

Identifying and exploring the particular ethical, narrative and aesthetic pressures on the production of life writing by siblings bereaved by suicide.

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Abstract

Identifying and exploring the particular ethical, narrative and aesthetic pressures on the production of life writing by siblings bereaved by suicide.

This thesis includes a creative project and a critical essay. The creative project takes the form of a piece of autobiographical life writing, *Small Pieces: A Book of Lamentations*, about the suicide of my brother and the loss of my mother to cancer. Its structure is informed by trauma theory and inspired by Jewish religious texts. In the critical essay, I survey the life writing by siblings bereaved by suicide. There are few such texts. Given the near-universality of the sibling relationship, and the significance of suicide as a public health issue, I query why this should be so. I identify three forces which may inhibit such writing: the cultural neglect of the sibling relationship, the taboos surrounding suicide and the unassimilable nature of traumatic experiences. I also identify forces which might compel me and others to write: the need to reaffirm and explore the continuing bond with the lost sibling; the imperative sense of an 'appointment to witness' experienced by traumatised subjects. I argue that suicide bereavement further complicates this picture, infusing the sibling relationship with grief and anger. It prompts the survivor to search for answers and to attempt to address their trauma through a legal paradigm of healing, which offers but cannot deliver closure. The literary paradigm offers an alternative. I explore these issues further in relation to texts by two other bereaved siblings. Using Object Relations theory, I consider suicide survival and siblinghood with reference to Hattie Gordon's *The Café after the Pub after the Funeral*. Trauma and the legal and literary paradigms of healing are discussed in relation to Jill Bialosky's *History of a Suicide: My Sister's Unfinished Life*. I hope that by examining life-writing texts from this unique perspective, informed by my own experience as a writer and bereaved sibling, and by my knowledge of Object-Relations theory, I have made an original contribution to the field of life-writing studies. I

conclude that this interdisciplinary approach yields useful insights, and could be applied further.

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Polly Clark has been, as ever, an invaluable first reader of my creative work. My husband, Chris Hadley, has supported me all the way through. I should also thank him for being a generous reader of the manuscript of *Small Pieces*. For the same reason, thanks are due to my cousins Lisa and Nikki and especially to my sister-in-law, who chose her own and her daughter's pseudonyms for the book.

I submit this thesis in memory of Julian and Ruth Limburg.

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Statement of Objectives

Creative

- To produce an original, book-length work of life writing, addressing my experience as a sibling bereaved by suicide.
- To produce a piece of work in which both structure and style are informed by the experience of traumatic bereavement, by trauma theory and by my Jewish heritage.

Critical

- To locate and read the primary life writing texts produced by siblings bereaved by suicide.
- To survey the secondary literature relating to this subject, including research by psychoanalysts and psychologists on siblinghood, grief and suicide, alongside work by trauma theorists.
- To identify the particular ethical, narrative and ethical pressures on the production of life writing by siblings bereaved by suicide.
- To explore these pressures with reference to examples of published life writing.
- To demonstrate my understanding of my own work as another example of this form of life writing, subject to the pressures which I have identified and explored.

Creative part of thesis - Small Pieces has been redacted as it will be published as a book.

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Introduction

When I write about the ‘ethical, narrative and aesthetic pressures on the production of life writing by siblings bereaved by suicide, I do so as one who has experienced these pressures at first hand. I would go so far as to say that my decision to embark on a PhD came about as a response to these pressures, and that this thesis represents my attempt to resolve the conflicting impulses which I experienced as a direct result of them. On the one hand, I felt compelled to write about the loss of my brother, and to share what I wrote with others. On the other hand, I had an equally powerful sense that I should resist the impulse to write about him, and that, should I fail to do so, it would be unambiguously wrong to publish the results. The PhD has been my way of negotiating between the compulsion and the prohibition: it enabled me to put aside, or at least delay, the question of publication.

My research has also allowed to me to interrogate the impulses which prompted it, by applying a set of theoretical tools to my own creative work and to the work of other writers who have published books about the loss of their siblings. I came to the thesis with an MA in Psychoanalytic Studies, and my understanding of mourning, family dynamics and creative work was from the start informed by the work of Object Relations theorists such as Melanie Klein, Paul Heimann and D. W. Winnicott. While working on this project, I also came to rely on other theoretical resources. I used classic texts on life writing by G. Thomas Couser, Paul John Eakin and Nancy K Miller, among others. Work by trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Judith Lewis Herman, Shoshana Felman, Leigh Gilmore and Meg Jensen yielded many further insights. To help identify and explore the particular pressures on life writing by myself and other siblings bereaved by suicide, I have also found it useful to draw on the research of psychologists into the sibling relationship and the nature of suicide bereavement.

The Creative Project

Small Pieces: A Book of Lamentations

Julian Limburg, my younger and only sibling, took his own life on the 14th August, 2008. The bereavement his wife, his daughter, our mother and I experienced was abrupt and traumatic. In the course of my research, I have come across many definitions of trauma, but the one I have found most useful in understanding my own experience is this one, by Juliet Mitchell:

A trauma, whether physical or psychical, must create a breach in a protective covering of such severity that it cannot be coped with by the usual mechanisms by which we deal with pain or loss. The severity of the breach is such that even if the incident is expected, the experience cannot be foretold. We cannot thus make use of anxiety as a preparatory signal. The death of a sick relative, the amputation of a diseased limb may be consciously known about in advance, but if they are to be described as traumatic then the foreknowledge was useless. In trauma, we are untimely ripped.²⁷

The physical language Mitchell uses, of breaches, rips and amputations, conveys something of the abrupt and painful shock we experienced. It was also true that we could not resort to ‘the usual mechanisms’ to cope with the loss of my brother. My sister-in-law, left isolated and shocked far from home in a town in the mid-West, was unable to make coherent decisions, and left them to others. When my mother and I arrived, we discovered that there was to be no funeral, and that my brother had already been cremated. We are Jews, and as rule, we do not cremate. This compounded our shock. We could not bury and mourn my brother traditionally, as we had buried and mourned my father twelve years earlier.

Neither did I feel able to resort to my other ‘usual mechanism’ for dealing with any difficult experience, which was to write. As the first line of *Small Pieces* testifies, I did not allow myself to take proper notes of my stay in the town I call ‘Plainsville’. This

²⁷ Juliet Mitchell, ‘Trauma, Recognition, and the Place of Language’, *diacritics* 28, 4 (Winter 1998), pp 121-33.

was because I felt that ‘to write about [my brother’s suicide], to make creative or any other kind of capital out of it, would place me so beyond the pale that the only honourable course would be to kill myself in turn.’²⁸ Yet at the same time, I ‘could not refrain’ from making a few small notes, which were the ‘signs of my writerly incontinence’, and ‘a clear indication, even then, that I would break the vow I had made, not to write about any of this’.²⁹ I have already said that the PhD represents my attempt to negotiate between these contradictory pressures. What I did not appreciate in Plainsville was that my experience, far from being unique to me, would be familiar both to other suicide survivors, and to those who had experienced other types of trauma. Judith Lewis Herman writes: ‘Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable*... The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma.’³⁰

I approached *Small Pieces* with the sense that, as a work of traumatic witness, the form which my text took should allow this ‘central dialectic’ to be expressed rather than suppressed. For this reason I chose not to rely on conventional, chronological narrative, but instead aimed to represent the ‘highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner’ in which, according to Herman, traumatised subjects ‘often tell their stories’.³¹ The text is therefore made up of short pieces of writing. These were not written in the order in which they now appear: like poems in a collection, they were produced individually, and arranged at the end of the process. As I wrote, the pieces were collected in three folders, marked ‘Plainsville’, ‘Before 2008’ and ‘2008-11’. The ‘Plainsville’ pieces dealt with my visit to the US after my brother’s death, and were

²⁸ *Small Pieces*, p. 9.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 8

³⁰ Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery [from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror]* (London: Pandora, 2001), p. 51.

³¹ Herman, (2001), p. 51.

written in the present tense. The folder '2008-11' concerned the three years between my return from Plainsville and my mother's death; these were also written in the present tense. In 'Before 2008', I collected pieces about the life of my family up until the day of Julian's death, and these were written in the past tense. My aim was to give the reader a sense of how trauma explodes one's sense of chronology, narrative and causation.

The earliest versions of my creative project which I handed in to my supervisor were collections of fragments, and it was clear to both of us that the project could not remain in that condition if it was to be successful. I understood from my reading of trauma theory that the purpose of a project like mine was not only to express the disintegration of trauma and loss, but also to act as a symbolic form of reintegration. I had read Suzette Henke's book *Shattered Subjects*, in which she discusses the work of writers such as Janet Frame, Audre Lorde and Sylvia Fraser.³² Henke considers their autobiographies and autobiographical fiction as attempts to address their traumatic experience. In her account, each writer is occupying three different subject positions in the course of their work: the writing self, which is engaged in the work of re-collection, repair and reconstruction; the earlier, fragmented self, which she seeks to redeem through a process of 'narrative recovery'; lastly, the later, unified self, which is the result of her work. The writer's task is twofold: first she must express and testify to the fragmented nature of the earlier self, and then she must unify it. Through her writing, she is then able to render her traumatic experience thinkable, knowable and speakable.

In the absence of a chronological narrative, I needed an alternative organising principle for my text. As a poet, I would often adopt a dominant image or metaphor in order to structure a piece: in a conference paper I presented in 2015, I explain how I

³² Henke, Suzette A., *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

used the story of Isis and Osiris to shape my poem ‘Sister’.³³ In this paper, I refer to Celia Hunt’s work on the therapeutic effects of using fictional and poetic techniques in autobiographical writing.³⁴ In the course of her research into creative writing pedagogy, Hunt has observed that her students often need to introduce fictional or poetic elements into their work before they are able to gain any kind of transformative perspective on their own experiences.

Alongside my growing collection of written fragments, I had a guiding image in mind: I imagined a brief film of a vase smashing, played backwards so that it began with the vase in scattered pieces and ended with it whole again. I had heard of a creation story from the Jewish mystical text, the Kabbalah, called ‘The Breaking of the Vessels’. After further reading on this myth, I realised that it would make a perfect structuring metaphor for my creative project.³⁵ According to the story, we live among the ruins of an earlier, broken universe, and it is the task of the Jewish people to reassemble its pieces. As I explain in ‘Rabbis’, the introductory section of *Small Pieces*, ‘[t]he counterpart of this primordial break, in human history, is the expulsion from Eden; in Jewish history, it is the destruction of the First and Second Temples and the Exile from Zion. For Jews, every subsequent loss is an echo of this one, the founding loss...’³⁶ By placing this explanation at the beginning of *Small Pieces*, I am able to establish the analogy between the shattering of my family narrative and the Kabbalistic story by which the text is structured. As there are ten vessels in the traditional story, I had a readymade ten-chapter structure with which to work.

³³ Joanne Limburg, ‘The Re-making of ‘Sister’: an experiential account of auto-poetic reconstruction following a sibling’s suicide’, 5th Global Conference on Trauma, Lisbon, Portugal, 22nd March – 24th March 2015, <http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/at-the-interface/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Joanne-Limburg-trauma5-wpaper.pdf>.

³⁴ Celia Hunt, *Therapeutic Dimensions of Autobiography in Creative Writing* (London; Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2000).

³⁵ Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*, (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times BookCo, 1974).

³⁶ *Small Pieces*, p. 16.

As well as giving me a structure for my book, the story of the Breaking of the Vessels served as a link to the Jewish community in which my brother and I had spent our shared childhood and adolescence. There are other explicitly Jewish through-lines in the book. I make repeated references to the *Book of Lamentations*, which mourns the destruction of the Temple and the Exile from Israel, a displacement which is echoed by my brother's and my voluntary displacement from the Jewish community as adults, as well as my loss of my childhood home. The introductory section of the book, 'Rabbis', begins with my questioning two Rabbis about the Jewish attitude to suicide, and each 'Vessel' begins with a question about Jewish law, which sets up the theme for the chapter to follow. I also refer to the Jewish literary tradition of narrative Midrash as a justification for my filling in the gaps of memory with dialogue which I could not possibly remember verbatim.

This re-affirmation of my family's and my links to our community was a vital part of the work of traumatic repair which I wanted *Small Pieces* to accomplish. As Herman explains, the damage which trauma causes cannot be fully comprehended without an awareness of its relational and social dimensions:

Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience...

The damage to relational life is not a secondary effect of trauma, as originally thought. Traumatic events have primary effects not only on the psychological structures of the self but also on the systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community.³⁷

My brother's abrupt death entailed a violent discontinuation of all his relationships, and caused the disruption of the relationships between surviving family members. Suicide may not be intended as an act of aggression towards loved ones,³⁸ but

³⁷ Herman, (2001), p. 51.

³⁸ Thomas Joiner explores this in detail in his books, *Myths about Suicide* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010) and *Why People Die by Suicide* (Cambridge,

will inevitably be experienced as such by the people left behind.³⁹ In *Small Pieces*, I aim to show how the suicide of a sibling can be seen as a catastrophic event in the story of an ongoing relationship, and how, in writing about it, the surviving sibling might seek to repair and re-negotiate that relationship. I understood that a relationship with a significant other is not curtailed by death, but changed by it, and work remains for the survivor. In my chapter on Hattie Gordon's book *The Café After the Pub After the Funeral*, I shall explore the nature of this relational work with reference to Object Relations theory.

The 'ethical pressure' I felt, that sense of prohibition that had hampered me from the beginning of the project, had a relational context: I feared that by writing about my brother and my mother in an honest, non-eulogistic way, I would be doing harm to them. I believed that it would be wrong to derive any kind of good for myself as result of writing about them. In his essay 'The Worst Thing I Ever Did: The Confessional Contemporary Memoir', Blake Morrison considers the charge that in writing about our dead relatives, we are somehow betraying them. He acknowledges that his parents would 'not like everything I've included in my accounts of them' but argues that 'I'd still say I was honouring them, even while departing from their official versions of themselves.'⁴⁰ For Morrison, doing right by the dead 'means being honest, not hagiographical'.⁴¹ I would agree with this, and wrote *Small Pieces* partly as a correction to the eulogies I had written for both my brother and my mother, which I felt had done violence to them – and to me – by necessitating the suppression of the full, complicated,

Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005). The idea that suicide is motivated by the desire to cause hurt to others is one of the 'myths' he explicitly refutes.

³⁹ I will explore this more fully in my chapter on Hattie Gordon.

⁴⁰ Blake Morrison, 'The Worst Thing I Ever Did: The Confessional Contemporary Memoir' in Zachary Leader (Ed), *On Life-Writing* (Oxford: OUP, 2015), 201-220 p. 219.

⁴¹ Morrison, p. 219.

living truth of them. I wanted to rescue my family's experience from taboo and silence, and render it, to use Herman's term, 'speakable'.

My ethical obligations to the living were somewhat different. I was very aware that in revealing my own life, I could not avoid revealing aspects of the lives of others, and that these aspects were difficult and painful. To protect the privacy of my brother's family, friends and colleagues in the States, I changed all their names, as well as the name of the town in which he lived and worked. That my brother's death was a suicide made this particularly important: as I explore in both my creative and critical projects, the aftermath of suicide in a family or community is complicated by currents of guilt and blame. Suicide is an anomalous death, prompting questions. By the time I came to write *Small Pieces*, I had come to understand that the search for answers was itself a symptom of suicide bereavement, and could not offer the emotional resolution it appeared to promise.⁴² One of my reasons for avoiding conventional narrative was that I believed that to adopt it would entail an implicit assumption of mechanisms of cause and effect with regard to my brother's death. In plain terms, it would make it appear as if my brother's death had come about as a result of people's actions, that they were to blame.

In my chapter on Jill Bialosky's book *History of a Suicide*, I will discuss further the ethical difficulties that result when an author frames a memoir as a search for answers, with reference to Shoshana Felman and Leigh Gilmore's work on juridical and literary modes of testimony.⁴³ In my own case, I hope that I was able to address these difficulties by choosing a structure that resists closure. As I explain in the final section

⁴² My understanding of the peculiar nature of suicide bereavement is informed by as, Christopher Lukas and Henry M. Seiden's book, *Silent Grief: Living in the Wake of Suicide*, (London: Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007).

⁴³ Jill Bialosky, *History of a Suicide: My Sister's Unfinished Life* (New York: Atria Books, 2011).

of *Small Pieces*, the last of the ten broken vessels is not for me to reassemble, textually or otherwise:

It is not for me to complete the work.

I cannot complete it because of the impossibility of remembering what really happened, hence the ‘midrashim’, the made-up conversations.

I cannot complete it because the other main participants in the story – my mother, my brother – are gone, and they have taken their perspectives with them. Often in the writing I have had an impulse to ring either one and check a memory or a fact, only to realise -

I should not complete it because completion implies the closure of a case, the closure of a case implies the passing of judgement upon the parties involved, and it is not for me to judge anyone else in my family’s story. Anyone else would have different fragments, and arrange them differently. Only G-d, if such a being exists, possesses them all, and can put them in their proper order.⁴⁴

The Critical Project

1. Review of the Primary Literature

As I worked on *Small Pieces*, I was also seeking out and reading life writing by other siblings bereaved by suicide. Using citation indices, library catalogues, the Amazon.co.uk database and the Google search engine, I was able to find six memoirs that belong to this category. Two of these were from the United States: *History of a Suicide: My Sister’s Unfinished Life*, by Jill Bialosky, and Kyle Boelte’s *The Beautiful Unseen: Variations on Fog and Forgetting: A Memoir*. I found two books by bereaved siblings from the UK: *The Café after the Pub after the Funeral*, by Hattie Gordon and *Standing on my Brother’s Shoulders: Making Peace with Grief and Suicide* by Tara J Lal. Australia and Canada yielded one book each: respectively, *The Eclipse: A Memoir of Suicide* by Antonella Gambotto, and *Small Mercies* by Barbara McCauley.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ *Small Pieces*, p. 217.

⁴⁵ Jill Bialosky, *History of a Suicide: My Sister’s Unfinished Life* (New York: Atria Books, 2011); Boelte, Kyle. *The Beautiful Unseen: Variations on Fog and Forgetting: A Memoir* (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2015); Hattie Gordon, *The Café After the Pub After the Funeral* (London; New York: Continuum, 2003); Lal, Tara J., (foreword by Garland, Alex), *Standing on my Brother’s Shoulders: Making Peace with Grief and Suicide*, (London: Watkins, 2015); Antonella Gambotto, *The Eclipse : A Memoir of*

I have grouped these books together as all six are memoirs which take a sibling's suicide as their main subject, even though these bereavements are often shadowed by other losses. There are other first person accounts which do not fit into the memoir category but should be mentioned here. One is Sara Swan Miller's *An Empty Chair: Living in the Wake of a Sibling's Suicide*, a themed collection of interviews with siblings bereaved by suicide, which includes her account of her own loss.⁴⁶ Michelle Linn-Gust's book *Do They Have Bad Days in Heaven? Surviving the Suicide Loss of a Sibling* is a self-help book rather than a memoir as such, but, like Miller, Linn-Gust is writing as a bereaved sibling: her book includes a great deal of material about her sister's suicide and her own response to it.⁴⁷

Another non-fiction book I should mention is the autobiography by the Eels frontman Mark Oliver Everett, *Things the Grandchildren Should Know*: although it is not the main or only subject of the book, the suicide of Everett's sister and only sibling is one of the defining events of the story he has to tell.⁴⁸

There is also a recent novel which can be read as life writing by a bereaved sibling. In *All My Puny Sorrows*, Miriam Toews tells the story of a pair of sisters, one of whom takes her own life. Toews has been open in discussing the book's autobiographical origins, and its acknowledgements end with a reference to 'my beautiful sister, Marjorie Anne Toews: comic genius, badly missed.'⁴⁹ The Von Riesens, the Canadian Mennonite family who feature in the novel, are in many ways very similar to Toews' own family as she describes them in an earlier, non-fiction book.

Suicide ([Australia]: Broken Ankle Books, 2003); McCauley, Barbara, *Small Mercies* (Santa Fe, NM: Sherman Asher Publ., 1998).

⁴⁶ Sarah Swan Miller, *An Empty Chair: Living in the Wake of a Sibling's Suicide* (Lincoln: Writers' Club Press, 2000).

⁴⁷ Michelle Linn-Gust, *Do they have Bad Days in Heaven? Surviving the Suicide Loss of a Sibling* ([S.I.]: Chellehead Works, 2001).

⁴⁸ Mark O. Everett, *Things the Grandchildren should Know* (London: Little, Brown Book Group : [distributor] TBS The Book Service Ltd, 2008).

⁴⁹ Miriam Toews, *All My Puny Sorrows*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2014).

This book, *Swing Low: A Life*, is a biography of Toews father, written by Toews herself, but using her father as first-person narrator, so that the text reads as if ‘in his own voice’.⁵⁰ Mel Toews ended his life by kneeling in front of a train; like Toews’ real-life sister Marjorie, her Elfrieda in *All My Puny Sorrows* chooses to die as her father did, by this same method. Although my aim to concentrate on memoirs which observe the ‘autobiographical pact’,⁵¹ I find Toews work useful as a particularly rich illustration of Celia Hunt’s ideas about how life writer might employ the techniques of fiction to convey the subjective truth of her experience.^{52 53}

2. Forgotten mourners, disenfranchised grief

One of the notable features of this body of primary literature is that it is very small. This might be considered surprising for three reasons. The first is that life writing by siblings bereaved by suicide belongs to the wider genre of ‘grief memoir’, itself one of many sub-genres of memoir which have boomed in recent decades.⁵⁴ The second is the nature

⁵⁰ Miriam Toews, *Swing Low: A Life*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2013).

⁵¹ According to Philippe Lejeune, the ‘Autobiographical Pact’ is the implicit understanding between author and reader that the author’s identity is also that of both the narrator and subject of the text. Philippe Lejeune, Paul John Eakin, *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis [u.a.]: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1995).

⁵² Meg Jensen also uses the techniques of fiction to explore the experience of losing a sibling to suicide in her short story, ‘Something Beautiful for Mary’. [‘Something Beautiful for Mary’, *New Writing*, 9 (2012), 337-341]

⁵³ Although I have chosen to focus on prose works in this thesis, I have also come across some books of autobiographical poetry which addresses the experiences of siblings bereaved by suicide. These include Matthew and Michael Dickman’s collection, *Brother* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016), Jeffrey Harrison’s collection, *Incomplete Knowledge : Poems* (New York; Lebanon, NH: Four Way Books ; distributed by University Press of New England, 2006) and poems in the collection, *The End of Desire* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997) by Jill Bialosky, whose prose memoir I explore in Chapter Two. I should also mention my own sequence *The Oxygen Man*, which I published as a pamphlet with Five Leaves Press in 2012, and which will be incorporated in my next poetry collection, *The Autistic Alice* (Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, 2017).

⁵⁴ Marta Bladec, ‘“A Place None of Us Know Until we Reach it”: Mapping Grief and Memory in Joan Didion’s the Year of Magical Thinking’, *Biography*, 37 (2014), 935-952, p. 936; Julie Rak, *Boom! : Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier UP, 2013).

of the sibling relationship, which is neither unusual nor trivial: as the psychoanalyst Joyce Edwards states, when someone loses a sibling, he loses ‘the person who knew him the longest’, and in doing so may also lose ‘a companion, a supportive figure, and a person with whom one’s past has been closely intertwined.’⁵⁵ The longevity of the sibling relationship and the shared past it represents remain significant even in cases where the relationship is troubled and the past disputed. The third reason to question the slightness of the literature is the status of suicide as an acknowledged major public health problem. The Samaritans’ website states that ‘In 2014, 6,122 suicides were registered in the UK. This corresponds to a suicide rate of 10.8 per 100,000 people (16.8 per 100,000 for men and 5.2 per 100,000 for women).’⁵⁶

So, given the popularity of the grief memoir, the importance and near-universality of the sibling relationship and the generally-accepted seriousness of the problem of suicide, why are there so few memoirs by siblings bereaved in this way? A possible answer to this question lies in our cultural attitudes towards the sibling relationship on one hand, and towards death by suicide on the other. In the course of my research, I have read work by psychoanalysts, psychologists and health care professionals who have studied siblings and the impact of their loss. Every single one of them, regardless of his or her field, acknowledges that the significance of the sibling relationship has long been underestimated.⁵⁷ This statement on page 1 of a book by

⁵⁵ Joyce Edward, *The Sibling Relationship: A Force for Growth and Conflict* (Lanham, Maryland: Jason Aronson, 2011).

⁵⁶ <http://www.samaritans.org/about-us/our-research/facts-and-figures-about-suicide>, accessed 13/10/2016

⁵⁷ Stephen P. Bank, Michael D. Kahn, *The Sibling Bond* (New York: Basic Books, 1982); Victor G Cicirelli, *Sibling Relationships across the Life Span* (New York: Plenum Press, 1995); Prophecy Coles, *Sibling Relationships*, (London; New York: Karnac, 2006); Kari Dyregov, Atle Dyregov, ‘Siblings After Suicide – “The Forgotten Bereaved”’, *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behaviour* 35, 6 December 2005, pp 714-723; Joyce Edward, *The Sibling Relationship: A Force for Growth and Conflict* (Lanham, Maryland: Jason Aronson, 2011); Juliet Mitchell, *Siblings: Sex and Violence* (Oxford: Polity, 2008); Wendy Packman, Heidi Horsley, Betty Davies, Robin Kramer, ‘Sibling Bereavement and Continuing Bonds’, *Death Studies*, 30 (2006), 817-841; Dorothy

developmental psychologist Victor G Cicirelli could stand for many others: ‘The progress of research aimed at understanding sibling relationships has been relatively slow compared to that of research on spousal and parent-child relationships, largely because the full impact of sibling relationships on the developing individual has only recently been realized.’⁵⁸

As the psychoanalyst Joyce Edward writes, this lack of awareness has extended to clinicians as well as researchers: in her book *The Sibling Relationship*, she refers to many cases in which the therapist’s failure to appreciate the importance of siblings to their patients (or, for that matter, to themselves) has impeded the progress of treatment.⁵⁹ Edward also understands that this blind spot affects other scholarly disciplines, including the study of literature. In her chapter, ‘The Death of a Sibling’, she considers the experience of Holden Caulfield, the fictional protagonist of J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*.⁶⁰ Edward suggests that while ‘the central theme of [the novel] is generally regarded as the conflict between an adolescent and adult society, the novel can also be understood as a sensitive account of how one adolescent boy struggles to come to terms with the loss of his brother.’⁶¹ She notes that she has only found one instance of a literary scholar’s reading the book in this way and speculates that the relative neglect of the book’s theme of sibling mourning ‘may reflect the general lack of appreciation of the significance of sibling loss...’⁶² In common with Edward, I have found that a search of secondary texts on sibling mourning in literature and culture yields very little. Out of all the literary critics in my bibliography, only Meg

Rowe, *My Dearest Enemy, My Dangerous Friend: Making and Breaking Sibling Bonds*, (Hove and New York: Routledge, 2007); Patricia Moyle Wright, ‘Adult Sibling Bereavement: Influences, Consequences and Interventions’, *Illness, Crisis and Loss*, 24, 1 (2016), 34-45.

⁵⁸ Victor G. Cicirelli, p. 1.

⁵⁹ Joyce Edward, *The Sibling Relationship*.

⁶⁰ J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983)

⁶¹ Edward (2011), p. 167.

⁶² *ibid.*, p. 167

Jensen and Mitchell Breitweiser deal specifically with the ways in which writers have addressed the loss of siblings.⁶³

As Edward suggests, a neglect of the subject in particular fields, whether clinical or literary, is reflective of broader cultural attitudes. The gerontologist Kenneth J Doka formulated the concept of ‘disenfranchised grief’, to refer to ‘the grief experienced by those who incur a loss that is not, or cannot be, openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported’.⁶⁴ Doka observes that ‘societies have sets of norms – in effect, ‘grieving rules’ – that attempt to specify who, when, where, how, how long, and for whom people should grieve. These grieving rules may be codified as personnel policies. For example, a worker may be allowed *a week off for the death of a spouse or child, three days for the loss of a parent or sibling* [my italics].⁶⁵ In Doka’s example, personnel policy expresses the relative significance of different losses in stark numerical terms, so that the loss of a sibling is slightly less than half as important as the loss of a spouse. I would argue that it is also seen as less significant than the loss of a parent. The implicit notion of a hierarchy of kin-relationships is neatly encoded in the UK laws on inheritance, by which the property of a person who dies intestate passes to their spouse or civil partner; in the absence of a legally-recognised partner, it passes to their descendants; in the absence of descendants, it can be claimed by their parents; only

⁶³ Mitchell Breitweiser, ‘Fitzgerald, Kerouac and the Puzzle of Inherited Mourning’ in Peter Homan (ed) *Symbolic Loss : The Ambiguity of Mourning and Memory at Century's End* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000, pp. 43-61; Meg Jensen, ‘Getting to Know Me in Theory and Practice: Negotiated Truth and Mourning in Autobiographically Based Fiction (J. G. Ballard, Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Jack Kerouac, Louisa May Alcott and Me)’, *LIC3 Literature Compass*, 8 (2011), 941-950; Meg Jensen, ‘Chapter Four: Mother/Muse, Psychic/Sister? The Personal and Intertextual Connections between Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield’ in *The Open Book: Creative Misreading in the Works of Selected Modern Writers*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

⁶⁴ Kenneth J Doka ‘Disenfranchised Grief’, *Bereavement Care* 18.3 (1999), 37-39, p. 37.

⁶⁵ Doka (1999), p. 37.

when no there are no parents living do the surviving siblings have first claim on the property.⁶⁶

The message to any writer who considers writing about their deceased sibling is implicit but clear: what was theirs is *not* automatically yours. I would argue that cultural assumptions about relationships – their relative importance, the rights and duties that appertain to them - apply in literature as they do in inheritance law. There is an understanding that when parents die, their children inherit the facts of their lives: this understanding is expressed in the title of Philip Roth's memoir, *Patrimony: A True Story*, and underpins Nancy K. Miller's personal study of memoir about the death of parents, *Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent's Death*.⁶⁷ To write about a parent's life is analogous to the process of sorting through a parent's material property: the memoirist is working through what has been handed down to her, deciding what to make of it, what to discard and what to keep. When Jeremy Gavron and Tim Lott write of the suicides of their mothers, they are considering their own cultural and emotional inheritance.⁶⁸ They have a right to the material. After my mother died, her brother insisted that the wording of her epitaph was entirely my business. Her neighbour asked me if I would consider writing a biography of her, so that people would know what she had achieved: in this neighbour's view, I had not only a right to the material of my mother's life, but a duty to make it known and decide on the means of its expression. By contrast, when I began to write about my brother I feared that I had no right to the material of his life, and that in shaping it I risked usurping someone else's duty – that of

⁶⁶ Great Britain: Gov.ac.uk, <https://www.gov.uk/inherits-someone-dies-without-will> [accessed 12/10/2016].

⁶⁷ Philip Roth, *Patrimony : A True Story* (London: Vintage, 1991); Nancy K. Miller, *Bequest & Betrayal : Memoirs of a Parent's Death* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2000).

⁶⁸ Gavron, Jeremy, *A woman on the edge of time: a son's search for his mother*. (Melbourne and London: Scribe, 2015); Lott, Tim., *The Scent of Dried Roses : Our Family and the End of English Suburbia - an Elegy* (London: Penguin, 2009).

his young daughter, or his widow. It had not escaped my notice that none of the lost siblings in the memoirs I was reading had left any children.

If my niece were ever to write about her father, she would not therefore be writing, as I was, as a member of a class of relatively disenfranchised, or ‘forgotten’ mourners.⁶⁹ She would not be writing against the silence that results when a relationship is subject to social and cultural neglect. She would, however, still have to contend with the pressure of another kind of silence: the silence that accompanies death by suicide, as it accompanies other forms of experience that are attended by trauma, stigma and taboo. In Doka’s terms, suicide is a ‘disenfranchising death’:

There are... cases in which the circumstances of the death create such shame and embarrassment that even those in recognised roles (such as spouse, child or parent)⁷⁰ may be reluctant to avail themselves of social support or may feel a sense of social reproach over the circumstances of the death. Death from a disease such as AIDS or from suicide or other self-destructive causes (e.g. drink-driving, drug overdose, etc.), or even in certain situations of homicide, may all be illustrations of disenfranchising deaths.⁷¹

There is nothing new about this disenfranchisement. Considering the history of the suicide survivor, George Howe Colt writes that ‘[w]hile suicides are no longer buried beneath mountains to trap their restive souls, their survivors are still struggling to dig themselves out from under the weight of centuries of accumulated stigma.’⁷² The suicides were buried under mountains, in unconsecrated ground, because their deaths were seen as atrocities which they had visited upon themselves. To return to Judith Lewis Herman’s words, suicides can be understood as ‘...violations of the social compact’ which are thus ‘too terrible to utter aloud’; as Herman says, ‘this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable*’. In attempting to write of a death by suicide, and to

⁶⁹ Dyregov, Kari, Dyregov, Atle, ‘Siblings After Suicide – “The Forgotten Bereaved”’, *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behaviour* 35,6 December 2005, pp 714-723.

⁷⁰ Note the absence of siblings in this list.

⁷¹ Kenneth J Doka ‘Disenfranchised Grief’, p. 38.

⁷² George Howe Colt, ‘The History of the Suicide Survivor: The Mark of Cain’ in Edward J. Dunne, John L McIntosh., Karen Dunne-Maxim, Karen., *Suicide and its Aftermath : Understanding and Counseling the Survivors* (New York: Norton, 1987), 3-18, p. 16.

render one's experience of it 'speakable', the memoirist is fighting against 'the will to deny horrible events'.⁷³ In *Small Pieces*, I depict myself as capitulating to this pressure when I write a eulogy for my brother which avoids any mention of the nature of his death. As I will show in Chapter Two, Jill Bialosky describes how her early attempts to write *History of a Suicide* were overwhelmed by her need to push the facts of her sister's death from her.

Along with the impulse to protect herself, the survivor may feel that she has a duty to protect other people from the transmission of such painful knowledge. It may be this socially-sanctioned 'will to deny' that lies behind the fact that suicide, like siblinghood, is a relatively neglected theme in literary criticism. In the course of my reading, I have found very few discussions of suicide bereavement in life-writing and literature. In his paper 'Relational Deaths: Narratives of Suicide Survivorship' Richard K. Sanderson suggests that suicide might be seen as 'an act of self-definition', which 'as a communication that both gives shape to one's life and expresses a yearning for a different life... bears a certain resemblance to autobiography itself.'⁷⁴ The act of suicide also imposes a set of definitions on the survivors: "I am a suicide; this is a family with a suicide in it; you are survivors of suicide."⁷⁵ With this in mind, he concludes that '[i]f killing himself or herself is the suicide's "autobiographical act," then retelling that death in a published (auto)biography is, for some survivors, a way to regain control over the family story and over their own lives.'⁷⁶ Although, as I have said, the research on suicide suggests that it is anything but an act of self-definition, Sanderson's insights into the experience and motives of writer-survivors definitely speak to my own experience, and have informed the direction of my research. As I shall discuss in my Chapter on

⁷³ Herman, (2001), p. 51.

⁷⁴ Richard K Sanderson, 'Relational Deaths: Narratives of Suicide Survivorship' in Couser, G. Thomas., Fichtelberg, Joseph., Hofstra University., *True Relations Essays on Autobiography and the Postmodern*, (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 44.

⁷⁵ Sanderson., p. 44.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p. 44

Gordon, disputes over the family narrative are a characteristic source of conflict between siblings.

The other two articles I have found on the subject are both examples of reflective autobiography, personal criticism by life writing scholars. In ‘Tales of 43 Year-Old Runaway’, Valerie Allison-Roan takes a critical look at the therapeutic writings she undertook after losing her father to suicide.⁷⁷ She uses autoethnography and the work of Lukas and Seiden to throw light on her situation, thoughts and feelings, and concludes with an affirmation of the therapeutic value of telling one’s traumatic story. Pauline Liu-Devereux’s paper ‘On the Other Side of the Words: Family Trauma and the Ethics of Life Writing’ explores her anxieties as a theorist-turned-memoirist writing an account of her sister-in-law’s suicide. Central to her article is this question: ‘What are the ethics of applying narrative conventions to another’s life, or in this case, to an account of suicide?’⁷⁸ She concludes that, while there is no clear answer to this question, we must acknowledge that ‘No matter how conscientious or scrupulous life writers are, these questions haunt every line we write.’⁷⁹ Both these papers were useful to me as examples of how life writing theory and practice might inform each other and reassured me that such an approach would prove fruitful when applied to the experience of suicide survival.

Faced, like Liu-Devereux and Allison-Roan, with the ‘weight... of accumulated stigma’, which we experienced as a force propelling us towards silence, Bialosky and I both chose, in the end to speak. However, neither of us would write in such a way as to deny that the pressure had ever been there: in both her book and mine, it is represented

⁷⁷ Valerie Allison-Roan, ‘Tales of a 43 Year-Old Runaway’, *Life Writing* 11, 3 (2014), 333-347.

⁷⁸ Pauline Liu-Devereux, ‘On the Other Side of the Words: Family Trauma and the Ethics of Life Writing’, *Literature Compass*, 8, 12 (2011), 982-989, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2011.00846x/full>, [accessed 17/9/2012], p 988.

⁷⁹ Liu-Devereux, p. 988.

in the fragmentation of the text, and by the empty spaces between the fragments. In presenting *Small Pieces*, and giving serious critical consideration to life-writing by siblings bereaved by suicide, I hope that this thesis will make further inroads into this silence.

3. Suicide bereavement, siblinghood and life writing as a relational act: Hattie Gordon's *The Café After the Pub After the Funeral*

By choosing to compose our books as fragmentary texts with gaps left unfilled, Bialosky and I are able to represent the struggle with the pressures towards silence which continues throughout the writing process. As the work progresses, other forces will come into play to shape the text. Some of these will arise from the nature of the sibling relationship. All the books I am considering here are examples of what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have defined as 'relational autobiography'.⁸⁰ In writing about others, and about family members in particular, the writer is engaged in a relational act: her work takes place in the context of her relationship with her subjects. It is performative, in that it will inevitably leave that relationship changed.

This is no less true when the relative concerned is deceased. As Bank and Kahn write in *The Sibling Bond*: 'It has been said that death ends only a life, it does not end a relationship.'⁸¹ The authors of a paper in *Death Studies* entitled 'Sibling Bereavement and Continuing Bonds' note that, while successful grieving was once seen as a process of detachment, it is now understood as the renegotiation of an ongoing relationship.⁸²

⁸⁰ Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis [u.a.]: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2009).

⁸¹ Stephen P. Bank, Michael D. Kahn., *The Sibling Bond* (New York: Basic Books, 1982).

⁸² Packman, Wendy, Horsley, Heidi, Davies, Betty, Kramer, Robin, 'Sibling Bereavement and Continuing Bonds', *Death Studies*, 30 (2006), 817-841.

They argue that this concept of a healthy ‘continuing bond’ between mourning and mourned ‘applies to the sibling relationship’ as it would to any other.⁸³

In Chapter One of this thesis, I consider Hattie Gordon’s book *The Café After the Pub After the Funeral* as a relational act.⁸⁴ Her memoir tells the story of her relationship with her older brother Gareth, whose troubled life ended when he died by suicide at the age of twenty-four. I hope to show that, in writing and publishing her book, Gordon is not only recounting the story of a relationship that has passed, but also acting in the context of a relationship which is ongoing. To explore the nature of this relationship and the ways in which it is played out in Gordon’s book, I use the work of psychotherapists Bank and Kahn and psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell.⁸⁵ In *The Sibling Bond*, Bank and Kahn consider sibling pairs in all their permutations: merged, twinned, or defined in opposition to each other; as allies and antagonists; as caregivers and cared-for; as close or distant. In *Siblings: Sex and Violence*, Juliet Mitchell takes a critical look at what she sees as the neglect of siblinghood in psychoanalytic theory and practice. As she explains, psychoanalysts’ ‘understanding of psychic and social relationships has foregrounded vertical interaction – lines of ascent and descent between ancestors, parents and children.’⁸⁶ According to this limited model, siblings are seen simply as rivals for the attention of their parents. Mitchell sets out a possible model for understanding the sibling relationship in its own right. For Mitchell, sibling love (and hate) can be understood both as object-love *and* as a form of narcissism, with the two aspects interacting and modifying each other.

As I explain in my introduction to Chapter One, Gordon’s book seems to me to offer a particularly clear picture of the forces of love, hate and identification which

⁸³ Packman, Horsley, Davies and Kramer, p. 819.

⁸⁴ Gordon (2003).

⁸⁵ Bank and Kahn (1982), Juliet Mitchell, *Siblings: Sex and Violence* (Oxford: Polity, 2008).

⁸⁶ Mitchell (2008), pp. 1-2.

Banks, Kahn and Mitchell describe. I aim to show how these continue to work within the ‘continuing bond’ that exists within a sibling pair even after the death of one of its members. I will go on to identify and explore the ways in which these forces manifest themselves in and through Gordon’s text. I will argue that, as a suicide survivor, Gordon is engaged in an act of particularly painful grief-work, complicated by the violent and traumatic nature of Gareth’s death, as well as by the anger and guilt which accompany a bereavement of this kind. In Object Relations terms, *The Café after the Pub after the Funeral* could be seen as an act of reparation compelled by strong emotions of love and guilt.

4. Suicide bereavement and traumatic witness: Jill Bialosky’s *History of a Suicide: My Sister’s Unfinished Life*

In my commentary on *Small Pieces*, I described myself as caught between a powerful compulsion to write and an equally strong sense of prohibition. This sense of prohibition, as I came to realise, was a product of the different forms of disenfranchisement that I experienced as a sibling and as a suicide survivor. As I will suggest in my chapter on Hattie Gordon, the compulsion to create art about one’s lost siblings is driven partly by the urge towards reparation. In my chapter on Jill Bialosky, I will explore the other powerful force behind the compulsion to write: the urge to bear witness to trauma. As Judith Herman says, ‘[t]he conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma.’⁸⁷ As I shall show in Chapter Two, Bialosky is able to adopt this central dialectic as one of the structuring principles behind her book.

Shoshan Felman has described this compulsion to write or speak about traumatic events as an ‘appointment to bear witness’ from which ‘the witness-appointee cannot

⁸⁷ Herman, (2001), p. 51.

relieve himself.’⁸⁸ In *History of a Suicide*, Bialosky sees herself as appointed twice over, first by her sister and then by the family, represented by her mother. At several points in the text, she writes of a sense that her lost sister Kim is present in some form, and waiting for Jill to tell her story for her. She also explains that her mother has passed Kim’s papers and other effects on to her, thus appointing her writer daughter ‘keeper of the tomb’.⁸⁹ Bialosky’s task is to figure out how best to keep this appointment.

In attempting to do so, Bialosky is faced by the particular difficulties and dilemmas of traumatic witness. In order to explore these, I make use of work on trauma and life-writing by various theorists, including Shoshana Felman, Leigh Gilmore, Cathy Caruth, Meg Jensen and Margaretta Jolly.⁹⁰ According to these writers, traumatic experience is by its nature difficult to express and the speech of trauma victims tends to be disorganised, fragmented and self-contradictory. The experience has never been fully assimilated and so cannot be rendered coherently. As Bialosky acknowledges, it is also accompanied by so much pain that it feels dangerous to approach it: one of the narrative strands in her book relates to the tortured history of the project itself, which she would feel unable to address for long periods. A smooth narrative would thus misrepresent the traumatic experience of losing her sister, as well as her sister’s own traumatic life. I will show that Bialosky’s acknowledgement of the difficulties of the process, the fragmentary and non-chronological structure she uses, and her inclusion of bursts of

⁸⁸ Shoshana Felman, ‘Education and Crisis, of the Vicissitudes of Teaching’ in Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 14.

⁸⁹ Bialosky, *History of a Suicide*, (2011a), p. 93.

⁹⁰ Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Shoshana Felman, ‘Education and Crisis, of the Vicissitudes of Teaching’ in Cathy Caruth (1995); Shoshana Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2002); Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000); Meg Jensen and Margaretta Jolly, *We Shall Bear Witness: Life Narratives and Human Rights* (Madison: Wisconsin UP, 2014).

self-questioning in the text allow her to convey something of the nature of traumatic experience to her readers.

As Bialosky explains in an interview, her book ‘is not solely a memoir’.⁹¹ She intends not only to convey her experience, but also to find a means of containing it. She is trying to find a way in which to heal the traumatic hurt for herself, for her sister, for her family, and for other survivors of suicide. As Felman, Gilmore and others have written, the legal paradigm has come to be the dominant mode through which trauma has come to be addressed. One of the main strategies Bialosky adopts is that of the ‘psychological autopsy’, a quasi-legal form of investigation invented by the suicidologist Edwin Shneidman.⁹² By gathering documentary evidence about her sister, reading the diaries and compositions she left behind, speaking to people who knew her, and interrogating her own memories, Bialosky hopes to reconstruct Kim’s inner world at the time of her death. Shneidman himself is an important character in *History of a Suicide*: Bialosky sends him the evidence, and goes to visit him to hear his conclusions, which appear at the end of the book, as the culmination of Bialosky’s quest.

Bialosky begins her investigation with the hope that it will bring her and her family closure, but she will find that this cannot be fully achieved, and certainly not through the legal paradigm. Both Shoshana Felman and Leigh Gilmore provide detailed critiques of the limitations of the legal approach to traumatic experience, and I use these to show how Bialosky’s attempt at a definitive psychological autopsy risks not only failure, but also the reinforcement of the oppressive structures which gave rise to the trauma in the first place. Bialosky depicts herself, her mother, her two sisters and her younger half-sister Kim as vulnerable women, for whom men were ‘our enemies and

⁹¹ Jill Bialosky, ‘A Conversation with Jill Bialosky’ in *History of a Suicide* – Reading Group Guide, Simon & Schuster publisher’s website, http://books.simonandschuster.com/History-of-a-Suicide/Jill-Bialosky/9781439101940/reading_group_guide [accessed 9/3/2016].

⁹² Edwin S Shneidman., *The Suicidal Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 54.

also our saviours'.⁹³ In one crucial scene, Kim's unreliable, emotionally abusive father appears after a long absence, only to condemn her by telling her that she will 'never amount to anything'.⁹⁴ I suggest that, by allowing Shneidman to pronounce the judgement on Kim's abusive father at the end of her book, Bialosky is re-staging a situation in which men have a monopoly on judgement and what is seen as definitive truth. I also suggest that Bialosky, who is was in many ways as much of a parent to Kim as she was a sister, runs the further risk of exploiting her sister through the text. In G. Thomas Couser's terms, the 'structural inequality' in their relationship and the 'privileged access' Bialosky has to the facts of her younger sister's early life mean that her use of this material could be seen as ethically 'problematic'.⁹⁵

Although Bialosky has insisted in interviews that she has never intended to ascribe blame, her use of the legal paradigm primes the reader to look for guilty parties.⁹⁶ As Lukas and Seiden explain in their book on suicide bereavement, the urge to search for someone to blame is a common feature of grief after suicide.⁹⁷ In my chapter on Bialosky, I use Lukas and Seiden's work to show how *History of Suicide* can be read partly as a dramatisation of this compulsive, painful and ultimately inconclusive search. By the end of her book, Bialosky has come to understand that her psychological autopsy will not deliver her the closure she has sought. However, the book is not simply the record of a failed quest for answers: Bialosky also draws on what Shoshana Felman calls the 'literary mode' of healing, which allows her to explore the truth of her own and her sister's experience, while resisting the impulse towards closure.

⁹³ Bialosky 2011a, p. 72

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, p 121.

⁹⁵ G. Thomas Couser, *Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 56.

⁹⁶ Boris Kachka, 'History of a Suicide Author Jill Bialosky on the Struggle to Write a Non-Depressing Grief Memoir', vulture.com, 10/3/2011 http://www.vulture.com/2011/03/jill_bialosky_a_history_of_a_s.html#, [accessed 9/3/16].

⁹⁷ Lukas, Christopher, Seiden, Henry M., *Silent Grief: Living in the Wake of Suicide*.

In *The Juridical Unconscious*, Shoshana Felman states that ‘literature can be defined (accounted for, and understood) as a specific mode of testimony’ which writers may feel compelled to use ‘when they know or feel that knowledge, though available, cannot become eloquent...’.⁹⁸ I will suggest that *History of a Suicide* can be read as an example of this mode of testimony. Bialosky speaks of a lack of any ‘full portrait of living, breathing human being’ in the psychological texts which deal with suicide.⁹⁹ I will show how she uses her skills as a poet and novelist in order to create a fuller portrait of Kim, and so to make her knowledge of her sister’s life ‘eloquent’. Drawing on the work of Celia Hunt, and of Object Relations theorists D.W. Winnicott and Marion Milner,¹⁰⁰ I will identify the places in Bialosky’s text where she is able to enter into a flexible, imaginative space and approach her material in ways that are not constrained by legal definitions of truth. I shall also argue that, within this defined, imaginative space, Bialosky is able to give expression to her identification with Kim, an identification which might otherwise be too psychologically dangerous.

*

The three memoirs considered here – Gordon’s, Bialosky’s and my own – can be read as attempts at ‘auto-poetic reconstruction’, written as responses to traumatic loss.¹⁰¹

There is evidence that writing can be a particularly appropriate therapeutic tool for suicide survivors like us. In their paper ‘Writing Projects: Lessening Undergraduates’ Unique Suicidal Bereavement’, psychologists Kovac and Range describe a study in which students bereaved by suicide were given the opportunity to write about their

⁹⁸ Felman (2002), p. 96.

⁹⁹ Bialosky (2011a), p. 76.

¹⁰⁰ D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Penguin Books, 1988) and Marion Milner, *On Not Being Able to Paint*, (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Books, 1971).

¹⁰¹ Limburg (2015).

experiences on four occasions over a two-week period.¹⁰² When compared to a control group tasked with writing on more ‘trivial’ subjects, these students ‘reported less grief associated with suicide’ at the end of their experiment, and again at the six-week follow-up. Psychotherapist Shanee Stepakoff has suggested that a creative response might be especially pertinent in the case of suicide grief: in making something, the survivor might hope to counteract the forces of violent destruction which suicide has brought into her life.¹⁰³

As Kovac, Range and Stepakoff acknowledge, grief after suicide involves pain of a unique kind: it brings the knowledge that a loved one has intentionally destroyed his or herself, and thus severed the bonds which linked them to those they leave behind. It brings too, the knowledge that one’s love was not enough to keep them alive. This knowledge feels, at times, impossible to bear. Accompanying this knowledge is the sense that, if it were to be transmitted, it would cause wider harm. In my creative project, and in the chapters on Gordon and Bialosky which follow this introduction, I hope to provide some new insights into how siblings bereaved by suicide negotiate the unique combination of ethical, narrative and aesthetic pressures brought to bear on them when they seek to write of their experience.

Both critical and creative projects have been informed by my own experience as a writer and bereaved sibling, but also by my knowledge of Object-Relations theory and trauma theory. I hope that in working from this dual perspective throughout, I will be able to make an original contribution to life-writing practice and to its theory.

¹⁰² Stacey H.Kovac, Lillian M. Range, 'Writing Projects: Lessening Undergraduates' Unique Suicidal Bereavement', in *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 30 (2000), 50-60.

¹⁰³ Shanee Stepakoff, 'From destruction to creation, from silence to speech: Poetry therapy principles and practices for working with suicide grief.' in *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 36 (2009): 105-113, p. 105-6.

“‘Why can’t you just write a novel?’”: Siblinghood and survival in Hattie Gordon’s *The Café after the Pub after the Funeral*

1. Forgotten mourners

In this chapter, I will discuss Hattie Gordon’s book, *The Café after the Pub after the Funeral*, a memoir which deals with death of her mother and the suicide of her brother Gareth. I have chosen to focus on Gordon’s book as I believe it offers an unusually clear, honest and poignant account of the tensions and contradictions inherent in the sibling relationship. In *The Café after the Pub after the Funeral*, Gordon shows the reader how a sibling’s suicide can be experienced by the survivor as a relational act, to which they feel compelled to respond. I will show how Gordon is able to dramatise and re-work her relationship with her brother through the writing of her book. I will discuss her text in relation to Freud’s views on mourning, and suggest it is the re-working of a relationship, rather than the severance of it, which is the purpose of the grieving process. In examining the particular nature of the sibling relationship and its impact on mourning, I will draw on the work of psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell, psychotherapists Bank and Kahn, and the psychologist Dorothy Rowe.¹⁰⁴

I will also explore the other kinds of relational work which Gordon is able to accomplish through her writing. As mentioned in the Introduction, suicide is a trauma not only for individuals but also for families. Relationships between surviving family members can be disrupted or even severed. When one family member writes, and publishes, their account of traumatic events in their family, their actions will also have an impact on their relationship with surviving family members, for good or ill. The writing could expose conflicts, exacerbate them, or cause new ones. In the case of the Gordon family, the conflict over Hattie’s book would generate further print.

¹⁰⁴ Juliet Mitchell, (2008); Bank and Kahn, (1982); Rowe, Dorothy, *My Dearest Enemy, My Dangerous Friend : Making and Breaking Sibling Bonds* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007).

In an interview with the *Telegraph*, Gordon revealed that when she told her father, the literary agent and writer Giles Gordon, that she was planning to publish a memoir, he was not initially supportive. “‘Why can’t you just write a novel?’” he asked her.’¹⁰⁵ He went on to write a scathing attack on misery memoirs in a newspaper, prompting his daughter to respond with her own article about the value of life-writing and the importance of challenging taboos.¹⁰⁶ In the newspaper interviews that appeared around the time of her memoir’s publication, Gordon discussed her motivation for writing a memoir, explaining that, in the wake of her brother’s suicide, she had sought out accounts by sibling survivors of suicide and found none.¹⁰⁷ She told Cassandra Jardine that “‘I kept remembering how, after Gareth died, I looked for books by people who had had similar experiences and couldn’t find anything that wasn’t patronising or full of psychobabble.’”¹⁰⁸ Speaking to a journalist from the *Camden New Journal*, she added that ‘it’s frustratingly rare to find someone dealing with a loved one’s suicide in this way.’¹⁰⁹

In my Introduction, I suggested two reasons for this paucity of accounts by sibling suicide survivors like myself and Gordon, two forces which conspire to pressure us into silence. The first is the taboo nature of suicide, which leads to the suppression of the survivors’ experience.¹¹⁰ The second is the way that the biological sibling relationship has been, as Leonore Davidoff puts it, ‘strangely neglected’ in our culture, a

¹⁰⁵ Cassandra Jardine, ‘I wanted to try to make sense of it all’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 20 October 2003, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/health/3302941/I-wanted-to-try-to-make-sense-of-it-all.html>, [accessed 17/3/2016], p. 1.

¹⁰⁶ Jardine (2003), pp. 1-2.

¹⁰⁷ By ‘Gordon’, I mean Hattie Gordon. I shall refer to her father from this point as ‘Giles’.

¹⁰⁸ Jardine (2003), p. 2.

¹⁰⁹ Jonathan Allen, ‘The tragic ambition of Hattie’s big brother’, *Camden New Journal*, [undated archive piece],

http://www.camdennewjournal.co.uk/archive/111104/r111104_02.htm [accessed 17/3/2016], p. 2.

¹¹⁰ Christopher Lukas and Seiden, (2007).

fact which I shall explore further in this section.¹¹¹ The combined effect of this suppression, on one hand, and neglect, on the other, is that those who survive the suicide of a sibling are doubly disenfranchised as mourners. I saw the evidence of this disenfranchisement when I attended a one-day conference for suicide survivors, an experience I describe in *Small Pieces*:

On arrival, I am given a blue name badge: a blue badge signifies a lost sibling, pink a lost partner, white a lost child. There are plenary sessions in the morning, one addressed by a woman who trained as a psychologist after losing her brother. After lunch we split up into groups, and I join her in the smallest of these, which is for the blue-badge holders, the siblings. The group facilitator is a founder member of the organisation, who has lost a son; a man who works with the police to support bereaved families has also joined us, with our consent; the rest of us are here because we have lost brothers - or, in one case, a sister....

The facilitator opens the discussion with a short speech, explaining that as siblings we are often called 'the forgotten mourners'. As she says this, I wonder if the reason why our group is so small is that many of us wonder if we even have the right to see ourselves as wounded, compared to the parents, partners and children, the scale of whose loss is so clear to everyone who hears of it.¹¹²

If sibling bereavement is comparatively overlooked, this reflects the cultural neglect of biological siblinghood which Davidoff identifies. In her book, *Siblings*, Juliet Mitchell observes that the biological sibling has remained largely unexamined and unrepresented in Western culture.¹¹³ Mitchell suggests that this is because '[o]ur understanding of psychic and social relationships has foregrounded vertical interaction – lines of ascent and descent between ancestors, parents and children.'¹¹⁴ She also identifies a cultural focus on abstract ideals of social brotherhood 'under the banner of Western "liberty, equality and fraternity"', which serves to obscure the place of biological siblinghood in our social life.¹¹⁵ Gordon's book, which describes her relationship with her mother in the context of her relationship with her brother, could

¹¹¹ Leonore Davidoff, 'The sibling relationship and sibling incest in historical context' in Prophecy Coles (ed), *Sibling Relationships*, (London: Karnac Books, 2006), pp 17-48, p 18.

¹¹² *Small Pieces*, p 201.

¹¹³ Juliet Mitchell, (2008).

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 1

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*, p xv

thus be seen as a subversion of our cultural expectations: Gordon is implicitly suggesting that, in some families at least, it is the sibling relationships which are the more important.

To make such a suggestion would be to turn conventional clinical wisdom on its head.¹¹⁶ Where sibling relationships appear in the psychoanalytic and psychological literature, they are generally seen as secondary to the relationships between parent and child. This bias can be traced back to Freud, and his emphasis on the father-child-mother triangle represented by the Oedipus Complex. In Freud's view, it was the path taken by the infant through this complex that would shape his or her sexuality, character and – in many cases – neurosis.

This bias can be illustrated by considering Freud's account of the 'Wolf Man' case.¹¹⁷ Juliet Mitchell devotes several pages to this case history in *Siblings*; Bank and Kahn also discuss it extensively in their book, *Sibling Relationships*.¹¹⁸ In the 'Wolf-Man', Freud seems for a moment to suggest that sibling relationships could determine the aetiology of some neuroses, only to push the notion aside and return to the Oedipus Complex. The Wolf-Man had a sister, two years his senior, and, as he told Freud, when she was five and a half years old and the boy three and a quarter:

... his sister had seduced him into sexual practices. First came a recollection that in the water-closet, which the children used frequently to visit together, she had made this proposal: "Let's show one another our bottoms," and had proceeded from words to deeds. Subsequently the more essential part of the seduction came to light, with full particulars as to time and place. It was in spring, at a time when his father was away; the children were in one room playing on the floor, which their mother was working in the next. His sister had taken hold of his penis and played with it, at the same time telling him incomprehensible stories about his Nanya, as though by way of explanation. His Nanya, she said, used to do the same thing with all kinds of

¹¹⁶ Bank and Kahn (1982); Prophecy Coles, (2006); Juliet Mitchell (2008).

¹¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis'. in Sigmund Freud, James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, Alan Tyson., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud : Early Psycho-Analytic Publications. Vol. 17, 1917-1919, an Infantile Neurosis and Other Works* (London: Vintage, 2001, pp. 3-124.

¹¹⁸ Mitchell, (2008), pp 99-103; Bank and Kahn (1982).

people – for instance, with the gardener: she used to stand him on his head, and take hold of his genitals.¹¹⁹

There is no sexual activity in the story of Hattie Gordon and Gareth, but both Hattie and the Wolf-Man suffered a great deal of ill-treatment at the hands of their older siblings. The Wolf-Man recounted that his sister was aggressive towards him, that she enjoyed making him look stupid, and would torment him with a terrifying picture of a wolf. It would be reasonable, then, to suppose that his obsessional neurosis, and the nightmare of wolves in the trees from which the case takes its name, had their origin in his sister's treatment of him. However, Freud thought differently: as the case history unfolds, the sibling relationship – which is mentioned very near the beginning – fades into the background, as Freud ascribes the greatest significance to a primal scene which he understands the Wolf-Man to have observed as an infant. For Freud, the interaction between siblings, while worth noting, was of secondary importance, only significant in its effect on the crucial developing psychosexual relationship between parent and child.

As both Juliet Mitchell and Prophecy Coles have observed, this preoccupation with the vertical relationship has continued to hold sway in psychoanalytic theory.¹²⁰ While Object-Relations theorists, following on from Melanie Klein, differed from Freud in their emphasising the relationship between the infant and its mother, rather than that of the child and its father, they continued to view siblings mainly as competitors for maternal resources. Consequently, relationships between siblings were still overshadowed by their shared relationship to the main object of their instinctual drives, the mother: siblings were not seen as objects of love or aggression in their own right. As I shall show in this chapter, sibling competition is a theme in Gordon's account of her relationship with her brother, but not, in the end, the dominant one. In Bialosky's book, which I discuss in the next chapter, sibling rivalry barely figures at all.

¹¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, 'A Case of Infantile Neurosis', p. 20.

¹²⁰ Prophecy Coles, (2006).

This cultural and clinical neglect of the relationship they have lost has painful consequences for bereaved siblings, these ‘forgotten mourners’. When we lose one significant connection, we look to make others; we look for connection with those who can understand our loss. This is what I was seeking, along with my fellow blue badge-wearers, when I attended the session at the suicide survivors’ conference. Like Hattie Gordon, I also searched for connection on bookshelves, for the ‘rendez-vous, as it were, with the other’ which Nancy K. Miller has written about in her work on the relationship between writers of memoir, readers of memoir, and the text in which they meet.¹²¹ Like Hattie Gordon, when I failed to find my consoling ‘rendez-vous’ as a reader, I decided to attempt one as a writer. Writing, circulating and publishing accounts of experience is in part a way of re-establishing a connection with community which traumatic loss and the silence around it has severed. As I shall explore in the next section, it is also a means of re-establishing and re-negotiating the relationship with the lost sibling.

2. ‘A hatred that has been overcome’ Violence and retaliation¹²²

The Café after the Pub after the Funeral is a product not only of Hattie Gordon’s desire to reach out to the living, but also of her need to address her continuing relationships with her dead mother and brother. She knows from experience that ‘[t]hey exert an influence, the dead over the living.’¹²³ Although our dead loved ones are no longer present as living, separate physical beings, they persist as objects within the psyche of the survivor, and as such they retain their role as significant others. The Kleinian psychoanalyst Paula Heimann, in her paper on an artist’s struggle with her internal objects, provides a vivid description of these ‘objects’ as dynamic ‘memory-traces’:

¹²¹ Nancy K. Miller, (2000).

¹²² Juliet Mitchell, (2008), p. 26.

¹²³ Hattie Gordon, *The Café After the Pub After the Funeral* (London; New York: Continuum, 2003), p. 174.

The memory-traces of psychological experience, past and present, are not static imprints like photographs, but moving and living dreams, like never-ending scenes on a stage. These inner dramas are composed of the subject and her instinctual impulses towards original objects (father, mother, brother and their later substitutes, up to and including the analyst), who are seen as they had been felt and are felt to be under the impact of her impulses; in addition, the objects also display her own impulses.¹²⁴

According to Freud, the work of mourning consists in the acknowledgement of the reality that 'the loved object no longer exists' and the gradual, painful withdrawal of the self 'from its attachments to that object'.¹²⁵ This work is 'carried out bit by bit, at great expense of time and ... energy, and in the meantime the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged.'¹²⁶ The work which Freud describes is painful and long drawn-out even in the most straightforward case. The traumatic bereavement that follows a suicide further complicates this difficult work¹²⁷.

Gordon's book testifies to the fact that, after a suicide, the task of grieving threatens to overwhelm the survivor. She writes:

I know the sister who resides in pain. She who lost when you won your death. The sister that got trapped as she was when you passed away. Always a child to an older brother. The sister caught near your death. The sister that aged. Felt worn-away at twenty-one.¹²⁸

In these lines, Gordon describes herself as someone for whom the flow of life, and of time, has been disrupted by trauma: she is at once 'trapped' at the point of Gareth's death, stuck in her childhood role as little sister, and thrown forward to the end of her life. Images of entrapment appear earlier in the book, where they are associated with ideas of punishment and persecution: 'I was held hostage to dreams of guilt, accusation

¹²⁴ Paula Heimann, 'A contribution to the problem of sublimation and its relation to processes of internalization (1939/42) in *About Children and Children-no-Longer: Collected Papers 1942-80* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 31-32.

¹²⁵ Freud, Sigmund, 'Mourning and Melancholia', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume 14*, (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 244.

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 245.

¹²⁷ Lukas and Seiden, (2007), p. 34.

¹²⁸ Gordon (2003), p. 81.

and pain in the aftermath of Gareth's death. Stalked in the night when I should have had peace...' ¹²⁹

This painful, frightening internal landscape is represented most vividly in an account of a dream Gordon had in the period immediately following Gareth's suicide. In this dream, she answers the door of her family home to find Gareth there 'seething, his face shines forth an explosive anger. I don't want to let him into the house, don't want to be tarnished by his state of mind, don't want to be caught in his force. A mouse in a mousetrap. As he starts opening the door that keeps only inches of safety between us, pushing what protects me, I muster all my strength in a futile attempt to keep it closed.' ¹³⁰ A struggle follows, which the terrified Gordon knows her brother must inevitably win. Gordon catches sight of an old friend in the street; this friend greets her but does not respond to her call for help. At the very moment when the friend 'vanishes into her house', Gareth stops pushing:

Abruptly, he unexpectedly releases his Samson strength from the door. It is ajar and we stand facing each other as though time is standing still. I have no idea what he will do next because he is so hurt. I fear ruthlessness surfaces most when we are hurt. The pathos on his face eats into my own face, his green eyes stolen from some sea creature speak of terror and he says, 'You never loved me anyway.' ¹³¹

Up to the point when Gareth releases the door, the dream presents the siblings as locked in conflict. The language in which Gordon recounts the dream recalls her description of herself as '[s]he who lost when you won your death'. In the context of their relationship, his sister Hattie experiences his suicide as an attack on her, a final move that has ended their fight and made him the victor, even though it has cost him his life. As I shall show, Gordon's text could be seen as a means of re-addressing this conflict, replaying it in the hope of a more equitable outcome.

¹²⁹ Gordon, (2003), p. 65.

¹³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 65

¹³¹ *ibid.*, p. 66

In her book *Siblings*, Juliet Mitchell addresses the neglected sibling relationship, and offers a way of understanding the conflicts that are dramatized in Gordon's nightmare. Just as Freud and Klein uncovered violence and sexuality in parent-child relationships, so Juliet Mitchell identifies strong forces at work in relationships between siblings, which, like those of the Oedipus complex, may threaten the individual, the family, and the social order if they remain unresolved. She suggests that a sibling presents an existential conundrum, perhaps even an existential threat: my sibling is both like and unlike me; my sibling could even be an alternative me, a replacement me. She suggests that, initially, love of a sibling is not object-love, but narcissistic love, in which violence and sexuality, in contrast to the Oedipal scenario, are aimed towards

...the same person. This proximity of sex and violence between siblings affects both aspects of the equation. There is a fundamental desire to murder your sibling. It too meets a prohibition: you must not kill your brother Abel; you must instead love your brother (neighbour) *as yourself*. The violence must be turned into love – but the possibility of love is already there in the love one has for oneself, what, in psychoanalytic terminology, is called narcissism. How does narcissism become love of another, object-love? It seems to me that the ambivalence towards siblings is an integral part of this transformation. What is the violence that is born at the same time as love?¹³²

In a more succinct statement, Mitchell describes the peculiar structure of sibling-love in the following terms:

I suggest loving one's sibling *like oneself* is neither exactly narcissism nor object-love. It is narcissism transmuted by a hatred that has been overcome.¹³³

The hatred in the sibling relationship depicted in Gordon's book is not difficult to find. The symbolic struggle depicted in her dream reflects many scenes of real violence in the book, typically with Gareth as aggressor and Hattie as victim. Gareth's violent antipathy to his sister was such that at its worst, as Gordon puts it: 'If I accidentally caught his eye, he'd thump me.'¹³⁴ Mitchell offers an explanation for this hatred, particularly when it is hatred for a younger sibling. As she acknowledges, the

¹³² Mitchell, (2008), p. 35.

¹³³ *ibid.*, p. 26

¹³⁴ Gordon, (2003), p 154.

arrival of a sibling is understood to be traumatic for the older child, particularly when that child is a toddler ‘at the height of his/her phallic omnipotence’.¹³⁵ ‘The list of problems that can accompany the reception of a new sibling includes eating disorders, phobias, bed-wetting, imaginary companions, hatred, violence, “false selves”, serious illnesses, night-horrors and terror of death.’¹³⁶ The child sees the sibling – real, or if she is a youngest or only child, potential – as an opponent in a zero-sum game, whose victory would mean annihilation: mother can have only one baby. If the child manages to work through this trauma, he or she will come to understand that in fact this is not a zero-sum game: sibling differences are serial, not binary.¹³⁷ She need neither destroy nor merge with the other, but can live alongside him.

The dream image of Gareth and Hattie struggling at the front door could be read as a powerful symbol of sibling survival as a zero-sum game. The language of winning and losing which Gordon employs when describing herself as a bereaved sister is also strongly suggestive of siblinghood as a battle for survival. Another passage in her book treats the theme of competition for resources in the most explicit way possible. It begins with Gordon’s explaining that ‘Gareth was particular about his food’ and adds that he consumed ‘a staggering amount’ of it.¹³⁸ She describes his behaviour on family trips to their local Chinese restaurant, where ‘Gareth would plunge into the food as if he had starved for days. My father said he ate *like a ravenous vulture* [my italics]... Such was his pace that the rest of us hardly stood a chance of keeping up. *The table became a*

¹³⁵ Mitchell in Prophecy Coles, (2006), p. 157.

¹³⁶ Mitchell, (2006), p. 159.

¹³⁷ These differences are not only serial, but also often both numerous and significant. Judy Dunn and Robert Plomin explore this at length in *Separate Lives: Why Siblings Are So Different* (New York: Basic Books, 1990). According to Dunn and Plomin, these can be accounted for by differences both in genetics and in environment, as no two siblings can have exactly the same childhood, even if they share both parents as well as a home.

¹³⁸ Gordon, (2003), p. 67.

battlefield for the survival of the fittest, or rather, the quickest [my italics].¹³⁹ This is yet another instance of siblinghood as a zero-sum game: either Hattie or Gareth can survive, and only at the other's expense. In passages like these, Gareth appears as a persecutory object: in object-relations terms, he is imbued with Gordon's own internally-projected aggressive impulses, which have been disavowed.

This is not to suggest that all the aggression in the dream has its origins in Gordon's violent, instinctive inner world. If Gordon's book is such a good illustration of the existential threat within the sibling relationship, it is partly because, in Hattie and Gareth's case, the threat was quite concrete. Gareth, a middle child who had been the youngest until Hattie's birth, resented his sister from the outset, and was extremely violent towards her. Gordon writes that:

From as far back as I can remember, until I was about twelve, Gareth had hated me with a passion. The slightest thing could set him off. Looking at him the wrong way, getting a larger portion of food than him at dinner, sitting in a chair that he wanted to sit in, or being in a room that he wanted to occupy alone. At breakfast we would sit on opposite sides of the table and my mother would put a cereal box between us because if I looked at him he would hit me.¹⁴⁰

Although the violence towards Hattie was at its worst when the siblings were younger, only stopping when Gareth was sent away to boarding school, he continued to attack her after he returned. Throughout his life, Gareth would often be in a state of extreme psychological distress, and when he was distressed, he could be dangerous. Gordon's best hope of protecting herself lay in doing her 'best to disappear,' quite literally.¹⁴¹

On the stairs I would sink into the wall. Flatten my reed-thin self against it, giving him all the space and praying he might not notice me because I had squashed myself as much as I could. Into the funny wallpaper that looked as though rice had been scattered behind it. I turned my face to the wall and looked down so I couldn't be accused of catching his eye, of challenging him and his eyes that didn't want to see me. The one who was supposed to be unseen, so why was I on the stairs? I

¹³⁹ Gordon, (2003), pp. 67-8.

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 153-4

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 154

couldn't explain why I was there because I shouldn't have been. He saw and he punched.¹⁴²

Frightened both *of* her brother and *for* him, Hattie did not retaliate until she was fifteen, by which time their mother and older brother Callum had both left the family home, leaving Hattie and her father to cope with Gareth when he was not in hospital. For most of Hattie's life, her mother had been preoccupied with the impossible task of looking after her disturbed middle child, and when she could not cope with him anymore, her solution was to move away. In the competition for maternal resources, Hattie has lost, and lost again. Since their mother has moved away, she has had to move, unmothered, into the mother's position, shopping for Gareth, sometimes cooking for him and filling in forms for him, since he is 'unable or unwilling to do those things for himself.'¹⁴³ When she finally snaps, it is after their mother has visited Gareth at home and the row between the siblings is sparked by conflict over their relationship with their mother.

Heaving distortions reigned prolifically in his thoughts. I was trying to get inside his head. I was trying to control him. Then one day, following one of my mother's regular visits to him, with villainous rage, he shouted out that I was manipulating her. I went nuts. I'd lost her to him early on in life and he was accusing me. The gall, I couldn't stand it. For the first time I shouted back at him, I thought he was going to hit me and wouldn't have cared if he had, I had stopped feeling blows long ago. Surprisingly he didn't raise a finger. I ran out of the house to my mother who was beginning to drive away, back to her sanctuary away from us. I told her if she wanted to have her life back she should leave Gareth alone.¹⁴⁴

Not long after this incident, Gordon's mother developed a rare muscle-wasting disease, and within a few months she had died. Gareth's response when Hattie tells him the news shows his inability to perceive other people except in relation to himself: "Well, this doesn't exactly help my situation does it?" He didn't know how to express anything else.'¹⁴⁵ Gordon goes on to recount the story of the fight Gareth and their

¹⁴² *ibid.*, p. 159

¹⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 150

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 151

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 102

father had over who was to sit in the front car seat on the way to the funeral. ‘It was a ridiculous quarrel’, she writes. ‘As head of the family our father thought he should be sitting in it. Gareth thought he was entitled to it in the same way he thought he was entitled to everything... Saying no to Gareth usually ended up in subtle acts of violence. He pushed and pushed until it ended in loudness and hurt. Selfishness thrives well in depression. It grows grabbing limbs which see no other way, leeching others of what they have.’¹⁴⁶

Gordon has described the brother who tormented her as a ‘ravenous vulture’, and now as a leech.¹⁴⁷ Gareth is long dead and cannot answer back. Hattie may describe her brother as having ‘won’ with his death, but in the most literal sense, it is Hattie who has survived, and therefore Hattie who has won the zero-sum game of rivalrous siblinghood. She is still alive and able to write and publish her version of the family narrative. Having survived her brother’s murderous rage, she is now free to avenge herself on him by destroying him in print, if she chooses.

Certainly, through most of the book, the portrait she depicts is an ugly one, in turns terrifying and abject. The abject aspect of Gordon’s representation of her brother is at its most evident in a harrowing passage shortly after the beginning of the book, which opens with her receiving the news that Gareth has died, at the age of 24, after the latest of a long series of suicide attempts has succeeded. Gordon tells us that Gareth died alone in his flat, and that his body was only found after several days had past, by which time it had begun to decompose. She and her older brother Callum have the task of clearing out his flat:

We went back to the bedroom, entered it, got close to the bed, where the smell was the worst. On blood stains, where his dying body had leaked, clans of maggots had hatched in his mattress, nourished by the aftermath of rotting flesh. It was repellent. Wriggling insects feeding on my brother’s deathbed. We threw the mattress out of the front window, then debated whether to put it in a skip that was in the street, or burn it.

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 103-4

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p 68

Burning won for fear of further contamination. At the edge of the road, some distance from the parked cars, we started the fire, the cremation of his bed. A middle-aged man came out of his house, he looked shocked, pious, at the potential neighbourhood hazard. ‘Do you think you should be doing that there?’

Looking up, we saw people were coming out of their houses up and down the street. They watched, but none of them said or did anything. They knew. My ever-patient brother, rather than flying into a rage, replied ‘Where would you like me to do it?’

We joked that this could have been evidence of an immaculate murder we had committed, and they were thinking it couldn’t be, surely we wouldn’t be burning the evidence so blatantly in front of their many greedy eyes. They didn’t question it. Because they knew. They just watched.

We returned to his flat and rooted through his private possessions like searching burglars.¹⁴⁸

The language Gordon uses here, where she speaks of herself and Callum as appearing to commit the ‘immaculate murder’ of their brother, which they follow by ‘root[ing] through his private possessions like searching burglars’ is very striking. It suggests that, like the dream of the struggle over the front door, the text of the book itself represents a playing-out of the deathly conflict that continues between herself and those memories of Gareth. It would seem that Gordon has internalised her memories of her brother and condensed them into an object in her internal world. She is engaged in conflict not with the actual Gareth, who is dead, but with the internal object which represents him.

This language of self-accusation also suggests that Gordon is well aware of the way in which her own perceptions colour her account of her family’s life. As she acknowledges later in the book, ‘No one person’s sense of history is the truth.’¹⁴⁹ When she writes about Gareth’s violence towards her, she describes how she remembers her body, in childhood, as constantly covered in bruises. She goes on to explain that how a conversation between her brothers called this memory into question: ‘Years later when Callum asked [Gareth] why he used to hit me, he innocently denied all knowledge of

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 62

¹⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p 179

ever having done so, and I questioned the purple composites' past existence.'¹⁵⁰ The psychological literature on sibling relationships confirms that the family narrative is central to the sibling relationship across the life-cycle. It can be disputed and fought-over, yet another battleground in the never-ending sibling conflict. It can also be shared, a means of maintaining a positive sibling bond.

In her popular psychology book, *My Dearest Enemy, My Dangerous Friend: Making and Breaking Sibling Bonds*, Dorothy Rowe explains how sibling conflict can be played out in disagreements over the family narrative, the narrative of their shared – or not shared? – childhood:

The ferocity of sibling arguments about past events is often based on the belief that there is one true account of the past...

Those who believe that there is only one true account of events overlook the fact that different people cannot help but see things from different points of view. Where siblings are concerned this may be literally so. Two year olds live in a world of giants, while a healthy twelve year old may be able to look adults in the eye. But when it comes to interpreting events, no two people ever see anything in exactly the same way. Two people can be involved in the same event but only one of them feels invalidated by the event.

When adult siblings compare notes about their childhoods one sibling may have no recollection of an event that the other remembers well. Sometimes one sibling will remember the event but not the feelings that were aroused in the other sibling. A remark like 'I didn't think you were upset' can be extremely hurtful. Equally hurtful can be 'I know you always felt that Dad didn't love you but he really cared for you a lot', because it implies that the other sibling has misinterpreted events and has no right to feel unloved.¹⁵¹

While Rowe focusses on the ways in which the siblings may dispute the family narrative, Jennifer Silverstone suggests that 'siblings can hold the family narrative for each other, and become the containers for the history of their childhood.'¹⁵² In this way, they can perform what would normally be a 'maternal function' for each other.¹⁵³

Callum and Hattie are able to perform this positive role in each other's lives: the very last page of the book is taken up with a photograph of the two of them, smiling together.

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 157

¹⁵¹ Rowe, (2007), pp. 213-4.

¹⁵² Jennifer Silverstone, 'Siblings' in Coles, 225-246, p. 225.

¹⁵³ Silverstone, p. 226.

Callum has his arm around his younger sister, and holds the camera in his other hand: he is holding the frame for them both.

The photograph of Gordon and Callum leaves the reader with a reminder that there is love and protection in the Gordon family narrative, as well as violence and conflict. Gordon's book does not consist solely of a demolition of Gareth, the lost sibling. As I shall show in the next section, it is also an expression of Gordon's love for him, of her desire to protect him and to make reparations for any damage she feels she may have done to him, in life or on the page.

3. 'When my heart is pulled in the night, I wonder who is pulling it.' Love, guilt and reparation ¹⁵⁴

If the story Gordon tells featured nothing but the record of Gareth's aggression towards her, and her correspondingly violent textual response, then it would be the perfect illustration of the reductive model of the sibling relationship as one of competition for maternal resources. That it is far more complex and nuanced reflects the complicated, ambivalent nature of the relationship between the Gordon siblings in particular, and between siblings in general. As I discussed in the previous section, Juliet Mitchell has described the sibling relationship as a combination of object-love and narcissistic love: it is love both for the sibling as loved object, and for that same sibling as an image of the self.

There are as many possible combinations and permutations of these two kinds of love as there are sibling pairs, and many different variables at play. Birth order is one. When a new child is born into a family, an older child, who has defined herself in relation to her parents, must now also define herself in relation to the new child. For a younger child, the situation is different: they are coming into a world in which the older

¹⁵⁴ Gordon, (2003), p. 173.

child is an established presence. Some even appear to form a stronger attachment to the older sibling than to anyone else. As Bank and Kahn point out, this is especially likely in families where the parents are physically absent, emotionally absent, or in some way abusive. Then, siblings are vital to each other's psychic – and even physical survival: this is the Hansel and Gretel scenario familiar from folklore.¹⁵⁵ In the Gordons' case, their mother would leave the family home, and it would be the younger sibling, Hattie, who would become the carer for an older brother.¹⁵⁶

According to Bank and Kahn, the strength of the emotional bond 'depends on something we came to call "access". Clearly there are numerous pairs of siblings who go through life *not* resonating to one another. Such siblings appear to have little emotional impact upon one another. These are what we call "low access" siblings, and tend to be apart in age, have shared little time, space or personal history...'¹⁵⁷ Sibling pairs like Hattie and Gareth, on the other hand, who share the same space for most of their lives, are 'high access' siblings. Bank and Kahn explain the other factors that influence the level of sibling access:

Similarity in age and sex promotes access to common life events. Difference in sex and age diminishes access... The earlier access begins, and the more prolonged it is, the more intense will be the relationship between siblings when it is stressed by the issues of separation, death, and comparison in later life.¹⁵⁸

Bank and Kahn see this bond as '... a connection between the selves, at both the intimate and public levels, of two siblings; it is a "fitting" together of two peoples' identities. The bond is sometimes warm and positive, but may also be negative. Thus, for example, rivalrous siblings who hate each other can be considered to be "bound" if

¹⁵⁵ Jill Bialosky writes of just such a situation in *History of a Suicide*.

¹⁵⁶ It is of course Gretel, the sister, who rescues Hansel, the brother, from the witch who plans to eat him.

¹⁵⁷ Bank and Kahn, (1982), pp. 9-10.

¹⁵⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 9-10

their identities have any influence on each other.’¹⁵⁹ Gordon and her brother Gareth could be classified as “high access” siblings, and her memoir is, literally, a testament to his continued impact on her life even after death. The fact that Gordon’s relationship with Gareth was so often characterised by violence and paranoia on his part, and fear and resentment on hers, affected the quality of their bond, but not its intensity or its importance in their lives.

According to Bank and Kahn, ‘[t]hrough the sibling relationship, one gets the sense of both being a distinct individual and of constancy through knowing a sibling as a predictable person.’¹⁶⁰ The way in which the sibling bond affects the individual’s sense of identity varies. Siblings might experience themselves as merged or twinned.¹⁶¹ A child may identify herself with their sibling, model herself on her, or define herself in opposition: I wish to be nothing like her, and am whatever she is not. One sibling may idealise another, and wish to model herself on her idol.¹⁶² These patterns of identification are not confined to same-sex pairs; as I will show, they can also be observed in opposite-sex pairs, such as Hattie and Gareth.

Other sibling relationships are complementary, as for example between a caretaker and care receiver, or between the one who dominates and one who is dominated.¹⁶³ Siblings may be cast as opposites within the family, for example in cases where one child is ‘good’ and one ‘bad’.¹⁶⁴ One sibling may identify with one parent, while another identifies with the other parent.¹⁶⁵ The combined effect of all these different operations - of narcissistic identification, of object-love, projective identification and introjection - will be unique to each family, and will play their part in

¹⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 15

¹⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p. 15

¹⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 38

¹⁶² *ibid.*, p.93

¹⁶³ *ibid.*, p. 62

¹⁶⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 23-4

¹⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p. 218

determining the nature of the sibling bond and in shaping the individual's identity. In Gordon's book, we can see these forces at work.

In *The Café after the Pub after the Funeral*, it is clear that one pair of roles Gareth and Hattie played in relation to each other was that of persecutor and victim. One's first impression, when reading Gordon's account is that it was Gareth who took the role of relentless persecutor. That he attacked Hattie physically and that she had little defence against his violence is stated again and again in the book. However, the fact that Gareth denied it when challenged by Callum suggests that, in his psyche at least, the truth was more ambiguous. During a row he has with Hattie after their mother has moved out, he accuses his sister of a kind of psychological violence towards him, a suggestion she angrily rejects:

Heaving distortions reigned prolifically in his thoughts. I was trying to get inside his head. I was trying to control him. Then one day, following one of my mother's regular visits to him, with villainous rage, he shouted out that I was manipulating her. I went nuts. I'd lost her to him early on in life and he was accusing me. The gall, I couldn't stand it. For the first time I shouted back at him, I thought he was going to hit me and wouldn't have cared if he had...¹⁶⁶

Gordon's assertion that she has 'lost' her mother to Gareth is supported by the records kept by professionals who tried to help the family. She devotes a substantial part of the book to a detailed examination of this evidence. She combs through her mother's and Gareth's medical notes, and speaks to her mother's social worker. The social worker describes Gareth and his mother as 'enmeshed', meaning that their psyches were so closely bound up with each other that it was not possible to view them, or their various psychological difficulties, as separate.¹⁶⁷ She explains that Gordon's mother was initially referred for psychotherapy because there was some concern that she had given Gareth the aspirin he used for his first overdose. Gareth's role in the family was

¹⁶⁶ Gordon, (2003), p. 151.

¹⁶⁷ *ibid.*, p. 169

partly determined by his mother's preoccupation with him and his monopolisation of her attention, to the point where Hattie felt herself to be forbidden access to it.

On the other hand, Gordon understands that she has not been the only injured party. It is Gareth, not Hattie, who was sent away to boarding school for several years; the care he receives when he is not in hospital is almost non-existent; Hattie's belief that Gareth has all their mother's attention is mirrored by Gareth's sense that Hattie has first claim on their father's:

When he wasn't in hospital, there was little or no care for him. We were supposed to handle him, but we didn't know how to and no professional gave us advice on what was best for him, and us, when he was at home.

My feelings towards Gareth changed when my mother made the flippant comment that he disliked me because I was the apple of our father's eye and he was jealous. Like most things she spat it out as though it were common knowledge.

'You know he's envious of you because of Dad.'¹⁶⁸

As Gordon writes, this casual remark of her mother's leads to a change in her feelings about her brother, and, crucially, to the way she understands herself in relation to him:

From then on I decided that I would make a concerted effort to be nice to him rather than just keep out of his way. I wrote him letters while he was at boarding school, one a week, so that he would receive something before he came home for the weekend. I started buying him small gifts for when he arrived on a Friday night, peace offerings. I made fudge and cakes for him so that he would feel spoilt by food.¹⁶⁹

After this turning point, Gordon writes that the siblings 'became fond of one another, we began to laugh together and enjoy each other's company.'¹⁷⁰ Her book therefore is more than just the record of persecution escaped, not only the account of a victor in a life-or-death struggle: it is also an act of love, a testament to the life of someone valued and lost.¹⁷¹ The very last chapter in the book describes Gareth's love of 'engines and things he could make move' and his exceptional understanding of

¹⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p. 160

¹⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 161

¹⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p. 161

¹⁷¹ Although, as Meg Jensen has pointed out, the phrase 'peace offerings' would suggest that this loving act is still driven partly by the need for self-protection.

aeronautics.¹⁷² Callum and Hattie decided to scatter Gareth's ashes at Ivinghoe Beacon, where he used to fly remote control gliders – the place where he was able to exercise mastery and feel free and happy. The implication of their act, and of Hattie's placement of it at the end of the text, is that this is the Gareth she wishes her readers to take into themselves and remember, rather than the aggressive, unhappy young man who has cast his shadow over so much of the book.

The book reveals the relationship between Gordon and Gareth to be multifaceted and complex: they are competitors; they are aggressor and victim; they are companions with a shared culture of jokes and memories; they also have a complementary relationship as caregiver and care receiver. By the time Hattie finally snaps and shouts back at her brother, she has already stepped into the role of main caregiver that their mother has vacated. Like the other aspects of Gordon's relationship to Gareth, this is manifest in and through the text of the book. Shortly after she has described the nightmare in which she and Gareth struggle over the front door, she recounts another dream. It is also a nightmare, but in it the sibling relationship, and the emotions that arise from it, are configured very differently.

Next I was to eat my brother. Ingest his corpse into my flesh in a butcher's trick of alchemy.

I step down wooden stairs into a vast basement. A friend and I begin preparing dinner on a monumental wooden table. We chop vegetables, copious amounts of vegetables, and toss them into a large cauldron-like pot, blackened from years of naked flames, layer upon layer of burning. We are making a stew for everyone in the house. The mummified body of my brother, which lies on the table, is added to our stew in small sections. We didn't cut him up and there is no anatomical mess, but there is chopped up in to pre-prepared neat pieces which we add one after the other along with diced aubergine and chunks of potato. This is normal, nothing to be afraid of. When the stew is cooked we gather around this table to sate our rumbling tummies. Only the two of us deceitful chefs know that we are all demolishing my brother, no one else is aware he passes our lips. His nutrients enter our blood stream and he becomes alive within us.¹⁷³

¹⁷² Gordon (2003), p, 187.

¹⁷³ *ibid.*, pp. 66-67

The placement of this dream within the book, between the account of the door dream and the description of Gareth in a Chinese restaurant ravenously consuming the resources meant for a whole family, might suggest that this dream simply dramatizes Gordon's equally violent revenge: she cooks and is then 'demolishing' her brother; she is the victorious survivor of their life and death struggle; the family history is hers to write, and she can demolish his character without fear of retaliation. This is not a triumphant dream, however. Instead it is a dream shot through with guilt of different kinds. There is the guilt of the survivor of a zero-sum sibling conflict, who knows that she can only remain alive over her brother's dead body. There is the guilt of the family life-writer, transforming her dead brother into literary stew, the 'deceitful chef' whose readers do not realise the magnitude of the crime in which they have become the unwitting accomplices.¹⁷⁴ In the dream of the front door, Gareth was identified as the aggressor; in her account of this dream, as Hattie chops and eats, there is a suggestion

¹⁷⁴ This dream has an obvious folktale quality, and it is reminiscent of a tale which resonated very powerfully with my own guilt at not only surviving my brother, but also using his life and death in my writing. It is called 'Moyshele and Sheyndelev', and appears in *Yiddish Folktales*, edited by Beatrice Silverman Weinrich and translated by Leonard Wolf. Like Hansel and Gretel, Moyshele and his sister Sheyndelev lose their mother and have her replaced by a cruel stepmother. One day, she makes them a meal, putting Moyshele's food in a pot and Sheyndelev's on a plate. She warns Moyshele that if the pot breaks, she will chop off his head, and Sheyndelev that her legs will be forfeit if the plate is broken. While she is out, a rooster knocks over the pot. When she returns, she takes Moyshele into another room, supposedly to wash his hair, but really to chop off his head and cook it in secret. She feeds it to Sheyndelev, who, 'unaware of what she was eating, sucked the marrow from the bones and threw them out of the window.' (p 55) A new Moyshele grows out of the mound of earth covering his bones, and sings the following song:

*Murdered by my mother,
Eaten by my father,
and Sheyndelev, when they were done,
Sucked the marrow from my bones
And threw them out the window.*

Although Sheyndelev and her father have been duped, the song depicts them as guilty parties in Moyshele's destruction. The implication is clear: Sheyndelev is a bad sister, who has taken nourishment from her brother's death.

that she is taking back her own aggressive impulses, her capacity for action, so that the Hattie that has had to ‘disappear’ can begin, literally, to fill out, take up space.

Some of the guilt that pervades the dream could be attached to Gordon’s role as care-giver, and one who may feel herself to be in some way responsible for Gareth’s death and for the unrelieved suffering that led to it. The dream casts her in a nurturing role, making a stew for the family. As cook for family and friends, she cannot be entirely at fault: her brother is ‘pre-prepared’ and the task is ‘normal, nothing to be afraid of’. It is even possible that this cookery is ultimately for Gareth’s benefit, as when ‘his nutrients enter our bloodstream’, ‘he becomes alive within us’.

There is therefore a hint, contained within the final image of this dream scenario, that perhaps if Gordon can work through and assimilate her grief fully, if she can in a sense ‘digest’ and ‘metabolise’ it, she may then be able to resurrect an image of her brother as a healthy, living object within her. In this image, Hattie the surviving self and Gareth the internalised object are nurturing each other: his continued existence is dependent upon his presence in Hattie’s psyche; she in turn has taken in ‘his nutrients’. If this mutually nurturing relationship with a continuing internal object is the successful outcome of the mourning process, then it seems to some extent to contradict Freud’s view of mourning as chiefly ‘a work of severance’, from an object which in reality has been ‘abolished’.¹⁷⁵ In her article ‘How we laid our demons to rest’, Gordon explains that her father, at least at first, saw her writing of the book as a failure, or postponement, of such a healthy, successful severance. She writes that ‘Dad was clear from the outset: “Leave it alone, it’s bad for your health. Let it go and move on.”’¹⁷⁶

Gordon’s response to this indicates her awareness of her life-writing as a form of productive mourning, or grief-work, using imagery reminiscent of the cutting and

¹⁷⁵ Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, p. 255.

¹⁷⁶ Hattie Gordon, ‘How we laid our demons to rest’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 22 September 2004, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3624311/How-we-laid-our-demons-to-rest.html>, accessed 17/03/2016, p. 2.

chopping in her cookery dream: ‘I tried to explain that, to move on, I had to first dissect what had happened, so that I could end the chapter, literally close the book and put it on the shelf.’¹⁷⁷ There is an unavoidable amount of violence and aggression involved in the ‘dissection’ of the memories of her mother and Gareth as they are made into material suitable to be assimilated into a text, but this is only a necessary stage in the work of their ultimate textual reconstruction. In her interview with Gordon, Jardine explains how, in the writing of the book, the author was able to transform her ongoing relationships with the memories of her mother and brother:

Gradually, she began to understand the dynamics of her family better and, at times, she felt stupid. Why hadn’t she realised that Gareth resented her for being their father’s favourite? Why hadn’t she understood that, when her mother appeared distant and unloving, it was because she was depressed?

She had only partly appreciated the strain that Gareth’s behaviour put on her mother’s mental and physical health, let alone the difficulties it caused in her parents’ marriage. There were moments of guilt, too. It was hard remembering the times, shortly before Gareth’s death, when she would avoid him rather than face his sadness and anger. And it was with a sense of waste that she learnt about how dyslexia caused him to be underrated and frustrated at school.¹⁷⁸

I would argue that the successful outcome of Gordon’s work as mourner and writer is not a simple severance of her attachment to her mother and brother as objects, but a reconstruction of them as whole and separate from herself, with their own narratives and their own perspectives. Gordon’s dream of cooking and eating Gareth depicts this reconstructive work as a benign process whereby she takes her brother into herself and thereby gives him new life. The greater part of this work takes place in the second half of the book, in Chapters Eight and Nine, in which Gordon turns her attention to medical records, and to her encounters with the professionals who were involved with her family. Although her researches cannot deliver any definitive answers as to what troubled Gareth, who never received a conclusive psychiatric diagnosis, they do help her to begin to mourn not only for what she has lost herself, but to mourn *on*

¹⁷⁷ Gordon (2004), p. 2.

¹⁷⁸ Jardine, (2003), p. 2.

behalf of Gareth and their mother, for their thwarted lives. At the end of Chapter Nine she writes:

Towards the end of his life Gareth became more and more aware of how institutionalized he had become over the years. He bore a sense of dread over the past which outweighed any optimism he might have conjured up for his future. As his depression left him in ways ever so slight, this became a reason in itself to be melancholic. He mourned for the life he'd missed. He lacked education, work experience and relationships he had faith in. He saw only what he didn't have, not what he could have. The stronger Gareth became the more he talked of what he'd missed out on. There seemed to be no going forward in thoughts or actions. He didn't know how to, didn't know how to move. Looking at the aftermath was too painful to live with.¹⁷⁹

To see Gareth's life through Gareth's eyes is an act of empathy on Gordon's part, an act of love. To use Juliet Mitchell's terms, the book represents her overcoming of hatred for her sibling, and the growth of her capacity for love. It is a process symbolised in the difference between Hattie's two dreams: the first dream shows the siblings engaged in a violent struggle to the death, while the second ends with them living together in one body, nourishing each other. It can also be seen in the trajectory of the text as a whole. The book begins with two policemen delivering the news of Gareth's death to Hattie, a traumatic interruption of her day which is heralded by the invasive 'pitch of the doorbell' as it 'filled [the house's] rooms and hallways.'¹⁸⁰ It closes with a very different scene, in which Hattie and her brother take gentle leave of Gareth by scattering his ashes in a place that he loved: no longer a disruptive presence, his memory can be integrated into the world. He 'gallops in time to the wind'.

In this section, I have been discussing this in terms of object-love – love of the other – but Mitchell offers a different model for sibling love, suggesting that 'loving one's sibling *like oneself* is neither exactly narcissism nor object-love. It is narcissism transmuted by a hatred that has been overcome.'¹⁸¹ In this next section, I shall examine

¹⁷⁹ Gordon, (2003), pp. 177-8.

¹⁸⁰ Gordon, (2003), p. 1.

¹⁸¹ Mitchell, (2008), p. 26.

another thread which runs through Gordon's book: that of Hattie's identification with her brother.

4. 'That pathos on this face eats into my own face'¹⁸²

At the end of the dream of the front door, the struggle ceases and Gareth and Hattie are left standing face-to-face like mirror images of each other, as the 'pathos' in Gareth's face 'eats into' Hattie's own. I have explored what Bank and Kahn would term the 'complementary' aspects of the Hattie-Gareth relationship, and shown how the Gareth represented in the book is an object with whom Gordon is coming to terms. In the image of the siblings face-to-face, she shows us another side of the sibling relationship. It is the aspect which Bank and Kahn call 'merging or twinning' and Mitchell terms 'narcissistic identification'. As Mitchell says, a sibling is loved '*like oneself*'. If that sibling then destroys himself, the 'existential conundrum' of siblinghood comes painfully to the fore.

I am familiar with this pathos, which emanates from a sibling's suffering face, and eats into one's own. In *Small Pieces*, I write about how, in the wake of my brother's death, I took what I imagined of his experience, emotional and physical, into myself. After my mother and I returned from our trip to the Mid-Western town where he had killed himself, I was subject to bouts of nausea which, at first, seemed to come from nowhere:

I'm in my office in the loft, staring at hold-all with my brother's ashes in it, and talking to a friend on the phone. She's a Jungian analyst, so I don't feel I have to censor too much. I'm telling her how sick I felt on the flight back.

'And I *still* keep feeling nauseous – when I'm thinking about it all, but sometimes even when I'm not – I get these sudden waves of nausea. Sometimes I even retch.'

'OK...Do you mind telling me how your brother killed himself?'

'No. It was potassium cyanide. He got it from his lab.'

'And he ingested it?'

'Yes, he did.'

¹⁸² Gordon, (2003), p. 66.

‘Well, there you are then.’¹⁸³

If the surviving sibling can keep the dead one alive inside her in this way, breathing and ingesting and suffering on his behalf, then she can delay that separation which Freud sees as the end of mourning. When endless ‘melancholia’ occurs in place of finite ‘mourning’, it is because an ‘*identification of the ego with the abandoned object*’ has taken place, in which object-love is replaced by narcissistic merging.¹⁸⁴ I would argue that this is what I was experiencing when I felt nauseous. As I will show, Gordon’s writing suggests that she experienced something similar in the wake of Gareth’s death.

To identify oneself with a loved one bent on this own destruction is clearly a dangerous thing to do. Lukas and Seiden acknowledge the danger of this position in their discussion of the various maladaptive defences that can disrupt the mourning of suicide survivors.¹⁸⁵ They describe the different forms these ‘bargains’ take: the survivor may scapegoat a third party, take on the burden of the guilt herself, spend years saying goodbye without letting go, or cut herself off from the possibility of anything good in life; she might keep moving from town to town, job to job, relationship to relationship, in an effort to outrun her pain; she may ultimately decide to even things out by committing suicide herself.¹⁸⁶ Every one of these ‘deals’ have both payoff and a price: the payoff is that painful thoughts and feelings can be kept in a bearable holding pattern; the price is that they can never then be worked through. In a striking passage towards the end of Gordon’s book, she describes her own painful ‘bargain’, the motives and mechanisms behind it, and the price she paid for making it:

For fear of losing [her memories of her mother and brother] I had wanted to keep them alive in mind so they could stay. I went into the archaeology of recollection

¹⁸³ *Small Pieces*, p. 51.

¹⁸⁴ Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, p. 249.

¹⁸⁵ Lukas and Seiden (2007), p. 55.

¹⁸⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

every day to have them here when they were gone. I wanted them to have lived longer, that they could have escaped their sadness, illnesses and depressions. I was livid they'd gone before they found the lives they might have liked. I wanted them to have years of happiness before they died. Behind my skin crawled the bitterness of their endings.¹⁸⁷

Gordon is aware throughout of her own identification with Gareth, and of its potential deathliness, to which she very nearly succumbed. His suicide attempts, which began when Hattie was still in primary school, left their mark on her from the beginning. Her account of her own attempt, made while he was still alive, lays bare the mechanisms of identification by which she came to follow her brother's example. For much of her short life, she had been 'wondering how to vanish', but then Gareth's actions showed her how: 'With Gareth's first attempt, my innocence was irrevocably tarnished, sullied, because I realized that what my mind had been suggesting to me all that time was a desire to leave the body by killing it.'¹⁸⁸ When she took her overdose, at thirteen, she was consciously measuring her dose and her body's weight and strength against his:

I calculated the amount of aspirins I would need by comparing my body weight with Gareth's. I needed nothing like as many, but he never succeeded, therefore I needed more. I had no idea what would happen to me. I just wanted to go away for a while, a long time, go into a hibernation that would last beyond the winter ...After taking the pills I was fine for a number of hours, so many hours that I thought nothing was going to happen. I even started to think that, impossibly, my body was stronger than Gareth's despite our difference in strength.¹⁸⁹

Hattie never told her parents what she had done. She spent three days throwing up, at the end of which the family concluded that she must have had gastro-enteritis and she realised that she wanted to live. In this respect, she succeeded in drawing a clear line between herself and Gareth, who continued to make suicide attempts throughout his life until, at the age of twenty-four, he made the one that killed him. After his death,

¹⁸⁷ Gordon, (2003), p. 185.

¹⁸⁸ *ibid.*, p. 141.

¹⁸⁹ *ibid.*, p. 139

however, Gordon's fear that she must, inescapably, share the suffering of her lost mother and brother returns. In the penultimate chapter of the book, she writes of a conversation with her mother that continued to haunt her.

I recall my mother telling me once, 'Hattie, I found life very difficult in my late teens and early twenties.'

She said it as if it were a warning.

This comment of hers haunts me, because I, too, find life difficult sometimes. At my lowest ebb I realize he'd been at least 100 times lower. His open wounds rubbed with salt, raw, without salve and bandages. I finally agree to take anti-depressants, having refused them for months after my doctor suggested they might be good for me. I convince myself that I am following in my mother and brother's genetic footsteps. I am reluctant to take the pills because I think it is the road to their endings. I don't want to live like my mother, when she was in bed with a bottle of wine and the silver packet of pills were shoved behind her scarves on the shelf in her wardrobe. Spots on leopards jeopardize any chance of change. The darkness may fall again, on me.¹⁹⁰

The imagery Gordon uses here, of hauntings and darkness falling, recalls Freud's comment in 'Mourning and Melancholia' that, when the ego has become identified with the lost object, 'the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object.'¹⁹¹ Thus Gordon condemns herself as a 'leopard' whose spots 'jeopardize any chance of change', an incorrigible and doomed follower 'in my mother and brother's genetic footsteps'. This, again, is a picture of Gordon as a traumatised subject, 'caught' and 'trapped' at the terrible moment of violence and loss.¹⁹²

If Hattie Gordon had remained in this position, the outcome might well have been terrible, but she does not. The sister, and the text, move on, with Hattie taking the anti-depressants and discovering that, for her, they work. A page on from the passage which describes her hauntings and her fears, she writes of her growing awareness of the great difference between her and her lost brother.

I wonder why [the medication] didn't work for Gareth. The more my life becomes normal, the worse it seems his was. The gauge of wrongness becomes

¹⁹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 180

¹⁹¹ Freud, 'Morning and Melancholia', p. 249.

¹⁹² Gordon, (2003), p 81.

tangible, not clouded in the everyday visits and the drugs and the overdoses, and the heroin requests, and the tears of one in so much turmoil.¹⁹³

After a short time, Gordon cuts back on the medication. ‘I wait for my blood to turn to lead again,’ she writes, ‘but it doesn’t’ and therefore ‘I haven’t turned into Gareth or my mother as I thought I would. I’ve come back to life.’¹⁹⁴ She has separated from her lost objects, and is now free to love and mourn them as they were. This is a kind of parting, but, unlike the mourning process which Freud describes, it is one that makes a true meeting with the other possible. In a beautiful passage about her mother, Gordon writes that:

... Once more she is transformed for me but this time she is real. Real life woman. Absence and presence. All in one. My moments with her, I place them together and she ventures back to me. From Absent to Dead to Angel to With Me. I have her now.¹⁹⁵

This passage suggests to me that Gordon has accomplished this successful de-merging and reunion with her mother and brother. She has achieved this partly through her acceptance of treatment, but I would argue that she has also been able to use the writing and publication of her book as a means of healing. In her article ‘How we laid our demons to rest’, she counters her father’s objection that her writing project is unhealthy and that she should “‘Let it go and move on.’” with the assertion, that, for her, the writing process and the process of moving on are one and the same: ‘I tried to explain that, to move on, I had to first dissect what had happened, so that I could end the chapter, literally close the book and put it on the shelf.’¹⁹⁶ In taking up and working on the material of her brother’s and mother’s lives as an active, creative subject, researching them, then writing them into a book which she can then ‘literally close... and put [] on the shelf’ as a solid monument, Gordon seems to have achieved what she

¹⁹³ *ibid.*, p. 181

¹⁹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 182

¹⁹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 184

¹⁹⁶ Gordon, (2004), p. 2.

hoped to do. There is a suggestion in this passage that she has succeeded in separating from her loved ones without abandoning them. The book which opens with her receiving the terrible news of Gareth's death ends with his flying away into the air over his beloved Ivinghoe Beacon, the place where he was happiest and most successfully himself:

... his free. Free on the Beacon to go where he wants. To fly like his models once had, with a slow ease that catches rides on the tails of restless winds. We take our time, let him fall through our fingers as slowly as he wants. We throw some up to make clouds that are carried. With no great haste the grey mist of Gareth gallops in time to the wind.¹⁹⁷

5. 'Creativity can overcome death'¹⁹⁸

A few months before her memoir was published, Gordon sent the manuscript to her father. Painfully aware of how much he disapproved of her choice of genre, she was understandably anxious about what his response would be. When it arrived, she was astonished by what she read.

A 16-page letter arrived a few days after I had sent the book to him. I tore it open and skimmed his words, looking for the barrage of criticism I felt certain will be there. There was nothing of the kind. He saw strength and beauty, he said (he saw more of both than I did). His letter was full of praise and appreciation, and his memory had clearly been jogged by things I had written. But he was also struck by the things he had never known about and that he was sorry he hadn't been able to respond at the time. I had stunned him and, in his response, he had stunned me.¹⁹⁹

Gordon's risky strategy had been vindicated in this unexpected textual rendez-vous with one very significant other, her father. This experience was made all the more poignant by the fact that Giles Gordon died suddenly, not long afterwards.

Gordon's rendez-vous with her father took place through his reading of a book that was already written. By then the book had already enabled other family rendez-vous, with Gordon's lost significant others; these had taken place in the course of her

¹⁹⁷ Gordon, (2003), p. 190.

¹⁹⁸ Gordon, (2004), p. 3.

¹⁹⁹ *ibid.*, p 2.

writing. The explicit and honest nature of this writing, with its visceral imagery, enables the reader to see two different psychic processes vividly dramatized. The text charts her progress through the grief-work that Freud discusses in *Mourning and Melancholia*, in which aspects of her relationships to her lost brother and mother are taken up, worked through and finally – in her words – ‘put on the shelf’. In this respect the book belongs firmly in the genre of grief-memoir which I identified in my introduction. However, it also performs a rarer act, which is to lay bare the dynamics of siblinghood described by Juliet Mitchell as well as Bank and Kahn. In *The Café after the Pub after the Funeral*, we can see how these particular dynamics, with their rivalries and identifications, shape the work of grieving for a sibling; we can see, in turn, how the surviving sibling’s experience of their relationship with the lost sibling is changed by the impact of their loss. Furthermore, Gordon’s book shows how the suicide of a sibling is experienced by the survivor as a relational act, and how, through the act of life-writing, she might seek a final textual rendez-vous with that sibling, in which the damage done to their relationship can be symbolically repaired.

‘A Godlike Voice from the Void’: Traumatic Witness, Psychological Autopsy and Literary Recreation in Jill Bialosky’s *History of a Suicide*

1. Introduction

In *The Café after the Pub after the Funeral*, Hattie Gordon shows how a memoir of sibling suicide loss might enable a series of rendez-vous: between the writer and her lost object, between the author and her surviving family members, and, just as crucially, between the author and the reader who shares her experience. Her book also acts as an example of how grief work might be accomplished through the creative act of writing a memoir. The interviews with Gordon quoted in the previous chapter show her awareness that her book represents the accomplishment of both these types of work. Interviews with another bereaved sibling, Jill Bialosky, suggest that her intentions in writing *History of a Suicide: My Sister’s Unfinished Life*, are perhaps more complex, and more difficult to accomplish. She resists any simple definition of her book as memoir, stating that:

... my book is not solely a memoir. I don’t mean to be coy. It is more than that. I write about my experience living with my sister’s suicide, and I also attempt to recreate her inner world. The book is also partially research driven. It is not only an account of what I have remembered. I am interested in writing another nonfiction work.²⁰⁰

In this short passage, Bialosky identifies three different purposes for her book: to write about her own experience; to recreate her sister’s inner world; to write a ‘research driven’ ‘nonfiction work’. Thus the book is at once a memoir, a biography (which will employ the techniques of fiction), and a research-based investigation into the subject of suicide. The concept of the book as investigation is crucial to Bialosky’s approach. As she explains, it is a concept that has informed not only the finished book, but also the process of writing it: ‘I did not think of my book as a memoir when I was writing it. It

²⁰⁰ Jill Bialosky, ‘A Conversation with Jill Bialosky’ in *History of a Suicide – Reading Group Guide*, (2011) Simon & Schuster publisher’s website, http://books.simonandschuster.com/History-of-a-Suicide/Jill-Bialosky/9781439101940/reading_group_guide [accessed 9/3/2016].

defied categorization. I thought of it as giving life to the experience of my investigation. In that sense it was driven solely by the need to discover.’²⁰¹

Bialosky is not speaking of investigation purely in general terms. Her book depicts a particular kind of investigative procedure, one applied specifically to cases of suicide: the psychological autopsy. In pursuit of answers about her sister’s death, Bialosky writes to Edwin Shneidman, the originator of this investigative procedure and founder of suicidology, the discipline which informs it.²⁰² She has read his book, *The Suicidal Mind*, in which he sets out the purpose and method of the psychological autopsy:

...After the forensic and toxicological evidence is in, the answer [as to why the deceased took their own life] may still not be clear. “It depends,” says the certifying coroner. “On what?” you may ask. “It depends,” on what was in the mind of the deceased. It depends on what the dead person’s *intentions* were.” Whether she took those pills with the intention of sleeping and waking up, or with the intention of never waking up. But how can you find that out inasmuch as she is dead? We can ask around, talk to people who knew her, reconstruct her personality, examine her life-style especially in the days just before her death, ascertain what she said and what she did. In other words, we can conduct a psychological autopsy.²⁰³

Autopsies, coroners, and forensic evidence all belong in the realm of the law, of courts, trials and judicial inquiries. In *The Judicial Unconscious*, trauma theorist Shoshana Felman argues that, in the course of the last century, the law emerged as the dominant paradigm by which traumatic experience, whether collective or individual, might be contained and through which traumatic wounds might be repaired. Discussing George W. Bush’s speech after September 11th 2001, she observes that ‘no sooner had collective trauma (“the wound to our country”) been named than its link to law and justice has emerged as a reparative and healing mode of a community’s recovery of meaning.’²⁰⁴ Following Felman, it could be argued that the psychological autopsy, as

²⁰¹ Bialosky (2011b), p 5.

²⁰² Bialosky (2011a), p. 83.

²⁰³ Shneidman, (1996), pp 54-5.

²⁰⁴ Felman, Shoshana. *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century*. (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 3.

Shneidman describes it, is a ‘reparative and healing mode’ of a family’s ‘recovery of meaning’ in the aftermath of the suicide of one its members. It is, in form at least, an act of ‘legal justice’.²⁰⁵

This is the work that Bialosky hopes to accomplish in *History of a Suicide*, which is both the expression of her trauma (‘I write about my experience’), and an attempt to contain it through the medium of the psychological autopsy, which takes the form of a forensic investigation, informed and underwritten with the authority of established voices and of the law (‘The book is partially research-driven’). However, as a poet and novelist, Bialosky has another mode of repair and recovery at her disposal, and the book also functions as an act of what Felman calls ‘literary justice’ (‘I also attempt to re-create [Kim’s] inner world’).²⁰⁶ As I shall show in this chapter, these three perspectives – the traumatic, the legal and the literary – complement each other in *History of a Suicide*, but they also conflict. Since Bialosky chooses to employ all of them, her text dramatizes this conflict and lays bare the cultural and ethical tensions which beset the writer bereaved by suicide, as she seeks to articulate and derive meaning from her traumatic loss. It is a text written in the hope of finding closure, even as fresh questions continue to rip it open:

How would Kim feel about having her private life probed and reinvented through my words? Am I doing justice and honor to her experience? Would she be pleased? On this too sunny day I am seized by serious moral questions and uncertainties, trying to determine what is permissible. Is my own discomfort about suicide threatening to thwart my efforts to tell her story? Is the desire to push painful memories away a necessary part of survival, or what ultimately hinders recovery? Am I able to make her story universal? Avoid self-pity and blame? I tell myself that, if I can portray her inner world, it may offer a window for other readers to understand the fragility of the suicidal mind. But am I just deluding myself?²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ Felman, (2002), p. 8.

²⁰⁶ *ibid.*, p. 8

²⁰⁷ Bialosky (2011a), pp. 98-99.

2. Bearing witness to trauma

I felt driven to understand what had happened to Kim. She was a phantom always near me; I sometimes felt as if she was beckoning me to try and piece together her story.²⁰⁸

In this passage, Bialosky writes of her compulsion to write the story of her lost sister Kim, and of her own grief. Threaded through the book is a meta-narrative, recording the conflict which Bialosky continues to experience between this compulsion to write of her traumatic loss, and her equally powerful need to protect herself from it. This need for protection becomes particularly acute for Bialosky, as in the months after Kim's death she loses two babies to premature birth, before adopting a newborn. Her adopted son, Lucas, becomes identified with Kim, a much younger half-sibling whom Bialosky had effectively helped to parent, and this identification of the two infants further increases Bialosky's sense of fear and vulnerability:

I lived with the strange fear that there was worse to come, that I did not deserve the happiness that Lucas had brought to our lives. Sometimes when I sat in the rocker with Lucas in my arms and fed him bottle, his little fingers picking at the skin around my cuticles – a soothing habit he had discovered – I inadvertently called him Kim. At night I had dreams about her and in my dream she was a little girl and she was calling out to me.²⁰⁹

It is no surprise that, as Bialosky says, while '[t]here were periods in which I could allow myself to think of Kim, there were 'other times when it would sink me.'²¹⁰ In Part 3, she describes a period two years after Kim's death, during which she '[becomes] a voracious reader of the literature on the act of self-annihilation', reads police and toxicology reports pertaining to her sister's death, and writes to Edwin Shneidman.²¹¹ All these researches are intended to lay the groundwork for Bialosky to

²⁰⁸ Bialosky, (2011a), p. 31.

²⁰⁹ *ibid.*, p. 30

²¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 87

²¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 88

‘piece Kim’s life together’, and write the account which would ‘restore her dignity’.²¹²

The compulsion to do so drives her forward, but when Dr Shneidman phones and offers to talk to her, Bialosky hesitates. As she explains it, ‘uncertainty and dread intervened’, causing her to ‘put aside the project’, which at that time felt ‘too painful and private.’²¹³

Trauma theory can offer a useful framework for understanding Bialosky’s struggle. As critics such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Leigh Gilmore have observed, the subject who sets out to speak or write her trauma is faced with a fundamental paradox, in that traumatic experience, by its very nature, at once resists expression and insists upon it.²¹⁴ Bialosky feels, on the one hand, as if Kim herself is ‘beckoning’ her, the older writer/sister, to do her duty and tell her story, to bear witness on her behalf; on the other hand the experience of losing Kim is ‘too painful and private’ for her to answer this call to bear witness in such a public manner. The result of this struggle is a text that gives expression to what Roger Luckhurst identifies as ‘the fundamental tension between interruption and flow, blockage and movement’ which characterises any attempt to give narrative form to traumatic experience.²¹⁵

Bialosky is too self-aware a writer to attempt to erase the evidence of this struggle from her work; instead, she chooses to structure her book through its dynamic. It is divided into six parts, each of which is subdivided into a number of brief passages. This structure allows her to move between the past and the present, between Kim’s life and her own and, sometimes, from prose to poetry. It allows for shifts between different registers: traumatic witness, psychological autopsy and literary recreation. It can

²¹² *ibid.*, p.77

²¹³ *ibid.*, p 91

²¹⁴ Cathy Caruth, ‘Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History’, *Yale French Studies*, (1991) and *Trauma : Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Shoshana Felman, ‘Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching’ in Caruth, 1995; Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2001).

²¹⁵ Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London; New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 79.

accommodate toxicology reports and lists of the contents of Kim's wallet on the day she died, as well as extracts from Kim's own writings. It cannot be further broken by any of these contradictory forces as its very structure articulates the knowledge that it is authored by a 'shattered subject', attempting to 'piece together' what is already broken.²¹⁶ Fragmentary and peppered with silences, constantly shifting between different times and different voices, sometimes turning round on itself to question its own legitimacy, the text exhibits the characteristic markers of trauma narrative.

As the subject is shattered by trauma, so is her capacity to experience, register and articulate that trauma. Caruth writes that this pathology of trauma is defined neither by the nature of the event that instigated it, nor by the unconscious distortions of memory that lead to classic neurotic symptoms, but rather by '*the structure of the experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event.'²¹⁷ In the phantom Kim which 'beckons' Bialosky to tell her story, she offers the reader a personification of this traumatic possession, of the unassimilated experience which re-emerges unbidden, threatening to transform 'Lucas' into 'Kim' and investing Bialosky's experience of motherhood with a sense of dread and fear. When, after some years, she finally answers the phantom's call, she describes it in these words: 'In small increments, I allowed her death to possess me'.²¹⁸

Like Caruth, Felman emphasises the loss of agency that trauma brings with it, the sense that the traumatised witness is compelled to speak by an entity other than herself. In 'Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching', she refers to Elias Canetti's notion of the 'appointment to bear witness', from which 'the witness-

²¹⁶ Suzette A. Henke., *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998); Bialosky (2011a), p. 31.

²¹⁷ Caruth, 1995, pp. 4-5

²¹⁸ Bialosky (2011a), p. 148.

appointee cannot relieve himself by any delegation, substitution, or representation’, and asks:

Is the appointment to the testimony voluntary or involuntary, given *to* or *against* the witness’ will? The contemporary writer often dramatizes the predicament (whether chosen or imposed, whether conscious or unconscious) of a voluntary or of an unwitting, inadvertent, and sometimes *involuntary witness*: witness to a trauma, to a crime, or to an outrage; witness to a horror or an illness whose effects explode any capacity for explanation or rationalisation.²¹⁹

Bialosky dramatizes her predicament as witness in her account of her relationship with a phantom Kim. This sense of vocation is reinforced by their mother, when she chooses to pass Kim’s journal to Jill, her writer daughter, rather than to either of Jill’s full sisters:

... I came across the spiral notebook with a teddy bear on the cover she used for a journal in high school. My mother gave it to me a few years after Kim died, when she was finally able to go through the private things she had stored in boxes in the basement. Next she gave me the contents of Kim’s wallet and her diaries and papers as if unconsciously passing the torch and appointing me keeper of the tomb. True to form, I did not let her down. I read the journal for the first time in the damp, cool, basement of the house in Cleveland where my mother still kept Kim’s wooden cradle. I was overcome by the private, inner world I discovered hidden there.²²⁰

The journals and papers which are passed on to Jill, along with her suicide note, constitute the only forms of direct testimony attributable to Kim, the absent central character in Bialosky’s narrative, whose ‘unfinished life’ the book attempts to ‘piece together’. As such they possess a unique authority, but they also poignantly demonstrate the paradox at the heart of trauma that Caruth has identified: that the traumatised subject is unable to understand or articulate her experience as it happens, and that as a consequence she struggles to bear witness to it herself. Directly after the passage in which Bialosky describes her ‘unconscious appointment’ by her mother, she reproduces this excerpt from Kim’s high school journal:

I need out. Why doesn’t my chest stop hurting? I don’t think I have any tears left to cry. I wish I would get cancer or something so I could just die. I don’t want to live

²¹⁹ Felman, pp. 14-15.

²²⁰ Bialosky (2011a), p. 93.

*anymore this way. It's too unsatisfying. All I am is unhappy, unsure, depressed. I need a way out. Please help!*²²¹

A History of Suicide represents Jill Bialosky's attempt to respond to this cry for help from her sister, and to accept the responsibility, the duty of care, that her mother has unconsciously passed on to her. Responsibility, and the sense of guilt that attends upon it in the wake of Kim's death, are major themes in the book. Kim's father left the family when she was still an infant, and Bialosky writes that '[we] sisters rallied to help my mother with Kim now that she was a single mother again. My mother used to boast that Kim had four mothers.'²²² Their mother was particularly dependent on support from her three older daughters, as she was prone to 'falling into long periods of melancholy', which would leave her unable to mother any of her children effectively.²²³ She also relied on her older daughters to act as 'live-in babysitters' when she went out on dates, seeking a new husband who would support her and her girls.²²⁴ This was a continuation of the role they had taken during the last months of her failing marriage to Kim's father, when the adults would return home from nights out 'too inebriated to hear the baby cry'.²²⁵ As she describes caring for Kim on these nights, Bialosky writes with a tenderness that seems at least as maternal as it is sisterly:

... one of my sisters or I would go in and pick Kim up and rock her back to sleep. If it was my turn I'd get out of bed in the pitch-black, put on my robe, and go downstairs to make her a bottle. I would have been eleven or twelve. My mother had taught me to heat up a saucepan with boiling water and then put the bottle filled with milk in the pan. She told me to test the temperature by pouring a drop of milk on the inside of my wrist to make sure it wasn't too hot for the baby. I'd go upstairs to the nursery, pick Kimmy up from her crib, and carry her over to the rocking chair to cradle her, enjoying the feel of her dense, damp body against mine. I'd feed her until the intoxication of the milk sealed her eyes shut.²²⁶

²²¹ *ibid.*, p. 93

²²² *ibid.*, p. 58

²²³ *ibid.*, p. 62

²²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 54

²²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 51

²²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 51

As this shows, the sibling relationship Bialosky describes is of a very different kind from Gordon's relationship with her brother. Unlike Hattie and Gareth, Jill and Kim did not grow up together: they did not share a father (Bialosky's died when she was small); as Bialosky describes it, her relationship to Kim was not one of equals competing for maternal resources, but that of caregiver and care-receiver. This aspect of their sibling relationship was openly acknowledged by the family. It was one consequence of the large difference in age between the two girls, the other being that Bialosky and her two other sisters left home when Kim was still a child, rendering them, in Bank and Kahn's terms, 'low access' siblings.²²⁷

I would argue that, as a result of these differences in their sibling relationships, Gordon and Bialosky, although both writing about the loss of siblings by suicide, are engaged in two quite different relational acts, subject to different kinds of ethical pressure. To tell the story of one's suicide survival is, inevitably, to attempt to confront one's own sense of guilt.²²⁸ As I explained in the previous chapter, Gordon's writing enables her to express and work through her sense that, as Gareth's rival, she has somehow survived at his expense. Although she does possess a degree of guilt about her inability to save him, the predominant form of guilt in her story is that of survivor guilt of the purest kind: *I survived while my sibling did not, and therefore my survival is its own indictment.*

In Bialosky's story, the reverse holds, and it is the guilt of the failed caretaker that predominates. There are expressions of survivor guilt, as on page 222, when she states that 'Sometimes I think I should be the one dead, and Kim should be having my life.'²²⁹ It is also true that one of the questions driving her writing is that of why it should be that she and her other two sisters have survived such a difficult upbringing

²²⁷ Bank and Kahn (1982), pp. 9-10.

²²⁸ 'If there is one pervasive reaction that survivors have to suicide, it is guilt.' Lukas and Seiden, (2007), p. 39.

²²⁹ Bialosky (2011a), p. 222.

while Kim did not. However, unlike Gordon and Gareth, Jill and Kim shared neither an upbringing nor a father. Nor did they lose fathers in the same way: Bialosky's died, whereas Kim's left when she was three years old, came back into her life ten years later, and shortly after let her down again.²³⁰ In 'piecing together' Kim's story, Bialosky is aware that she is examining a situation she has not experienced directly: she is distanced from it by the differences between her circumstances and Kim's, as she is distanced from it by age difference and, at the time of Kim's death, by the many miles between New York and their hometown of Cleveland, Ohio. This distance means that her book is less an act of witness and – as she acknowledges – more of an act of investigation.

I would also argue that in Bialosky's relationship with Kim, there is an element of structural inequality that is absent from the relationship between the two younger Gordon siblings.²³¹ This arises chiefly from the fact that, as Bialosky acknowledges, she has been more like a mother than a sister to Kim. This aspect of their relationship informs the act of writing itself: in telling Kim's story, Bialosky is taking on a task that her mother, by 'passing on the torch', has delegated to her. If we regard *History of a Suicide*, as a *de facto* parental memoir, then, as G. T. Couser says, its 'politics and ethics' become 'inherently problematic'.²³² In his book *Vulnerable Subjects*, Couser argues that:

Parental memoirs are akin to authorized biographies insofar as parents have privileged access to their children. Indeed, parents frequently have knowledge of their children's lives that the children themselves lack, for instance of their origins and infancy... Parental memoirs tend, however, to be either unauthorized or *self*-authorized, insofar as parents assume rather than request the right to write their children's lives... They are thus inherently, literally, paternalistic, particularly when they are undertaken before the subject has reached the age of consent.²³³

²³⁰ *ibid.* p. 53 and 67

²³¹ G. T. Couser, *Memoir: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 104.

²³² G. T. Couser, *Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), p 56.

²³³ Couser (2004), pp. 56-7.

Bialosky, who witnessed the marriage of Kim's parents, Kim's birth and then her infancy, indeed possesses direct knowledge of Kim's life that Kim herself lacked. This privileged position is reinforced by further factors: firstly, that Kim is deceased and cannot give consent to the writing and publishing of her life story; secondly, that because of her youth (she was 22 at the time of her death) and her emotional vulnerability, she had never possessed the capacity to do the work that Bialosky hopes to undertake on her behalf, that of understanding her own story. The list of questions from *History of a Suicide* ('How would Kim feel about having her private life probed...?') which I have quoted indicates that Bialosky is well aware of the first factor and its implications.

There are also points in the book where Bialosky indicates that she is aware of the second factor. Some passages suggest that the reason that Kim could never have written an account of her own traumas is the very same, by implication, as the reason she was unable to save herself: she was unable to give adequate expression to her own pain. According to Bialosky's text, the limitations imposed by Kim's age and confused mental state are discovered by the older sister in the course of her researching and writing the book. In a section entitled 'Hopelessness', as she explores ideas about the origins of suicide, Bialosky writes that:

Young people who feel hopeless need help in solving problems and think their parents don't understand or are not involved enough to know the depth of their need. Objectively they do not have more problems than others, but they are less equipped to deal with them. people are able to tolerate depression as long as there is a feeling that things will improve. If that belief is shattered the only option may be suicide.²³⁴

During her account of Kim's final, painful days, Bialosky gives an account of two relevant conversations, one with her mother and one with her therapist:

My mother recently told me of the times those last months when Kim came to her in the middle of the night, crying inconsolably. Once she said she wanted to die. "Did you ask her what was wrong?" I asked. "Kimmy would never tell me anything," my mother said, "I could never reach her." When I related this incident to my therapist,

²³⁴ Bialosky (2011a), p. 171.

she said, “Kim didn’t have the words. At her age, only twenty-one, it is very difficult. It takes a lot of persistence to find the words.”²³⁵

All in all, it is clear that Bialosky is in a complex and difficult position with regard to Kim, as she sets out to piece her sister’s life together. She is both a sister and a mother; a traumatised child and a privileged adult; a member of a traumatised family and the investigator appointed by that family to heal their trauma. As appointed witness and ‘keeper of the tomb’, she is compelled to find the words to complete Kim’s story on Kim’s behalf, yet in doing so she must employ verbal resources that Kim would never have used, effectively putting her own words in her sister’s mouth; thus she risks overstepping the boundaries between her younger, more vulnerable sister and herself. The situation in which Bialosky finds herself is analogous to that of the family member who is named as the executor of a loved one’s estate: this executor is at once both family member and legally appointed officer, licensed to breach the privacy of a fellow family member in ways that would have been unacceptable during that person’s lifetime. If Bialosky’s rights and duties as family storyteller can be seen as analogous to those of an executor, she might then claim an analogous authority to overstep formerly intransgressible boundaries. In the next section, I shall consider how Bialosky’s text makes its appeal to the law and to forms of external authority, functioning as an attempt to seek ‘legal justice’ for her family and her sister.

3. The investigation

History of a Suicide is in part, an example of how a writer might use the rhetorical structure of the law to, in Felman’s terms, ‘[try] to contain the trauma and to translate it in to legal-conscious terminology, thus reducing its strange interruption’.²³⁶ I know from my own experience that a suicide in the family is surely one of the strangest of

²³⁵ *ibid.*, p.191-2

²³⁶ Felman (2002), p 5.

strange interruptions. In the preface to my memoir, *Small Pieces*, I depict myself explaining the effects of my brother's suicide as I experience them:

There's before and there's after: before and after the breaking of the vessels, before and after the Exile, before and after my brother's suicide. I explained to the Rabbi that his death was the point of fracture in my world.

'When he did that,' I said, 'it sent out cracks in all directions – all the way through the family story, past and future – everything I think I remember, I have to question now – I don't know where the problem started – it's all fragments. And it's up to me to gather them because I'm the one that's left.'²³⁷

My family narrative has been interrupted, fractured and then fragmented. Like Bialosky, I am responding to a compulsion to mend what has been broken, to find some way of containing the chaos. To do this, I choose to employ a metaphor taken from the kabbalistic story of the Breaking of the Vessels: the text is divided, not into chapters, parts or sections, but 'vessels', into which the fragments can be sorted. If there is a structuring metaphor in Bialosky's account, it is that of the legal investigation.

This is not unusual for family memoir. One good example is Mary Loudon's book, *Relative Stranger: A Life After Death*, which charts her quest to learn about the life of her estranged, mentally-ill sister Catherine, in the wake of Catherine's death from breast cancer.²³⁸ Loudon is a journalist by trade, and much of the book is written as investigative journalism, recording her searches through her dead sister's belongings along with interviews with the people who knew her sister during the last twelve years of her life. The book is explicitly informed by her research into schizophrenia, the illness with which her sister had been diagnosed. Like Bialosky, she also gives voice to her own experience, as a child growing up with a sibling who is now deceased, and as an adult seeking to reconstruct that sibling's life. Like Bialosky, she perceives a distance between her own situation and her sister's, but, unlike Bialosky, she does not, at the same time, identify with her sibling. This understanding is implicit in the title of

²³⁷ *Small Pieces*, pp. 17-18.

²³⁸ Mary Loudon, *Relative Stranger: A Life After Death* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2006).

the book, *Relative Stranger*, and in the words that conclude its first, short section: ‘It looks as if Catherine and I began our lives in the same place but we didn’t. She had schizophrenia and I did not.’²³⁹

Although Bialosky does not resist identification with her deceased sister in this unambiguous manner, she has in common with Loudon an established professional status which makes it possible for her to assume an authoritative subject position outside the family: Loudon is a journalist, while Bialosky is a poet, novelist and literary editor. It is through her professional connections that Bialosky is able to establish contact with Edwin Shneidman, and ask for his assistance in her efforts to understand Kim’s death. Although Bialosky quotes from a variety of sources in the book, Shneidman occupies a privileged position: it would not be exaggerating to state that he is the authority presiding over the whole text, as a coroner might preside over an inquest, to record his narrative verdict. The ‘godlike voice from the void’ which gives this chapter its title is his. It is the voice which Bialosky hears over the phone when he responds to her letter requesting his help. She quotes from this letter at length:

I think you have done more than any one writer I have read, aside from the great poets and philosophers, in furthering the understanding of suicide in this country. I am writing to ask whether you would be willing to do a psychological autopsy of my sister... What I would like to emphasize in my book is that suicide does not happen in a vacuum. I want to record the personal and family history, and try and describe the psychic pain of the suicide... but most of all I want to understand.²⁴⁰

The letter is an appropriately respectful appeal to expertise and authority. Shneidman offers Bialosky a language (he coined the phrase ‘psychic pain’) and a rhetorical structure which might enable her to ‘wrest coherence from the unwieldy material of personal truth’.²⁴¹ It might be argued that what Bialosky is doing here is indicative of what Idit Dobbs-Weinstein has called ‘the need or temptation to respond to

²³⁹ Loudon (2006), p. 4.

²⁴⁰ Bialosky, (2011a), p. 86.

²⁴¹ *ibid*, p. xvi

a traumatic event with an escape from experience into law or some other form of ideological formal refuge.’²⁴² In doing so, Bialosky is resorting to the ‘dominant paradigm’ of repair and containment that Feldman has identified. It is not an unusual move, either for a memoirist or a family bereaved by suicide. In the previous chapter on Hattie Gordon, I referred to Lukas and Seiden’s list of the various unhealthy ‘bargains’ with which survivors attempt to deal with their grief and guilt. They are seeking for balance, for recompense, for justice to come with her scales. The mind of a suicide survivor can be likened to an internal courtroom, in which they hope either for proof that they are not guilty, or, if this is not possible, a just punishment. As Lukas and Seiden write, the compulsive search for answers is in part a search for exoneration or expiation:

“Why?” is often the first word that comes to the lips of survivors. It may remain there for many years – perhaps forever. You hear it from the moment the suicide happens: “Why did he do it?”... “What made him think we didn’t care?”... It is a natural, if endlessly frustrating, task. Natural, because survivors need some kind of reassurance, some way to eliminate the possibility that *they* were the reason for the suicide. Frustrating, because only the dead person has a clue as to the real reason why.²⁴³

By engaging in a psychological autopsy, Bialosky hopes to appease her sense of guilt, repair her ruptured family narrative and give the phantom Kim the sense of peace that she believes she failed to give her during her lifetime. In the final section of Part 3 of *History of Suicide*, she writes that ‘[i]f I can make sense of the incomprehensible, then I am redeeming Kim and in memory she remains unscathed’, adding the question: ‘But am I doing it for her or for me?’²⁴⁴ The answer would appear to be for both of them, but not only for them. Suicide is a disruption that goes beyond the grieving individual or family. It is significant that it is only after attending a group for suicide

²⁴² Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, ‘Trauma and the Impossibility of Experience’ in Kirsten Brown Golden and Bettina G. Bergo, *The Trauma Controversy: Philosophical and Interdisciplinary Dialogues* (Albany, SUNY Press, 2009).

²⁴³ Lukas and Seiden (2007), p. 83.

²⁴⁴ Bialosky (2011a), p. 100.

survivors that Bialosky finally feels ‘able, bolstered by the courage of others living with suicide, to write my story, free of disgrace’.²⁴⁵ Her experience of sharing stories within an otherwise diverse group of people reinforces her awareness of suicide as a public health problem and reassures her that, in writing and publishing her sister’s story, she is working towards the public good. She goes on to write: ‘Suicide should never happen to anyone. I want you to know as much as I know. That is the reason I am writing this book.’²⁴⁶

What Bialosky knows is partly the fruit of experience, and partly, as she says, ‘research-driven’. Examples of the latter form of knowledge are spread throughout the text. Her account of Shneidman’s concept of the psychological autopsy is the chief example, in that it partly structures the text, but she takes in material from many other professional or official sources, including, among others, a paper on suicide and genetics by the psychiatrist David Bakish, along with quotes from her e mail correspondence with him; the psychologist Erik Erikson; psychiatrist Andrew Slaby; statistics from a report on suicide by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality and material from the *Diagnostic and Statistical manual of Mental Disorders-IV (DSM-IV)*.²⁴⁷ Her use of this material serves at least two purposes: it acts as set of rhetorical tools for the safe handling of Bialosky’s own traumatic experience and that of her sister, while giving the knowledge produced by her text an authority and a broad applicability which she believes would not apply, were it ‘solely a memoir’ and as such, merely the product of one individual’s subjective experience.

Alongside her array of tools for her autopsy, Bialosky assembles her evidence. In order to do this, according to Shneidman, she needs to ‘...ask around, talk to people who knew [the deceased], reconstruct her personality, examine her life-style especially

²⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. xvii

²⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. xvii

²⁴⁷ *ibid.*, pages 139, 142, 146 and 153

in the days just before her death, ascertain what she said and what she did.²⁴⁸ Bialosky is of course a witness as well as an investigator, and she is compelled to examine her own memories for clues. She scrutinises both earlier memories, such as her experience of caring for baby Kim, and more recent ones, such as her impressions of the last phone conversation she had with her Kim, three days before the younger sister died:

... “How are you?” I asked, hearing a slight turn in her voice.

“I’m OK,” she said, in a voice that sounded far away, detached, as if she were underwater, swimming through a tangle of thick seaweed.²⁴⁹

Bialosky is able to take this perception of Kim’s detachment and hold it up next to their great Aunt Harriet’s description of Kim ‘at their last lunch together, [when] she said that something was wrong with Kim’s eyes, a vacancy, as if she wasn’t there anymore.’²⁵⁰ She speculates that: ‘Days before Kim died, she must have folded up into a place inside herself that she couldn’t be pulled back from. It is the only explanation for the kind of terrible courage it takes to end one’s life.’²⁵¹ For a possible answer to the question of how long her younger sister had been in this state, Bialosky then turns another source of evidence: her dead sister’s diaries. She quotes from an entry written shortly before Kim turned eighteen:

*Well, I’m almost 18 now. I had all these plans & I’m not doing anything that I dreamed about. My Dad said I’d fail at most things, I guess he’s right. I’m hopeless. Everybody’s leaving soon. I’m planning to go to school in January, but the way I’ve been feeling I don’t think I’ll make it.*²⁵²

Reading these words leaves Bialosky certain that ‘the suicide leaves a map of her fate long before she dies.’²⁵³ She then backs up both this general statement and the conclusions she is reaching about her sister’s particular case with a reference to her reading: ‘In my reading about why suicidal people become isolated, I learned that

²⁴⁸ Shneidman (1996), p. 55.

²⁴⁹ Bialosky, (2011a), p. 17.

²⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 196

²⁵¹ *ibid.*, p. 196

²⁵² *ibid.*, p. 197

²⁵³ *ibid.*, p. 197

people who are hurting emotionally think very little of themselves and act in ways that will cause those they love to think poorly of them.²⁵⁴ In this way she uses the tools, techniques and underlying theoretical assumptions of the psychological autopsy to ‘reconstruct’ Kim’s turbulent internal state during the last years of her life.

In the diary entry Bialosky has quoted, Kim writes that ‘*My Dad said I’d fail at most things, I guess he’s right.*’ A theme that emerges again and again during Bialosky’s reconstruction of her sister’s story is that of Kim’s damaging relationships with men – first with her father, and then with her boyfriend, Alan, who abuses her and undermines her attempts to get a college education. Bialosky records that Kim left Alan for a while after an incident which left her with ‘her face smashed, her eyes so bruised she couldn’t open them’, but let him win her back.²⁵⁵ Bialosky notes that: ‘Even when she moved out of his house he was still under her skin, as if he possessed her.’²⁵⁶ Eventually the two did break up, and Bialosky learns that on Kim’s final, desperate night, the last phone call she made was to Alan:

She broke down and called Alan, who was once like a father figure to her. The person with whom she had placed her hopes and plans. When she dreamed him, he was powerful. Strong. If only she could see him, just this once. Come over, she said. Please. She made her voice soft and sweet, struggling not to let any desperation show. I can’t, Kim, he said. I’m seeing someone... What was she going to do? If she couldn’t have Alan, how could she expect to have anyone? How would she get through the night?²⁵⁷

As Bialosky’s use of the phrase ‘father figure’ indicates, she makes an explicit link between Alan’s abuse and abandonment of Kim and the treatment she received from her father. The description of her last phone call is immediately followed by a section entitled ‘DADDY’, in which Bialosky quotes from a source she uses throughout *History of a Suicide*, a book called *Father Loss*: ‘In *Father Loss*, Elyce Wakerman writes that a girl who has lost her father to abandonment or divorce “ruminates rather

²⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p 197

²⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p. 151

²⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p. 151

²⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p. 199

than mourns.” She forever hopes for a reconciliation... But what if he doesn’t come back, or what if she rejects her? She may try to secure that love with another male object – a lover. But what happens when that person disappoints her?’²⁵⁸

Wakerman gives Bialosky support for her conclusion that Kim’s father has left her especially vulnerable. This is reinforced by the fact that he has abandoned her not just once but twice. In the section ‘REUNION’, Bialosky tells the story of what happened after Kim, aged thirteen, asked to see her father.²⁵⁹ On the advice of a psychologist, her mother arranged contact. Bialosky describes the resulting relationship as a kind of emotional (i.e. non-physical) seduction and abandonment on the part of the father, a ‘courtship which lasted a year or two’ before he ‘began to find fault with her.’²⁶⁰ He spent less time with her. Then, during her last year of high school, he delivered a terrible blow. Depressed after a pregnancy and abortion, followed by a break-up with her boyfriend, Kim began to fall behind at school.²⁶¹ A meeting was arranged with the guidance counsellor, which both parents were to attend. Her father was displeased with Kim, and made this plain: ‘[Kim] told me later, with tears in her eyes, how he had said, “You’ll never amount to anything,” before he got up and walked down the hall without her, shaking his head, the squeak of his leather shoes resounding on the polished linoleum floor.’²⁶²

This seems to Bialosky to have been the *coup de grace* for Kim. Towards the end of the book, she goes out to visit Edwin Shneidman, presents him with her assembled evidence, and he confirms what she has intuited. His verdict could not be

²⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p. 199

²⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 65

²⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p. 67

²⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 118

²⁶² *ibid.*, p. 121

clearer: ‘He said that the villain of the piece was her father’.²⁶³ Bialosky asks about her mother, and this is his reply:

...He explained that my mother was needier than her children. She wanted to be taken care of. She made a good first marriage and the worst thing happened: my father died. “Your father loved you. He died. His death was unrecoverable. Kim’s father told her by leaving her that she didn’t deserve to live.” He explained that Kim internalized his abandonment as “What did I do to chase him away?” “Your mother did what she could,” he said.²⁶⁴

According to Shnidman, it is the fathers who have been the decisive influence on the lives of their respective daughters: Jill’s father loved her and so permitted her to live even after his death; Kim’s father abandoned her and condemned her to death. Their mother, ‘needier’ than her children, had no more authority to give or deny life than they did. And as for Jill herself:

He told me that no matter what I might have done, I *didn’t have the authority* [my italics] to prove to Kim that she mattered. He explained that I didn’t have the authority because I was not her father figure.²⁶⁵

It might appear that Bialosky’s consultation with Shneidman has proved conclusive: she has presented him with her evidence, and he has exercised his authoritative judgement. Thus the family’s traumatic experience has been successfully contained through the legal paradigm represented by Shneidman and his psychological autopsy. However, this is not the case, either within the text or outside it. Traumatic experience, by its very nature, resists containment. As Judith Herman says, this is reflected in the ‘highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner’ in which traumatised subjects attempt to relate their experiences.²⁶⁶ Meg Jensen and Margaretta Jolly explain in the introduction to their edited collection, *We Shall Bear Witness*, that the incoherent, inconsistent nature of witness statements by traumatised subjects present a difficulty for those who seek healing through legal redress, because ‘[l]egal contexts

²⁶³ *ibid.*, p. 226

²⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 227

²⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p. 227

²⁶⁶ Herman, (2001), p. 51.

require strict distinctions between truth and fiction.’²⁶⁷They also demand a clear and internally coherent narrative. These are the areas in which traumatic memory, with its fragmentary nature, its temporal disorder, its spots of forgetting and its hallucinatory, dreamlike qualities, must almost inevitably fall short. As one of their contributors, Molly Andrews, states: ‘[t]raumatic testimony is marked by what is not there: coherence, structure, meaning, comprehensibility.’²⁶⁸

Bialosky’s book represents, in part, her attempt to contain her experience through means derived from the legal context. In her contribution to Jensen and Jolly’s collection, Andrews considers another such attempt at containment, although on a wider scale: she takes a critical look at the methods of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which had the task of gathering, translating and recording the evidence of traumatised witnesses. She describes the interpreters crying as they struggled to do ‘the impossible job of translating that which could not be communicated... Testifiers struggle to put their experiences into words, and interpreters struggle to put these often ruptured and chaotic expressions into another language.’²⁶⁹The result of this clash between the nature of traumatic experience and the requirements of the setting was that the former was often lost: ‘... often the original testimony was cleaned up, and in some cases information was added. A close comparison of the recordings and the official transcripts of the hearings show that sometimes the original testimony differs significantly from its subsequent representation.’²⁷⁰ In such situations, as Jensen writes, ‘a politics and hierarchical

²⁶⁷ Meg Jensen and Margareta Jolly, (eds) *We Shall Bear Witness : Life Narratives and Human Rights* (Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), p. 10.

²⁶⁸ Molly Andrews, ‘Beyond Narrative: The Shape of Traumatic Testimony’ in Jensen and Jolly, 32-47, p 37.

²⁶⁹ Andrews, (2014), p. 38.

²⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p. 38

structure is always installed by legal discourse around testimony, which... privileges so-called expert testimony over that of witness or victim.'²⁷¹

The potentially distorting pressures on testimony in a legal context also apply to the act of writing about one's trauma for publication. Leigh Gilmore observes that the genre of autobiography 'is characterized less by a set of formal elements than by a rhetorical setting in which a person places herself or himself within testimonial contexts [such as] the Christian confession, the scandalous memoirs of the rogue, and the coming-out story in order to achieve as proximate a relation as possible to what constitutes truth in that discourse.'²⁷² The use of these familiar settings 'establish expectations in audiences'.²⁷³ One can see Bialosky trying to play down such expectations in an interview on the entertainment news website vulture.com:

It seems clear that your mother and Kim's father bear some responsibility for her spiraling depression – but you don't spell that out.

I don't think my mother was responsible. I don't think it was any one thing at all. I don't want to discuss [her father] if that's okay. I don't feel there should be any kind of blame.²⁷⁴

Bialosky did not write her book in order to cast blame, but the juridical thread running through her book, which culminates in Shneidman's passing down of judgement, pushes the reader towards the interviewer's conclusion. The words are Shneidman's, not Bialosky's, but this only gives more weight to readers primed to respond to a discourse which, in Jensen's words, 'privileges so-called expert testimony over that of witness or victim.' By adopting a form of discourse which has this hierarchical effect, Bialosky's

²⁷¹ Meg Jensen, 'The Fictional Is Political: Forms of Appeal in Autobiographical Fiction and Poetry' in Jensen and Jolly, 141-157, p 145.

²⁷² Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca, NY.: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 3.

²⁷³ Leigh Gilmore, (2000), p. 3.

²⁷⁴ Boris Kachka, 'History of a Suicide Author Jill Bialosky on the Struggle to Write a Non-Depressing Grief Memoir', vulture.com, 10/3/2011 http://www.vulture.com/2011/03/jill_bialosky_a_history_of_a_s.html#, [accessed 9/3/16]

text appears to ascribe to Shneidman's perspective a greater validity than that of Kim, her wider family, or the author herself.

It is clear that while the legal paradigm holds out a promise of healing, closure and the containment of traumatic experience, it is not without its limitations, or its risks. Feldman observes that the attempt to apply a legal remedy to trauma can, paradoxically, lead to the re-enactment of the very experience it is supposed to address:

Uncannily... while the law strikes to contain the trauma, it often is in fact the trauma that takes over and whose surreptitious logic in the end reclaims the trial... when a jury or a court confronts the trauma in the courtroom, it is often inflicted with a particular judicial blindness that unwittingly reflects and duplicates the constitutional blindness of culture and consciousness towards the trauma. A pattern emerges in while the trial, while it tries to put an end to trauma, inadvertently performs an acting out of it. Unknowingly, the trial thus repeats the trauma, re-enacts its structures.²⁷⁵

With this in mind, I want to look again at two statements from the Bialosky's account of her conversation with Shneidman. These are:

- i. "Kim's father told her by leaving her that she didn't deserve to live."
- ii. [Shneidman] told me that no matter what I might have done, I *didn't have the authority* [my italics] to prove to Kim that she mattered. He explained that I didn't have the authority because I was not her father figure.

In Shneidman's view, and for Bialosky, it is fathers, and not sisters – or mothers – who have the power of life or death. It is Kim's father who hands down the lethal verdict: "You'll never amount to anything." The figure of the harmful, seductive father, or "beautiful tyrant! Fiend angelical!" reappears in Kim's life as Alan, and confirms the death sentence.²⁷⁶ Bialosky observes that "[w]hen a boy was in her company, Kim lit up her twinkling, innocent smile. Love me, it said, don't hurt me. I know I'm not good enough. Please stay."²⁷⁷ Growing up in 'the house of women', with a depressed single mother and feeling the want of a male breadwinner, Bialosky and her sisters 'worked determinedly... to save enough money to put [ourselves] through college', fearing that

²⁷⁵ Feldman (2002), p. 5.

²⁷⁶ Bialosky (2011a), p. 149.

²⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p. 60

otherwise their mother's 'dependent predicament' would be their 'fate'.²⁷⁸ By working hard, they could exercise control over their financial situation and not have to depend on men for physical sustenance or material comfort. However, no amount of getting good grades or waiting tables could prevent them from dependence on the judgement of men:

... we grew up thinking our lives rose and fell depending on how a person of the opposite sex viewed us, whether that meant our absent fathers or the boys we gave our hearts to.

In our house of women, men were our enemies and also our saviors. We looked up to their cool strong bodies and their impenetrable eyes; we were enamored by their capable hands and their aloof smiles; we wanted to possess their sense of freedom and daring. We thought they might be safe houses in which to store our wounded hearts. We were wrong.²⁷⁹

When Kim's father enters into the private world of the house of women, it seemed to the ten-year-old Jill that he 'was part of the larger, more powerful patrician world outside the domestic life of my family where I imagined men conducted important and complicated business transactions.'²⁸⁰ The private, 'domestic' world is lesser and female, contained within a larger public world which is gendered male. Years later, as she struggles to make sense of the private trauma suffered by her house of women, Bialosky appeals to the man who is the public face of established knowledge. She writes to him, and when he phones to respond, what she hears is a voice that 'appeared out of the void, godlike, and for a few brief moments adrenaline flooded my body and I thought to myself, finally there will be answers.'²⁸¹ The definitive, damning judgement at the heart of Kim's traumatic story, handed down by her father is met with a judgement from another male figure, who identifies him as 'the villain of the piece'. Neither Bialosky nor her mother 'have the authority' to pronounce judgement in either case.

²⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p. 69

²⁷⁹ *ibid.*, p. 72

²⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p. 40

²⁸¹ *ibid.*, p. 91

In the world of *History of Suicide*, men retain a monopoly on judgement and on violence. One striking difference between Gordon's book and Bialosky's is that while the former is full of rage, the latter is characterised by its restraint, typified by Bialosky's behaviour towards Alan, when he comes to their mother's house after Kim's death, and explains how he misunderstood the import of Kim's last call to him: 'Dumb fuck, I wanted to say... I wanted to kick him, but instead, because he was suffering, I opened my arms and hugged him.'²⁸² This is the man who, as Bialosky has explained earlier in the same paragraph, had once punched her sister and put her in hospital. In its tone, it is as angry as Bialosky ever allows herself to get. Kim is similarly characterised. Despite the fact that she has carried out a fatal act against herself, suffocating herself with exhaust fumes in her mother's garage, this is portrayed as an act of surrender rather than aggression: 'She opened the door to our mother's car, slipped in, as if she were only going to sleep the long sleep of a Sleeping Beauty. Maybe she thought she would be kissed awake.'²⁸³ Even at the moment of her suicide, Kim is portrayed as lacking agency.

I would argue that what I have been describing is the process by which the 'surreptitious logic' of the trauma of Kim, Jill and their family has 'reclaimed' the psychological autopsy by which Bialosky had hoped to contain it. The story the book tells is one of a suicide which arises in the context of a set of 'hierarchical structure[s]', in which women are confined to the private, domestic sphere, lacking agency and authority, and dependent upon the men to come in from the wider public sphere and exercise their authority and agency upon them. To the extent that *History of a Suicide* is a form of psychological autopsy, it re-enacts the trauma of the sisters' upbringing, Kim's death and Bialosky's bereavement by reinscribing these structures within the text. Even as an adult, Bialosky is still subject to external authority. By describing her

²⁸² *ibid.*, p. 2

²⁸³ *ibid.*, p. 210

mother as ‘needier than her children’, Sheidman indicates that even she, the senior member of the family, has failed to achieve the agency and authority which come with full adult status. In her recourse to a form of legal discourse – the psychological autopsy – Bialosky has allowed her perspective and her text to be constrained by a symbolic order that identifies the law with the father, and thus condemns women to a subordinate, helpless position within it.²⁸⁴ It could even be argued that by taking on the role of investigator, Bialosky is identifying herself with this external authority, and visiting further judgement, from her privileged position, upon her helpless, speechless sister.

In some respects, *History of a Suicide* exemplifies the contradictions and difficulties inherent in the legal mode of redress. Bialosky does, however, also have the literary mode at her disposal, and, as I shall show, this enables her to speak a truth that lies outside the juridical sphere, and to give expression those parts of her which identify, not with authority, but with her silenced sister.

4. ‘I imagine Kim’,²⁸⁵

History of a Suicide is a text that questions itself, written by an author aware of the limitations and pitfalls of any one approach. Like *The Café after the Pub after the Funeral*, its writing was motivated partly by a sense of frustration with the available texts on the subject of suicide and suicide grief:

While I was desperate for answers, reading whatever I could get my hands on about suicide – philosophical, sociological, or psychological studies – I found myself longing for the story of the individual soul. Where was the story of the young girl who brightened over the simple pleasures of a box of animal crackers or a piggyback ride, who loved cats and playing hide and seek, who possessed the gift of generosity and had held such promise? I could catch glimpses of her in the language of despair written by poets or in works of fiction. But it wasn’t enough. I could find no full portrait of a living, breathing human being, no different from any one of us, who had lost the will to live.²⁸⁶

²⁸⁴ Gilmore, (2000), p. 59.

²⁸⁵ Bialosky (2011a), p. 111.

²⁸⁶ *ibid.*, p. 76

One could argue that the psychological autopsy is itself a ‘story of the individual soul’, and in its assemblage of details, material traces, writings by the deceased, and testimony from those who knew them, it does provide at least some of the components of a ‘full portrait’. The evidence Bialosky gathers together for *History of a Suicide* is wide-ranging, and includes: poems, letters, compositions and diary entries by Kim; a list of the contents of Kim’s wallet at the time of her death; the police report of her death; the autopsy report; a list of the things left in her closet; a list of Kim’s favourite foods; a description of the possessions left behind in her bedroom; oral testimony from her mother and other members of the family; Bialosky’s own memories of Kim.

The detailed lists of Kim’s personal effects function as evidence, but they also perform another, quite different function in the text, by enabling Bialosky to dramatise her obsessive search for answers, for traces of the sister she has lost. Along with its fragmentary structure and eruptions of self-questioning, these lists mark the text as expressive and symptomatic of traumatic grief. In the account of my own meeting with a survivors’ group which appears towards the end of *Small Pieces*, I describe myself coming to the realisation that ‘[t]he search for answers is a symptom of suicide bereavement, not its solution.’²⁸⁷ Legal and quasi-legal proceedings, such as the psychological autopsy, appear to hold out the promise of transforming the loss into a closable case, but in practice this closure is ever-receding. Bialosky understands this, and so does Shneidman. When Bialosky hears his voice as ‘godlike’ for a moment, and finds herself ascribing to it the power to utter definitive answers, it is Shneidman himself who swiftly brings them both down to earth:

“But can you help me figure out what happened?” I asked. “If you come see me we can talk,” he replied. He described the reason for the psychological autopsy. “To locate the pain. Suicides are in psychological pain. But I have to caution you. There may not be answers.”²⁸⁸

²⁸⁷ *Small Pieces*, p. 203.

²⁸⁸ Bialosky (2011a), p. 91.

Shneidman is a literary scholar as well as a suicidologist. He is obsessed with Melville, and with *Moby-Dick*. When Bialosky visits him to learn his conclusions about her sister's death, they talk 'about Kim specifically, and about his work on suicide' but also 'about literature. Sontag, Melville, Plath.'²⁸⁹ Bialosky and Shneidman share a passion for literature, and a belief that it can offer valuable insight into the problem of suicide. As Bialosky explains, *Moby-Dick* is a crucial text for Shneidman in this regard:

He described a suicide's state of mind as the "damp, drizzly November of the soul" from the opening lines of *Moby-Dick*. When he contemplated the unconscious he referred to Melville's term, "the lower layer," stating that Melville wrote explicitly about the unconscious in *Moby-Dick* five years before Freud was born. To help me understand, he pointed out a scene in which Ahab is chasing the elusive whale and refers to the "lower layer" – the region of the unconscious where our hurts and desires are not readily visible.²⁹⁰

Bialosky is a poet, and one of the threads running through *History of a Suicide* is her repeated turn to literature, both as a reader and a writer, in her attempts to 'piece together' the lost Kim. She references, and quotes from, a number of literary writers including Wallace Stevens, Shakespeare, John Donne, T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath.²⁹¹ In her letter to Shneidman, she praises him by placing him in their company: 'I think you have done more than any one writer I have read, aside from the great poets and philosophers, in furthering the understanding of suicide in this country.'²⁹² These literary texts offer Bialosky a metaphorical space quite different from the law-bound coroner's court of the psychological autopsy. Examining a range of autobiographical, posttraumatic texts which trouble the boundaries between fact and fiction, Leigh Gilmore describes them as offering 'an alternative jurisdiction for the self-representation of trauma' and enabling their writers to claim 'truth-value of an extralegal kind.'²⁹³

²⁸⁹ *ibid.*, p. 226

²⁹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 229

²⁹¹ *ibid.*, pages 19, 88 and 89

²⁹² *ibid.*, p. 86

²⁹³ Gilmore, (2000), pages 43 and 69.

In *The Juridical Conscious* Shoshana Felman explores the possibility of literature as testimony at some length:

I have suggested elsewhere that literature can be defined (accounted for, and understood) as a specific mode of testimony, and that writers often feel compelled to testify through literary or artistic channels precisely when they know, or feel intuitively, that in the court of history (and, I will now add, in a court of law) *evidence will fail or will fall short*; when they know that other sorts of testimonies will, for different reasons, not be evidenced. Writers testify not simply when they know that knowledge cannot be obtained through other channels but, more profoundly, when they know or feel that knowledge, though available, cannot become eloquent, that *information cannot become consequential*.²⁹⁴

I would argue that when Bialosky complains of the lack of any ‘full portrait of a living, breathing human being’²⁹⁵ in the literature on suicide, it is because she ‘knows or feels’ that the knowledge of her living, breathing sister which she carries within her, ‘cannot become eloquent’ through a mere recital of the facts. In order to express this knowledge, she must resort to the ‘literary channels’ to which Felman refers. In Felman’s words, she must employ her ‘art... narrative... literary style, or [her] artistic rhetoric [as] a precocious mode of bearing witness and of accessing reality when all other modes of knowledge are precluded or rendered ineffectual.’²⁹⁶

This is precisely what Bialosky does. Whenever she comes to a point in her sister’s story where available, legally admissible forms of evidence ‘fall short’, she employs the techniques she has developed in her career as poet and novelist to help her fulfil her task of bearing witness to trauma – her sister’s, her family’s, and her own. As I have stated, Bialosky could be described as a privileged witness to Kim childhood and early girlhood, with direct access to information that Kim herself lacked, but this changes after the older sister leaves home and her direct knowledge of Kim’s life becomes limited and sporadic. Rather than leave blank spaces in her story, Bialosky chooses to recreate her sister’s private world by employing fictional techniques. These

²⁹⁴ Felman (2002), p. 96. The ‘elsewhere’ referred to is her chapter in Caruth (1995).

²⁹⁵ Bialosky (2011a), p. 76.

²⁹⁶ Felman (2002), p. 97.

speculative passages, which are usually signalled by a reference to ‘imagining’ or ‘picturing’, increase in frequency as the story moves towards Kim’s death.²⁹⁷ This passage, in which Bialosky describes Kim’s relationship with Alan, is a good example of her use of this technique:

I imagine he passed her a joint when they drove in his car, taught her his particular way of keeping the smoke in her lungs till it burned before slowly blowing it out. I imagine she liked the feeling, dreamy and nice, as if the world had suddenly become a safe planet to live on. They drove around the city, along roads they knew like the back of their hands, getting high. Then later to visit his hangout, an after-hours bar called the No Name in a strip mall in University Heights where one of his buddies worked and where he sometimes tended bar. He set up shots of tequila. Showed her how to lick her hand, sprinkle salt on it, then squeeze lime on it, before tossing it back... And for those few hours when she was just a little high, when he reached over and for a minute pulled her close, it was good enough.²⁹⁸

The phrase ‘I imagine’ acts as a threshold-marker for a textual space within which the strict binaries which hold sway in the realm of the legal are relaxed, allowing for a creative loosening of the boundaries between self and other, inner and outer reality, truth and fiction.²⁹⁹ In her work on the therapeutic use of fiction in autobiography, Celia Hunt uses the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott’s concept of ‘transitional space’ to describe the flexible internal space within the writer which makes it possible for her to relax these boundaries sufficiently to do her creative work.³⁰⁰ Winnicott defines transitional space as ‘... an intermediate area of *experiencing*, to which inner reality and external life both contribute. It is an area that is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf expect that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet

²⁹⁷ For example, on pages 128 and 197.

²⁹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 128

²⁹⁹ In *Literary Aesthetics of Trauma Virginia Woolf and Jeanette Winterson*, Reina van der Wiel explores the idea of this space as a ‘container’ for traumatic experience in relation to Woolf’s use of spatial metaphor in her fiction.

³⁰⁰ Celia Hunt, *Therapeutic Dimensions of Autobiography in Creative Writing* (London; Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2000).

interrelated.³⁰¹ According to Winnicott, art takes place within this space. His fellow psychoanalyst, Marion Milner, asserts that it is the artist's 'pliable medium' which allows them to bring internal reality and external life into a 'dialogue relationship'.³⁰² While the medium has this pliable quality, it remains itself a part of that external world, retaining its own intrinsic qualities, with which the artist must negotiate. In Bialosky's case, her medium is language in general, and, in the passage above, the conventions of literary fiction in particular.

These conventions are a shared cultural language, and in using them Bialosky can begin to communicate her traumatic experience in an intelligible form, while protecting both herself and her audience from its full, catastrophic force. In this sense, the conventions of fiction are analogous to the formal rules of poetry, which, according to therapist Shanee Stepakoff, can help move a grieving suicide survivor 'from formless anguish toward a capacity for the verbal representation of psychological pain.'³⁰³ The form functions as a container for the trauma, enabling the writer to recall their impressions without re-experiencing them in painful flashback; thus they can reconfigure a traumatic memory as knowable and bearable for both themselves and their readers. Bialosky is aware of the role a shared understanding of literary convention can play in the belated comprehension of traumatic experience: when she identifies, retrospectively, what might have been the decisive moment in Kim's undoing, she does so by making an explicit reference to these conventions:

She fell behind during her last year of high school. Up until then her grades had been strong; suddenly her papers were left unfinished, tests incomplete, and long-term projects not begun. *I'll never finish, be good, or smart enough*, she wrote in her journal. I imagine on the days she showed up to school, it was easier to smoke a cigarette in Hippie Hall and hang out with friends than to follow the thread of

³⁰¹ D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, (London: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 3.

³⁰² Marion Milner, *On Not Being Able to Paint*, (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Books, 1971).

³⁰³ Shanee Stepakoff, 'From Destruction to Creation, from Silence to Speech: Poetry Therapy Principles and Practices for Working with Suicide Grief', *AIP the Arts in Psychotherapy*, 36 (2009), 105-113, p. 105.

thought in the classroom; having missed so much, she struggled to keep up. She might have looked around at her many friends who managed to stay on course and wished she could be like them. *It's so nice to be happy*. If there is a particular time that defined the clear yet inaudible sound of a life beginning to unwind, this was it, the moment before her life began to spin off course, like the point in a novel at which everything that has come before turns and past events reveal their significance. Yet we didn't see it.³⁰⁴

This passage demonstrates a further advantage which the literary mode has over the legal. Celia Hunt has observed that it enables authors like Bialosky to employ fictional techniques as a way of 'experiencing other people's points of view' and so better understand their family's history from the perspective of its other members.³⁰⁵ In the flexible creative space opened up by this approach to writing, Bialosky is able to collapse the boundaries between herself and Kim, and appeal to the authority of shared experience: they have attended the same high school, have both smoked cigarettes in Hippie Hall. They have grown up in the same house, as daughters of the same mother. Like *The Café After the Pub After the Funeral*, *History of a Suicide* shows how a bereaved sibling might give expression to their identification with the deceased. In both texts, there are passages where the reader can find evidence of what Bank and Kahn would term 'merging or twinning', and Mitchell would describe as 'narcissistic identification'. Like Gordon, Bialosky loves her sibling, in part, 'like herself'. Bialosky acknowledges this explicitly in the text, stating that 'Sisters are mirrors. We see parts of ourselves in each other.'³⁰⁶ When she starts to reconstruct Kim's pivotal teenage years, she invokes the idea of the mirror:

When I looked into Kim's eyes in those days, they were like mirrors calling me back to my adolescent self. I watched her sit near the phone in her bedroom, which had once been mine. She was fifteen, smitten with her first boyfriend. *It's so nice to be happy*, she wrote in her journal. After they'd had a fight, she would come down to

³⁰⁴ Bialosky 2011a, p. 119 'Yet we didn't see it' – in this sad little phrase, (which must be so familiar to any suicide survivor), Bialosky acknowledges the belatedness of traumatic experience: her family were unable to bear witness to events, or to have any knowledge of their true significance, while the events were unfolding.

³⁰⁵ Hunt, (2000).

³⁰⁶ Bialosky (2011a), p. 114.

the breakfast table wearing sweatpants and a baggy T-shirt, eyes swollen. Boys, with their sexual magnetism, sweaty brows and hands, and crafty ways of making their interests known, had taken priority in her life.³⁰⁷

The shared experience which Bialosky is exploring here is both female and embodied. She animates the textual body of her lost sister with her own remembered physical sensations, her own experience of desire. Writing about Kim's relationships with her first boyfriend, Bialosky moves almost seamlessly from Kim's imagined, embodied experience to her own remembered experience, and back again:

... He winked at her. He squeezed her knee until she screamed for him to stop. He possessed that proud swagger in his walk that came from knowing his girlfriend adored him. Around him, dressed in her tight T-shirt and cutoff jean shorts that revealed her long, curvy legs, Kim was alluring and fun-loving, too. I understood. When I was her age I was attracted to boys just like him – the kind that liked to play sports, fish, go hiking, drive cars. We were girls who liked to watch others and basked in their radiance. While she was supposed to be writing an essay or working on computation, Kim's mind might have drifted back to the dimple in his cheek when he smiled.³⁰⁸

'Alluring' Kim, with her 'long, curvy legs', is frequently described in terms of her physicality and physical beauty. Later in the book, Bialosky writes: 'I wish I could describe how beautiful Kim was. I have tried. Thick, long, blond hair, blue eyes, hourglass figure, and a twinkling, innocent smile.'³⁰⁹ Bialosky also emphasises their mother's beauty, and its importance to her. Describing her as she was when Bialosky's father died, she explains that '... my mother ... did what most women of her generation, raised to be wives and mothers, would have done and what her family encouraged her to. She went on a quest to find a new man to replace my father. She wasn't yet thirty. She was a beautiful woman with wavy dark hair she wore in a flip and with a model's figure, and she exuded a warm, caring glow.'³¹⁰ Bialosky goes on to speculate that perhaps it was not only her mother's beauty, but also her 'vulnerability' which men

³⁰⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 101-2

³⁰⁸ *ibid.*, p. 104

³⁰⁹ *ibid.*, p. 152

³¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 37

found attractive. The women with which Bialosky identifies – her mother and sister – are appealing characters, attractive, ‘warm’ and ‘caring’ but also vulnerable. They have suffered both physical abuse and psychiatric illness, which in Kim’s case ended her life. Like Hattie Gordon, Bialosky experiences her identification with her lost sibling as dangerous. Towards the end of the book, she confesses that ‘Sometimes I think I should be the one dead, and Kim should be having my life. I have to remind myself that I am allowed to be among the living even though one hand holds the hand of the dead.’³¹¹

One especially perilous and painful site of identification between Bialosky and Kim is that of maternal loss. I have mentioned the abortion which precipitated Kim’s emotional decline, and the unborn children which Bialosky lost not long after Kim’s death. When she tells the story of Kim’s abortion, on the page before she reveals her own to the reader, the words she chooses are indicative of a sense that she is moving into precarious territory: ‘*I did not want to imagine* [my italics] how Kim felt when she awoke from the anaesthesia, the embryo having been vacuumed from her uterus, the hospital sterile and cold.’³¹² Imagining is the act that allows Bialosky to merge her own identity with her sister’s in a benign, creative way, but at that moment in their lives this was an act that felt too dangerous: her psyche defended itself by compelling her to remain separate from her vulnerable mirror. Years later, writing of herself and Kim on that same day, protected by the intervening time, and the literary mode of testimony, she is able to recall both her own and Kim’s abortions in one sentence, which moves between the two sisters’ experiences as if through a porous membrane, without even a comma between them: ‘Later that night, when I checked on Kim in her bedroom, she was curled up in the fetal position facing the white and gold floral wallpaper I had stared at, too, when it had been my room and I was in fear of what I had done –

³¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 222

³¹² *ibid.*, p. 113 Having myself experienced a miscarriage, after which I was subject to the surgical vacuuming of the ‘remaining products of conception’, I can testify to the difficulty of approaching this experience in writing without re-traumatising oneself.

conceived like her a child out of carelessness and a false sense of invincibility – and she used to tumble into my bed.’³¹³ Within the container of this sentence, its carefully-crafted rhythms and cadences, Bialosky is also able to give expression to Kim’s merging with the lost babies, as she ‘tumbles’ into her older sister-mother’s bed.

It is a sentence that could almost be read as a poem, and reminds the reader that Bialosky is a poet as well as a prose-writer. The book includes poems she wrote about Kim both before and after her sister’s death. She reveals that her first published poem, ‘Sisters’, was written for a twelve-year-old Kim, and was about ‘the journey through adolescence’. Their Aunt Harriet ‘insisted we bury it with Kim inside her casket’. In the poem, Bialosky describes returning home from graduate school to be greeted by a sister who has ‘changed’.³¹⁴ Bialosky explores her identification with her younger sister in the second half of the poem. Even at twelve, years before her death, Kim is already being depicted in terms of her physicality and vulnerability:

I’m surprised finding your face thinned, diamond white,
eyes that pool tears so much like stars, the light behind them.
Your hair, like fallen leaves, dies a little more each day;

the colour is a suspension of yellow and brown.
Your small breasts float on your chest, are apple blossoms
bobbing in a pond. Your body wanders off like a shadow.

It all comes back, hurrying past every mirror,
giving in to that last trail of light, then in bed suspending
that moment in dreams of yourself, women you flip in magazines.

I want to make it all easy, or at least have answers
for the old body shed, for the new horrors
that arise at night, for parents quarrelling,

for friends turning away and returning daily,
for desires you can’t name, longings for the ease of a dream,
answers I can’t give you. Reasons for surviving the night.³¹⁵

³¹³ *ibid.*, p. 114

³¹⁴ *ibid.*, p 63

³¹⁵ *ibid.*, p 64

In 'Sisters', Bialosky employs the two kinds of writing techniques which Celia Hunt explores in her paper 'Therapeutic Effects of Writing Fictional Autobiography'.³¹⁶ One is the 'dialogic' technique, which involves 'creating imaginative engagements or dialogues between different self-concepts, or between self-concepts and conceptualisations of significant people in one's life'.³¹⁷ Although Hunt is referring chiefly to the use of this technique in autobiographical fiction, I would argue that Bialosky employs it in her explicitly autobiographical work, in the ways that I have described. The other technique, which Hunt terms the 'semiotic', pertains mostly to poetry, and requires an emphasis on 'rhythm' and 'rhyme', on the sound of words rather than their meaning.³¹⁸ Like Marion Milner, Hunt sees the creative use of rhythm as enabling 'a closer engagement with the body's felt perceptions and emotions'.³¹⁹ Borrowing some of the terms Hunt uses to discuss a student's semiotic exercise, I can argue that Bialosky's poem, with its 'rocking rhythms', allows 'the physical body to be present' in the writing, permitting 'the bodily and emotional dimensions of self to be foregrounded, given a voice'.³²⁰ This is the expression of Bialosky's physical and emotional self, the side of her which is identified with Kim, and through which Bialosky comes as close as she can to conjuring up her lost sister as a 'living, breathing being' again.³²¹

³¹⁶ Celia Hunt, 'Therapeutic Effects of Writing Fictional Autobiography', *Life Writing*, 7 (2010), 231-244.

³¹⁷ Hunt (2010), p. 235.

³¹⁸ *ibid.*, p 236

³¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 235 A full account of Milner's ideas about the creative use of rhythm can be found in the chapter 'Rhythm and the Freedom of the Free Drawings' in Milner, (1971).

³²⁰ *ibid.*, p 235

³²¹ Bialosky (2011a), p. 76.

5. Conclusion: ‘You grieve for a lifetime’³²²

Standing back to consider the project of recovery which *History of a Suicide* represents, Bialosky asks, ‘But am I doing it for her [Kim], or for me?’³²³ The answer to this question, as I have suggested, is probably ‘both’, but, as Bialosky comes to realise, there is a limit to what she can achieve for either of them. In the course of writing the book, she has tried every mode of recovery available to her, including her own testimony as a witness, the legal redress of the psychological autopsy, the appeal to expert knowledge, the literary techniques of fiction and of poetry. Surely no writer could ever have tried harder to ‘piece together’ a broken girl or to heal her own grief. In the end, however, she has to admit that her success has been, at best, limited.

Bialosky has, like Gordon, been able to use her writing as a kind of grief-work, and as a mode of redress for her trauma. As she shows in the section ‘THE MEANING OF WORDS’, she is aware of the way language and narrative can be used to address psychic pain and trauma:

Formulating our own words about our lives translates our interior hieroglyphics into the stories we tell ourselves to make events from our past more understandable, give them shape and meaning, organize the chaos of the unconscious where we most often dwell.³²⁴

Ever since Bialosky first published her work in graduate school, she has been trying to translate her ‘interior hieroglyphics’ into written words in order to give events ‘shape and meaning’. In her ‘opening words’, she describes how, standing at Kim’s grave eight years after the younger sister’s death, ‘I told myself that I would write about her for two reasons: to redeem her death, and in so doing honor her, and because I needed to understand what she had done and why in order to move forward with my own life.’³²⁵

At the end of the book, Bialosky has read her sister’s journal, visited Shneidman and

³²² *ibid.*, p. 235

³²³ *ibid.*, p. 100

³²⁴ Bialosky (2011a), p. 192.

³²⁵ *ibid.*, p. xii

has gained many insights into what might have happened to Kim, but she has also learned that her knowledge of ‘what she had done and why’ must remain forever incomplete. She has to accept that there are aspects of her sister’s experience, her inner life, and her suicide, that will always resist any attempts to understand them. She acknowledges this in the very last lines of the book, where she describes catching sight of a humpback whale, quotes from *Moby Dick*, and then watches as ‘in the distance the whale slides back into the dark blue underwater world of mystery and terror far beyond our grasp.’³²⁶

The whale represents all that remains mysterious in suicidality, Kim’s experience, and in Bialosky’s own grief, which she has come to realise is not something that can ever be fully contained or mastered. A few pages ahead the ‘Coda’ which ends with the disappearance of the whale, there is a section titled ‘THE ETERNAL LIFE OF GRIEF’, in which she acknowledges that the bereaved must ‘grieve for a lifetime... Sometimes grief disappears for months at a time and you tell yourself, I’m past this now. And then grief comes to visit again like a long-lost friend. It is mysterious, but never take it for granted. Get to know it as well as you know your best friend.’³²⁷ Bialosky may ‘move forward with her life’, but this does not mean that she can resolve her grief and trauma or leave them behind: neither testimony, the psychological autopsy, nor the literary mode could ever accomplish so complete a victory.

Neither can Kim, or her death, be redeemed entirely. As I have shown, Bialosky retains a strong belief the redeeming power of literature – the reading and the writing of it. It has helped her to organise her own inner chaos, and even before Kim’s death she made many attempts to gift its power to her younger sister. Kim recognised literary truth, and valued it. She quotes from one of the papers Kim wrote for a college

³²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 240

³²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 235

composition course, in which ‘she described an awareness she had gained about herself from a novel I had given her that year for Christmas.’³²⁸

The gift of a novel represents Bialosky’s attempt to pass on to Kim a capacity for a kind of imaginatively-derived self-knowledge. Bialosky states in the book that Kim, possibly along with their mother, lacked the capacity for the flexible, imaginative exploration of her past, present and future which literary texts embody, and which might have saved her. She could not make language work for her in the way that her sister Jill can. As she wrote in her diary, ‘... *I just don’t know how to write half of the stuff that I want to say. I wish I could write down the way I feel and could express it to other people. I just have so much trouble doing it.*’³²⁹

The poems which Bialosky wrote about Kim during her lifetime could be seen as the exploitation of a vulnerable subject, but a more sympathetic reading of them would suggest that they were attempts to contain Kim’s chaos on her behalf. *History of a Suicide* could be seen in a similar light. I have suggested that the literary mode allows Bialosky to merge herself with Kim, and so to articulate Kim’s physical experience through her own engagement with the medium of literary writing. One section of the book is titled A PROSE POEM IN TWO VOICES USING EXCERPTS FROM KIM’S DIARY and in it Bialosky inserts words of her own into the body of her sister’s text, as if trying to transplant her own capacity for imaginative reflection into it. It begins:

*What do you do when someone is always on your mind? All I do is think and want, what can I do? I hate it. Oh, girls who are hungry. You sit at the table and watch the kitchen clock. Tick, tock. You paint your toenails, wash your hair, leaving behind your pink princess dress, butterfly wings, braided hair. You smoke cigarettes, drink beer, watch your heart in your chest leave you like a wheel rolling down the hill. If it’s going to be without him I need to start now. It’s not getting easier. It’s getting hard. Please help me...*³³⁰

³²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 165

³²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 192

³³⁰ *ibid.*, 106-7

As an expression of Bialosky's continuing love for her sister, her grief at her death and her desire to make good her sister's hurt, this device is moving – it succeeds. However, I would argue that, if read as an attempt to speak on Kim's behalf, it can only be a poignant failure. The benign illusion of bodily union with her sister which the literary mode offers Bialosky can enable her own dialogue between parts of herself, but it remains an illusion: she cannot bring back Kim with her own words or her own breath. The juxtaposition of her own words with Kim's in the prose poem only serves to show the gap between Bialosky's formal, verbal fluency and her sister's limited capacity to translate her own 'inner hieroglyphics'. At the end of the book, Kim remains a spectral figure. Bialosky describes her as 'thoughtful and sympathetic, belonging more to the world of silences, connecting to the sensitive underside of people...'³³¹ Bialosky can – and does – mourn Kim with great eloquence, but she cannot, in the end, give her a voice she never had.

³³¹ *ibid.*, p. 126

Conclusion

In the Introduction, I explained how my PhD project grew out of the internal conflict I experienced as I contemplated writing about my brother's suicide. An examination of the nature of this conflict revealed the contradictory pressures that lay behind it. On the one hand, there were pressures that impelled me towards silence: the difficulty of giving intelligible form to incoherent traumatic experience; the taboos attendant upon traumatic experience in general, and suicide in particular; the social, cultural and clinical neglect of the sibling relationship, which made me question whether my brother's suicide was a legitimate subject for me to explore. On the other hand, there were motivating pressures, that compelled me to write: the compulsion to give voice to traumatic experience, which Shoshana Felman describes so memorably as the 'appointment to bear witness'; the urge to make reparations towards the damaged inner objects which represented my lost brother and mother, and to renegotiate my relationships with them in the context of ongoing bonds; the urge to re-work and re-tell my family's broken story; the need also to reach out to the wider community and combat the sense of isolation which accompanied my bereavement in its early stages.³³²

My PhD has given me the opportunity to address this conflict in two ways: creatively, through the writing of *Small Pieces*, and critically, by examining the work of other siblings bereaved by suicide. Working on the critical and creative projects side by side has enabled me to place my own writing and my own conflicts within a broader context. In the chapters on Hattie Gordon and Jill Bialosky, I have shown how these two writers have negotiated the pressures I experienced, and how these have motivated, inhibited and ultimately shaped their very different accounts of suicide bereavement.

³³² Felman (2002), p. 14.

Hattie Gordon's book, *The Café after the Pub after the Funeral*, was particularly interesting to me for its exploration of the complex forces at work within the sibling relationship. Using work by psychologists Banks and Kahn, and by the psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell, I was able to show how these forces of love, hate, guilt and identification were played out in and through Gordon's text. Bialosky's memoir, *History of a Suicide*, revealed an equally complex, but very different dynamic. When I returned to my own work, *Small Pieces*, I saw how my own love, hate and guilt towards a lost sibling, and my own identification with him, had informed my writing. I understood that part of the sense of prohibition I had experienced came out of my awareness of my own negative feelings towards my brother, and the guilt that arose from them. I saw how my desire for his company moved me to recall our shared experience in my writing. I understood that my sense of responsibility as the 'big sister' drove me to memorialise him, just as it had driven me to take charge of half his ashes and bring them to his friends. Like Gordon and Bialosky, I also had to work through my identification with my lost sibling, which suicide had rendered both painful and potentially dangerous. These three texts, along with the others I mentioned in my introduction, demonstrate that when we neglect the sibling relationship, we neglect a relationship that is both rich and powerful. It is not an insignificant relationship; it is not an insignificant loss.

I have argued that the sense of prohibition, the 'ethical pressure' alluded to in my title, needs to be understood in a relational context. In my chapter on Hattie Gordon, I suggested that her writing was an act of relational work, allowing her to renegotiate her ongoing bonds with her late brother and mother, improve her relationship with her father and to reach out and make connections with other survivors of sibling suicide. The acts of 'narrative recovery' which Henke describes in terms of shattered selves can also be seen in the context of damaged or disrupted relationships. As I explained in my

introduction, damage to relationships and to the individual's sense of connection to others is a significant part of the experience of trauma. In my chapter on Bialosky, I explored how this kind of harm is further exacerbated in cases of bereavement by suicide: firstly, because the suicide itself is experienced by the survivor as a violent attack on their connection to the deceased; secondly, because the feelings of guilt and blame which circulate in families following the suicide damage relationships between surviving members; lastly, because the taboo surrounding suicide leads survivors to feel cut off from the wider community.

As Shanee Shepakoff has noted, creative writing can be a particularly effective tool for restoring a lost sense of connection. By writing about our relationships with our lost siblings, Gordon, Bialosky and I have been able to reaffirm our bonds with, respectively, Gareth, Kim and Julian. Gordon was further able to deepen her relationship with her father through the medium of the text. Bialosky's task was to honour her sister's memory on behalf of her family, and to reconstruct the family narrative which had been shattered by Kim's death. Like Bialosky, I found myself in possession of a fragmented family narrative, and felt myself 'appointed' to reconstruct it. Like Gordon, I found that my book helped to repair relationships with surviving members of my family. After my sister-in-law read the manuscript of *Small Pieces*, she said that she now understood for the first time what the experience of losing Julian had been like for me: thus the book which I had feared would estrange us became a means of bringing us closer together.

The act of publishing an account of one's experience also allows a traumatised subject to reconnect with the wider community. In this context, all three texts discussed here could be seen as acts of testimony, or traumatic witness. I have used trauma theory in my discussion of Bialosky's text. Viewed in this light, I found that her book performed three different, but related, tasks. Firstly, it functioned as an account of

Bialosky's own experience, as an act of traumatic witness. It also represented Bialosky's attempt to contain this traumatic experience, on behalf of herself, her lost sister and her family. In doing so, she had access to two different modes of repair which Felman has identified as the 'legal' and the 'literary' modes. Adopting the legal mode, Bialosky made use of a specific tool, the 'psychological autopsy', in order to attempt to reconstruct her sister's state of mind and to find an answer to the questions which are the special torment of every suicide survivor, namely: 'Why did she do it?', 'Was it my fault?' and 'Could I have stopped her?' In *Small Pieces*, I explain how reading Lukas and Seiden's book on suicide bereavement brought me the insight that this search for answers was itself a symptom of complicated grief, and could not offer a solution; I also described a discussion at a conference for suicide survivors which yielded the same conclusion. I have shown how Bialosky came to this understanding. Our discovery of the limits and pitfalls of the legal mode of containment supports a key contention of trauma theorists such as Felman, Gilmore and Jensen, which is that traumatic experience cannot be adequately addressed through legal or quasi-legal means. I have argued, further, that Bialosky's work shows how legal modes of reparation can lead, paradoxically, to the repetition of the forms of harm they are intended to address.

As an alternative to legal forms of redress, Felman offers the 'literary mode' of reparation. The legal and literature modes can be understood as presenting different kinds of metaphorical space in which to write. The legal mode takes the writer-suicide survivor into a figurative courtroom, or tribunal, where strict legal definitions of truth apply, and definitive answers are promised. In such a space, the fragmentation, incoherence and self-questioning that characterises traumatic witness renders it inadmissible as evidence. As I explained in Chapter Two, the legal mode cannot provide the closure it promises. In contrast, the literary mode as described by Felman, Gilmore and Hunt offers a more flexible space, in which the writer can make truth-claims relate

to felt experience rather than to established facts, and in which this experience can be contained in its fragmentary, incoherent state. I have followed Celia Hunt and D.W. Winnicott by describing this space as ‘transitional’. In transitional space, a thing can be both itself and something else at the same time. In this space, a lost relative can be reconstructed in the form of words in a text; Gordon, Bialosky and I can merge with our lost siblings without putting ourselves in danger; in this space, a writer can express anger towards a person without fear of hurting them, and love that person at the same time. The literary mode allows a suicide survivor who writes of her loss to resist premature closure – and, moreover, to tolerate the knowledge that where suicide is concerned, all closure is premature.

When I understood that I was writing *Small Pieces* within this flexible, creative space, I experienced some relief from the sense of ethical constraint which had been inhibiting me. I realised that I was not required to tell everything I knew, or to pass judgement on the people in my account. What I was required to do was to give some kind of form to my experience, in order to make it communicable to my readers. I have explained how I used the story of the Breaking of the Vessels as a structuring metaphor for *Small Pieces*. By presenting my chapters as vessels which contained ‘small pieces’ of my family’s story, I was able to give my work a coherent shape that still allowed me to express something of the fragmentary nature of traumatic experience. I have noted that the structure of Bialosky’s book allows her to do the same. In both cases, we have held on to the blank spaces within our text, honouring both the silence of our dead siblings and the parts of our experience which must remain unresolved and impossible to verbalise. Our solution to the narrative and aesthetic pressures that arise from trauma has thus not been to resolve or suppress them, but to express them by formal means. As Louise Woodstock writes in her paper, ‘Hide and Seek: the paradox of documenting a suicide’, it need not be necessary for a suicide survivor to reveal and expose everything

in order to heal. According to Woodstock, '[t]he constructed nature of storytelling demands silence, forgetting and obscuring as well.'³³³

Literary devices can also function as a means of affirming a writer's connections to the communities to which she belongs, and of accessing shared systems of meaning in order to counter the senselessness of our sibling's deaths. Bialosky and I were both approaching the task of producing our accounts of suicide survival as writers who had already published works of poetry, fiction and non-fiction. Bialosky makes particularly extensive use of literary allusion, taking on the suicidologist Edwin Shneidman's preferred image of *Moby-Dick* as a metaphor for all that must remain unknowable about a suicide. In doing so, she establishes her connection to a literary tradition, and all those who have written in it. I would also argue that Hattie Gordon's vivid imagery and sophisticated, poetic language expresses her membership of the literary world, as the daughter of a writer and agent: it is no accident that she communicates with her father not through speech, but through a literary text. In my case, I borrowed extensively from Jewish religious texts as a way of writing out a space for myself within a community and tradition from which I had felt painfully estranged.

What I hope I have shown is that when siblings bereaved by suicide use writing to address their experiences, they are subject to a unique set of ethical, narrative and aesthetic pressures. These pressures arise from the particular dynamics which characterise the sibling relationship, the traumatic nature of suicide bereavement, and the double-disenfranchisement suffered by siblings bereaved in this manner. I have also argued that suicide bereavement brings with it a peculiarly acute sense of ethical discomfort, owing to the forces of guilt and blame which circulate in families and communities following this most anomalous of deaths. I hope that by examining life-writing texts from this unique perspective, informed by my own experience as a writer

³³³ Louise Woodstock, 'Hide and seek: The paradox of documenting a suicide.' *Text and Performance Quarterly*. 21:4 (2001): 247-260, p. 247.

and bereaved sibling, and by my knowledge of Object-Relations theory, I have made an original contribution to the field of life-writing studies. I also hope that I have demonstrated that this interdisciplinary approach yields useful insights into the ethical, narrative and aesthetic pressures which writers face when they take their families as their subject, and could be applied to other texts by other writers.

I would also suggest that, in writing *Small Pieces*, I have demonstrated some of the ways in which theory might inform creative-writing practice. When I chose to use the notion of *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world, to define and give structure to my project, I did so with the understanding that works of art can be seen, in psychoanalytic terms, as works of reparation. As I became familiar with work by trauma theorists, their descriptions of the fragmented and self-contradictory nature of traumatic memory also began to feed into the formal decisions I made. The theory formed one part of the vessel in which the painful material of my creative project could be safely contained; the institutional framework and supervision provided by the University formed the rest. Without that containment, *Small Pieces* could never have been written.

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