

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY  
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

THE ART AND THEORY OF GRIEF

JESSICA BRENN  
SUMMER 2013

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for a baccalaureate degree  
in English  
with honors in English

Reviewed and approved\* by the following:

Christopher Castiglia  
Liberal Arts Research Professor of English  
Thesis Supervisor

Lisa Sternlieb  
Associate Professor of English  
Honors Adviser

\* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.

## ABSTRACT

People grieving the death of a loved one are often confronted with sentimentality—in the form of sympathy cards, the scripted language of wakes and funerals, and generalized platitudes. This paper will examine the ways poetry can challenge sentimentality by complicating the relationship between love and loss and bringing a more truthful experience to the forefront. By examining the poetry of Rebecca Lindenberg and Mark Doty, this paper will re-imagine a modern grief that follows a non-linear arc and that is lived through.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Acknowledgements.....iii

Introduction..... 1

Chapter 1 Non-Linear Narratives.....5

Chapter 2 Living with Grief.....23

Conclusion .....41

**BIBLIOGRAPHY** .....43

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the amazing faculty members who have helped me along the way, particularly Chris Castiglia for his guidance in our honors seminar and as my thesis supervisor. He encouraged me to follow my interests and to take on challenges. I would also like to thank the creative writing staff, particularly Sheila Squillante and Julia Kasdorf, for sharing poetry, inspiration, and conversation with me. Thank you to my honors adviser, Lisa Sternlieb, for not only supporting my plan to graduate early but for helping me as much as possible in navigating the entire process of suddenly finding myself in my senior year last September.

I would also like to thank my family, for their unwavering belief and encouragement. Many thanks to Dan Losowyj and Julianne McCobin, as well, for their endless support and for not minding too much when I thought out loud.

## Introduction

*Woke up early this morning and from my bed  
looked far across the Strait to see  
a small boat moving through the choppy water,  
a single running light on. Remembered  
my friend who used to shout  
his dead wife's name from the hilltops  
around Perugia. Who set a plate  
for her at his simple table long after  
she was gone. And opened the windows  
so she could have fresh air. Such display  
I found embarrassing. So did his other  
friends. I couldn't see it.  
Not until this morning.  
- "Grief," Raymond Carver*

Why do we read poetry of grief and mourning? What motivates us to turn the pages of a poet's expression of memory, pain, love, and loss that seems so distant, incomprehensible, or personal? If the beauty or reward of poetry is in recreating an experience through details, it stands to reason that readers would not enjoy, in any sense of the word, the writings of a stranger about the death of another stranger.

But yet, we do, if evidenced merely by the fact that books and anthologies of poetry in response to death continue to be published and bought. "Death is the great equalizer" that eventually comes for us all, but yet no death seems common to those who feel its aftershocks. Sentimentality might argue that death is common, in order to interrupt the process of grief—which both the grieving person and the people around him or her would want to act on because it is painful and potentially disruptive to society (for

example, through lost days of work or “destructive” behaviors that may result). Sentimentality operates through clichés, like “the circle of life,” euphemisms, like “passed away,” and other forms of denial. From sympathy cards to the scripted language of a wake or funeral, sentimentality smoothes over the surface while avoiding what lies beneath.

I hope to show through an examination of Rebecca Lindenberg’s *Love, An Index* (2012) and Mark Doty’s *My Alexandria* (1992), *Atlantis* (1995), and *Sweet Machine* (1998) what grief-driven poetry has to offer its reader and, more generally, our society. Their poetry challenges sentimentality by embracing the queer elements of grief. In Chapter One, I will show how the use of non-linear narratives in each author’s works question the relationship between love and loss in a seldom seen way. In Chapter Two, I will present the techniques and imagery that the poets use to work out what their relationship will be with grief, how they memorialize their loved one, and how they will survive loss.

What happens when one can speak, or write, freely—without shame or embarrassment or anything else holding one back? In her poem, “Losing Language: A Phrasebook,” Lindenberg lines up phrases that people say to the grieving and phrases that the grieving say back with what they really mean. The end of the poem repeats the phrase “Thank you” four times, from the mourning speaker’s point of view, giving the reader a glimpse of what the speaker might say if she felt that she could:

Thank you:                    *For the casserole, the box of wine, for  
the walk—I needed to feel the sun on  
my hands.*

Thank you:           *For cleaning the cat box, for watching  
me nap. For the money.*

Thank you:           *When I didn't know where to put my  
attention, for your conversation,  
thank you.*

Thank you:           *For not leaving me alone (51-9).*

This poem, as well as others in *Love, An Index*, brings some truth to the surface of the situation. Lindenberg writes the words that can be too hard to say. Many of her poems fit editor Kevin Young's description of the "best poems," poems which "evinced their origins in the need to speak, or to write; to render a complex fate simply; to render chaos as chaos; or to examine the unseen complexities of seemingly simple, even everyday, experience" (xv). With her first collection of poetry and incredible skill, Lindenberg proves herself capable of the best poems, despite the worst circumstances.

In his memoir, *Dog Years*, Doty speculates why so many people turn to sentimentality: "The public revelation of grief is unseemly, an embarrassment of self-involvement. Or at least that's how it seems on the surface. The truth is probably that we want grief to remain invisible because we can't do anything about it, and because it invariably reminds us of the losses we'll all suffer someday, the ineluctable approach of sorrow" (9). In prose and in poetry, Doty grapples with grief over his deceased partner, pets, and friends, each death felt painfully and fully in its own right. His keen sense of the relationship between love and loss backlights all his writing, resulting in beautiful and moving work that reaches across the lonely expanses of grief to bring people back in contact with the world once more. Like Young and Lindenberg, Doty values poetry that

defamiliarizes what is “normal”: “In this American moment, it’s fundamentally queer to be a poet, queer to be interested in what can’t be packaged or sold in the marketplace, queer to enjoy the fundamentally useless, contemplative pleasure of poetry. Queer means that which is not business as usual, not solid identities founded on firm ground, but a world in question” (*The Art of Description* 115). The assumptions and traditions around death and grief have been normalized, yet it has been a topic greatly overlooked in literature studies and critical theory. But the contemporary poetry of Lindenberg and Doty has created an opportunity to look at the world with a new lens.

In the spirit of William Carlos Williams, as he writes in “Tract” of how to carry out a funeral, “No wreathes please — / especially no hot house flowers. / Some common memento is better, / something he prized and is known by” (35-8). What might we find when we cast aside the sentimental coverings and instead seek details and personal truth? The speaker of “Tract” urges the townspeople, “sit openly — / to the weather as to grief. / Or do you think you can shut grief in? / What — from us?” (62-5). As we will see in Chapter Two, grief is not something that can ever be completely left in the past. And, as the speaker points out, though we all face grief in differing circumstances and from different perspectives, why do we hide our experience from others? “Though dedicated to the dead, in a crucial way elegies are written for the living,” Kevin Young states in his introduction to *The Art of Losing* (xviii). Grief work in poetry is important, for writers and readers, for those of us still here, to renew contact with a sort of truth obscured by sentimentality and to question what is taken to be stable, certain, or distinctly divided.



## Chapter 1

### Non-Linear Narratives

Rebecca Lindenberg's story can be placed along a timeline, as one would expect. She started what would become *Love, An Index* in 2006 while living with her partner, fellow poet Craig Arnold, and his son, Robin, in Rome (McSweeney's par. 3). "It was a book about our unconventional little family, about love and its many complications," Lindenberg said in an interview with McSweeney's editors Dominic Luxford and Jesse Nathan. However, the family faced unexpected tragedy when, in April 2009, Arnold did not return to the inn that he was staying at after going on a solo hike at a volcano in Japan (Orr par. 1). After an extensive search, Arnold was found dead.

"At that stage," Lindenberg explained, "as you can imagine, the direction of the book changed dramatically, as did my feeling of urgency about it" (McSweeney's par. 4). In a stroke of good timing, Lindenberg received a "residential fellowship at the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, beginning in the fall of 2009," which allowed her to complete most of the book (McSweeney's par. 4). After further funding through a grant from the National Endowments for the Arts, *Love, An Index* was published as the debut volume in McSweeney's Poetry Series in March 2012.

While traditional modes of storytelling typically present events in chronological order, such as in novels, memoirs, and movies, a queer reading of *Love, An Index* highlights the non-linear narrative order to the poems. In this chapter, I will examine the ways in which the experience of Lindenberg's relationship with Arnold is presented—

within the arrangement of the collection and within individual poems—and the effects of these authorial choices. By expressing her grief in a non-traditional way, Lindenberg challenges sentimentality and common notions of death and grieving.

To begin with the arrangement of the collection, the progression of the poems within the volume does not parallel the “real life” timeline of Lindenberg’s relationship and the development of *Love, An Index* discussed above. The romantic or personal story is not given in a straightforward manner; while poetry does not necessarily owe its reader some kind of story, poets often build characters, images, and themes in a patterned order within a published collection. The pattern is usually chronological. A reader of culture sees this everywhere—in movies, news stories, television shows, novels, and more. To choose not to use a chronological order, or in essence to obscure cause-effect relationships, particular events, or the nature of personal relationships, can lead to disorientation or a plethora of questions in the mind of the reader.

Furthermore, with particular concern to the subject at hand, one could expect that a story about the death of a loved one would be especially straightforward. There is a time before the death, then the death, and then a time after the death. It seems as if there are lines drawn in the sand dividing these periods, lines to be crossed sequentially, moving forward from one to the next. This concept functions similarly to the “five stages of grief” made famous by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her book, *On Death and Dying*. Though Kübler-Ross writes that the stages—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—“are not stops on some linear timeline in grief” or that “[n]ot everyone goes through all of them or in a prescribed order,” the stages are often not understood in this way (par. 2). In popular culture, people are usually thought to be progressing from one to

the next in order, an idea most likely encouraged by calling the range of emotions “stages.” By challenging traditional chronological modes of storytelling and expression through the arrangement of *Love, An Index*, Lindenberg questions these separate “stages” of grief. Further breaking down distinctions, her poetry also raises the question, Is the love poem so far from an elegy?

The collection begins with the poem “What Rings But Can’t Be Answered,” which carries the tone of urgency Lindenberg said she was struck with after Arnold’s disappearance. Ambiguity and fragmentation dominate the poem; apt to the discussion of narrative structure is that “What Rings But Can’t Be Answered” gives no indication of the full story behind *Love, An Index*. It creates an uncertainty, in lines like “Where do we go from here?”, and lets the reader wait by the phone with the speaker in lines like “I’m a balloon, / each minute you don’t call is a breath / you blow into me” (5, 6-8). The final line, “And when that phone does ring—”, invites readers to turn the page, where they find the next poem rather than a completion of the thought (19). Through these techniques, Lindenberg introduces the reader to the feeling of anticipation and anxiety, without calling in details that one might think are needed, such as who should be calling the speaker or where that person is.

Offering a little more certainty are three poems in the collection that are dated between 2005-06 and describe moments that occurred while the family lived in Italy and traveled in Greece, yet through their placement in the collection challenge the traditional modes of storytelling. “Which, If I Never Thought to Mention It Before, I Now Feel Compelled to Address” appears fourth in the collection, “Greek Easter” appears thirteenth, and “An Appetite for Rain” appears fourteenth. Though all three appear in the

first half, their placement bucks a before-and-after chronology that one might expect in a collection based around the death of a loved one. In an interview for *CALYX* Journal, Lindenberg said, “I didn’t feel comfortable with the way narrative suggests causes-and-effects that might or might not function that way, nor did I feel comfortable with the way narrative inevitably suggests hierarchies of information and incident—that some experiences or activities must be more important than others” (Haug 26). Reordering the poems shifts the focus away from the narrative arc to the subject and sensations of each poem, as seen with “What Rings But Can’t Be Answered.” Since the reader is not given the connections that are implicit in a chronologically ordered collection, the reader is forced to make her own connections that deepen the meaning.

These dated poems, especially “Which, If I Never Thought to Mention It Before, I Now Feel Compelled to Address,” raise an intriguing question—how far from love is loss? Other writers have questioned how distinct these two things are, as we will see in our discussion of Mark Doty’s poetry. In Jeanette Winterson’s novel, *Written on the Body*, the narrator asks, “Why is the measure of love loss?” (9). In “Which, If I Never Thought to Mention It Before,” the reader is offered a glimpse of Lindenberg’s original project, in which she set out to write “about love and its many complications” (McSweeney’s). The location and year inscribed at the end of these three poems marks them, like the hazy mirage effect of a flashback on a television show. Yet, its inclusion in *Love, An Index*’s final state and its juxtaposition with poems that come after Arnold’s death blur the line between love poem and elegy. Our culture often emphasizes love without end, through things like the symbolism and marketing of diamonds (“diamonds

are forever”) and the symbolism and ceremony of marriage. In contradiction to this, grief poetry shows love and loss as two sides of the same coin.

Amidst words of love and praise for her “tall man,” the speaker of “Which, If I Never Thought to Mention It Before” admits to the rough edges of the relationship, an aspect that people rarely wish to mention after the other’s death (1). This is exemplified in the poem “On the Death of a Colleague,” by Stephen Dunn, in which a student stands up to say that the teacher who died was a drunk, though she was still a good teacher and loved by those who knew her. This truthfulness moves the audience members at the memorial service, bringing them to tears. Dunn’s poem shows how powerful the full picture is, rather than glossing over the ugly or uncomfortable parts and sticking to the funeral script. Lindenberg makes a similar gesture in her poem, when the speaker says,

Yes, sometimes I want to pick up my shadow  
and sling it at you—yes,  
you make me so angry  
I burst into green, green flames.

I love you. Forgive me, (12-6).

Rather than a lamentation over a loss as in a traditional elegy, this poem dwells on the passion between the speaker and her partner. If the verb tense was different, though, would this be read as a celebration of the love the couple once shared? As the line between love poem and elegy becomes thin, so does the line that divides love from loss. In her interview with McSweeney’s editors, Lindenberg reminds us of the simple truth, that “[y]ou grieve someone because you love them” (par. 6). Thinking of love and loss as

inseparably intertwined is painful, and thus the sentimentality of “diamonds are forever” sets in to dull the pain.

Furthermore, an elegy does not necessarily have to be sad or dark; it is possible to imagine a grief that sings like a love poem. Lindenberg told McSweeney’s editors, “I think it is also important to remember that elegy is a story of change—elegy, true elegy, culminates in some kind of coming-to-terms. It can hold onto the affirmation without requiring the grief. Elegy takes our attachment and desire and longing and sublimates it into song” (par. 7). This is a new way of thinking about grief and mourning. In response to a question about the book’s epigraph, Robert Creeley’s lines “To the hands come / many things. In time of trouble / a wild exultation,” Lindenberg said, “I wrote these poems to celebrate an incredible person, an incredible conversation, a wild life, a vibrant and difficult and triumphant relationship—as well as the notions about poetry that Craig and I shared, and that I have developed in my own way since his passing. Even a kind of fluorescent grief can be exultant, I believe” (par. 21). “Celebrate” and “fluorescent” are not words typically brought up in a conversation about grief or death. But, if grief’s home is in love, perhaps these words should be used more often. Without the context of the date and location placed on “Which, If I Never Thought to Mention It Before,” or with a slight change in the verb tense, would readers know the poem was written well before Arnold’s death? While it is uncomfortable to think of love as so close to loss and grief, Lindenberg guides her audience to a possible way of expression that does not rely on sentimentality, yet does not deny the difficult aspects of life and relationships.

Continuing in the non-chronological arrangement of *Love, An Index*, there are poems which are undated but seem to be about a particular time and place; with these,

Lindenberg continues to question narrative. “Love, A Footnote” seems to be about the first time the speaker, or Lindenberg, met Arnold—at “[t]he KGB Bar off 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue in New York’s East Village” (1). This poem varies from the dated poems in that it is not wholly self-contained in the memory or moment it is focused on. “You sat next to me, thought I didn’t know you at the time,” footnote number six reads. “You acted surprised that I had such a thought. I took it as a compliment at the time” is recorded in footnote number eight, repeating the earlier phrase “at the time.” These lines represent reflection, after the fact of meeting. The poem records a memory, but does it set it off as distinctly as the dated poems, though the event it focuses on must have happened much earlier than the others. This poem demonstrates the way readers are free to make their own connections between and within poems; the form of footnotes leaves part of the story out, the unseen text that the lines are footnoting. This also demonstrates how Lindenberg breaks down information hierarchies that might have formed in a chronological narrative. The connections the reader forms are different with “Love, A Footnote” as the fifth poem are different than what they would be if the poem was first. If this poem introduced *Love, An Index*, the collection would have a vastly different tone.

Another poem that is focused on a distinct moment in time but is undated is “Illuminating.” The poem, printed so that one has to turn the book ninety degrees clockwise in order to read it, describes a day in the speaker and her partner’s travels through the Dakota Badlands. In the left, right, and bottom margins are notes, scattered so there is seemingly no particular order they are supposed to be read in. Lindenberg writes in her artist’s statement for the National Endowment for the Arts that the “marginalia collaborates with the text to question its accuracy by adding to it” (par. 1). It

also questions the “storytelling” of the entire collection by building on the themes of inclusion and exclusion, as touched upon in the discussion of the form of “Love, A Footnote.” One note in the margin reads, “I do not believe I remember any of this wrong, but there is a reason I have left bits out” (p. 20). Like the reflective phrase “at the time” that appears in “Love, A Footnote,” one note that “illuminates” the line “From time to time a gang of hogs roars by on its way to the rally at Sturgis” reads, “I would have said *bikes or motorcycles* but the sleeveless drunk gentleman at the diner was good enough to give us a brief tutorial in biker gang slang and custom” (p. 20). These two notes point to the relationship between writing and memory, the choices the author makes—such as what to share, how to say it, what perspective to show it from, and how to feel about it in the present.

Thus far, the arrangement of *Love, An Index* has been examined as it challenges traditional, chronological modes of storytelling and instead finds new ways of expression through inclusion and exclusion patterns that push readers to make their own connections and to delve deeper into the collection. But several of the poems contain multiple points of time within them, becoming their own sort of collection. The title poem, “Love, An Index,” is one of these poems; it brings together memories, research, and many other elements into one poem written as an index that goes through each letter. Noticeably, the structure is alphabetical rather than chronological. Like “Love, A Footnote,” “Love, An Index” is missing the unfragmented, “complete” text it is indexing.

But why write this way? While these memories, thoughts, facts, and other pieces are mixed and fragmented, they create a sort of web when put together into an index. In a way, it reflects an individual’s perspective—what influences her outlook, what



experiences have brought her here. This echoes what has been said of the arrangement of the collection. Lindenberg takes on the challenge of telling more of her story in “Love, An Index” than she did in other poems. Arnold’s death is addressed, but memories, thoughts, and research “entries” in the index continue to challenge the narrative and deny readers the ability to focus on any one part for too long. More ordered than stream of consciousness, but less recognizable than memoir, Lindenberg’s transformation of an academic form into poetry is charged with emotion, as Lindenberg lets readers deeper into her “meditations in an emergency” (CALYX par. 19). Letters with only one entry are especially striking. Under the letter “K” is just

KUCHINO-ERABU-SHIMA, an island (See also: VOLCANOES). You called me  
 from the ferry. I was talking about Zukofsky,  
 you were saying you hated Zukofsky. You were happy and told me  
 I would hate it there, the sea was very rough. You said  
 “I love you, I miss you.” I said, “I love you, I miss you, too.”  
 You said, “Tell Robin I love him.”  
 That’s as far as I went with you (p. 44, l. 1-7).

Since mentions of Arnold’s disappearance are rare in *Love, An Index*, this moment stands out, even more so as the only text on the page. Another stanza, under the letter “O” surprises the reader with its bluntness: “OH, a sound suggesting startlement, appropriate / to situations of spiritual amazement and erotic bliss, / but also polite boredom or the horror of learning / the person who really knew you has died” (p. 48, l. 5-8). The next entry after “OH” is a memory, recalling the places that the speaker and her partner used to frequent in “OMAHA,” like “the Antiquarium for old books, / the Zen Center for

poetry slams, and to that one / Persian restaurant, the chicken stewed in pomegranate- / walnut sauce” (9-12). This memory almost seems to allow the reader a moment to breathe, after the sharp entry of “OH” and before diving into the two heart wrenching entries for “OVER.” But it also serves the purpose to remind readers of Arnold’s life, of Lindenberg and Arnold’s relationship, to bring the focus back to the memories, to the “wild exultation.”

Returning to the “real life” timeline discussed at the beginning of the chapter, the information surrounding Arnold’s death is not as simple as a calendar could show. Reading ABC News reporter Susan Donaldson James’ article, “Poet Craig Arnold Disappears at Volcano,” published on May 2, 2009 only a few days after his disappearance, gives a sense of the confusion friends and family of Arnold had to deal with. Chris Arnold, Craig’s brother, believed he was still alive, though perhaps lost (James par. 4). Another theory, coming from the “Japanese rescue workers,” believed that Arnold was injured but perhaps alive and surviving off of wildlife (par. 28). A third theory, suggested by Arnold’s sister-in-law, Augusta Palmer, was that maybe Arnold was “only in hiding and [would] soon re-emerge” (par. 41). Understandably, all were desperately hoping that Arnold was somehow still alive. Looking from this perspective complicates the notion of a time before death and a time after death. Even with a death that results from an accident, as “Love, An Index” suggests there is the memory of the last words shared, the obsession over how you could have asked him not to go, the mix of hope and dread and anxiety as you wait for the final word—not just that he is missing but that he is gone, the memories of before and what they mean to you after.

\* \* \*

Mark Doty and his partner, Wally Roberts, received unimaginable news in 1989—Doty was immune but Roberts was HIV positive. Amidst the American AIDS Crisis, Roberts' health declined, eventually partially paralyzing him. The couple continued to live together up until Roberts' death in 1994. Again, what seems like a simple timeline is most certainly not.

Doty does use a much more chronological narrative structure in his poetry. One explanation for this difference between his work and Lindenberg's might be that Doty published three volumes of poetry, *My Alexandria*, *Atlantis*, and *Sweet Machine*, between the years of 1992 and 1998, while Lindenberg worked on *Love, An Index* from approximately 2006 to 2012. This gave Lindenberg more flexibility in arranging her poems and in how she wanted to represent the last six years or so within her more narrowly defined project. But Doty's work still raises very interesting questions about the linearity of grief and the intersection of love and loss. As Doty says in *The Art of Description* of poetry, "Queer means that which is not business as usual, not solid identities founded on firm ground, but a world in question" (115). Doty's poetry, specifically his imagery and metaphor, reveal that not all is as it seems when it comes to grief and that binaries are not as distinct as they may seem. While I showed how a timeline of grief can be complicated in relation to a death from an accident, in this section I will show how grief can precede death in the case of terminal illness and what this might mean about the relationship between love and loss.

Critical to understanding Doty's work is his idea that "[t]o love anyone or anything comes with the understanding that what we love will eventually disappear, be carried away from us in time, and that we ourselves will disappear" (Royale par. 6). In these terms, love becomes a reminder of our partner's and our own mortality and, consequently, grief could precede actual loss in those who are finely attuned to this eventuality. In cases of terminal illnesses, a partner's imminent death can become impossible to ignore due to physical symptoms or prognosis, which can also begin the process of grief before loss occurs. It is helpful to read Doty's poetry as "autobiographical," as grief could have very possibly been operating in this way in his relationship with Roberts (Hennessy 76).

Doty points to the fact that people also enter this relationship with their pets, in which case the time frame is typically much shorter. Despite knowing that the pet will die in so many years, or perhaps earlier due to an accident, many people still make the choice to adopt and love the pet for the time they are given. An even more exaggerated example of this relationship can be found in flowers, which may only last a few months when kept in a garden or a few days when cut. Yet people still cherish flowers, putting time and effort into gardening or spending money on bouquets. Why do people appreciate flowers the way they do when they know they will only last a small portion of their own lives? Seldom are sentimental fake flowers as precious as the real kind, which wilt and fade with time. Doty offers that, "[o]f course, it's a gift, to know that things have limits; of course, the shadow is what creates three-dimensionality. But I fix on the darker note, and sometimes I think the only kind of beauty I can see is the kind that's right on the verge of collapse" (*Dog Years* 62). But maybe it is more than a "gift";

maybe something must have limits or the possibility to cease in order to be appreciable, perhaps as we will see in the later discussion of Lindenberg's "Catalogue of Ephemera." In this way, perhaps the potential for loss creates the potential for love, whether or not it is something we are conscious of.

To begin exploring the non-linearity of grief through Doty's poetry, "Fog Argument" and "*Grosse Fuge*," both from *Atlantis*, serve as particularly good ways to think through this abstract concept. In the first section of "Fog Argument," titled "Jade," the speaker is looking at a salt marsh that seems to go on forever. The poem opens with the line, "Of course I know it ends," that seems to be referring to the salt marsh, though because of its ambiguity it could be read as speaking about relationships or life as well (1). This alternate reading is strengthened by the final lines, which read

love, I know, it ends,

you don't have to remind me,

though it seems a field

of endless jade (30-33).

The word "love" may be an address to a person, as the speaker reaffirms that he knows there is an end to the salt marsh, or to their relationship together or to their lives. Though it would rely on strange syntax, "love" could also be the "it," bringing the second reading closer to the surface of the poem. These lines echo Doty's concept that starting a relationship with another person comes with the knowledge that it will one day end,

though that ending might be obscured currently—“But from here, from moor’s edge / ... it doesn’t seem to [end]” (5-8).

The second section of “Fog Argument,” titled “Beach Roses,” adds to this idea by bringing in an element of the non-linearity of death and grief. In this section, the speaker is viewing “a heap of roses / beside the sea, white rugosa / beside the foaming hem of shore” (46-8). Considering the roses, the speaker contemplates, “What are they... / shadow-centered petals blurring, / toward the edges, into everything?” (34-8). This builds on the exploration of boundaries begun in the first section and is completed in the final lines,

And we talk

as if death were a line to be crossed.

Look at them, the white roses.

Tell me where they end (51-4).

The imploring tone of the final two lines, conveyed through the verbs, gives the sense of quiet frustration. The speaker implies that death is *not* “a line to be crossed,” though it is so commonly viewed that way. Doty’s experience of witnessing terminal illness, AIDS in particular, gives him a unique perspective that he can draw upon to question the linearity of death and grief.

The poem “*Grosse Fuge*” provides another metaphor that questions the linearity of death and grief. The speaker describes an October in which unseasonably warm weather causes many of the flowers to bloom—a “gorgeous hurry of budding and decline: / bloom against dry leaf” (65-6). The speaker asks, again like in “Fog Argument,” attempting to make sense of things,

How are we to read  
 this nameless season—renewal, promise,  
 confusion? Should we be glad or terrified  
 at how quickly things are replaced? (54-7)

Doty complicates the poem by weaving in two other threads: the speaker's attempt to "understand" classical music, particularly the song *Grosse Fuge* by Beethoven, and the speaker's friend Bobby's fight with AIDS (90). Bobby's health mirrors the strange mix of weather, as he is "[s]till too sick to go home, / —wherever that might be—and too ill, as well, / to stay" (213-5). The speaker's work of listening ends in the realization "that Beethoven / could see the forest *and* the trees" (a variation of seeing the forest for the trees), which becomes a sort of metaphor as well (159-160). The final lines, "What can you expect, in a world that blooms / and freezes all at once? / There is no resolution in the fugue," ties together the three threads and shatters the illusion of neatness or linearity to life (225-7). If the seasons, "the calendar / down to its last, late pages," can go completely off course, what can one expect in any other aspect of life (16-7)? What seems certain is shown as unpredictable and lacking the clean lines that sentimentality promises.

In the poems "Fog" and "The Ware Collection of Glass Flowers and Fruit, Harvard Museum," both in *My Alexandria*, Doty offers flowers again as a metaphor, though this time one that helps readers to think through the connection between of love and loss. Doty makes flowers into a mirror for the human body and death. In "Fog," the speaker juxtaposes HIV testing and his garden. "The peony buds' / tight wrappings are edged crimson; / when they open, a little blood-color / will ruffle at the heart," the

speaker begins, but the comparison becomes much more pronounced in the next few lines (3-5). After having blood drawn for the HIV test, he says, “I’m seeing blood everywhere” (9). The blood from a small cut is described as “wine-fountain / dark as Siberian iris” (12-3). In this poem, Doty applies the language of the body to the flowers (but also to some extent flower to the body, as in the last quote), which seems unusual at first—but his preoccupation with the HIV test and later its devastating results change the way he views his surroundings. Flowers take on a new meaning in light of his partner testing positive; “Every new bloom is falling apart” (74). Roberts’ diagnosis as HIV positive forces Doty to confront the fact that he loves Roberts and that Roberts will eventually die and likewise that he loves his garden and that the flowers in it will also eventually die—harkening to the beginning lines of the poem, “The crested iris by the front gate waves / its blue flags three days, exactly, / then they vanish” (1-3). This poem might represent how Doty came to his concept of how love and loss intertwine and what it might be like to suddenly see the mortality of everything. In the foreword to *My Alexandria*, Philip Levine writes that “[t]he courage of this book is that it looks away from nothing; the miracle is that wherever it looks it finds poetry” (xi). Despite the pain of these realizations, Doty turns it into beautiful, thoughtful poetry.

In the poem, “The Ware Collection of Glass Flowers and Fruit, Harvard Museum,” the speaker contemplates the artist’s decision to make flowers and fruit from glass, “the glassblower’s academic replica, / his copies correct only to a single sense” (12-3). But the speaker says, “They’re lovely because they *seem* / to decay: blue spots on bluer plums, / mold tarring a striped rose” (9-11). These pieces of gorgeous glass cannot satisfy, “can’t be tasted, won’t yield,” and are thus inferior to the real fruits and flowers



that will decay or disappear (24). Love is not the diamond ring, but the person, with whom you can share a give and take relationship, though that relationship will someday end.

Through these poems, it seems that grief is built into relationships from the beginning sparks of desire and love. Some of Doty's poems describe dreams, which in pre-loss situations make the speaker confront the eventuality of death (as was the case with the flower imagery like in "Fog") and in post-loss situations can extend relationships, looping momentarily back into the timeline. In the first section of the poem "Atlantis," from the collection *Atlantis*, the speaker is telling someone about his reoccurring dream in which his dog is struck and killed by a car. The speaker acknowledges that the dreams began when Roberts received his diagnosis, connecting the two directly (20-6). What is particularly interesting is that, when awake, the speaker says, "sometimes I am still / in the thrall of the dream," and, as he frantically reaches for his dog as it steps into the street, "didn't know who I was trying to protect" (60-71). These dreams seem to represent not feeling in control of the fate barreling towards him and his partner. While the speaker tries to move forward, like his dog—"he is that-which-goes-forward"—he ends up moving back and forth in time between dreams and waking, and between thinking of the present and the future (52).

After Roberts' death in 1994, dreams become a sort of comfort in Doty's poetry, a way to revisit his loved one, to make a momentary loop back in time. In "The Embrace," in the collection *Sweet Machine*, his partner comes to the speaker in a dream, but the speaker "didn't for a moment doubt [he] was dead" (5). This seems like a sad or painful

thing to be aware of, but in fact it is the best possible scenario, as becomes apparent in the final stanza:

Bless you. You came back, so I could see you  
once more, plainly, so I could rest against you  
without thinking this happiness lessened anything,  
without thinking you were alive again (21-4).

The dream places the two in “some old house / where we’d live” as they were preparing to move again, but the speaker is shocked out of the story by seeing Roberts’ face (9-13). The sweetness of the final lines and the speaker’s palpable relief at seeing his loved one’s face once more make “The Embrace” a heart-warming look at grief and the love that can continue past death without hindering the happiness of the survivor.

Through these poems focused on flower and dream themes and motifs, Doty challenges the notion that grief comes only after the death of a loved one, that there are always neat and logical resolutions, or that love is separable from loss. The beauty of the ephemeral and the moments of relief seem to make the pain of grief worth the suffering in order to engage lovingly with others and the world.

## Chapter 2

### Living with Grief

In his introduction to *The Art of Losing*, Kevin Young reminds us that “[t]hough dedicated to the dead, in a crucial way elegies are written for the living” (xviii). Poetry can be essential to both the writer and the readers, as the writer moves through her loss. Some of the most powerful and memorable moments in grief poetry are when the author works through what she needs for herself in this time of change. How does one continue on? Roger Rosenblatt articulates it well in his memoir, *Making Toast*, about moving in with his son-in-law and grandchildren after the sudden death of his daughter. Recounting a counseling session, Rosenblatt writes, “[The therapist] says that one of the delusions of people in grief is that once a year passes, things will start to look up. She reminds us... that grief is a lifelong process for every one of us... As for the demarcation of a year, ‘Things actually get worse. [Your family is] now realizing the hard truth that this is how life will be from now on. One year is no time at all’” (148).

In *About Grief*, the authors make the sobering statement that “grief changes our self-narrative, alters our established story of who we are, and often does so in ways that are both challenging and transformative” (Marasco 148). In this chapter, I will discuss the identity work that is played out in grief poetry, the way authors honor the presence of their lost loved ones through images of absence, and how authors begin to imagine a future for themselves. In *Love, An Index*, Lindenberg struggles with changes in her identity; how she defines herself and how she views herself are two key areas explored in

her collection of poetry. To preserve Arnold's memory, Lindenberg turns to the negative space where objects should be, and to imagine futurity for herself, she turns to images of renewal and reconnection towards the end of the book.

After building up a relationship and a life with another person, the loss of that other person can be especially painful for the survivor. Commonly in our culture, we define ourselves by our relationships, through familial, romantic, and friendship connections. One person might have several "definitions," for example as a mother, wife, sister, aunt, best friend, and co-worker. Unique to each person is the weight he or she gives to each particular role or label. It is not much of a stretch to imagine that those you love the deepest might play a bigger role in your identity.

Beyond what is lost in the present, the survivor must cope with the lost psychic and futural attachments that often come with love and desire for another person or object. In her essay "Cruel Optimism," Lauren Berlant argues that when we desire someone, what "we are really talking about [is] a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us" (20). This seems related to the idea that "opposites attract" or that partners round each other out personality-wise. Losing your "other half" is losing a part of yourself and requires some reconfiguring. On another level, this can be the shattering of the promise of lifelong companionship, attaining a certain socio-economic class, or the emotional or childrearing support that was expected.

After Arnold's death, this is something Lindenberg must think through—who is she now? In "Love, An Index," she asks this very question herself, in an entry under the letter "P":

PARTNER, this feeble word we use to introduce each other:

“This is my partner Craig,” and “This is Rebecca,  
 my partner.” What word explains how, with you,  
 everything meant something—a drive through Abiquiu  
 with *A Passage to India* playing on tape; a Scrabble argument  
 after which you touched my face and said, “Fair enough”;  
 sharing a bottle of wine that tasted like fresh Band-Aids  
 while we boiled the carcass of a chicken for stock  
 so I could show you how to make risotto. And what  
 is the word for me now? (See also: WIDOW.) (p. 49, l. 1-10).

Highlighting all that the word “partner” has to encompass shows its “feeble[ness].” The words “husband” and “wife” have hundreds of years of history and evoke strong connotations in our heteronormative society. Non-normative couples must find their own terms. But the relationship can be even harder to explain and the identity work can be even more challenging when loss occurs.

This brings us to the poignant entry for “widow.” “Love, An Index,” with its connections and cross-references, directs the reader to this entry in response to the final question under “PARTNER.”

WIDOW, a woman whose husband has died.

So, not me. But many of the obelisks  
 in the Provincetown cemetery commemorate  
 captains and whalers lost at sea and their widows.  
 In this sense, I am like those women (p. 58, l. 1-5).

The factualness of the definition of “widow” and the shortness of “So, not me.” punctuate the difficulty of redefining yourself when you already did not quite fit the norm. Though the speaker is not comfortable with calling herself a widow, she does reach a kind of resolution by finding an identity to share with women whose husbands are “lost at sea.”

The search for a new word for the speaker shows a frustration with language. The speaker seems unhesitant, unlike in “PARTNER” or “WIDOW,” to use the term “fragment,” though it is not a word usually used to describe people.

FRAGMENT, I am a fragment of us. I am a fragment composed  
of fragments. Mosaic, pastiche, ruin. Everyday  
consciousness proposes lightbulb, ropeswing, teapot,  
David Bowie, your sweater on, your sweater off, tomatillo,  
all associated. Parts suggesting the whole  
they long to be gathered into (p. 39, l. 36-41).

As Rosenblatt wrote, grief is a life-long process. The term “widow” does not expire after a year. The entry for “fragment” highlights the disarray that can occur after the loss of a loved one. Loose ends are not just unpaid bills or unfinished projects, but the unfulfilled promises that make up a partner’s life or outlook. Grief is the painful, difficult process of gathering the fragments, but into a new form.

Secondly in the question of identity is how the image of self is approached. By switching to third person in the poems “The Girl with the Ink-Stained Teeth” and “The Girl with the Microfilm Face,” Lindenberg creates the distance and perspective that allows her to work through her response to Arnold’s death. These two poems face each other on opposite pages in the second half of *Love, An Index*. Both look similar, with

dropped lines and unconventional spacing. “The Girl with the Ink-Stained Teeth” has a choppy sound, beginning with three relatively short sentences and ending with a longer sentence broken up by the spacing: “she announced / if she was gonna off herself / she’d stage something / madcap enough / to compare / to the tall man / who vanished” (10-6). The tone reflects the “drunken[ness]” and the scramble of suicidal thoughts.

“The Girl with the Microfilm Face” also describes the painful aftermath of Arnold’s death, including seeing news stories on it and having to “[recite] again / interviews: the last thing / he said to her, why / he was knocking around / volcanoes anyway, / evidence he wouldn’t / intentionally vanish” (7-13). Through the metaphor of having “newsprint [on] her skin” in the form of “microfilm” which is a “projection,” the woman is able to reach a sort of resolution—some relief—by moving out the of reach of the projection (22-5). The placement of the poems suggests a positive ending to both through the ending of the second. There is more agency and the regaining of power in the second poem, particularly in the last line, “all she has to do / is stand in the light” (24-5). Like using third person to broach a discussion about oneself, metaphor offers a way to visualize solutions and alternatives.

Remembering the lost loved one is an important part of grief poetry, and is especially powerful and moving. Though it is not unique to her, as we will see with Doty’s poetry as well, Lindenberg uses negative space as a way to imagine a presence in absence. In the poem “Catalogue of Ephemera,” the speaker lists what her partner has given her: “You give me seduction and you let me give it back to you... / You give me an apartment full of morning smells—toasted bagel and black / coffee and the freckled lilies in the vase on the windowsill. / You give me 24-across” (5, 7-9). But it is not just any

items; “ephemera” is the noun form of the adjective “ephemeral,” meaning “in existence... for a short time only; short-lived” (OED). Some of the items are more tangible than others, but each brings a moment alive within the poem. The final lines, “You give me paintings of women with their eyes closed. / You give me grief, and how to grieve,” finds a gift from Arnold through his death (39-40). Though this is not exactly a representation of negative space, it does memorialize Arnold through “objects” and what he has imparted to the speaker, tangible or not. Most of the things, in fact, are not lasting objects—instead, Arnold is remembered through sensations like “the swoop of homemade kites in the park on Sunday,” tastes like “afternoon-colored beer with lemons in it,” and smells like “bruised mint” or “black hair” (14, 15, 30, 31). With the exception of “a t-shirt” and “paintings,” the actual physical objects are ones that are transitory, including the several mentions of food and the many mentions of flowers (22, 39). These items are no longer in the speaker’s physical possession, and in this way the poem marks their absence to remember Arnold and his impact on the speaker’s life.

While others might value transitory or ephemeral things less, “Catalogue of Ephemera” revalues them, showing how precious and lasting those moments, feelings, and memories can truly be. In a sense, all of the lines fall under the ultimate ephemeron, love. “You give me *you*,” the poem reads (6). In this way, the poem becomes an argument for love and relationships, despite their inevitable and painful ending of separation in one way or another. The author turns “grief” into a gift, a beautiful thing that belongs alongside “midnight apples in a car with the windows down” and “flowers resembling moths’ wings” (40, 26, 10). This is a stark contrast to “diamonds last



forever”; rather, it is a celebration of the fleeting and momentary, the beauty and life that mingles with love and loss.

The poem “Ghostology” begins turn to images of negative space, though it raises more questions than it answers. It begins

The whistler’s

inhale,

the white space

between *is*

and *not*

or after a question,

a pause (1-7).

These first lines focus on negative space in language—oral and written. The title, “Ghostology,” meaning “ghost-lore” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, leads to the possible interpretation that these are spaces which ghosts inhabit. A less literal reading could be that in these pauses—like wanting to say “Arnold *is* coming back” rather than “is not”—is when the memory of Arnold resurfaces. Between the two readings is the sense that Arnold’s memory in these negative spaces is unwelcomed, unlike in “Catalogue of Ephemera.” “Haunting,” which the title “Ghostology” implies, has a much less positive connotation than suitable for a memorial poem.

Finally, Lindenberg creates an amazing image through absence that is a personal and fitting memorial to Arnold in the poem “In the Museum of Lost Objects.” “You’ll find labels describing what is gone,” the speaker begins, like a museum curator leading the reader through the exhibits (1). “To help us comprehend the magnitude / of absence, huge rooms / lie empty of their wonders—the Colossus, / Babylon’s Hanging Gardens,” the speaker continues (9-12). At the line, “My love, I’ve petitioned the curator,” the reader realizes the speaker is not the curator, but a stand in for Lindenberg, explaining the space to the deceased Arnold. The latest addition, at the request of the speaker, is “an empty chest / representing all the poems you will / now never write” (16-8). The images described are reminiscent of the Bebelplatz memorial in Berlin, Germany, “an underground room with empty white bookcases” that can be viewed through a glass window in the pavement above it (“Berlin Memorials”). It marks where Nazis held the “Burning of the Books” on May 10, 1933, outside Humboldt University. Lindenberg’s poem does with words what the Bebelplatz memorial does visually. Though they both mark what was tragically lost, a key difference between the two is that “In the Museum of Lost Objects” marks what would have been written, had Arnold lived longer, rather than texts already created.

It also relates to a poem from W. S. Di Piero’s collection *Nitro Nights* (2011), “The Lives of Objects,” in which the speaker describes what is on his desk and what is not. Under the part “Not On My Table,” the speaker lists items like the

cherried medicine-bottled

flaky wine [Father] drank

by the drive-in speaker

that rained-on night

at *Pork Chop Hill* (68-72)

and his “Mother’s chiffon blouses, / zircon pendant... / dream book, Mass cards” (73-4, 77). What is not present or visible is given equal weight to what is in this poem. Like Lindenberg’s “Catalogue of Ephemera,” the poem conjures vivid scenes attached to the items. The missing objects are outlined by the speaker and thus make a space for the missing people in the attention of the speaker.

In the theme of narrative, the poem ends with the lines, “I hope you don’t mind, but I have kept a few of your pieces / for my private collection. I think / you know the ones I mean” (23-6). Poetically, these lines rein in the publicness of the museum space and recalls Arnold as a person within the realm of the private. This echoes Lindenberg’s statement on wishing to keep some things back within the narrative of *Love, An Index*.

Finally, in the discussion of Lindenberg’s poetry, we can examine the ways in which a person continues on. Like in “The Girl with the Microfilm Face,” imagery and metaphor can be a way to visualize positive outcomes or alternatives. In this case, Lindenberg employs imagery of renewal and reconnection in poems towards the end of *Love, An Index* that inspire hope for the future and living through loss. Kevin Young writes, “To lose someone close to you is to enter an experience no amount of forethought or hindsight can free you from. You must live through grief. You cannot outsmart it, nor think through the fact of someone’s being gone, and forever. You must survive sorrow” (xvii). This is a truth not to be overlooked. While finding ways to connect with the lost loved one through negative space or presence in absence is part of this process, it is important for the survivor to reconnect with the life around them as well. These kinds of

images appear in the poems “Love, An Index,” “Dispatches from an Unfinished World,” and the final poem in the collection, “Marblehead.”

To begin with the title poem, “Love, An Index,” which spans from the beginning of Lindenberg and Arnold’s relationship to times after Arnold’s death, the final entry in the index projects hope through natural imagery and draws on the motif of green used throughout the collection. The second entry under the letter “Z” reads

ZEPHYR, the other wind. Not the mistral

but the green-faced wind

with its cheeks puffed out. The stir

of tablecloths, sundresses, curls.

The messenger of spring (p. 61, l. 2-6).

If “zephyr” is the “messenger of spring,” then it brings signs of coming renewal and can be representative of hope. “[C]heeks puffed out” and the “stir of tablecloths, sundresses, [and] curls” are images full of life and movement, not related to death, winter, or cessation. Also, the color “green” is used several times throughout the collection; prior to this point it appears in the dated poem “An Appetite for Rain,” in which the speaker recalls standing with her partner “[s]ide-by-side / ... in the perpetual green” (13-4). “Green,” or shades like “luminous emerald” in “An Appetite for Rain,” is connected with positive, happy, or peaceful memories (9). So, when it reappears in later poems, it casts positivity into the future.

Lindenberg continues to develop these themes of greenness and natural life in “Dispatches from an Unfinished World” to show the speaker reconnecting with the physical world and other people. Literally, another man appears in this poem, though he

is not a romantic partner since “[m]y correspondent / will not let me love him” (19-20). The speaker also notes, “Inside, my mother humming / a song I’ve never heard,” suggesting the possibility of continuing to seek out new experiences (15-6). But the speaker also connects with natural life. She notices, “A leaf the green that a child would choose / if asked / to draw a leaf,” echoing the poem “An Appetite for Rain” in which she is mesmerized by the greenness on a trip with Arnold and his son (1-3).

The final two stanzas show a growing sense of agency through the sentence structure and verb choice as the speaker connects physically and perhaps spiritually with the natural world. The lines

I uncross my legs  
 to find, with a bare foot,  
 that sun has warmed the stone.  
 I partake of the sun.

\*

And the stone (23-7)

suggest an opening up, testing the waters, and attempt to become part of something greater than oneself again.

The final poem of the collection, “Marblehead,” begins with a sweet, almost silly epigraph from James Schuyler: “not to be in love with you / I can’t remember what it was like / it must’ve been lousy.” As in many other poems in the collection, Lindenberg vividly recreates moments from her time with Arnold, recalling details like “While we were gone, you left / the stove on low—some things / you do make me so nervous” (6-8).

This poem seems as if it could have been written before Arnold’s death—neither the verbs nor the content hint at his demise, besides the sort of foreshadowing admission that some of his actions cause nervousness. However, in response to a question about “Marblehead” in the *CALYX* interview, Lindenberg said, “I’d actually written this poem very soon after Craig disappeared, while visiting [friends]... This poem was one that I wrote there and read to them. But then I kind of put that poem away and forgot about it for a while” (par. 34-5). When trying to figure out how to end the collection, her friend reminded her of this poem, which seemed to be the perfect fit. “It engages directly and very presently with the person and story of the book,” Lindenberg said, “but ends in a way that feels green, promising the possibility of renewal without having to give up (or give up on) anybody or anything” (*CALYX* par. 34-5). Indeed, the ending draws upon food—sustenance for life—and greenness:

But now lobster steam billows  
 up the window, you gulp  
 purple wine, your pinky sticking out,  
 and the round olives are the green  
 all green things aspire to be (18-22).

The perfection of the green olives mirrors the feeling of the epigraph, creating a reading that happiness, contentment, and fulfillment was shared between the speaker and her partner in their love. While not chronological, the arrangement of *Love, An Index* provides a satisfying conclusion for readers by building a hope for the speaker’s future in the second half of the collection. Though the grief and memory of Arnold will be a part

of her life for a long time, these poems imagine a continuation of the happiness that they once shared.

\* \* \*

Mark Doty's poetry is rich in memorialization and images of survival. Unlike in Lindenberg's poetry, though, there is no evidence for identity work in Doty's writing. Perhaps, as an already marginalized gay male (who, as he writes in "Homo Will Not Inherit" of *Atlantis*, has inherited "the margins / which have always been [his]"), he does not feel the same pressure to consider "widowhood" or other social labels (22-3). In any event, assuming the role of caretaker and eventually survivor is certainly enough to deal with. To remember Roberts in poetry, Doty tends to turn to images of negative space, which can take on different meanings in pre- and post-loss grief. To imagine survival for himself, Doty must forge images and metaphors that work both during the illness and after the death. He mainly employs images of objects in disrepair to explore "what the experience of grief is like and... the ways that it might be lived through" (Royale par. 6).

Beginning with how Doty preserves the memory of Roberts', the poem "The Wings," in *My Alexandria*, shows that negative space is not necessarily a comfort pre-loss. As discussed with dreams in Chapter One, negative space can be a painful reminder of what is to come. In "The Wings," the speaker and his partner attend an auction in the countryside, where "things that were owned once, in place, / now must be cared for, carried / to the block" (5-7). The speaker is halted by some items, though; "It's the

clothing I can't get past," the speaker says as his attention is drawn to the declining health of his partner (130). The powerful lines

One can't look past

the sleeves where two arms

were, where a shoulder pushed

against a seam, and someone knew exactly

how the stitches pressed against skin

that can't be generalized but was,

irretrievably, you, or yours

show that the speaker can only see the negative space as a sort of threat (141-7). Though at the auction he is viewing the clothing that strangers once occupied, his viewpoint is the pain of the survivor looking at the clothes of a loved one. The negative space of clothes is a powerful technique used by survivors who make panels in memory of loved ones for the AIDS Quilt, begun by Cleve Jones around 1985 and now formally run by the NAMES Project Foundation ("The AIDS Memorial Quilt" par. 3-4). Clothes are extremely personal—recalling what the person wore day to day, perhaps a "common memento" they were known by, and the particular shape it took on after time. At some points, clothing, as it represents the body and spirit of a loved one, can serve as a memorial, but at some points, such as before the terminal illness has reached its end, it can be too painful to acknowledge.



In his memoir *Dog Years*, published much later in 2007, Doty reflects on representations of negative space when describing the way a family he knew marked the loss of their pet dog. Doty remarks, “If Elliott was forgotten, he’d be lost again, wouldn’t he? But if his absence remained, if the space where he stood or lay on the rug were given attention—then that’s a way of keeping something of the dead with us, even if what is kept is an empty outline” (10). In the poem “Where You Are,” in *Sweet Machines*, Doty employs negative space as a way to remember Roberts. The first section of the poem consists of fragmented lines, seemingly little pieces of specific memories tentatively threaded together. The anxiety of the first section, both in content and form, is calmed by Roberts’ appearance in the second section. It begins, “I thought I’d lost you. But you said *I’m imbued / in the fabric of things, / the way that wax lost from batik shapes / the pattern where the dye won’t take*” (36-9). This poem parallels Lindenberg’s “Ghostology,” particularly in lines like, “*the air around your gestures, / the silence after you speak. / That’s me... / that close, where I am: between / where breath ends, air starts*” (44-50). Imagining presence in what seems like emptiness allows the speaker a way to “find” the lost partner and to not feel so far apart from that person.

Finally, the rich imagery and metaphor Doty crafts provide ways to imagine surviving both the difficulty of taking care of a loved one who is dying and the pain of the loved one’s death when it comes. Surprisingly, the very first poem of *My Alexandria*, the earliest collection of the three discussed in this paper, offers hopeful images. The speaker of “Demolition” is observing the knocking down of a building. It was built in 1907 and, throughout its history, it has been a “rooming house,” a “bake shop and florist” (10). At one point in the demolition, the speaker remarks

the single standing wall  
 seems Roman, momentarily, an aqueduct,  
 all that's left of something difficult  
 to understand now (51-4).

Doty could have had the speaker say that it looked like something that was not anything anymore or like something that just could not be understood. Instead, it is something “*difficult* to understand *now*,” implying that at one time it was useful and made sense. The transformation of the building gives hope that somehow some good could come out of the great changes beginning in Doty and his partner’s lives.

The speaker also imagines a future for the building. He sees it becoming a parking lot where “the kids will skateboard / in their lovely loops” (48-9). Even though the building “topples,” the lot still has a lively future (66). This is an encouraging metaphor for someone facing the fast-approaching death of a loved one: though things might not be the same, there is potential on the other side of the demolition.

In “Rope,” from *Atlantis*, the speaker describes an old man and his dog, Antony and Charley respectively. Antony constructs a “sort of rope harness” for Charley to help the dog stand so that they can continue to go on their daily walks (80). The metaphor does not provide so much a way to move on in the future; in fact, it seems to avoid thinking about one of them without the other, as quite literally they are tied to one another in this arrangement. But it does offer a way to negotiate the grief and move through life while the partner is alive yet declining physically. The reader is told, “They stand for hope, / and seem as tentative and constant / as the steeple of the Unitarian church, / which leans a little to the right, / but stands” (72-6). Hope within this poem

seems more for the present functioning than in an optimistic, futural way. Of this rope harness, Doty writes in *Dog Years*, “This always seemed to me a synthesis of love and art; craft found a way, for a while, to keep the beloved other in the world” (203). Poetry seems to be Doty’s rope harness for his own partner. In “Two Ruined Boats,” from *Atlantis*, Doty names poetry as “a mode of travel, / but not a means of repair” (82-3). Poetry can function like a controllable dream, allowing the poet to manipulate and move time, to step back and view things from outside himself, and to hopefully find some peace and optimism.

The poem “Wreck,” also from *Atlantis*, offers the image of an abandoned boat barely staying above water that can be read either way—as inspiring the ability to carry on in the face of illness and/or to push through the pain of loss. It is “wave-beaten” and, although it should “at any moment, cave in, / dissolve... / It doesn’t, hasn’t,” by constantly releasing the water it takes in and by “[keeping] its grip on the shore” (23, 30-3, 41-2). The personification of the boat likens it to a human, making the leap of metaphor a little easier for readers. The importance of holding on is heightened by ending the poem on the image of the boat still stubbornly gripping the shore, giving a sense of continuation beyond the end of the poem.

Like Lindenberg’s *Love, An Index*, this exploration through Doty’s poetry ends on an optimistic note. In “Visitation,” the final poem of *Sweet Machine* (which is not by any means Doty’s last published volume of poetry, simply the last one discussed within the scope of this paper), a whale who has wandered into the harbor becomes a metaphor for the speaker. He connects “grief,” a “dim / salt suspension in which I’ve moved / blind thing, day by day,” with the image of the whale,

[I] couldn't help but look

at the way this immense figure

graces the dark medium,

and shines so: heaviness

which is no burden to itself.

What did you think, that joy

was some slight thing?

Through his words, Doty lightens the “heaviness” of grief and joy, suddenly revealed as weightless underwater through the metaphor of the whale. Bringing “joy” into the poem seems to bring some attention to the incredibility of survival; though your loved one is lost, he or she is remembered, and though you felt alone or broken, you can be reconnected and made strong again. No slight thing, indeed.

## Conclusion

Writing, reading, and studying the expression of grief in poetry is crucial in challenging what is deemed normal in our culture, including the use of sentimentality to avoid dealing with the pain of loss and the scripted language that surrounds death that keeps people from communicating with each other. Rebecca Lindenberg and Mark Doty, two incredibly talented contemporary poets, take on this task and bring their unique perspectives to their work in order to question the linearity of grief and the separation of love and loss, as well as to shift through identity, the memorialization of a loved one, and imagery that imparts hope for living with grief.

While reading this literature may help individuals work through difficult times, it may also impact society by chipping away at the harmful social regulations around grief, which stop some people from mourning in a way that is best for them. Bitter with the dismissive or sentimental attitudes of friends and family after she had five miscarriages, Jenny Rubin writes in an article on *xoJane*, “Along with the doctor, everyone loved to say how common it is. I have had a lot of friends who have had a parent pass away. Funny, I never once told them how common it is” (par. 16). Social regulation defines who has the right to grieve; Rubin’s loss was not deemed great enough by others to justify her grief over losing pregnancy after pregnancy.

The study of grief in poetry is also applicable to public grief. From the poems that circulated soon after the attacks of 9/11 to the poems written and gathered in

response to national or regional tragedies like the AIDS Crisis, the death of Matthew Sheppard, the destruction caused by Hurricane Sandy, and many, many other events, the words that bring groups of people together are an interesting and little discussed topic.

While at times grief-heavy poetry can seem distant or difficult to engage with, it is a rewarding area that has much to offer. As the Raymond Carver's "Grief," which appears as the epigraph to this paper, suggests, one day it might not seem so incomprehensible anymore. This is a painful fact to acknowledge, but one can find comfort in good company by choosing to forge ahead through it, rather than try to circumvent it through other means. There is hope, beauty, and love throughout the entire journey.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

“The AIDS Memorial Quilt.” *The NAMES Project Foundation*.

<http://www.aidsquilt.org/about/the-aids-memorial-quilt>>.

Berlant, Lauren. “Cruel Optimism.” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural*

*Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3. 2006. 20-35.

“Berlin Memorials.” Center for Holocaust & Genocide Studies. University of Minnesota.

<http://www.chgs.umn.edu/museum/memorials/berlin/>>.

Carver, Raymond. “Grief.” *Poetry Magazine*, February 1985. P 254.

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse/145/5#!/20600178>>.

Di Piero, W. S. “The Lives of Objects.” *Nitro Nights*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon

Press, 2011. 37-40.

Doty, Mark. *The Art of Description: World into Word*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press,

2010.

--. *Atlantis*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995.

--. *Dog Years*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007.

--. *My Alexandria*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992.

--. *Sweet Machine*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998.

Dunn, Stephen. “On the Death of a Colleague.” *The Art of Losing: Poems of Grief and*

*Healing*. Ed. Kevin Young. New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2010. 94-95.

“Ephemeral.” *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<http://www.oed.com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/view/Entry/63199>>.

“Ghostology.” *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<http://www.oed.com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/view/Entry/78077>>.

Gilbert, Sandra M. *Death's Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006.

Hennessy, Mark. “Mark Doty.” *Outside the Lines: Talking with Contemporary Gay Poets*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005. 74-91.

James, Susan Donaldson. “Poet Craig Arnold Disappears at Volcano.” 2 May 2009. *ABC News*.

<http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/MindMoodNews/storyNew?id=7483695>>.

Krasner, James. “Doubtful Arms and Phantom Limbs: Literary Portrayals of Embodied Grief.” *PLMA*, Vol. 119, No. 2 (March 2004), pp. 218-232.

Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth and David Kessler. “The Five Stages of Grief.” *Grief.com*.

<http://grief.com/the-five-stages-of-grief/>>.

Lindenberg, Rebecca. “A Conversation with Rebecca Lindenberg.” Interviewed by Bethany Haug. *CALYX*, Summer 2012, Vol. 27:2.

<http://www.calyxpress.org/CALYXSummerJournal272Interview.html>>.

--. “Author’s Statement.” *National Endowment for the Arts*, 2011.

[http://www.nea.gov/features/writers/writersCS/writer.php?id=11\\_55](http://www.nea.gov/features/writers/writersCS/writer.php?id=11_55)>.

--. *Love, An Index*. San Francisco: McSweeney’s, 2012.

--. “Interview with Rebecca Lindenberg.” Interviewed by Dominic Luxford and Jesse

Nathan. *McSweeney’s*, 27 March 2012. <http://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/a-mcsweeneys-books-qa-with-rebecca-lindenberg-author-of-love-an-index>>.



- Marasco, Ron, and Brian Shuff. *About Grief: Insights, Setbacks, Grace Notes, Taboos*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2010.
- Oliver, Mary. *A Poetry Handbook*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994.
- Orr, David. "There Will Be No More Poems From Him." 20 May 2009. Arts Beat. *New York Times*. <<http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/05/20/there-will-be-no-more-poems-from-him/>>.
- Rosenblatt, Roger. *Making Toast: A family story*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010.
- Royale, Rosette. "Love, loss and grief, transformed into art." *Real Change*, Vol. 17, No. 9. 24 Feb 2010. <<http://www.realchangenews.org/index.php/site/archives/3858>>.
- Rubin, Jenny. "It Happened to Me: I've Had Five Miscarriages." *xoJane*, 16 Jan 2013. <<http://www.xojane.com/issues/miscarriage-the-silent-heartache>>.
- Spargo, R. Clifton. "The Ethical Uselessness of Grief: Randall Jarrell's 'The Refugees.'" *PLMA*, Vol. 120, No. 1, Special Topic: On Poetry (Jan. 2005), pp. 49-65.
- Williams, William Carlos. "Tract." *Poetry Magazine*. <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/174772>>.
- Winterson, Jeanette. *Written on the Body*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.
- Woodward, Kathleen. "Grief Work in Contemporary American Cultural Criticism." *Discourse*, Vol. 15, No. 2, Special Issue: The Emotions, Gender, and the Politics of Subjectivity (Winter 1992-93), pp. 94-112. Wayne State University Press.
- Young, Kevin, ed. *The Art of Losing: Poems of Grief and Healing*. New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2010.

## ACADEMIC VITA

Jessica Brenn  
412 University Avenue, Apt 1  
Ithaca, NY 14850  
[Jessica.brenn1@gmail.com](mailto:Jessica.brenn1@gmail.com)

---

### Education

BA, English, August 2013, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania

### Study Abroad

The National University of Ireland, Galway, Spring 2012

### Honors and Awards

- Schreyer Honors College Scholar
- Paterno Liberal Arts Undergraduate Fellows Program
- The President's Freshman Award for Academic Excellence, The Pennsylvania State University, January 2011
- Dean's List, Fall 2010 – Spring 2013

### Association Memberships/Activities

- *Kalliope*, Undergraduate Literary Magazine (Editor)
- Schreyer Literary Committee (Member)
- Geoblogger, Pennsylvania State University's Global Studies Office
  - View archived posts: <http://geoblog.psu.edu/author/jeb5502/>

### Professional Experience

- **Intern, U.S. Embassy Hanoi, Vietnam, June – August 2012**
  - In my role in the Consular Office, I implemented an emergency text messaging system for American citizens living in and around Hanoi. I also updated the American citizen warden registrations, compiled appointment statistics, edited English correspondence written by local Vietnamese staff, and filed closed adoption cases.
  - In my role in the American Center under Public Affairs, I gave weekly lectures on various aspects of American culture to audiences of forty or more Vietnamese students. I also planned and led group discussions and activities, wrote the monthly e-newsletter, and drafted official event reports.
- **Intern, VIDA 2013 Count, July 2013 - ongoing**
  - Compiling statistics on the gender divide in literary magazines to affect change in the publishing community
- **Crew Member, Trader Joe's, State College, PA, Oct. 2012 – Aug. 2013**
  - Rang up sales, helped customers find and learn more about products, cooked and served food in the demonstration area, stocked products, and cleaned

### Research Interests

I have broad interests in contemporary poetry, Irish literature, and critical theory. I am particularly interested in Joyce studies and queer and feminist theory.