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The Art of Mourning

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Panel: The Art of Mourning

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Rachel ROSE

The Art of Mourning

It is a sad truth that it is infinitely easier to rend, to implode, to destroy, than it is to repair. Bones can be broken in seconds, but take weeks to mend. This is also true of hearts. From the time the Ancients first began to write, one of the writers' primary jobs was consolation; there is even a genre of comfort literature, *Consolatio*, perfected by Cicero and Seneca in Ancient Greece more than two thousand years ago.

Growing up as the daughter of a doctor, I was not sheltered from suffering. I assisted in my first home birth at age five, and also sat with the sick and the dying from a young age.

I have a poem called "The Opposite of War," about those blood donors who come, week after week, to donate blood for strangers. It is that measure of love, freely given, that is at the heart of my writing. Recently, I was invited to participate in a poetry project to mourn all those killed by police violence in America. It didn't matter whether they were cops or civilians. We poets were given a name and had twenty-four hours to write a poem.

At one point, I would have said that mourning is what separates humans from beasts, but evidence has shown this to be yet another example of human arrogance: animals such as whales and chimps, elephants, dogs and even cows mourn fiercely and for extended periods. But this shared culture with non-human animals only makes mourning more profound, more significant.

As a poet, I have been called to write eulogies on more than one occasion. A couple I know recently gave birth to their first daughter. There were profound complications, and they were sent home to wait for her to die—which she did, in their arms, after twenty-three days. Not knowing what else to do, I wrote them a poem. They read the poem at her memorial service; they said it helped them immeasurably.

Here is an excerpt of another poem:

Delivery Room Under Renovation

for Susan, for Alec Michael

The night my water broke, a week early,
I held my wide sides and rocked, knowing
that before another day came,
you would be born...

...Slowly I was drawn by the rope
around my hips, dipped in and out of that well
of pain. In between I sipped rose tea,
marked a few last-minute changes on a manuscript,
dripped and dripped and dripped.

In the hospital a day later, they handed me you
in the recovery room. My abdomen had been
stapled shut and I was still numb from the ribcage
down. We were in a room full of the knock and rattle
of jackhammers....

The nurse, leaning over my bed, said to us
they were bringing in a woman to recovery
whose baby had just died. She did not need
to ask us to stifle our delight. The woman was wheeled in,
moaning but sedated. The nurse pulled the curtain
around her bed, and I held my newborn, her eyes
still glistening with erythromycin, the small white bonnet
pulled over her wet hair, and only a thin curtain
separated me from the mother whose baby had died:

I don't mean a metaphorical curtain, I mean a thin
green hospital curtain on a metal track,
and I wished to, but dared not, pull it back.

It was the first time I had read this poem in public. I finished the reading, and everyone had left but one woman. She came and said, "I'm the woman behind the curtain." She had indeed given birth at the same hospital, within weeks of the time I'd had my daughter. I was afraid that the poem I'd written had added to her pain, but she thanked me. "I felt so invisible," she said. "You saw me." So now you can see that this poem is dedicated to Susan, and to her stillborn son, Alec Michael.

A stillbirth, a missing loved one, justice denied: these are the hardest losses to overcome, because the loss is invisible. Any wound needs to be examined, gently cleaned and exposed to the air in order to heal. For humans, the process of grief being witnessed and shaped by ritual is what makes it possible to move on. Though it's never enough, sometimes this is the most I've been able to offer. These poems are also the only times I've been absolutely sure of my calling, sure that my strange skill set can bring a measure of comfort.