

Over the wall ...

Alan Maley
grappling with grief.

The old saying goes that there are only two certainties in life: death and taxation. But whereas the taxman gives us plenty of warning about payback time, the grim reaper keeps us in suspense. And when the moment comes, we are bereft and adrift. We grieve for things we have lost and will never have again. Most often, these are people we have loved, though we can also grieve for other things, such as our former selves, who are gone for ever. Grief is the flipside of love, and no one can escape it. That is why it has figured so largely in literature and other forms of remembrance. Grief is a condition; *mourning* is a process we engage in to deal with grief. And perhaps grief cuts deeper and lasts longer in our modern world because the comforting rituals of mourning have largely been dispensed with. We are left alone with our loss. It is, therefore, no surprise that there are so many instances of people writing their way out of grief. I have chosen four different ways of dealing with loss here.



A Grief Observed

C S Lewis is better known for his fantasy novels about Narnia, such as *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. But he was an Oxford don and a fervent Christian, who also wrote books on popular theology, such as *The Problem of Pain*. After remaining a bachelor for many years, he fell passionately in love and married in his middle age. Tragically, his wife died just four years after their marriage. *A Grief Observed* is his attempt to come to terms with his devastating loss. It makes for a harrowing read. In just 64 pages, Lewis anatomises his grief in painstaking, and painful, detail. He describes how there is 'a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me'. He feels he has become 'an embarrassment to everyone I meet'. Try as he may, he cannot remember his wife's face, though he can bring back her voice. He reproaches himself bitterly for thinking more about his own grief than about his dead wife herself, and fears that he is building a picture of her which is nothing like the real person she was. Then he turns his anger against the God he has spent his life believing in, referring to God as '*the Cosmic Sadist, the spiteful imbecile*'. He tries logical argument: '*If God's goodness is inconsistent with hurting us, then either*

God is not good or there is no God.' For most people, that would be the end of the argument, but Lewis continues to pick at the scab of his imperilled belief in an attempt to salvage what remains. After many spiritual contortions, he seems to conclude that it is only by accepting what has happened that he can in any sense come close to the person he has lost and the God he still clings to but cannot hope to understand. Addressing God directly, he asks: '*Can I meet H [his dead wife] again only if I learn to love you so much that I don't care whether I meet her or not?*'

Levels of Life

There are no such theological struggles in the case of Julian Barnes, as he is a self-confessed non-believer. In *Levels of Life*, he comes at the issue of grief obliquely, an approach which will be familiar to anyone acquainted with his fictional works *Flaubert's Parrot* or *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*. Barnes has a disarming way of presenting events and facts which only gradually come into focus, like a photographic plate in a developing dish. There are three sections to the book, each one corresponding to a 'level of life'. His controlling metaphor in all three is the



bringing together of two previously unconnected things. The first, *The Sin of Height*, deals with the exploits of the early balloonists, including Fred Burnaby and the legendary French actress, Sarah Bernhardt, and of the inventor of aerial photography, Nadar. The second, *On the Level*, recounts the failed love affair between Burnaby and Bernhardt. It is only in the third, *The Loss of Depth*, that Barnes explicitly anatomises his grief over the death of his wife Pat after 30 years of marriage. He opens with: 'You put together two people who have not been put together before ... Then ... one of them is taken away. And what is taken away is greater than the sum of what was there. This may not be mathematically possible but it is emotionally possible.' His reflections on his loss are skilfully interwoven with the narratives of the previous two sections, and we begin to see their relevance. He touches on many of the familiar symptoms of grief: the anger, the indifference it breeds, the insensitivity of friends, the way time is reconfigured, the dreams and the memories. He laments the loss of lovers' shared vocabulary – 'the tropes, teases, short cuts, jokes, sillinesses, faux rebukes, amatory footnotes – all those obscure references rich in memory but valueless if explained to an outsider'. He laments the death of reciprocity as he tries to talk to his dead wife: 'There is no echo coming back; no texture, no resonance, no depth of field ... This is what those who have not crossed the tropic of grief often fail to understand: the fact that someone is dead may mean that they are not alive but doesn't mean they do not exist.' I have now read this slim book three times and, every time, I have found new angles to appreciate.

H is for Hawk

H is for Hawk is a magical book in which Helen Macdonald describes the months following the death of her father – 'when you've lost trust in the world, and your heart is turned to dust'. She decides to

buy a goshawk and to train it. The problems she has with her relationship with the bird, with her own psychological state and with the loss of her father are described in language of great poetic beauty which gives fascinating insights into the mind of animals and the nature of grief. Parallel with her own narrative, she tells the story of T H White, author of *The Sword in the Stone* and a deeply disturbed man, and his own struggles to train a goshawk and, thus, to find himself. A wonderful book, which deservedly won the Samuel Johnson prize for non-fiction last year.

Redgrove's Wife

Poetry has been a preferred genre for the expression of grief. Most of us can recall fragments, at least, of poems on the subject. Auden's *Funeral Blues*, with its opening line 'Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone' and the closing lines 'Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood. For nothing now can ever come to any good', will be familiar to anyone who watched the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. But everyone will have their own favourites. For me, Dylan Thomas's *A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London* and Allen Tate's splendid *Ode to the Confederate Dead* would certainly be on the list.



But here I would like to focus on a series of poems by Penelope Shuttle in her volume *Redgrove's Wife*. These poems are also found in Neil Astley's anthology *In Person: 30 Poets*, which has an excellent DVD so you can watch the poet reading her own work. Shuttle's sequence of 24 poems, *Missing You*, is about as moving a commemoration of a loved one as you would find anywhere:

*'Like a saltwater wife, I prise open the oyster of my loss
Hoick out the pearl of your death.'*

Each poem touches us in a different way: With humour:

'I wept in Tesco, Sainsburys and in Boots where they gave me medicine for grief.'

With passion:

'I used to be an atom; you split me.'

And with inconsolable grief:

'I don't want anything except the past, bring me five years ago, last winter, the week before last, yesterday.'

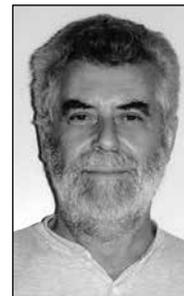
But finally there is some kind of reconciliation with the fact of her husband's loss:

'Today, who is a shadow of his former self, lets you go.'



Grief is hardly a subject one would expect to select as the direct focus of language lessons. Yet, given the universality of loss and grief, teachers may sometimes need to show sensitivity when they encounter it in students, so a greater awareness of it may be no bad thing. And for advanced conversation classes, at least, these titles provide a wealth of texts to trigger discussion. **ETP**

Barnes, J *Levels of Life* Vintage 2014
Lewis, C S A *Grief Observed* Faber and Faber 1961
Macdonald, H *H is for Hawk* Jonathan Cape 2014
Shuttle, P *Redgrove's Wife* Bloodaxe Books 2006



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