

To Move through Grief towards Healing: An Essay in Pop Culture Associations

GATHERING DISCURSIVE THREADS

The anger and despair I felt after the Boulder shooting shook me. Breath gathered at the base of my throat and sat there, as if it could fester and become a cancer. The grief became a many-armed monster peeking out of every drawer, its tentacles slithering out from under couches and chairs. It reached out for me, caught my foot, tripped me, and disturbed whatever task I had set for it. Everyday motions were laborious, I felt like I was moving through muddied water.

I began to feel as if only metaphor could properly rectify the uneven facets of how I felt. I found comfort in literature, art, film. I told myself a story with pictures, sounds and letters not my own; stitched them together to make a thorny quilt that might protect me from the howling banshees of what I remembered, that was now, again, what I saw. This wasn't the first mass shooting to hit my community. The last one was closer...and history tells us there will be another.

As folks who study the humanities, we create meaning by bringing together myriad associations around a subject (object, event, etc.). We gather them close and bring their connection into focus with an argument. Most of the time our observations are incremental contributions. We nudge the discussion on life (past present future) towards an intriguing new direction. There is much scholarly work on grief, much on trauma, much on the healing power of art and writing to address both. I use my art – the art of associations of cultural artifacts – to bear on these griefs. When you experience trauma, the one in the past becomes present and they play against each other like cymbals in an echo chamber. To move through and past this grief, I scrutinize its echoes in the cultural artifacts of my daily life.

THREADS OF EPIC PERSONAL GRIEF

In *The Changeling* by Victor LaValle, the grief of losing a child is enacted in the horror genre.

The first part of the novel terrifies through a precise foreboding. We are still shocked when the protagonist, Apollo Kagwa, finds that his wife, Emma has killed their child (or so it seems). His grief (and hers) extends beyond genre and needle into your stomach. Kagwa is briefly committed, imprisoned, so consumed by it. I had a hard time picking the book up again after that scene. The rest of the novel is quite good, too, and makes an intriguing turn into the realm of Grimm fairytales.

I picture that grief, a parent losing a child. I imagine it, I fear it – as any parent does. It is unthinkable, incomprehensible, as much as it is ordinary. It happens every day. I tell myself that because I can see it, surely, I will be saved from it. It's those that don't think it can happen to them who are subjected, right?

Grief is epic even as it remains mundane, highly personal, restricted. It decimates the incremental moments of our lives. It disturbs our private spaces, making our bedrooms seem like stages, our bathrooms streets. Mass violence subverts the epic play of grief through noxious public interrogation. The streets and stages become witness boxes with false bottoms, hot mics and other gotcha paraphernalia haunt us; internet trolls, conspiracy theorists and deniers have somehow become

mediators. Like proud puffins they present their evidence, little more than dried droppings, crystallized in snow. In the pattern they see “the truth:” their own grizzled reflection in warped water droplets. Kagwa discovers this, as he sees his history eviscerated, his son (he still believes at this point it was his son) turned into a joke. It is the ultimate cruelty. One that we, as Americans, do to each other with disturbing ease.

In *The Changeling* Emma and Apollo’s grief is healed when the baby is discovered to be alive, after all. Emma is no murderer. She was the only one who saw the truth – the child had been taken and replaced with a changeling.

In Yaa Gyasi’s novel *Homegoing*, a series of short stories centuries in the making illustrate the toll of historical collective trauma. The story begins as the tale of two sisters, one ends up in slavery (Esi), the other the wife of a slaver (Effia). The weight of this family’s tragic history is such that it culminates in a horrific catharsis. One of Effia’s descendants, Akua, accidentally burns her house and children while asleep, as she is so haunted by devastating ancestral memories. Only her son, Yaw and her husband survive. Years (and stories) later the cycle of trauma and grief is brought to a close when the descendants of the original two sisters visit the source (for lack of a better word) of their familial grief – Cape Coast Castle. Esi resided in the slave dungeons, for a brief time, Effia in the trader’s quarters, for many years. The experience washes over the two of them, and without knowing their connection they reach for healing through recognition; through a sort of gathered stillness.

I crave a moment where I can come to some sort of understanding with the events of my own familial traumas, even though they cannot be undone. In our case, that insidious thing referred to as “mental illness” haunts our history. Its claws are deep within each branch of my family tree, and just as we feel we may escape, the grip tightens, necks snap.

My mother still has not recovered from the death of her father. He shot and killed himself when she was nineteen. Her mother, my grandmother, found him. She searches for meaning in other stories of her family’s history. Brave stories, heroic stories. Ones with plottable beginnings middles and ends. It would seem to me she knows more about his brother, uncle Scottie, a man she never met who was shot down over the English Channel during WWII, than she does about her father. She will not discuss him. Her grief is too great, and it inhabits the small spaces of things. She searches for the great griefs, the epic ones that are inscribed meaning without interrogation, without censure. I don’t blame her. I thought about including a picture here, but couldn’t choose one. They are also not mine to share.

Over the past year our family (like many others) has suffered a dizzying array of disruptions and dissolutions. Reconfigurations that in the moment one cannot quite comprehend. Like being too close to a puzzle, you cannot grasp all the pieces. Visually, physically, the lack of distance (shall we say perspective) is blinding, disorienting to the extreme. So, we sort, we move things around, engage in pieces. Facts are reconsidered, others selected. Relationships, crumble. Feelings are tattered and scattered with a certain wantonness I struggle to describe. We cannot get our feet under us. If I had just...then... If he had just...then... If only that one time... he... they...I.

A series of traumas, small and large have formed the soundtrack to our last year and a half together in this community, in this country, in this world. With the murder of ten people at the King Soopers in Boulder we were derailed further. My geography was distorted, certain places once unconsidered warp my map. Every day when I drive home, I notice the gun store, mere blocks from Arvada High School. Two

blocks from my home. Schools, shootings, nearby, home. These are not new things for me. Columbine, UCSB; two that hit the closest.

In my own small space images of the 1985 film *Return to Oz* played over and over in my head. Dorothy running from the Wheelers in the cracked and decimated Emerald City. Later, they try to follow her past the borders of the city, but the deadly desert stops them as Dorothy and her companions fly away on the couch-cum-Gump. But the momentum of the group is too much, several are pushed into the dunes themselves and [quickly turn from flesh to sand](#). I feel my own momentum twirling me towards such a fate at times; all of us spinning in directions best left in shadow.

What are the goals of seeking reason in tragedy, of confronting the cause of our grief? To stop the spinning, perhaps? To avoid whirling headlong into destruction, perhaps. Is it worth the emotional toll? For my mother it is not. There is too much at stake. For us – what do we ascribe to the Boulder tragedy? Is it the work of one man, one gun; of a society steeped in gun culture, toxic masculinity, and instant gratification? Is it meaningful to confront our villain? Should we (must we) ask why, and who does it serve? We crave our narratives of justice, of retribution. Our narratives with endings that we can delineate, describe, and then set aside. Yes, we must find meaning. But there are many ways to do this.

THREADS OF SPECTACLE AND PUNISHMENT

While watching an old episode of *Parts Unknown* on Libya, I was introduced to the [Misrata War Museum](#). This museum includes an array of objects dedicated to memorializing the country's uprising against its brutal dictator, Muammar Qaddafi. Photographs of martyrs (shuhada') line the museum's walls. There are many martyrs of the Arab spring. Their faces decorate formal monuments, like the Misrata Museum. They elsewhere as well - memorialized in spray paint on pocked walls in Syria, corners of Tahrir Square in [Cairo](#). [They are all heroes/martyrs of the revolution](#).



Photo: Ramy Raouf, "Al-Magd al-shuhada'" [Glory to the martyrs], Cairo, Feb 11, 2011. Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Glory_to_the_Martyrs.jpg

The Misrata museum includes a television on which a recording of the capture and execution of Qaddafi by the freedom fighters plays on a loop. The recording serves as an endless display of graphic, violent retribution for the decades of cruelty and mayhem the dictator brought to his people. In this episode of *Parts Unknown*, Anthony Bourdain's guide describes to the host what Qaddafi is saying in the video. He is asking why, why are you doing this? "Still, he doesn't understand." The unasked question is why, and the answer is that he deserved it (the hunt, execution, the looping of this event on film) for what he did. Bourdain nods, says nothing.



Screenshot: Anthony Bourdain: *Parts Unknown*. Season 1, episode 6: Libya

Included in this museum are pairs of Qaddafi's expensive Italian shoes. His wristwatch, [one of his chairs](#). But these trinkets are dwarfed by the walls of unsmiling faces – the shuhada', the dead. The grief of each small memorial is serialized, as one picture after another, one on top and beside another, the faces different but the collection together making them one and the same. The shine on the photographs forms eerie frames that at times distort the solemn faces. The effect on film is dark, claustrophobic, ominous. It is hard to describe from my point of view what the museum memorializes, what these photos show us.

I was struck by the labor involved in the theatrics of the museum. A very specific set of choices was made by the curators of this museum to portray this causal relationship between Qaddafi, the perpetrator who caused so much death and destruction, and the photographs of those afflicted that line the walls. There is something unfinished about their relationship, that perhaps coincides with the unfinished nature of the Libyan revolutionary process. Later in the episode one of the only women to speak to Bourdain talks about the difficulty of adjusting to life after the revolution. During the fight momentum carried them, the cause was all they needed. Reconstruction, reconciliation is more difficult. [The Arab Spring is not over yet.](#)

The Misrata museum presents the solution as simple: this is what to do with those who do us unprecedented violence. There is a process, our exquisitely flawed criminal justice system informs us. A proper way to do these things that will rebalance the scales, that will provide us with...closure. We

confront the villain with his crimes, those and any others we can think to intonate. The spectacle is spectacular. It is grandiose, bellicose, and dramatic. Like the video at Misrata, however – something is lost in the re-creation that indicts the makers. And us, the viewers.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault discusses the evolution of the French justice system. He analyzes how it changed from requiring spectacle for the community's healing – in the form of confession, torture and execution – to the modern penal system. Prison became the proper mode of punishment and attrition. Just punishment evolved (for lack of a better word) from the cathartic spectacle of the gallows to the solitary, secret transformational penitentiary. But today, don't we continue to see the persistence of the gallows, physical or otherwise. Spectacle, humiliation remains the default for criminality. The spectacle is the trial, the understanding of prison as a torturous wasteland (our imagination is key), and then the continued spectacle of documentaries, books, exposes, continued morbid fascination in the minutiae of the case. We have not gotten the confession, or at least haven't yet in this case. But is that what we really want? Or is it something else. Spectacle in the form of confession magnifies, agitates grief. It gives it a shot of adrenaline, enough to get you part way there, but exhausted and anxious at the end. It is no form of healing.

Perhaps it is not the spectacle so much as the confrontation that is required for a public catharsis. The conversation that declares, we know what you did. In a 1977 *Columbo* episode titled "Try and Catch Me," the would-be-murderer, murder-mystery novelist Abby, confronts her nephew (by marriage) who she blames for the death of her beloved niece [as they stroll on the beach](#) in a most satisfying fashion, narratively and visually. She turns to him. They are in profile, a good deal of space between them. The wind and surf crash as another sound rises. "I know what you did, everything you did," she says. He stares back at her, hesitant. He knows, too. The audience knows. A pair of horses gallop around the two as they take each other's measure. Neither of them flinches.



Screenshot: *Columbo*, "Try and Catch Me," Season 7 episode 1, 1977.

What happens in the rest of the episode is almost incidental. The confrontation has erupted the chance of any elision, any denial. It is the story, the culmination and the satisfaction of Abby, the main character's, grief. After she kills her nephew by locking him in her vault, his death and the subsequent investigation becomes spectacle, and we are delighted. In the end Columbo corners her as he does all of his adversaries. But this too, is incidental. The scene at the beach has provided us our catharsis, closed our circle. The audience as community is relieved from this moment on. She knows, he knows. It is known.

In *Cairo Station*, the 1958 film directed by Youssef Chahine, the confrontation without confession is taken in another direction, into another type of extreme and public catharsis. Qinawi, a lame and pitiful young man from the countryside is taken under the wing of Madbouli, the gentle newspaper seller in Cairo Station. However, Madbouli's kindness is rewarded with horrific results; Qinawi goes mad with love of one of the informal soda sellers, Hanouma. After being rejected, Qinawi attempts to kill her but kills one of her companions instead. He hides her body in Hanouma's bridal trousseau in order to frame her fiancé. The cast at large is fooled for a short time, but in the end Qinawi is *en masse* pursued, and caught just as he is about to kill Hanouma on the tracks outside the station. Madbouli is sent out to appeal to Qinawi as he holds a knife to her throat, "my son...put on your suit, you will be getting married..." We, the audience are not certain until Madbouli places the jacket on Qinawi what is going on until we see the long sleeves – a straitjacket. Qinawi's realization quickly follows, he screams, "Madbouli, don't leave me, help me!" Madbouli turns away, rejects him. Our confrontation is what we need, as a community (the audience, the large crowd gathered to save Hanouma and foil Qinawi) can move to healing.



Screenshot: Qinawi holds Hanouma on the tracks, *Cairo Station*, 1958.

But are these, then, revenge. It is unclear, especially in the case of Qaddafi. Revolutions are highly complicated, they are intricate masses of ancestral pain, trauma and grief. Reconciliation seems like a dream, something far out of reach.

THREADS OF LOVE

In *All about Love*, bell hooks posits love as a radical, revolutionary act. Something that takes courage, cannot be done in the shadow of violence. Love is not a given, it is not a word, it is not inherited, granted, or provided. It is created, it is acted – to, for, upon. It is the striving of bettering oneself for the sake of another, for others. Why does this come to me as I consider grief, our collective suffering? What does love as an act of self-betterment offer us when we consider such traumas?

Peace and love have always been threats, they have always been radical. I am reminded of Mehdi Rajabian, jailed for producing music unapproved by the regime in Iran, and yet he [continues to do so](#). His album, [Middle Eastern](#) is a series of tracks named after countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Each track was written and composed by artists from those countries. The message is one of community, peace, creativity. It is radical. Love, connection, peace are confrontational in a way that can deny violence, loosen the grip of extremism, eviscerate the logic of repression. Especially as they are small, local affairs practiced daily and in defiance of fear.

Grief, like love, is prescient as it is a private, specific affair. It is rooted in context; even communal grief cannot be abstracted. The small, intimate gestures of grief (and love) bind us in mutual understanding as to the stakes of our existence – of our duty to each other, whether assumed or denied. Such small spaces can hold many. Many thoughts, many feelings, many people. Grief, like love, is difficult. It is tenacious yet varied, and because it is so particular it may resist casual articulation. Perhaps because there must be vulnerability to experience both, a bearing of souls that is the root of many terrors.

In the 1977 film [The Water Carrier is Dead](#) directed by Saleh Abouseif based on a book by Yousef Al-Siba'i, a water carrier named Shousha goes about his daily life in solemnity, unable to cheer in mourning for his wife who died in childbirth 10 years before. He resists calls to mirth, big and small, until he is befriended by a lively mortician, Shehata, who intends to live life to the fullest. The water carrier succumbs, has fun getting high and hanging out at a coffee shop, he opens up to his son about his wife; and then his friend dies. Shousha is devastated. His grief is compounded by the fact that he knew this all along – one who loves, must suffer. Through the aid of his family and community Shousha re-emerges, a man more engaged with his life. The story's achievements lie in the author's ability to convey to us the intimacy of death and grief, of their heft, weight and gravity in the heart (and history) of another. Shousha is not healed because he faced the villain of his loved one's deaths – this was not possible for him. He was healed and changed because he confronted himself. The way his losses affected him, his life; what he lost and what he gained.



Screenshots: *Al-Saqqā Mat* [The water carrier is dead], The two friends discuss Shousha's wife (L), Shousha confronts his grief in the cemetery (C), and hugs his son at the end of the film (R) 1977.

THREADS OF QUIET GRIEF, RECONCILIATION

It is hard to think of mass violence as causing an intimate grief, but I posit it must be so. Might we then cradle it, experience it, care for it, the way we do other griefs – other deaths that are given the dignity of privacy, of peace. It is challenging to reconcile this, because in episodes of mass violence we not only grieve for the loss, but we also ache for the dead's suffering. For their final moments, for their mental, physical, and emotional pain. We fear that there is no love in those final moments, how could there be? We agonize over the pain and fear, over the inability to be present, to take some of that as our own. We are certain, that, in that moment, they were alone.

In her memoirs about her life with her husband, Taha Hussein, Suzanne Taha-Hussein writes about the author's final moments:

We were together, alone, close to an extent beyond description...Each of us was before the other. Unknown and united as we had been at the beginning of our journey. In this last unity, in the midst of this very close familiarity, I talked to him, kissing that forehead that was so noble and so handsome...a forehead that still emanated light. For before anything and after everything, and above all things, he was my best friend.

This experience offered Suzanne is denied to us in the event of mass violence – denied to the community, denied to the sufferers, denied to the friends and family of the dead. All are denied dignity, the privacy, the intimacy of passing and grief. Even more so they are turned into hashtags, tokens, symbols too easily discarded. Lists of names in footnotes, bumper stickers. Discarded digital bits like breadcrumbs lost in the rain.

There is no possibility for reconciliation, no chance of a proper closure with the person who has died. So, we continue seeking what has been taken – in the body of the villain, whoever that might be. Or rather, that is what the Ur narrative of crime, inquest and retribution would demand.

Do we allow the villain to deny us our proper grief – one that is private, small, gestural, tender, spontaneous, honest, and more than the sum of its parts? One that must be experienced in time, in the small spaces, intimately and differently from others? To move toward healing it must not be so. I, we, my family is more than the sum of our tragedies. I choose to practice to become better, in small gestures and little ways; I would choose love.

Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* offers an option close to us in the humanities. The protagonist, Little Dog, writes a panegyric to his lover, Trevor, after the latter's death. It is a complicated poem, in terms of literary form and feeling. Little Dog writes to justify his writing, to justify in some ways – his remembering, his grief. "Because he tasted like river and maybe you were one wing away from sinking."

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