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Past Grievs

Lara Langer Cohen

Swarthmore College

I never imagined I'd write an essay for an academic journal about my pregnancy, and not only because it's such an excruciatingly intimate topic. It's professionally inappropriate in a more narrowly historical sense, too: while my field is nineteenth-century literature, my pregnancy was as twenty-first-century as they come. To achieve it, I swallowed innumerable pills, injected myself with various fluids, and monitored my body's insides with ultrasound imaging. I paid for these things—dearly—with the money I made as a professor, an unimaginable transaction for the women in the books I read and teach.

Yet my pregnancy ended with that most clichéd scene of nineteenth-century American literature: a dead child. In the warped time of grief—the incommensurability of yesterday and today, the evacuation of a future, the dogged presence of the past—this was the most wrenching temporal confusion of all. Mourning is inescapably isolating, but this grief alienated me from my entire present. Dead babies belonged to another century.

In the days that followed, I battered on the only other dead babies I knew: the ones that lined my bookshelves. I did it with shame, silently apologizing to my own dead, for turning away from his memory, and to my intellectual training, for weltering in scenes I knew better than to trust. Every Americanist knows that in nineteenth-century literature, dead children are the height of emotional manipulation, almost always ideologically suspect: obfuscating metaphors for slavery, occasions for performing gentility, fantasy bribes for exploiting the vulnerable, and so on. Still, guided by the scholarship of writers like Mary Louise Kete, Karen Sánchez-Eppler, Karla FC Holloway, Max Cavitch, and Dana Luciano in a way I had never anticipated, I burrowed into poems by Lydia Sigourney, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt; essays by Fanny Fern; novels by Frank Webb and Harriet Beecher Stowe; and collections of consolation literature with titles like *Echoes of Infant Voices* (1849), *The Early Dead, or Transplanted Flowers: A Collection of Thoughts Poetical and Scriptural on the Death of Children* (1857), and *Our Little Ones in Heaven* (1858).

None of the deaths they recounted were exactly like mine. I gave birth at twenty-two weeks, just the wrong side of viability, and the baby only lived a few moments. The problem was that it wasn't a baby at all; it was a fetus outside my body, an impossible thing. It failed to compute: for months I struggled to explain it to my hospital's baffled billing office, which charged me for the baby's "room and board" (the gurney where he failed to breathe?) because I hadn't enrolled him in my health insurance plan within seventy-two hours, when there was, after all, no longer any "him." It was no more comprehensible emotionally. Something had died, but what? With the best intentions, family and friends worked to give shape to the death. They offered their condolences on my "pregnancy loss," or they urged me to "mourn him like a son." Meanwhile, I silently raged that I had lost more than a pregnancy, but I knew I hadn't lost a child either; I had never had one. I couldn't name what I had lost, and as agonizing as that was, somehow I also didn't want to explain it away. It was true, and in a sense, it was all I had of him. Indistinction was his one distinguishing feature.

I had been drawn to nineteenth-century literature for company in a type of loss all but unknown to those around me. But I found unexpected affinity in its mode of grieving, too. For even as nineteenth-century writers built an entire culture industry around child mortality, the object of their mourning often remained obscure. The most potted sentiments reverberate with a fearful question: what is a dead baby? It is not that these consolatory works fail to console, although in many cases this seems to be true. But for all their eagerness to answer the anguished question *why*, they often struggle—or in some cases, simply decline—to define *what* has died. "If I repine," as Ralph Waldo Emerson puts it in "Threnody," his elegy to his son Waldo, "'Tis because a general hope / Was quenched."¹

Emerson's refusal to specify his grief gives added poignancy to his decision, fifteen years after Waldo's death, to exhume his coffin and look inside.² But such open-ended mourning was not just the preserve of self-consciously philosophical poets. Lydia Sigourney is best remembered as the poet who turned mourning into a vocation, a forerunner of Mark Twain's lugubrious Emmeline Grangerford. Yet for all her poems' sanctimonious clichés about child death, they can be startlingly brutal, while their dead children, like Waldo, are often oddly indefinite. Formally, Sigourney (who herself had one stillborn baby and two who were born prematurely and died soon afterward) favors heavy midline caesurae that evoke the finality of death without anything we might call resolution. In "Death of an Infant," for instance, she writes:

Death found strange beauty on that polished brow
 And dash'd it out.—There was a tint of rose
 On cheek and lip.—He touched the veins with ice,
 And the rose faded.—Forth from those blue eyes
 There spake a wistful tenderness, a doubt
 Whether to grieve or sleep, which innocence
 Alone can wear.—With ruthless haste he bound
 The silken fringes of those curtaining lids
 Forever.—There had been a murmuring sound,
 With which the babe would claim its mother's ear,
 Charming her even to tears.—The spoiler set
 His seal of silence.—³

You can hear death's unmistakable sickening thud, but each line remains open. (One thinks, in contrast but not unrelatedly, of the jarringly sing-song double and triple end rhymes of "Threnody"—dying/lying, reclining/resigning—which seem to strive so desperately to capture something they cannot.) And while Sigourney excruciatingly details the extinction of nearly all signs of life, her ostensible contrasts also suggest that even in life, the infant was never fully recognizable. His beauty was "strange," his face had a look of "doubt," his eyes were "curtain[ed]." All of these characteristics, or lack thereof, give him the "beguiling anonymity" that Jessica F. Roberts has identified as a hallmark of infant elegies. "Their apparent dislocation from any particular instance of grief," Roberts explains, "must be understood in relation to their circulation via anthologies," which encouraged "mapping one's child on to the poetic dead child."⁴ The formal anonymity of the dead child made for a brilliant marketing strategy; if the subjects of the elegies were unknowable, anyone could know them. But it was in their unknowability itself that they resembled my baby.

For Sigourney's original readers, however, the elusiveness of the dead child may also have been born of the very familiarity of infant mortality. For most of the nineteenth century, around a quarter of children died before reaching the age of five.⁵ Facing these odds, any baby was haunted by the nearness of death. After Fanny and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's seventeen-month-old daughter died, for example, Fanny Longfellow recounted that she would often "devour my [remaining] children's faces as if looking my last upon them."⁶ Infant life and death lie agonizingly proximate in Sigourney's poetry, as well. In "Death of an Infant in Its Mother's Arms," the titular event is strangely absent

from the poem, for no one—neither the speaker nor the mother—realizes when the infant dies. As his mother is holding him,

Where best he loved to hide him,
 In that dear sheltering spot,
 Just there his tender spirit pass'd—
 Pass'd, and she knew it not.⁷

It seems impossible to imagine holding a corpse and mistaking it for a living person. Yet I remember a nurse gently handing me a terrible body, cleaned and swaddled—and I remember later blankly telling my own mother that I didn't know if it was alive or dead. How could I not have known? “Death of an Infant in Its Mother's Arms” doesn't explain, exactly, but it shows how bewilderingly the infant's death bends time, and with it, not only the distinction between the living and the dead but the distinctions between past and future, inside and outside, earth and heaven. By the penultimate stanza, the poem syntactically doubts whether the infant was ever there at all:

No more thy twilight musing
 May with his image shine,
 When in that lonely hour of love
 He laid his cheek to thine;
 So still and so confiding
 That cherish'd babe would be,
 So like a sinless guest from heaven,
 And yet a part of thee.⁸

The oddness of the second line's “may” construction, which simply seems awkward at first glance (the infant can no more shine in the mother's twilight musing, or will no more?), resurfaces in the sixth line, where the infant who died becomes the infant that “would be.” If you work hard to parse those lines, you can read “would be” as a habitual construction describing the past, but in the poem's mood of yearning, it sounds much more like a conditional tense. Redistributed between the memory of the past and the imagining of a different future, a future with that infant in it, the infant who *was* disappears. Rather than attempting to resolve this confusion, the poem embraces it, crowning it with a logical puzzle: the infant who felt so much “a part of” the mother was also “like” a stranger, a “guest from heaven” all along.

The conceptual ambiguity of infant mortality may have derived from linguistic ambiguity, as well. “Infant” (and for that matter, “babe” or “baby”) referred to a much broader range of ages in the nineteenth century than it does today, as any reader who has ever been startled to find a character called an “infant” talking, playing tag, or reading a book can attest. In early legal discourse, “infant” simply designated a minor, or someone under twenty-one. The “infant schools” that spread through the United States in the early 1800s enrolled children up to six years. Those called “infants” in *Echoes of Infant Voices* range in age from newborns to five-year-old Waldo Emerson.

Religious beliefs about children blurred matters further. Whereas the Calvinist doctrine of infant depravity dominated seventeenth- and eighteenth-century understandings of childhood, in the nineteenth century Americans began to believe not only that children were born innocent and thus destined for salvation but that they were “virtually angels reincarnate,” as the historian Karin Calvert puts it.⁹ The interchangeability of children and angels forms the plot of Fanny Fern’s sketch “Incident at Mt. Auburn,” which recounts how a woman, visiting the grave of her firstborn child, sees a small, white-robed figure appear out of the darkness, calling, “Mother! mother!” The mother faints, but the narrator explains that the figure was simply her youngest child, who had slipped out of bed to come find her. “After all,” Fern concludes, “it was ‘an angel’ that we saw.”¹⁰ But if children were angels on earth, even living children were always only a step away from heaven, as the numerous other doomed “angel children” who fill the work of Fern and others attest.

For Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt, who wrote some of the fiercest mourning poetry of the nineteenth century, it is not the continuity of life and death but their discontinuousness that makes the dead child so hard to grasp. “Her Blindness in Grief,” written in the months after Piatt lost her four-day-old, beats itself against the evanescence of a child. Yet the speaker rejects assurances that the infant is safely in heaven:

. . . [C]ould I, through these endless tears,
 Look high into the lovely spheres
 And see him there—my little child—
 Nursed tenderly at Mary’s breast,
 Would not my sorrow be as wild?

The poem bitterly mocks the association between children and angels, pointing out that it avoids the most salient point: “Who grieves for an-

gels? Do they die?" To call a child an angel is to disavow its death, and the poem fights to retain that stark fact.

There is no comfort anywhere.
My baby's clothes, my baby's hair,
My baby's grave are all I know.¹¹

In place of the consolations of spiritual knowledge, the poem insists on the cognitive dissonance of the child's death. "Oh! precious hands, as still as snows, / How your white fingers hold my heart!" the speaker cries out, an image that is harrowing precisely because it is impossible: hands that are "still" cannot (but do) clutch at their mother's heart. Finally, the speaker rejects the comforts of heaven completely, flatly declaring, "Despair can only be despair. / God has his will. I have not mine."¹² Without a fixed object, despair circles back on itself, never transfigured, never translatable.

If the poem's title disavows the mother's despair as "blindness," its own searing vision is difficult to forget. Even Piatt's more light-hearted poetry often turns on ghoulish jokes about the indeterminateness of dead children. "My Babes in the Wood," "Last Words," and "The Sad Story of a Little Girl" begin as elegies, then reveal themselves as allegories: infant death here is just a figure for growing up. So in "My Babes in the Wood," the speaker tells two children that they had "a baby sister and a brother," now "gone from human sight," only to explain to her wondering audience in the final line, "why, it is your dead selves I mean!"¹³ In poems like "The Favorite Child" and "Sad Wisdom—Four Years Old," Piatt flips this story around, suggesting that actual death also changes a child into a different person. "You are my favorite now, I fear!" she tells the absent child, her grief transforming both the one who is gone and those who remain.¹⁴ With varying degrees of acceptance, Piatt's mourners mourn for children they do not know.

Reading this writing through the haze of my own grief was not exactly reading for pleasure. But in the midst of so much well-meaning advice to name, particularize, and understand what I had lost, it was a relief to find a mode of grieving whose condition was not recognition.¹⁵ Lately I've wondered if this mode of grieving, which seemed at the time so unbearably private, so peculiar to its circumstances, really was so. For nineteenth-century mourning writers, the unknowability of a dead child was an effect of the evanescence of childhood itself, and certainly the biological liminality of my baby made its indescribability all the

more acute. But maybe these writers also had a more expansive version of attachment than we have today, one that reached toward what was not-yet-known as well as what was known. I'm thinking in particular of Lloyd Pratt's recent work on strangerhood, which suggests that the nineteenth century may have been more receptive than we are to the unintelligibility of those of any age. In the pervasive figure of the stranger, Pratt discerns a belief that "to be human is to be in a constant state of coming-into-being rendering each of us always strangers to those we encounter."¹⁶ By this account, alienation is not incompatible with affiliation, and no less a part of our attachments to those who are gone. If mourning does not require a fully fledged object, perhaps equally, it never has one. As much as we mourn for the loss of what we knew, we also mourn for the loss of what we didn't know, and never will.

Notes

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Poems* (Boston: James Munroe and Co., 1847), 242.
2. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman et al., 16 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 14:154.
3. Lydia Sigourney, *Poems* (Philadelphia: Key and Biddle, 1834), 30.
4. Jessica F. Roberts, "The little coffin': Anthologies, Conventions and Dead Children," in *Representations of Death in Nineteenth-Century US Writing and Culture*, ed. Lucy E. Frank (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 142, 143.
5. See Samuel H. Preston and Michael R. Haines, *Fatal Years: Child Mortality in Late Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), chap. 2.
6. Fanny Appleton Longfellow, *Mrs. Longfellow: Selected Letters and Journals*, ed. Edward Wagenknecht (New York: Longmans, Green, 1956), quoted in Sylvia D. Hoffert, "'A Very Peculiar Sorrow': Attitudes toward Infant Death in the Urban Northeast, 1800–1860," *American Quarterly* 39 (1987): 604.
7. Lydia Sigourney, *Pocahontas, and Other Poems* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1841), 51.
8. *Ibid.*, 52.
9. Karin Calvert, *Children in the House: The Material Culture of Early Childhood, 1600–1900* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 105.
10. Fanny Fern, *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Port-Folio* (Auburn: Derby and Miller, 1853), 262.
11. Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt, "Her Blindness in Grief," in *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt*, ed. Paula Bernat Bennett (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 49.
12. *Ibid.*, 51.
13. Piatt, "My Babes in the Wood," in *Poems in Company with Children* (Boston: D. Lothrop and Company, 1877), 151, 152, 153.
14. Piatt, "The Favorite Child," in *Palace-Burner*, 57.
15. Perhaps this sense of historical dislocation was another experience I shared with nineteenth-century mourners. As Paula Bernat Bennett points out, Piatt's poems often describe their speakers grieving while reading about another parent's distant grief, imagining the loss of a child as "something shared over time and space" ("God's Will, Not Mine: Child Death as a Theodician Problem in Poetry by Nineteenth-Century American Women," in *Representations of Death*, 137).
16. Lloyd Pratt, "'I Am a Stranger with Thee': Frederick Douglass and Recognition after 1845," *American Literature* 85 (June 2013): 249.