House of Grief

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HOUSE OF GRIEF

by

Megan Eralie

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

English

Approved:

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This collection of essays examines how I house the grief for the losses of my religion and my grandfather. Through nonlinear narratives and speculation, I wanted to think about the kind of house grief builds and what might be housed around or inside it. My first essay, “Body of Feathers,” looks at my body as a house of shame and how I transformed my body into something that could be mine instead. It explores a series of moments from my life where I felt disconnected from my body, usually because of rules or expectations set by someone other than me. In the essay, I move from feeling like I had no control of my body, to taking back control and experiencing my body as mine for the first time. It ends in a moment of speculation, where my body undergoes an impossible transformation that mirrors the reclamation of my body and the erasure of shame.

The second essay, “Obituary,” houses the grandfather I knew and loved but shares space with the grandfather I didn’t know and who didn’t know me. I center most of my essay in the final few moments with my grandfather before he died and weave memories of him and drafts of the obituary I didn’t write for him at the time. I complicate truths that
I chose to ignore and write about the truths I only learned after he was gone. It is ultimately a eulogy for his life and a eulogy for the things I never got to say to my grandfather.
This collection of essays examines how I house the grief for the losses of my religion and my grandfather. My first essay, “Body of Feathers,” looks at my body as a house of shame and how I transformed my body into something that could be mine instead. It explores a series of moments from my life where I felt disconnected from my body, usually because of rules or expectations set by someone other than me. In the essay, I move from feeling like I had no control of my body, to taking back control and experiencing my body as mine for the first time. The second essay, “Obituary,” houses the grandfather I knew and loved but shares space with the grandfather I didn’t know, and who didn’t know me. I center most of my essay in the final few moments with my grandfather before he died and weave memories of him and drafts of the obituary I didn’t write for him at the time. I complicate truths that I chose to ignore and write about the truths I only learned after he was gone. It is ultimately a eulogy for his life and a eulogy for the things I never got to say to my grandfather.
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Megan Eralie
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The red birdhouse nailed to a crooked, splintered wood post is my favorite. Nestled in a bed of roses and the giant boulder my mom claims she and her brother rolled down the hill themselves, it was the first thing I looked for each time I pulled up to my grandparents’ home. It was also the first thing that disappeared after grandpa died. It must have been the same day he died that someone dug up the post with a shovel and snuck the birdhouse, post included, into the trunk of their car. I don’t know why they bothered keeping it a secret, considering my aunts started clearing out Grandpa’s closet in front of him while he was still gasping his last breaths. Maybe they felt guilty, but I’m no better—I took the beloved Bach bust from his office the second day he was in the hospital.

Grandpa was dying for four weeks. We finished mourning him by the end of the first. The birdhouse—I still need to mourn.

Eviction Notice: all birds must vacate the property immediately.

-Management

Utah eviction law requires a three-day minimum notice before a tenant can be forced to vacate, under probable cause such as breach of contract. The birds did nothing wrong. Their rent was always paid, they respected the land, abided by the contract given to them. My grandfather cared for them, and they cared for him. All they asked for was a safe place to feed. If they weren’t birds, they could file a lawsuit against the property thief.

I’m the furthest thing from being an ornithologist. I can tell the difference between a pigeon and a crow, sure, but ask me about a crow and a raven and I’ll say,
“They’re both black.” Google tells me mourning doves are the most likely species found in my grandpa’s yard. It feels a little too ironic to be true. Sometimes that’s just how it goes. Grandpa died on Halloween, a day when people everywhere get to pretend to be dead, and irony established itself.

I’m thinking about gray mourning doves with little brown suitcases flying to the courthouse and filing a wrongful eviction lawsuit. The clerk would ask what happened. The birds say, “Our house is gone!” The clerk would imply something about worthiness, needing to follow x, y, and z to get back into the house. The birds would feel frustrated, like the clerk wasn’t really there to help them. “The problem isn’t getting in,” they’d explain. “The house is just gone.” If I were the clerk, I’d offer to build them a new house, a better one, one that wasn’t crooked.

But maybe the birds vacated the house long before all of this. It was the end of October—don’t birds have to migrate?

Google says no.

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In her essay, “On Grief,” Naira Kuzmich writes about eulogizing the loss of a grandparent and the loss of culture. Of the difficulty she experiences while trying to write this essay, she says: “Grief lives on the tongue, yes, but I had swallowed mine long ago” (218). Finding the words to describe grief requires allowing the words to actually come out, and that was the part I struggled most with. I wanted to write about my grandfather’s death, and I wanted to write about losing my religion, but the words hurt. The grief still hurts.
I watched my grandfather die, slowly and painfully. Simultaneously, I watched my family begin to erase him. Before he was dead, his closet was emptied, his truck sold, and his workshop dismantled. Mormon doctrine promises my family a new life with their loved ones after death—their earthly life is merely a blip in the eternity promised to them. I no longer believe in that eternity—and that’s another form of grief. Loss of religion, especially a religion so central to my identity, came with a lot of resentment, confusion, and even fear. My whole worldview, existence, and purpose dissolved, and I don’t think I’ll ever be done grieving the loss of that.

How do I house my grief?

To answer this question, I have built a house of words. I'm interested in the empty spaces left behind after loss—whether my body as an empty space that was once a house of worship, or the birdhouse outside my grandfather’s home that’s now an empty hole in the yard. Houses are where things go to be contained, either by choice or by force, and houses constantly undergo changes (in decoration, construction, even ownership). I wanted to think about the kind of house grief builds and what might be housed around or inside it. My first essay, “Body of Feathers,” looks at my body as a house of shame and how I transformed my body into something that could be mine instead. The second essay, “Obituary,” houses the grandfather I knew and loved but shares space with the grandfather I didn’t know and who didn’t know me.

II. Form and Structure

Linear essays require a chronological timeline of events and have a clear beginning and end. I could have written linearly about my grandfather dying and my
leaving the church, but, if I had, that linearity would suggest an end. Since I do not have a clear beginning or a clear end to my grief, nor a concrete truth about my spirituality, my grandfather dying, or what any of that means for housing grief, I chose to write these essays in a nonlinear form. I was more interested in thinking about how memory and grief can move by association rather than as a narrative about what happened.

A reader’s experience with nonlinear forms differs from traditional forms because it is more interactive. Brenda Miller, in her essay “A Braided Heart: Shaping the Lyric Essay,” explains there is “a tendency toward fragmentation that invites the reader into those gaps, that emphasizes what is unknown rather than the articulated known” (3). Miller, quoting from the Seneca Review, also adds that there are “built-in mechanism[s] for provoking meditation” (3). Through white space, I invite the reader to explore their own grief in the gaps on the page.

Nonlinear forms rely on white space to attract the reader’s attention during important moments. For example, white space during a transition between sections can visually signify a shift in ideas or narrative. A major theme of my project is emptiness. I, at times, use the white space on a page to replicate my own emptiness. The challenge is to do this in a way that isn’t overly obvious. If there is ever too much white space, or no apparent explanation for it, the structure fails. So, while I wanted to mirror the emptiness of grief with the emptiness on the page, I had to choose these moments carefully, so the reader doesn’t lose faith in me. Done well, white space gives the active reader an opportunity to find meaning and look through those windows of hope I strive to provide. Alternatively, a lack of white space is meant to visually represent the times where grief was overwhelming, when grief consumed me.
Writing for an active reader was important to me because grief, while a shared experience, is experienced alone. John D’Agata says of the nonlinear form: “What we think of it, and what we make of it, and what we know of it is up to us” (10). I wrote knowing that where I house grief is different from where my readers house their grief. I cannot tell someone what to do with their grief because, as Pauline Boss explains in an interview with Krista Tippetts, “People live with grief. They don’t get over it” (75). But what I could ask my reader to do is understand the open-ended nature of grief by asking them to engage in an open-ended exploration of grief itself. My two essays provide my reader with glimpses, or windows, intended to give the reader hope as they rebuild the empty spaces left behind by grief. In her essay, “The Pain Scale,” Eula Biss writes “I am comforted, oddly, by the possibility that you cannot compare my pain to yours. And, for that reason, cannot prove it insignificant” (22). No grief is insignificant.

My two essays both take on elements of speculation as well, particularly “Body of Feathers.” Speculative nonfiction allows me to reach into spaces I haven’t seen, will never see, and imagine “what if.” What if my body could undergo an impossible form? Surely, I have been through tougher challenges than this. Maybe it is possible? As my grandfather was dying, I was anticipating the words I would need to write about his life. But until he was dead, I didn’t know what those words would be. I could only imagine them. In “Obituary,” the speculative allowed me to write as my grandfather would often tell stories: with exaggerations. It gave me permission to take my reader into these imaginative, and, at times, speculative spaces.
III. Literature Review

Several works informed the content, themes, and form of my thesis, including memoirs centered around faith exits, works that explore grief and loss through personal narrative.

First, I looked at faith transition memoirs, which offered me two things: (1) knowledge about how others experience a transition away a strong religious upbringing, and (2) a better understanding of how I wanted to address (or didn’t want to address) the LDS church specifically in my own writing. Martha Beck’s memoir, *Leaving the Saints*, is one of the more prominent ex-LDS memoirs. Beck, the daughter of Hugh Nibley, a well-known and beloved figure in the church, published the memoir in 2005. Early in the book, while musing on her faith transition, she writes: “As far as the Latter-day Saints are concerned, I’ve already committed the only sin worse than murder: I left the church” (21). The stakes are high for someone leaving the church because members are taught that leaving the church is essentially accepting their condemnation to hell.

What’s remarkable about Beck’s memoir is that though it was published in 2005 and written about a spiritual transition taking place in the early 1990’s, much of that experience is similar to the experience members face today. The church is stuck in the past, and, with it, its members. While every ex-Mormon writer’s experience is unique, our stories each stem from the same problem: a system of powerful men who are masters of exploitation. I believe Beck was too kind to the church in her book, but my thesis is not meant to be an exposé of the church as a whole. I’m most interested in Beck’s observations on church culture, particularly this idea: “Mormons tend to know a whole whopping lot of stuff beyond a shadow of doubt, I envy them. My whole life is shadowed
by doubt” (7). I used that phrase a lot as a member, “beyond a shadow of doubt.” This phrase was fed to me every day of my life. From an early age, children born in the church are paraded to the front of the chapel to bear testimony about the church, speeches rehearsed and whispered into their ears by their parents. As soon as I could talk, my parents helped me rehearse the lines I would repeat in front of anyone who would listen: “I know the church is true—and I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that Joseph Smith was a prophet.” Beck’s depictions of church beliefs, culture, and traditions proved useful as I explored the ways I felt suppressed as a woman and struggled after leaving the church to find out who I actually was and wanted to be. Someone was always there to control my identity, down to the very phrases I would use in conversation. Beck’s experience within the church is much darker and more complex than my own, but her exploration of church culture is what mattered most to my work. It is difficult to provide the necessary context and beliefs of the church to my readers, especially those who are not familiar with the doctrines and practices. Beck’s memoir provided a great model for accomplishing this.

I also turned to the works of writers leaving other religions and cults to learn how to write more universally about my experiences and grief. *Leaving Isn’t the Hardest Thing* by Lauren Hough is an exploration of identity after growing up in the Children of God cult. Her essays reveal the many ways her identity was restricted and stifled, and how it wasn’t until she left that Hough was able to discover herself. Hough’s experiences with spiritual and physical trauma, as well as her exploration of gender and sexual identity are in many ways entirely unlike my own, but what I love about her approach is that she channels her younger selves throughout her essays by incorporating excerpts
from her childhood diaries. In the essay titled “Leaving Isn’t the Hardest Thing,” she writes about the day she left the cult, which she refers to as “the Family.” It’s interesting that during an event so formative to the rest of her life she can’t even name it on the page:

I was fifteen years old when we left the Family for good. Escaping a cult isn’t nearly as exciting as they make it sound, not the Family anyway. We talked one night after dinner. No big deal. All I have to mark the occasion is a single line in the diary I’d been keeping: ‘Mom came in to pray with me.’ No one reading my diary would’ve known what I’d meant. But I’ll never forget. I made the note in my diary, and I tried not to hope. (204-205).

Hough explores anger, fear, grief, and relief throughout her essays, notably in “Speaking in Tongues,” “Leaving Isn’t the Hardest Thing,” and “Everything That’s Beautiful Breaks My Heart.” Hough keeps the reader close, expressing vulnerability in the writing, made apparent as she engages with her childhood journals. This work encouraged me to turn to my mission journals and use what I could to write about those experiences in “Body of Feathers.”

I studied works of grief in addition to works centered on faith transitions because I believe the two themes to be intimately connected. Leaving one identity to find a new one means certain things are left behind: relationships, family, old comforts, a future. I explore grief in two ways: the loss of self and community I experienced as I left the church, and the death of my grandfather. An essay by the late Joan Didion, “Goodbye to All That,” asks questions about the first kind of grief. Who are we without the community we know? How do we form new community? Didion seems to suggest that we all eventually go back to what we know, but we won’t go back as the same person. There is beauty to be found in familiarity, but there is also beauty in anonymity. Didion reflects on feeling anonymous in a community of familiar faces: “I began to cherish the
loneliness of it (community), the sense that at any given time no one need know where I was or what I was doing” (235). *The Year of Magical Thinking*, another work by Joan Didion, also explores themes of grief. After the unexpected deaths of both her husband and her daughter, Didion, left alone, was forced to reckon with these two tragedies:

I know why we try to keep the dead alive: we try to keep them alive in order to keep them with us. I also know that if we are to live ourselves there comes a point at which we must relinquish the dead, let them go, keep them dead. Let them become the photograph on the table. Let them become the name on the trust accounts. Let go of them in the water. Knowing this does not make it any easier to let go of him in the water (225-226).

Didion writes about ordinary moments of grief and warns: “Life changes in the instant. The ordinary instant” (3). Grief may take things away, but perhaps grief gives us something else in return.

*Sound Like Trapped Thunder* is a collection of lyric essays by Jessica Lind Peterson that takes a reader from Minnesotan winters to dead whales in the Amazon Rainforest to seahorse mating rituals—but at its core, the collection asks the reader to understand loss. At the center of the collection is the essay titled “Dear G.B.” In this essay, Peterson grieves the loss of all the grandmothers in her life, both her own and her husband’s, who all seemed to die around the same time. As she explains how the last grandmother died, she writes: “And I cannot help but think. That we will all end up in the ground with earth piled up all around us. Whether or not we are beautiful. Whether or not we are kind. … Whether or not our wounds have healed, if our displaced organs have settled back into place. If we have forgiven or been forgiven” (71-72). To wrestle with this kind of existentialism is a massive undertaking, and one that I feel Peterson has done expertly. She asks the reader big questions: what does it mean to be alive? How do we
hold space for a trauma that is not our own but is a trauma we must process? Peterson relies on metaphors deeply rooted in color, moving from essay to essay through the color wheel. Greens and blues are used often to reflect emotion in unexpected ways—blue is meant to be beautiful, and green is mournful. A line that repeats in my mind as I think about this book is: “It’s like a sickness the way I need green” (63). She uses color as a structural tool to connect the essays together, helps me think more about how form is established.

V. Conclusion
This project presented several challenges, many of which stemmed from own inability to articulate my own grief. I learned that grief changes as time passes, and the same is true about writing grief. Words change. As I wrote “Obituary,” I realized that the only way to create a house for my grandfather was to also write about the hard truths I spent a long time trying to ignore. Yes, there are things I loved, and still love, about him, but I understand now that there was also fear. I needed to meet his expectations, because if I didn’t, our relationship would have ended. That is where the real grief, to me, existed. I had to mourn the reality of our relationship. “Body of Feathers” came together quickly, and I love how it took my grief and transformed it into something that feels beautiful. I let the white space carry me through the grief and shame my body experienced while at the same time honoring the parts of me that had been restricted or controlled for so long. I didn’t want to turn away from them anymore. I have held my grief, and now I have placed pieces of it into a new home, this home, “House of Grief.”
VI. Bibliography


