

Patho Graphics

Narrative, Aesthetics, Contention, Community

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Assembling a Shared Life in Anders Nilsen's *Don't Go Where I Can't Follow*

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In a 2015 review article, “No Protocol for Grief,” Ann Jurecic observes that “literary grief memoirs are having a moment in publishing; they provide vivid evidence that mourning is more complicated than formulaic accounts of bereavement acknowledge.”¹ Jurecic’s statement corroborates what Amy-Katerini Prodromou argues in her book published in the same year, *Navigating Loss in Women’s Contemporary Memoir*. As Prodromou explains in her introduction, her study makes the case for “a subgenre that emphasizes the complexity of recovery in line with new wave theories of grief that have been emerging in opposition to Freud and the standard model of grief since the early 1990s.”² Both Prodromou and Jurecic use, as case studies, books of prose that “defy neat placement into genre categories.”³ For Prodromou, these include late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century works of grief and loss, including, as some examples, Lucy Grealy’s *Autobiography of a Face* (1994), Jenny Diski’s *Skating to Antarctica* (1997), and Judith Barrington’s *Lifesaving* (2000). Jurecic similarly reviews two genre-defying, hybrid prose texts, both works she describes as “essayistic”: Helen Macdonald’s *H is for Hawk* (2014) and Rebecca Solnit’s *The Faraway Nearby* (2013). As Jurecic says of the two books she reviews, in a statement that could apply to all of the texts mentioned here, these works of mourning “experiment with ideas.”⁴ More specifically, they could be said to “connect,” as Solnit does, “the faraway and the nearby, the invisible and the visible, the unknown and the known.”⁵

For Jurecic, “One need not be a writer . . . to think essayistically”—by which she means experimentally—“about loss.”⁶ Indeed, if each experience of loss is unique, and if “there is no ‘right’ way to mourn,” then it stands to follow that

there are as many ways of turning one's experience of loss into a representation as there are of experiencing loss itself.⁷ In this essay, using Anders Nilsen's *Don't Go Where I Can't Follow* (2006; republished 2012), a multimodal hybrid text in which the artist, a well-known North American cartoonist, mourns the death of his partner, incorporating representations of and mementos from their time together, including photographs, postcards, a letter, illustrations, comics, and diary entries, I explore what it means to grieve in and across a variety of modes, and how such an examination might shed light on the visual dimensions of loss and grief.⁸ Nilsen's self-described "memorial" book testifies to his nearly six years of being with artist Cheryl Weaver, who died of cancer in 2005 at the age of thirty-seven.⁹ Arranged in a loose chronology of eight unnumbered sections, his book can best be understood as an assembly, a word that, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, includes as some of its definitions, a "gathering together," a "meeting," "the state of being collected or gathered," "the action or method of assembling a . . . composite article," "the coming together of two persons or things," "a gathering of persons," and "a collection of things."¹⁰

With its unique structure, the text, which in some way or another corresponds with each of these descriptions, highlights the assembly work that grieving calls for, a response to the fracturing that occurs in especially forceful ways following the loss of a person with whom one has been sharing a life. The assemblage that comes after such a loss might include, most importantly, a grieving person's attempts to connect: (1) past memories and present outlook, (2) former and current senses of self, (3) the ineffable "presence" of the lost love with the enduring presence of the survivor, and (4) the bereaved self with a community of others. A close reading of Nilsen's *Don't Go Where I Can't Follow* reveals a range of modes and modalities within which such connecting, gathering, and meeting can be propelled, even as, ultimately, these various mechanisms of assembly reinforce the insurmountable separations—between the living and the dead, the past and the present, the individual and his community—that this kind of work tries to repair.¹¹ Additionally, reading *Don't Go Where I Can't Follow* as part of a growing body of contemporary grief memoirs—in the case of this essay, mainly works of prose but with a potential to apply these analyses to other formats and modes, such as poetry, more conventionally structured graphic narratives, photographic essays, and works of fiction—shows how the assemblage so visibly traceable in the book itself also presents a potential prototype for the kind of assembly work at the heart of the PathoGraphics project. As its web-page description makes plain, the mission of PathoGraphics, which is to put in conversation "literary studies, media studies, cultural studies, history of science, and medicine," is one of assembly, a way of bringing "inter-medial and cross-cultural perspective[s]" in dialogue with one another in order to help individuals rethink experiences from and of the body, both in and out of medical and institutional settings.¹²

Travel Stories

"Grief, as it transpires, has its own territory," writes Kay Redfield Jamison in the prologue to *Nothing Was the Same* (2009), her book about the loss of her husband, Richard Wyatt, to cancer. "It provides a path, albeit a broken one, by which those who grieve can find their way."¹³ Jamison's words evoke what Marta Bladek refers to as "the spatiality of mourning."¹⁴ In addition to the literal places and settings in which people recall (whether joyfully or with pain), or suppress, memories of their losses, grief is often depicted figurally using spatial terms, specifically as a "journey" to a previously unexplored or unknown setting.¹⁵ "Katherine's death had sent me into the dark wood," writes Joseph Luzzi in his memoir of loss, "a new dimension of life that I had never imagined existed."¹⁶ In both Jamison's and Luzzi's works, as in most grief memoirs, this spatial component of grieving is inevitably tied to a temporal one, whether explicitly (e.g., "as it transpires") or implicitly. Their books unfold in some kind of order, however creative the arrangement: of togetherness, losing, loss, and the aftermath to that loss.¹⁷

The majority of Nilsen's ninety-plus-page book—up until page sixty-five, which begins a section titled "The Hospital"—testifies to their time together, which includes time together while apart, before her illness. The text is divided into eight sections, each including a title page utilizing a consistent, uniting font: "Postcards from Her to Him," "The Camping Trip," "Miscellaneous," "Air France," "France," "The Hospital," "The Lake," and "Postcards from him to her."¹⁸ In this manner, the work's overarching structure provides a trajectory of a life lived together, and a little bit after; it charts a loose chronology mapped onto both real and imagined places, commingling the spatial and the temporal as well as the here and there, the now and then. Nilsen describes his composition thusly: "The book is a collection of travel stories, of trips we went on together, literal or figurative, and some we went on separately, correspondence when we were separated and of disasters, both minor and great and irrevocable."¹⁹ With this language, and in the manifestation of such related contrasts and pairings throughout, there seems to be an attempt to gather and mix, so that places and events, always tied to memories, appear out of order but still connected. The titling and related arrangement of various representations of these once-scattered trips and experiences are reminders that the past is being collected in the present, constructed as a means of trying to bridge together a life before and a life after.

The composite is thus made apparent not only in the subjects of the separate sections of the book but in the mixed forms and formats that make up each section. The work is, for example, bookended by pages displaying pairs of postcards exchanged by the couple early on in their relationship, in sections titled, as mentioned, "Postcards from Her to Him" and "Postcards from him to her." Two distinct but bonded aesthetic voices and styles emerge from these mini-collections of four pieces each. She sends three short, quirky, and enigmatic prose-poems typed up and centered in a blank white space. "So, next time you're

speeding / Honk and wave when you race by. / Honk and wave," she writes on one, a tiny poem, however tongue-in-cheek, that in this context seems to capture the longing and nostalgia that the bereaved might feel in looking back.²⁰ In the final chapter, Nilsen's postcards, in contrast, are pictured only from the back, so neither addressee nor stamps are visible, offering more centrally the perspective not of writer but recipient. Two include illustrations paired with handwritten words, characteristic slices of the kind of work, comics, that Nilsen was already known for at the time and that encompass the majority of his published work.²¹

These tiny assemblies, collections united in the book, stand in for disparate but ultimately mutual realities, a visual synecdoche of sorts; here are souvenirs left by a pair of individuals reaching across time and space, employing seemingly irrelevant, mostly disjointed details to communicate. Each works out a distinct way of upholding her or his part of the conversation using images and words, and a close look reveals some common motifs and formats: of movement and flight, of fragmentation and collage, of the proximity between different forms of life—animals and insects and humans—and the convergence of metropolis and wilderness, city and country. The appearance of the postcards also discloses separate, if related, poetic and aesthetic processes and styles, the product of two individuals (both artists, though each with a different area of focus) creating apart from each other, alone in the making.²² Reproduced, these are traces of a once-vibrant and spanning exchange, of a past, shared, remembered, and brought together, however precariously, in the present.

Miscellaneous Selves

Nilsen presents a variety of representations of places traveled, each image or narrative piece offering a unique perspective presented in its own particular mode and register. There are several chapters that open with pictures of maps, a distant and depersonalized view, one map paired clearly with a place-name ("France"), another ambiguously paired without one ("Miscellaneous"). There are reproductions of photographs, some in full color, some in somber black and white—of landscapes, of landmarks, of Cheryl and Anders.²³ When pictured, sometimes the two appear separately and sometimes together, calling attention to the fact that each of them was, at various points, likely involved in taking those pictures, positioned behind a camera lens while the other stood proximate but apart. There are comics and illustrated diary entries, always composed by Nilsen in his hand and offering still other points of view to these places and occasions. In one chapter, for example, "Air France," Nilsen presents a loose, cartoonishly composed four-page sequential graphic narrative, a humorously conveyed recap of a series of mishaps that prevented the couple from taking a trip to France as planned.²⁴ Over the course of this comic, at times he presents scenes of the pair at home or in public, pictured as though from an imaginary outside observer; at other times, he relates an outsider's perspective but

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captures moments with only his alter ego in sight, Cheryl somewhere outside the frame.

With this mosaic, a piecing together of a variety of points of view, sometimes shared and sometimes passed along, Nilsen discloses a sense of being together, even before the inevitable break, as always having been something of a splintered state. They are, solidly, a couple, in one panel from the aforementioned comic, for instance, pictured in bed together, their parallel bodies sharing a joint exclamation in the form of a single word bubble.²⁵ Halfway through the following chapter, they are depicted in a set of near-identical photographs, heads tilted toward each other in each, expressions nearly the same.²⁶ Using different means, these images all testify to their togetherness: the bond they shared and the commitment they made to each other. But the loss, while worlds away from the life they lived beforehand, nonetheless seems loosely foretold in the structure of the book, its pieced-together sections revealing how even individuals who share a life hold their own distinctive worldviews, live their separate lives, all the while. Some things cannot, will not, ever truly be shared.

"This *home*—without my husband—is not possible for me to consider," writes Joyce Carol Oates in her memoir, *A Widow's Story* (2011), at the beginning of the second section, "Free Fall."²⁷ This is the point in the narrative when she has to grapple for the first time with life after loss. For Oates, the shock of her husband's death is inseparable from her now-disturbed sense of self. She takes on her new identity, *widow*, tentatively, sometimes writing the word with a capital W, sometimes discussing "the widow" from a third-person distance, as though she were writing about someone else. "For a widow inhabits a tale not of her own telling," she writes at one point, calling attention to the devastating loss of a cohesive sense of self that such an event often engenders.²⁸ "The real shock of a reader of *A Widow's Story* arises not from sudden spousal loss," writes Jeffrey Berman, "but from Oates's almost unrecognizable self-portrait."²⁹ A grief memoir can be as much a story about the nature of a life once shared, of an individual now absent, as a tale tracking a broken sense of self. In telling his story, the bereaved often searches for a means of finding continuity between what feels like a split: from a previous self to a self "after."³⁰

At several points in the narrative, Nilsen includes reproduced snippets from the past, in the form of photographs and diary entries often paired in proximity to retrospective reflections. For example, in the "Miscellaneous" chapter, made up of four pages with the image of an unmarked map of New Jersey inaugurating the sequence, he includes two sets of pages that address seemingly unrelated events.³¹ The first two pages include a couple of photographs with a narrative handwritten underneath, a self-contained story of a Christmas spent together in 2003. As the narrator conveys, the pair set off on a road trip, but several hours in Cheryl fell asleep at the wheel, the car careened off the highway, and they ended up stranded in New Jersey. The description of the experience was written in retrospect, ending as it does with the narrator's reflection that, despite the

near-disastrous crash, “it was actually a really nice Christmas.”³² The couple looks amused, first slightly and then more so, in the accompanying photographs, which testify to their willingness to create a record of this unanticipated event, thereby transforming it from a misadventure to an experience they want to remember.

Turning the page, the reader is confronted with what appears to be a completely disconnected set of pages. Against a bright white background, the oversized, bubble-lettered heading at the top of the first in this set of images reads, “1 • 03 • 05.” “I’m grumpy. Bad mood,” the scrawled diary entry below announces. With this suddenly dated page, the narrator now seems desperately alone with his words and mood, even from within the comfort of his as yet undisturbed past life. The entry is dated two months before Weaver’s original cancer diagnosis.³³ With the conjunction of diary entries and photographs—two modalities generally, though misleadingly, thought to supply unmediated, direct connections to the past—alongside a retrospective framing of past events, Nilsen joins together various, sometimes competing versions of his past and present selves, even as the attempt at such an assembly reinforces the futility of such an endeavor.³⁴ The book, meant to recreate unities of various kinds, in the end evidences the false promise of any such proof of cohesion.

“Not Even Here”

“Why do I tell you these things? / You are not even here.”³⁵ So read the final lines of the late John Ashbery’s poem, “This Room.” Throughout most of this composition of grief, Ashbery’s narrator is painfully alone with his thoughts, mourning a time passed and a loss, whether of his own past self or of some beloved other, or both. In these final lines, a “you” suddenly, more concretely, emerges, some absent presence to whom the narrator seems to have been addressing the poem all along. The interrupting “even” in the final, declarative words of the poem, “not here,” suggests an abruptly disturbed reverie: a presence that, against all odds and in the midst of the narrator’s deepest, most absorbing solitude, has made itself known. The loss is painfully felt, the other is no longer, but something—still, even—lingers.

In a 2016 article, philosopher Kathryn J. Norlock describes what therapists sometimes refer to as “imaginal relationships,” or relationships with loved ones who have died that can potentially be considered forms of “real relationships” as opposed to entirely fantastical constructions.³⁶ As she argues, building not only on philosophical works in metaphysics and psychological literature on bereavement but also individual narratives of grief, “the relationships bereaved persons may maintain with the dead are meaningful even when they are no longer reciprocal, and not merely limited to past impressions.”³⁷ In other words, there is the potential for continued, active interaction with our loved ones after death.

Throughout *Don’t Go*, Nilsen builds on the “absent presence” of his lover, including photographs and drawings of her at various stages of life and through

her illness, and also providing an assortment of conversational moments—scenes when her presence surfaces as an active recipient of, or agent for, his dispatches. In the second chapter of the book, “The Camping Trip,” for example, Nilsen includes a photocopy of a twenty-one-page undated letter, handwritten on white lined paper and set against a clean, gray background.³⁸ Directed at his sister, here the letter writer, Anders, recalls an impromptu camping trip the couple made one summer out on Lake Michigan. He catalogues all of the, in the end, amusing misadventures that befell them: squirrels in their tent, flies on the beach, lost (and eventually found) car keys, dead flashlight batteries.

The letter is scribbled in Nilsen’s handwriting, and its reproduction not only bears out a narration of events recollected but also bespeaks the time and effort involved in the letter’s composition. “So, my dear sister, that’s the story of our camping trip,” the letter’s concluding paragraph begins.³⁹ This mention of the letter’s original addressee, generally though not completely remote since the “Dear Ella” that opens the letter, takes readers out of the transformed context of the reprinted document. If originally part of a discourse with an absent sister, a sister to whom the letter writer, Anders, in writing the detailed letter intends to express care and a sense of how she is missed—“I wish I could be there with you all,” he declares toward the very end⁴⁰—the letter now stands as both a testament and a call to another, more absolutely absent beloved, Cheryl.

And just as the response of the original intended recipient of the letter, Nilsen’s sister, is not included here, we do not ever see a direct response from the subject of this whole project, Cheryl. But that does not mean that her presence is not keenly felt, especially in such open-ended forms of address. Indeed, analogous to the postcards that open and close the book, the letter testifies to the spaces between, the gaps around which relationships, and conversations—those building blocks to relationships—take shape. These gaps become spaces from which the absent Cheryl’s presence can be felt, from which she is “not even here.”

Beyond the letter, there are a variety of visual markers testifying to such conversational moments, instances tracking the “imaginal relationship” that the book both bears witness to and enacts. Nilsen explains of the second collection of images included in the “France” chapter, which consists mainly of photographs: “The black and white pictures were not intended to be, or to seem, poignant. That was simply the roll of film that was in the camera that day.”⁴¹ Indeed, one such shot, the second half of the aforementioned set of photographs of the couple with their faces closely nestled together, reveals a double exposure of Cheryl’s face glancing sideways off the page.⁴² This shadow image is not the only such photograph or image that seems, in retrospect, to forecast an impending future absence. Another photograph in full color depicts the side of a highway, and seems unnotable in the context of other nondescript and unpeopled landscape images included in the set (see fig. 2.1).⁴³ But there is an arrow, obviously added by Nilsen later on, pointing to a standing cardboard shape of a formless cartoon body on the highway.



CUT-OUT SILHOUETTES LIKE THE ONE ON THE RIGHT WERE A REGULAR FEATURE OF THE LANDSCAPE ALONG THE ROAD. PRESUMABLY THEY MARK THE SITE OF A FATALITY.

2.1 Anders Nilsen, *Don't Go Where I Can't Follow* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2012), 50 (bottom half of page).

The caption explains, "Cut-out silhouettes like the one on the right were a regular feature of the landscape along the road. Presumably they mark the site of a fatality." Death was all around us, Nilsen's retrospective annotations seem to say, as though Cheryl were already communicating with him, from beyond the land of the living, while they were both still alive together. The beloved's future absence seems consistently to have been part of this past shared life; similarly, her active presence in her bereaved lover's life without her, in the varied ways she is seen and felt throughout the text as a presence that is somehow still active, engaged, and in conversation, seems distinctive and "real."

Gathering Together

As the book comes to a close, in one of its final chapters, "The Hospital," Nilsen depicts his lover in the throes of her illness. He seems to be turning inward, as a series of journal entries relays. These trace his attempts to come to grips with what is happening through language: a recording of Cheryl's various ailments, the nonsensical phrases she has been uttering, as well as his own emotional turmoil, the "waiting waiting waiting" that now takes up all of his time and energy.⁴⁴ The

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entries testify to an increasing divide between their perspectives: "I can't know what it's like," he remarks, describing the increased distance between them even as he sits right beside her.

In addition to these journal entries, he includes four careful illustrations of her in her hospital bed. In one of these drawings, only her head is visible as it tilts to the side, her eyes closed though covered with glasses.⁴⁵ Two fingers are illustrated, cradling the top of her forehead. Her head is tilted in the direction of those fingers, as though in sleep she can nonetheless discern a modest presence, an extension of the eyes looking at her as her body falters, the hands taking down the details. There is also an oddly placed close-up drawing of her ear, a copy, drawn just off to the side of the sketch of her face and signifying another potential connection between her and the rest of the slowly disappearing world: the voice or voices that speak to her from the sidelines.⁴⁶

In words and illustrations, Nilsen seems to move among connecting with his lover, taking in and putting down her experiences, and feeling jostled by the recognition that they now face the world from hopelessly incongruent positions. Throughout, particularly in his drawings of her, he searches for what he can continue to give her as she fades away, however feeble his offerings; this turns out to be his attention, his focus.⁴⁷ Above the final illustration of her drawn-from-life, dated November 7, six days before she died, she is pictured in a careful sketch that tracks in painstaking detail the lines on her pillow, the hairs on her head.⁴⁸ Her mouth rests slightly open, her eyes closed. Alongside the horror of this slow and steady division from the person he once knew, perhaps even because of it, there is the potential for new kinds of intimacy, new ways of paying attention to his partner who, though dying, is still very much alive.

This chapter is followed by "The Lake," a sequential illustrated narrative in which the narrator describes a memorial ceremony that took place several months after Cheryl's death and concluded with his spreading her ashes into the water of Lake Michigan, close to where they had lived together. The chapter is set apart from the rest of the book because it is composed as a direct address to the now-departed beloved, it depicts a life after her death, and it does not include page numbers. The eight-page narrative consists of two large, rectangular panels per page drawn in black and white ink, with words neatly laid out. In contrast to the journal entries and illustrations included in the previous chapter, in this one Nilsen seems more invested in creating order, a careful chronological composition borne from the chaos of grief.

The chapter also differs from the rest of the book because other individuals outside the couple are largely featured. In its opening pages, Nilsen depicts a number of people walking together, including a version of himself. Only the backs of these figures are visible. This posture brings to mind an earlier cartoon of the lovers leaving France together, an image included on the page before "The Hospital" chapter opens, before Cheryl's final illness, and also featured on the title page to the book (see fig. 2.2).⁴⁹

Don't Go Where I Can't Follow

For Cheryl



by Anders Nilsen

Drawn & Quarterly
2012

2.2 Anders Nilsen, *Don't Go Where I Can't Follow* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2012), title page.

At this point, Anders has become part of an anonymous, assembling crowd, instead of his previous posture as half a couple. Captured in the book, the previous images of the couple together linger in the wake of these substitute images; the drawings exist in conversation.

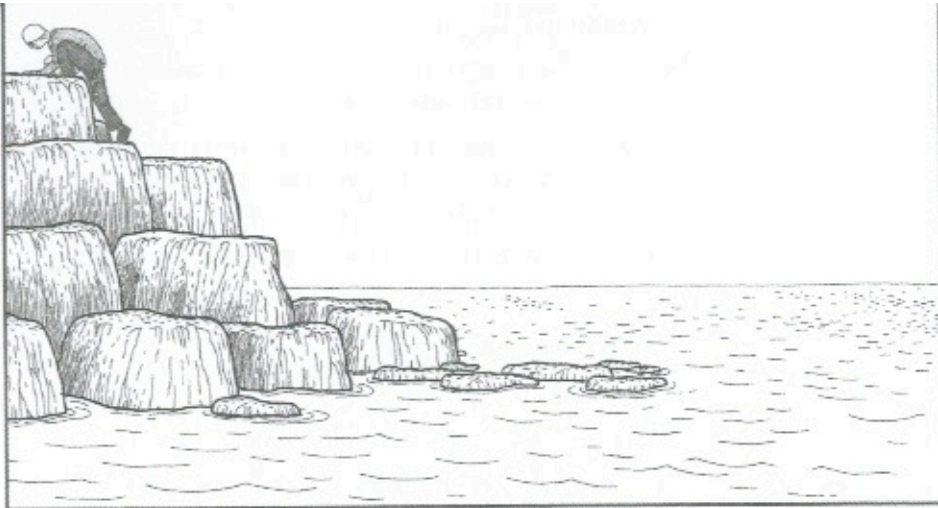
The words tacked between the early panels tell the story of his sense of isolation even in the moving, growing cluster, how distant he feels from everyone around him. As he writes between these opening images, he cannot, in fact, clearly remember who accompanied him on this walk—"I think Adam. Probably my

mom."⁵⁰ His desire is for separation, to remain, impossibly, as part of that earlier couple: "When we started out everyone was behind me, following. I stopped for a while and let them pass. You are in my arms." Despite this description and the desire it conveys, in the first seven images he is increasingly visually part of the crowd, only a hint of what is in his arms even evident. Eventually, in the eighth panel, the perspective shifts from a seeming invisible presence behind him and the crowd watching all of them to a view of him emerging separately. He can be seen climbing down the rocks alone, one arm grasping a box holding her ashes, another leaning on a boulder for support. The crowd is visible behind him, gathered at a distance, their bodies all drawn as outlined silhouettes in contrast to his more carefully composed and shadowed individual, scrambling body.

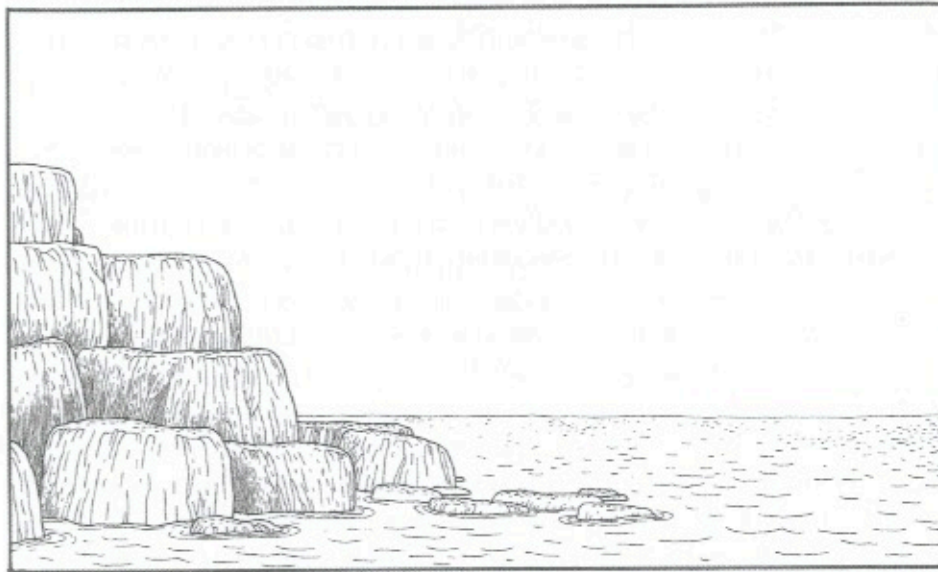
In "Grief as a Social Emotion," Nina R. Jakoby argues for "grief [to be] seen as a social emotion and interpersonal process because it emerges from relationships, attachments, expectations, and obligations."⁵¹ Jakoby helpfully points out that attending to such a sociological perspective can help us understand grief not as a pathological condition separating the individual from his community but as on a continuum with other kinds of ever-shifting social relationships and networks. In this way, we might better make sense of how individuals cope with loss by paying attention to "the structural conditions surrounding the life of the survivors,"⁵² their interactions with groups of people around them. Nilsen's graphic narrative at the end of this memorial book emphasizes how bereavement can make an individual feel separate and distant from his community, from all communities, in fact. But the narrative also presents that community as a potential anchor for the individual alone in his grief. Even in this ultimate form of solitude—he is pictured alone on the rocks on the top of the second to last page, an image of the empty landscape where her ashes were just scattered visible on the bottom half of the page—the narrative reveals that the presence of others still looms (see fig. 2.3).⁵³ New or revised forms of intimacy await.

"When the bag was empty I just wanted to sit and sob and collapse into the water with you and disappear," he writes on the same page, reflecting a desire to follow his beloved into death: "That feeling lasted many days. But I didn't collapse. I got up and went back onto the grass. Got hugs. Cried some more and walked back. Later Ella sang for you, Jim and Lea and Mike played some Elizabeth I songs. People said a lot of nice things."⁵⁴ With this final sequence, even while visually depicting a sense of being painfully alone, the narrator depicts others, too, surrounding him. His figure, though solitary on the rocks, approaches a community. Via an assembly of images and words, the comic merges a powerful sense of solitude with a possibility of meeting others in spaces where they are willing to wait.

As a form of address that readers of Nilsen's work can all bear witness to, they—we—also become part of this community of grievers. The final visual narrative, which encapsulates the structure of assembly that characterizes the book as a whole, extends the site of communal affiliation beyond those who knew Cheryl in life and honors the ways that the relationship memorialized in this book was



WHEN THE BAG WAS EMPTY I JUST WANTED TO SIT AND SOB AND COLLAPSE INTO THE WATER WITH YOU AND DISAPPEAR. THAT FEELING LASTED FOR MANY DAYS. BUT I DIDN'T COLLAPSE. I GOT UP AND WENT BACK UP ONTO THE GRASS. GOT HUGS. CRIED SOME MORE AND WALKED BACK. LATER ELLA SANG FOR YOU, JIM AND LEA AND MIKE PLAYED SOME ELIZABETH COTTEN SONGS. PEOPLE SAID A LOT OF NICE THINGS.



2.3 Anders Nilsen, *Don't Go Where I Can't Follow* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2012), 85.

always more than the sum of its parts, a conversation not limited to two people but always taking place between and among many others.

Conclusion

In Ann Jurecic's *Illness as Narrative*, a book published three years before the review of grief memoirs mentioned in the opening to this essay, she argues that memoirs about illness can only be fully understood by carefully considering how critics have thought about these texts in the past.⁵⁵ Utilizing French philosopher Paul Ricoeur's notion of "listening" as a form of staying open to what different narratives seek to tell us, Jurecic argues that critics need to find "interpretive approaches that enable them to assemble meaning in the face of life's fragility."⁵⁶ Later in her opening chapter, she invokes the word *assembly* once again, this time connecting her call for "listening" with Bruno Latour's 2004 invocation for new forms of critique in the face of what he then called "these most depressing times."⁵⁷ As he writes in the closing to his essay, "The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather."⁵⁸

If we "listen" closely to Nilsen's grief memoir, we might find in it such a meeting place, not just for or by critics but of readers, where different forms of searching and documenting, testifying and mourning, might come together. The work of grieving requires a recognition that we all, at some point, will take turns not only as griever but also as grieved ones. "It is essential to speak of death and the dead," writes Sandra M. Gilbert, "because if those who have died are still part of us even while they are part of death, then death is part of us too."⁵⁹ Reading Nilsen's work, we are reminded that such activities might engage us as much with our own processes of grieving, whether preliminary or ongoing, as with the singular, untranslatable grief of another.

Notes

1. Ann Jurecic, "No Protocol for Grief," *Lancet* 386, no. 9996 (2015): 848. Sandra M. Gilbert, in "The Way We Grieve Now," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 3, 2016, asks: "How and why . . . has [the grief memoir] become so popular among writers and so compelling—and controversial—to readers?" She speculates that the reason has to do with "widespread cultural confusion about how and where to mourn in an increasingly secular society." Marta Bladek, in "A Place None of Us Know Until We Reach It: Mapping Grief and Memory in Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*," *Biography* 37, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 935, additionally points out that "current demographic patterns of spousal

loss" might explain the boom of grief memoirs related to this type of loss. For a book-length study of such "spousal loss memoirs," see Jeffrey Berman, *Writing Widowhood: The Landscapes of Bereavement* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015).

2. Amy-Katerini Prodromou, *Navigating Loss in Women's Contemporary Memoir* (New York: Palgrave, 2015), 7. Prodromou does a thorough job of reviewing professional literature published on grief from the 1950s on and covering some of the "new wave theories" that have developed, not without contention, over the past thirty years or so. See chapter 1 of *Navigating Loss*, "Life Writing and the Literature

of Grief," 13–33. For another overview of existing models of grief, in this case from two clinical psychologists, see Fiona Maccallum and Richard A. Bryant, "A Cognitive Attachment Model of Prolonged Grief: Integrating Attachments, Memory, and Identity," *Clinical Psychology Review* 33, no. 6 (2013): 713–27. See also clinical psychologist and researcher Robert A. Neimeyer's 2001 edited collection, *Meaning Reconstruction and the Experience of Loss* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2001). In his introduction, "Meaning Reconstruction and Loss," Neimeyer calls for "a grief theory for the 21st century," an individualistic one that he describes as "founded on the postulate that meaning reconstruction in response to a loss is the central process in grieving" (4; emphasis original).

3. Prodromou, *Navigating Loss*, 8.

4. Jurecic, "No Protocol for Grief," 849. For a definition of the subgenre of grief memoirs, see Kathleen Fowler, "'So New, So New': Art and Heart in Women's Grief Memoirs," *Women's Studies* 36 (2007): 527. As she explains, "What distinguishes the grief memoir from other literary treatments of grief is that the death, the loss, the grieving is the defining reality—the heart of the text" (emphasis original).

5. Jurecic, "No Protocol for Grief," 849; emphasis added.

6. *Ibid.* As she explains, "The word essay, which stems from the French verb *essayer*, means an attempt, and the fundamental work of essay-ing is to experiment with ideas" (849).

7. *Ibid.* See also Michael I. Norton and Francesca Gino, "Rituals Alleviate Grieving for Loved Ones, Lovers, and Lotteries," *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 143, no. 1 (2014): 266. As they analogously argue, there are, broadly speaking, innumerable "rituals of mourning in the face of loss" across time and place, and these rituals are "so common" as to at times contradict one another across cultures.

8. Anders Nilsen, *Don't Go Where I Can't Follow* (Drawn & Quarterly, 2012). All references in this essay refer to the republished text. As Nilsen writes in an "Author's Note" on the back page, he had originally intended to self-publish a handful of copies just for family and friends, to distribute at Weaver's memorial. When he could not manage to put out enough copies on his own, Drawn & Quarterly stepped in and eventually the book found an even broader audience, leading to its second print run.

9. *Ibid.*, "Afterword," n.p.

10. "Assembly, n." OED Online. September 2019. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed-com.ezproxy.gc.cuny.edu/view/Entry/11795?redirectedFrom=assembly&My>

understanding of the term as, simply put, "a gathering of things together into unities" can also be traced to Thomas Nail. "What Is an Assemblage?" *SubStance* #142 46, no. 1 (2017): 22. Nail distinguishes "the English word 'assemblage,' [which] according to the Oxford English Dictionary, comes from the French word *assemblage* (a-sahn-blazh), not the French word *agencer*."

11. Nilsen published a second related book, *The End* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2013). This one takes up the question of grief in a memoir that is still "experimental" and hybrid in form but composed primarily of drawn images and text. In the interest of space, I do not take up the second memoir here, but more could be said about this notion of "assembly" in examining the texts in relation to each other.

12. From the PathoGraphics website: http://www.geisteswissenschaften.fu-berlin.de/friedrichschlegel/assoziierte_projekte/Pathographics/sl_2_ABOUT/index.html.

13. Kay Redfield Jamison, *Nothing Was the Same* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 5.

14. Bladec, "A Place None of Us Know," 937.

15. Fowler, "'So New, So New,'" 528. As she writes, "one central theme regularly recurs in the grief memoir—the sense of finding oneself navigating uncharted territory."

16. Joseph Luzzi, *In a Dark Wood* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2015), 45.

17. Though all grief memoirs track individual experiences with countless differences, an important distinction to keep in mind in cataloguing such memoirs, when such a taxonomy is useful, is that of death following long or protracted illness and sudden, unexpected death, within days, hours, or even minutes of an initial life-ending catastrophe.

18. The discrepant capitalization is true to the text. Also of note, two additional sections tacked on at the very end of the book without title pages are "Afterword" and "Author's Note," the latter of which is dated July 2012.

19. Nilsen, "Afterword," *Don't Go Where I Can't Follow*, n.p.

20. *Ibid.*, 6.

21. *Ibid.*, 89.

22. See Jessica Hopper, "Grief Made Graphic," *Chicago Reader*, September 6, 2007. <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/grief-made-graphic/Content?oid=925842>. Hopper describes a visit to Nilsen's apartment around that time, when she saw one of Weaver's photos hanging in his living room. "Weaver was an artist, and when she lived here, shooting the park through the seasons was an ongoing project," Hopper explains. The two met in 1999 at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where Nilsen had

come to study painting, though he soon left to work on comics full time. Weaver was a graduate student there, working on "experimental film and video."

23. Throughout this essay, I refer to Weaver by her first name only, "Cheryl," and Nilsen by his first name only, "Anders," when I am pointing to intimate moments from within the text, in order to better match the tones of the sections of the book with which I engage.

24. Nilsen, *Don't Go Where I Can't Follow*, 38–41.

25. *Ibid.*, 38.

26. *Ibid.*, 58.

27. Joyce Carol Oates, *A Widow's Story* (New York: Ecco, 2011), 65.

28. *Ibid.*, 81.

29. Berman, *Writing Widowhood*, 2–3.

30. Much of the professional literature echoes this point. See Neimeyer, "Introduction," 4. As he points out, a "major loss" has "implications . . . for the individual's sense of identity, often necessitating deep revisions in his or her self-definition." See also Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), for more on a similar function of writing for illness memoirists.

31. Nilsen, *Don't Go Where I Can't Follow*, 31–35.

32. *Ibid.*, 33. The book was started during Weaver's life, as Nilsen makes clear in his "Afterword," so it is not certain whether this "retrospective" narration was composed after she was diagnosed but still alive or after her death. As he explains, "I'd intended, before the seriousness of Cheryl's illness was clear, to do a small book with some of this material, for friends and family."

33. *Ibid.*, "Afterword," n.p.

34. See Kylie Cardell's study, *Dear World: Contemporary Uses of the Diary* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 5. There she lays out, and derides, the various "myths" surrounding diary as a mode, exposing, for example, the false assumptions that all diaries provide "raw," "unself-conscious," and "unmediated" displays of the thoughts and feelings of individuals who write them. For foundational critical readings of the myths surrounding photographs, and particularly images of people, see Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (London: Picador, 2001) and Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

35. John Ashbery, "This Room," <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/56431/this-room-56d238eb55158>.

36. Kathryn J. Norlock, "Real (and) Imaginal Relationships with the Dead," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 51, no. 2 (2017): 341–56.

37. *Ibid.*, 342.

38. Nilsen, *Don't Go Where I Can't Follow*, 10–30.

39. *Ibid.*, 30.

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*, "Afterword," n.p.

42. *Ibid.*, 58.

43. *Ibid.*, 50.

44. *Ibid.*, 68.

45. *Ibid.*, 71.

46. Many professionals and caretakers who have experiences of being in the room with people who are dying believe that hearing is the last sense to function, though this has not been definitively proven. See, for instance, <https://www.dyingmatters.org/page/being-someone-when-they-die>.

47. See Roz Chast, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 211–22, for another visual memoirist who does this. In the final chapter of her memoir about her parents' lives and deaths, she includes illustrations of her mother in the final months of life.

48. Nilsen, *Don't Go Where I Can't Follow*, 72. There is one additional image of her toward the end of the chapter: a cartoonish version of her suspended, as though in space, with mechanisms and tubes connected to her and carefully labeled. This image could be said to be a drawing of her neither alive nor dead but somehow in between (74).

49. *Ibid.*, 64. The figure included here is from the title page.

50. *Ibid.*, "The Lake," n.p.

51. Nina R. Jakoby, "Grief as a Social Emotion," *Death Studies* 35 (2012): 680.

52. *Ibid.*, 695.

53. *Ibid.*, "The Lake," n.p.

54. *Ibid.*

55. Jurecic, *Illness as Narrative* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), 2.

56. *Ibid.*, 4. See also Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

57. Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 226.

58. *Ibid.*, 246.

59. Sandra M. Gilbert, *Death's Door* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 16.

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