorporation of my person (my subjectivity) into my pedagogy. At the same time it requires the recognition of my students' subjectivity and a willingness to allow them agency in matters of body and emotion. In essence, it means uneasy transformation, a slippage of personal effects in and out of both my academic and personal lives: not breaking down, but breaking through.

Collapsing (from) Grief: The Body and the Breakdown

In his 1999 keynote address to the University of New Hampshire Writing Conference, Richard Miller, referring to what he sees as an unhealthy increase in published memoirs, decried the emphasis in these narratives on “every bodily fluid,” or, as I would assert, the seepage of personal effects into the text and the classroom. Calling for “embodied writing” that critiques institutions, Miller, who, in his essay, “The Nervous System,” overtly resists the binaries that commonly categorize student writing, nevertheless reconstructed in his talk the familiar duality between personal narration (calling it “mundane”) and academic critique (which he labeled “intellectual”), advocating the inclusion of the personal in student texts only inasmuch as such writing is embodied in more traditional academic forms.

Embedded in Miller’s critique are not only the binaries between academic and personal writing — that is, the hierarchical positioning of academic critique over personal disclosure — but also a denunciation of popular memoir, which Miller seems to indicate is more pronounced and prolific than ever. There is in his words “bodily fluids,” in fact, the hint of excess personal narration, not to mention narration that is situated too close to the body, that literally and figuratively flows through and from the body. Here Miller’s denunciation of every bodily fluid lends an aura of messiness to personal disclosure, the image of substances that cannot be contained. The point is, Miller suggests, that excessive disclosure in the popular public realm seeps into the academic sphere, influencing (flowing into) the composition classroom and the texts that come out of that classroom.

The idea that student texts and the integrity of academic critique are threatened by
influences of popular culture is not a new one. What seems different here, however, is the direct linkage of popular disclosure with personal narration in the academy. Miller is not alone in this view; there is, in fact, a kind of unquestioned consensus among particular compositionists about the cause and effect relationship between “confessional” narratives in the popular arena and those generated by students. In these constructions of so-called confessional narration in classrooms, popular culture is invariably depicted as the point of origin for disclosure, and disclosure itself is portrayed as a popular, media-driven trend. Such an adherence to a cause and effect model of disclosure — the positioning, that is, of disclosure as a direct consequence of mainstream media — obscures recent movements within the academy springing from and fueled by feminist critiques of objective, empirical concepts of learning, and acknowledging instead the epistemic value of personal experience. Indeed, the popular-culture-equals-student-disclosure equation forwarded by some critics of personal narration erases any mediating ground between mainstream media and the kinds of texts students write.

In decrying the influx of deeply emotional writing and personal disclosure in her creative writing class, for example, Lucia Perillo, in an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education, associates the increase in personal disclosure in student texts with talk show culture and other forums of popular confessional discourse. “Far from being isolated incidents,” Perillo writes, “these narratives of what Louise Gluck has called ‘dark Truth’ have become typical fodder in many classrooms” (A56). Likewise, Dan Morgan, reflecting on why students choose to write such narratives, declares, “[T]hese students’ topics and concerns, and their life experiences and points of view, reflect what has been occurring in our society at large....And writing about profoundly personal issues comes easily to our students because we live in a pervasive culture of public self-disclosure, as talk shows, tabloids, daily newspapers, books, and movies will attest. In our popular culture,” Morgan asserts, “private issues are no longer private, and public disclosure seems to have become a means toward personal validation” (324; emphasis Morgan’s). Similarly, Marlowe Miller,
in an essay entitled “Death Gets a B,” assesses the difficulties of grading loss narration, and also fingers popular culture as the motivating force behind these kinds of essays: “Increasingly,” Miller writes, “we live in a world that encourages personal disclosure. We see it on television talk shows and in the popularity of memoirs and autobiographies. We also see it in the classroom, where our students echo behaviors in the world around them by sharing their personal experiences, either vocally or in writing” (98).

These critics of personal disclosure obviously seek thoughtful ways to respond to emotionally explicit narratives. And they are correct, I think, to recognize a link between popular media and the discourses students use. Nevertheless, it is clear from their positioning of media and popular culture as vehicles of disclosure — not to mention as the actual reason for student disclosure — that they also experience, as I did in my own class, a kind of discomfiture, a decomposition at the point of collapse between academic and popular culture. The clearly implied assumption here, in other words, is that the “trend” towards disclosure, and disclosure in and of itself — anchored as it is in popular discourse — is undesirable; such a view also renders academic culture monolithic (solid and stable) and popular media transient (trendy). What is at stake in the tension between writing that discloses and writing that does not are the very boundaries that separate academic and popular texts. Here, then, we can see the academic’s concern for the infiltration (the seepage, if you will) of popular media discourses into our students’ (and our) lives and language.

It would, however, be too simplistic to dismiss these arguments as simple angst over boundary collapse and the bad influences of media and other kinds of mainstream culture on student writing and behaviors. The obvious concern in these critiques, in fact, is not just about the role of disclosure in the classroom and in “society,” but also about our own negotiation of the ground between the personal and the public, our own discomfiture at the instance of disclosure itself. Discomfiture in this sense might mean not only the discomposure teachers feel at the moment of emotional disclosure, but also the de-composition of the kinds of academic writing we have traditionally expected of our students. Both of these
meanings — poised along the boundaries that separate composure from discomposure — are situated between the process of pulling together (composing) and being composed, and the process of coming apart or de-composing. What is at stake here, in other words, is the opposition between writing itself and its content, between the surface features of what often is assumed to be good writing (well-composed writing) and the ragged features of emotional content.

This question of boundary negotiation and the oppositions between the surface and depth of a piece (writing as product vs. writing as process and content) is of paramount concern to critics of loss narration. To many of these critics, the emotional content of a piece obscures the features of writing, those features, that is, that are more easily accessible to evaluation. These may include organization, sentence coherence, paragraph structure, subject/verb construction and other syntactical and grammatical features. While no writing teacher would see these features as entirely divorced from content, when emotional disclosure is involved, the critical approaches to so-called emotional writing often exacerbate the perceived opposition between not just writing and content, but also content and syntax, and content and grammar—oppositions that critics rarely, it is worth pointing out, apply to other topics and genres of writing.

Perillo, for example, asserts that — although her students write about such topics as "rapes, their abortions, and, in one case, a baby sister's brutal murder" — her own "assumption... is that we are gathered to work on the [writing] only; working on the psychic turmoil must be handled elsewhere, since my expertise pertains only to my students' writing, and not to their lives" (A56). Likewise, Marlowe Miller—struggling with what she sees as the collapse of boundaries between writing and content—asks: "How can you find a respectful way to keep [our students'] focus on the writing, when they want to share their troubles" (101)? Echoing Perillo and Miller, a colleague of mine, in response to a writing staff e-mail in which I solicited responses to loss-narrations, replied: "It is incredibly difficult to grade these papers, because comments about substance can seem cruel and comments about gram-
mar can seem trite—either way, the instructor gets frustrated and the student gets hurt.” In all of these cases, the content of emotion, the content of the paper itself, are conceived of as different and necessarily separate from actual writing. With these binaries firmly in place, emptied of its emotional and human dimensions, writing is rendered strangely flat.

Despite the appearance of emotional flattening, however, loss narration in writing classrooms is bound up in emotion of all kinds and on all levels, not only at the level of disclosure itself, but also at the level of grading and evaluation. The implication of many critics, in fact, is that such writing and its evaluation, as my colleague suggests, inevitably results in “hurt,” while other writing and grading do not. This notion of a painful and emotional transaction between writing and content, not to mention between teacher and student, manifests itself most prominently in the image of the student breakdown — that is, the discomposure and decomposure evidenced both in text and in “reality,” and always as a direct result of emotionally explicit writing. In a session on personal writing at the 1999 CCCC, for example, Elizabeth Flynn told the story of a student who, having written about personal loss, ended up, “as a result,” dropping Flynn’s class and withdrawing from the University as a whole. In similar fashion, Dan Morgan, disturbed by the representation of loss by one of his students, warns us of the potential consequences of soliciting personal disclosure in our classrooms: “As it turned out,” Morgan claims, “the process of writing this paper contributed to sending the student over the edge to a nervous breakdown and hospitalization” (324).

These kinds of warnings, rooted in the dangers of personal disclosure, while often — as in Flynn’s and Morgan’s case — based on actual incidents, nevertheless function as lore, urban legends, if you will, that circulate among writing teachers at both school and conferences. “I heard of one teacher,” a recent conference participant said, “whose student completely broke down after writing about her mother’s death.” This kind of admonishment against emotionally explicit disclosure, particularly as it arises from student narrations of loss, sometimes seems prescripted — a part of a repertoire of response, predetermined and
rehearsed, and brought forth during any debate about personal writing. Indeed, like urban
legends themselves, such stories may or may not have their basis in fact; also like urban
legends, while certain elements of the stories are altered to suit particular contexts, the basic
elements always remain the same. These binding elements are: a student enrolled in a
writing class writes a "disturbing" emotional disclosure, usually about a traumatic loss; the
teacher struggles with a way to "deal" with the student's loss and also to grade the essay;
shortly after, and as a result of writing the paper, the student experiences a breakdown. The
student withdraws from school, and — because the story ends abruptly here — presumably
from life.

The hearsay dimension of these stories signals not just the loaded and problematic
positioning of personal narratives in academic contexts, but also the complicated and emo­
tionally fraught relationships we ourselves have with grief, loss and death itself — both our
students' and our own. Indeed, the repetition of details in the stories themselves, and the
passing along of these stories from teacher to teacher, function, like oral history and myths,
not only to instruct and warn, but also to posit certain cultural and moral codes reflective of
widespread societal attitudes towards death and the demonstration or concealment of grief.
Positioned as they are, then, between composure and discomposure, composition and de­
composition, stories of student breakdowns signal fragmentation, disintegration, and mort­
tality. They also assume preconceived stances towards loss and its representation in the
composition classroom, reinforcing and reconfiguring the boundaries that exclude (overtly
at least) emotion from learning and teaching, and reconstituting the binary positions that
govern both affect and intellect in the academy.

I do not mean to suggest here that a student’s emotional breakdown is not serious or
cannot be coterminous with, or even culminated in, the writing of loss. Nor do I wish to
imply that such narration cannot be a catalyst for emotional crisis. To do so would be to
negate the validity of teachers’ and students’ experiences, as well as to dismiss the power
and consequences of writing itself. Nevertheless, I think it is important here to note that
these stories have at their core certain unquestioned assumptions. The first is centered around the notion of the breakdown itself—that is, that students who experience acute emotional crisis are rendered immobile, dumb, and hopeless, not so much by the experience of loss as its evocation through writing. It is a fixed theme in all breakdown stories, in fact, that, after the climactic, *traumatic* moment of disclosure, writing and learning cease. In this sense, both the disclosure and the breakdown that follows *forecloses* on either the possibility of the future or recovery. The script here, in other words, always includes the student’s withdrawal from the classroom, a scenario which not just obscures hope, but also invests withdrawal from the classroom with enormous tragic implications.

The second assumption, tightly bound up with the first, is that the breakdown itself is not just an *avoidable* evil, but also that it *is* an evil. What I mean by this is not that a breakdown can in anyway be nondisruptive or benign, nor that the breakdown story itself implies demonic influences in personal writing, but rather that the recurring themes of the story suggest that acute psychic and emotional turmoil of any kind — especially the kind that motivates academic withdrawal — is necessarily a bad thing. The idea here, in other words, is that a student who, having experienced loss and/or trauma, and having had to confront through writing the implications not simply of the loss itself, but also of its inarticulation (that is, the consequences of having repressed and silenced it), and who must, as a result, interrupt his/her formal education to recover (from) the loss gains nothing from either the breakdown or the respite from academic work. The flip side of this assumption might be, in fact, that a student who is ultimately compelled through a crisis of painful articulation to come to terms with the personal effects of loss — even if such a crisis means hospitalization and/or withdrawal from the academy — might actually be in the throes of a *breakthrough* rather than a breakdown, one that does not end in cessation of learning, but rather strives towards the integration of emotional with intellectual experience, and whose impulse is towards incorporation and restoration rather than fragmentation.

There is at play in both these assumptions, in fact, the tell-tale signs of superstitious
cultural attitudes towards the psychologically unstable, as well as the notion that psychic
and emotional episodes of any kind are pathological and thus must be discouraged. Here
then is the basis of a third assumption — that is, that breakdowns, academic paralysis,
withdrawal from school, psychic and emotional suffering, and hospitalization as a result of
emotional duress, will not happen unless triggered by personal disclosure. In other words,
if we prohibit loss narration, if we shut off the avenues of disclosure, dam up the streams of
personal effects, we forego the possibility of breakdowns, protecting both the student and
ourselves from discomposure and decomposition. This assumption ignores the function
and nature of memory, and the consequences of discounting the role of memory in our lives
and in our writing. Furthermore, it doesn’t account for, narrate, or keep record of the num-
ber of breakdowns students experience — if not as a consequence of so-called academic
writing — then at least concurrent with it.

The tellers of these stories, in fact, and those who take these stories unquestioningly
to heart, by eliminating from the narrative the lives of students elsewhere, either in or out-
side of the academy, appear to constitute a fairly narrow view of writing classes, one that
nevertheless invests writing teachers themselves with incredible power—the power to make
or break a student. Moreover, these stories presuppose a linear and progressive model of
schooling, one that envisions students as moving forward without either interruption or
disruption along the progressive track of formal instruction, from primary to secondary to
post secondary education. Indeed, it may be that some critics of loss narration, particularly
those who locate the source and culmination of emotional crisis and discomposure solely in
their classrooms and in the personal writing of students, have themselves followed, without
much disruption, the traditional trajectory of formal learning from grade through graduate
school. Wedded to their own experiences of what education should be like and how it should
progress, some of these critics perhaps do not account for the nontraditional student who
has had, for one reason or another (including loss and grief), to interrupt her/his education,
but whose muscle for critical and intellectual work—far from atrophying—has only grown
stronger in the student's absence from school. Such an expanded vision of the role of formal schooling in students' lives, in fact, would diminish the power of a narrative that suggests that not only does the intrusion of loss and mourning (the embodied lives of students into the classroom) result in intellectual paralysis, but that a disruption of, and leave of absence from, college equates tragedy and failure.

The narrative of breakdown, then, especially as it evolves through hearsay and takes on a life of its own away from actual events and people, conveys a fatalistic and terministic view of both grief and education. It never, for instance, makes room for such important questions as: What happens to the student six months, a year, ten years after the breakdown? Does the student get support and help? Is it possible that the student may in fact, or does indeed, return to school later? And how can/does writing function in the process of restoration and recovery, composition and re-composure?

Without asking these questions, critics of loss narration do not recognize the complex entanglement of writing with learning and loss, the complicated enmeshing of composition (composing) with mourning and memory (decomposing and recomposing). Not only do they project onto the student a linear model of living and learning, they replicate this model in writing. Unable or unwilling to acknowledge the recursive nature of grief and traumatic memory, in other words, they also negate the recursive nature of writing itself, its constant cycle of, and relation to, breaking down and breaking through, razing and restoring, de-composing and composing, revisiting and revisoning.

In some sense, too, by establishing a linear and binary model of relationship between the affective and the intellectual in the writing course (loss narration and academic writing), critics who recycle the breakdown story expel both body and emotion from the classroom. The either/or nature of the story, and its culmination in crisis and fragmentation, isolates, rejects and pathologizes the personal effects of loss, thus attempting to restore a kind of intellectual purity and health to the writing classroom. The frequent references to hospitalization in these stories, in fact, refer as much to embodiment (or dis-embodiment)
as to emotion. In this sense, affect and the body are inextricably linked, as acute emotion and the disclosure (the spilling forth) of that emotion is channeled away from the academic space to the spaces of the sick. The word dis-closure itself, after all, indicating as it does revelation, also suggests an unclosing or opening up, as in the reopening of a wound, and the oozing forth of blood. What the breakdown story accomplishes in respect to these meanings of the word, then, is to foreclose on disclosure, if not by eliminating it, then re-containing and reconfiguring disclosure within the so-called limits of writing and the composition courses in which writing is performed. Thus, as Nancy Welch, drawing on the theories of Bakhtin, notes, critics of loss narration and other kinds of deep disclosure in the writing classroom reveal “a tendency toward hushing up the discursive carnival of laughter, anger, tears, and joy that might disrupt our official, moving-into-academic-high-culture narratives” (43).

That disclosure and the emotions of loss narration are projected onto the carnivalesque body that ingests and expels becomes abundantly clear in the language critics often use when talking about such writing. Some literature professors in the department where I now teach often complain about the writing program, using the vocabulary of embodiment and bodily functions when they discuss ways of discouraging students from personal disclosure. (It is interesting to note that these discussions occur even when, and perhaps particularly because, most of these professors do not teach composition courses). Such language almost always refers to notions of mothering, body parts, and bodily waste, all of which — in situating the writing close to the female body — point to the boundaries between culture and nonculture, life and death, matter and antimatter. Among terms I’ve heard these professors use when talking about this kind of writing and any empathetic response to it are: “potty training,” “weaning” (as in to wean away from “mother” language and storytelling), “coddling,” “hand holding,” “spewing forth,” and “emotional diarrhea.” While I will discuss later in this chapter how the female, and particularly the maternal body is implicated in loss narration, I will simply point out here how this kind of language con-
ceives of grief disclosure as not simply embodied, but embodied to the extreme. Such excess embodiment, especially as it is likened to spontaneous physical functions, suggests a dangerous fluidity: messy, volatile, and uncontained.

An intrinsic quality of the breakdown story, then, is the fear of noncontainment implicit in the notion critics evoke of traversing dangerous grounds, transgressing boundaries, and closing distance between student and teacher, writing and content, and the writing classroom and personal experience. When teachers debate whether or not to allow the narration of grief in the writing classroom, for example, they often map out with geographic metaphors classroom terrains and the place of loss and disclosure within those terrains. In this context, the idea of distance becomes central to the negotiation of emotional ground. Not only must teachers maintain professional distance from their students, but students themselves must strive for distance from their topics as well as from the experience of loss itself.

Several of my colleagues tell me, for example, that they do not allow their students to write about deaths of family members or friends, because, being only eighteen or nineteen years old, students don’t have the “critical distance” necessary to write about death. The keyword here, of course, is critical, as it suggests that emotional and embodied writing is separate from critical writing. It is interesting to observe, also, that this notion of critical distance rarely concerns teachers when students write about nearly any other topic. The embodied emotion of loss narration, in other words, presupposes a dangerous proximity to the event itself, and thus an inability to extract emotion from the event. This inability to extract emotion, in turn, detracts from critical, academic analysis. As one of my colleagues responded during our online discussion:

I tell [my students] right out in the personal narrative direction sheet to NOT write about the death of a loved one...I tell them it’s too big a topic, and too early in the semester to match skills to the attempt (we do narratives first, generally). I’m not saying that students can’t do a good job on these papers...[But] in my experience, [a good essay about death] has been the exception, not the rule, among 18/19 yr olds....it’s really hard to be objective and present a full picture of a loved one or a loss in four
pages. The urge seems to be to write a eulogy, rather than about a specific event, or moment.

Here the notion of distance merges with the idea of objectivity. Objectivity in this sense means, of course, the absence of subjectivity, that is, the absence of the student — his/her body and emotions — from the paper. It also refers to the subject(ivity) of death itself. Finally, it relates age with the ability to objectify. The assumption here, it seems, is that with the passage of time and with distance from the death itself, students will be able to write objectively rather than subjectively, academically rather than personally, about loss. The emphasis here, in other words, is on achieving the right amount of distance before writing, rather than conceiving of writing as a mode of both accessing lost and acquiring distance from it. This notion of critical distance, in fact, disregards the ground that students in grief should and must be encouraged to traverse, however imperfectly, in order to gain distance. Students need, in other words, not only practice in, and modeling for, traversing that ground, but also sincere attention to the writing that constructs that ground.

Thus, while my colleague acknowledges here the difficulty of writing a “good” essay about death (and I believe she does so with sensitivity and respect for students), she also specifically links good writing with skills rather than with emotional or experiential content. In doing so, she not only discounts alternative functions of writing (i.e. functions that are not necessarily “critical” or academic in nature), but she also establishes a hierarchy of narrative, allowing certain kinds and certain topics but disallowing others. In her negation of the eulogy as a proper narrative, for example, she also dismisses the complex motivations of students in writing these pieces; nor does she fully appreciate how these pieces function on multiple levels and for multiple audiences.

Among these multiple functions, for example, are what Tom Newkirk calls the student’s performance of self, “a complex cultural performance” (xii), rather than simply a naive expression of a unitary self. In this context, students construct and assert various “selves” in the first-year writing classroom, selves that are meant to represent for teacher
and classmates not just the student's interests and values, but also his or her familial relationships. The memorializing quality of loss narratives can be likened, as I will show later, to family photographs, in which family relationships, and the positions of family members in relation to one another, are firmly fixed in the photograph as well as within the scope of the reader's vision. This snapshot quality of loss narration, dependent as it is on frozen time and fixed relationships, are, as I will argue, meant to position family and family relationships (including the writer's relationship with the departed one) into a kind of monumental frame.

Situating familial relationships in this way not only identifies the student as a member of a certain family (thus constructing for the reader and student alike the student's pre-college history, a history that says: "This is who I am and this is how I want you to see me"), but also consoles the writer with the apparent permanence of those relationships. In this way, loss narratives that memorialize and eulogize function not just as manifestations of grief but also as vehicles for consolation. When read against the backdrop of a first-year college student's experiences, these snapshots make sense, as they secure for the writer familial relationships at a time when the student senses, but is perhaps not ready to accept, what is entirely true — that by his/her departure from home and entrance into college, he or she occupies a transitional space between childhood and adulthood; that this space is not the stable site of familial relationships as constructed in the verbal snapshot; and that, indeed, by entering college the student has changed forever not only the dimensions of those relationships but also his/her own position within them.

While one of the most common complaints about these kinds of narratives, then, is that they encourage solipsism rather than an extension outwards towards larger concerns and social issues, Newkirk's image of the performing self, and the snapshot moments that occur within loss narration, suggest an awareness of audience and an expectation of response from that audience. In representing oneself before teacher and classmates, for example, the student initiates a dialogue with that classroom. In this fashion, the various
construction of selves in the depiction of loss evolve in response not simply to the comments and suggestions of students and classmates about a particular piece of writing, but also to grief narratives other students write. What often happens in composition classrooms, in fact, is that when one student writes and shares such a narrative, other students follow. When this happens, while one could say with some validity that a kind of competition ensues — a contest, if you will, in which writers vie against each other to represent the most dramatic and significant moment of loss — they also set up a dialectic of grief, one that makes space in the academic community — where little space is to be had — for the sharing of loss and also the possibility of opening up conversations about its cultural, historical, and political contexts.

The dialectic of grief that evolves from the sharing of loss and loss-writing, then, motivates essays and conversations rooted not just in the writers’ ideological and cultural positions, but also in his/her awareness of context and audience. Far from being restricted to the classroom, in fact, audience awareness in this sense includes family and friendship groups as well as other institutional collectives, such as school and church, and even the media. When writing about the deaths of grandparents, for example, students I talk to in conference often inform me that they cannot, or will not, revise particular memorializing segments of their essays, as these segments were written for the benefit of the students’ mother or father — that is, the parent who was the child of the deceased grandparent. In this sense, students view their writing as not so much a reconstruction as a gift. In addition, memorializing scenes that recall with particular detail mourners huddled in sorrow and avowing to “be there” for one another (this is particularly evident in papers about deaths of classmates) take on, I believe, a media-moment quality, a kind of looked-at-ness that evokes scenes and tropes from such widely divergent media “events” as the coverage of the Columbine High School shootings, the television show, “Friends,” and the lyrics of such pop stars as Jon Bon Jovi, who avow to “be there” for friends who experience loss.

Also some students who write about grief — assessing and delivering what they
think their teachers want (perhaps, as Salvio suggests, even "incorporating and ingesting" their teachers' losses) — show a sophisticated awareness of audience as constituted by the writing programs in which their essays are constructed. The program in which I currently teach, for example, calls for a variety of writing, but also invites the personal narrative and personal disclosure. While I believe the majority of students who narrate loss (quite possibly for the first and final time in their academic careers) sincerely welcome the opportunity to do so, we can correctly assume that some students think that deep disclosure equals an "A," or at least that, because we fear "grading emotion," we as teachers may be more lenient with essays about loss than those of supposedly academic contexts and contents. Such an assumption about personal writing and its grade-ability, however, need not necessarily be cynically, nor even consciously, motivated. I believe in the majority of cases, in fact, students who hope essays about deaths will result in lenient grading are more fearful overall of college writing and send, via narrations of loss, messages (unconscious or otherwise) to their teachers that indicate they are in pain — not just from the loss event they write about, but also from the loss of home, family, and the schools in which their pre-college writing may have seemed "easier" and more successful than in college composition.

But more seriously than this, students who write about death and loss may also be dealing with episodes of trauma. In these cases, the process of writing serves not simply as therapy, but also as a way of composing both history and a future for the traumatized "self." In the third chapter, for example, I will offer a reading of a student's paper that narrates the writer's experience as a second grader whose school was besieged by a woman with a gun, and who "testifies" to the trauma of the event and also to the death of his classmates. I will show how such personal writing, with its focus on death and its engendered crossing of boundaries, threatens a kind of implosion, a collapse inward of structures of power that depend on the reinforcement of boundaries, negation of the maternal body (personal effects made visible), and what Cathy Caruth describes as the trauma of "waking into consciousness" (63), or the reincarnation of memory as the repressed symptoms of trauma. Trauma in
this sense, as Caruth writes, "is the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" (91). However, trauma is also "the experience of waking into consciousness that, peculiarly, is identified with the reliving of the trauma" (63). It is, in other words, "the necessity and impossibility of confronting death" (100).

To survive trauma in these terms requires an act of forgetting at the very instance of the wound, or the precise moment of loss. Such a forgetting effects sanity, but also plunges the victim into an act of betrayal towards the past, and towards memory itself. In my student's case, for example, as trauma is registered in the body (vis a vis the student's literal presence at the site of trauma, and the repositioning of the traumatized "self" into his essay), his survival, his actual history, occurs at the very juncture of seeing and forgetting — that is, his future and his healing depend on the suppression of both the memory and the articulation of that memory. Trauma, then, is subsequently "suffered through the psyche precisely it would seem, because it is not directly available to experience" (Caruth 61). In this context, the "seeing" of trauma, "while erasing, like an empty grammar, the reality of an event" (Caruth 29), also becomes "the necessary betrayal of sight" (30), the moment of apprehension that enables the student not only to survive traumatic loss, but also to salvage, through and from writing and rewriting, seeing and revising, his past and his future.

Such a process of (not) seeing would occur, for example, when a student, having (re)experienced loss indirectly (myopically) through the subconscious, finally "sees" loss through its written representation. Such articulation of loss, trauma theorists argue, betrays, by its indirect route of representation, the specificity of the traumatic moment itself (its actual occurrence), but also makes possible through the articulation of loss the writer's history (or at least an awareness of that history), while opening up for the writer a future outside of the cycle of repressed memory and the continual return to the haunted site.

Even if the traces of trauma are not a significant influence on either a student's life
or his/her writing, loss narration itself evokes a complicated process of re-membering that — figuratively at least — revivifies the deceased as well as the writer him/herself. Students who write these essays, for example, engage in kinds of ceremonies both for and against the dead. In this sense it could be said that the writing of loss becomes a sort of rite or even funerary ritual itself. While we cannot make assumptions regarding the familial and cultural practices that govern individual students' belief's about death, nor the funerary practices to which they may be accustomed, it would be fairly safe to assume that most students in the United States, despite their individual cultural positionings, also partake of larger cultural attitudes that repress if not deny death. This being the case, many students who narrate loss may be seeking a ritualistic format for their grief, one that pays tribute to the dead while at the same time reaffirming life, thus "speaking," as Douglas Davies says, "words against death." This language of affirmation, or what Theresa Rando calls the "reinvestment" in life (42), is aimed at both the writer and the communities (including the classroom community) to which the student belongs.

These life-affirming utterances are even more significant, as Davies notes, since "there is little [in this postmodern age] by way of extensively shared beliefs or ideologies." Thus the "wider community, in which someone once lived, is decreasingly involved with death" (32). As Rando notes, in fact, increased "secularization and deritualization" have resulted in the "trend to omit funeral or memorial services and not to view the body" (47). Furthermore, as Davies indicates, with the professionalization of death....the range of words spoken [via institutionalized rituals] has been reduced....reflecting the growing privatization of life," and the decreased likelihood that groups of people will "share words against death" (32, 38). With the growing prominence of cremation as a method of body disposal, moreover, both deceased bodies and bodies of grief themselves are "very seldom 'memorialized' in any concrete sense of inscribed markers or the like" (Davies 31). Thus, while institutional burials and funerals enable the ritualistic public exchange of words uttered for/against the dead/death, cremation and the distribution of ashes outside of institutions such
as churches and cemeteries mark a shift from “an institutional to a personal placing of the remains in a significant context, from public verbal utterances to subdued whispers or internalized thoughts” (31).

The context for language that Davies constructs here suggests that the impulse for ceremony and the affirming of life through the construction of relationships may drive students to write about grief — that is, that their desire to find words, even (and perhaps especially) clichéd tropes and phrases that not so much lend “reality” to death as invoke a kind of incantatory language against it, governs the forms and content their essays take. These essays, then, if not entirely replacing religious or funerary ritual, may at least supplement it. “[M]ortuary ritual,” as Davies remarks, “is viewed as the human adaptive response to death, with ritual language singled out as its crucial form of response. It is precisely because language is the very medium through which human beings obtain their sense of self-consciousness that it can serve so well as the basis of reaction to the awareness of death” (1; emphasis mine) Such ritualistic language, while memorializing and mourning, also “motivates ongoing life” (1), and the writing students do about life and death.

Whatever the motivation for these kinds of essays, students who write loss, commonly perceived as turning inward in a kind of narrow isolation, are more than likely turning outward to a variety of audiences and social contexts. Thus, as I will show in more detail in subsequent chapters, grief disclosure in student papers, as David Bleich might argue, “can help to bring the subjective and the collective categories of experience together; it can maintain the necessity of understanding the collective within the subjective, and the subjective within the collective” (16). Close to the person, in other words, grief narration can also be productively and critically social, because it allows students, as Kristie Fleckenstein would argue, a kind of rhetorical “immersion involv[ing] a multifaceted engagement among reader, writer..., material place, and evolving textworlds,” so that “there is no reader, no writer, no text apart from the relationships among them” (296). These relationships are already self-evident, as Davies implies, since the individual bodies of the dead,
as they are represented through writing (or anywhere else for that matter), are "symbols of marriage, kinship, friendship or fame, so that when an individual dies these very ideas are attacked or impugned in microcosm" (11). Thus, when regarding loss narrations, "the crucial question to ask," as Fleckenstein suggests, "is not 'What does this [text] mean?' but, instead, 'What is the constellation of relationships that renders this [text] meaningful" (296)?

Because of their performative and dialogical elements — their sometime ritualized language, in other words, and their demands for public and communal attention (particularly within the context of the writing group workshop) — loss narratives also admit the potential for, and necessity of, what Fleckenstein calls "emergence," or "the contextualizing of personal body within public body" (297) — that is the discursive construction of that body in relation to larger institutions and practices. Because of its movement between immersion and emergence, in other words, and also because rather than despite it's proximity to body and affect, loss narration effects and mediates distance between the personal and the academic, opening up through writing the continuum along which experiences and discourses of all sorts merge and evolve. Rather than negating academic discourse, narrations of loss, when contextualized politically historically, and socially (not to mention personally) nourish rather than deplete critical analysis, run concurrently with rather than against the work of the academy.

There Are No Words: Teaching (non)response and the Life of "Encrypted Memory"

Academic work as incorporating loss, memory, and narrations of trauma, runs — as Paula Salvio notes — against the grain of common wisdom about the function of education and particularly about the roles of educators. Despite research and literary analyses that incorporate personal narration and the relationship of personal experience to knowledge building, three assumptions, Salvio observes, remain deeply rooted in general attitudes about teaching and teachers, and that also support "the meticulous work being done by mainstream culture 1) to solidify normative notions of what it means to be a good teacher and a good student, 2) to possess emotional stability and 3) to determine which bodies and bodies
of knowledge are most worthy” (2:19). Such assumptions perpetuate myths about the sto­
lidity and emotional stability of teachers and also work to exclude emotional embodiment
from the spaces in which they teach.

Given these general assumptions about pedagogy, teachers, and the function of uni­
versities, responses to loss and its narration are often muted and repressed in particular
academic contexts. The discomfort around opening up the wounds of loss, the discompo­
sure triggered by disclosure and the pouring forth of those wounds, can manifest itself, I
believe, in either angry repudiation or uncomfortable silence. I have noticed, for example,
that many academics in staff meetings, classes, and other groups replicate the behaviors and
kinds of cautious responses we are critical of when talking about our students and their own
responses to material that causes discomfort. An instance of this is when a graduate class
comprised of teachers who complain to one another about silent and lackadaisical students
fall mute themselves in response to their professor’s promptings and questions. This same
mode of response is sometimes repeated in writing teachers’ staff meetings when a director
or colleague raises questions about sensitive topics and is met with silence and discomfort.
These kinds of responses prove the difficulties of disclosure, even when that disclosure is
framed in public discourse for an audience and within academic contexts.

What interests me about these kinds of responses is that we are often blind to them,
ever interrogating them in the same light as we do our students’ responses (or lack of). The
assumption inherent in our own silence may simply be that we have the authority and expert­
tise to withhold comment, whereas our first year students do not. I believe, however, that
this assumption goes largely unexamined and unquestioned. I believe, in fact, that our own
silence is based not merely on a sense of security, authority, and community, but also on the
same kind of discomposure some students may feel in the face of disclosure. Similarly, I
think our own resistance to certain “loaded” ideas, while delivered in academic settings as
objective and intellectual inquiry, may also be rooted in discomposure, the fear of (or re­
pressed presence of) de-composition in the classroom and in our lives.
In her study of melancholia and Anne Sexton’s teaching life, Salvio situates this discomposure, the de-composition that results in repression, silence or anger, in sites similar to what I have earlier described as haunts or locales of revisitation. This notion of haunting, or the activity of returning repetitively to sites of loss and memory, is of course a psychoanalytic concept, one that Freud uses to describe not just the consequences of repressed memories, but the functioning of loss throughout our lives and on every level of our (un)conscious. Applying the metaphor to the classroom and to the teachers who occupy it, Salvio refines and extends Freud’s notion of repetitive return and the effects of repression when she describes loss as embedded in kinds of “crypts,” never fully (re)covered. These crypts, Salvio indicates, function not as tombs that contain and isolate, but rather as secret spaces characterized by traces and seepage, or the personal effects that I have described earlier. The crypt, Salvio says,

marks the trace (or retrait) of a “ghost effect,” a site where repression or incorporation fails, even as the psychic content of the crypt never becomes fully conscious. This vault or psychic tomb harbors the phantoms we have yet to fully confront. [...The] encrypted memories we bring to our teaching lives constitute a melancholic strain within the curriculum that presents educators with a set of perplexing problems. [...The prohibition of loss and the distortion of memory registers in our students and in ourselves as a type of inarticulateness and ‘acting out.’ (5:10)

I realize that as I appropriate Salvio’s terms and apply them to the ways teachers may or may not respond to loss narration, I run the risk of simplistically portraying educators who wish to avoid such disclosures, or who find responding to them problematic, as merely ignorant or naively unaware of the depth and complexities of their own psychic lives. In this context, one might say that these teachers respond only in knee-jerk fashion to student loss and the writing that accompanies it. To make this statement, however, would be reductive at best, not to mention insulting to well-meaning educators who sincerely believe that the classroom should not provide access to, or encourage the manifestation of, emotional expression. Nevertheless, to deny that we, not simply as teachers, but also humans, not only are tremendously invested in the repression of emotional wounds, but are also
unable to access the specificity of those encrypted wounds, would be to deny the psychological significance of our responses. And while a psychoanalytic perspective is not the only way to conceptualize our responses, it at least offers a vocabulary and framework for locating them.

Here are some examples of the kinds of responses I am talking about. A doctoral student in the education department tells a story in a graduate class about the trauma and loss a former high school student of hers suffers when that student witnesses the immediate and physical aftermath (the literal corpse and its personal effects) of his brother’s suicide. The student never tells his story directly to the teacher (as what story of this kind can ever be narrated directly?); rather he writes about it in a journal entry at the end of the semester. The incident helps the teacher reframe and understand some of the student’s “acting out” in class. However, her response to the entry on the whole is unsympathetic. Rather than empathizing with the student’s pain, the teacher projects the trauma onto herself and those who advocate student narration of loss experiences “And they expect us to talk about this stuff!” she exclaims. “Imagine what this does to me.”

Another scenario: A colleague and I, participating in an English Department presentation, present papers on loss and melancholia in student writing and in teaching. Amid our theorizing of loss, trauma, and pedagogy, we each also disclose personal information about the losses we ourselves have suffered. When we have finished the presentation our colleagues are generally silent, except when one of them raises the issue of a teacher’s discomfiture when their students express grief and loss. A discussion about this issue ensues, but no one, neither during nor after, neither privately nor publicly, acknowledges our losses or sees them as possible subjects for analysis and commentary. “That was very well-written,” one colleague said to me as she left the room. Others also commented on the form of our writing and presentations, and while they participated fairly freely in the debate about personal disclosure from students, all were mute concerning the articulation in our presentation of our own personal pain.
A third example: As a doctoral student writing her dissertation, I am enrolled in a dissertation discussion group that meets monthly throughout the academic year. The purpose of the group is to read and discuss individual works-in-progress, to give feedback to one another about our writing, and to generally serve as both a writing and support group. When it is my turn to submit work, I offer my dissertation proposal, which includes the personal disclosure with which I begin this chapter. In the proposal, then, while I outline the problems and questions I wish to address, and while I delineate my theoretical grounding and methodologies, I also narrate Paul's story and the scenes of my own loss. The resulting discussion generally follows the traditional lines of the personal versus academic debate, with most of my colleagues trying to decide if a student's personal disclosure is appropriate. The rest of the discussion focuses almost exclusively on syntactical and grammatical issues in my paper, except when, near the end of the session, one colleague, who has been silent throughout, remarks that my work, since it is focused on composition classes only, has no relevance for her own work, which is the teaching of literature: "It's not appropriate for the literature classroom," she observes; no one else disagrees. More importantly, perhaps, no one comments in any way either about my loss or the way I narrate it at the beginning of the piece.

It's true that a few people present in the room knew about my loss and had acknowledged it to me previously and privately. What interests me most about this incident, however, is not who or who did not originally acknowledge the loss, but that the loss itself, when incorporated into an academic piece and context, became not just untouchable, but also unremarkable; that is, there simply were no words. Clearly, in fact, my colleagues felt uncomfortable at the intrusion of flesh-and-blood emotion as it was both embodied in my work and through my presence in the room. And while they seemed able to talk about the problematics of personal disclosure in general terms, they were reticent to situate loss close to themselves or even close to me.

Moreover, by acquiescing to the notion that both my work and personal disclosure
itself were appropriate only to the composition classroom, they re-enacted and re-engaged
the binary models that separate literature from writing, or the so-called personal from the
academic. Ironically, however, even as they sought to extract emotion from the immediate
academic context, they also worked to situate and contain it within what they saw as its
appropriate sphere, the composition rather than the literature classroom; once contained
within that sphere the (de) composition of loss could not, it may be presumed, contaminate
the literary spaces that supposedly operate outside of emotional content and motivation. In
this context, and especially in the sense that composition courses are entry level courses,
numbered and positioned lower in University catalogs than other English Department courses,
the emotional disclosure supposedly contained in them remains quite literally buried be­
neath, and encrypted within, the so-called literary content of the department.

I was hurt by the erasure of my loss during this session, pained by the way I sensed
my colleagues not only disavowing and separating themselves and their work from my loss
and my own work, but also their inability to attend to (to listen and be present for) loss in the
simplest and most humane sense. In some ways, in fact, I felt ashamed after submitting my
paper for public scrutiny — not of my colleagues but of myself. Their silence seemed a
kind of reprimand, and I felt that I had somehow disgraced myself through the inappropriate
display of my body and person. Consequently, whether or not their comments were, in fact,
antagonistic, I sensed them as such. Responding only in academic terms to their academic
critique, moreover, I also found myself “personally” speechless. I did not, in other words,
have any way in which to frame a response that would call attention away from the theoreti­

cal bent of their discussion to the embodied and emotional loss itself, or that at least would
incorporate that loss into their debates and analyses.

Obviously, all of these examples show how our students themselves could react in a
classroom, when —after narrating loss and/or trauma — they too might be met with silence
or abstract critique that circumvents or attempts to cover over emotional wounds. (It is
important to point out here, however, that I have not yet had a writing classroom that did not

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— for the most part at least — respond openly and with sincerity and compassion to a classmate’s narration of loss.) To this extent, students run the risk in academic settings not only of being silenced — or, perhaps more specifically, of being made receptacles of silence — but also of being repudiated and having their losses appropriated. In the first scene I cite above, for example, the teacher who cannot “bear witness” to her student’s loss (a brother’s suicide) not only angrily dismisses it, but also assumes the student’s wound specifically and entirely for herself. (“What do they think this will do to me?”) The most immanent danger here as I see it, in fact, is not the merging of the personal with the academic, but rather the teacher’s failure to adequately negotiate the gap that separates (or closes) the distance between her own experiences and those of her students.

This emotional distance, related perhaps more closely than we might like to think to “critical distance,” is, I am convinced, best traversed and opened up (disclosed) rather than avoided and obscured (given closure). But it is this process rather than the product of disclosure (the student’s draft rather than the finished text) that many teachers I talk with seem to find problematic. A colleague and a member of the dissertation group I mention above, for example, tells me that one reason she “went into literature rather than composition” is that composition is too “processy.” Interestingly, she is not referring to the emphasis the writing programs in which we both have taught put on revision. Rather, she is referring not only to what she sees as the emotional content of the composition classroom, but also to the field’s focus on the emotional investment of teachers and students in those classrooms, to the construction of composition pedagogy itself.

Throughout this project, and especially in the final chapter, using my own responses to, and readings of, students papers, I will focus more on the traversing of emotional distance between student and teacher, teacher and academy, and academy and writing. Suffice it to say for now, however, that this distance, the ground of loss itself, functions not so much as a barrier between discrete spheres, but rather, as I have suggested earlier, as an essential, albeit sometimes treacherous, terrain that must be navigated. At its core is the distance
between the experience of loss and its (non)articulation, as well as the ground that connects
the private to the public. In this context, the anxieties that teachers feel about the articula-
tion of loss, grounded in our own losses and experiences, can be located, I believe, between
rather than within opposing spheres of experience. The ground of loss is, in fact, a textured
ground, comprised of layers of experience, imbricated in ideology, and merging with the
rich subterranean vein of unconscious life. It is the ground we all walk, whether we like it
or not.
Bodies of Grief: The Narration of Personal Effects

I walked up to the funeral parlor that humid summer afternoon wearing a navy blue sundress and matching shoes. Blue was his favorite color; it was my personal tribute.

(Angie, "Absolut Princess")

It is October again, the fourth autumn since Paul’s death. Fall has always evoked for me a profound sense of loss, and the grief that I associate with that season, while not a consequence of having lost anyone to death during that time, is linked to the obvious late autumn changes: the cooling weather, the browning flowers, the dry crumbling leaves. It is at this season that churches of various faiths recall and honor the dead, that individuals and congregations memorialize their departed and dwell in silent sanctuaries with their memories. It is the season of stillness and stirring, death and renewal. As a young Catholic girl, I used to attend church with my family to commemorate All Soul’s Day. Amid the darkness and incense and the priest’s Latin chanting, my mother used to cry. An unusual event, her tears frightened me and taught me to mistrust the dead.

Today I weep covertly, looking down, as I sit in the sanctuary of a large Unitarian Church in Portsmouth New Hampshire. Having invited a meditative moment in memory of the dead, the minister bows her head amid the rustlings and coughs of the congregation, who shift into silence and prepare themselves for remembrance. Absent are the fragrance of incense, the dark interior, and the mysterious words of an ancient language. The large-paned windows, lacking the deep purples and blues and reds of Catholic Cathedrals, allow ample light into the church and onto the walls. While the high-arched windows reveal a
clear sky outside, however, the fall wind bats leaves and newspapers against the walls and
doors of the church and whines and whistles through cracks in the old building. This wail­
ing evokes in me both sadness and fear, as in an odd irreverent moment I think of the movie
my mother took my brother, sister and me to see years ago, not too long after my father’s
death when I was eight. A Disney Film called “Darby O’Gill and the Little People,” the
movie was full of stereotypical Irish superstitions: fairies and headless horses and horsemen
and, most memorable to me, the ghostly Banshee who wailed and keened for days outside
houses where death was immanent, where the aged or young infirmed lay breathing their
last breaths.

Although I have since seen that movie as an adult, and discovered that what pro­
voked fear in me as a child was more silly than fearful, I have never been able to completely
shake the image of the Banshee, especially during the autumnal season of screeching winds.
As I listen to the complaining elements now, I try hard to focus on the faces of those I have
loved and those who have died: my father and mother, aunts and uncles, Paul’s mother, and
Paul himself. As I think about the circumstances of Paul’s death, I am suddenly angry and
guilty: mad at the alcoholism that led to the death and angry with the alcoholic himself, then
guilt-ridden at my rage. I am also undeniably sad.

As I sit with these discordant feelings, I think of the set of papers I have most re­
cently commented on and handed back to my students. I recall how one-third of the class
had written, for their first essays this semester, about the deaths of family members and
friends and how these students had worked in their papers to reconcile what they believed
about death — theoretically, philosophically and spiritually — with what they knew in
their bodies to be true. Like me, these students struggled with anger, guilt, fear, and sadness.
The discordance of discourses in their essays and the grasping for what a colleague of mine
calls “facile” solutions, reflect a clash of emotions. The urge to tie up the maddening strands
of loose emotions, to theorize them away, fights in student grief writing with the desire to
embody them, to scream them out just as they are.
Striving to be still, I grapple with these same impulses in church. Days earlier, a colleague had shared a paper with me that he thought was significant both in terms of my research and also as it related to my own experiences with the dying alcoholic. Titled “Absolut Princess,” the paper belongs to Angie, a first year student in my colleague’s writing class. In the paper, Angie writes not just about her grandfather’s death, but also about her perceived role in that death. “I sit alone, and angry,” she writes, as she recalls her grandfather’s funeral:

I couldn’t get it out of my mind how I had killed him. No one in the room knew it was me, and I never told anyone. I was mad at the people crying for him: people who never went to see him, people who forgot he was alive in the first place. I never forgot him. He always said he would have to be dead to wear a suit, he was, and it looked nice....Grandpa was the only person that ever called me princess, and he was my prince.

“What a jumble of things I can remember, if I let my mind run,” Virginia Woolf writes when recalling her deceased mother (qtd. in Simon et al, 41). Like Woolf, Angie, working in her paper to memorialize her grandfather, also reveals a mind in a jumble. Unlike Woolf, however, who remembers her mother as the heart and soul of a “crowded, merry world”(41), Angie depicts her grandfather in darker terms. While her paper simmers with resentment and anger at the man for his role in both her own guilt and his death, Angie refuses either to admit overtly to this role, or to direct her anger at her grandfather himself. That she clings to a kind of fairy tale is evident in the depiction of herself as a princess to her prince—her grandfather.

This prince, however, was an alcoholic who used his eleven-year old granddaughter as a kind of moonshine and cancer stick runner. He died of lung cancer and cirrhosis of the liver. Angie describes the situation this way:

He had a cup rack [in his shower] to hold his Miller Lite. I seldom saw him without a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other...Mom would drop me off at seven in
the morning and go to do Gramp's grocery shopping....She was usually gone until
ten. In that time it was my job to go around the corner to Henry's market and buy
two fifths of scotch, three six packs of beer, and two cartons of cigarettes...[Henry]
always made sure I went the back way, behind the apartment, so I wouldn't get
caught with the bag. I always made it home before my mother. Gramp gave me $30
each Sunday. I would buy his eight items, and he let me keep the rest. I did this for
seven years...No one knew about what I bought but me and Gramp....He said I was
the princess and he was the prince and the ten Scotch bottles were the gold we
protected.

As Angie concludes her paper, she admits that she never told her mom about her "job" with
Grandfather, and allows that

perhaps I'm just as deceitful as him for keeping it from her. My mother refused to
support his habit, but I didn't. I walked around the corner and saw Henry every
Sunday, bought what [Grandfather] 'needed,' and kept the change...When you do a
job people pay you, and he paid me. I didn't know any better.

Moving from grief to guilt to suppressed anger, Angie obviously struggles in her writing
through a range of emotions. In the end, however, rather than blame her grandfather for
involving her in unethical activities, she not only keeps his secret, but theorizes about the
importance of trust and loyalty:

I did talk to him at his funeral, but I waited until everyone was gone. I cried at his
side and vowed to love him forever, unconditionally, and I do. I told him how mom
found the vodka and how I never told her. He must have really trusted me. I always
did what he told me, because I trusted him. Trust or not, if I knew I was going to kill
him, I never would have taken the money.

Despite Angie's insistence upon the rightness of her actions and her grandfather's role in
them, her last sentence of the essay is a plea for her own innocence. This sentence also
undermines the philosophical scaffolding that precedes it, the theories of familial relation-
ships based on trust and "unconditional" love, producing a chink in the writer's armor and
rendering her vulnerable in her reader's eyes. Here the fairy tale is undone. So is the myth
of pure grief, unconditional, unadulterated—untainted by anger, ambivalence, confusion, or guilt.

As I sit in the sanctuary in silence, I feel all of these emotions. Like Angie, I want to love the deceased unconditionally, but I struggle not just with sadness; I also contend with rage towards the deceased, as well as towards myself. I register anger in the very depths of my body, work to quell it, and then feel the same tension of clashing emotions Angie experiences. My father, mother, uncle, and finally Paul—all alcoholics like Angie's grandfather—charged towards their own deaths with seemingly self-destructive zeal, implicating those around them in their actions, and then leaving to their children, friends and significant others a legacy of guilt, grief, resentment and remorse—their personal effects. Like Angie, we are constantly plagued with the "what ifs." What if we could have done something to prevent these deaths? What would have been the consequences of such prevention? Longer life? More time to drink? Protracted fear among those who loved the alcoholics?

Here in the quiet sanctuary, kept company in my silence by my fellow worshipers, the reverie of remembrance is disrupted and I am called back to my body by the howling wind. Just then the minister rings a small golden bell, indicating the end of meditation. As I listen to those around me rearrange their minds and bodies for the service ahead, I think of an e-mail a colleague of mine wrote me recently. Discussing his own spiritual quest, he declared that meditative practice was difficult for him, making him "want to jump out of [his] skin." My colleague's association of spirituality with physicality, his linking of the soul and mind with the body and surface of the person, remind me again of the gaps in our lives between belief and practice, theory and praxis, philosophy and action—the long disturbing spaces between the invocation of meditation and its abrupt end. These gaps, uncovered only in the silent spaces of reflection, house and sustain the messiness and immediacy of human experience: the smoking, drinking, embodied selves, as well as the enraged, bereft and ambivalent selves. These are the gaps that reveal themselves, not just in student papers, but also in our daily lives as academics and our attitudes towards the papers we both
read and write.

I have a metaphor for these gaps, one rooted in my own experiences with grief and the reflective and embodied moments that comprise those experiences. In the Spring of 1995, Paul’s alcoholism raged and his path towards death became more apparent to me. When he was hospitalized again for the fourth time in two months and temporarily sober, he asked me to come see him. Up until that time, he had fiercely resisted my attempts to visit him, had even run away from me, unwilling to admit to himself his relapse into active alcoholism or to reveal his condition to me. Fearful of the intrusion of Paul’s body on my academic space, I worked hard to deny his condition, and the demands of this new and terrible embodiment on my time, emotions, and intellectual territory. Each trip to the hospital he made, however, characterized by bleeding and the failure of organs, screeching embodiment, pulled me from my intellectual reverie, the theorizing of practice and the philosophies of writing. My own academic writing, the actual embodiment of my thoughts, had ceased.

“Things went on like this until he went into the hospital [the final time],” Angie writes of her grandfather, describing her visit to him and the death that follows. She continues:

He was propped up in that hospital bed like a rag-doll with a coat-hanger in his back. Tubes came from his nose and throat. He couldn’t swallow, could barely talk, and never smiled. The last time I saw him he gave me a teddy bear one of the nurses bought for me in the gift shop; a princess with a gemstone crown. I cried long and hard when he died, and never came out of my room on Sundays [when she used to visit her grandfather] for over a year. The bear sits on my dresser next to a bottle of Absolut. Sometimes you never realize just how naive you are until the damage is done….Do I resent him? No, not at all. The reason: because I know he loved me. What he did may have been out of selfishness, but it didn’t change the way he felt about me.

Angie’s description of her grandfather’s deteriorated body here, scant as it is, as well as her earlier and much fuller description of his pre-hospitalized body (“He wore so much Old
Spice that it saturated the furniture; "he smelled like a grandfather to me;" "gray whiskers;" "thick glasses resting on the bottom ski-jump of his nose") comprise the kinds of detail writing teachers yearn for in these narratives. At the same time, the grandfather's embodiment here reasserts, as Bradbury and Davies argue, a kind of ontological and psychic order, a realignment of relationships within the family in the face of death, and an affirmation of the individual's place within this relational constellation.

The writer's groping for and around the body through written description is simultaneously a feature of craft, a method of survival, and an indicator of the central role the departed one plays, both in the drama of death and the emotional life of the survivor. It is, in essence, epistemological in nature, a way of knowing rooted in concrete representation and an inclination towards the physical, that which can be identified and touched. Is this, I wonder, the same impulse I felt during Paul's illness and shortly after his death, when to be acknowledged by friends, and even strangers, to feel the touch of their consolatory hands on my arm or hear the warmth of sympathy in their voices, sustained me? When I leaned towards (inclined towards) them in ways that I formerly - so proud of my independence—thought impossible? Are these leanings towards the physical, the concrete, the same impulses my students feel when they write grief, relate death, respond to one another in a workshop "around" the topic of mortality and loss?

When the death of a family member threatens the writer's very existence in family and society, reconstructing bodies in writing, as Mark Bracher suggests, "can provide a surrogate body for the body ego through either describing or enacting such images. Descriptions of bodies...can express either the writer's desire for bodily unity and coherence or the writer's anxiety about bodily fragmentation and lack of control" (41). In this context, "thick description" of the bodies of departed ones—or the avoidance of such description—reflects more than skill or lack of skill in writing. It can also indicate an emotional, epistemological, and psychological resituating of the writer herself, not merely within the essay, but also within the classroom community and within larger communities as well.

72
The impulse to re-situate, the need for re-orientation through representation, became for me almost a compulsion as I sat in the hospital waiting area during this hurriedly arranged visit, anticipating the arrival of Paul’s doctor. To use a cliche commonly found in student grief narratives, I felt at that moment as if my world had come crashing down, and that the only way I could reconstitute it was to narrate it. Having spent the last half hour at the pay phone in the hospital lobby trying desperately and futilely to reach friends and family, I retreated to the corner of the waiting room and pulled out my teaching notebook. There, amongst the essay assignments and daily comments I had made about my writing classes, I began to record the details of Paul’s illness and its effects on his body as I had just seen them. Like Angie, I described the tubes and other hospital paraphernalia protruding from the patient’s body; I noted how lifeless he seemed; I described his long graying hair spread out on the pillow. I compared the body I had just seen to the body I had once known. And as I wrote, the dizzying sensation of having been dislocated and violently unsettled subsided, at least somewhat, as I wrote myself in relation to the crisis and the hospital environment. Reconstituting the body of the infirmed, I discursively regained my bearings and reconstituted myself.

Like me, students who write about grief—often representing their experiences in linear, diary like fashion and doggedly recording details that may seem unimportant to their teachers—not only write “words against death,” as Davies claims, but struggle to reconstitute their own existence within a multitude of relational and communal frameworks. Indeed, in many senses they work to reestablish those frameworks, sensing their vulnerability in the face of the sudden absence of the deceased who once played vital roles within them. As Charles Anderson and Marian M. MacCurdy write: “This is a natural, nonutopian discursive process that integrates the personal and the social..., a site at which the social and discursive practices of the individual, the community, and the larger culture are interrogated and from which they may be effectively altered”(7).

This move to reconstitute and situate the writing “self” within a web of relationships
and communities can also be seen as the writer’s need both in the essay itself, and within the framework of grief experience, to realign the body (the writer’s own and the deceased’s) in relation to theories and beliefs. It is not just the writer’s physical, emotional, and relational welfare that is threatened by death and loss; it is also the core of his/her beliefs, that which she assumes to be true about life and death not simply during and after, but also before she suffers loss.

In her essay, Angie relates in concrete detail the person of her grandfather, both ill and “well” (a practicing alcoholic, he is never entirely well). She also delineates for her reader the “real” circumstances of her relationship to him. Orienting both her reader and herself in this way, she is still left with the destabilization of her beliefs, of the philosophical groundwork on which she stood before her grandfather’s death, and before the complications of alcoholism led him to use his granddaughter in a way that may be immediately questionable and self-serving to Angie’s readers. Angie does not mention God or religion in this essay. Nevertheless, she expresses dissatisfaction in the church itself during the funeral when those who don’t “know” her grandfather cry, and we have reason to believe here that she is experiencing, if not a spiritual, then at least a philosophical and epistemological crisis. After all, who really knew? Who knew the grandfather and now, in the face of death, who knows anything? Her mother, the person from whom secrets were kept, does not know. But does Angie herself “know” “Does she know that her grandfather loved her, or does she suspect (as ample evidence in this essay suggests) that he simply used her? Or does she know both?

This kind of crisis of knowing and not knowing, practicing and believing, is at the heart of what Therese Rando calls “complicated mourning,” grief intensified and disturbed by the tangled relationship of the living with the departed. Angie’s insistence at the end of her paper on “unconditional love” and “trust,” as well as her repeated assertions throughout the paper that her grandfather loved her, while revealing a reluctance to admit to the “reality” of the situation, also show a defensiveness in the face of new knowledge, in light of her
maturity and retrospective analysis of her grandfather’s actions. In writing her paper she begins to negotiate this crucial shift in the ground of both being and knowing, doing and believing, the concrete and the abstract. While she never arrives in this draft at a definitive stance against her grandfather’s behavior, she takes a discursive step in realigning herself in relation to the deceased and in interrogating that relationship. This is a crucial step in both the process of writing and in the process of mourning itself.

Concerning the student writer’s grasping towards easy and cliched statements in the face of loss and grief, Lad Tobin argues that when student writers introduce complications throughout their essays, and then retreat from them in the end, they may have a variety of motivations. “Maybe they say such things because they feel guilty about having exposed family secrets. Or maybe because they think we expect essays to have clear resolutions. Or maybe they say these things because this is what they actually believe” (82). Whatever the reasons for pat endings and solutions, writing teachers who seek to help students complicate essays about mourning need to acknowledge the complications inherent in mourning itself, as well as the complex interrogations of grief already present in these narratives. By overlooking the complexities embedded in essays such as Angie’s in order to simply decry unsatisfactory endings, we ourselves grasp onto facile conclusions about mourning and subscribe to simplistic notions of writing as well.

In a conference presentation at NCTE several years ago, Janet Gardner, working with what Anderson and MacCurdy call “deep experience” (the relating of a teacher’s own experiences with those of her students), tells how, after an old high school friend of Gardner’s had died, she responded with anger at what she perceived as her students’ “facile” notions about death. Gardner admits that her frustration rose in a large part from her own difficulties in writing about her friend, something she attempted to do repeatedly immediately after his death. On the one hand, her frustrating attempts at writing showed her how difficult it is to narrate grief, thus allowing Gardner to see grief narration from the perspective of her students and to appreciate their efforts. On the other hand, her own experiences as an En-
glish teacher and scholar of literature, and her expertise in writing literary analysis, com-
pelled her to fault not so much her students as the department and institution for the way
students cling to pat renditions of complicated events. Quite simply, she said, students are
taught to write, and English professors are trained to admire, essays that are tight and "con-
tained” and full of the authoritative voices of others.

This notion of containment is linked not just to ideas about genre, but also to institu-
tional practices and attitudes, those actions and perspectives that are, in turn, part and parcel
of the intensely active and competitive professional track we find ourselves on. Don Snyder,
in Cliffwalk, an autobiographical account of his dismissal without tenure from the univer-
sity where he was employed for a number of years as assistant professor, rails against what
he describes as academic luxuries. Where else but in academia, Snyder writes, do employ-
ees come and go as they please and get summers off completely? When I discussed this
book with colleagues — those who, like me, are concerned about tenure and contract re-
newal; those who chair dissertation committees not only during the school year, but also
during winter break and summers; those who cut holidays short in order to write and present
at conferences; those who sit on university and department committees that meet during
“off hours” and vacations — they laughed and shook their heads. “Where is he coming
from? No wonder he didn’t get tenure!”

A reasonable argument can be made, of course, that some tenured professors at the
end of their careers float along on the periphery of departmental, institutional, and scholarly
activity. For the most part, though, institutional practices demand that our professional
lives dominate and even suppress our personal and private lives. In a letter to a friend Jane
Tompkins’s reveals this separation of the professional from the private, the severance of the
emotional from the academic:

Do you remember once when we were having a telephone conversation about how
busy we were? You were worrying about how you were ever going to finish the
critical biography you’d been working like a dog on for years, we’d been talking
about our families, when suddenly you burst out with: “I don’t know what I would
do. If my parents should die I wouldn’t have time.” I’ll never forget that moment.

(Tompkins 148)

Here Tompkins recognizes in her friend’s statement the rift between work and personal life, the sublimation of her friend’s parents’ death—and life—to that of some literary figure who is the subject of a critical biography. Most important, Tompkins indicates with this example that academics have at their disposal a professional sleight-of-hand when it comes to sublimating personal lives to work-a-day goals: words. We know how to use words to theorize “realities,” conceptualize embodiment, rhetoricize loss, and set aside grief. Doing so, we tend as a whole to become more and more impatient not just with the intrusion of our own losses on our professional lives, but also, by default, student renditions of loss: “I stick to the rules on my syllabus,” one of my colleagues proclaimed in a recent meeting. “When someone comes to me and says, ‘My grandmother died and I couldn’t take the test,’ I answer, ‘I’m sorry your grandmother died. You get a zero on the test.’”

I don’t think this professor means to be unkind. I believe, in fact, that he is a sympathetic man, because I have seen how empathetic he is with colleagues who have suffered losses. Nevertheless, caught up in the professional merry-go-round, he simply perceives himself as neither having the time to administer make-up tests nor the flexibility. With both death and students marginalized, he still talks elaborately and articulately with his peers about his study of loss and trauma in literature, and the suffering of literary characters. Referring in these conversations to the various theorists to whom he turns in his analysis, he is proud of how he “complicates” death and dying in the novels he critiques.

This kind of complicating, however, can squeeze life from the text, sever belief from practice, as teachers confine life and loss to novels and disallow its seepage into the classroom. Such extraction of the stuff of living from our daily work also springs from theorizing for the sake of theorizing, superimposing theory onto living texts only to have the theory stand in for the texts, not to mention the people who read these texts. Complication of this
sort results in a cold and austere textual site, in which function, form, and making meaning no longer work together relationally. A good metaphor for such sites is the chapel that I visited during one of Paul's many hospitalizations.

While spending time with him in the hospital at the end of my first year as a graduate student, I decided to stop into the chapel, one floor up from the intensive care unit where Paul was laying, to get away from all the medical hubbub around me. Small, empty, unembellished, dark (except for the muted light that leaked through a single stained glass window)—furnished with only three scant rows of hard backed chairs—this chapel, in all its dreary severity, left me feeling not only claustrophobic but tense. As I looked around the dim and stuffy interior, I sorely missed the white-washed walls and dark woodwork that characterizes many New England churches, the clean simplicity that soothes the spirit and frees the mind for meditation. On the other hand, I also yearned for the soaring arches, the fancy iconography, and the imposing figures of saints that lend to the Catholic church its mysticism. A red light that was meant to convey the warmth and mystery of a votive candle glared from a dark podium at the front of the chapel, inspiring neither hope nor faith, but dull despair instead.

As I left the chapel, I passed a row of shelves near the door on which had been neatly placed various religious pamphlets from one faith or another. Choosing one, I stepped outside into the hallway in order to read it in a better light. What I was looking for in this tract, I suppose, were the kinds of fiery words that might ignite some sort of spiritual spark; the sort of connection with human experience or feeling, that is, as William James claims, the very "source of religion." This kind of inspiration, however, was not forthcoming; the words on the page neither burned nor danced in front of me and the "thees" and "thous" and devotional acclamations were as alive to me as the empty wheelchair that occupied the other end of the corridor where I stood.

In his essays on religious experience, James advocates a "Science of Religion" that incorporates into its scheme both feeling and the intellect, a living theology that derives its
energy from the personal experiences of those who believe. It is not the ossified theories of theologians that interest him, but rather the belief and "conduct" that ordinary human experience engenders. If the sterile sanctuary I visited this weekend reflected what James calls the "fruits" of someone's experiences and beliefs, I could not help but question the nature of that person's humanity. Absent from the chapel's interior were any signs—not only of divine presence—but of a common and shared human life; a vacuous and meaningless space, it eerily belied the emotions and events (birth, death, suffering, joy, grief) that went on incessantly around it.

That night as I drove home to New Hampshire, I kept thinking of the dead language of the religious tracts that I had looked at, and the barren room that had housed them. In relation to this, I couldn't help but think of one of James's passages: verbality has stepped into the place of vision, professionalism into that of life. Instead of bread we have a stone; instead of a fish, a serpent" (214). What kind of professional advice, I thought, went into outfitting that barren chapel? What specialist saw to its lifeless literature? Who was the person who took the living bread of spirituality and turned it into lifeless stone?

Transforming the stuff of the body and spirit into a kind of stone is something all academics risk when they undertake the study of language and the people who produce it. Even as I write these words, I too struggle with one of the chief dilemmas not only of scholarship, but also of personal essaying: Can personal experience (mine and my students'), the particular and the concrete, suffice on its own? Or should I "complicate" such experience through the theories and ideas of others? After all, while I never actually use the term "complicate" when talking to my students about their grief narratives, the kinds of questions I ask them are aimed towards complication: "Why do you think you felt this way?"; "What changed your mind?"; "What is it that you want to say here that you aren't saying?"; "Can you give me the history of this incident?"; "How did it come about?"; "What do you think about this?"; "What do others think?"

Sometimes I ask students to research their topics, to turn to other sources and other
voices—in poems, novels, essays, or scholarly journals—that might help them see anew, re-vise their narratives, to discover ways in which others have grieved, to find out what experiences they share with others, or how their experiences differ. As I invite them to step outside of the immediacy of personal narration and to locate their experiences within a larger framework, I realize that I am also asking for distance, and that such distance has the capacity of rendering personal narration lifeless, not unlike the chapel set apart from—and designed indifferently to—the suffering and pain of the hospital residents, rendered invisible by the dark walls and *faux* spiritual symbols, and devoid of lived experience.

This is the risk I run even as I write, even as I grieve. On the one hand, I wish to stay firmly grounded in personal experience, honoring my own and my students’ experiences, foregrounding those experiences, and keeping the potentially deadening and distancing voices and theories of others at bay. On the other hand, I have learned from grief itself, from actual personal experience, that loss compels search and re-search, inquiry and the drive to know and situate. Loss also, for me at least, has meant turning towards, rather than away from, others. It has meant being attuned to the *situation* of grief, its history, its “culture,” its many voices and discourses. It has meant not only seeking out, but also assuming the positions and discourses of others, now trying on this experience, now trying on that. In short, while I am adamant about the inclusion of my own particular experience in my writing, and furiously protective of my students’, I am compelled to think of that experience relationally, to “complicate,” to theorize.

Accordingly, in the section below, I cautiously assume the voice of the academic, take on the discourses of my discipline, re-vise (re-see) my own grief, my own losses, and the losses of my students, in relation to theories and theorists. Such theories allow me access to histories and representations of grief, lead me further into the whys and why nots of academic attitudes towards grief display, yield both the questions and answers that not so much “complicate” as elucidate.
Grieving in Theory (What the Teacher Learned in School)

"Conscientious and unconscious at the same time, I plunged ahead, striving to be brilliant in the classroom, not yet cognizant, on many levels of the human situation I was in."

(Jane Tompkins, A Life in School, 93)

One major criticism of postmodern theories is that, in their stress on fragmented identities and the dissolution of the unitary self, concrete experience and the meaning of that experience for individuals is obscured and even denied. This criticism is particularly prominent in theoretical approaches that seek to "write the body" in ways that respect not just its discursive properties, but also its material and cultural properties — that is, theories that conceptualize the body as a cultural production while acknowledging its actual physical presence and the tangible conditions in which it resides. In her essay "Writing Bodies," for example, Fleckenstein agrees with Gesa Kirsch and Joy Ritchie when they call for "a politics of location, an approach to writing and research that, in the words of Adrienne Rich, locates the self within 'the body of this particular human being'" (295). Fleckenstein writes:

Eclipsed in dualistic and idealistic theories of meaning aiming at a 'view from everywhere' or erased in poststructuralist theories 'seeking a view from nowhere' (Bordo), bodies as sites of and participants in meaning-making have been elided. In sacrificing bodies to some illusion of either transcendent truth or culturally constituted textuality, we cut ourselves adrift from any organic anchoring in the material reality of flesh. (281)

Postmodern notions of fragmented identities that are not only not fixed, but floating like so many detached signifiers, negate the possibilities of locating emotion and loss — at least in so far as emotion and loss are characterized by their proximity to the body. Thus, while on the one hand postmodernism and the fragmentation it espouses speak naturally to the notion of death and decomposition, on the other hand, the disintegration of the body within the deconstructing impulses of postmodernist discourse signals an overt and conscious movement away from death and its terrors, especially as these terrors emanate from the threat of de-composition, or the flesh and blood of the body itself. The dispersal of materiality
inherent in postmodernist texts—their refusal to admit coalescence or coherence—undoes the body as a tangible reality and negates the possibility of its mortality and grief.

As with the ground of loss itself, however, the manifestation of body and emotion (and most certainly death) in postmodern discourses is more complicated than it seems. Neither the body nor its negation can be situated one against the other within totally dichotomizing spheres. While it might be tempting to see postmodernism as the absolute dispersal and flattening out of embodiment and loss, Robert Schleifer, in a book entitled Death and Rhetoric, views postmodernist discourses (and the modernist movement from which they evolve) as deeply and ironically implicated in the foregrounding of death even as these discourses seek to negate it. Situating postmodernist discourse in the modernist turn from sentimental and realist texts, Schleifer sees postmodernism as rooted in Eliot’s notion of the “objective correlative,” a means of conveying emotion not directly but rather indirectly through symbolism. Severing the link between discourse and emotion, objectivism of this sort, Schleifer observes, “mystifies and dematerializes language” (101). At the heart of this dematerialization is the obscuration of the (female) body and its associations with death (and birth).

At the same time as it dematerializes both language and the body, however, postmodernist discourse, playing as it does along the surface of language, also engages in a metonymic relationship with real bodies and the materiality of those bodies. As Schleifer writes, “[m]etonymy exists within the historical and social institution of language: even when the ‘deep’ and transcendental truth is lost, the interhuman ‘play’—the transmission of discourse goes on.” Thus, as Bakhtin states, “any utterance—the finished, written utterance not excepted—makes response to something and is calculated to be responded to in turn” (qtd. in Schleifer 103-04). Given this interplay among human bodies and human voices, utterance and response, postmodernist discourse, offering through its “surface dance of words” and its refusal to fix truths and ultimate meanings to these words, echoes with “the resonating overtones of nothingness, non-sense, death” (109); at the same time, how-
ever, the metonymic play among writers, texts, and discourses reconstitutes real bodies and mortality, the possibility of decomposition and demise. To put this more simply, and within more tangibly embodied terms, all texts respond, allude to, and reflect other texts. Therefore, even as so-called postmodern texts aspire to their own fragmentation (the de-composition of their corps), they are re-composed in relation to other texts. Here then, whether it is acknowledged or not, is the cycle of life and death, embodiment and dis-embodiment, material reality and its dissolution, giving away once more to life, and so forth.

What Schliefer does is locate the body and the possibility of its decomposition within the postmodern moment itself, and—as I will argue—within academic impulses and theories that reject embodied emotion in many of its discourses. “The rhetorical play of the surface in [post]modernist discourse” (69), Schliefer argues, is the superficial or overt attempt to reject bodies and death, at the same time as such play resurrects these phenomena from beneath the surface of language, or from the obscured wellspring of meanings made manifest only through metonymic associations. Drawing from Barthes, Schleifer further asserts that “language realizes and manifests an effect of intentionality that responds to and counters the random power of death” (102; emphasis Schleifer’s), but in the process of doing so evokes the body and its inevitable link to death. Here Schleifer notes, for example, that (post)modernist discourses “are ‘tactile’ as well as ‘tactical;’ they produce the ‘affect of loss, language’s power to produce bodily responses — what Shoshana Felman calls ‘the scandal of the speaking body’”(171).

While Schliefer’s main concern is with death and rhetoric rather than the emotional consequences of death, in his pointing specifically to the “affect of loss,” he extends his analysis to include, as the side-shadow of death, embodied emotion, and especially grief. In this way, like Fleckenstein, he urges the reconstitution of real bodies and emotions within theories and discourses, and helps map the connection between the (post)modernist repudiation of the female body and academic wariness of that body, vis a vis grief and “sentimentality” in student writing. Indeed, Schleifer describes the female body as the site of
contestation in modernist and postmodernist discourses, even as he simultaneously notes the failure of these discourses to expunge that body. Drawing from Derrida, he links (post)modern writing very particularly to embodiment, calling all writing the “accidental materiality of language”(206), which, by its very nature, cannot be erased. Because of its materiality and associations with body and death, Schleifer concludes, “[i]f modernism attempts to erase women and children from its history as fully as Yeats attempts to erase women and children from ‘Among School Children,’ placing their plural voices with the philosophical, masculine austerity of Plato, Aristotle, and Pythagoras, the nuns and mothers and female children nevertheless remain”(22).

As with psychoanalytic theories that cite the mother’s body as the primary location of struggle, then, Schleifer places the female body at the precarious juncture between “deathless” discourse and death itself. It is clear not so much from the (de)positioning of the female body in (post)modernist rhetoric as the violence of its suppression and the struggle surrounding it that language, texts and theories that obscure or deny this body reenact an ancient and historical battle of (for) engendered power, the manifestation of which can be seen clearly (as Schleifer himself indicates above) in Plato’s linking of dangerous grief with feminine excess. According to Plato, in fact, overt displays of grief have “little place in the well-ordered soul and the well-ordered state” (Spelman 16). Therefore, “representations of suffering and anguish...stir up our insatiable, appetite-like desire for experiencing grief, thereby subverting reason” (Spelman 23). As Elizabeth Spelman notes:

Plato also suggests that there might be less grieving if people could develop a sense of shame at giving in to grief. Socrates tries to induce such shame by characterizing the readiness to grieve as the behavior of a woman....Given the central role women in classical Athens played in funeral rites as mourners, and vivid Socratic castigations of weeping and lamenting as womanish behavior, attempts in the Republic to mute grief appear to be aimed at minimizing powerful forms of typically feminine behavior (30-1).

Here we see the Western roots of the conflict between feminine bodies and rational dis-
courses and the kind of discourse about emotion and grief that informs not just Plato’s philosophies, but — as Schleifer observes — the literature and theories of the last several decades. Indeed, as Spelman illustrates above, what is at stake in Plato’s conceptualization of grief is repulsion for bodily excess and so-called womanly behavior. This excessive feminine principle, unmanly, also distorts reason; overflowing and expanding, it cannot be contained. Embodied to the extreme it is also shameful.

That the female body yet remains associated with grief, loss, and emotion is abundantly clear in the proliferation of images in art, media, and popular culture of grieving women and the roles they still play in tending the dead. While for the most part women of Western countries no longer dress and watch over the dead as they did a century ago, they figure more largely than their male counterparts in scenes of caretaking as well as in the acts of weeping and lamentation. In these terms, for example, we might think of the recent Million Mom March, in which mothers demonstrating in Washington, D.C. against gun violence were marked in the media according to their losses and degrees of grief, as spokeswomen for the march testified to the shooting deaths of children. In the same fashion, McDowell observes that in “images of urban homicide, the black mother becomes the central figure in a tableau of death that ultimately marginalizes all other survivors with a “compositional staple...the mother looking down on or seated just to the side of the coffin that holds her son”(157).

Mother grief, mother loss (in both the sense of losing mothers and mothers losing or imaged as losing), and the female body’s associations with separation and lamentation are, as I will show later, especially pertinent to my discussion of loss narration in the composition classroom. So-called feminine centered grief, positioned as both nurturing and threatening, “natural” and shameful, governs the way we as teachers and composition scholars admit (to) or don’t admit loss either in our classrooms or into certain discourses of the academy. This is because feminine-based representations of loss and grief simultaneously engender both the “othering” of death and its containment within a “womanly” sphere.
Reemphasizing this relation of women to grief Jenny Hockey writes:

If we shift from the domain of grieving to the closely related sphere of dying, we find arguments to suggest that the proliferation of representations of dead women in western art and literature from the eighteenth century onwards [Hockey later includes current popular media in her discussion] can be seen as a complex cultural preoccupation with death which serves to distance masculinist readers or viewers from their own deaths (Bronfen 1992). In giving visibility to the deaths of young women in particular, death is made accessible, but by proxy. It is the death of the Other and not the self which is contemplated (93).

In this context, women are not only the visible bearers of grief, but also the bodies of death. This double standard of emotional expression is rendered even more paradoxical when, as Hockey suggests, death is displaced onto popular images of females, which are, in a kind of endless cultural recycling, returned to audiences through the activities of reading and spectatorship. Furthermore, not only are "the (cultural) expression of women’s losses not given the same...representational value as those of men within the Western canon of literature, philosophy, and psychoanalysis," as Juliana Schiesari notes, it is also "seen as the everyday plight of the common (wo)man, a quotidian event" (Schiesari 13).

Such passive projection and consumption of death enacts for men (in particular) a more "literary" or "artistic" model of loss, which makes abstract the process of mourning, and implicates women as the primary bodily objects or bearers of emotions. As such, women become associated more closely with the personal effects of losing and grieving. By this I mean that not only are they stereotypically linked to the body by virtue of their gender — that is, through their ability to give birth and menstruate — but also by their traditional roles (until recent Western history, at least) of preparing corpses for burial, as well as by their representational roles as embodied death. Finally and foremost, in their roles as "grief proxies," they are also, as I have suggested earlier, inevitably linked with the excesses of affect. As Hockey and the other critics I cite indicate, images of females grieving — sobbing, wailing, rending clothes, succumbing to "hysteric" — comprise the primary me-
dia images of mourning.

The words "common" and "quotidian" in Hockey's passage are also markers of taste and social class. They signify the elitism with which the kind of grief, for example, to which Plato refers distances itself and renders abstract the specific bodies of death; these bodies include actual corpses, the personal effects of the departed, and the women who lament, tend, and preserve them. Such allusions to commonplace and mundane sentiments and practices also signify the value system that often structures the academy, and the ways that we, as teachers, may participate in, and perpetuate, a grief split along gender and class lines. Melissa Zeiger, for example, points out the privileged position of the masculine authored elegy, which has enjoyed a "high place among traditional forms" and "remains an object of lofty poetic ambition" (1). "High place" and "lofty" here function as class descriptors, and Zeiger names Milton, Arnold, Yeats, Tennyson, Auden, and Lowell as "lofty" elegists included in canonical lists.

But Zeiger also examines the way "female figures abound in the major, canonical English elegies, occupying constantly shifting roles as enabling or threatening adjuncts to the poetic process" (Zeiger 11). Like Hockey, she recognizes feminized images as objects of displaced masculine grief. However, she also discerns a certain anxiety amid the "lofty" eulogizing and thus locates disturbance at the very core (the body of elegy): "Although the proliferation and multiple functioning of female figures in the traditional English elegy may serve to consolidate male literary authority," Zeiger asserts, "the sheer excess of these figures tends to betray an insecurity at the heart of that authority" (11).

The encryptment of emotion and the academic guard against embodied writing is not, of course, a conscious act, one that demands that those in charge of curriculum come forth and overtly state their case against the body and grief. No one gathers at conventions and proposes the disembodiment and emotional distillation of writing; nor do men get together and vote on tenets of repression, official articles that force the elimination of the body from writing and curriculum. Indeed, as I have indicated earlier, the suppression of
embodied and emotional discourse not only operates on a subconscious level; it is also predetermined by political, cultural and historical structures. Hence, it would be foolish and even tragic, I think, to recreate and reinforce polarized models of emotion versus reason, feminine vs. masculine, and body versus mind when talking about literature and writing curricula. Such an extremely dichotomized version of the tensions at stake in writing and learning would not only eliminate the need for further discussion about these issues, but erase the usefulness and especially the beauty of canonical literature that gives form to embodied emotion. I think here, for example, of Tennyson’s “In Memoriam,” a poem that has moved me immeasurably during my own grief, and that has proven to me that the relation of emotion to writing, and writing to canonical constructions of the grieving body, are more complicated than strictly oppositional models allow.

Admitting this, however, does not negate our need as teachers to question and complicate the function of embodied writing in the academic classroom, and in the history of academic curricula. As Worsham and Grumet, drawing from Lacan and Kristeva, note, the bodies of females represent the time or state-of-being preexisting language. Thus, from a masculinized curricular viewpoint (no matter its unconscious grounding), an alignment with the female body results in loss of language. It means, in essence, a falling back onto — indeed, into — the feminized body. It signifies a return to the womb, to the excesses of the physical and the emotional. In short, this absorption back into a feminine space means the blanket negation of the structure and language that have traditionally been the University’s raison d'être.

Given the power of this feminine space and linkage with the body, the containment of body and death becomes imperative. As Mary Bradbury notes, “fears of pollution from the decomposing corpse and the strength of taboos around death and decay are harnessed to create and maintain male power and authority” (123); this is accomplished by linking death with feminine excess and feminine excess with contamination. In this sense, then, the student grief narrative itself becomes symptomatic of the ways in which emotion in the writing
classroom is both registered in and rejected from (simultaneously ingested and expelled by) the body of the University.

I would even suggest that at the heart of academic revulsion towards, and (quite often) ridicule of, essays that constitute what one woman at a recent writing conference denounced as a “pity party,” is a fear of *de-composition* — that is, the dis-ease and disembodiment of the university and of academic bodies; the contamination and death of “culture” as the University promotes it; the traumatic “impossibility of living” (Caruth 62) that constitutes one’s personal knowledge of mortality; and the undoing of legitimate academic language. It is, in other words, the ineffable fear of returning not just to the mother’s body, but to the pre-mother, or inanimate matter. It is also the denial of the impulse (the death wish) to return to that matter (Freud. qtd. in Caruth 64).

At stake in both this denial, and the symptomatic repression of personal effects that characterizes it, is, I believe, the paradoxical enactment and failure inherent in Freud’s model of successful mourning, in which he posits as a template for proper bereavement the detachment of the libido from the lost object and its reattachment to another object. Such a model of cure effects healing by foregoing almost entirely the actual process of grieving, the crucial re-membering of the body. As Kathleen Woodward notes, “Freud cut the distinction between mourning and melancholia too sharply, leaving us no place between a crippling melancholy and the necessary end of grief as the telos of mourning” (100). Embracing Kristeva’s theories, Woodward “enjoins us to live in our grief which is our emotional testament to and heritage of our time....Mourning decidedly should not come to an end, affect should not be discharged as in the Freudian model” (99).

Emulating the Freudian model, however, many academics, in their negation of emotion and their insistence on the “discharge of affect,” rather than acknowledging the effects of loss, displace these effects from the object of separation and trauma (the mother, the body, and the promise of death) onto curriculum itself, “foreclosing on the emotional and physically painful work of grieving....and require[ing] that we console ourselves with a mas-
culine project that is contingent upon encrypting the acute emotional pain associated with loss" (1:25). Such encryptment operates concurrently, I believe, with historical and cultural repression, as well as with the isolation of death and its attendant emotions. In this sense, it is perhaps no coincidence that the modern University, with its specialization of disciplines, division of labor, and repression of traumatic episodes such as “slavery, genocide of First Nations people, and global diaspora” (Britzman 54), emerges concurrently in the nineteenth century with the “the removal of the cemetery from the city” (Leming 398), and the establishment of funeral homes in which the dead are hidden. The two phenomena converge and strive towards (but never entirely accomplish) the erasure of personal effects, the denial of the shirt sliced open to reveal the body in trauma, the bodily traces, the literal and figurative blood stains, and the effects of dying.

They also work to eliminate the kinds of sentimental accounts of death that, once prominent in the nineteenth century, not only revised for the reading public the personal effects of dying, but—as Jane Thompson and other critics point out—were eventually expunged from the canon and dismissed as nonserious literature. These largely female-authored texts were characterized by scenes of death and grief that usually involved women and girls, and situated the scene of dying in domestic contexts. Among the most popular of these books in the nineteenth century was Susan Warner’s *A Wide, Wide World*, in which tears and dying played a central role. Other examples of these kinds of death scenes occur in *Little Women*, in which Beth March, “on the bosom where she had drawn her first breath,...quietly drew her last” (464), and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, in which Tom, a kind of Christ figure, gives his life for the cause of emancipation. It is important to consider in this last example that Tom, as black man and slave, is feminized in order to assume the female burden of “dying well.” In all of these scenes, in fact, the notion of “dying well” and the Christian ethic that informs this concept play prominently in the feminized and domesticized scenarios of these novels. These scenarios serve as locations of tears and emotions, as well as the simultaneous smoothing over of personal effects (dying well does not entail glimpses of bloodied
bodies and the sound of death rasps) and their eruption through the tears of both the charac-
ters who witness and testify to the deaths, as well as of the reader who is moved by them.
Such a blunt yet complicated manifestation of embodied emotion conflicts with Eliot's
notion of the objective correlative, a concept that, as Newkirk remarks, governs our recep-
tion not only of these sentimental novels, but also of student papers. "We have been taught,"
Newkirk says, "to be 'vaguely nauseated' by the emblems of sentimentality that presuppose
a corresponding emotional reaction on our part...[T]his nausea...entails distancing ourselves
from the ways emotion is expressed and expected in the wider culture that some students
draw on" (36).

In laying out the conversations, concepts, and debates surrounding the relationship
between loss and curriculum, death and language, the University and grief, I have attempted
to establish here the essential framework for my readings of student papers. As I turn to
those papers in subsequent chapters, I wish to stress again the importance, as I see it, of
recognizing the writing of loss not as introverted and individualistic, writing that discour-
gages social relationships and connections between ideas, texts, and people, but rather as
serious discursive, cultural and psychological work that honors both academic integrity and
the integrity of students' (and teachers') relationships and their memories. "If memory is to
remain vital," Salvio notes, "if it is to produce possibilities for social intervention and re-
newal, then it must sustain its capacity to be unmoored, mobile, lacking any fixed position,
and allied to relationships through the making of associations" (1:11). Memory in this
sense—the story of loss and the loss itself—can only be accessed indirectly and only through
associations and relationships. Salvio continues:

This does not mean that we are specular images of one another, but rather...that the
autobiographical position from which I speak cannot simply be confessed to or named.
I can only access my autobiography indirectly through the lives of others, through
theory and through reading literature, for my life story, like the stories of many men
and women I live and teach with, is the story of a (partial) amnesia, a story that is
present here, in this text [Salvio refers here to her work on the teaching life of Anne
Sexton], but whose writing cannot coincide with my consciousness (1:17).
It is this sense of memory as (partial) amnesia and the necessity of indirect access that I wish to emphasize in my readings of student narrations of loss. Focusing on the slippage of loss in and out of memory, and the slippage of memory in and out of writing. I seek the personal effects of loss and the traces of embodied emotion in student writing. By doing so, I am trying to resist a "pedagogical narrative that disassociates itself from the life of feeling, and the needs, desires and vulnerabilities of the body" (Salvio chap. 1, p. 14), recognizing instead that the kinds of grief narratives students write are complicated by both embodied emotion and the simultaneous demands of their academic and personal lives.

**Don’t Ruin My Exams: Lessons in Theory**

"The doctor warned him about cancer and cirrhosis, but he ignored him, claiming things like that happened to other people. When I got older guilt set in when I realized what I was doing was hurting him, but I never stopped."

(Angie, *Absolut Princess*)

Like Kathleen Woodward, “I [am] interested in the uses of grief, especially in the way in which it suffuses our very sense of ourselves as being, precisely, alive, not dead” (100). Nevertheless, when I re-read what I have written in the section above, I sense a shift in discourse along with a diminishment of the personal voice with which I begin this chapter. The discourse I use above is one that assumes the formal voice and diction of the academic whose sense of audience abruptly changes from peers to evaluators. Do I work to embody or disembody grief here? Trying to answer this question, I have to admit that, as I make my way between personal experience and what I see as the necessary theorizing of that experience, I risk creating a lifeless space full of the *symbols* of loss but absent its substance. In this respect, I can’t help but think of the hospital chapel with the red light bulb substituting for the living flame of a candle, the haughty words of religious tracts silencing the outcries of grief, stones substituting for bread.

When I asked my readers to comment on this section of my work, responses were mixed. Some warned me that, with the inclusion of this section, I risked obliterating my experience and especially the experiences of my students. Others appreciated the section,
seeing in it a necessary academic move between the particular and the abstract. Faced with these competing responses, I worried if I should keep the section at all. It seemed to me that I had only two choices: to leave it as it was or to omit it entirely. Eventually, however, I saw that there was another choice available to me, and that was to situate this section and the discourse I use in it in relation to my personal experience, my students’ experiences, and the academy itself. To do so, though, I’ve decided it is not only imperative to preface the theorizing with focus both on a student paper (Angie’s) and my own experiences, but also to treat the section itself as a kind of performance, one that enacts for my readers the ways students strive when writing about grief to occupy different subject positions vis a vis multiple discourses.

Drawing on film theory, Charles Anderson calls this co-opting of discourses “suturing.” “Suture,” he writes, is a term denoting the process by which we, as viewers of a given scene or as participants in a particular discourse, move toward and are fastened onto the subject position” (60). While suturing has its dangers, it is not, as Anderson notes, in itself an entirely negative process:

Because meaning is essential to human beings and is dependent on being located within the discourse of an other, the process of suturing ourselves or allowing ourselves to be sutured into the discourse of an other is all but irresistible....Suture inserts us into discourses that appear to give our lives coherence, wholeness, and meaning, but in that process they also wound and break us, separate and alienate us, pacify us, and expose us to losses so severe that we can easily cease to be....[But these] losses [are] neither inevitable nor irreversible. In the struggle to represent, to name and rename, to revise personal and public histories,...writers creat[e] complex alternatives to the obscurely simplistic formulations of discourse, self, and world....[To] discourse with the other, when the other is the fluid text out of which one’s story emerges, is not to be trapped and wounded by the words of the other nor to trade being for meaning, but to be released by those words, to experience a convergence of meaning and being, and to name a self not broken by discourse, but, immersed in it, in charge by it, empowered by it. (Anderson 62)

With this idea of “suture,” one which identifies the shift in voices and subject positions as dangerous, but also as fluid and even empowering, I see my “lapse” into pure theorizing as my attempt to assume the subject position of the authoritative academic writer, to become a
member of the community to which I belong. At the same time, because I do so self-consciously and reflexively, and because I see this shift in discourses as one of many I will (and have) made throughout the course of this chapter, I understand it as an empowering intellectual move that allows me to perform and accomplish what I think my students strive to do when they write about grief—and that is to give their teacher what they think she wants (and indeed she does want): both the particular and the abstract.

This kind of suturing is different from the violent severance of experiences and discourses I felt throughout Paul's illness, when my academic writing, which I had not yet allowed to become enmeshed with my personal writing, felt not simply stiff and distant, but also threatening to my very sense of being. Instead of recovering my experiences and the voice of pain, it covered these over. An example of how I allowed this to happen occurred in the spring of 1997, three months before Paul's death. The night before I was to begin my doctoral exams, the phone rang and I heard Paul's desperate voice on the other end: "I have cancer," he said. At that moment panic rose into my throat, and while—in retrospect—I realize that the fear I felt was rooted in the loss I faced that moment, I released my panic in a short angry outburst: "Don't ruin my exams!" I blurted out to Paul, and then immediately began to cry.

Of course I didn't mean that my exams were more important than Paul or the sorrow he and I both felt at that moment. What I meant was that in this moment of intense personal pain and discourse, I could see no way of reconciling my academic work and discourse with what was happening in our lives. To use the student cliche again: My world had come crashing down. I couldn't control cancer; I had no control over death; and I certainly had no control over the intense grief I felt at this news. But I could control my exams.

I went on to take my exams, but I did so at some personal cost. During the next three days, as I worked at my computer at home, I laid aside the diary in which I was used to recording, over the last couple of years since the onset of Paul's active alcoholism, a record of his deterioration and my grief. I called no one and told no one about the devastating
news. Instead I immersed myself in the discourses of my discipline. When I finally turned in the last of my exam essays, my legs and ankles were painfully swollen and as I made my way back to my car, I could barely walk. The physical explanation for this phenomenon is that I had been sitting at my computer in the same position for hours on end. A psychosomatic explanation says something quite different, that I had incorporated grief, literally ingested it into my body. I had sublimated it to the academic task at hand, and was paying the price for its repression.

I have to admit, though, that—at some level—this turn to scholarly discourse empowered me, and allowed me to “survive” and float through the interval immediately following Paul’s news. I will never forget, however, the crass and inhuman response I had to that news, the silence at the other end of the phone, and the helpless feeling that accompanied all of this, a feeling springing from the disparate lives I was leading and the disparate discourses in which I was engaging. As I think of my response to Paul, I remember the colleague I mentioned above, whose response to a student who had just lost her grandmother and could not take an exam was equally as disturbing: “I’m sorry about your grandmother. You get a zero on the test.” I see in this response, and my own response to Paul, no transition, no bridge at all, between the loss itself and the academic task which supposedly supercedes it. My task now is not to let go of the suturing that allows immersion into academic discourses, but, by merging my students’ experiences and my own with such discourses, to position myself and my work relationally—more holistically—than I was able to do when Paul called me with his news.

**Walking the Path: Embodying Theory**

Shortly after Paul’s death, I attended an inter-denominational service sponsored by a local hospice commemorating “All Soul’s Day,” or the “celebration” of the dead. Seated to the side of the congregation in a metal folding chair (grief was playing to a packed audience that day), I listened as speaker after speaker entrusted the experience of loss and mourning to the wordsmiths, the versemakers and eulogists who embodied ragged grief in smooth
rhyme. Each mourner read solemnly from Xeroxed pages pressed stiffly against the lectern, as if the words in front of them might simply fly off and disappear — just as their loved ones had — leaving them speechless. Eyes downward, they stepped silently to the lectern, then back again to their seats, effacing themselves, as if concealing all expression of living would please the dead.

Then eighty-seven year old Mr. Cassava rose to speak. Moving slowly to the front, clutching an uneven sheaf of papers in his hand, he carefully picked out a path between pews and chairs. Arriving at the lectern, he smoothed out the sheets in front of him, tremblingly adjusted the microphone, groped at the switch of the small reading lamp that didn’t work, then looked up at the waiting congregation. “I want a drink of water!” a small child shouted to her mother in the back pew. Mr. Cassava waited impatiently for the child’s parents to shush her. Finally he said: “I want to read a letter that I wrote to my wife Grace after she died. We were married for sixty-seven years. The theme of my letter is appreciation.” Silence. Then a strong voice from a failing body: “Dear Grace...”

As Mr. Cassava read, he forgot about us and the child who raised her voice in an occasional wail. Grief animated his words, and he addressed Grace as if she were present: “During the depression,” Mr. Cassava wrote to Grace, “you became the sole breadwinner of the family when I couldn’t find work. You also cooked the meals, cleaned the house, decorated the tree, made all your clothes and some of mine too. [The very tie Mr. Cassava wore, we learned, was Grace’s own creation.] You read to the kids, ironed my clothes, and did everything for me....And I didn’t know it.” Here the congregation rumbled together in appreciative laughter, as Mr. Cassava’s wonder at his wife’s life and accomplishments hit him afresh, and he smiled in stunned surprise.

More silence. Scuffling feet near the front as someone shifted in the pew; a cough from the back. Mr. Cassava was suddenly crying. The flames of a hundred memorial candles rippled on the altar. “Grace,” he started, stopped, started again: “Grace...the hospice counselor encouraged me to talk to you about dying while you were still alive, but I
didn’t, because I thought putting it in words would make it happen.” A page fell off of the podium. The minister picked it up and placed it back on the pile of paper, but Mr. Cassava, ignoring it, remained silent.

When the service was over, the congregation gathered around a long table in the vestibule where photographs of departed relatives had been placed lovingly by those who had lost them. When I asked Mr. Cassava which one was Grace, he pointed to a picture of a white-haired woman with soft cheeks, and dressed in brilliant blue. “That’s my wife. The original picture I had wasn’t so good,” he said, “so I had that one blown up.” Several of the congregation gathered around the portrait, and as they peered at her face, the silence was broken by the details that were Grace.

The details of the departed; the personal effects: These are not just the eyes and nose and mouth, the clothing, wedding ring, scars and skin. They are also the noise of the image itself, the explosion of sensation onto the bereft, or Felman’s “scandal of the speaking body” — the disruption of long silences, the uttering of names, and the struggle for the words that enable utterance. Here too are the closing and opening of distance, discomposure and composure, the approach towards and retreat from the dead, decomposition and the act of composing, chaos and order. Within the picture’s frame, and the framework of the service itself, these elements clashed and merged. This is the essence and process of critical distance, finding one’s way between opposing spheres, shaping experience (death and existence) along the continuum between those spheres, merging theory with practice, belief with action.

I had begun thinking about this traversing of critical spaces and distances when, during the summer of Paul’s death, I met with a minister to arrange a memorial service of my own. Having arrived at the meeting with an outline, I recited the details of the service as I had envisioned it. Sitting silently, the minister waited for a few minutes after I had finished and then tactfully offered an alternative plan, reminding me that the service was not so much about Paul as about me and the other persons who would attend. I remember being taken aback by this announcement, and then stunned not only by his agility at planning, but
also by his awareness of audience and his acute appreciation for the multiple functions of
the service and the narration of grief, the different discourses involved. These were func-
tions and discourses I had only sensed, but had not been able to formulate. Recalling my
mother’s dictates about her own post-death arrangements, I had conceived of the service as
a straightforward affair, a “simple” (my mother’s words) event, certainly without the ex-
 pense and frills of the kinds of funerals my mother had disdained. “I want to be cremated,”
my mother had announced brusquely at Thanksgiving in 1983, a year before her death.
Clearing off the dishes and placing them in the sink, she added abruptly: “And after that,
don’t make a fuss; do whatever is most convenient.”

And we did. My mother did not want a funeral, and we didn’t give her one. Instead,
a couple of days after her death on a cold December morning my sister and I placed her
cremated ashes in the grave next to my father’s, a plot of land staked out with both their
names and tombstones since 1959 when my father had passed away. Paul and my sister’s
husband (the only others in attendance) stood at a short distance from the grave as Nini and
I deposited the “simple” box containing the ashes into the square hole dug for that purpose.
As I had been the first to arrive at the cemetery that morning, I had been the recipient of
those ashes, placed in my hands by a gravedigger. I was surprised when the short man in
jeans, cap and work jacket silently handed me the box; I also remember the shock I felt at
the weightlessness of the ashes themselves.

Later, as we stood at the grave, not having planned anything for the occasion, the
four of us looked at each other silently and then laughed in that embarrassed, relieved way
survivors of the deceased do. We were grieving and probably in shock. Yet the snappy wind
at our backs and the muted sun on our cheeks felt good. We couldn’t help but smile at the
many folding chairs the cemetery personnel had put out for the anticipated crowd who had
not been invited. At the top of the hill overlooking the site, the gravediggers sat in their
truck, waiting to inter the ashes as soon as we left. We saw their shovels and other tools in
the truck bed and noticed how the men in the cab politely averted their gaze whenever we
looked up.

When my father died we had done things differently. I had been eight at the time of that first loss, and recalled a more public venue of mourning — the ladies of the church bearing casseroles and other assorted dishes into our home, the open casket, my father's hands entwined in rosary beads, the rites of the Christian burial, the Catholic Mass with priests in black vestments, altar boys swinging smoking canisters of incense, the prism light of stained-glass windows, my mother's black-veiled face. At the cemetery family and friends occupied rows of chairs and the priest performed the burial rites. It was summer time, hot, and perspiration soaked our backs. My long braid, having been snagged on the chair, tugged at my head when I moved. I thought it was my father’s ghost.

There was no obvious hint of ghosts or mystification at my mother’s burial, however. She wanted none of that sort of “hocus-pocus” and display. After my father’s death, she not only left the church, but she seldom cried in our presence. Bearing up under grief was a virtue she touted, and I remember well her admiration of Jacqueline Kennedy’s restraint after President Kennedy’s death in 1963. In my memory, the veiled Jackie and my mother have somehow merged and become interchangeable. While certainly ritual aplenty characterized the Kennedy burial, its public format, and the containment of grief in front of that public, remained for me the most important “virtues” of not just the Kennedy funeral, but also of grief itself. For this reason, I suppose, I had constructed a straightforward, no-nonsense kind of service for Paul, one that, eliciting few tears, would permit only dignified grief and public speech, leaving little room for the insertion of personal emotions into public space, and negating any opportunity for serendipitous, spontaneous, or excessive displays of sadness. I had, in short, disregarded completely the power of not only craft and presentation, but also of mourning itself.

The minister, on the other hand, gently usurping my role as service-maker, transformed the event into a performance of song, ritual, and narration, a textured presentation designed simultaneously for public consumption and private participation. We were to be
moved. Accordingly, each piece of the service was timed, expanded or condensed as necessary — not to give a false impression of Paul’s life — but rather to aesthetically transform his personal effects, to collect and contain them within the genre of the memorial service, and to invite expression of grief. Attention was given to the material conditions of the ceremony, the bodies present in the pews, the proper timing between songs, the placement of the ashes on the altar, and both the emotional and physical needs of those attending. “At this point in the service, right after the songs and my opening remarks,” the minister said, “they will want to sit back and listen. You don’t want them to get tired or bored. This is the time for stories. And bring pictures too,” he added.

Finally, he gently and respectfully suggested changes in the eulogy I had written, rearranging it so that it seemed less like a list. In this way, the service covered a variety of rhetorical and emotional grounds, now distancing the writer and audience from the moment of death and the body, now inviting us to approach that body and its personal effects. What the minister envisioned was not a linear and contained model of grief and remembering, but rather a more organic model, one that honored and grew out of the social nature of collective mourning, accounted for the needs of the living, and gave equal value to remembering and representation. To this end, the rewriting of my eulogy and the reshaping of the service itself promised the kind of immersion and emergence to which both Fleckenstein and Anderson refer when they describe how discourses and material worlds — constructing and constructed within texts — are contingent upon and evolving from one another, taking shape and moving fluidly between and among genres.

This pathway between genres (between narration and eulogy, between invocation and obituary, between reflecting and reporting, between theory and practice) separates and connects memory from/with memorial. In walking that pathway, the bereft writer who strives towards public utterance moves between the body of the dead and the service that memorializes it, back and forth between what the poet Mark Doty calls “white-hot” emotion and public display. The teacher who assists the student along this pathway serves as
both director and caretaker. In relation to the bereaved, his/her role as facilitator of emotion replicates, to some degree at least, the roles "death professionals" play in relation to the newly bereaved. Taken literally, death professionals, as Bradbury points out, are the morticians and funeral directors—mostly male—who in the nineteenth century replaced the so-called "death wives" (counterparts to midwives) who had up to that point laid out the dead and prepared them for burial. (Bradbury 13)

Since writing teachers mediate grief through form and other avenues of re-presentation, they also act as death-wives. Not willing to disassociate themselves entirely from the material and emotional circumstances of a student's life, and reluctant to sublimate the production of memory and its attendant emotions to pure image, writing teachers who facilitate the composing of grief accompany students back and forth between production and representation. Here we might compare the image of the dead body removed from family and home and prepared cosmetically for viewing to academic texts that are valued only as finished products. Such bodies and texts are the consequences of modernist attitudes towards the dead, and also towards writing. Writing teachers who function between the role of death professional and death wife undermine the disengagement of the body from texts and the lives of the classroom.

As facilitator of distance and emotion in student texts, the writing teacher/director has the opportunity, I believe, to perform ambiguously gendered and multifaceted roles in relation to student grief narratives. Resisting the tendency to disregard memory and emotions in favor (solely) of generic conventions (the representation of the body as opposed to its living impulses), he/she renders reciprocal rather than oppositional the relationship between traditionally masculinized and feminized approaches to grief, dying, and writing itself. In this context, we might conceive of the teacher as a kind of groundskeeper, the figurative manager of a discursive cemetery. Welcoming the bereaved to the burial grounds, the groundskeeper facilitates grief by containing and retaining encrypted memories and bodies; he/she buries the pollution and disorder of decomposition (the body and text in...
decay) in the smooth and ordered ground that cover them (grief and text in composure). A prominent figure in this “cemetery,” the teacher assists the student in maintaining the grounds, erecting monuments, making gravesites accessible, enabling ritual, and fertilizing the haunted grounds themselves, those perennial sites of not only burial and repression, but also of resurrection and revisitation.

Thus the teacher as caretaker/director is attentive to the physical layout of the text as well as to the material circumstances of bodies at work in texts — both bodies written and bodies writing. Sensitive to both the physical manifestation of grief and the real and discursive consequences of death itself (decomposition and chaos; the disintegration of social ties and kinship bonds; the eruption of memory; the disruption of the text itself), teachers in this sense attend also to the emotional and psychological spaces of grief narration. Encouraging both representation and revisitation, image and memory — teachers who facilitate grief narration learn to read student texts (the burial grounds) for both their personal effects and public rituals. Such texts, after all, are — among other things - services, monuments, wakes, and cemeteries.

In this context we may think again of the hospice service during which Mr. Cassava spoke. There the bereaved struggled for both words with which, and genres in which, to represent the dead. Sometimes they co-opted the work of others (the poets and obituary writers); at other times they drew on personal memory (the details of Grace’s person and life). Negotiating the critical distance between the unthinkable and the concrete, the unspeakable and the spoken, each positioned him or herself along the continuum between loss and articulation, trauma and ritual, private and public. Those who preceded Mr. Cassava to the podium, encasing their sorrow in the often repeated words of well known authors, drew on kinds of scripts. In this way — like all of us who have ever responded to death, or have lost speech to grief — they found words, ritual, and composure in cliches and verses, the kinds of accessible tropes and language that function, in some sense at least, as not only “words against death,” but also about and for the dead.
Partially secular, partially religious, the service, while embodying ritual, also erased it. An interdenominational affair, it extracted song and ceremony from a variety of both religious and secular sources, honoring individual beliefs while making (or striving to make) those beliefs — and the emotion of grief itself — accessible to all. In this way, the service itself replicates the efforts of students, most of whom — although sometimes referring to their own religious groundings — enact in their narratives an awareness of the multiple belief systems of their audiences. Moving thus from private to public, they eulogize and memorialize, but also narrate and evaluate. Doing so, they too emulate the roles of service director and keeper of the burial grounds, accompanying the reader from the death incident itself and disposal of the body to the public maintenance of encrypted spaces and memories, as well as the discourses on which, Foucault points out, the body depends. (Bradbury 118).

Indeed, given the potpourri of discourses and rites available to students who narrate grief, it is not unreasonable to draw further parallels between public memorials and student grief narratives. It may be useful to note, in fact, that the catchall character of the services I have described above emulates memory itself, both its sudden and startling emergence and its opaque repressed presence. The memorial service, the burial site, and the grief essay, in this respect at least, all function as kinds of locales, or contingent sites, rather than single unitary events. Spaces dependent upon rather than separate from, one another, each “event” is characterized by both abruptness and continuity, as each attempts to represent not only the twists and turns of memory, but also the beliefs and experiences of individual writers.

If, for example, we recall the hospice service, we can see its conglomeration of images, sights, sounds and bodies — the ritual lighting of candles; the various colors and shapes of bouquets laid on the altar by individual grievers; the child wailing; the shifting bodies and boundaries; movements and sounds of composure and discomposure; words found and fixed; words slipping away, pages falling from the podium; the portraits of the dead and the expressions of the living in response to the dead: muted, cliched, spontaneous,
profound; emotions in conflict, laughter and pain, disbelief and acceptance, understanding and resistance; numbness; the reconstruction of the dead, their life stories, their hands at work; the texts of the living and the deceased, texts answering each other from past and present; texts growing out of or dependent upon other texts; private made public, and the public made private.

Privately Public: Grief goes to School

“[D]istance can collapse in a moment as the image of the beloved returns unexpectedly and the heart opens to embrace the vanishing ghost.” (Robert Waxler, “A Father’s Tale,” 13)

The often treacherous line between private and public, the fear that crossing that line engenders, and the grieving lives of many teachers were made evident to me as I began my search last year for a position in Composition and Rhetoric. My curriculum vitae, my cover letter, and my writing samples all revealed my interest in student narratives about grief and death. In the MLA interviewing rooms, where several faculty (and sometimes graduate students) gathered to interview prospective candidates, this interest often drew compelling discussion and questions about theories of loss, novels and poems about grief, and even films about death and dying. “What is the relationship between women’s elegies and tragedy?”; “What do you think Shoshana Felman would say about that?”; “I’m wondering how this might compare to Milton’s Lycidas?”; “What about the coverage of the Columbine Shootings?”; “Have you seen the movie, ‘Truly, Madly, Deeply?’ What do you think of images of grieving in that film?”

Other responses had to do with the ethics of inviting such personal writing in the composition classroom, as well as its positive or negative role in preparing students for academic writing. “How do you get them to write on these topics?”; “Where do you move to from such personal subject matter?”; “How do you think this plays out in other classes?”

All of these questions occurred in a public forum, and were entirely appropriate to such a space. These were not the occasions in which sudden display of grief would be expected,
nor would such a display be sanctioned. Even I, who have insistently included in my work references to my own loss and grief, downplayed these elements during these discussions. To do otherwise would have violated certain unspoken cultural expectations about the proper time and place for grief display.

Private moments, one-on-one interviews and conversations occurring during the campus visits that followed, however, yielded different kinds of comments and questions. I was struck during these times how willingly and even eagerly faculty who knew about my work on loss and grief shared their own experiences, many of which were recent or ongoing. At one school I visited, sitting in a dark but comfortable faculty office, I listened to the account of a professor whose mother lay dying in the hospital even as we talked. At no time in that "interview" did we discuss other issues that might be pertinent to my hiring. Instead we discussed the details of dying and grief, and not only the difficulties of talking about these details with colleagues, but of introducing them to the classroom and our students.

At another interview, a professor shared with me the story of his deceased son, whom he had lost to heroine addiction. Having read about Paul in an essay I had written, and the circumstances of his addiction, this professor could identify with my own particular loss, and I with his. At lunch together, away from the campus and his colleagues, we talked very specifically about the slow progression of illness and death when alcohol and drugs were involved, and recalled in particular the changes in the bodies and behaviors of the alcoholic and addict. While we spent a few short minutes at the beginning of our session talking about my potential role in the department if I were to be hired, most of our conversation focused on grief and loss.

Each campus that I visited also had its own particular losses, and these losses too came to the foreground of conversations I had with faculty and others who interviewed me. As if waiting for the opportunity, many seemed eager to talk about the colleague who had died of cancer, the dean who had died in an accident, the professor in another department who lay dying in the hospital. These were conversations I am certain would not have occ-
curred had my research been on another topic. Such conversations showed me what I sensed was already true – that the narration of grief is a social practice demanding response. Testifying and responding are, in fact, at the heart of grief narration and this almost compulsive telling. At the schools I visited, such testimony and response occurred fairly easily when those involved felt safe to do so and when the groundwork for grief sharing had been laid.

However, during these same campus visits, in the context of the classroom, I noticed something different, as faculty who had shared with me in more private situations withheld their experiences from their colleagues and especially from their students. This happened during the teaching demonstrations I had prepared for my campus visits. For these demonstrations, I had designed an exercise that would involve both students and faculty in writing. In most cases, I was asked to take over the writing class of another instructor during its regularly scheduled class period. As hiring committees observed me, I first asked both students and faculty to write for five minutes about “what was on their mind at this very moment.” This request usually resulted in a few minutes of baffled silence from students: “What’s on my mind? ANYthing?” some would ask. When I replied in the affirmative they eventually settled down to writing. I noticed, however, that the professors on the hiring committee had, for the most part, begun to write almost immediately.

When five minutes were up I asked both students and faculty to either read or talk from their writing. The students responded with concrete “things on their mind:” “I need a new battery for my car;” “The exam I have next period;” “My stomach growling;” “How tired I am.” “How nervous you must be doing this.” Eventually, but not surprisingly to me, students also spoke in more personal terms about losses or potential losses: ”My cousin who died in an accident last spring;” “My mother’s leukemia;” “My father’s car accident.” As a few students began to speak in these terms, other students seemed more willing to join in, and I noticed that those who felt at first they had nothing to say would now offer up “the death of my grandfather/grandmother” as an issue on their minds.

With the faculty, though, I heard something different. Even though I had spoken
with several of them earlier in the day about death and losses they had recently experienced, or were currently concerned with, their responses not only avoided these topics, but dwelled mainly on the nonpersonal or abstract: "Censorship"; "Hate Speech;" "The increase of careerism in universities;" Among these were one or two more concrete concerns, concerns that allowed students a glimpse into at least the professional lives of their teachers, but certainly not into their personal lives: "The deadline for the article I'm writing;" "Preparing for my next class;" Only one person offered up this concrete statement, which elicited a chuckle from students: "The big screen TV I bought, felt guilty about and returned."

After listing some of these responses from both students and teachers on the board, I then asked all of them to write for five minutes about their beliefs. "What do you believe in?" I asked. At the end of this exercise, both faculty and students responded mainly in abstract terms: "Family;" "Friendship;" "Tolerance;" "Love;" "Being yourself;" "Taking Risks;" "God;" "Freedom;" "Honesty;"

My next step was to ask them to connect the concrete with the abstract, to take the kinds of particulars they wrote about when they responded to "What's on your mind?" and apply them to "What do you believe in?" To do this, I showed them how the first questions had elicited concrete responses, and the second had elicited abstract responses, and the differences between being concrete and abstract. I told them that good essays move back and forth between the concrete and abstract. Then I asked them to take one of the abstract beliefs they had listed and to write, using concrete description and details, about a time they had, or had not, acted on their beliefs.

The point of this exercise was, of course, to show students the difference between the concrete and the abstract and to have them use detail to particularize what seemed general and vague. It was also a brainstorming exercise, designed to help students find material to write about. For the next fifteen minutes, they wrote about enacting or not enacting one of the beliefs they had listed. When they finished, it did not surprise me when several of them had chosen to write about the particulars of experiences such as Angie's, times they
had once had a chance to act in a certain way towards loved ones who had died, and either had or had not. These accounts arose from such abstract beliefs as “family,” “trust,” “friendship,” “love,” “integrity,” and “honesty.”

As I ended this exercise, I never had the opportunity to ask the teachers in the room what they had written during this final step. I somehow suspect, however, that they generally stayed in the abstract or wrote about less personal topics than their students did. My point here is not to fault them for this, but rather to show how complicated writing about, and exposing, grief is. In the classroom situation in which these exercises took place, there were boundaries between professor and student to be attended to, and worries about crossing professional lines not just with students, but also with colleagues. I believe in this sense that there was, as Erving Goffman would certainly point out, a performative element to their responses, one that maintained for professors a distant and authoritative image of “self” that may have been altered with the show of either emotion or the sharing of common ground with their students. I understand classroom boundaries and respect the need to enforce them. I have to admit, too, that—while I have shared some of my losses in similar exercises in my own classroom—I have done so sparingly.

I still wonder, though, how these sessions might have been different had faculty joined in on the same level with students and talked more openly and more particularly about those experiences of grief and loss they had shared with me only moments before the teaching demonstration. For me it seemed a strange moment of disconnection, and I remembered something Jonathan Silin wrote about our reluctance to incorporate discussion of personal loss into our teaching:

... [T]he hospital vigils, times of reassuring connection and painful separation, are not shameful adult secrets that occur in a different world from the one we share with [students]. Nor are we different people as we move between sickroom and classroom. I keep asking myself what this all means for the lives [students] and teachers in classrooms.... Perhaps it is not that the curriculum can prepare [students] for death, but that we might choose to live differently with them when keeping this knowledge consciously in front of us. For when we attempt to exclude death, we also exclude the life-affirming understanding of human temporality.... This turning away from
affective and material realities alienates teachers from their work and students from the curriculum. (39-41)

Silin’s comment also made me think again of Gardner’s claim that “containment” is one of the major motivations behind teaching in English Departments: containment of writing, containment within genres, containment in our deportment and what we say and do in the classroom, and also in the discussions we allow from students. Angie’s paper pushes against this kind of containment, disrupting formal classroom discussion by allowing into the academic space the taboo topics of alcoholism (especially in the sense that she had sworn secrecy about the subject to her grandfather) and death. It also changes the formula of classroom interaction. If, in the exercise I described above, I had had more time, and we had focused during the whole period on one student’s writing about loss and grief, the traditional classroom formula of statement and response, assertions of reserved “selves” and cautious reactions to those assertions, would have been altered.

But this was, after all, only a “demonstration,” a kind of show artificially constructed for a particular purpose. While the admission of loss and personal lives into the classroom vis à vis student writing pushed the form of the demonstration, it still allowed for containment and the formal separation not only between the personal and the public, but also (and especially) between student and teacher.

The Ashes That Would Not Fit: (In)Forming Loss, Contextualizing Death

“For some reason, maybe it was hope, I could swear I kept seeing him breathing”

(Angie, “Absolut Princess”)

Shortly before Paul’s memorial service, I gingerly removed his ashes, enclosed securely in a plastic bag, from the box I had picked up at the funeral home days earlier. I was struck by how they had conformed to the container, and —as I balanced them in my hand, where they formed a heavy, solid block with square corners—they were no longer recognizable as either body or remains. My task at that moment was to reshape the block so that it would fit the decorative urn the minister of the chapel had placed on the altar for the pur-
poses of displaying the remains. In a bittersweet, comical moment, my sister and I struggled with the gray block of ashes, squeezing it and manipulating it so that it might adhere to the shape of the urn. Try as we might, though, we could not change the solidified square, could not slide it into the embracing curvatures of the urn. As I worked mightily with the remains, my sister finally shouted, "Stop! If that bag breaks, you’ll regret it for the rest of your life!"

As the remains resumed their residence and former shape in the anonymous brown box (as opposed to the eye-catching urn that would have foregrounded them) my sister and I laughed. We were relieved to have humor interrupt, for an instant, the long day of mourning. Weeks after the service, though, as I once again sat down to a semester’s first batch of student papers, I saw the situation and my sister’s warning in a new light. On the one hand, the potential breakage of the bag and the scattering of the effects signify complications of personal writing about death and loss, in which opening the bag releases traces of trauma and the effects of grief. On the other hand, the fear of breakage and spillage also indicates the wish to restrain and contain the remains within pre-scripted forms, forms that also disallow flexibility, or the reshaping of the remains to fit different containers.

This inclination towards restraint and containment also reminds me of the ways that the remains of the dead, rigidified and restricted to “safe” areas away from the living, erase the living contexts of both the dead and the living. Gregory Clark opposes this kind of ossification of form when he writes about the need to allow contextualization of genres so that they not only accommodate personal experience, but also relational experience. While interviewing Kenneth Burke once, Clark was impressed by what he calls Burke’s “lateral thinking,” his situatedness in relationships and context. When Burke talked about rhetoric, genre, and his own work, he always, Clark says, contextualized his comments in terms of family, friends and the world around him. Burke’s inclination towards relational theorizing compelled Clark to look at his own scholarly writing and how, while his father was dying, the language he used in his writing, his adherence to a strict “scholarly” form of discourse, revealed an “impoverishment of ethics.” Admiring Burke’s contextualized and relational
mode of theorizing, Clarke compares him to an artist he knows:

A friend I have known since childhood is a sculptor who has carved and displayed his own coffin. He is forty and healthy, and does not expect to die soon, yet he made that coffin and put it at the center of his recent show. I read it there as a text that contextualized his ideas about art and life in an identity that is intricately constituted in relationships. And as a reader I found that the relationship with him that this text enabled made both his ideas and his identity, as well as forgotten aspects of my own, immediately accessible to me. The coffin complicated his aesthetic and philosophical commitments by embedding them in his personal history and relationships, which rendered them as his version of an experience others may share...Coffins are conventional forms, but he carved into the conventionally blank sides and the lid of his coffin a network of words and images and objects that entangle the identity of the person it will contain with those many others it will not. In doing that, the coffin presents his ideas and his identity as inherently interdependent, an assertion that invites those who see it to establish a relationship with his contextualized identity, and to see their own identity similarly. On the sides he carved names, dates, and places for progenitors three generations before his parents; for his parents and siblings; for the house where he was born and where he now lives; for his birth and baptism. He carved phrases, images, and artifacts that chronicle his life with the woman he loves, and the birth and life of each of their children. And there is blank space yet on the sides, for my friend is still alive. On the lid he carved statements of his guiding ideas, ideas that, because of the way the reader’s eye reads the coffin, are read in the context of the relational history from which they came. He pressed the boundaries of convention not by changing the coffin form but by writing on it where conventionally nothing is written...A coffin is a genre, and my friend used it but pushed through its boundaries a bit by writing a context over its decontextualizing form. (133)

I love this description of the coffin, since it so thoroughly underscores the issues I have addressed in this chapter, and will continue to address in chapters ahead. As I read this anecdote, I think about the genres and discourses in which students such as Angie write and the ways in which they reshape our expectations of them. I also consider how much of students texts and contexts (not to mention my own) can and should be read both experientially and relationally, across borders and disciplines, across theories, and even across institutions. While the coffin itself, emblematic of death, at first seems to represent the containment of personal effects, the outward writing on the coffin represents a pressing outward of these effects, evidence of their fluidity and the roles stories of the dead play in the lives of
the living, who stand on the outside and read the coffin. Most of all, the empty space on the outside of the coffin for writing after death signifies hope and the continuation of life, as survivors not only write the lives of their dead, but their lives in relation to the dead as well.
CHAPTER III.

"A TESTIMONY OF CONVERSATIONS"

"The Concrete Sentence:" A Dialogue Begins

Aviva Freedman reminds us that, "as teachers, we are mostly concerned with how our students fall short, while as researchers, the more we uncover the more awed we are by the complexity and sophistication involved in what we deem commonplace" (179). In this chapter, I support Freedman's point by reading and interpreting a student's loss narrative in detail. The final draft of this paper was submitted as part of the student's final portfolio for the first year writing class I taught in 1998. The paper was the writer's first for the class, a response to a personal narrative assignment. For this assignment, I invited students to write on topics of their choice. While we brainstormed subject matter in class and discussed possible topics in individual conferences, each student wrote about whatever he or she wanted.

In this chapter, and the one that follows, female students narrate stories about the deaths of prominent male figures in their lives. I situate these papers back to back in contingent chapters to show how these papers are not isolated pieces written separately and completely individualistically, but rather how they are written relationally. I have found, for the most part, that grief narratives written in first year composition classes result in, or are a part of, sustained processes of testifying and response; when one student writes about a loss he or she has experienced, others also write about such losses, but do so in ways that draw on, or evolve from, the first paper about loss. These papers, and the discussions about them in classrooms, are reciprocal and dialogic.

Janet's narrative, entitled "The Concrete Sentence," concerns the death of the student's grandfather, who died of cancer during Janet's senior year of high school. The paper opens
with the solitary narrator standing in the cemetery overlooking rows of uniform tombstones, as the narrator discusses how the uniformity of these tombstones and the cemetery landscape in front of her disguises—covers over—her grandfather as an individual and hides the specifics of his life. The setting of the narrative never really shifts. Although later in the essay Janet details some of her grandfather’s life and her relationship to him, she never actually removes the reader from the cemetery site where the narrator stands.

While Janet made some revisions in this paper, at the end of the semester, she retained the essay essentially as she first wrote it. The subsequent paper in Chapter IV, written by Erika, and entitled “The Accident,” was, I am convinced, composed both in response to Janet’s and in dialogue with it. During class, Janet and Erika not only read each other’s work in peer response groups, but also, since Janet had agreed to workshop her paper aloud to the class, Erika had an opportunity to read the paper a second time. Meanwhile, Erika herself had been writing a piece about the virtues and strengths of her mother and stepfather. After the peer group reading and workshop, however, she quickly revised her piece so that it focused less on the attributes of her parents and more on the accident that killed her stepfather, a focus that I’m convinced, and as I shall demonstrate in Chapter IV, submerged in the original version, and brought to the surface largely in response to Janet’s paper.

Janet’s “A Concrete Sentence” is a fairly tightly crafted and symmetrical essay. Approximately five pages long, the essay begins and ends at the site in the cemetery and with references to tombstones and the permanence of words “carved in stone.” Playing on the notion of indelible and “deep” writing (deeply inscribed in stone), the title of the essay indicates eternity and inevitability, the almost prison-like nature of death (as in being sentenced to it forever), and also the nature of her grandfather’s particular grave, its marble marker and the perceived permanence of the name and dates inscribed on it. Janet takes issue with the frozen “face” of the stone, suggesting throughout her essay that it stands in for, replaces and sublimates, both the body and man, not only their corporeal qualities, but also the myriad of details that once individualized them. In this sense, she gropes for ways
to overcome the obliterating effects of the words “frozen” on stone, their ability, by virtue of their almost overdetermined repetitive and cliched qualities, to render anonymous the tombstone and the man who lies beneath it.

Here again we might recall the hospice service during which Mr. Cassava, interrupting the recitation of canonized texts that preceded his tribute to Grace (the poems and lines of famous authors), shattered the cycle of repeated and familiar words with the sudden insertion and “noisy” delineation of his very specific personal experience and his relationship to Grace—their life together and particularly the physical details of her body as shown in her photo. These are the kinds of insertions and details that Janet omits, at least initially from her paper, but inserts later at my request, albeit somewhat hesitantly and, at times, even sketchily. What Janet struggles with, especially in her use of the image of the tombstone and the “concrete sentence,” is the seeming opposition between memorializing and memory, the difference between death and life, the public practice of putting the dead away under uniform stones as opposed to the private, covert, and often silent manifestations of grief and the resurrection of the dead in the emotional and psychic life of the survivor.

At the heart of “The Concrete Sentence” is the writer/griever’s struggle with articulation, her attempt to breathe life into words, to work both inside and outside of the cultural scripts (the genres, tombstones, obituaries, ceremonies, and eulogies) that often contain those words and the bodies they construct. Considering Janet’s later difficulty in revising this piece, the “concrete sentence” also refers to the problematic nature of writing itself, its impulse—at least in cases of grief construction—to memorialize, to function as a kind of tombstone inscription, one that can be difficult to alter, especially once the words are “carved in stone.” Despite the notion of permanence and stasis implicit in the “concrete sentence,” however, not to mention Janet’s seemingly coherent and tightly constructed text itself, Janet’s images belie the anxiety and movement at work beneath the text, much as the tombstone covers over the decomposition of the body and the disintegration and dissipation of the body’s features.
Thus, while the surface the essay emulates the uniformity of tombstones marking graves, it ripples with an undercurrent of decomposure, just as the writer's skin, as we shall see, hides the "confusion beneath" it. Here Janet undertakes an epistemological quest when she hints at the way the uniform gravestones obscure knowledge of individual bodies, and also asks the questions: What is true and what is not? Foregrounding in these opening lines the grandfather's voice and body, she introduces a decided sense of skepticism to her essay:

"How do you know? Is it carved in stone?" My grandfather taught all us grandchildren to say that to someone when we doubted whatever they said was true.

My tired toes, free from the imprisonment of uncomfortable shoes, were tickled by the softness of new grass—like an angora carpet—and earthworms wiggling in between each one. I stood quietly, cautiously like a stone and thought. The peaceful stillness was in almost perfect contrast to the stormy confusion inside my skin. The seven-dollar sunglasses perched casually on my nose filtered out most of the rays of an unknowing sun, as a playful breeze danced through my hair, down my neck, and billowed out my clothes. I gazed across the calm horizon and saw stones, so many stones, like the pieces on a game board strategically placed, just so, as if according to a master's plan.

The issue of what one knows or doesn't know in the opening sentences obviously refers to the writer's disbelief at her grandfather's death, her wondering if it can be true. It also refers to the authority of cemetery stones, and other sorts of generic memorializing, that dictate in the most abbreviated manner the details of someone's life. Here the writer consciously works her grandfather's own authoritative words into the theme of the essay, words that, to her at least, inscribed in memory, are thus "carved in stone." In this sense, if "the concrete sentence" of the tombstone —the reductive inscription of details on the surface—erases both the speech and wisdom of the man buried beneath, Janet calls to question not only the truth of the stone but also notions of authority — sacred or otherwise. Embedded in her opening lines, in fact, is a kind of understated loss that not only points to the grandparent's death, but also signals loss of certain knowledge, the kind of knowing that has been challenged by her grandfather's death.
At the heart of Janet’s essay, then, as in Angie’s, is an epistemological crisis, one that is rooted in the fear of decomposition and erasure. Such a crisis and the anxieties that fuel it are evident in the way the narrator moves from the “sure” knowledge of her grandfather’s words to the juxtaposition of life with signifiers of death. As she continues her opening paragraph, Janet segues fairly abruptly from the signifying effects of words carved in stone to a somewhat panoramic view of the cemetery itself. In doing so, she combines suggestions of imprisonment and death with images of freedom and life: her toes freed from the imprisonment of shoes, her body subject to the tactile sensations no longer available to the dead, she feels the soft grass tickle the bottom of her feet. Evoking the image of earthworms as a signal of decomposition, Janet alludes to the decaying effects of death, even as she consciously wrenches the image out of its common context (“the worms crawl in, the worms crawl out”) and into the context of the living body, its senses, and its tactile appreciation for its sensual environment, as the worms tickle her toes.

Enhancing for the reader both an appreciation of life and the sensations that accompany it, the living observer and narrator, with the intensity of her own bodily senses doubled, assumes the departed’s share of tactile pleasure. In doing so, she inadvertently refers to the death of sensual pleasure in the deceased body, thus resurrecting the notion of death even as she works mightily here to depict life. While life is juxtaposed with death here, absent from the buried body is not only a sense of tactile pleasure, but also any hope of pleasure restored in a spiritual afterlife, some post-death state that promises a renewal of “self” and/or soul, or the possibility of post-life sensibility. While Janet alludes to “God” later in the essay, she does not prominently feature in her narrative either a religious ritual or the Platonic/Miltonic notion of “the relationship between the immortal soul and the human body” (Bradbury 111). Rather, what characterizes this part of the essay is not so much spiritual outlook as a kind of “looked-at-ness”. In this context, the writer is not just fixated on life in the present (toes in earth, earthworms wriggling), but also on a construction of a visual self, one that demands from the reader a kind spectatorship and that evokes a certain cinematic sensibility.
We see, for example, the young narrator — as if standing outside of herself—viewing herself as the solitary character she constructs in her essay, her “seven-dollar sunglasses perched on [her] nose.” Despite this last reference to money and the cheapness of her glasses, Janet does not, I think, refer so much to class status as to the conscious individualization of the narrator. The not-so-pricey sunglasses, the casual and solitary stance of the narrator, and the summer dress blowing in the breeze, imply a departure from both ritual (for which one might dress up) and the social groups from which ritual springs (church, family, neighborhood, etc.). Here we are meant to see the narrator as a solitary griever, eminently significant in her relationship with her grandfather, and not yet positioned in relation to other family members or social groups.

Significantly, we also join the narrator as gazers, mute spectators on the periphery who watch the character in grief, the young woman who—rather dramatically—stands on the hill overlooking the tombstones. We continue to watch as narrator/writer/bereaved becomes a kind of protagonist in her essay, “gaz[ing] across the calm horizon,” feeling the “playful breeze dance through [her] hair” and “billow out her clothes.” In some ways it could be said that what Janet constructs here is the Emersonian individual, the figure enacting the American myth of individuality, a solitary figure who bears up under grief alone and stands outside of social relationships, family, or cultural institutions. This kind of construction of a solitary sojourner is enhanced by the images to which it is opposed in this essay—the uniformity of the cemetery and the facelessness of the stone which cannot be differentiated from the group of cemetery markers. While these conform, the writer implies, the narrator does not.

What strikes me as particularly significant about this scene is its reliance not so much on personal experience as on the kinds of media-driven images of grief filtered through the lenses of television and movie cameras. Students such as Janet, who write about loss, may very well perceive of themselves as dramatic characters upon whom the camera is focused. This kind of visual imaging in essays results, I believe, from the fact that many first
year students, especially those, of comfortable middle class backgrounds where death may have not yet played a prominent role, often have no other framework than visual media in which to situate their experiences of loss. This is especially true if family and religious rituals “around” death are absent, in which case the writer constructs experience in relation to the media images that arise from tragedies such as the Columbine High shootings or the Oklahoma bombings. We might think here also of the countless television shows and movies that feature lone characters standing at gravesides, hair uplifted and clothes buffeted by the wind. In these scenes, while often preceded by ritualistic funeral rites shared by family and friends, the bereaved ends up standing alone, addressing the dead as well as (indirectly) the viewer him/herself.

This does not mean that the student who writes about death “cinematically,” using for effect the occasional “close-up shot” that features the writer as a central and solitary figure, is totally self-absorbed and turned inward. On the contrary, we the readers/viewers (students and teachers alike) stand in *abstentia* for the significant social groups that might normally comprise death events, and the social and grief relationships that arise from the narrator’s loss. In this sense, for Janet—a first year student who has left family and membership in the social groups of her home community, and who strives to replace these relational ties at college—paper about loss is also a paper about community: the regrets of having lost one community and a gesture towards a new one. Later, for example, we will see how Janet not only constructs family relationships for the reader, but also figuratively immerses herself in family figures and even assumes the identity of her departed grandfather. At the same time, by delineating the web of familial and communal relationships for the reader, she invites the classroom community into a private and personal space, in essence opening a pathway between her previous and current life, between old relationships and the construction of new.

But negotiating this intermediate space can be treacherous. Far from being a simple conduit between past and present, the ground the writer walks here is actually a very am-
biguous one. Characterized by gaps and ruptures, it is the ground of loss, the haunted
ground of repression and revisitation. As such, memory, encrypted spaces, and the threat of
personal effects lie at its core. More is at stake here, in other words, than the death of Janet’s
grandfather, for we can infer from her paper a myriad of losses or at least the fear of such
losses: loss of family, loss of individuation and identity, and the loss of perceived immortality
(a childhood fantasy related to memories of her grandfather). In terms of the writing
classroom itself, we can also infer from the image of the “concrete sentence” a kind of
resistance to revision, a reluctance to decompose what is concretely composed, a notion of
immutability that is firmly linked to the writer’s sense of identity. This fear of re-vising, the
resistance to change and perceiving anew, is anchored in the ambiguous transitional space
of the student, a space characterized by the tension between her perception (and her teach-
ers’ perceptions) of herself as a writer in high school, and how she may be perceived as a
writer in college.

Such loss, and fear of loss, leaves cracks in the seemingly wall-like memorial to the
grandfather and in the essay itself (also a memorial), infusing elegy and narrative not just
with sorrow, but also with anxiety. “I stood quietly,” Janet writes, “cautiously like a stone
and thought.” Inadvertently dropping the comma after stone, Janet links “thought” with the
idea of a weighty, stone-like caution, and also connects conceptualizing with the image of
the tombstone that appears monolithic and stable, but that actually erases bodies and signals
annihilation. With this slippage in meaning, she lends to the essay itself (the vehicle of
thought) the same kind of tentativeness she sees in the “concrete sentence” — an uncer-
tainty that undermines “the master’s plan.” While the word master refers vaguely to a god
figure, Janet herself, the solitary essayist and griever, also functions as a kind of “master,”
the author at work constructing the image of coherency in the face of loss and possible de-
composure. In planning her essay and the components that comprise its overt symmetry
and sense of containment, Janet performs the role of cemetery groundskeeper, finding the
forms that give surface composure while working to contain and encrypt the processes of
decomposure that threaten the surface.

The emphatic tension between composure and discomposure (composing and decomposing) becomes even more evident as Janet extends the image of the “concrete sentence” more specifically to her grandfather’s grave and tombstone. At this point in her essay, Janet focuses on the surface features of the tombstone, cemetery, and the coffin itself, which she alludes to briefly, but without putting it in the context of her grandfather’s funeral. In this way, Janet tightens the focus on the essay so that it stays on the cemetery, and closes the aperture of the camera so that it includes only her grandfather and herself:

The stone I stood in front of looked like the others, but was not at all like them. Cold and smooth it stood solemnly, a soldier at attention, oblivious to the inconsistent air, it’s strange how indistinguishingly similar they look until you come upon one with a familiar face. I had seen that stone several times prior to that particular afternoon, but I had only really looked at it once before. It was morning, or perhaps more accurately a mourning, when I averted my eyes from a long sleek coffin. Even through the blurry haze of tears, I couldn’t help but notice how smooth the stone looked — like ice. The coffin, too, was so smooth. So clean-cut. It looked so simple. I laughed to myself at the irony in that. The concept that the simple rock represented was in actuality anything but simple. “You can never judge a book by its cover,” my grandfather always said. “things ain’t always like they seem, kid.” He always had the answers; sometimes they were clichéd, but hey, isn’t life?”

In this passage, Janet—giving the stone a face and soldier’s status—personifies the stone and thus conflates her grandfather’s marker with her grandfather himself. Such conflation lends to both the stone and her grandfather an aura of the uncanny, something strange, but also something familiar. Although reassuring in its supposed familiarity, the ground of loss Janet constructs here, both the cemetery and the essay itself, is also frightening. Acutely aware of the threat of erasure in the “smooth” surface of things (coffin, cemetery, grave, essay), Janet makes an important move. Equating the tombstone to a soldier at attention, she implies not so much uniformity and anonymity as heroic status. While there is nothing in Janet’s essay to indicate that her grandfather is buried in a military cemetery, by introducing the military metaphor, Janet depicts her grandfather as a brave and powerful figure, one
whose death is worthwhile in the sense that it is a kind of sacrifice for the sake of “higher” values. Indeed, later in the essay, Janet calls her grandfather her soldier, thus rendering him not so much nameless and faceless, but as positioned in specific relationship to the narrator, who is depicted in this essay as a kind of sole survivor, herself heroic. Thus, while the concrete sentence and the tombstone might imply uniformity and anonymity, the narrator's ownership of the deceased as her own personal soldier imbues the deceased with not only heroic, but also salvific powers, the ability to save his granddaughter from the death he himself has suffered.

This image of a mythological heroism in death is typical of what Davies calls the redemptive mode of grief, during which the death of a loved one is imbued with a higher, more symbolic meaning than it might otherwise have. By alluding to soldierhood here, Janet invokes higher cultural scripts, masculinized scripts of war and heroic adventures, scripts that make kinds of sacrificial characters of the dead, departed figures who have not simply lost their lives like common mortals, but rather have “given” them for the sake of others. As Janet’s text indicates, the deceased’s death enables the writer, linked inextricably in her essay to the tactile sensations of the living, her own survival. As Clive Seale writes, the death and life of the deceased are “given a larger meaning and purpose, so that order is restored and the authority of culture over nature is re-established”(Seale 29). Here too the authority of particular cultural values, although initially challenged in the opening lines of the essay (“Who says so?”) are also restored.

Even with such order seemingly reestablished, however, images of upheaval and uncertainty continue to prevail in Janet’s paper. While some of this is due to the deliberate slippage of meaning in the writer’s own punning (“mourning” and “morning”), much of it has to do also with the equally deliberate underscoring of paradox, as Janet juxtaposes the “indistinguishably similar” with the very “familiar.” Here we have a return again to the notion of the uncanny, haunted ground revisited and traversed. At the same time, we also recognize the writer’s suspicion of appearances, her skepticism towards the surface of things.
It is not, however, the writer's abhorrence at the actual texture of the surface—"the long sleek coffin" or the stone "like ice"—that is important here; more significant, I think, is her fear of the encrypted matter beneath the surface—the unconscious and discomposing memory and the decomposing body itself.

I believe, too, that in the foregrounding of a "familiar face" among a veritable lineup of similar objects, all of which are likely to be dismissed as indistinguishable from one another, the writer, consciously or unconsciously, emulates her own position as an individual among the nameless masses of entering students in the university, the crowds of the large anonymous first-year lecture halls, and even among the other writers in the composition classroom. The playing out of this impulse to be recognized as an individual with prior kinship and community ties—much as the writer wants recognition for her grandfather's individuality—is evident not just in the embodiment of the grandfather who speaks ("things are not what they seem, kid"), but also in the "family snapshot" moments of the essay. In these moments, which I will delineate below, while Janet still maintains her protagonist role in relation to her family, she also very specifically delineates the roles of other family members in relation to the deceased, as well as in relationship to herself. With the construction of familial relationships in the essay, the writer recreates, even (and especially) in the face of first-year terror and namelessness, a stronger (albeit transformed) familial web than the one she has actually left. This focus on family announces very particularly to teacher and classmates alike who the writer is and how she wishes to be perceived within this framework of relationships.

There is no doubt that amid the construction of family and relationships here is an element of sentimentality. Such sentimentality manifests itself particularly in the use of the term "soldier," which evokes sentimental patriotic responses, and in the cliched language and image of the grandfather dispensing platitudes to his granddaughter. The use of these cliches and platitudes, a grabbing hold of "common" and undistinguished language, creates a kind of irony in the text of the young woman who seemingly denounces uniformity and
anonymity, and whose apparent task is to discern the individuality of both her grandfather and herself. The abrupt turn to cliches here, however, and the statement that such language is, in essence, the vocabulary of life ("he always had the answers; sometimes they were cliched, but hey isn’t life?"), reveals, I think, not so much an acquiescence to conformity as an acknowledgment of the social nature of language and—despite the construction in the essay of solitary mourning—the social nature of grief. As Ruth Goldfine and Gina King note, cliches “provide...an ‘explanation’ of the speaker’s concept to which most members of the audience can relate; there is a generally accepted meaning attached to a cliche” (349).

Kinds of throwbacks to an oral culture, then, cliches function as useful tropes and mnemonic devices for storytellers. Since Janet’s intent in using her grandfather’s words here is to place her grandfather not in silent but rather in speaking relation to her family and also to her audience itself, her use of cliches enhances the notion of both embodiment and orality, and makes the grandfather tangible and accessible through his “everyday” speech.

On a deeper rhetorical level, the use of cliches also signals a loss of words, a deficiency of language in the face of death. If life is cliched, as Janet asserts, then what is death? The tentative nature of her essay says that the writer is unsure. While cliches continue to slip in and out of her paper in relation to her loss, the repetitive thrust of the writer’s “thesis” (that you cannot judge a book by its cover) undermines the efficacy of cliches as they purport to define grief and the “deeper” implications of death. What Janet seems to struggle with here is what Shleifer calls the crisis of synecdoche, the instability and dissipation of meaning below the surface of texts, even as the surface apparently extends towards meaning. What seems obvious in Janet’s essay is the kind of strained relationship between surface and depth that Schleifer sees at work in most (post)modern texts.

This is not to say that Janet’s essay is a (post)modern text, at least not in the ways we commonly think of such texts; it is, however, a symptom of postmodern fragmentation, especially if we include in this fragmentation the dissolution of ritual and the dissolving of familial and communal ties. The essay’s “meaning,” especially as it may have once found
expression in shared rituals and ceremonies, the stable loci of communities and cultures, is, throughout the piece, either dispersed or contested. While certainly the essay reflects and tends toward the reinforcement of values (God, patriotism, family), the opposition between surface and depth (neat cliche and messy decay) nevertheless prevails, dissipating and fragmenting, even while striving to consolidate meaning. Playing along the surface of her essay, Janet's imagery and even choice of words (e.g. "mourning" and "morning"), referring as they do to other meanings, discourses, texts, and media, indicate metonymic (superficial and unstable) movement rather than synedochic (deeply rooted: "carved in stone") stability. Like the earthworms around the narrator's toes (here depicted on the surface of things, but generally associated with the depths of the earth and with the decay of the body) the surface features of Janet's essay signify other spaces and other meanings, gesturing toward the encrypted spaces of memory and the buried body itself.

These seemingly superficial (surface) references also extend themselves to other kinds of crucial texts, texts overtly absent yet invoked in Janet's piece. The reductive inscription of the tombstone, for example, which Janet suggests covers over the details of person and body, recalls the rich history of funerary writing in Western cemeteries, the actual inscriptions on tombstones that, because of the once active proximity of the living with the burial spaces of the dead, not to mention their involvement in rituals that concerned the dead, once made of cemeteries and tombstones viable spaces and texts. This past "use of writing to record and celebrate the dead," as Armandi Petrucci notes, "brings together some of the great strands in the cultural history of humanity: the relationship of the living to the dead, the cohesion and endurance of the genus, the right to individuality, control of land, the formation and administration of power,...wealth, and the symbolic and signifying power of written culture" (xviii). It is this certain and signifying authority and viability of writing that Janet both calls to question and seeks to invoke in her essay.

Jean-Didier Urbain observes, "at the base of the narrative decrease in the funerary text lies an important transformation in the attitudes and imagery relating to the status of the
dead in Western society” (qtd. in Petrucci; 129). This transformation is evinced in the progressive distancing of cemeteries from cities and communities. In the United States, “cemeteries are located as many as 30 or 50 kilometers from the cities they serve and have become strange green necropolises where any explicit reference to death, dead bodies, or physical decomposition is severely frowned upon.”¹ These ‘invisible cemeteries are not places suited to exhibited writing, for the very purpose of exhibition, that of communication of the memory of the dead to others, has disappeared”(Petrucci 130). In the uniformity and mundaneness that Janet reads and deplores on the face of the cemetery and her grandfather’s tombstone, she senses the diminished significance in “today’s society” (a well-known student cliché) of funerary writing, its lack of value and meaning to the living, its failure to any longer adequately signify the dead.

While we have no indication in Janet’s essay that the cemetery she visits is removed from the community in which she lives, we can at least figuratively relate the distance between cemeteries and the living that Petrucci describes here to the kinds of critical distances that the writer who composes death must negotiate. We can, in fact, see in the model of the distanced cemetery and its “ill-suited[ness] to exhibited writing” the problematic nature of grief writing in the composition classroom itself — that is, the figurative distancing of writing from the body, the encryption of bodies and memories, and the displacement of bodies and memories onto invisible spaces. These kinds of distancing, while performed in the name of critical and objective writing, too often work to dismiss one of the most important functions of grief writing, which is, as Petrucci claims, “the communication of the memory of the dead to others.” This is a function that, in our zeal to push students towards so-called academic genres of writing, we often dismiss.

¹Since I have been in New England, I have seen and spent time in older cemeteries that are in the hearts of towns and cities. Some of these are still “active” cemeteries. However, in my hometown of Denver, cemeteries at the core of the city were actually “dug up” and removed to the outskirts of the city at the turn of the century. In other cities in the Western United States, cemeteries continue to be developed well away from urban centers.
But the idea of distance inherent in Petrucci’s notion of the hidden burial grounds, and the “invisible” writing within those grounds, applies not just to the politics of the composition classroom, but also to the work of Janet’s essay itself. We have already seen, for instance, the way surface opposes depth in the essay — the ways in which the chaos of the encrypted and buried spaces threatens to shatter the seemingly bland smoothness of the essay’s surface, and how the writer attempts to make meaning of that which is invisible and all but erased. At stake in this tension is Janet’s relationship with both the dead and death.

In the next section of her essay, Janet retreats from the site of the cemetery and into the encrypted and embodied spaces of memory, bringing to the forefront the material presence and voice of her grandfather, and delineating family in relationship to him. It is at this point in Janet’s narrative too that we first hear about her grandfather’s cancer:

It was not possible that his six foot-two inch two hundred and fifty pound body could even be contained in that small coffin I looked at only a few months earlier. A big, burly man kneading bread with what seemed to be colossal hands greeted the four of us grandchildren with a great smile and big bear hug each weekend. Then again, during those last few months of his battle, cancer was taking its toll. His what used to be enormous frame had since wasted away to a body not much larger than that of my one hundred and eighty pound brother and by the time he died his bones weighed just about as much as my one hundred fifty pound brother.

Until now, the essay leads us to believe that Janet’s grandfather has simply died from old age rather than from disease. I believe that Janet consciously delays discussion of cancer, because she times its insertion into the essay as a kind of suspense creating device; she doesn’t want to give it away at the beginning and she includes it here only as part of other information about him. I think, too, that she—consciously or unconsciously—represses beneath the overtly uncomplicated ground of the essay the decomposure and decomposition of disease, the cancerous effects themselves. It is important to note here that these are the precise personal effects, the details of body, person, and disease, that Janet initially omits from her essay, but includes, in response to my suggestions, in her final revision. Thus,
while Janet sets out in this essay to distinguish her grandfather from the many nameless faces signified by the “anonymous” tombstones, she sublimates disintegration and *dis-composure*—the very individual particulars of her grandfather’s disease and his body in pain—in favor of composure and neat composition. For Janet, the well-composed piece (like the well-composed widow and the tombstone itself) maintains a smooth face.

There are, however, cracks in the veneer, especially as Janet inserts into her essay the details of her grandfather’s body and the relationships that comprise her family and the ways they are constructed around both the grandfather and the disease itself:

[my grandfather’s] eyes, death was simple. He spoke quite frankly of death. When my great uncle’s wife’s mother died on the day before their long-planned vacation, this is what he told us: “They couldn’t get a refund on the plane tickets, so they put the old lady on ice and went to Florida. ‘Dziadz!’ I remember exclaiming, surprised at his apparent lack of sympathy. ‘What? It’s not like the old lady minds. She’s not going anywhere. Life can’t stop for death, you know.’ “You have quite a way with words, Dziadz,” I said. Dziadz is Polish for grandfather. Though neither of my grandparents was “right off the boat” they weren’t too Americanized. I remember him telling us this story when we were sitting around in my grandparents’ living room. My family had just found out my grandfather had cancer and I think he was trying to lighten up our moods a bit.

With her insistence that in her grandfather’s “eyes, death was simple,” and her grandfather “spoke quite frankly of death,” Janet tries to erase death’s uncertainty, and also its attendant grief and messiness. With the authority of the deceased himself, the writer reinforces the image of composure she strives to maintain in her essay and continues to work for redemptive meaning in the disease and her grandfather’s death (“life is for the living”). Consequently, she is still able to render death as beneficial to the living. From the grandfather’s story and the death itself, the family supposedly learns lessons not only about how to live, but also how to (not) grieve. Contrary to simplifying death, such disclosure actually complicates loss. Contextualized in this passage within the web of community and family relationships, the grandfather’s death reminds us again that, as Davies remarks, the “[d]ensity
of kinship relationships” (16) is not only affected by the death of a family member, but also governs the response of those who survive. Thus, while the grandfather’s own casual response to death of kin, his making light of it in the face of his own demise, instructs the family in survivorship, the writer’s depiction of her grandfather as the center of a constellation of family relationships also suggests a collapse, or fragmentation, of those relationships in his absence.

“Dziadz’s” Polish background is also important here, especially in terms of portraying the family as a unit of insiders to which the writer belongs, and which positions her against the vast anonymous collection of other first-year students, “outsiders” to her family. Her statement of cultural heritage is a way for Janet to self-identify, to proclaim her particular circumstances and background to the class. While Janet does not indicate any sense of being marginalized in relation to non-Polish Americans, she indicates in this passage that cultural traits and language bind the family together around the grandfather, who appears to be not only the heart of the family, but also the family’s first American, making him the basis on which the family’s Polish-American identity—their way of acting and being in this country—is built and defined. Implicit too in Janet’s statement about her grandfather’s cultural origins is that his outright confrontation of death, his lack of hesitancy to talk about it and the seemingly crass terms in which he does so, is un-American, not, of course, in the sense that such talk is politically subversive, but rather in the sense that such discourse doesn’t acknowledge the rules of death and grieving by which the larger American culture (and I use this term loosely) abides, those unspoken rules that insist on tactfulness and restraint, and even embarrassment, in discussions of death.

We also learn, in subsequent paragraphs that comprise the core of the essay, that Dziadz is the patriarch, “the strong man in the family,” and we hear how he played this role not just in his own immediate family but also with the twelve siblings of his wife, a woman to whom Janet refers only twice in her essay, and only by her familial title, grandmother. We learn also that when Janet’s “great uncle was diagnosed with cancer,” it was [her] grandfa-
ther who got up at 5 a.m. to drive two hours to chemotherapy.” With this second mention of cancer in relation to the deceased, the patriarch of the family is inevitably bound up with the disease, as the disease itself begins here to take on a central role both in the essay and in the writer’s family.

As Janet concludes this section of her essay and details the particulars of the family’s relationship with her grandfather, she suddenly returns to the cemetery, taking to task again the anonymous stone and the earth itself, which becomes fertile with her grandfather’s body:

[T]echnically he was so close by, tucked in the bosom of the earth under a blanket of fertile brown soil, just beneath the privileged stone which bore his name. And dates. That’s all. As if he was just an average Joe. But he’s not. He is John. A caring, loving, kind, gentle, honest, wonderful John James Ziema: a son, a brother, a husband, a father, an uncle, a grandfather, a friend, a man. A man who would help whomever needed help and who put the world before himself, a man who loved his family, his friends, and his God. Nothing on his stone said that in his eyes family came first, whether it meant driving 300 miles for a christening or sitting in a hospital room for hours while some one of my uncles was in chemotherapy. Nor did it say that Thursday nights were Bingo nights and every day at 8:15 you could see him in church - 3rd row, middle aisle. Or when my grandmother’s health started failing that he had to be home every night because she wasn’t sure whom or where she was. Never a complainer, always a fighter, right to the bitter end. Why wasn’t that written anywhere?

In this list of the specific practices and beliefs of her grandfather, Janet takes an important step in separating the body and life of the deceased out from the bland uniformity of the cemetery and the rows and rows of similar gravestones. Here, rather than rows of graves, we have “rows” of attributes and actions. Coming in quick succession this way, we are bombarded with the personhood of Dziadz, much in the same way as, at the memorial service at which Mr. Cassava spoke, we are confronted not just with the photograph of Grace, but also with Mr. Cassava’s own litany of who she was and what she did. This kind of litany, while delineating for her teacher and class the very specific person her grandfather was, functions for Janet, who is the protagonist of the essay and who constructs herself in it as having a close and special relationship with the departed, as a way of distinguishing
herself from her classmates. For me this kind of litany says of the writer: "This is who I am. This is how I relate. This is what I value. This is where I come from. I am like no other."

Crucial to this section of Janet's essay is the collapse of past into present ("As if he was an average Joe. But he is not"), as Janet, reciting who her grandfather was in relation to family and community also constructs for her audience who she was—and is—in relation to the deceased and also to her classmates and teacher who read the essay. Standing as a character in her essay, she recalls in swift and uninterrupted succession both the big "burly" man he once was (a bear of a man who bakes bread—a mythological figure) and the disease-wasted man he eventually became ("the bitter end"). Both of these images, however, are subsumed in the greater image of death—not death in its overt physical details, but, rather, in the decomposing features encrypted in the coffin. Indeed, the breathless and almost impetuous nature of the litany of personal attributes and the writer's exclamation against anonymity and loss reveals a shattering of the contained surface, as the student herself, along with the figurative body of her grandfather, confronts the details of disease and mortality.

This crisis in relation to disease and death is clearly evident in the personal effects and bodies already embedded within the essay, and perhaps in the cemetery itself. We suddenly learn, for example, that cancer runs in the family; not only does the grandfather die from it, but Janet's great uncle is also treated for it (we do not find out whether or not he still lives). And we easily infer from the reference to the grandmother's "failing health," that she quite possibly has pre-deceased her husband, whether or not to cancer, we are unsure. Therefore, while the essay continues to memorialize the grandfather, it also becomes a working through of mortality, a confrontation of personal effects, and the manifestation of Janet's own fears about disease and death.

Such anxieties reveal themselves in the condensed rush, in the passage I quote above, of references to illness, hospitals and dying, and particularly in the detailed identification of the familial dead, which—in some figurative sense at least—replicates the literal identifi-
cation of the dead by next of kin in hospital morgues. Such identification of the dead, as Davies indicates, reflects not only the practical and legal requirement to claim one’s dead, but also the need of the bereaved to identify and locate him or herself in relation to the dead, as well as to the living. “[P]ostmortem identity of the dead,” Davies writes, “also relates to the ongoing social life of a community. Death rites are as much concerned with issues of identity and social continuity as with the very practical fact that human bodies decay and become offensive to the sight and smell of the living” (5). Intrinsic to Davies’ definition of death identification and rites is the conflation of life with death, the vibrant life of social webs enmeshed with the decaying body. This kind of conflation of the living with the dead (the christening and church Bingo are, after all, interspersed in Janet’s passage with chemotherapy and disease), the relationship between identification with (of) the dead and the need to move forward and away from the dead in newly constructed communities of the living, are at the heart of Janet’s essay.

Janet negotiates the diminishing space between the living and the dead by appropriating a kind of funerary discourse that both pays tribute to the departed and reconstructs them for the benefit of the living. A list rather than the narration and development of the details of her grandfather’s life and person, Janet’s tribute to her grandfather here is almost like an obituary, which honors the dead, but also informs the living and helps them resituate themselves in relation to death. The obituary is, in fact, a highly social kind of genre. While it is restricted in length and in the kinds of information it contains, it presumes a fluid and viable web of relationships constructed around the deceased, relationships and persons that will be affected and altered by the absence of the departed.

This kind of funerary listing, while characteristic of the obituary, is also a feature of other kinds of funerary writing, including public and media tributes to certain public figures and also elegies read in funerals. They are familiar to any of us who have been television witnesses to the huge public memorials after the Columbine High Service, who have attended the services of public figures, listened to the elegies at Princess Diana’s funeral, or
have written and spoken our own. That Janet, despite my prodding, wishes to contain the personal effects of her grandfather within a kind of funerary tribute rather than a narrative is not surprising; nor does it mean that she is naive and lacking in skill. It signifies instead her knowledge of other genres and her sophistication in manipulating these genres, genres that may be very familiar to her through media and other public venues.

The kind of discourse she uses here also imitates the memorializing language of ancient epics, those passages in The Iliad and The Odyssey, for example, that — employing the listing, sing-song technique of transmission common to oral cultures — not simply honors fallen warriors but also situates the dead, as well as the bereaved and living, within relationships and social institutions, delineating for listeners/readers the kinship ties at the core of those relationships and institutions. "Suturing" herself into these kinds of discourses, Janet experiments with genre, reconstructing as she does so her role both as relative to the deceased and survivor among the living. While the list of attributes and actions seems at first to be superficial and simplistic, it is actually multifunctional and meaningful, providing the writer framework and authority for the reconstruction of her dead.

Despite this kind of scaffolding, however, what Janet ultimately confronts in her essay, especially in her closeness to her grandfather's body ("technically he was so close by"), is a crisis not just of decomposition and mortality, but also of identity and life. These crises manifest themselves in crises of writing. We see the such crisis ("Where is it carved in stone?") in the tombstone itself, a bland signifying object that actually represents as much the tangible circumstances, relationships, and material existence of the writer herself as of the deceased relative, but covers over those details in the same way as the reductive inscription in the stone conceals details of the deceased's life. The second crisis of writing occurs when Janet, asking "where is it written?", pushes against the restrictions and containment of genres and calls to question both the inadequacy of language to compose death, and the failure of writing that, ironically perceived here as permanent (carved in stone), actually proves itself eminently temporal and elusive. Thus, even as the writer appropriates
the discourse and genre forms of funerary writing, she challenges the inherent function of such writing, which names but restricts and even eliminates the details and body of the deceased. In this sense, it may be reasonable to draw a parallel between the university and the tombstone —not to suggest that learning itself is deadening (although it can be), but rather to show how some academic writing, as it is often commonly perceived at least, restricts and eliminates the subjective and personal—the lives, bodies, and deaths of both writers and their subjects.

Such crises of writing do not function in Janet’s essay simply as critiques of genres. Rather Janet herself performs crisis in her simultaneous attempt to, yet resistance towards, “crack[ing] open a scene” (Hampl 42), bringing forth fully the details of relationships and persons, developing stories that image these details for the reader. The memorial listing of names, relationships and the particulars of her grandfather’s life serve a definite and positive function, as do the anchoring here of the dead and the living in synecdochical meaning: God, country, family. Such anchoring is a necessary shoring up against the storm of death, the chaos of decomposing bodies and the anarchy of disintegrating relationships. Here the God-country-family trinity works against the metonymical surface play of the text, the kind of play that tends towards, yet resists, acquiescence to fixed meanings and so-called universal principles, and, like post-modernist texts, destabilize the “fixed” meanings of such institutions as family, state, and church. Here we see again the opposition between surface and depth, composure and de-composure, as “the body’s remorseless decay can be seen as a symbolic threat to the inner cohesion of a group” (Bradbury 120). Thus, the anchoring of the body in values and social institutions, especially as such anchoring is performed in ritualistic naming and lists, functions here as words both for and against the dead, in much the same ways that epic storytellers invoke lists to name and relate the dead to the living.

This kind of controlled and tautological listing, however, becomes itself a sort of burying over, a smooth and repetitive surface that implies depth but never reveals it. To reveal such depth may be a risky venture, especially if students like Janet struggle through-
out their narratives to come to terms with mortality and the decaying human body. Likewise, it may also be risky for the teacher who elicits from the student more details and the foregrounding rather than the glossing over of substance (going in-depth). At this point in the “negotiations” between student and teacher, the teacher herself must uncover her own personal effects and come face-to-face with their embodied remains. This is not at all to suggest we should literally imagine and discuss bodies in decay with students, nor that we should encourage students to do so. Nor does it suggest that we as teachers should usurp the student’s loss. Rather, as we ask students to develop scenes, to “show-don’t-tell”, to exhume the details of relationships and departed persons, we need to be aware of the emotional, psychological, and intellectual impact of our requests on both teacher and students, the difficulties and consequences of performing this task, and also the possible, yet complicated rewards of doing so.

Janet’s response to my own request for such details was not, perhaps, entirely successful, in that she never entirely left the “we-would” for the “one time/one day” mode of description (“I would go to my grandfather’s house; “I would visit him in the hospital” as opposed to “One day while visiting my grandfather”). Rather than taking individual incidents and exploring them in-depth, she continued to re-count, to enumerate and tell, rather than focus, expand, and develop. Nevertheless, we learn enough about the narrator’s grandfather to understand the ways in which he serves as a kind orienting “device” in her essay, an “object” that allows her to situate herself in relation to others. We also learn of Janet’s very particular relationship with her grandfather:

Days when my cousins and brother wouldn’t let me play wiffle ball (“Girls can’t play wiffle ball, ya know.”), my grandfather would call me in so we could go on “a date.” This never consisted of much more than a movie and a snack but I was able to put on a tie of my brother’s and coat of my grandfather’s. I never wanted to be just a girl, but one of the guys.

This passage, inserted into the final draft of the essay amid the funerary listing and naming
of relationships, values, and the grandfather's attributes, seems startling here, mainly be-
cause it has not been completely integrated into the text, nor fully developed. But it is
nevertheless a singular passage in the ways that it highlights gender dynamics and relation-
ships. Very few references to female figures occur in this essay; in this passage they are
especially obliterated. Janet herself becomes not simply a male figure, but also the figures
of her brothers and her grandfather. Here we see once again the merging of the living and
the dead, as Janet—donning her brother's tie and her grandfather's coat, the signifiers of
masculinity and their personal effects—seemingly inserts herself into the patrilineal line.
By doing so, she erases the boundaries between the dead and the living and assumes the
identity of the deceased himself. Becoming him, she works to re-situate herself within the
family, especially now that her grandfather is deceased and she herself has departed to
college.

Particular to the ways Janet assumes the roles of both bereaved and deceased in this
essay is the very obvious slippage of gender roles. As the sole female sibling in the family,
Janet positions herself as both an outsider—excluded from male play and bonding—and an
insider who actually becomes "one of the boys," even as the reference to her "date" with her
grandfather repositions her (from a heterosexual perspective) as female. Switching gender
roles here and situating herself as masculine, Janet seems to repudiate the female figure, and
the mother's body in particular. In the way Bradbury might imagine this scenario, the
repudiation of the feminine sphere for the masculine erases the female body and its associa-
tion with coporeality and death.

While it is literally the male figure who dies, then, we might consider again what
Hockey, Bradbury and other critics say about the role of females as grief and death proxies.
While nothing in Janet's essay suggests that her brother or male cousins, in "real life," do
not grieve for their grandfather, Janet omits from her text the participation of these figures in
funerary services or in any display of grief. Wanting to be one-of-the-boys, in fact, the
writer—a kind of mediating figure between the living and the dead—interposes herself
between her male relatives and her grandfather, in much the same way as her grandfather functions as a mediating figure between the male relatives and Janet. Appropriating both the gender and authority of the departed, Janet is better able, in the face of the fragmenting effects of death on family and communal networks, to reconstruct those networks and to situate herself within them.

Having momentarily assumed her grandfather’s identity, however, Janet just as quickly drops it, and turns instead (and again) to listing and eulogizing: “He did not think of himself as a great man,” she writes, “just a guy who was trying to fulfill his obligations to his family and his God.”. In this fashion, she continues to use the public discourse of the memorial service and other kinds of oral funerary occasions to transform her grandfather—once more—into a kind of savior who infuses death with meaning and the dead body itself with redemptive powers: “My grandfather would not have wanted me to cry,” Janet writes. “’That’s life, kid,’ he would have said, with a half smilshrugwink, a special gesture which only the grandfather-types can perform.” With this comment, the deceased grandfather redeems Janet from the possibility of death, intervening between surface and depth in the same way as the live grandfather intervened between Janet and her cousins.

Ironically and startlingly, though, this moment of conciliation with her grandfather’s passing is abruptly and even angrily undercut in the very next paragraph, as the writer, struggling to accept her loss, allows her text to erupt in confusion and fear. Here the cuddly and stereotypical grandfather type suddenly becomes the focal point of rage and resistance, as the writer’s competing emotions and positions are played out around his cancerous and decaying body:

With every fiber of my being, I wanted to scream at him, at Him, and at the rest of the world, just because. Realizing that screaming wouldn’t change things, I didn’t bother. SSHHhh h h h...the wind lulled as if trying to calm my anger—which was really just the aftertaste of the fear/confusion concoction that my grandfather’s cancer had built up inside me these past months. I sighed deeply and opened my eyes. Having adjusted to the angora carpet, or perhaps a little frozen, the bulbous earthworms attached to my feet ceased their squirming and stood petrified. I knew that I
could not, must not dwell in any place too long. Life moves on. I move on... Today reminded me that as long as I stayed in Yesterday, I could never go to Tomorrow. Before bidding farewell to my soldier, I took one last look around. My eyes were particularly transfixed on the green spurs of life springing through the fertile blanket of soil. It had been nearly three months since the body had been interred, since the ground had been disturbed, and the grass was growing back nicely. I could read the concrete sentence now. His death was certain. It was carved in stone.

Here Janet ends her essay with a gesture towards acceptance of death and affirmation of life. This is particularly evident in the fertile ground and green shoots of grass that indicate renewal and a positive outcome for the decayed body, a kind of resurrection in nature that ensures immortality. Meanwhile, nature itself is personified in the wind that whispers soothingly to the narrator. Despite the wind's efforts, however, the fear of death—tangible, embodied—ruptures the passage and creates fissures in its surface, as a certain terror of annihilation can be read in the writer's rather vague reference to the "petrified" earthworms. While we are not certain whether these earthworms are real or merely kinds of forced symbols in the essay—signifiers, like the tombstone itself, of bodies in decay—they signal not just the body's (essay's) decomposition, but also the dangers of exhuming (of writing) the body. As the earthworms cease to live they are frozen in stasis, inscribed across the writer's feet, in much the same way as she sees herself paralyzed in relation to, and inscribed across, her grandfather's death. The image of the earthworms is publicly constructed, consciously formulated for her audience's consumption (a gesture towards craft). Placed at the end of the essay, it symmetrically mirrors the image of the worms in the opening scene of the essay. Despite this conscious move towards craft, however, the narrator's anger and mixed imagery suggest in an intensely personal crisis of mortality, one that is seen most clearly in the writer's quickly repressed spurt of anger at her grandfather, God, and the mortal world ("him, Him, and the rest of the world").

Indeed, with the word "aftertaste" and the image of the cancerous "fear/confusion concoction," Janet seems literally to eat the decay and terror that, resurfacing from the depths of her own body to her mouth, suggests dis-taste and even possible regurgitation.
The image reveals not only a certain repugnance, but also a clear attempt to expunge disease and decay (the taste of mortality) from the writer's body, and also from the writer's text. Such attempts at purification are reinforced in the writer's return to cliches ("Life moves on"), ritualistic tropes that reach out to community but also empty out substance. Like the act of embalming itself, the return to cliches drains the blood from both the body of the deceased and the writer's essay, as the details of the writer's grandfather and her relationship with him—not to mention her intensely embodied fear and anger—suddenly give way here to familiar and comforting language.

This sudden turn from anger and memory to cliches and platitudes is not surprising, since, as the writer claims herself, to be trapped in the embodied moment—the instance of confrontation between living and dead, life and mortality—is not only to erase the future, but, more specifically, to succumb to death itself. ("As long as I stayed in Yesterday, I could not go on to Tomorrow"). Given this threat, it is not surprising to find here the distillation of death and its flattening out (its coverage) through the use of pastoral imagery: the green grass, fertile soil and wind reaffirming the notion of life moving on. At the heart of such imagery are both pagan and Christian affirmations of resurrection, the alignment of nature with death, and the ultimate bringing forth of vitality from decay and stasis.

The urgent need to make death redemptive and link it to a purposeful life is evident in Janet's last reference here to the grandfather as soldier. This image solidifies the idea of a meaningful death, as the writer once again represents the deceased figure as a noble and sacrificial character, someone who gives his life so that others—particularly the writer herself—may not just live, but may also live well, free of anxiety about death. Also, the rounding out of the essay in the writer's return here to the concrete sentence and the carved stone, the same images with which she begins her piece, contributes to the idea of a cycle, the movement of life into death and death back into life. Despite this indication of a death cycle that includes at least figurative resurrection, Janet's reference to the encrypted body and then her quick abnegation of its decay ("It had only been three months since the body..."
had been interred....and the grass was growing back nicely"), reveals the writer working from conflicting positions, creating tension at the center of her essay and at the core of the burial ground. Like many of her peers who write about death, while Janet seeks to diminish this tension, to erase it completely from both her text and psyche, she never completely succeeds. The tension between depth and surface, the dead and the living, continues to make itself known in the tell-tale fissures of narrative and in the fault lines of memory as well.

**When Death Knocks, How Do We Answer?**

Janet was the first student to workshop her paper in class that semester, and I was impressed by the way her students responded to her with sympathy and respect. Certainly there was not much active critique, at least not in the sense that we commonly perceive critique, and I suppose some critics could say this is problematic. I feel, however, that the kind of dialogue and narrative responding that happened in this workshop not only lay the groundwork for community, but also functioned as a kind of "critique." I will show in the next chapter how this kind of narrative response can comment on or complicate, a student's essay, and how the dialog continues long after the first paper is written and read in class.

Meanwhile, let me point out that in this particular class, and in this particular workshop, I solicited and received two kinds of responses, both of which were directed towards the student writer. The first was a written response, the second an oral response, supposedly derived from the written. Each student in the class had a copy of Janet's paper, which she had distributed at the beginning of the workshop, and which her classmates followed along with as Janet read aloud. While I am not always successful in having students do this, I ask them to read the paper with pen or pencil in hand in order to write quick comments as they go or to mark areas they would like to return to and talk with the writer about when she finishes reading. I also tell students that I do not want them to focus on technical and grammatical "faults" in the essay, but rather to look at content, ideas, and organization. Since I believe that this can be best accomplished if students are allowed to reply spontane-
ously to a paper, the class does not read the paper ahead of time. Thus they do not try to "fill up space" in their responses by pinpointing punctuation and other "errors," or by trying to "correct" the paper.

Before this first workshop, we had spent some time talking in class about ways of responding in peers. During this discussion, I asked students what kinds of responses they hoped to hear from their classmates. While a few of them, trained in high school English classes to think that harsh critique is the best and only kind, replied, "I want people to rip my paper apart," most students answered that they wanted "respect" and "honesty" from classmates. I reminded them of these answers as we began to discuss Janet's paper.

After Janet finished reading her paper aloud, I asked her classmates to turn their copies over, and—on the back of the paper—write a brief response to the writer. I gave them about five minutes to do this. Then I asked them to speak to Janet from what they had written. As with all first time workshops, and most workshops in general, students were fairly silent during the first few minutes of the response period, wary, perhaps, about being the first to step forth or to be seen as criticizing their classmate. Finally, one or two of the bolder students spoke up. Since these students had both experienced losses similar to Janet's, they narrated their own experiences and how they "could relate" to Janet's piece. "I like the way you described your grandfather. Mine died this summer too and your grandfather sounds like mine;" "When my grandmother died, I had a hard time at the funeral. Maybe you want to bring in more about your grandfather's funeral;" "I know just how you feel; I had a friend who died in a car accident...." As the comments continued, the descriptions of loved ones and the details of illnesses and accidents were fleshed out, as more and more students began to share their stories of direct or indirect loss ("my best friend's brother's friend died of an overdose").

I hear in these narrative responses a reluctance to criticize what many of them seem to think cannot be changed, tales of loss that, because of their subject matter and the writer's very personal stake in it, must remain as is. I also recognize the elements of community
building in these comments, the swapping of stories, and the sharing of some common
ground. While some of this sharing might be considered “grandstanding,” or a contest to
see who has the worst death story, most of it functions, I believe, as consolatory language.
Although I have yet to hear a student actually say to a classmate, “I’m sorry you lost your
grandmother (mother, father, friend),” I discern in their narrative responses voices that say,
“You are not alone; I know how you feel.” I have even seen students, men and women, shed
or hide tears in the classroom, either while listening to a paper about loss, or when respond­
ning with their own stories. Like older adults, young adult students seem to have difficulty
finding meaningful words to offer someone who writes about death, but instead of grap­
pling for the perfect Hallmark platitude, they offer a story of their own. Although I have
heard several of my colleagues call this kind of storytelling selfish, I believe it is a way of
offering sympathy and also of validating what the workshopping writer has experienced.

What I hear most of all in these workshops is a yearning to make sense of something
which, for many of them, is fairly new. While teachers and nontraditional aged students
may have already experienced several deaths of family members and friends in their lives,
many traditional aged students may not have had such experiences. When colleagues make
fun of student loss narratives, I often wonder how it is that we first experienced the sensa­
tion of mortality and how we coped with it. I know that after my father died, aside from the
priest who came to our house to help my mother break the news to us, no one ever talked
about it. I also remember that four years later, when I was twelve, I experienced a sudden
realization of the finality of his death, while sitting in my bedroom reading a book. I do
not remember what it was in the book that initiated this feeling, but I remember being grief
stricken and depressed for a period afterwards, feeling abnormal, and not having anyone to
turn to. I think of this experience as students share narratives of loss in the writing class­
room and I think of what it may mean for them to do so, and what it might mean if they do
not.

The truth is too that, while we might want to think that timeless truths hold sway in
academic spaces without relation to phenomena outside of these spaces, students entering college these days, while perhaps not facing more or less risk than previous generations, nevertheless must confront certain risks, which change their perceptions of learning, writing, and being. These include the threat of HIV/AIDS (indeed, none of these students has ever known a time when sex was not linked to this threat); increased possibility, as more cars crowd our highways, of deaths by automobile accidents; an increase in violent deaths by guns; and increased likelihood they will succumb to alcoholism or other sorts of addiction, and/or die of a drug overdose. Certainly the kinds of papers they write indicate the prevalence of these risks.

This is indeed grim. Yet I know many teachers who either would rather not think about these issues or who insist that there is no place for them in the English classroom. John Silin, a gay man who has witnessed the death of his lover and several friends from AIDS, tells of colleagues and other critics who take issue with his mission to discuss both AIDS and the issue of death and dying in schools. Those critics claim that such discussions have “no relevance to life in the classroom” (107). Marilyn MacCurdy, though, argues that “[s]tudents quickly recognize that the separation of text and life is artificial,” and that to avoid conversations and texts about issues such as illness, death and grief, “limit[s] [students’] growth as writers and as people” (195). Resisting the stances of his critics, Silin, taking his cue from Nell Noddings, and “reject[ing] the Greek assumption that right knowledge is sufficient to right behavior,... advocates a moral education based on an ethic of care, which includes modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation” (129).

In Janet’s workshop I witnessed what Silin calls a “testimony of conversations,” as well as the kind of dialogue, practice, confirmation, and modeling that Noddings advocates. Although I did not usurp Janet’s workshop time, or the comments of my students, I attempted to model loss and ways of writing and responding to it by briefly telling the story of my father’s death. I wondered as I began if I might disrupt the students’ dialogue and easy sense of sharing, inserting an awkward moment as students tried to figure out how to re-
spond to their teacher’s loss, a far different kind of response than one they might give a peer. I was set at ease, however, when it seemed that they appreciated hearing such a story from their teacher, and continued afterwards to offer their own.

To be sure, not all students responded in this workshop with stories of loss. In fact, about a quarter of the class did not respond at all, but I do not think this is because of the subject matter of Janet’s paper, but rather that this ratio of response is about the average for any workshop. When the storytelling subsided, and I felt sure no one else had other comments, I briefly modeled the kind of respectful critique of ideas and craft I wished to elicit from my students. I did this by asking questions or formulating “I wonder” statements, rather than making adamant assertions about writing. “I wonder how the paper might be different if you started with a story about your grandfather and then went on to the image of the grave and the cemetery.”; “What was your grandfather’s relationship with your grandmother like?”; “Have your parents ever told stories about him? Do you think you would want to include those?”; “I wonder what would happen to this last part of your essay if you explained more why it was you had to move on at this point. What would have happened if you had stayed by the grave longer? What did you do when you left?” With these statements and questions I aimed at demonstrating for students how to elicit ideas and help writers develop and organize those ideas.

Finally, I asked students to pass in their copies of Janet’s paper with their comments on them. After I looked them over, I gave them back to Janet. The comments that Janet’s classmates had written formed a kind of second tier of response. I discovered, for example, that while many of Janet’s peers had been reluctant to comment on craft in the discussion and in public, they did not hesitate to do so in their written remarks. Probably they withheld commentary on organization and content in the essay because they did not, given the topic of death and loss, want to appear insensitive towards Janet. In this sense, they seemed to do the opposite of what many writing teachers and critics of personal writing advocate, and that is—when faced with the subject of death or trauma in a student paper—to focus, as
Lucia Perillo states, “only on the writing.” Students flipped this mode of response around so that it was the person and the personal to which they responded in public, and then the writing itself (although, of course, not in not such a dualistic manner).

I was pleased with these responses, all of which were thoughtful. Knowing that students would respond as compassionately as possible to their peers, I was also glad that students had found their way, through the less public process of writing on Janet’s paper, to offer concrete advice for revision. When I saw this two tiered way of responding, I thought how we, as teachers, too often dichotomize the classroom and our activities in it. We often think that with papers such as Janet's there are only two options for response—to critique the writing or to respond to the person—and that we must choose between one or another. We do not always acknowledge that different avenues for response might allow for different kinds of responses, and that these seemingly disparate responses can work together rather than cancel each other out, in much the same way that death merges with life and the living become cohorts of the dead.

**Teachers Writing Loss: Understanding and Responding**

Several years ago, Tom Newkirk wrote an essay for *The Boston Globe* telling how his mother had asked him to accompany her to her chosen gravesite. Although it was difficult and emotional to grant her request, he was glad he did so. He viewed the moment as tenderly instructional, a mother’s way of preparing her son for her death.

When it came to her death, my mother was more given to edicts than to thoughts of preparing her son or daughters. Certainly her plans for her own burial were made with others in mind; that’s why she did not want us to spend time on funeral preparations or money on elaborate services. Still, the absence of talk about death throughout our lives, despite the intrusion, via my father’s and uncle’s deaths, of loss on the family, seems curious. When my father went into the hospital for the final time (he supposedly died of a ruptured appendix; but I’ve often wondered if he actually died of complications from alcoholism), we were shuttled off to parishioner’s houses, families with kids who went to school
with us, but whom we hardly knew. I have only two acute memories of these “charity” stays in other peoples homes as our father died: one is of a woman scolding me for dropping my coat onto the back of a chair rather than hanging it up in the closet. The other is of waking up at sunrise one morning and hearing the cry of mourning doves from under the eves of the roof. I cannot, to this day, hear this sound without a resurgence of the sadness, fear, and loneliness I felt then.

While I was much younger than either Angie or Janet when they lost their grandfa­thers, I felt, like Angie, an acute sense of guilt when my father died, thinking somehow that I had killed him. I thought so not because I had provided him with liquor and cigarettes (although he had these aplenty), but because the night before he became ill, I refused him a ritual that we both shared and enjoyed. This ritual consisted of an early evening window-shopping walk just before dinner, when weather permitted, along Colfax Avenue. Sometimes we would stop into the small drugstore on the way and my father would buy me a magazine or book. He himself usually picked up cigarettes, but I never remember him buying or imbibing alcohol on these trips. As we walked home, he held my hand, and as I remember his face during these outings, it seems to me he enjoyed them as much as I did.

Like the father in James Agee’s A Death in the Family, my father enjoyed sitting outside and watering the lawn after he got home from work, holding the hose himself rather than setting up the sprinkler fixtures. Sweeping the water back and forth in long lazy strokes, he seemed at peace and reflective during these times. Instead of the front stoop, he’d sit on the Royal Crest milk box, and on hot days he’d invite us to run through the sprinkler. On the night before he got sick, my brother and sister had dried off and gone into the house, and my father indicated it was time for our walk. (My father had other rituals he shared with my brother and sister; the walk was my alone time with him.) It was a particularly hot, dry June, and I had been plagued with serious hay fever that season. Feeling cranky, I told him I didn’t want to go. I’m sure that my father was never angry at me for this, but I still remem­ber with yearning and the vastest sense of loss seeing him shut off the sprinkler and walk

146
down the street alone. I never saw him again, except at the open casket at the funeral.

This refusal to walk with my father is what gave me that peculiar, self-centered feeling kids get when someone dies and they think they somehow have caused the death. This and the fact that, the next morning, a Saturday, my mother, no doubt trying to get us out from underfoot while she tended to my father, gave us money and sent us to the local theater for a Disney double-feature. She admonished us to buy tickets and snacks, but to bring back the change. When the movies were over, though, we spotted some Disney figurines in the case next to the candies at the theater, and blew the change on these. When we got home and admitted to our mother what happened to the money, she seemed sad and distracted. We thought at the time it was because of what we did, when really it was because of my father’s intensifying illness.

My father died within the week and we were never allowed into his room. I don’t even know if he went to the hospital. All I remember is that a doctor (back in the days when they did such things) came to call and disappeared upstairs where my father lay. I also recall the terrible fear I felt, a sustained anxiety that I experience to this day when relatives don’t call when they promise to, and that I always experienced when Paul arrived home late from work. It is an anxiety deeply rooted not only in the experience of loss, but also in the absence of language that, for me, characterizes loss. I don’t remember if we were instructed not to talk about the illness and the death-in-progress, or that we just knew somehow that in our family we didn’t do such things, but the silence of the house during my father’s illness was like a weight. I’m sure we talked now and then, but only in superficial terms and never about the thing itself.

When my father died and we were retrieved from the different parishioners’ homes in which each of us had been placed that week, we were taken home to hear the news and to share in the dinner provided by the ladies of the church. Afterwards, we were swept away to my Uncle and Aunt’s house where we played noiselessly on the floor in the living room. Silence pervaded that space too, and I liken this long hushed evening to the game we played
that night. Having no children of their own, my Aunt and Uncle had no toys, so we simply took all of the leather bound books from their shelves and lined them up like dominoes on the rug. Since my Aunt and Uncle never read books, but kept them as part of the decor, the bindings on these classic novels and works of famous philosophers were especially stiff. Having formed a kind of snaky line of them, we'd knock the first one over and then watch all of those stories go tumbling down.

I think one of the greatest gifts I received, and I say this with out exaggeration, was to be offered the opportunity, years later, to write about my father's death and the guilt I never knew I had. This happened when I was 42 years old, and a graduate student in Lad Tobin's composition theory class at Boston College. The class was designed to prepare T.A.'s for teaching the First Year Writing Seminar. Up to this point in my master's program I had been decidedly disappointed, finding that the courses I had been taking essentially repeated what I had learned as an undergraduate and hardly even introduced me to new theories. I had no idea, before I enrolled in Tobin's class, that such a thing as composition theory existed. I'll never forget the exhilaration I felt during the first week of class as we all actively discussed teaching and read theories of writing. Until this time, I had considered writing a "natural" act, a kind of lower level skill. Although I had had my own bouts with writer's block and other kinds of writing related anxieties, I had never before thought to hold these experiences up to what I assumed was true.

In Tobin's class, though, I began to do just that. Not only did I begin to question my assumptions, I also began to write in ways I had never done before. I had never, for example, written a personal essay of any kind. While I once fancied myself (and failed at being) a novelist, and then a poet, and while I read and enjoyed the kinds of personal narratives that appeared in The New Yorker or other such publications, I never thought of this writing as serious writing. I suppose I also assumed, because it was personal, it was also ridiculously simple to do. In this class, though, when we were required to write such a narrative (Tobin's philosophy was that we should experience writing from our students'
perspectives), I was overcome by the difficulties of the task. What subject was I to choose? Who would care about it? Why would anyone want to read it? How could I possibly make it interesting?

While I hear many teachers ridicule students for choosing the topics they do, it is interesting to note that in a class such as this, comprised of adults of various ages, about half of us chose to write about death, disease, or family dysfunction. I was no exception. In my piece, I related the death of my father, the details of the movie-going experience, the farming out of each of us to other people's houses and the funeral itself. When I finished revising the essay and turned it in with my portfolio at the end of the semester, while—like Janet—I made superficial changes, I still had clung to the chronological narration of the event, chronicling every detail in a linear fashion that made me realize that I had not yet negotiated the space between surface and depth, the kind of negotiation that would have allowed me to revise, re-see, the death from an adult's perspective. What I had done instead was to record. Out of this record, however, came two realizations. The first was that I had always harbored sadness and guilt about my father's death and my perceived role in it. The second was that I had not finished revising, that this was a story I could, and would, return to. These realizations freed me both in terms of craft and my perceptions of myself as a writer, and also in terms of the person I perceived myself to be in relation to my family and the dead.

These were great lessons to learn. I will not claim here that I am a "healed" person because of this experience, but I will allow that writing about death sets healing in motion and can have healing effects. As Amy Brand claims, "If learning and memory are defined by the capacity to make changes and remember them, then healing through language has evolved from the ability of the brain to modify thoughts, feelings, and behavior" (217). I was grateful that I was given the opportunity to harvest this ability, if not to entirely "transform" the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that evolved from that one week of fear and loss in June of 1959, then at least to begin living with the hope that I could.
Grief Narration as Response

"When people sit around in a group and share experiences, the universe of possibility begins to change....[W]hen people sit and tell each other what the world is like for them, the air becomes electric with both danger and hope."

Mary Rose O'Reilley, The Peaceable Classroom, 41

When Janet workshoped her paper in class, she received respectful feedback and sympathetic response from her peers. Perhaps her classmates sensed from this workshop that writing about grief would be safe—and even productive—in the space they shared. Or perhaps they found her topic more "dramatic," less "mundane" than the topics they themselves had chosen. Or maybe they simply intuited that Janet's evocation of grief demanded not just response but also revisitation and revision. Whatever the reasons, several of Janet's classmates—having already written first drafts on other topics—changed these topics and wrote instead about deaths of family members or friends. Erika, for example, told me in conference that she had revised her own paper with Janet's in mind. While she never used the word response or dialogue, clearly her re-focus in her final draft on the death of her stepfather, and her obvious attention to audience in this draft (made evident through the exclusion and/or omission of certain material), reveal Erika's awareness of herself as both a member of a community, and a partner in a discursive dialogue.

I believe that there is historical and literary precedence for this kind of dialogue and response among grief narratives. When students write about grief, they not only respond to and draw from a variety of discourses and texts, they often compose and memorialize according to particular pre-scripted models. One such model is the elegy. Allison Giffen
argues that traditional canonical elegies, such as Milton’s “Lycidas,” overcome or master grief through poetic movements that enact distance from mourning through ritual and the lapse of time. In “Lycidas,” the poem’s speaker grieves but distinctly moves beyond grief by claiming for the deceased a kind of immortality manifested through nature and revealed to the speaker at the poem’s end. This kind of poetic model becomes not only a work, but a working through of grief, a process that initiates the artist, by the poem’s completion, into a grief-free future as survivor. Such a notion of literary healing depends largely on the stereotypical image of the individual artist, a romantic figure who lives and writes relationally to the departed, but who also achieves freedom and artistic integrity through the departed’s death and the poet’s own adherence to a linear course of healing. Akin to the redemptive model of healing we have already seen in Janet’s paper, this mode of grieving infuses the loved one’s death (and the loved one him/herself) with meaning and the power to redeem the writer/survivor.

In the sense that it is a template for healing, this literary model replicates in shape and impetus popular psychological theories about grief and loss. Most prevalent of these theories, as Mary Bradbury suggests, is the stage-based model of grief, in which “[i]ndividuals [are] viewed to proceed through a series of stages such as numbness, followed by yearning and protest, despair and, finally, recovery and restitution”(165). Bradbury and other critics, while not dismissing the model, see in a too strict adherence to it a tendency to pathologize the bereaved, particularly those who neither heal nor pass through the progressive stages the model advocates. Indeed, those who grieve outside of this often uncomplicated model—and who show little sign of, or inclination towards, “getting well”—are often positioned by mental health professionals as problematic and even chronically ill.

Because prolonged grief is commonly (and officially) perceived as undesirable, then, students who write about death often enact the so-called stages model in their narratives—partially as a way of initiating actual healing, and partially, I think, to deflect the pity and concern of adults and other authorities who may attempt intervention when student papers
take on a “chronic” melancholic tone. Thus, the student who seeks empathy through writing might also work to convince readers (especially teachers), that, Lycidas-like, he/she has followed the proper stages of healing and has thus “mastered” his/her grief. In Janet’s case, for example, we have seen in the writer’s vow to “move on” not only her attempt to reassure the reader (and herself) with a narrative of recovery, but also an initiation of recovery (the last stage of the model) by drawing on the kinds of redemptive discourses that give to death significant and even sacred motivations and meanings.

That students draw on such discourses is no surprise. Not only is the language of healing promoted in psychological literature and well-known elegies, it is also prevalent in popular media. Television coverage of death and grief often includes images and ways of summarizing loss that—repeated again and again in “news-bites”—function in the same way as cliches do: to create a common language for talking about death, to infuse dying with meaning, and to encrypt the decaying body and sublimate its personal effects. Such coverage repeatedly validates a linear and terministic process of recovery, a model of grief oftentimes abridged to the point of absurdity. For instance, just one day after the January shootings in Wakefield, Ma (a shooting rampage during which a man killed seven of his co-workers), a Boston television news team opened their evening broadcast with a story about the candlelight memorial service that would take place that evening: “The healing begins in Wakefield,” the news anchor announced.

“I don’t remember when the words first began to echo in the hollow aftermath of loss,” Ellen Goodman writes in one of her columns, “But now it seems that every public or private death, every moment of mourning is followed by a call for ‘healing,’ a cry for closure.” As an example of this impulse to hurry healing, Goodman cites media treatment of mourners who lost family members in the Oklahoma bombing. “Assorted commentators and reporters asked the families whether they felt a sense of ‘closure’” after Terry Nichols was found guilty of the crime. While some seemed to embrace the notion of healing, indicating that “[i]t’s time to move on,” others told a different story. “Sometimes I feel like it’s
bleeding," one mother said of her loss, depicting a wound that refuses to heal over. Another mourner concurred, describing the loss of her husband as "'a huge hole that can't be mended.'" Despite this evidence of nonclosure, however, "[b]y the second day... the cameras had turned away, [and] the microphones had turned a deaf ear, as if they had heard enough keening (Goodman E7)

Goodman asserts that "it is our own anxiety in the presence of pain, our own fear of loss and death, that makes us wish away another's grief or hide our own" (A7). Acknowledging that there are indeed bereaved who follow a linear trajectory of mourning and healing, she insists correctly that the ways of grieving are as diverse as the kinds of losses that are suffered. But this diversity is ignored, as the "vocabulary of 'healing' and 'closure' has spread across the post mortem landscape like a nail across [a] blackboard" (Goodman E7). Columnist Ginger Casey agrees. Evaluating the media coverage of the Columbine High shootings, Casey writes:

The push to immediately find meaning in madness has resulted in a skewed form of journalism that is becoming more and more prevalent. We have turned catastrophic events into news 'products,' complete with story lines that are sadly predictable—first the raw facts, then the search for meaning, then the assignment of blame, followed by the final wrap-up, the reports bringing "closure." (1)

In her coupling of "raw facts" with "closure" here, Casey signals the tension between decomposition and composure. Coverage can refer to the burial site, the body and coffin covered over; it also implies the sound-byte glossing over of grief, as well as its emotional and psychic encryptment. This is the kind of interment given to the unspeakable and the unimaginable, that with which we are not able to come entirely and directly to grips. The raw facts are the antithesis to coverage: the writer's avoidance of the boundary between surface and depth, the skirting of the "contact zone" between life and death, present and past, the body and burial. The discourses of healing and coverage spring from the impulse to make meaning out of the meaningless, coherence out of incoherence, and composure out
of discomposure.

Student essays draw heavily on these discourses. Even as they do so, however, they also subvert them by pointing to other models, other genres, and other texts. Such texts include certain nineteenth century elegies written by women, narratives of grief that incorporate, yet undercut, the Lycidas model of progressive recovery. Alison Giffen notes, for example, that—unlike many of their male counterparts who represented grief as an obstacle to overcome—a good many nineteenth century women writers were reluctant to "give up the dead," partly because women's roles in families, and in death and dying itself, were usually more complicated and involved than were men's roles, and also because to relinquish bereavement meant to surrender their roles as serious artists—in the same way, perhaps, as students might sense that writing about death validates the "seriousness" of their work. Prolonged and public mourning for the dead was widely regarded at this time (and perhaps still is) as more fitting for women than for men. Thus, in the elegy, female writers found a sanctioned public platform to express their emotions, and just as importantly a venue for publishing that was otherwise prohibited them. A certain literary authority was extended to mourning women that was not normally granted to them at other periods of their lives.

Giffen goes on to suggest that grief manifests itself in women's elegy as more sustained and protracted than in many male-authored elegies, shifting shape and evolving rather than sublimated and ending. This is not to suggest that the elegies of female poets entirely subvert more traditional forms. In fact, as Giffen points out, they often follow the conventions of canonical elegies, but only up to a point. What often is missing from these bereavement texts, Giffen claims, is a final heroic resolution, something common to such elegiac poems as "Lycidas." Or, if such a resolution of grief is present, syntax and word choice in these poems often signal disruption of the masterful scripts of healing and distancing that characterize many canonical elegies. Since the bereaved female writers often publish, over a span of time, a series of works memorializing and mourning loved ones, they also initiate
a kind of dialog with their readers, who not only expect the revisioning of grief in subsequent texts, but also reciprocate grief, writing letters, poems and other kinds of texts in reply. Grief work and grief writing within the tradition of women's elegy, then, is communal, recursive and dialogic.

While I would hesitate to draw strict parallels between nineteenth century women's elegy and student bereavement narratives (especially since I have already suggested that the latter are likewise rooted in other traditions), I believe that the two genres share certain attributes that enable their writers to initiate and partake of a kind of dialogue, a conversation of grief that evolves from the sharing of texts and the creating of grief communities. Like nineteenth century women's elegies, for example, student grief narratives are often perceived in academic circles as lesser texts—not on a literary par with the kinds of bereavement literature students might read in upper-level English classes; this would include literature that, drawn from canonical sources, functions as legitimate objects of literary study. Also like these elegists, students who write grief narratives, having no great recourse to the public display of their writing, see the composition classroom as an opportunity to "publish" their work, especially in the context of writing workshops in which student texts are reproduced, distributed and shared. Like these elegists too, students who write grief (male and female alike) often embed their narratives in domestic spaces, in settings close to home and peopled with family. Finally, and also like these elegies, student grief narratives, although shaped around both cultural and canonical scripts, often disrupt those scripts. Such disruption occurs when students not only resist closure, but also reject a mode of grieving that demands solitude and isolation. Refusing (or unable) to confine mourning to private spaces, students often work within a communal framework of sharing and response. This kind of sharing and responding is evident in Erika's paper, which begins as a kind of reply to Janet's, and evolves with each successive draft into a revisioning of the grief experience as Janet began it.
"The Accident": Relating Grief and the Relational Experience of Grieving

"One afternoon [when I was fourteen], my uncle came to the house and said they had found my father in the highway, with the truck overturned and part of its back on him. I remember when he walked out the door earlier that day. He had been in the kitchen, the door slammed, he got in his pickup, and he said, "I'm going to go to the gin." I felt incomplete because it was a normal day; the sun was shining, and he gets up and walks away and that's the last we hear of him. It felt sort of like 'no closure.'"

(Gloria Anzaldua, qtd. in A Music I No Longer Hear, 83-4)

After Janet read her paper aloud in a whole class workshop, Erika, a member of Janet's peer writing group, told me that when she had read Janet's paper earlier that week, she had decided to narrow the focus of her own paper, to reshape her essay so it revolved less around the biographical details of her parents' lives and more around her step-father's accident and death. While the first draft, in keeping with its lack of focus, had no title, the second draft was entitled "The Accident." Erika begins her paper with the following scene:

As I stood waiting in the frigid December air, I knew the bus was going to be late. It had just snowed and the roads were a slushy mess. The frosty wind was quickly numbing my nose, so I buttoned up my coat and snuggled into the warmth. Glancing down the road, I saw my mother approaching in her light gray Ford Taurus wagon. She pulled up beside me. I was puzzled. I didn't think I had forgotten anything at the house. Grabbing the icy handle, I opened the car door, to be greeted by a gust of warm air that heated my frozen face. My mother's features were blocked from my view by a lock of blonde hair that swung over her face. As I climbed into the car, she looked over at me and I was shocked at what I saw. Tears were streaming down from her bright blue eyes, leaving shiny trails across her cheeks as they fell. She didn't usually cry so I was instantly concerned. She started to speak. "Honey, I know you are wondering why I am here. I wish I didn't have to be, but I have to tell you something. Roger got in a serious accident this morning on his way to work. His truck hit black ice and he lost control. An oncoming truck hit his. He doctors don't know how bad the damage is, but they told me he's in a coma."

Erika had moved this paragraph from where it had once stood at the end of her first draft to the beginning of her final draft. In the first draft, the passage followed several pages of background information about her mother and stepfather, descriptions of their personalities, the qualities she liked best in each, and a short account of their relationship—how they met,
what life was like for Erika and her mother before that time, and what life was like afterwards. From that initial paper, and also from this final draft, I inferred that Erika, after her mother’s divorce, did not have the extended family relationships that Janet claims in her paper. I sensed too that her mother had struggled emotionally and financially to make a living and to raise Erika alone before meeting her second husband.

What strikes me as particularly important about the opening passage of this draft is the way the writer elides those details of family and begins instead with an “I stood waiting” image, in much the same way that Janet, near the start of her essay, presents the reader with her “I stood quietly, cautiously” graveyard scene. The revising of her opening could be, I believe, a direct consequence of Erika’s reading of Janet’s paper, as Janet’s immediate first person stance at the start of her essay and the class’s favorable reaction to that stance appeared to have validated the student’s experience. Consequently, Erika begins her essay from her own viewpoint, one that she explicitly shuns in her earlier draft, which—focusing on her parents—mainly used third person pronouns.

Indeed, while in her first draft she refers to herself occasionally, she does so only tangentially, making her mother and stepfather the key “characters” in the piece. Such an avoidance of first-person narration, I have found, is common among first-year writing students. Despite what may appear to be an increased acceptance and validation of personal experience and narration in high school writing classes, for the most part, my students tell me, they have been forbidden the use of “I” in secondary school writing. Such instruction is obviously based on traditional conceptions of academic writing as intrinsically objective and dependent on the elimination rather than the inclusion of subjectivity. Students are also reluctant to try first person narration because they have been taught (or have intuited on their own) that such narration is often considered both unacceptable and selfish in academic circles. Indeed, when students write from the first person they are often accused of being hopelessly self-involved.

This notion of self-involvement is strongly linked to the hierarchical positioning of
certain kinds of knowledge and their epistemological value in the academy, where not only first-person narration is often regarded with suspicion, but student experience itself is either devalued or negated. Negative attitudes towards first-person narration by students assume that they have not lived long enough and thus have not earned the right to weigh in with their own experiences and opinions, that any experiences they may have had are not substantial enough to be written about, and that the disclosing of such experiences from their own perspectives contributes little to academic knowledge. As I indicated in my last chapter, I have seen such attitudes played out among teachers who insist that students cannot possibly achieve the critical distance (the objectivity) they need to be adequately reflective about death and grief.

The irony that underscores these criticisms of student first person narration is that certain texts written by certain young adults have been deemed not simply adequate but hugely influential in historical, cultural and literary terms. Such a text, for example, is the Diary of Anne Frank, which, as far as I can tell from my students’ own accounts, is still read and regarded as a canonical work in high school English classes. Certainly Frank’s account, written from a first-person perspective, rooted in the young writer’s own experiences, and composed in diary form, is — among other things — a first-person narration of death, grief and loss. While it is obviously a different kind of narrative than those written by most first-year students (rooted as it is in the history of the Holocaust), the success and treatment of Frank’s diaries as a literary text belies common assumptions about the superficiality of students’ experiences. It reveals, in fact, the ways in which first-person experience as narrated by traditional-aged college students can be complicated by a shift in context and perspective on the part of those who read them. As Deborah Mutnick writes, we need to regard the “personal narrative in college classrooms not only as a pedagogical device but as a contribution to our collective knowledge of diverse experiences and points of view” (86).

Like Frank’s diary, these narratives are kinds of cultural artifacts. But along with their epistemological and literary significance, such texts can also be deeply psychological.
In both Janet’s and Erika’s essays, for example, the bodies and shapes of the respective texts, like the bodies and egos of the student writers themselves, are alternately cohesive and fragmented, composed or decomposed. While some of the uneven qualities of the texts can be (and most often are) attributed to the authors’ lack of skill, as Mark Bracher observes, bodies of writing and bodies proper—personal narration and the physical bodies of students—are never separate, always tellingly linked. Informing the close relationship between bodies and their texts are the writers’ psychological frameworks, their conscious and unconscious motivations, the coherence or incoherence of their egos. In Janet’s essay, we see the boundaries between the dead and the living disintegrate with the student’s absorption into, and her complete identification with the grandfather. We also see not only the rupture of the text in the student’s angry exclamation against “him, Him, and the entire world”, but also the sudden coverage and closure of rupture in Janet’s embrace of cliches and resurrective discourse. In Erika’s essay we will see similar composure and discomposure, particularly as they spring from the writer’s conscious and unconscious relationship with her mother, as well as the personal effects of the dead. As Mark Bracher asserts, all writers experience the narcissistic desire to maintain the ego’s sense of bodily, visual, and spatial integrity and unity in a multifarious, disjunctive, and sometimes threatening environment. In order for us to feel a secure sense of identity, the body ego and its relation to other embodied individuals, as well as to the physical, visual, and spatial surroundings in general, must be secured. The body ego encounters both security and threats in the form of physical, spatial, and visual surroundings (e.g., landscape and weather), as well as in the form of other bodies, animal and human. Other human bodies, however, constitute the most significant threat and solace, and subjects respond to other human bodies...in order to promote and defend their body ego’s sense of integrity. (38)

Speaking very specifically to the role of the psyche in student writing, Bracher’s theories explain the disruption of both texts and social relationships that occur upon the death of a loved one and the disintegration of the body. The body’s decay in this sense refers not simply to the encrypted corpse, but also to the communal disruption caused by death, the threat of decomposition to communities and individuals, the possible disintegration of so-
cial alliances and relationships that constitute the identities of both the dead and the living.

In this sense, the body of writing becomes, as Bracher says, a “surrogate body” (38), a physical entity that can assume (like Janet with her grandfather) the specific features of the deceased subject, and the writer who strives to recompose the decomposing (discomposing) body. Thus, as I have suggested earlier, the ruptures and sutures in texts, the decomposition and recomposition that define them, can be related to the threatened identities and bodies of the writers themselves. In their efforts to reconstitute both the subject of writing and the subject who writes, students writing grief narratives “seek to fortify [their] body ego through inhabiting, literally or imaginarily, physical-visual-spatial environments that stimulate experiences of bodily coherence and unity” (Bracher 38-39). For Janet, the smooth surface of the cemetery, and of the text itself, constitutes the space in which she reconstructs the body and the body ego. For Erika, the fortification of body in relation to environment is considerably more vexed.

Like Janet, Erika situates grief not just in relation to her stepfather’s accident, but also in relation to nature. Whereas in Janet’s essay, however, the personified wind becomes a kind of maternal force, in Erika’s nature functions as a hostile element at the heart of a frozen landscape, an opponent that signifies and foreshadows the approach of loss. While Erika could have begun her essay in any number of settings—home, car, hospital room—she links impending death and anticipatory grief with the “frigid December air,” “slushy mess,” and “frosty wind.” Albeit unconsciously perhaps (although I am inclined to believe she does so from a sense of craft), she uses the image of frozen nature here as a kind of wasteland metaphor for both her psychological state and for death itself. “Inanimate bodies and shapes,” as Bracher observes, “can also function as surrogate bodies with which humans can identify in order to fortify their own sense. As Lacan notes, we often use images of integrity and fragmentation...to express our own desired or feared state of being” (38). In Erika’s essay the frozen street and the image of being outside set the stage and appropriate mood for what is to come, but also stand in as kinds of bodies, in this case bodies of death.
What pulls her away from impending grief and its cold accoutrements is her mother’s body and the sudden “gust of warm air” that, heating the writer’s “frozen face,” accompanies the maternal figure who draws Erika into her car. While it is true that Erika’s mother makes her first appearance in this essay as a harbinger of loss, delivering news of the accident partially in maternal terms (“Honey, I know why you are wondering why I’m here”), and partially in the discourse of a television anchor person (“His truck hit black ice and he lost control. An oncoming truck hit his”), she is inevitably portrayed as a loving parent who is also eminently human – perhaps even too human (too connected to the body) for the writer’s comfort. The writer is shocked, in fact, at the show of tears from a mother who seems otherwise to restrain emotion in public, and perhaps even in private. As the maternal figure cries and speaks in a “weak” voice, the woman becomes a kind of child herself, implying the potential withdrawal of mother from daughter, at least in the traditional sense of the mother/child bond, in which the mother is the caretaker and the daughter her charge. This threat of abandonment deeply underscores Erika’s essay. For it is the mother, her proximity to, or distance from her child, that either reassures the writer or initiates for her a crisis of anxiety. As if to highlight the tenuous presence of the mother, she first enters the paper only in profile and with a lock of hair slipping over her face. In this image the maternal figure becomes partially obscured: she is both there and not there, semi-present and only halfway seen.

Even in her partial presence, the maternal figure is a key element in Erika’s essay, one that counterbalances Janet’s narrative, in which there is a conspicuous lack of female figures and the maternal is subsumed in the masculine presence of the writer’s grandfather and male relatives. While we could say that Janet’s grandfather—kneading bread and caring for Janet—is a kind of maternal figure, Janet herself, by assuming her grandfather’s identity, wearing masculine clothing, and wanting only to be “one of the boys,” seems to reject any feminine figure. Erika, on the other hand, makes her mother the key character in
a narrative about the stepfather’s death. I believe, in fact, that Erika’s strong foregrounding of her mother is a response (conscious or otherwise) to Janet’s seeming erasure of the mother, to her removal of the mother from the scope of the reader’s vision and to the mother’s emergence through nature (whispering “shhhh” to the troubled child), which, although benign on the surface, resides not only in the invisible wind, but also in the green grass and fertile soil that gives coverage to the decaying body.

Such a strong insertion of a feminine element into Erika’s narrative signals not simply love for her mother, but also fear of her withdrawal. Indeed, Erika’s a sense of potential abandonment, while apparently centered on the immobile and deteriorating body of her stepfather, is also strongly anchored in the body of the mother. This fear manifests itself in an epistemological crisis, a childlike ignorance (innocence) and an almost willfull blindness. Describing how she felt when her mother announced her stepfather’s accident, Erika writes:

I realized she was still talking but I couldn’t comprehend what she was saying. I just couldn’t follow her. A coma, what was that? My stepfather was fine. He had to be. Nothing could have happened to Roger, he was too invincible. I stared out the window, watching the trees, trying to block it all out. Maybe if I didn’t listen to her it wouldn’t be real, I must be dreaming, I thought to myself. I had to be. The swirl of the snow swept up in our wake caught my attention. My mother’s voice faded into the background. I watched familiar houses pass by me; they were blurry and swirling like the snow. My mind wandered. Maybe I was dreaming. The world didn’t seem real. I felt detached from everything, like I was looking on, outside of my own body.

Here a distinct rupture occurs between the incident of trauma and the way the writer actually experiences it. This rupture is characterized by a crisis of seeing and not seeing, knowing and not knowing. We also see here a crisis of language, as the writer, struggling for the words to describe her response to the accident, utters instead only phrases of denial, insisting twice that she must be dreaming, she cannot accept what she hopes is not “real.” This kind of denial, as we shall see, permeates and shapes the narrative, as later Erika struggles constantly to avert her gaze from the decaying body and its death-like implications. As
novelist and memoirist Laura Furman points out, such denial of death “is a vast ocean, not the discreet hillock” we often imagine it. It is “a constant habit, part of [our] skin and [our] brain; it is what happens before understanding or thinking; it is the cloud [we] carry around [us]” (5). As a colleague of mine once said, we are “hard wired” in our denial of death, psychologically programmed to think of death in terms of what Mary Bradbury calls the “not me, but the other” syndrome. (51)

Given this second nature quality of death denial, it is remarkable when anyone, let alone an eighteen year old student writer, is forced to confront it. Confronting it, however, is just what Erika attempts. This does not mean that she accepts death or is easy with it. Far from it. Rather she approaches death warily and acknowledges its (un)familiar face. (We might think here also of Janet’s grandfather, and the tombstone’s visage made familiar). In some ways, in fact, the writer herself becomes a kind of surrogate body, suffering indirectly the trauma her stepfather has already incurred. Repeatedly she tries to “block it all out,” in the same way as her stepfather, slipping into a coma, blocks out consciousness: “looking on, outside of [her] own body,” she even undergoes a kind of near-death experience, which removes her not just from the world but also its language. Unable to comprehend what her mother is saying, in fact, Erika labors here under the shadow of an epistemological crisis. Caught between the strange and the familiar (the haunted ground of the uncanny), she embarks upon a landscape she no longer knows, a seemingly familiar terrain made strange by the “swirling snow,” the frozen nature she associates with death. Traversing old ground, she sees it shift shape around her, as, like the hair that veils her mother’s face, the snow obscures the child’s vision. Vision in this sense means viewing with the eyes as well as the mind, both sight and in-sight.

Complicating the image of seeing and not seeing, knowing and not knowing, are the double meanings of the word “follow” in this passage. “I couldn’t follow my mother,” writes Erika. Here she obviously means that she couldn’t comprehend what her mother was saying, couldn’t grab hold of her train of thought. The word “follow,” however, also means to
accompany, or to quite literally be lead. As my students might say when they indicate an unwillingness or inability to confront something, "she simply could not go there." In this sense, not being able to follow signals the writer’s fear of the encrypted spaces her mother occupies in relation to her husband and her husband’s decaying body, the spaces the young writer cannot, or will not, enter. It also may mean that her mother, preoccupied with her husband’s condition and her own grief, may very well be at an emotional distance from her daughter, who may yearn to follow, but cannot. We have seen evidence of this distancing in the “weak” crying image of Erika’s mother, who temporarily abnegates her maternal role for the role of the child. This role reversal and the mother’s withdrawal confuses and frightens the writer who is then plunged into the obscured landscape.

Since her inability to follow her mother coincides with a crisis of not seeing and not knowing, we might say that the writer here, along with the child who yearns to follow the mother, loses her way. “When we finally got back to my house I still felt like I was in another world,” she writes. Here Erika reaches a crisis point in the essay itself, one that is contingent upon her initial draft, a kind of biographical account of her parents. In that draft, Erika, praising her parents almost in the fashion of the memorial service eulogy, recounts what she knows of their lives. Even though later, after reading Janet’s paper, she abandons that biographical material, the biographical subtext strongly underscores Erika’s final draft, especially for readers who have read both versions. This biographical subtext does not diminish but rather enhances the sense of mourning in Erika’s piece. As Brenda Applegate notes, “Biography is a discourse with the dead” (439). The “biographer pries open coffins, beckoning the reader into a harrowing world where the dead are not quite dead, the forgotten never forgotten….The entire biographical project is suffused with loss” (438).

Such a sense of loss, rooted in the omitted biographical details of her parents, permeates Erika’s text. In groping her way through her revision, Erika seems unclear here, as a writer engaged in craft, whether and when to turn from her mother to her stepfather. Choosing one, she senses she may lose the other. Complicating this confusion is the literal
girl herself, the main character of the essay, whose work of the moment seems to be the aversion of her eyes from the frightful deteriorating body of her stepfather. Here Erika writes:

My mother came and checked on me frequently to see how I was doing. Later that day, my mother and older brother went to go see Roger. She explained to me that she didn’t want me to see him yet. From what the doctors had told her, he was in bad shape and she didn’t want me to have to see him like that. The thought of how bad he looked frightened me. I know that my mother realized this and that’s why she didn’t urge me to go visit him.

Prohibiting Erika from seeing her stepfather, her mother refers explicitly to the deteriorating body that Erika describes here as simply “like that” (the truth itself is unspeakable), rather than the “gentle giant of a man” she wishes to remember. Freed from actually gazing upon the body, Erika (like Janet with her grandfather) can now mythologize Roger. Janet’s grandfather, we recall, was a “big, burly man” who made bread. Erika’s stepfather is also large, a hugely strong man, who like Janet’s grandfather, is remarkable not just for his masculine but also for his maternal traits. “He would come home from work and lift me up to the ceiling with his massive arms,” Janet recalls. “Laughing his deep gruff laugh, he would envelop me in those huge arms and give me a bear hug. I didn’t want to see him in the hospital bed, helpless.”

The tension in the essay obviously lies here between memory and “reality,” the writer’s reconstruction (composition) and the moment of deconstruction (death, or decomposition). Mediating this moment is Erika’s mother who, while present for the daughter, nevertheless walks the line between life and death, daughter and husband. In fact, it is at this juncture of the essay, the precise point of the mother’s mediation, that a seemingly ordinary but curious change occurs, as Janet, with her mother’s prohibition against viewing the body, ends the section, inserts extra spaces into her text, and then begins the next section with an abrupt reversal of her mother’s position. In the second section, her mother, no longer shielding the girl, insists that Erika see Roger. Thus splitting the first part of her essay from the second, Erika creates a line of demarcation between her mother’s emotional
presence and her absence, between not seeing and seeing, between a willful blindness and an almost violent coming into sight.

This blank space also signals the passage of time and the maturing of the young girl herself, probably to an age and point where her mother believes she can handle viewing Roger’s body. Here the reader is excluded from the intervening years; we see neither Erika nor her family, and we are also protected, like Erika, from the deteriorating body. Thus the space also signals an interval of blindness for not just the writer, but also the reader. Without markers of any kind, this space between the time of the accident and the time of Roger’s death is like the landscape in the beginning of the essay, obscured by snow, familiar but infinitely strange, blanketed in a quiet nothingness. Devoid of words, the blank space also suggests the failure of language. Here indeed the writer is mute. The section that follows this blank and wordless territory shatters the stillness:

Then came the day when my mother was told that Roger was on the brink of death. She wanted me to go and see him one last time. I went, unwillingly. The trip took forever; it felt like the day of the accident all over again. I looked out the window trying to focus my attention on the street signs, the trees, and the ground. Anything to get my mind off the long wait. It didn’t work. My mind was still swamped with terrible images of what I might see. My mother talked to me about the situation almost the whole ride. She tried her best to prepare me for what Roger looked like... ‘He is not going to look like you remember him,’ she said. ‘He has lost a lot of weight and there are tubes ticking out of his arms...’ As the trees grew less and less dense, I noticed we were no longer in the country. The hospital loomed ahead, large and imposing. The sign read, “The Greenery.”

Working to re-present, re-compose, the experience of loss, Erika struggles here with and against seeing and acknowledging both Roger’s body and the accident itself. Such struggling with seeing/comprehending results in a poverty of descriptive detail and language, as no words seem adequate to describe the trauma and seeing in order to recover language remains an obstacle for the writer. Indeed, as Erika and her mother near the hospital, the writer tries to lose herself again (to be outside her body) by absorbing herself in the landscape, which—as if signifying clarity of sight and comprehension—no longer swirls in
snow, but, uncovered—like the dying body awaiting her in the hospital—demands to be recognized. Even the hospital itself, with its rather odd and pastoral name, “The Greenery,” suggests a clear and easily readable landscape, rather than the snow-covered grounds Erika looked upon earlier. “As the trees grew less and less dense, I noticed we were no longer in the country,” Erika writes, indicating her entrance into a terrain that reveals rather than obscures.

As she enters this clearly demarcated landscape, Erika is not only forced to see trauma, but almost quite literally to relive it. The act of seeing here, in fact, seems almost tinged with a kind of violence, since it is Erika’s mother, who, once having protected the child from gazing upon the broken body, now insists that Erika see the body, and even “drives” her towards the sight. Accompanying Erika’s fear of viewing Roger, then, is also the fear of her mother’s abandonment, as Erika seems to sense in her mother’s urgent bidding to see the undead stepfather that her mother herself stands dangerously near the body and death; these almost absorb the mother in the same way that the out-of-body experience and snow obscured landscape absorbed Erika earlier in the essay. Here we see the potential threat to the child of her mother’s emotional withdrawal, a kind of death itself.

As Erika enters the hospital room she is dismayed and frightened that her mother sits “on the starchy linen blankets beside Roger and [speaks] to him as if he were fine.” How, Erika wonders, could her mother “still hang on and think he was going to get better?” The image of hanging on here refers as much to Roger’s suspension between life and death as Erika’s mother’s reluctance to let go. This does not mean that the writer or the child whom the writer constructs here is malicious and unfeeling. It does enhance, however, the notion of terror Erika feels about the deteriorating body and the death-to-come. While she seemingly welcomes death in her later assertions that it would “free Roger from pain,” this “death wish,” accompanied by her yearning for her mother’s detachment from the dying body, also suggests a natural child-like yearning to be the sole center of maternal attention and love. There may be reason to believe, in fact, that Erika has seen her mother in stages of
emotional distancing from her daughter throughout the coma and the long wait for Roger to die. While we will clearly see that Erika’s mother is, for the most part at least, touchingly present and supportive of her daughter, the child’s anxiety at a moment like this may very well spring from a sense of her mother’s emotional preoccupation at this time of crisis.

Andre Green would call this emotional withdrawal from the child and its effects the “dead mother” syndrome. While Green uses the term principally to explain the dynamics of the mother/child bond, particularly in the first months after birth when some women are subject to post-partum depression, other theorists have extended his idea to later periods in the mother/child relationship. The theory is complicated. Simply put, however, it examines the effects of a mother’s depression on the child, for whom, because of the mother’s emotional preoccupation with something other than the child, she cannot be fully present. When this happens, the child is forced to withdraw from the mother and to find other objects of attachment. What results is a “massive decathexis of the maternal primary object, which leaves traces in the unconscious in the form of ‘psychic holes’” (Kohon 2). These holes form the basis of a kind of “blank mourning,” the child’s unconscious internalization of the mother’s depression and her longing for a resurrected (alive again) mother. The child’s conscious identification of the object for which she mourns, however, is difficult, since the child grieves for an object that is neither overtly present nor overtly absent. As Jed Sekoff observes of the dead mother, “the horror is to be suspended between life and death....This is the fate of the dead and deadening object relations of the dead mother complex: to be suspended between the living and the dead” (122).

Sekoff’s image is a particularly apt one here, since Roger, the victim of a prolonged coma, functions in the essay as “the undead,” a body her mother identifies and cares for even as she strives to care for her child. Meanwhile the child herself lives in fear of the undead body and her mother’s preoccupation with it. This fear, and the relationship with and among the undead is considerably more complicated when we consider the subtext of this essay, which can be more clearly seen in the first draft rather than the final version I am
working with here. Erika’s final draft, a response to Janet’s narrative about her grandfather’s death, is contained and focused compared to Erika’s first draft, which preceded Janet’s piece. In her earlier draft Erika writes not only about her parents’ relationship and lives, but also (and extensively) about the fate of Roger’s body. Absent from the final draft, but present in the initial one, is Roger’s birth family, who—in a battle over the fate of the body—are represented as foes of Erika and her mother. Not only does Roger lie in a comatose state for a couple of years, but when Erika’s mother decides to remove the body from life support, Roger’s family takes her to court to prevent it. This action prolongs Roger’s coma and Erika’s mother’s attachment to the body. As Erika relates the story, the court suit and family dispute result in the hostile and angry estrangement of mother from step-family, that family’s abandonment of Erika, and the disastrous economic circumstances that follow. “We lost our house to foreclosure,” Erika explains, “and had horrible financial difficulties.”

It is in this first draft too, that Erika reveals information about her own immediate family that she later omits from her final draft, information that reinforces in her essay a disturbing undercurrent of threatened abandonment and familial fragmentation. On the first page of her initial draft, she writes:

My mother grew up in a home where her father was abusive. All her life all she wanted to do was get married so that she could leave her house. She married my father and moved away to New Mexico. She finally saw the real him when he turned to alcohol. He was the same kind of man that her father was. She was able to break the cycle of abuse because she thought of my older brother and I growing up like her, and she couldn’t stay with him. I was only one year-old when this happened. She raised my brother and me all alone for the first 7 years of my life. I am so glad that she had the courage to break the cycle of abuse so that I would be able to enjoy a better life.

Having read this passage in Erika’s first draft, I see in her later draft not simply her refusal to acknowledge Roger’s body and the effects of trauma, but also a fear of familial disintegration. To acknowledge the results of the accident, and Roger’s death itself, would be to uncover a faultline within the reconstructed family, one that would threaten both the collapse of the mother/daughter relationship and also of the immediate family. That Erika
omits it from her later draft bespeaks, I think, her wish to continue constructing a family for her readers that is not unlike Janet’s, a family whose members are essentially “there for” one another, rather than fragmented and contentious. I believe Erika also erases this passage from her final draft because she may be unwilling to admit to herself—or to reveal to her classmates—that, while one cycle has indeed ended (the cycle of abuse) another cycle continues (the repeated disintegration of the family and the repeated “abandonment” of the family by a father figure).

Considering this buried layer of narrative, it is not difficult to understand Erika’s anxiety about her mother’s possible withdrawal and also her fear of the highly contested body itself. Neither dead nor alive, this body—in some figurative sense at least—stands in for both Erika and her mother. Erika, as we see in both drafts, is caught between the body and her mother. Meanwhile, her mother moves between husband and child, the body she wishes to put to rest and the body she nurtures. Concerned with the living, she is also concerned with the dead. It is this relationship with the “undead” that governs both drafts of Erika’s essay. Since Erika all but eliminates the contested body from the second draft, however, I believe she tries to cover it over with the kind of green grass and fertile soil, the smooth rhetorical gestures that Janet makes use of in her description of the cemetery in which her grandfather lies. This is not to say, of course, that Erika succeeds in entirely encrypting the contested body; it is obvious that she does not. Still, by largely keeping the deteriorating body from sight, and by eliminating from her essay the messiness of the family fight, she smooths over the grave and the bodies of contention and decomposure associated with it.

Thus, if we return once more to the blank space separating the first two segments of Erika’s essay, we realize the weighty implications of this space, how much of the body’s decay and the contest surrounding it have been erased. For it is in this space that, in Erika’s initial draft, the details of family and body once resided; it is here that Erika informs us of Roger’s condition and her mother’s fight with Roger’s birth family to take him off of life
support. What we get in the second draft, however, is a smoothing over of this bumpy terrain, a white space, or what Green would call the "blankness of mourning." We might think of this space not only as a maneuver of craft (a consciously thought-out way for the writer to organize her essay), but as the unconscious manifestation of a "psychic hole," the abyss of mourning that happens in the face of the mother's withdrawal, the negation of the decaying body and death itself.

To me, this hole is even more conspicuous than it might seem to a first time reader of the final draft. When I had talked with Erika about her first draft in conference, I had asked her specifically for more details at this point of her essay. I had wanted her to give me an image of Roger before the accident and while he was in the coma. In short, I had tried to convince Erika, as I had tried with Janet, that she could honor the dead by bringing their persons and personalities to life in embodied description. Like Janet, however, Erika does not particularize the deceased by using an abundance of detail here, the kind of particularized detail I had requested. Rather, referring again to the "giant" of a man who "lightened up the room with a smile," she eulogizes and mythologizes her stepfather, using the kind of often-cliched memorializing language that seeks to construct a larger-than-life image of the deceased. In this way, she appears to respond directly to Janet's representation of her grandfather. Indeed, in her portrayal of her stepfather, she almost duplicates the qualities that Janet attributes to her grandfather. Both the grandfather and stepfather, we learn, are giant men with nurturing powers. Janet's grandfather is burly and bakes bread, while Erika's stepfather is a gentle giant. Janet's grandfather has "colossal hands;" Erika's stepfather has "massive arms." Each man has a singular and special relationship with his granddaughter/stepdaughter.

Such mythological construction of characters signifies the nature of memory and its influence on the writing of grief. These images of huge gentle men, perfectly flawless, are based on the perspective of the children the writers once were, their early memories as young girls who looked up, both literally and figuratively, to the patriarchs of their families,
and who continue, even in the college classroom, to memorialize them from that perspective. But more than that, these figures are constructed gently and carefully with diverse audiences in mind. They are made presentable—laid out, if you will—for viewers and readers alike, both real and imagined. In this context, Erika struggles here not so much to express individualized grief—to pour forth raw and unmediated emotions or to engage in a solipsistic cathartic exercise (indeed, that would be no struggle at all) — but rather to reconstruct the deceased in ways that respect and account for multiple parties: Roger, her mother, and the class and teacher for whom she writes.

Accounting for diverse audiences when writing about grief can be difficult and even treacherous. Erika reminded me of this, when, throughout her conferences with me, she talked about the difficulties of composing the dead, about the tricky nature of disclosure, and also of audience needs and expectations. These were conversations that Erika herself initiated at my request for more details in her essay, more descriptions of persons and a greater contextualizing of the scenes and events of grief. Like other students who write about grief, Erika worried about what her audience “could take,” how much of the deteriorating body they would want to see, or that she should show. Also like many of her classmates, she worried about the actual ethics of reconstructing the dead. Aware that she was writing not just for herself, but also for her mother and her classmates, she was concerned with the appropriate representation of her stepfather, the negotiation of the boundary between private and public, family and school. She also felt that too explicit an account of the body-in-coma could repulse her audience and/or betray both her deceased stepfather and her mother. In short, she was keenly and clearly aware of the consequences of her essay, its effects on both family and classroom.

Like the participants in the hospice service I describe in the last chapter, in fact, Erika’s remembering of the dead works on multiple levels, performs multiple functions, and accounts for multiple audiences. As Davies and other critics have noted, the kind of narration of grief that Erika performs, while individually cathartic perhaps, is also socially and
publicly (perhaps even civically) meaningful. By reconstructing and honoring the dead, the writer/memorializer reinserts the departed into the web of living relationships, reinscribes and redefines those relationships around the loss, and works to mend the fabric of communities and social structures that have been rent by death. Foremost among these structures are the writers’ families. But they also may include other communities such as school, church, and civic organizations. Janet, for example, places her grandfather in relation to his church and country. Erika, on the other hand (apparently at least), situates her stepfather mainly in relation to the small nuclear family of mother, brother, and the writer herself.

Indeed, while Erika’s essay (as we shall see) expands its scope beyond the individual griever, it is nevertheless singularly and almost obsessively focused on the immediate family, and mainly on the relationship between mother and daughter. The older brother makes only a cameo appearance in the essay. While we learn that he accompanies his mother to see Roger immediately after the accident, we learn nothing more about him; nor do we even see him at the funeral. His absence narrows the lens through which we view the crisis, so that the dynamics of the mother/daughter relationship become the core of a narrative that can be mistakenly read as a story only about the death of a beloved father figure.

The aperture through which we see the mother/daughter relationship unfold and evolve becomes even smaller, the focus even tighter, when the writer sets up in her first draft, but eliminates from her final draft, the opposition between nuclear and extended family, her own immediate kinship relationships and those of her stepfather’s. While Erika removes this information from the final draft, however, its residue remains not only for readers of the first draft, but also for final draft readers who may sense a conspicuous absence of extended family, the kind of extended family that includes grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins—the familial web implied in Janet’s essay. Although later in her final draft, Erika refers briefly to her grandmother (her mother calls her on the phone to “brag” about Erika’s report card), Erika’s paper remains largely bereft of extended family, or mention of the initial disruption of family caused by her mother’s divorce.
In this final draft too, Roger plays a less viable role than he does in Erika’s initial draft. In that earlier draft, we learn, for example, how she comes to regard him as her “real” father and protector. With physical details and reference to ethnicity, she writes more specifically about his body and contextualizes it relationally:

My stepfather, Roger, came into the picture when I was 7. He was the first real male role model that I had in my life. He was a gigantic Man, an ex-body builder. Roger was 6’3” tall, which seems a staggering height when you are only 7 years old. He could bench press 375 pounds. He had dark hair, a big nose, and a strong Italian accent. I was very intimidated by him at first, for my real father had confused my concept of what a father was. Now there was an incredibly large man trying to move into my family, and my mother was allowing it. He frightened me at first with his looming height and bellowing voice. But this man quickly proved himself to be nothing like my real father. He was amazingly kind hearted and compassionate. He was fun. When we had family gatherings at my home, Roger would pick up the little kids and hold the backs of their shirts to let them pretend they were flying around the room. He was a protector and family man. Roger would never allow anything damaging or dangerous near his family. One could always feel safe when he was around.

With this picture, Erika introduces us not simply to the rich physical details of Roger’s person, but also to other possibilities and suggestions. The portrayal of ethnicity here, for example, excluded almost entirely from the final draft (except for a brief allusion to his “dark skin”), opposes the blue-eyed blonde mother to the dark-skinned Roger, and thus interjects the possibility, in the fight between the writer’s mother and Roger’s family, of not only ethical but also ethnic strife. Here Erika focuses on “composing” Roger and her preaccident relationship with him, while also suppressing the physical consequences of the accident and his subsequent de-composure. After the detailed description of Roger as a kind of superhero (as indicated in the capitalized “M” in “Man”), she provides scanty details of the accident itself. “Unfortunately,” she writes, “Roger was involved in a bad car accident when I was 11. He was in a coma for 6 years before passing away.” Although after the accident her stepfather becomes “a rack of bones, diminished to half the size he once was,” Erika writes that she would “rather remember him as the massive man of my childhood, laughing his booming laugh and giving great big bear hugs.” Since she eliminates the
vivid picture of the post-accident Roger in her final draft. Erika, true to her word, does not particularize the pain and deterioration of her stepfather’s body, but rather mythologizes him instead.

The rest of Erika’s first draft focuses mainly on the strength and love of her mother and her stepfather, and discusses how the writer herself has inherited these qualities. Characteristic of the language Erika uses in this draft is the kind of ressurective discourse about death we see in Janet’s essay. This discourse allows the writer/bereaved to give meaning to loss, enables her future as a survivor, and “resurrects” the deceased through the qualities she has inherited from him. Using this kind of discourse, Erika asserts that others who experience the loss of family members “can see through my success in dealing with grief, and though things may seem hopeless at that moment there is a ray of light in the future and a time when they can be happy once again.”

With this statement the writer herself functions as a kind of redeemer and also calls upon the linear model of healing, one that demands closure, as well as a sense of purpose and moving on. This model, conspicuously present in the first draft, is entirely absent from Erika’s final version. Furthermore, nowhere in her revision does she mention her birth father or her mother’s divorce. Nowhere does she talk about the cycle of abuse and her father’s and grandfather’s alcoholism. Nor does she directly allude to her mother’s financial difficulties. And, finally, nowhere does she refer to Roger’s birth family, who disown Erika and her mother. While Erika may have thought that omitting this information might create a less disruptive and ruptured text, these very conscious omissions actually open up other tensions in Erika’s revision, other possibilities for exploration, and new dimensions of grief and loss.

In an essay entitled “The Increasing Prevalence of Complicated Mourning,” Therese Rando helps illuminate the kinds of factors that create these tensions. Rando claims that, in the United States at least, grieving has become increasingly complicated due to:
urbanization; industrialization; increasing technicalization; secularization and deritualization (particularly the trend to omit funeral or memorial services and not to view the body); greater social mobility; social reorganization (specifically a decline in—if not a breakdown of—the nuclear family, increases in single parent and blended families, and the relative exclusion of the aged and dying); rising societal, interpersonal, and institutional violence (physical, sexual, and psychological); and unemployment, poverty, and economic problems (47-48)

The kind of complicated mourning Rando discusses here permeates Erika's text. We read this most clearly in Erika's inclusion and omission in/from her final revision certain incidents, characters, and details present in the first draft. We see in Erika's first draft, for example, the bioethical dilemmas that result in disputes over the fate of the body and disruptions of family relationships; we also see what Rando calls the blended family and its reorganization after divorce. We recognize too the kind of destructive generational cycles to which Rando refers, the kinds of separations, losses, and mourning that result from substance and physical abuse. And while we cannot detect the kind of cultural violence that Rando speaks of specifically in her article (e.g. gun deaths), we recognize in the car accident the violence of what Rando calls technicalization.

What is most significant about these factors, however, is not so much that they simply exist in Erika's essay, but rather that her writing—the very act of composing itself—is a way of negotiating them. Like other students who write about grief, Erika does not, as some critics suggest, simply “shoot from the hip,” spontaneously and unthinkingly purging herself of emotions and feelings. Rather, as with the process of grief itself, she works on complicated and even sophisticated levels that account both for the individual writer and for the writer's various communities—home and school, birthplace and the world outside of it. As I have indicated earlier, when students write about death and grief they usually write responsively and communally rather than solipsistically. This kind of responsive quality is immediately apparent when we consider the ways Erika revises her initial draft in answer to Janet's text. It is only after reading and hearing Janet's paper that she undertakes the process of omission and inclusion in her own story.

176
When Erika had written her first draft the class was only one week into the semester. But by the time Erika had written her final draft, the class was nearly over. During the period between drafts, Erika, along with her classmates, had had many opportunities to observe and adapt to the culture of the writing classroom. They had learned that, by sharing their work with their classmates, they would be writing for a wider audience than they may have been accustomed to. They had also offered and heard opinions about pieces written by professional authors, essays assigned to them not just as models of good writing, but also as springboards for classroom discussion about significant issues: race, class, gender and a myriad of political, cultural and ethical issues. Consequently, Erika had a sense of the various opinions, cultures and backgrounds of her peers. Given that they were all white students enrolled in an affluent, private Catholic University, and that most of them had attended private prep or secondary schools (also Catholic), she was able to make assumptions about her classmates' religious beliefs, economic status, families and communities, and even their political orientations.

It's important to note here that at no time did Erika talk to me directly about having made these assumptions about her classmates. Consequently, I can merely speculate about her motives in revising her paper. I am confident, however, that any careful reader may infer from both her first draft and final revision a negotiation of the various social and political positions of Erika’s readers. This does not mean that the kind of assumptions Erika may have made about her audience are necessarily true. As Tom Newkirk asserts, a certain degree of performance takes place during writing and classroom discussions, constructions of particular personae to suit particular audiences and contexts. Nevertheless, given the kinds of disclosures her peers made in the classroom and in their papers (at least early in the semester), Erika may have perceived that most of her classmates came from families undisturbed by divorce, dispute and financial difficulties, extended families in which grandparents and other figures often played “warm and fuzzy” roles. She may have felt that her own particular situation, as a daughter of a divorced, widowed, and working class mother, with-
out any apparent support from other family members, was the exception rather than the rule.

This may be why, in addition to her sincere wish to memorialize and pay tribute to Roger, Erika, in her final draft, responds to Janet's essay by selecting details to represent Roger that are almost identical to those Janet uses when describing her grandfather, details that allow Roger equal status with Janet's grandfather and that also align Roger with more traditional paternal figures and families. In this way, she responds not only directly and indirectly to Janet's text, but also implicitly to other classroom texts, including her classmates' papers, their discussions, and their modes of representing themselves. Positioning herself among these texts, assessing her classmates' perspectives, she removes the "messy," disruptive material from her paper about Roger's family. In doing so, she seemingly resists my own suggestions for ways to "complicate" her final draft.

With her acute awareness of audience and the impulse to construct her family in a very particular way, however, Erika's objectives in her paper are already complicated. Rather than unwittingly disclosing personal material, she assesses the risks of disclosure and withholds what she deems necessary. As she does so, she shows both an understanding of her audience, and a sophisticated sense of the line between the personal and public. At the same time, she is protective of her mother and of herself, careful not to disclose too much, or the "wrong" sort of information to her audience. While she certainly writes from an intensely personal position, then, she hardly, as I've heard critics claim about these kinds of student papers, "spews" forth her feelings; nor does she engage in what some critics debasingly call "emotional diarrhea." Hers is not, in other words, just the raw manifestation of the body (her own or those she represents), but rather a balancing act between personal effects and language, language and audience, and memory and genre.

Here we might reconsider what Rando says about the social and cultural factors that complicate grief. Erika's paper manifests these factors, first, in the break up and reorganization of the family, which—while quite apparent in her final revision—is still largely elided. The second factor is the bioethical dilemma, or the crisis of the "undead" and the legal and
personal battles Erika’s mother undertakes to remove her husband from life-support. The third factor is the economic status of the family, especially after Roger’s death.

A consideration of these factors and the complicated grief that results give rise to—and help answer—particular questions, some of which I have already briefly addressed. Why for instance, does Erika decide to exclude material about her father, the abuse and the divorce from her revision? Why, in that final draft, does she have such difficulty embodying (fleshing out with detail) Roger—not necessarily in his “undead” state—but as a living and loving figure before the accident? Why does she omit entirely the compelling information about the court battle and her mother’s decision to remove Roger from life support? Why does she not refer to her family’s financial struggles in the final paper? And why does she drop completely from her final version the kind of hopeful resurrective discourse that characterizes the first draft?

One way to answer these questions is by considering again how Erika may sense and respond to her various audiences. When Erika writes her first draft, even though the syllabus and my comments in class indicate otherwise, she assumes, I believe, that her essay will be written mainly for me, her teacher. Indeed, even though she may have had a clear understanding of the collaborative and communal nature of the class after our first session together, her past experiences in English classes may not have prepared her for a wider audience and more public presentation of her work. Thus, material that she may have felt comfortable sharing with me in the first draft she most probably omits from her revision when she realizes that her peers will also be privy to it. Also, by the time Erika writes her second draft she has had the opportunity to gauge the class and their particular social, political, and cultural positions. Whether or not such positions are factual or constructed does not matter. Erika may make important decisions about both craft and disclosure based on these facts of audience, and she revises accordingly.

Consequently, perhaps seeing the largely “pro-life” positions of many of her classmates in this Catholic university, she may have decided to entirely omit information about
the life-support battle from her revision, information that I received, but that the class as a whole never reads. Also because Janet’s paper presents to the class images of a united nuclear and extended family with close relationships, Erika glosses over information about divorce, marriage, abuse and family strife, alluding to these factors only with the word “stepfather.” She hesitates, I think, especially so early in the semester and her school career, to step forth as a kind of deviant in the classroom, or as a child of a “broken home.”

Even as she omits information, however, Erika consciously and boldly includes other material. In doing so, I think, she writes to “correct” Janet’s representation of grief and loss, Janet’s omission of a mother figure, and what may appear to Erika as Janet’s privileged circumstances—her united and extended family, their apparent financial security, the lengthy companionship of a paternal figure through his old age, her grandfather’s comparatively short-lived suffering, his easy laying to rest and the uncontested commitment of his body to earth and nature – all the elements that allow Janet to extol in her final version, through the memorialization of her grandfather, “God, family, and country.” As we have seen, in fact, this memorialization of Janet’s grandfather—his transformation into a “soldier”—enables Janet herself to stand apart from the processes of suffering and dying, the material circumstances of grief and loss, and to pose herself as a kind of historian recounting the past, an individual spectator overlooking the graves, a detached observer not fully engaged in the community of grief that involves her immediate family.

Erika, on the other hand, appears not only more involved in her mourning, but also more explicitly and directly related both to the living and the (un)dead, and in closer proximity to death and trauma. Rather than simply writing “about” her stepfather—separating herself, like Janet, as a kind of isolated observer—Erika represents herself as a participant in both grief and the events that engender it. Since her personal grief is contingent on her mother’s, she joins her mother—even merges with her—in a kind of prolonged bereavement, a lengthy and suspended mourning that seems to defy Janet’s easy terms of grief, the kind of progressive Lycidas-like recovery and healing towards which Janet’s essay gestures.
Again, Erika's revision both acknowledges her classmate's loss and transforms it according to her own experiences and her more personal involvement with grief, an involvement that undercuts the progressive course of so-called healing.

I certainly do not want to suggest here that Janet's text and mode of grieving are inferior to Erika's. To make such proclamations about grief and its apparent intensity (or lack of) would be, as Elizabeth Spelman says, to cast unwarranted judgments on loss, to arrogantly pronounce what counts as real loss and what does not. There are, in fact, ways that Janet's narration of grief is more aesthetically constructed than Erika's. Unlike Erika, Janet consciously shapes her essay by both opening and ending with the scene of the writer standing in the cemetery. In doing so, she creates a kind of symmetry, one that emulates Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," in which the poem's speaker overlooks the scene before him, reflects on the past, and then returns again to the same scene, refreshed and even transmogrified. Beginning her piece in the present and in a particular locale, Erika also shifts reflectively to the past, and then ends in the present and in the same locale as the opening scene. Like Wordsworth's speaker, she is transformed and ready to move on.

Janet also has more of a knack for language than Erika does, a propensity for word play (e.g. "mourning" and "morning") that Erika lacks. In one very significant sense, however, Janet's and Erika's essays are much alike: both are informed by the omnipresent tension between life and death, the body-on-view and the body encrypted, composure and decomposure. In Erika's essay these tensions are exacerbated and sustained by the complications of mourning I discuss above, and by her own personal fear of and revulsion towards the deteriorating body. These tensions are most evident as, in the final draft, Erika describes her visit to Roger:

I walked into the quiet hospital room. It was light blue and very calming. The lights were very bright, illuminating every corner of the room. The bed was situated in the middle of the room on the left wall. I instantly had to look away from it. I didn't look at the man on the bed. I couldn't. I didn't want to see what he looked like. I glanced at my mother, pleading to let me out of this; I couldn't stand it. She
briefly placed her hand in mine and then proceeded into the room. I stood in the doorway and followed her with my eyes. I froze when I finally looked over and saw Roger lying on the bed. He did not look like the man I had grown up with as my father figure. Here was not the man who could lighten up a room with his smile, with his laugh, with his mere presence. The person on the bed was a frail man. But as I looked deeper into his sunken face I realized that it was him. I didn’t want to believe it, but there he was. He was not the 6’3” dark-haired, dark-skinned giant that once loomed over me. He was helpless and small. At that moment, I knew that he was not going to recover.

Here the struggle between seeing and not seeing, light and shadow, knowing and not knowing intensifies. On the one hand, the room in which Roger lies is calming and well lit, with the “very bright” light “illuminating every corner;” the bed and the body themselves are in the middle of the room where they demand to be seen. On the other hand, it is precisely this visibility (the bringing of the body to light) that is the problem. For it is at this juncture in her text that Erika is forced both to confront the body and to prepare it, her audience, and herself for its viewing. Here Erika faces not just the ethical burden of representation, but the equally heavy burden of disclosure. Wishing to honor her stepfather, to depict him with integrity, she must still meet the demands of her teacher and classmates for more details, for images that “show, don’t tell.”

Erika’s preoccupation with seeing and not seeing is especially significant here, because such a struggle signals both the literal wish to avert the eyes and the problematic of disclosure itself. The issue at this point is not so much that she show as how much she show. Describing her stepfather’s body in detail, after all, means the fleshing out of the ugly facts of deteriorating flesh, reminding audience and writer alike of their own mortality, and, as trauma theorist Cathy Caruth argues, bringing to the surface of consciousness the effects of trauma, and thus making possible the violent “betrayal of sight.” It also means an explicit rendering of the body and its pre- and post-accident material circumstances, circumstances that the young writer may not yet be prepared to offer an audience who appears resistant not only to thinking about the decaying body and the physicality of death, but also, perhaps, the kind of “blended family” that is Erika’s. Thus, rather than bringing forth a descriptive
image of Roger here (as I had requested), Erika avoids description by avoiding looking. "I instantly had to look away;" "I didn't look;" "I didn't want to see." In this way she resists both gazing upon the body and fleshing it out for her readers.

Erika's traversing of ground back and forth between drafts, and also back and forth between her own texts and the texts of her classmates, comprises a critical negotiation of difference and distance. Because of these negotiations, it is a gross misjudgment to fault not only Erika's narrative, but also those of her classmates with a lack of so-called critical distance. Such judgments create a kind of either/or perspective of student narratives, one that either applauds them for their achievement of distance or that denounces them for their so-called proximity to the subject and the body itself. These judgments ignore the fact that narratives of grief comprise a variety of distances—are, in fact, virtual exercises in distancing—with writers choosing to distance themselves at some points in their essays, closing that distance at others, and then reopening up distance elsewhere.

By virtue of revising her piece, in fact, Erika embarks upon a cycle of distancing that allows the writer to explore recursively the depths and layers of grief and grief narration, the many facets of death and loss itself. When in her final draft, for example, she resists describing her stepfather and his body (indeed, drops description that she uses in her original draft), she struggles with the ethical questions of how to honor the dead and portray him with integrity. In her seeing and not seeing, she also replicates the actual incident she writes about—the eleven year old girl averting her eyes from the body's decay. Through averting and aversion, she seems to acknowledge in her revision the risks of opening up the casket, the dangers of exhuming the body after its many years of encryptment, of bringing that body closer and to the surface. This fear of exhumation is immediately evident in the kind of chronic anxiety and tension that underscore Erika's revision, as well as in the movements the writer makes towards and way from the body, the viewing and the not viewing of the remains.

The tension heightens, when, in what probably seems an act of betrayal on her mother's
part, the eleven-year-old Erika is “driven” to her stepfather’s bedside, urged to approach it, and compelled to gaze upon the stricken body and to bid it “goodbye.” Inviting her reader to close distance with her, Erika works in this portion of her paper to compose the discomposing body, to offer it up for view. It would appear, in fact, that viewing and glimpsing, not language and speaking, are the operative form of communication in this passage. As if to suggest that no language will suffice at times like these, that the proximity of the body and decomposure results in the failure of words and non-composure, no dialogue takes place between mother and child. Ironically, while Erika resists gazing at the body, it is body rather than oral language that enables communication, as Erika “glance[s] at [her] mother, pleading to let [her] out of this.” “I gaped at my mother in disbelief,” Erika writes, but her mother, saying nothing, merely places her “strong, hard-working hand on [Erika’s] shoulder” and guides her into the room. “Afraid to go any closer,” Erika chooses “the chair furthest from the bed” and finally gazes on the “sunken face” of her stepfather. Here, for the first time, and only for a fleeting moment, we glimpse the deteriorating body. Now both writer and reader move closer to the body, even while—reluctant to pause or gaze longer than necessary—the eleven year-old-Erika maintains her seat as far away as possible from her stepfather.

Significantly, then, while Erika describes her stepfather’s “sunken face,” and acknowledges his shrunken frame (“He was helpless and small”), she also offers her reader no other details about Roger’s body. By withholding the fleshing out of the dis-composing body, Erika once more takes steps here to honor her stepfather, and to retain for herself and her reader the earlier image of the “giant” of a man with “massive arms.” Taking a cue from Janet’s paper, she also, I believe, is eager to “cover over,” like the well-groomed cemetery itself, the shrunken remains of the once viable and larger-than-life man. Indeed, it is not remains we are left with at all, but rather the larger-than-life image of a kind of mythical being. This is how Erika chooses to remember her grandfather; it is how she lays him out for viewing.

184

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It is at this near-contact with the dead, the almost-viewing of the body, that there is something soothing and not at all coincidental about the way Erika's mother places her "strong, hard working hand" on her daughter's shoulder. With the suggestion of hard-working, Erika gives us another hint of the family's economic status. From this descriptor, it would appear that the family is working or lower middle class. Such status, like the other social and cultural positions implied in Erika's text, might further constrain the writer in the ways she enables or disables a full viewing of the body in her essay. By this I mean not necessarily the body in the bed (the stepfather's diminished body), but the living body of the man he was. A full fleshing out of *that* body would necessarily entail a description of clothes, person, work, and tastes. While there is no apparent indication that Erika is ashamed of her family's status, it would not be unreasonable to expect caution on her part as she considers disclosing this information to a classroom of (largely) economically privileged peers.

Such hesitation to fully disclose the "real" body of her stepfather, along with the writer's reluctance to approach and view the body, signify a kind of limbo, a transitional space of seeing and not seeing, of knowing and not knowing. This space—the space in which the writer resides is not unlike the space the "undead" stepfather occupies. As if to advance this notion of limbo, and her association with her stepfather, Erika creates another break in her essay, a blank space that signals a transition between the (non)viewing of Roger's body at the hospital and the life she and her mother lead afterwards. This is the transitioning period between Roger's life and death, a space that signals both a shift in content, and a state of inbetween-ness. In this section of the essay, Erika calls upon the discourses of progressive healing when she states that, while her stepfather "was in the state of limbo between life and death, there couldn't be any closure to the grief that [she] felt." Here too she hints at (although does not show) the court battle that keeps Roger on life support, how that contentious process keeps both the writer and her stepfather suspended in limbo. While she indicates that she loves her stepfather, then, she is emphatic in her yearning for "him to be

185

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able to let go."

It is Erika's mother who becomes a kind of anchoring point during this period of limbo, her "strength and salvation." "She tried to make our lives as normal as possible during the long years of the coma," Erika writes. On the one hand, then, we see the maternal figure fully present, no longer preoccupied with her "undead" spouse. Erika's mother tells Erika how beautiful she is, and when Erika comes home with a stellar report card, her mother "make[s] a fuss and hang[s] it on the refrigerator.....It made me feel like the smartest person, and I needed to know that. I needed to know that life could be....all right even after the accident."

On the other hand, if we consider again Green's theory of the emotionally detached mother, we might see in this description of intellectual achievement the young girl's filling of a "psychic hole." This hole, as we recall, results when the maternal figure, because of crisis and/or depression, becomes emotionally detached from her child. Although there is nothing specific to suggest that Erika's mother, whom the writer portrays as strong and loving, suffers such detachment, we have already seen the sense of threat Erika feels when her mother sits next to Roger's deteriorating body and speaks to him "as if he were fine," thus moving away from her living daughter and closer to the realm of death. There is also evidence in Erika's stress here on academic achievement of a kind of shoring up against the mother's withdrawal. In his analysis of Green's dead mother syndrome, for example, Gregorio Kohon asserts that children of emotionally preoccupied mothers often become over-achievers, especially in the area of academics, and that they do so to attract the withdrawn mother's attention and to pull her back into their realm. While we have no proof that this is so with Erika, we may reasonably conjecture that Erika not only wishes her mother's attention, but also wishes to cause her no pain.

In this context, Erika's impulse towards academic achievement seems to spring from, or be fed by, the girl's yearning for her mother. "I needed to know that [my mother] would always be there for me to support me 100%," Erika writes. The cliched term "to be there,"
a phrase students consistently weave through their papers, signals the girl’s desire that her mother be not simply physically present, but “100%” emotionally present. The word “need” here reveals the urgency of the writer to diminish any physical or emotional distance between her mother and herself. So insistent is this need that girl and mother, writer and object, seem to merge:

She would always tell me how beautiful I was, and I saw beauty as being like my mother. Her height, her blue eyes, her blonde hair, and her caring features I came to see in myself. I would watch her all the time, to see what she would do in different situations. I admired everything about her.

I wouldn’t want to diminish this tender and loving portrayal of a mother/daughter relationship by leaning too heavily on its psychological underpinnings. I believe, however, that Erika’s description of her relationship with her mother clearly reveals that, as daughter and mother become almost interchangeable here, Erika is absorbed by, and into, her mother. This is not necessarily a bad thing. By virtue of her warmth, in fact (the heat she brings with her to the car, the warmth of her hard working hand, and her warm hand clasping her daughter’s during the funeral that follows), the maternal figure here—simultaneously absorbing and radiating life—is starkly positioned opposite the figure of deterioration and death, the comatose Roger from whom the writer seeks distance. In this context, Erika’s mother functions not simply as the model of living (“I would watch her...to see what she would do”), but also as the vehicle and reason for living, the impetus behind the writer/survivor’s life.

**Coming Undone: (Under)cutting Grief and the Disruption of Coverage**

“I come from a place where breath, eyes, and memory are one, a place from which you carry your past like the hair on your head. Where women return to their children as butterflies or as tears in the eyes of the statues that their daughters pray to. My mother was as brave as the stars at dawn. She too was from this place. My mother was like that woman who could never bleed and then could never stop bleeding, the one who gave in to her pain, to live as a butterfly. Yes, my mother was like me.”

(Edwidge Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, 234)
Like Janet's essay, Erika's first draft, at its conclusion, inclines towards the coverage of the body and the smoothing over of emotion in redemptive discourse, lending to the "bad" experience of Roger's death, and to Roger himself, the power to redeem the young woman who has survived his passing. "As a result of all the good and bad experiences in my life," Erika writes, "I have developed into the wonderfully diverse person I claim to be...[and] I am loved unconditionally. This security leads me to be able to venture out and do more things because I know that I will be accepted for whatever it is I do. It is a good feeling."

Erika's final draft, however, concludes quite differently. While her initial draft seems to follow the trajectory of Janet's essay, in which the bereaved, redeemed by the death of her grandfather, is released again into the world of the living, Erika's second draft, while certainly not negating the living or the redemptive powers of the dead, undoes the neatly tied ends of her first draft. Undercutting the tidy linearity that characterizes that draft, Erika opens up rather than closes the wound of loss, offers the possibility of a collaborative and sustained mode of grieving, rather than the solitary and terministic model Janet constructs.

This sense of an undercurrent of protracted grief occurs as the writer describes the period after her stepfather's death. Here we are given to understand that her mother "wins" the battle to remove Roger from life-support. "When Roger passed away in 1996," Erika writes, "I knew that he was no longer suffering....I could now have some sort of closure. [But] I still didn't deal completely with the feelings of intense grief, [which] I will probably be dealing with...forever." In these assertions we see the writer's awareness of the progressive model of grief, in which the word "closure" is a key term. Nevertheless, while Erika seemingly wishes to embrace closure and move on, she resists finality in her claim to be "dealing forever" with the complexities of her grief. At the wake, in fact, although Erika is happy to see her stepfather as "serene and comfortable" in his casket, the notion of serenity she starts to construct here is abruptly undercut by anxiety and a disturbing wariness of her surroundings.
As if hyper-aware of the closeness of death and the decomposing body, for example, Erika seems to recognize the discordant quality of the sweet scent of the funeral home when juxtaposed with the reality of death and her stepfather's body. The "whole place smelled like freshly squeezed oranges," she writes. "When I asked my mother where the smell was coming from she told me that it was the air freshener." Erika's notion of something that "smells" (a smell that comes from something) signifies repulsion rather than pleasure, as she thinks to herself "how funny that they would use an air freshener that smelled like oranges." The (un)familiar scent that Erika notes here, and its purpose of covering over what is unpleasant, replicates again the kind of coverage we saw at the end of Janet's essay, the smoothing over of the decomposing body with (artificial) nature and the suggestion of smooth and pleasant landscapes that hide the encrypted remains.

That the coverage of the decomposing body and its effects is not entirely successful is evident in Erika's sustained sadness and anxiety during the wake and funeral. Although she still wishes to reconstruct her grief in terms of hope, and thus to sustain the resurrecive discourses of her first draft, she all but succumbs to fear and a sense of danger and collapse. "I sat down on the hard brown benches and looked around me. I saw people crying everywhere...I tried to concentrate on the service but instead I found myself watching my mother. Whenever I felt like I was going to cry, I looked at [my mother] and saw that she was fine and it reassured me that I would be ok too....She was sitting next to me, composed and collected, a vision of strength." Emulating this vision of strength, the eleven-year-old girl herself refuses to cry.

In this description of repressed tears and outward strength we recognize the model of deportment made famous by Jacqueline Kennedy. This gendered model of genteel grief, associated with the patrician culture of Washington's elite, pervades this instance of white middle-class ceremony. To be sure, Erika's mother wishes to remain strong for the sake of her daughter. But there is also a certain awareness of public scrutiny in her deportment, as, tearless, she solemnly rises and follows the casket "out the massive doors [they] had come
in, her sturdy frame...not break[ing] under the strain, even though....the world was weighing upon her shoulders.”

In this image of the cautiously grieving and restrained mother, we might also recognize the writer-in-action. Keenly aware of the kind of restraint her classmates admired in Janet’s paper, Erika seemingly strives here to stand, like Janet in the cemetery, erect and confident in the face of death. But, whereas Janet maintains the image of the independent and solitary griever to the very end of her essay, bringing it to closure by mirroring the opening image of herself as lone survivor, Erika’s essay ends in a touching image of collaborative grief and enmeshment with her mother. After the funeral ends, Erika accompanies her mother to the limousine and throws her arms around her:

I nested my head in her hair. She smelled faintly of lilacs. I wanted to be able to take away the pain that I knew she was feeling. I desperately wanted her to know that I would be there for her whenever she needed me. As I was thinking all of this, she started to cry. I felt helpless. As much as I wanted to, I couldn’t do anything for her. At that point, I couldn’t stop myself from crying. All the emotions had to be let out. It had been locked up inside of me for the last five years. It was the first time that I was able to cry. When my mother broke down and cried I realized that I didn’t have to be tough. I could cry too. So my mother and I held each other and sobbed. I remember thanking God at that moment. I was so glad that I had her to allow me to grow, but also that I had her to be there to comfort me when I fell apart.

Thus, with the image of “falling apart,” Erika concludes her paper with a sense of relief but no notion of triumph or an end to grief. Here indeed, rather than the closing of grief, we have its opening up. The joy Erika feels, in fact, seems to stem from grief’s inception, the breakdown of decorum in the face of public scrutiny and the sense of her mother as a partner in grief, her full emotional presence in the girl’s life restored. Absent from this conclusion are the Lycidas-like elements particular to Janet’s text—nature drawing strength from the dead, fertile spring inhabiting the site of death, the lone survivor redeemed by the dead, her delivery from dependence on the dead, and her embarkment on a path of solitary achievement and individuality. In Erika’s essay grief is sustained, not ended, strengthened, not diminished by the collapse of mother and daughter into tears, and parent and child into each
This merging of mother and daughter and the non-resolution of grief that results, is, I believe, Erika’s answer to Janet’s model of the solitary griever’s arrival at certain closure.

In revising her piece after reading Janet’s, Erika responds by quietly asserting a more complicated mourning and a perhaps more complex method of representing that mourning. She also rejects the masculine relationships that govern loss in Janet’s essay. Her unabashed enmeshment with her mother in her final draft offers a more dialogic and responsive way of mourning, just as her “answering” of Janet’s grief with her own story signifies a dialogic and responsive way of narrating grief in the composition classroom. While both essays are indicative of the power of personal effects in student grief narration, Erika’s narrative struggles more overtly between the cold blankness of mourning (the white spaces of the page), and the warmth of the living (the fleshing out of grief and its collaborative nature). These elements are not opposite but contingent upon one another, just as death is contingent on life, grief on joy, daughter on mother, and hope on danger.

Responding in Kind: A Teacher Confronts Grief

“...The biggest thing I wish my father had done was make me realize my mother was dead.....The central understanding of anthropology is rituals, rites of passage, of marriage, of birth, of fertility. Of death. We had none of that in our family, or just about. There was no finality. Nothing close. So I’ve had to do it myself.”

*Ken Burns, qtd. in Simon, et al.*

“Throughout this whole ordeal, I only saw my mother fall apart once.”

*Erika, “The Accident,” (First draft).*

Two weeks after my father died, and my brother, sister and I returned home from our temporary exile, we resumed our schedule of summer swimming, reading, and play as if nothing had happened. My mother never referred to my father’s death. Indeed, I can remember only two incidents with my mother that seemed grief related. The first must have occurred in late summer, two months or so after my father had died. I had just come in from
outside where I had been playing with my sister, busily and futilely trying to dress up the neighbor's cats in dolls' clothes (they would have no part of it and scurried down the alley half-clad in frilly undergarments and bonnets). I remember in particular the smell of hamburger frying on the stove and the quality of the summer light as it shown on the white Formica table in our kitchen. The table was set for dinner, but my mother was nowhere in sight. Suddenly, I heard a strange sound for that time of day, the splash of water filling the bathtub. Calling out for my mother and receiving no answer, I pushed the door to the bathroom open and saw her sitting on the edge of the tub, crying. Clearly she had run the water in an effort to drown out her sobs. I don't remember ever having seen my mother cry before and I was frightened. Quickly she "composed" herself, dabbing with tissue at her eyes, and returning to the kitchen to serve dinner. I remember watching her warily for any signs of disintegration.

It must have been that same year at Thanksgiving when I witnessed my mother's second "breakdown." By then, with my mother unable to pay rent and the expenses of raising her children on her own, we had moved into my uncle and aunt's basement apartment, and so spent holidays upstairs with them. (My uncle sheltered us grudgingly and with a sense of the power that it gave him over my mother; she hated it.) Sitting at the formal mahogany dining table, a table that rarely received guests, my sister, brother and I felt stiff in our dress-up clothes, and wary of spilling something or otherwise making a mess. When we had finished the main course, and my mother, uncle, and aunt had quaffed sufficient wine, my mother suddenly burst into tears over her pumpkin pie. Again, this was highly irregular and my brother, sister and I were subdued by this display. My aunt escorted my mother into the spare bedroom and I kept checking in on her to see how she was doing, creeping into the dark and fumbling towards her bedside. My mother reassured me that she was alright, but I had already learned that tears were regarded as pathological in our family, and I wasn't convinced.

I don't recall any other occurrences of this kind. And I never thought of these par-
ticular events until I read Erika’s paper. When Erika workshopped her final draft, her classmates were solicitous and even helpful in helping Erika think of how to revise the paper. (By this time they had certainly learned that I loved details in essays and so knew how to ask for them). They seemed baffled, though, by the blank spaces in the paper, an organizational technique that Robert Root, Jr. calls, segmenting or montage. A couple of them wondered if a more “straightforward” technique, one that allowed the essay to “flow,” would not have been better. They were confused, I think, about the spaces and what should have filled them. They also wondered about the role of her stepfather’s birth family during his coma, a question Erika never answered in the workshop. I could tell from their comments, too, that they wondered if Erika and her mom had “moved on” after the funeral, if they had finally healed.

When Erika turned in her portfolio at the end of the semester, she changed nothing on her final draft in response to her classmates’ advice. I had seen her paper go through several revisions, and I think she was confident that she had shaped the paper the way she wanted. For my part, I found the organization of the paper interesting, especially in terms of the blank spaces of mourning that I refer to earlier in this chapter. I knew from former drafts the effort Erika had made to omit or exclude information as she gauged her audience and became more skillful at features of craft.

But something else pulled me to Erika’s essay in a way I was not pulled by other grief narratives that semester—and that was the intensity of the mother/daughter relationship that Erika depicted in her piece. I had been deeply moved by the final scene of Erika’s mother dissolving into tears after her show of strength at the funeral, and—more particularly—the image of mother and daughter in shared grief, a kind of emotional dialogue. I liked the intimate details of the scene, the daughter burying her face in her mother’s hair and smelling the scent of lilacs on her mother. I liked the way the mother grasped her child and felt no shame at her display of emotions in front of her daughter. I was especially moved by the dialogue that seemingly took place between the two of them during the long duration of
Roger's coma. Missing from these scenes were the kinds of furtive hide-in-the dark tears my mother felt compelled to shed, or the notion of being exiled in the face of death and grief. Clearly Erika and been a partner with her mother in the process of grieving and would remain so for the rest of her life.

Filmmaker Ken Burns talks about the silence he experienced in his family after his mother died. He speaks up about the kind of psychological and emotional damage such silence does to children. But he does not blame his father for not talking about his mother's death. He realizes that it was a response from a particular time and a particular cultural outlook on death, one that excluded children in an attempt to protect them. Likewise, I don't blame my mother for her reclusive and solitary grief. I see not only the signs of 1950's white, middle-class America in her response, but also her impulse to protect us by remaining "strong." I also see her need to stay strong. A previously stay-at-home mother, she was forced to return to work (she had worked prior to her marriage as a legal secretary and returned to that occupation), and to care for her family with few resources. While she received my father's social security payments, she had little else with which to support us. Certainly my father had left neither savings nor life insurance when he died. Consequently, my mother had no choice but to distance herself from grief and to avoid the kinds of exchanges with her children that would have exacerbated it.

I knew these things. Yet as I re-read Erika's piece, I feel a kind of yearning for what could have been. I see in the blank spaces on Erika's page, the white glaciers of grief, the ellipses that have governed my grieving life. And I envy Erika her relationship with her mother, the touch of her hand, her guidance, and the way she accompanies Erika on the journey of distance between life and death, the living and the dying. I think how my particular experiences color my reading of Erika's paper, and how being aware of those experiences and the responses they evoke deepen my appreciation for her essay. I have learned how important it is not to ignore these responses, but to acknowledge them as a part of the dialogue that characterizes grief and grief narration.
When Erika brought her drafts to conference, I felt compelled as I read about her losses to respond with story to the young woman sitting across from with my own stories of grief. This compulsion surprised me, as I am usually reticent about disclosing personal information with my students. This time, however, I felt it was entirely appropriate not only to read and listen to Erika’s story, but to respond in kind. I didn’t take over the conference, and my disclosures were brief. But when she talked about her stepfather’s accident and death, I responded with a truncated version of my own experiences with my father and how his loss had affected me. This exchange between two women who, as children, had lost a parent seemed totally natural to me. I believe Erika thought so as well. When she left, I gathered up my books and papers, locked my office door, and headed out to my car. I considered the conversation we had just had and felt no guilt, no regret of having “gotten personal” with a student. Although I was well aware that personal disclosure between teacher and student could lead to dangerous ground, I felt that I had responded not just as a teacher, but also as a human being.

As I drove home, it occurred to me that what I had felt in conference and the way I had responded was how students felt and responded when they read or heard of a classmates’ loss. It was the way Erika must have felt when she read Janet’s paper, and how her classmates’ felt when they read hers. Given my own response, it did not seem at all unusual that a round of grief writing was now occuring in my class. At work in the room was a kind of tension, the sort of energy that Mary Rose O’Reilley refers to when she talks about narration and response. Perhaps we were all headed into danger. Or perhaps we were moving towards hope.
ENDNOTES

1I do not want to discount the benefits or validity of the healing model, even as I pinpoint its drawbacks.

2The women poets to whom I refer here are mainly white, and middle or upper middle class.

3I am certain most students have not had exposure to the kind of nineteenth century elegies I am talking about here. My intent is not to argue that they have been influenced by them, but rather that they share certain characteristics.

4Most writing teachers will agree that students reveal through their writing the violence of car culture, and are concerned with it. This in itself would make an interesting study.
Chapter V.

Mother Loss Imagined and the “Placement” of First Year Students.

“I dream, and have for years, that she is alive and that nothing ever changed. I’m happy and complete while dreaming; I am walking down Ninety-fifth Street on the long stretch between the canopy of Sixty-five and the entrance to our Fifty-five, and I look ahead and there is my mother. She is standing with her shopping cart and she sees me before I see her. Even seeing her I don’t realize for a minute that she is there, but she sees me, and she looks at me fondly and steadily, waiting for me to understand. I move toward her and there the dream ends.”

(Laura Furman, Ordinary Paradise, 12)

Separation and Re-enactment: Putting Students in Their Place

Usually when we speak of “placement,” we mean the kinds of assessment of student writing that results in first year students’ placement into particular levels of writing courses. At my school, for example, students write placement essays before they arrive in the fall. These essays are read by members of the writing staff over the summer. Based on certain criteria (e.g. the student’s skill in developing, focusing, and organizing his/her essay), students are assigned either to regular writing courses, or basic writing courses designed to prepare them for entrance into the regular classes. In some cases, students whose skill levels seem above average “place out” of writing courses all together.

At the end of this chapter, I will use the term differently to discuss how we might “place” students not just according to writing ability or levels of writing experience, but rather according to their multiple positions along a continuum of experience rooted in both home and academic life, a continuum that allows, acknowledges and incorporates loss and grief into the academic setting. Such imaging of placement, pointing to the “real” rhetorical
situations of students and their narratives in the composition classrooms, enables ways of opening up rhetorical spaces that make use of grief experiences in the service of writing and learning.

In a presentation at the University of New Hampshire Conference on Composition, Pat Sullivan referred to this sense of placement when she argued that “college freshmen are not thought to be sources of knowledge about any subject but their own experience, and personal experience is not thought to be a proper academic subject in any but a composition course.” Urging teachers to accept students as makers rather than simply recipients of knowledge, Sullivan advocates a view of first year composition courses that acknowledges the epistemological value of student writing. Citing Henry Giroux, she sees writing pedagogy as “‘a form of cultural production’ rather than ‘the transmission of a particular skill, body of knowledge, or set of values’” (qtd. in Sullivan 2). “Students are composing our culture when they speak and write. They are testing, questioning, and fashioning its meanings, not simply responding to—learning about—an already made thing” (Sullivan 2).

My reading of student grief narratives supports Sullivan’s claims that students both draw on and compose culture, that their narratives are complex constructions rather than mere reflections of ready-made knowledge. I’d like to extend this idea of students as makers of knowledge to the kinds of knowledge we as teachers bring to our pedagogy. Educators commonly agree, for example, that teachers teach best when they understand where their students “are coming from” — figuratively, in the sense that we should strive to view the world of the classroom from students’ perspectives, and literally, in terms of understanding their familial and cultural roots. Only students themselves can instruct us in this kind of positioning. Trying to “get into” our students’ heads, listening to students and empathizing with them, can lead to informed and sensitive pedagogies. As Susan McLeod points out, listening in this sense promotes empathy and empathy promotes involved and responsive teaching:

Empathy should not be thought of as a gift, like perfect pitch, possessed by a lucky
few and unlearnable by others; one can learn the skill of focusing on and listening intently to another (as it is learned by social workers in on-the-job training). Teachers can be taught active listening skills through modeling, observation, role playing, and practice. Active listening skills are worth learning, because learning the skills that go with empathic teaching can increase the learner’s empathy. (116)

I know the kinds of resistance McLeod’s statement elicits from teachers who either view the notion of empathy in the university classroom as “touchy-feely,” or regard the dissolution of boundaries between student and teacher as simply dangerous. At writing conferences, I have listened to arguments against empathy-based teaching, usually when a presentation deals with students’ autobiographical writing or the sometimes troubling texts they produce. Usually these discussions end in a polarized view of both teaching and therapy. At a CCC presentation two years ago, for example, I saw this oppositional model enacted again when several participants argued that teachers, not trained to psychoanalyze, should send troubled students to therapy and leave the writing to the classroom.

I am disturbed, however, when students who simply require empathic responses from their teachers are automatically shunted off to university counseling services. Is it not our job to enter into a dialogue with our students and listen to their perspectives? Can we not be human beings in our roles as teachers? Cannot teaching and empathizing be synonymous? Therapy can and does play a vital and significant role for troubled students and I do not deny its necessity and validity. Nor do I regard myself as a therapist. At the same time, I do not believe that the boundaries between teachers and therapists need to be so rigidly defined, nor that attentive listening to, and simply being in attendance upon, students is the job of therapists rather than teachers.

If we are to consider students as producers of, and partners in, knowledge—if we are to diminish the boundaries between knowledge givers and knowledge receivers—we also need to blur other sorts of boundaries, including the one between teacher and therapist. This does not mean that teachers should become therapists or vice-versa, but rather that teachers might occupy alternative roles and a middle ground between instructing and coun-
selying. This alternative ground, this middle space, could be analogous to the territory and function of the midwife, who is neither a doctor nor a woman-in-labor, but someone who moves between the two “occupations.” Such movement entails different kinds of positioning and promotes alternative perspectives. It requires that we see “things” from both sides—ours and our students’.

Wendy Bishop refers to this kind of positioning when she suggests we not avoid, but rather explore “the analogies between writing instruction and therapy:” (156). Bishop calls for composition programs that give “attention to issues of affect and provide...teachers and program administrators with a course of study that includes introductions to personality theory, gender studies, psychoanalytic concepts, and basic counseling” (143). With this re-envisioning of composition programs, Bishop does not deny the differences between teaching and therapy. She calls upon us not to become therapists, but rather to inform ourselves in the ways of therapists.

Having the courage to inform ourselves like this, we are likely to recognize the richness of student texts, what is already complicated in them before we even demand from students their complication. Beyond this, however, recognizing the emotional complexities of student writing—not as, but as if we were therapists—affords us a particular perspective or starting point from which to teach our students. Therapy of most sorts is concerned with a person’s past. Knowledge of the students’ past enables insight into the present and tools for teaching the future.

It is this in-sight, a looking into students, that Sullivan advocates. Her reading of student texts, oriented towards grief and loss, reveals the surprises and complexities of student narratives, their personal richness and their cultural complications. These texts teach us not just about writing, Sullivan says, but about particular cultural phenomena. Sullivan argues that:

If we take our students’ writing seriously as a form of knowledge,...it affords us a glimpse into a cultural text that no panel of experts, not even a panel of parents, could write. First-year college students, and especially first-semester college stu-
dents, are acutely aware that they’re parented. As they leave home and begin the
important work of cultivating and nurturing a separate identity, of parenting them-
selves, they are newly conscious of and often hyper-conscious of the entwined re-
lationship from which that separate, individual identity must be extricated. Their
parents are brought into sharp relief, narratively visible in a way they never were
before. For that process of separation/individuation, essential to the psychological
birth of the infant, is being reenacted once again (3).

Sullivan’s emphasis on separation and its reenactment in student writing depends on, or
evolves from, loss. The most immediate loss as Sullivan describes it is the students’ loss of
parents and family as they enter college. Earlier I described the ways first-year writing
classes are underscored by these kinds of losses, and how first year writing teachers, as sorts
of gateway figures ushering students from home into academic cultures and discourses are
always poised on the threshold of loss with their students. Loss in this context is allied with
the primal loss as described in psychoanalytic and Lacanian theories, the loss of mother in
return for the Father and the Law.

Unfortunately, many professors do not acknowledge the significance of this loss
when they teach or talk about first year students. Not recognizing the significance of their
students’ struggle to both separate and acculturate, they often deride entering college stu-
dents as immature and infantile. It is no secret that first year English classes are the most
unpopular to teach, mainly because—whether or not such classes demand academic or per-
sonal writing—teaching these classes is both labor and emotionally intensive. It is also no
secret that, unless mandated by their departments, most first year full-time tenured profes-
sors will not teach these classes. Despite, or because of, their distance from these class-
rooms, they continue to think of them as remedial, skills-based courses best staffed by
teaching assistants and adjuncts.

I think these attitudes towards first-year students and the work they do in the writing
classrooms deprives both student and teachers of important and rich experiences. Rather
than dismissing first-year students as not yet fully evolved, what if we actually welcomed
the knowledge they brought to the classroom? What if, for instance, universities collected
student work not in order to diagnose it (many English departments administer diagnostic
tests to see what’s “wrong” with student writing), but rather to study it as a body of knowl-
edge? What if we “empaneled or empowered [students] as the experts, or simply, as the
knowers” (Sullivan 2)?

Several years ago I called an English professor at a women’s college in the North-
east and asked her if her students wrote any autobiographical essays. I wished to see if
women writing in all-women’s schools chose different topics or wrote differently from their
co-ed counterparts. The professor listened politely as I explained my project, and then
replied rather curtly: “They don’t need that here” — that, I presumed, being personal writing.
Putting aside the issue of what they need or do not need at this particular college, I can’t
help feeling a deep regret at this answer, not because it hurt me personally, but because I
wonder what we have lost in not allowing and saving the personal writing of over a century’s
worth of female students. What contributions to history and our knowledge of culture (and
cultures) they would have made!

These are the kinds of contributions that Sullivan looks for in her students’ writing.
Drawing from the essays of her first year students, Sullivan studies representations of
parenting in these papers, and the different ways students construct their relationships with
their fathers and mothers. She notices that while students often laud their fathers for being
present at games and other functions, they more than likely take for granted their mother’s
presence; she is always there and thus not noticeable in the same way their fathers are:

Women, mothers, are absent from these narratives precisely because they are present,
 omnipresent in the [students’] lives. Mothers are so present—their caring, their love, their appreciation for their sons’ accomplishments so given—that Mother literally goes without saying; she is invisible to the writer looking for heroes. Mother cannot be the hero of such a narrative because it is her nature to there, like Penelope, like Harriet, like...Tipper. Students most often write about mothers when their mothers seem to be acting against their nature, when they do not reflect this cultural representa-
tion of motherhood, throwing it into question: when their mother works, or returns to school, or asks for a divorce, or has a fight with her child—When the child suddenly has reason to fear that when he or she looks, mother won’t be there (12).
Sullivan notes here how the presence of the father becomes overtly emphasized in these papers, especially as he is portrayed in attendance at games in which the student participates or in heart-to-heart talks in front of televised sporting events. Turning from these kinds of papers to an essay in which a student describes losing his mother to cancer, Sullivan notices not only the way the student’s total focus is now on the mother, but the way male figures try, unsuccessfully, to divert that focus from the female figure and the grief that subsumes the son.

What is most significant about Sullivan’s analysis in terms of my own focus here is the way she links student representations of parents with both real and feared loss, actual and anticipated grief. Since she sees as the student’s task in writing these pieces the important work of separation and individuation, she also suggests that the fear of mother loss is intrinsically related to the student’s entrance into college. This fear is both the fear of new contexts and the fear of being cropped out of the family photograph, of becoming “dead” to the family the student has left behind.

As I think of the male figures who try futilely to distract the grieving son in the paper Sullivan writes about, I cannot help but compare them to professors who dismiss first year students as unwilling to “move on.” I do not mean to position male figures solely as representatives of dis-empathy here. However, as they are constructed in the young man’s paper, they emulate institutional practices of pushing students towards abrupt and violent severance of connections to home life. I believe we would all do well to take a lesson from this model of dis-empathy. We need to recognize, as does Sullivan, the lessons our students teach us about their past lives and losses before they, or we, can adequately “move on.” These lessons are deeply rooted in the personal experiences students write about in the composition classroom. Foremost among these experiences are the students’ real or perceived loss of mother and home.

In this chapter, since I am most interested in themes and images of perceived loss of mothers in student essays, I will examine four narratives that indirectly explore (among
other themes) the issue of mother loss. Although the first essay I study is most certainly about loss through *real* death (the death of the students’ classmates in a school shooting), a loss whose grievous impact on the student I do not want to diminish, the paper is also strongly underscored by the student’s anxiety for what he calls his “missing mother.” The other three essays concern mother/child relationships and the students’ anxieties about, and/or denial of, mother/loss.

My intent in examining these essays is to show that, when students write about the loss of a maternal figure, their choice of topic is not accidental. Neither are the proliferation of such papers in the composition classroom entirely coincidental either. I have already shown, for example, that student grief narratives in general are produced and operate both relationally and responsively. But stories of mother loss are not just responses to other narratives; they are also dialogues in anxiety. They reflect the students’ awareness of their new and tenuous positions in the academy and the boundary they occupy between childhood and adulthood. Like various kinds of funerary writing, they also reconstitute not only the “departed,” but also the student writer within the framework of the family, and the family itself in the face of loss. This is important work, work that we can use in our dialogues with students; work that facilitates the student’s passage from home to school; work that both draws students near to, and distances them from, the bodies they have lost—the body of the child whom they once were, the body of the mother to whom that child was/is connected, the bodies of the family the mother represents. It is work that must be done.

**Mothers on the Verge: Separation, Loss, and Indirect Grief**

“She was a music I no longer heard, that rang in my mind, itself and nothing else, lost to all sense, but not perished, not perished.”

*Marilynne Robinson, Housekeeping, (qtd.in Simon et al)*

Several months before the Columbine High School shootings in April 1998, Max, a student in my writing class, wrote a narrative about an earlier school attack in the 1980’s. Max was eight years old and a student in the second grade at the school in Illinois where the
attack took place. His first piece for the class, Max’s essay begins with a humorous tone, as Max jokes about “how worried” he is when he arrives at school that morning and remembered that this was the day the second grader’s were to take their bicycle tests. “[T]here was no way I would pass the bicycle test without a bell perched on my handlebar,” Max writes. In need of the bell, Max calls his mother who surprises him by stopping by during to deliver the bell. Much to Max’s dismay, the bell is a “girly” affair topped by an image of a rainbow colored unicorn. Max is dismayed, but his mother reassures him that they can “put some masking tape over the picture” and “nobody would ever know what was underneath.”

While Max and his mother huddle together to conceal the “girly” bell, shots ring out, sounding “like somebody was hitting a metal pipe with a thirty pound sledgehammer.” Max “just didn’t know” what it was, but when his mother hears more “bangs,” and children screaming, she rushes out of the room “with a concerned look on her face.” Max’s panic at not knowing and not seeing intensifies, as his teacher orders her students to the classroom floor and tells them to draw. Frightened, wishing to obey, but compelled to see, Max keeps rising and looking out of the window, where he glimpses police officers with vests and guns rush out of their cars and into the school. One “smart boy” in the class, who seems to know everything, tells his classmates that the “bangs” they had heard were gun shots. “If it was really a gunshot,” Max writes, “then where was my mother, was she the one that had been shot?”

The writer Max does not give us an answer here. Instead, as if to signal a dangerous proximity to loss, or at least the threat thereof, Max largely steps back from his first person narration here, and—adopting the voice and discourse of the newscaster—delivers this report, mainly using third person pronouns:

What happened that morning was a shock and a tragedy to such a nice town as Winnetka. A woman by the name of Laurie Dann came into Hubert Woods Elementary School near 10:00 a.m. She walked into a classroom (Class #7) and told the teacher she was a student there observing. She then walked out of the room and
down to the boy's washroom and entered. In there, she pulled out her first gun and shot a little boy in the first grade by the name of Robert....That blast was the initial bang that we had all heard. The boy's washroom was right across the hall from my classroom (#3) about nine feet away. While in the washroom, her first gun jammed, allowing her to shoot Robert only one time. After her gun jammed, she hurried out of the bathroom and into class #7. She told the teacher that she had a gun and to put all of the kids in a corner. When the teacher did not comply, Dann removed her other gun and the two wrestled for it. Dann pushed the teacher away and began firing. When she finished, one boy, Nick was killed, and four others were wounded, all critically. Shot were Kathryn, Peter, Mark, and Lindsey. Once the firing started, children ran out of the class through an exterior door. Dann ran out the classroom through the hallway door, and out of the school.

Concluding this report, still delivered from the point of view of the newscaster or omniscient narrator, Max tells us that his mother runs outside to help the other children, and, seeing a little girl "lagging behind," runs up to help her. Having just been shot in the chest, the little girl collapses and falls into his mother's arms. Max's mother "scoops her up" and takes her, along with the other uninjured children, to the principle's office, where they huddle behind a locked door.

Having given this report, Max abruptly steps back into his narrative, taking up the first person story where he had left off. He begs his teacher to be able to see his mother and keeps asking if his mother is alright, "but she was unsure and couldn't give me a straight answer." Finally the teacher steps out of the room to find the mother. Directed by another teacher to the principal's office, she ushers Max into his mother's presence. "In there I found my mom and nearly 20 children huddled together crying," Max writes. "I was told the story of what happened, in part from the children present, and in part from my mom."

Soon after, parents arrive at the school and pick up the children, and Max leaves the school with his entire family:

I walked down the street the two blocks to my house holding the hand of my mother and father with my sister on the other side. We passed all of the police cars, news trucks, and reporters in silence. Not a word was spoken the entire walk home. We got back and turned on the television. It was there that I first heard the news. A friend of mine, Nick was pronounced dead at the hospital upon arrival. My other friends were in critical condition, with two having already undergone surgery. A lot
of tears were shed that night....It took a lot of crying and support from family and friends to get over the loss.

Immediately following this mention of acute loss, Max slips back into newscaster discourse, emulating the report he must have seen on television when he arrived home, and from which he “first” learns what happened. Here, as Max picks up the thread of the “newscast” he drops earlier, we learn that “Laurie Dann fled Hubbard Woods Elementary School right after she shot the innocent children. From the school, she flees into a house about two blocks away, picked at random,” and attacks a mother and her adult son. The son is shot, but survives. “Dann on the other hand was found dead, by a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head, by the SWAT team that raided the house she had taken captive.” Here we learn that Dann “had been a nanny for a family in Winnetka who was planning on moving out of state. Bitter about losing her job, she went into a tirade,” set fire to the family’s house and then went to the school to kill the family’s children. In the process, she opens fire on the other kids as well.

In this report we learn too that some “good” results from the crime, as tougher gun bill laws are passed, and the victims’ families continue to lobby against handgun violence. We also learn that Max and the other children have recovered from their trauma:

Even now, I can see that day just as vivid as I did then. The only good thing out of the entire tragedy was the fact that it happened when we were so young. With time comes healing, and there was a lot of healing to be done. All of the children that were either injured or just present seem to have followed a normal development, never forgetting the tragedy that struck our little town. I never did get to take the bike test; we were the only class in the history of the school to be exempt from it. And the unicorn bell, well we never threw it away, it still sits in a cabinet right above the telephone in the kitchen. A constant reminder of that day, a day I will never forget.

Until returning to this piece for the purposes of writing this chapter, I had not looked at it in three years. Reading it again, I was very much moved by Max’s depiction of the fear he felt and I cried, as I had not the first time when I had read it, to learn again about Dann’s young victims. While some of my colleagues would surely think this essay facile in its adherence
to cliches ("with time comes healing") and its seeming lack of deep reflection. I like it for its sincerity. I would even argue that it is sophisticated. I admire, for instance, the way Max inserts the voice of the newscaster into his narrative at perfectly planned points, a sign of craft. The first time he does so is immediately after he describes his mother leaving the classroom, thus delaying the answer to his question about his mother’s whereabouts and heightening the reader’s sense of suspense. The second time occurs after he returns home and hears the whole story on the news. Taking up the newscaster’s discourse here, Max resumes his “report” exactly where he had dropped it earlier, with Dann fleeing the school.

While critics of narratives such as Max’s often denounce them for their lack of reflection, I believe that Max’s use of news discourse here is reflection, an attempt to objectify and analyze experience, a strategy that allows the writer to move back and forth between the specific and the abstract. It is also, of course, a distancing strategy, one that not only inserts space between trauma and writer, but disrupts moments of intense fear and grief, those moments when the writer becomes too close to the traumatic events he narrates. The first insertion of news discourse, for example, interrupts the narration of the child Max’s acute anxiety about his absent mother. The second happens after the incident ends and he is plummeted into mourning. Such distancing allows the writer to step back from trauma, to recover language and cover over emotions in the face of loss. It also allows Max not only to compose himself for his audience, but also to shield the audience itself from the messy details of his grief.

Embedded in these strategies of distancing and craft are the writer’s negotiation of the mother and mother loss. Underscored by danger and fear, the narrative takes place in relation to a mother who is simultaneously present and absent, a mother who is good and a mother who is bad. Significantly, these figures are positioned within the context of the classroom, a space in which issues of knowing and seeing, not knowing and not seeing, are brought to the forefront. That the story begins and ends with the unicorn figure is significant to the issue of mother loss, since—from a psychoanalytic standpoint at least—the
unicorn represents the boy Max's repudiation of the maternal, that which is feminine (the "girly" bell). Indeed, it is at the moment of masking (encrypting) this symbol of femininity that the mother, hearing shots, abruptly withdraws.

Aside from its psychoanalytic implications the unicorn is also a symbol of (among other things) testing. On the most obvious level it refers to the bicycle test that Max anticipates and that he cannot pass without the bell—and without his mother's help. The introduction of the unicorn figure at the beginning of the essay suggests (somewhat humorously) that the test that looms large before Max in the morning—the bicycle test—is nothing like the test that awaits him in the afternoon—the shooting of his classmates and the near-loss of his mother.

In this sense, the mother is tightly bound up with the classroom and the institutional space and practice of testing. Her abrupt withdrawal at the height of crisis—at least from Max's perspective—coincides with the teacher (nameless here) who orders the students to the floor, so that Max's view is restricted to the classroom space alone, the site of institutional learning and examination. In practical terms, of course, the teacher strives to protect her students from trauma and gunfire: in metaphorical terms, the teacher's attempt to withhold both knowledge and "sight" from her students, coupled with the mother's withdrawal, make of the classroom not just a limited but also a dangerous place, one that is dependent on the separation between inside and outside, between institutional and "worldly" ways of knowing, and also between school and home. We might remember, for example, how Max, crouched on the classroom floor, his range of vision limited to his schoolwork (his drawing), and the new blue carpet, struggles to rise from the floor and view the world outside, the space beyond the institutional walls, seeking both "outside" knowledge and knowledge and vision of his mother.

Cathy Caruth describes this kind of struggle to see a "necessary coming to sight," a recovery from "blindness" that is an essential component in the process of healing from trauma. Victims of trauma, she argues, never actually experience, thus never actually see,
the moment of trauma as it occurs, since the nature of trauma itself is to obscure that mo-
ment and its horrors in order to allow the victim to cope and survive. While I have no way
or intention of gauging Max’s psychological state at the time of trauma or of writing about
it, nor of diagnosing him as a sufferer of post traumatic stress disorder (indeed, the humor
with which he begins his piece belies any psychological disturbance), I sense in the distanc-
ing mechanisms of his essay—the writing of the essay itself, as well as the movement back
and forth between the child’s experience and “objective” newscaster discourse—the kind of
struggle for sight to which Caruth refers.

This struggle is particularly apparent in Max’s quest for what he himself terms his
“missing mother.” Trying to see beyond the institutional walls, Max seeks not only knowl-
dge about the traumatic incident itself, but also knowledge about, and “insight” into, his
mother, who, at the time of the actual shooting, resides somewhere outside of the class-
room, beyond the institutional doors that confine her son. Her withdrawal from her son
threatens not just his “standing” in the classroom (indeed, confined to the floor, he does not
stand at all), but also his relational knowledge, his understanding of himself in relation to
both classroom and mother, school and family. In “real” terms, for example, the young Max
is afraid that his mother might be killed, that once gone from his sight, she will no longer
exist. In figurative terms, his mother’s withdrawal, and her replacement by the raging
nanny (a maternal figure gone awry), indicates a collapse of boundaries between “good”
and “bad” mothers.

It is no coincidence, in fact, that, at the precise moment of the mother’s withdrawal,
the rampaging Nanny steps in. “If it was really a gunshot” he had heard, Max writes, “then
where was my mother...?” Not answering this question, he inserts blank spaces, assumes
the stance of the newscaster, and replaces his mother with the enraged Nanny: “What hap-
pened that morning was a shock and a tragedy....A woman by the name of Laurie Dann
came into Hubbard Woods Elementary school near 10:00 a.m.....” Later in the essay, as
Dann retreats from the school building, Max’s mother abruptly steps back in: “Dann ran out

210
of the classroom through the hallway door, and out of the school. It was about this time that my mother noticed all of the fleeing children, and ran outside to see what was going on for herself.” Shortly after Dann’s withdrawal, Max is reunited with his mother.

It is not only the child Max’s experience that interest me here, but also the eighteen year old writer’s re-enactment of that experience. Max’s writing of a traumatic incident, which critics often view and lament as evidence of the student writer’s too-close proximity to his/her “subject, is—on the contrary—a virtual exercise in distancing; it is also a strategy of recovery and seeing, one that allows the (re)vision of both the subject of the writing, and the experience from which the subject derives. Here subject can mean topic as well as the student writer himself. In Max’s case, and in the case of at least two of his classmates whose essays I discuss below, the insertion of the mother, and the student’s evident anxiety about her revises—replaces or situates—the student/subject, now newly departed to college, in relation to the mother and family he has just left. Such positioning in relation to the mother also functions as a kind of statement (albeit unconscious) about the student’s anxiety about his/her position in college.

Max and his classmates are, after all, first-year students. Their first essays in the composition classroom are often their first pieces of writing as college students, the discursive beginnings to their academic careers. Thus their papers reflect anxiety about ways of knowing, ways of writing, and ways of experiencing and being at college. It is no surprise that these papers often reflect a crisis of separation, one that distinguishes academic knowing and seeing from the ways of knowing and seeing that may have been familiar to them at home and in high school. All of these elements of anxiety underscore not only the more direct renditions of loss, but also those pieces which reflect loss more indirectly. While many of these papers discuss father figures, the majority of them (at least in my experience) refer to mothers and/or maternal figures of one sort or another.

This brings us back to Sullivan’s arguments, that “first year students are newly conscious of and often hyper-conscious of the entwined relationship from which [their] separ-
rate, individual identity must be extricated,” and that, consequently, their parents are made “narratively visible in a way they never were before. For that process of separation/individualization, essential to the psychological birth of the infant, is being reenacted once again.” In Max’s paper, as in the papers I discuss below, this crisis of separation is enacted and reenacted in particular relation to the mother.

I cannot make an explicit connection between Max’s papers and each of the essays I address below, except to say they were all written by members of the same first year writing class, and in response to the same assignment, which was to write a personal narrative about a significant incident in the student’s life. Unlike Erika’s paper, which the writer herself indicated was revised in response to Janet’s, the following papers were written simultaneously, not in response to one another, but rather to fulfill the first writing assignment. Nor were these narratives substantially revised throughout the course of the semester. (This lack of revision, as I will discuss later, is significant, given the topic of these particular papers and also their perceived audiences.). However, even though they were not part of a general dialogue of loss and grief, as were Janet’s and Erika’s, these papers show the predominance of topics about separation and mother loss in many composition classrooms. This is particularly so, in fact, since the authors of these papers chose their topics “independently,” without first being influenced by their peers.

These essays join Max’s paper in highlighting the prevalence of what I call indirect grief and loss in student writing, loss that—as in the papers Sullivan examines—are almost always about mothers, even as they sometimes deny these maternal figures and the losses they evoke. The proliferation of these kinds of papers further defines the writing classroom as a site of both separation and mourning. This is not to say that writing classes are (or should be) dreadful and excruciatingly sad places, nor that the only kinds of activities and emotions that characterize them are grieving and grief. As centers of written expression and communication, writing classrooms are more complicated than this image allows. Nevertheless, as many students enact loss through their writing, and as most students in these
classrooms are young adults leaving home for the first time, composition classes, while
neither totally focused on, nor totally anchored in, loss, are “always already” sites of grief
and separation.

Evidence of this strong undercurrent of loss can be seen in the essays I discuss
below. By foregrounding these narratives, I lay the groundwork for considering how such
writing offers useful insights into students’ personal and academic positions, insights that
we cannot afford to ignore, especially as we examine our own “placement” within the aca­
demic community. My argument here is that rather than disassociating ourselves from
these insights, we use them to situate our students in relation to the academy, and ourselves
in relation to our students.

“Family Day:” Reconstructing Mother(‘s) Loss

“Anytime my mother arises in my life, it seems like a transformational experience.”
“Kelly,” (qtd. in Simon et al)

As its title implies this essay is, ostensibly at least, about a family road trip. The
essay takes place in flashback mode, triggered by a photo the writer imagines viewing on
the living room wall of his family’s home. As the essay begins, the writer walks wearily
through the door after a long day of work and summer heat. He is working during his last
weeks of summer vacation, the interval before he leaves home for college. Gone are the
family vacations that the picture depicts, replaced by the student’s summer job and his
responsibilities as a young adult. Unpacking his lunch cooler with “blistered hands,” the
student glances at the family photo and describes what he sees:

There I was, with my father and two brothers standing on top of an impressive
waterfall. This picture was huge, but since we were so far away, all you could
distinguish was what each person was wearing, and their height. I stood on the far
left; my feet partially submerged in a stream of water that cascaded down the water­
fall, wearing a gray sweatshirt and blue jeans, with traces of fresh dirt on them from
the adventure. My brother was to my right, a little shorter than I was, but was also
dwarfed by the waterfall. My older brother Dan and my father were next. We stood
on top of this waterfall.
Significantly absent from this picture is the writer’s mother. As we find out later, however, she is the person who takes this picture. It is her camera that freezes the family’s image; it is from her perspective that the family is composed.

These kinds of snapshot moments function frequently and prominently in student essays. In my classes, they often arise from prompts I give my students to help launch their essays. In these prompts, I will sometimes ask them to recall a photograph or to bring one to class in order to write about it. Rich’s opening paragraph was the result of such a prompt. Often, though, students need no prompt at all to incorporate images from photos in their essays. Whether these “photo opportunities” develop from prompts or spontaneously, they play important roles in the student’s essay. As Marianne Hirsch argues, “When we photograph [or view photographs of] ourselves in a familial setting, we do not do so in a vacuum; we respond to dominant mythologies of family life....These internalized images reflect back on us, deploying a familial gaze that fixes and defines us” (xvi). In Rich’s paper, the photograph fixes and defines family not only for the reader, but also for Rich himself.

The story behind the photo is this: At the mother’s insistence, the family agrees to take a trip into the mountains. “The trip start[s] out just like any other,” as Rich and his two brothers pile into the back of the family car with their dog sprawled across their laps. When Rich’s father, riding in the front seat with his mother, stops the car near a hiking trail overlooking a steep precipice, Rich’s mother aborts the hike and “shriek[s] in terror,...deathly afraid of heights, and of her children being in danger.” As if his mother ages from the ordeal, Rich “almost [sees] gray poke through her shiny black hair.” Consequently, the men of the family pile back into the car and drive around looking for “that ‘perfect place,’” a spot the mother will agree to explore.

Unable to find such a place, the irritated father now turns the car around to head towards home. Suddenly, Rich’s mother gasps, as she views “up ahead...the most beautiful mountain waterfall we had ever seen.” While Rich’s mother stays below with the dog, the three brothers and their father make the strenuous and even dangerous ascent up the
mountainside. "Testing the sidewalls," Rich writes, "I found some roots that could be used as hand and footholds and hoisted myself up. About halfway up, I lost my foothold and was hanging on with only my hands." Nevertheless Sean and his brothers, despite many near-slips, achieve the summit and their father soon follows. Digging their feet into the soft dirt near the precipice, all four males descend to the creek bed just before it disappears over the cliff. Seeing their mother at the bottom of the incline, the sons wave to her to take a picture. "The four men in the Reed family had just conquered an obstacle of nature, scaling a waterfall," Rich declares, lending to the occasion of the picture a kind of momentousness. "It was the most beautiful and peaceful moment I had ever spent with my family."

Ironically, but not surprisingly, as the male members of the family join in this beautiful moment, the mother is entirely excluded. Moments later, as the male faction of the family descends from the heights, Rich sees "silent tears working their way down [his mother's] face." Although sons and husband try to cheer her up, the woman continues to cry, and the adjectives the son uses seem to position her in weakness against the brave and nature-conquering men who have just rejoined her. "Her face grew redder and redder with every mile we drove. This is the last time that we are all going to be together for a long time," Sean's mother announces "between sobs and whimpers."

But while these descriptors indicate a kind of disdain the son's part, Rich ends his story with an acknowledgment of his mother's pain. Since the essay starts with the son returning from work in the summer and viewing the photograph framed and already on the family's wall, we understand that time has passed between the taking of the photo and the son's viewing of it. With the passage of time comes the son's maturity, and his ability to understand his mother's sorrow. He now agrees with his mother, that "[t]hings weren't going to be the same. In retrospect, he has a new vision of both the trip and the picture itself:

This climb was more symbolic than I thought. As we climbed, my mother stayed behind, watching us go. It was hard for her to just watch, which is why she started crying. It will be hard for her to watch us leave our home and begin new and excit-
I believe there is much ambiguity in this passage, ambiguity rooted in the student's impending loss of mother and his move towards separation. On the one hand, with the student's insistence on better things to come, the mother's perspective, her picture, becomes distorted, functioning here not so much as an image of happier times (as she had wanted it to be) but as a reminder of the student's independence. This kind of movement away from family, and especially away from the mother, as Sullivan argues, is a necessary move, one that the child must make. On the other hand, I see in the student's easy leavetaking of his family, his almost glib withdrawal from his mother, a kind of performance, one in which the student strives to convince not just his reader, but also himself, that he has indeed moved on. In this context, the student's own anxiety and fear seem to be projected onto his mother. It is only she who cries and "whimpers" at the thought of separation. It is she who freezes the family within the context of the trip and the frame of the photograph itself. Emphasizing the mother's state throughout the essay, the student deflects the reader's focus and his own grief away from himself and back onto his mother.

I have no doubt that Rich does look forward to a new life away from home and that he anticipates a more exciting future. But I also think his essay reveals a great amount of ambiguity about that future and the mother/family he leaves behind. I see, for instance, in his repeated insistence that life will be "exciting" and that there are "better things to do," as well as his complete projection of sorrow onto his mother, a certain (forced perhaps?) construction of independent masculinity. At the core of his essay, however, are his mother's loss, her tears that, in many ways—since they are cried for the family—represent not only her pain, but the impending grief of sons and fathers. As a woman and mother, she bears the brunt of overt grieving, the outward show of pain, even as the son himself carries that pain but projects it back onto her. It is this circuitous route of pain that lends to this paper both
an air of bravado and a tinge of the melancholic. So while it is not a paper that deals overtly with death, it is nevertheless tinged with the personal effects of both the student and the “departed.” Its undertones of separation and grief, evidence through the story of a mother’s pain, reflects the tentative nature of students and their “placement” between college and home.

"The People We Overlook:” Students on the Verge

"[My Father] looked up. “I hadn’t meant to tell you this, but perhaps it’s best that I do. It’s my belief that your mother’s death was no accident. She had many worries. And some disappointments.”

"...Surely,” I said eventually, “my mother didn’t expect me to live here forever.”

"Obviously you don’t see. You don’t see how it is for some parents. Not only must they lose their children, they must lose them to things they don’t understand.”

Kaxuo Ishiguro, “A Family Supper"

The kind of tenuous “placement” we see enacted in Rich’s essay plays a prominent role in the two essays I examine in this section. Unlike the kind of dialogue we see enacted between Janet’s and Erika’s essays, Lucy’s and Carroll’s papers, while uncannily similar in subject matter, are not linked dialogically. However, I pair them here as they both deal with the imaginary or near-loss of mothers and the students’ imagined or anticipatory grief associated with these almost-losses.

Lucy’s essay, entitled “The People We Overlook.” begins with a discussion of the student’s close relationship with her mother. “[My mother] has always been there for me from the minute I was born,” Lucy writes. “From our ten minute walks to school when I was young until our six hour drives to college, she has always reminded me that if there was a problem, a phone call would be sufficient for her to rush over in order to make me happy.” Not only does she strive to make her daughter happy, but Lucy’s mother it also generous and compassionate, even when her daughter hurts her. “She always came around and forgave me for my mistakes,” Lucy asserts. In addition, she and Lucy’s father encourage their daughter to be independent, giving her “the freedom to think for [herself] in judging things.”

217

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Despite the closeness between mother and daughter, however, one day Lucy pushes the boundaries with her mother and hurls angry and hateful words at her. The argument with her mother occurs when Lucy refuses to come to the telephone and speak to a friend with whom she has just had a fight. When her mom counsels Lucy in forgiveness, Lucy retorts angrily: “You’ve never been there for me!” and “You are never on my side!” While such accusations may seem mild to most readers, for Lucy they are hateful words that severely disrupt the mother/daughter bond. “I never understood how important my mother was, until the second I realized that our talks and shopping trips together to the mall would suddenly come to an end if I did not change my rebellious ways as I grew older,” Lucy writes.

But at the time of her argument with her mother, Lucy has yet to learn this. The day after her argument with her mother, Lucy’s mom visits her doctor and discovers she has a tumor that must be removed immediately in order to determine if it is malignant. When Lucy’s mother comes home and announces the news to her family, Lucy is “calm from hearing the news, because I was still upset at the argument we had the night before on a matter that I now know was not worth arguing about in the first place.” Besides, she “believed the surgery was simply going to be something like removing one’s tonsils, not a tumor that could have been cancerous.”

On the day of the surgery, though, Lucy is thrown into a tumult of fear. Of her trip to the hospital during her mother’s surgery, she writes:

The day of the surgery was informal, because I felt she was going on a short trip, where she would return in a matter of a few hours. Despite this, the wait seemed...like an eternity for her to come out of the operating room. Finally as they rolled my mother out on the hospital bed, I saw her in a lifeless way. Her eyes were shut, and she was so pale and her entire body seemed as though there was no blood circulating in her. I truly felt that I completely lost my mother. In a glimpse, I realized that if I had ever lost her I would not be able to live with myself, knowing that I never apologized for all the times I was wrong. Afterwards I prayed night and day asking for another chance to better myself as a daughter and as a person. I finally realized how important my mother was, when I saw her coming out of the operating room. If I had lost her that day, life now would definitely not be the same.
Lucy ends her essay by showing how, after she prays at her mother’s side for hours, her mother “came back into life after a long twenty hours in a fixed position.” She then acknowledges that “we come to understand the importance of one person at the moment when we realize that we are on the verge of losing them forever,” and she regrets her mistakes and “the burdens” she has placed on her mother.

It is easy to detect in this essay not simply Lucy’s remorse, but also her sense of guilt. She never directly states that she felt, as a result of her anger towards her mother, that she caused her mother’s near-death, but I think this sense of cause and effect and her role in events is deeply implied in this paper. Taking this one step further, I believe papers such as Lucy’s, written in response to assignments in first-year college composition classes, are reflective of students’ anxieties about leavetaking, and their unconscious intuition (or wish?) that severing the maternal bond and leaving home may not only wreak havoc on their families, but may also cause their mother’s (figurative) death. As Rich’s does with its focus on the family photograph, papers such as Lucy’s reconstruct and restore the family and the mother figure who is at the heart of it. Doing this, they also ensure the student’s own “placement” within the family and the constellation of relationships that comprise it.

Like Lucy’s essay, Carroll’s also focuses on adolescent anger and tension between mother and daughter. Simply entitled, “Hello?”, the piece begins with an image of the student dialing her mother from college. “A gentle sweet voice answers and softly says, ‘Hello?’ With excitement, I respond, ‘Hi mom, it’s me, Carroll!’” Carroll imagines her mother’s “wonderful smile growing vividly as if I was in the room with her,” and describes how her mother misses her and how she also misses her mother.

This closeness was not always the case, however. Carroll remembers times when she was 13 and her “pregnant mom was washing the dirty dishes thrown in the sink” by her whole family. “She would always leave her plate cold until she was done cleaning up after everyone else,” Carroll writes. Despite her chores, though, Carroll’s mom notices when Carroll tries to slip out of the house and plies her with questions about who she is going
with, where she will be, and when she plans to return. "It bothered me to be near her," Carroll confesses.

One time, while this motherly interrogation of daughter begins (we don't know where the father is throughout this), Carroll, who cannot "get [her] mind off that light blue halter-top and the matching ivory mini skirt in the window" of a local store, strides into the kitchen and demands loudly of her mother: "Give me thirty dollars." Carroll's mother turns wearily from the sink, and "brush[es] her messy white hair" out of eyes underscored by "heavy bags and dark circles." Staring firmly into her daughter's eyes for a few seconds, her mother finally, calmly and firmly, says, "No." Enraged, Carroll "turn[ing] into something else, something evil," shouts back: "Give me the money, you stupid bitch!"" Stunned at herself, she feels the room suddenly go cold and her "bare feet ... frozen on the tiles." Her mother turns back to the stove, as if intent on tidying up, but Carroll sees that she is "only trying to conceal her emotions...[I]t is impossible not to notice the sadness in her teary eyes." Carroll feels like apologizing, but as she steps closer to her mother, her anger rises again and she screams: "Just to let you know, I'm not going to take care of the baby. You'll have to raise it all by yourself! I hope you have a miscarriage!"

Pounding up the stairs to her room, Carroll slams and locks her door and buries her face in her pillow, glad for her isolation. "There was not a single soul to break my peace," she writes. However, "subconsciously, [her] guilt [grows] stronger" That night she has a dream. In the dream her mother is skimming a leaf off the family swimming pool with a skimmer net, while the daughter lounges tanning in a lawn chair and reading her horoscope in a magazine. "We did not speak a word to each other," Carroll writes. "She did what she needed to do as I relaxed in peace." Still, Carroll notices that her mother tries to catch a brown leaf floating on the surface of the water. Suddenly, her mother, who cannot swim, falls into the pool. Not sure whether the fall "is just an illusion," Carroll pauses, but then jumps in to save her mother. Describing this portion of her dream and her awakening from it, she writes:
As [my mother] slowly sunk to the bottom, all I was able to see was her pallid face. She looked at me with desperation. She hoped I would save her from drowning, from dying. Her eyes stared straight into mine, not even blinking once. As my mom extended her hand for me to grasp, I reached with great effort, but was unable to grab it. I had been swimming in place the whole time and could not move further. I felt hopeless. I started to cry. My tears mixed with the blue water surrounding me. A cold feeling shivered down my body. She continued to fall deeper; eyes wide open with fear. Her stare penetrated fear into me. Suddenly, I was able to swim closer to her, but as I reached for her hand, less than an inch away from mine, her fingers dropped one by one. Her dilated eyes had closed shut. Her fragile body had hit the floor of the pool as her head gradually fell backwards. She was dead.

I woke up and began sobbing with tears running down my face. I felt as though I had truly lost my mom. I was confused and filled with sadness and anger, sad that she had died in my dream and angered at the fact that I did not save her. I should have. Hearing my cry, my mom came into my bedroom, simply holding me close to her. Running her fingers down my long thick hair, she took my sadness away.

After the dream and her mother’s comforting presence, Carroll begins to help her mother with her chores, and to sing to her “soon-to-be brother or sister” in her mother’s womb whenever her mom rests. “I became a better person,” Carroll writes, “but one month later, my mom had a miscarriage...Till this day, I blame myself for my mother’s miscarriage.” In the next two sentences, Carroll then blames her past behavior towards her mother on her own hatred of herself, rather than of her mother, saying that what she needed was to begin loving herself in order to love another. Despite this assertion off independence, however, and the seemingly selfish re-focusing of her paper on herself, Carroll admits that, “Now that I am in college, being 400 miles away, I still think about the mistakes I have made in the past.” She knows she has to move on, but she also worries that she “never had the chance to apologize for all the wrong I have done. I’m truly sorry, mom.” With this italicized address to her mother, Carroll ends her essay.

When teachers call student papers like Carroll’s vacuous or facile, I am amazed. Carroll’s essay, like the pieces I have examined earlier, can be read on so many levels and from so many perspectives, that to dismiss it as empty and simplistic is simply to miss the mark entirely, to misread rather than to analyze, to fail to do one’s job as a teacher. Carroll’s
Paper can, in fact, be read in any number of ways—from a psychoanalytic and/or social-cultural perspective, or using discourse or rhetorical theories. It can be explicated and “unpacked” in the same way a literary text can. In Carroll’s essay, for example, we can see vividly the student’s placement, her positioning on the cusp between home and school, mother and academy, the familiar and the unfamiliar. Her guilt at having caused her mother pain and her perceived role in her mother’s miscarriage is entangled in her essay with her departure from home (“being 400 miles away”). Thus, while the conversation with which the essay begins shows the severed relationship between mother and daughter as restored, the ending of the essay reflects Carroll’s unconscious association of her dream of her mother’s death with the actual “death” from separation. “My mom knows I love her,” Carroll writes, using the present tense, “but I never had a chance to apologize for all the wrong I have done,” she concludes, reverting to the past. Here the phrase “I never had a chance” implies a certain finality, a missed opportunity, the failure, as Mr. Cassava indicated in his elegy for his wife, to say what one means while the departed lives. It is this failure of—and need for—language to express loss and grief that I think students consistently hint at as they write about real or imagined deaths. When we are attentive to these failures and needs, we become conscious of the other meanings of “student placement”—that is, where they stand in relation to us, to each other, to their mothers and families. This new sense of “placement” invites, as Paula Salvio suggests, the opening up of rhetorical spaces that allow for the incorporation of grief and response into the classroom. It is this sense of “placement” with which I am most concerned.

**Enacting “Placement:” Implications for the Composition Classroom**

“So much of my education had been...abstract, a test of memory: like a man, denied the chance of visiting famous cities, learning their street maps instead. So much of my education had been like that..., learning quite separate from everyday things.”

V.S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival*

It is easy to meditate on the theoretical aspects of “placement” and much harder to put it into practice in the classroom. “Placement” is linked to pedagogy and pedagogy is
linked to what we actually do when we teach. I think of my own classroom practices and how they relate to student narratives of grief whenever I recall my job search at the MLA in December of 1999. There a group of professors from a school I had applied to asked me to talk about my work with student grief narratives. When I had finished discussing my project, one professor asked why it was that I received so many of these kinds of narratives in my writing classrooms. “You must be doing something to invite them,” he insisted. I told him that, while my class taught students to write in a variety of genres, I also invited personal narratives. Moreover, I said, students could choose their own topics when they wrote these narratives, or any other kind of writing they did. “But still,” he insisted, “you must be prompting them somehow.”

During our conversation, this professor admitted that he himself did not teach composition, and so had no idea what kinds of topics students might choose when given the chance. Accordingly, he did not know that, in many first year composition programs, teachers often worry about and discuss ways of “handling” grief narratives and other troubling texts. In some sense, then, he misread the composition scene and the wide range of student writing. On the other hand, I think there was a great degree of truth in what this professor argued. It’s true, for instance, that we all unconsciously project our own griefs and desires onto others, and especially, I think, onto our students. To a great degree, in fact, this is what my work is about—the entanglement of my own narratives with those of my students.

Whether I am or am not the recipient of a larger than usual number of these essays is not the point, though. The point for me is what I actually (and consciously) do in the classroom to invite the opening up of rhetorical space around issues of grief and loss, to enable a different kind of “placement” of students, especially as such placement occurs in relation to the narratives they write about grief. As I think of these issues of practice, I also think of the professor who interviewed me. What exactly did I do? he wanted to know. This is a valid question, one that forces me to articulate my beliefs and my pedagogy in relation to those beliefs.
In the section below, I try not only to articulate my beliefs and pedagogy, but also to offer them up as suggestions for classroom practice around issues of grief, loss, and death. These suggestions are not prescriptive. Nor do they arise from rules and formulations, or from any kind of scientific analysis. They arise instead from seeing my classes and my teaching from my own perspective of—and experiences with—grief. The following, then, are suggestions and classroom strategies that depend not so much on “activities,” as on re-imagining our ways of being in relation to our students, our peers, and loss itself:

♦ Knowing that our students will reveal themselves in relation to grief and loss, I suggest we take a “placement exam” ourselves. What I mean by this is that we narrate our own grief, actually sit down and write about loss in our own lives. When we avoid writing about loss, we deprive ourselves of a rich experience—the sensation of revisiting, and distancing ourselves from, the departed and of working through what seems inconceivable and unspeakable. Most of all, we deprive ourselves of the opportunity to view writing grief from our students’ perspective: to grope for words when language fails, to lean on cliches, to reconstitute our worlds and lives around the dead and through the act of writing itself.

♦ We should have the courage, when students reveal a loss, to act as human beings and respond compassionately. I speak of courage here, because the construction of ourselves as teachers and scholars often means a kind of intellectual posturing that insists on “rigor” and rules and distance from students. To break out of this framework often means to call to question how we know, act, and be within the academy. Positioning ourselves as compassionate respondents, as well as teachers (should the two be separate?), helps us assess the ways in which we can acknowledge student loss without appropriating or sublimating it to our own. Compassionate responses begin by simply acknowledging a student’s loss with a comment to them on their paper or in person: “I’m sorry you had to go through
this. It sounds like a difficult period in your life." This is a first step, and it is not hard to do.

- We should read student texts with an eye towards what makes them rich and workable rather than what makes them deficient. We should play Elbow's "believing game" when we read the grief narratives of students, reminding ourselves that a student's first encounter with mortality is indeed a momentous and serious encounter, no matter the kind of language in which the encounter is couched. We should enrich our perspectives of student papers, opening up the rhetorical spaces in which they are written, by attuning ourselves, as Wendy Bishop suggests, to other fields and disciplines, to other kinds of literature and conversations that deal with grief and loss.

- We should not, as some critics suggest, separate content from writing when talking with students about grief and loss. The writing of grief is grief, or at least the reconstruction of grief, which is the only way a student can now experience it. It is through the actual writing that students negotiate loss, place their selves in relationship to the dead, and simultaneously distance themselves from, and revisit (revise), the graveyard and other spaces of loss. While it may be hard to find the language that allows us to discuss both grief and the craft of writing at the same time, to separate the content from craft sends messages to students that writing happens apart from living. It does not.

- We need not only to read student grief narratives for their complexities, but also to talk about these complexities in class and with our students themselves. Why can't we, for instance, respond to a student workshopping a paper about grief in class by admiring how he/she uses the tropes of elegy to give shape to loss, or how they employ the discourse of the newscaster to gain distance? Why not point out the cliches they use and discuss how cliches work, about how they
provide a communal language for talking about that which often makes us speechless? This does not mean that we condone and encourage cliches and "formulaic" writing, but rather that we show students how and why they (and we) use these prescribed forms to talk about loss.

♦ Since writing itself is a social act, and grief itself often occurs communally and responsively, we should consciously construct spaces in our classroom that enable dialogic grief. I don’t mean that we should limit these spaces to the narration of grief alone, but that we recognize that certain activities and ways of being with one another in the classroom best contain and also enable grief, its communal reconstruction and its reciprocation. These kinds of spaces engender dialogue. Such spaces for grief can be created through workshops, peer groups, and individual conferences with students. It is not necessary, as I have pointed out earlier, to instruct students to listen to and respond to grief; they often will do so on their own. We need, however, to provide the spaces for listening, narration, and the written expression of grief.

♦ I believe we should be in the business of active “placement”, constantly seeking opportunities to position one student text with another, and to model this kind of positioning for our students. In full-class workshops, for example, when one student reads his/ her own narrative of grief, we can situate that narrative (and the student’s grief) in relation to other grief narratives. I don’t mean that we should denounce one narrative in favor of another, but that we help students recognize emotions and strategies present in similar papers, and thus encourage the dialogues that are already underway. This could happen, for instance, by simply commenting to a student in a workshop: “The way you write about your mother in the hospital is really moving. What makes it moving are the details you give here. This section reminds me of Guy’s paper when he talked about
visiting his father, only Guy used dialogue. I wonder what would happen if you tried that too.”

◆ While we should not superimpose other texts on those of students, nor erase their efforts by pointing to the works of professional writers, I think we open up and expand the rhetorical spaces around grief when we call their attention to published essays, poems, novels, movies, and television shows that pertain to the topic of grief and loss. This can be done by simply offering students who write about grief a title to read and by comparing the recommended work to the student’s in a positive way, one that shows them that they are in the company of other writers and artists. We might say, for example: “The way you write about how grief changes over the years rings true for me. The poet Mark Doty says that grief is a matter of ‘shifting perspective.’ You seem to be indicating that as well here.” I often find that when I talk to students about other writers who deal with grief and loss, they will want the title of the work to which I am referring and seek it out to read it.

◆ We should have the courage to show our humanity in the classroom. I believe that when students talk about loss, we can—when appropriate and when it does not mean co-opting or silencing a student’s experience—narrate our own experiences with grief and loss. Certainly, we should be careful not to turn the focus of the class on ourselves, but we can weave our own experiences in with our students. When I have done this in my own classes, my “authority” was in no way diminished, and I believe my students respected me for this display of humanity. I think that when we disclose our own losses we model for students not so much what it means to be a scholar, as what it means to be a scholar who is human.

◆ Almost all composition texts include essays, stories, and poems about death, grief and loss (among other topics). But I have made the mistake in many of my
classes of not using these pieces to make connections between these texts and my students’ own work. I believe these kinds of texts help students see that when they write about grief, they are not alone and that to do so is a valid literary project. I think we should place these texts in relation to our students and provide kinds of writing and discussion, individually and in groups, that asks students to compare their experiences with those of the writers whom they read.

♦ We should position ourselves openly against those elements of institutional and academic culture that suppress not just student narratives of grief, but also our own expressions of compassion and sympathy towards students and each other. It is a common hobby among many teachers to denounce first-year students in general, and the texts of these students in particular. Death of grandparent papers, for example, are a favorite focus of (some) professorial derision. I think speaking up on behalf of our students and the richness of the grief narratives they write may—if not obliterate this culture—at least resist it and perhaps poke holes in it. It is through these holes that we can further open up the rhetorical spaces that give shape to loss and the communication of grief.

♦ Composition classes for the most part are intent on introducing students to new rhetorical situations and purposes, and to writing in a variety of genres. Thus, if a student who writes about grief cannot, or will not revise, his/her paper, we should consider the difficulties of audience and subject matter the student is dealing with, and let the student retain the piece as is and let him/her move on. Oftentimes I hear teachers focus obsessively on the grief narrative that remains cliched and that the student will not revise, or on the student who chooses that papers at as his/her “best piece of writing” at the end of the semester. If a student is submitting several pieces of writing in a portfolio at the end of the semester, then the one piece that seems flat should not matter that much. Indeed,
while the paper may not have value to us, it obviously has served an important purpose for the student. Asking the students to reflect on why they consider the paper the best piece they have written will very often show their reasons for choosing it. We often discover that they have outside audiences for their papers, such as a parent or other relative, or even that they intend to publish it in their old high school newspaper. This means the paper already serves the purpose for which the student intended it. I also don’t think it is wrong to talk tactfully but openly with a student when we think that the piece doesn’t work, even though the topic is about death. Doing so opens up yet another rhetorical space in which the student negotiates with his/her “official” audience (the teacher) both grief and its representation.

♦ Too often we forget that grief (like writing) is a process that happens both inside and outside of the classroom. Donald Murray says that once he was afraid about how he should respond to another person’s loss because he feared he would say the wrong thing. After his own losses, he realized it was better to say the wrong thing to someone rather than to say nothing at all. This kind of response may be messy, but also necessary. When we create the rhetorical spaces that allow and enable emotions as intense as grief, we are immersed in a human situation and all the messiness that comes with it. Usually (and almost always) our responses to students in grief, if thoughtful and not derisive, will not send the student over the edge. If a student withdraws from the class or leaves school, I think we are mistaken to, first of all, see these actions as failures, and, second, to see them as the sole fault or inevitable outcome of writing about grief. Other elements are at work in a student’s life outside of the classroom. If a student leaves the classroom and/or academy, this does not necessarily imply paralysis from grief, a breakdown, or failure. When the student is outside of our immediate domain, the process of grieving (and healing) still continues. And so does the student’s

229
life.

**A Brief Epilogue**

On April 10, 1999 I had just heard of the shooting rampage at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. Fourteen students and one teacher were dead, killed by two classmates who also turned their guns on themselves. I called my sister in Colorado and talked to my niece, who attends high school elsewhere in the state, but who was obviously shaken and frightened by the violence so close to home. We used the clichés that “serve as makeshift suture kits” (Quinn), and that were the only words we could think to speak at that moment. In the past year or so, my niece had been, in typical teenaged fashion, distant from her adult relatives, separating herself from family and struggling to find her own identity within her peer group, school, and the culture within which she lives. Now, however, she dropped her aloof facade, and, after we have discussed the incident at Columbine High, she paused. “I love you very much,” she said, before hanging up the phone.

My niece is 5'3 with black hair and a love of horses. Janet’s grandfather was six feet two inches and weighed two hundred and fifty pounds, “a big burly man [who] knead[ed] bread with...colossal hands.” Roger’s “massive arms” would sweep up his stepdaughter Erika and lift her into the air when he arrived home from work. The freshman Max is tall, wears a baseball cap, and has (he tells me after the Colorado shooting) trouble sleeping at nights. Carroll’s mother uses her “sweet voice” to soothe her daughter, who cries at dreaming her loss. Paul’s eyes were hazel, his hair black, his disease alcoholism.

The sublimation or avoidance of these particularities (these personal effects) within our teaching lives never fully erases them, but only functions to revive them as traces or symptoms in our unconscious or dreaming lives. To not acknowledge the fluidity and power of these phantoms as they float through our dreams, thoughts, and actions – and as they spin in and out of our students’ texts – not only disfigures memory, but dishonors the bodies who write it.
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The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research has reviewed the protocol for your project as Exempt as described in Federal Regulations 45 CFR 46, Subsection 46.101 (b) (2), category 4.

Approval is granted to conduct the project as described in your protocol. Changes in your protocol must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval prior to their implementation. Also, if you experience any unusual or unanticipated results with regard to the participation of human subjects, please report such events to this office promptly as they occur. Upon completion of your project or after one year, whichever is shorter, please complete the enclosed pink Exempt Project Status Report form and return it to this office.

The protection of human subjects in your study is an ongoing process for which you hold primary responsibility. In receiving IRB approval for your protocol, you agree to conduct the project in accordance with the ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of human subjects in research, as described in the following three reports: Belmont Report, Title 45, Code of Federal Regulations, Part 46, and UNH's Multiple Project Assurance of Compliance. The full text of these documents is available on the OSR information server at http://www.unh.edu/osr/Regulatory_Compliance.html and by request from the Office of Sponsored Research.

If you have questions or concerns about your project or this approval, please feel free to contact me directly at 862-2003. Please refer to the IRB # above in all correspondence related to this project. The IRB wishes you success with your research.

For the IRB,

Kathryn B. Cataneo
Executive Director
Office of Sponsored Research

cc: File
    Dr. Patricia A. Sullivan