WHO WILL SPEAK FOR AMERICA?

SAMIRA AHMED • CHARLIE JANE ANDERS • CYNTHIA ARRIEU-KING • CYNTHIA ATKINS • HERMAN BEAVERS • JERICHO BROWN • ADRIENNE CELT • RENE DENFELD • LINH DINH • VERONICA SCOTT ESPOSITO • SARAH ROSE ETTER • MELISSA FEBOS • LIANA FINCK • GANZEER • NANCY HIGHTOWER • BASSEY IKPI • MOHJA KAHF • KEN KALFUS • JOY LADIN • ANA-MAURINE LARA • CARMEN MARIA MACHADO • JUAN MARTINEZ • AIREA D. MATTHEWS • DIANE MCKINNEY-WHETSTONE • LYNN MELNICK • SAM J. MILLER • LIZ MOORE • EILEEN MYLES • SANDRA NEWMAN • ALICE NOTLEY • CYNTHIA DEWI OKA • TAHNEER OKSMAN • MALKA OLDER • CRAIG SANTOS PEREZ • MARC ANTHONY RICHARDSON • CARLOS JOSÉ PÉREZ SÁMANO • JEFFREY STOCKBRIDGE • MADELEINE THIEN • EDWIN TORRES • KC TROMMER • ADAM VINES • FRAN WILDE

Edited by Stephanie Feldman *and* Nathaniel Popkin

TEMPLE UNIVERSITY PRESS *Philadelphia • Rome • Tokyo*

hills, power plant churning smoke, shuttered car dealerships, ribs of dogs lying exposed in alleys, drugged corpses of my high school friends.

"I'll have another," he says, pointing to his empty soda.

"Why did you do it?" I ask.

"Need to drain the swamp."

"A man tried to grab me in the street this week. He tried to grab me between the legs. There are protests every day."

"Nothing like that happening out here. We're all happy. You're overreacting. We spent eight years your way, and look where it got us."

The greased air of the restaurant clogs my nostrils. More french fries are delivered to the table.

"Another car dealership shut down, you know," my father says.

I picture the cars, shimmering in the sun and then crushed into piles of wrenched metal. I slide a french fry into my mouth. Through the window, beyond the green hills, the power plant churns up more perfect white smoke.

IV

My father drives to the city in a big, white car.

"Nice boat," I say and drop a kiss to his cheek.

We walk through my neighborhood in the sunlight, beneath the green trees. We find a restaurant with a table outside and order plates of eggs.

"You know what I hate about the city?" he asks.

"What?" I ask.

"Everything! The crowds, the traffic, it's all trash everywhere."

I picture his life at home: the same restaurant every Friday, the same television show every Saturday, the same salted pretzels for a snack, on the couch, in the living room. I picture the gate around the neighborhood of identical houses where I grew up.

"Aren't you worried about crime?" he asks. "Something bad is going to happen to you one of these days. I worry about you all the time."

I shake my head. I know the numbers. I know what's on the decline.

"It depends what kind of crime you mean," I say, picturing the face of the man who reached for my crotch, in the street, in broad daylight, in my city.

SEASONS OF GRIEF

Tahneer Oksman

That fall was my season of studying other people's grief.

In late 2016, I was working on a book about absence and mourning, reading all I could about what it means to lose someone close—a parent, a spouse, a child. How the experience can shatter your sense of self and place in the world. How grief can turn you into a stranger to yourself and others.

"I feel as if I'm missing something visible—an arm, a leg," writes Joyce Carol Oates in *A Widow's Story*, her record of the year or so after she suddenly lost her husband, the author and editor Raymond J. Smith. "Or that part of my face has been smudged and distorted as in a nightmare painting by Francis Bacon."[1]

The grieving, of course, are always among us, but it takes a special kind of sight to notice that they are there. In other words, you have to seek them out.

"People who have recently lost someone have a certain look," observes Joan Didion, another famous writer recording her husband's death in her now canonical *The Year of Magical Thinking*. "It is the look of someone who walks from the ophthalmologist's office into the bright daylight with dilated eyes, or of someone who wears glasses and is suddenly made to take them off."[2]

Recognizing the (almost) invisible pain of those walking among us can be a way of somehow sharing in what seems unshareable, of bringing community into what feels indelibly solitary. That's what I was focused on that fall as I trudged every weekday morning to the same coffee shop around the corner, lugging my stack of grief memoirs, taking care not to spill tea on my slowly growing pile of notes.

• • •

Around that time, the elder of my two children was turning five, and like many kids his age, he'd recently developed a fascination with and curiosity about death. My philosophy was to be as open and honest as possible without fueling any fires. "Answer questions directly, but don't dwell," was the advice my older sister, a mother of three, had given me a few years earlier, speaking of how to respond to those tricky questions that children inevitably ask as they learn about the world.

One of my friends was in the process of losing her mother to cancer, and she was helping her children anticipate that loss by sharing books on

the subject. My child had gotten hold of one of these on a play date—the story of a boy whose goldfish dies—and since then he hadn't been able to stop talking about it.

"I'm dead now," he would sometimes say to me as we played games together, my invisible sword thrusting into his body, which would, in response, fall to the ground. "And now I'm not dead anymore," he would add a few seconds later, pulling himself up.

"Is *bubbeh* going to die?" he'd ask, referring to his ninety-something-year-old great-grandmother, whom we had at some point described as "very old" in an effort to explain why he had to be gentle around her, why he couldn't just jump into her lap as he wanted to. "Are *you* very old?"

I remember a family member, having overheard one of our many conversations on death, looking rattled. "Why are you talking to him about this?" she asked. "You're passing along your own personal obsession."

But the questions, the games, the curiosities had come from him. I was just responding to his queries, helping him work out what he was already so carefully churning in his mind.

• • •

Why would anyone voluntarily—even enthusiastically—submerge herself in death? "Early in my life, before anyone close to me had died," writes Edwidge Danticat in her recent meditation *The Art of Death*, "I was so afraid of death that I wanted to desensitize myself to it."[3] That, too, in the fall of 2016, was basically my line, though I would not have used the word *desensitize. I want to plunge into what scares me the most*, is what I might have said. *I want to be more aware of it, that other side of life.*

In many ways, what I wanted was to learn how to better see the grieving who are always among us, the grieving we will all, in one way or other, someday become.

Danticat continues, "Now that my father and mother and many other people I love have died, I want to both better understand death and offload my fear of it, and I believe reading and writing can help."[4]

I'm not sure that reading and writing about death has relieved me of my fears, but I do know that it makes me feel closer to those who have lost, those who are alone in their grief. It helps me begin to acknowledge their pain and suffering; in that way, it brings us nearer one another.

• • •

Reading about death so much of the time, I needed distractions. Dressing my kids in the morning and taking them together to drop the older one off at kindergarten, the younger one with a sitter; clearing away breakfast dishes; listening to podcasts on long walks through Prospect Park; thinking and talking with neighbors about the coming election. These were all suitable diversions, and they did the work of pulling me out of those endless, painful depictions of raw individual melancholy and loss. They returned me to the world.

In many ways, before Election Day, it was a season, too, of hopefulness, of a confidence often bordering on arrogance. Those talking heads on the radio and on TV and my own extensive but determinate social media circle: all were daily waxing on and on about how inevitable was Hillary's win. Even if not everyone was enthusiastic about it, even if many voiced reservations and regrets, it seemed like destiny, if only because the alternative felt so impossible.

Some days, when I had time to reflect, I could picture my childhood self marveling at a woman running the White House. I imagined my sons taking for granted that a woman could be—was—in charge of such an office. This had been something of a dreamlike hypothetical for me growing up, as for so many other little girls. Not that I would ever be president but that some woman could be.

"Of course girls can do anything boys can," my father had said to me often when I was young, pointing to Sandra Day O'Connor and eventually Ruth Bader Ginsburg as examples. He must have known that that was not really true, certainly not yet, but nevertheless he wanted to instill a confidence in me, that as a woman I would not feel bound by what I could not see, by what had or had not come before me.

Imagine a smart and competent woman perpetually in the public eye, making decisions, making mistakes, being put upon but enduring nonetheless. The thought was a comforting, if vague, abstraction—a diversion from the raw and individual stories of pain and grief I found myself marking up, day after day.

• • •

Every four years, a presidential election prompts so many publicized debates on civic and communal life that many Americans can't help but reflect on previous ones. But I have no memory of Obama's reelection in 2012. By November, my son was about to turn one after the longest year of my life. He was not, as I had quickly learned after a particularly long and painful labor, going to be one of those babies that parents brag about, the one who sleeps through the night at four weeks, who takes right away to sleep training or whatever tricks that miracle-working parent has in store.

I remember searching the Internet at some point in that first year to find out whether it was normal for my baby to cry throughout most of

the day. My fears and concerns—Why won't he nap? Why does he always look so uncomfortable? Why can't he just get back to sleep?—intensified in the haze of sleeplessness and the suspicion I had that I was not going through a typical new mother experience. It would take years, a second baby even, to figure out how to confront my fears head-on, to recognize, after hearing so many other people's stories, that there is no such thing as a typical experience of parenthood, to learn how to share in the burden and confusion and not just in the elation and everyday small joys. Eventually, I became grateful for having a baby, later a young child, who knows how to ask for what he needs and who, if I can just stand to look, to listen, will help me help him.

"Why do people die, Mom?"

"I don't really have an answer. I just know that everyone, every living thing, dies at some point."

"Will I die?"

"Yes, but I hope not for a long time."

"Will you die?"

"Yes, but I also hope not for a long time."

"Will you die first?"

"I hope so."

. . .

There's another reason why that 2012 election, and indeed so much of what transpired back then, is such a blur. I was desperately attempting to finish graduate school and find a new job and figure out how to pay all the bills that were piling up in the wake of this new life. But everything came to a sudden halt that summer, when my son was only seven months old and we received a phone call telling us that a dear friend's young son, Finn, had died.

I was holding my baby when I got the news, and I remember my husband, Jon, taking him from my arms and putting him down, maybe in his playpen, maybe in his crib. I don't remember his crying, though, or mine, or Jon's; nor do I remember what we did with the baby when we went to the funeral—left him with the babysitter, perhaps. That summer, so hazy now in my mind, my life, our lives, felt like they had incontrovertibly split in two. Looking back, it still feels that way. Here was a loss I could not absorb; how does life go on in the wake of such tragedy?

I turned to books on grief and death for the first time, hoping to make sense of the impossible. What I have since learned was that nothing about that loss would ever make sense. Time would not heal.

But thinking back on Finn in life, talking about him with Jon and my sons, now makes me smile. I can still hear him singing along to Whitney Houston the last time we visited and can still picture him carefully holding our new baby on his lap some months earlier, his grin huge. If I focus hard enough, I can remember the sound of his little kid voice calling out to his greatest love, the center of his world, "Mom. Mo-om."

Grief emerges because of love, because of life. Remembering Finn, in the company of those I love, produces joy.

. . .

On November 8, 2016, my husband and I eagerly rushed to the polls before school and work, with both kids in tow. We brought along a stroller, though our almost-two-year-old tried to pace alongside us for at least some of the ten-minute walk. The plot that would end with this Election Day denouement had been building; roles were clearly established. "Donald Trump is a bully, right?" our almost-five-year-old would often ask, and we would nod our assent. What else could we do but confirm this unnuanced but palpably accurate narrative he had carried with him home from school one day, along with his new art projects and emptied-out lunchbox? "We don't like him, right?"

Looking back, trying to reconstruct what feels, in retrospect, like an untraceable chain of events, I find that I took two photographs of our boys on that day: in one, their bodies are splayed across a gym floor, our voting site in Brooklyn. They look carefree, arms spread out, smiles wide. There are a couple of adult legs visible beside them, a line of people patiently waiting to vote. There are no traces of Jon's or my discomfort; our fears that this family excursion would end in tears, or tantrums, or worse, are not apparent in this snapshot. Because for our boys, of course, this was just another fun family excursion, albeit a rare opportunity to prance and play in the throes of a crowd, of people both familiar and strange.

In the second photograph, the kids are standing with their father, the younger one cradled in Jon's arms, a mischievous smile on his face, the older one standing and looking off to the side, his mouth slightly parted like he is mid-sentence. Jon is wearing an "I voted" sticker, even though he is also still holding a huge as-yet-unfilled ballot. My older one has an "I voted" sticker plastered on one of his cheeks. As I look at these photographs now, searching them for clues, the stickers look overly optimistic, boastful even. We should not have counted our chickens. We should have resisted a preemptive celebration, waited patiently for the time to come.

Returning home from the polls that day, we ran into neighbors and friends. The mood was light, our expectations already fixed. Soon after, we all went our separate ways; I returned alone to the cafe to dig into one of my memoirs of grief.

• • •

When I walked into my son's public-school kindergarten classroom the next morning, everyone looked glum. The teachers had set up plastic cups to fill with apple juice and spread cookies and treats across a table in honor of the expected celebration. In true kindergarten fashion—kids had to learn to be good sports, after all, and anyway a few parents in the class, it was rumored, were Trump supporters—this would remain a celebration. We sipped from our champagne glasses and made small talk. Each went her own way. Life, after all, had to go on.

In the weeks following, my older son woke up at night more often than usual, sometimes crying out from his bed to be soothed. It was something of a return to an earlier time, of more sleepless nights. I was adamant about not discussing the specifics of the election and its aftermath with him. We would go to a protest as a family, we would explain the basics of what was happening to neighbors and friends, but he had enough four-year-old worries to manage. Nonetheless, he absorbed our vibe, the adults talking in hushed voices about increased, sudden visits from ICE, our Muslim neighbors worrying that they could be deported.

In the wake of this unexpected result, my husband and I, like many others, searched for community. I found it in visiting with and talking to students and colleagues; he called his friends and family, debating what had gone wrong, what we could have done better. One night I received an e-mail from our local synagogue, inviting us to a postelection town hall, a time to mourn together. I was working, but my husband took the kids. Since both of our childhoods, our visits to synagogue had been relegated to using the swimming pool or, for him, playing in weekly basketball games at the gym. But in the weeks and months when we were adjusting to this new surreality, with Swastikas now daily appearing on synagogues and Jewish centers all over the country, we were willing to try new things, to reach out in alternative ways to the communities surrounding us. To find different ways of engaging.

• • •

Once the initial shock began to fade, some weeks after the election, I found that returning to my work, of all things, had become its own distraction. I started to parse the similarities and differences between the worn and angry faces of friends and neighbors, colleagues and students, and the haunting voices of the literature that I was reading. What's the connection between individual experiences of grief and communal ones? Are there ways to better see and be seen in our moments of loss, to somehow relieve one another, and accept relief, from the burdens of solitary grief?

The loss of an election, of a hope for a world where people are more willing to be held accountable for each other's pain and losses, starts off as a theoretical. Pretty soon, for so many, that initial abstraction turns into something very real: an experience confirming the knowledge that your body—and the bodies of people you care about—is not safe, that you are all alone in your own vulnerabilities. That every person's inevitable interdependence on others is something to be ashamed of, something to hide or disguise.

The loss of a loved one is, of course, anything but theoretical. It may take time, maybe even a lifetime, to come to terms with a death, but that loss is there in every minute of every day, in the spaces, now empty, of a shared home, in photographs, objects, and letters marking a history. There was a body, a look, a voice, a smile; now, only traces.

Still, there are points of convergence; while we were collectively losing an election, or while it was stolen through voter suppression and Russian interference, there were individuals starting, or continuing, to fade away, saying good-bye to one another in private, whispering and crying in hospital corridors and hospice beds. One loss does not preclude or slow down another.

Perhaps what a collective loss offers us is the potential, finally, to see each other across various modes and experiences of grief. If only briefly, in those weeks following the election, all of us who felt a loss were blinking through the intensity of a new, unanticipated day, our eyes unprotected, our pain and vulnerability plainly visible. That sudden transformation, that defeat, revealed to so many of us how quickly anyone can switch over into the grieving or the grieved.

It offers us, too, a chance to join forces, to act for each other as we concede that all of us are ultimately susceptible, however many layers of protection seem to divide us. How we are all, despite our varying everyday realities, at risk and reliant on one another. But we are also capable of transforming that dependence, that vulnerability, into a potent and unifying force, a way of moving forward, together, in the face of whatever comes next.

• • •

A month or so after the election, sometime in early December, I took my older son on some weekend excursion in Brooklyn. We chatted idly along the walk, as we usually do. Suddenly I found myself pulling on his arm,

getting him out of the way so he would not step on a dead bird lying on the sidewalk.

We walked along in silence for a few minutes, his steps as lithe and restless as usual, until he finally said, "That was a dead bird."

"Yes, it was."

"That bird's not going to get up again, is it?"

I looked at him; something had shifted in the months since his obsession with death had peaked. Something, I realized, had finally sunk in.

"No, it's not."

We continued on for a few minutes, holding hands as we crossed busy streets, looking with amusement at the daily goings-on unraveling before us. Just as we walked onto our street, he paused again, suddenly serious.

"I feel sad about that bird," he said. "The bird who died."

I looked at his newly five-year-old face, a face I had seen grow and change so quickly. Sometimes, as now, his easy knowing, his ability to grasp the world, astonished me.

"I feel sad about that bird, too," I replied. And we charged home, having, for now, concluded our exchange.

Notes

1. Joyce Carol Oates, *A Widow's Story: A Memoir* (New York: Ecco, 2012), 243.
2. Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (New York: Vintage, 2007), 74–75.
3. Edwidge Danticat, *The Art of Death* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2017), 7.
4. Ibid.

WHEN WE SEE

KC Trommer

What we see, we see / and seeing is changing.
—Adrienne Rich, "Planetarium"

What is it to say I know you, you raised me, a man like you raised me?
What does it matter that, because a man like you

raised me, I found other men like you and papered my life
with them? I know you. I have rid myself of you again and again.

What is it to watch you and all your tricks
but to not be able to warn the rest of them off of you?

What does it mean to listen, what does the sound of you beating inside our skulls mean, the sound of you so hard in us

that we stop being able to think of ourselves,
of what and who we love, with anything but fear?

Yes, I know you, I knew you, you are everything I have built myself
and my life away from, and here you are all over the radio, the television,

your name in everyone's mouth, the sound of a billion mouths forming your name, and even this I know because you are more known to me

than I am to myself, won't be enough for you—there is no enough.
What of it? This is the hope I'm tending to: that once we all have come to see

what it is you are and how you do what you do, that seeing it will be enough to end you. That seeing it will bring a great silence to you and men

like you. Silence—and the great space that your silence will make for the rest of us. That we will all see that you are not the story.

We are. We always were.