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Janel C. Atlas
University of Delaware, atlasj@udel.edu

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Cover Page Footnote
Grateful acknowledgements to Joseph Harris and those who read and gave feedback on this piece.

Narrative

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When her daughter was stillborn at full term in 2006, the author grappled with the limits of language to describe, explore, and share her experience of grief and life after loss. In this essay, the author reflects on the temporal layers of narrative about babyloss and ultimately realizes that writing to make meaning about life-changing losses continues over time.

Through the night, waiting for labor to progress, I heard babies' first caterwauls. Drifting down through the sterile hospital hallway came the sounds of laboring women, supportive nurses, encouraging partners. I turned onto my side and cradled my hugely pregnant belly in the crook of my arms.

I already knew that my baby would make no sounds in the delivery room when she was finally born.

I knew because she was already dead.

The nurses and doctor attending the birth would limit their words. After all, with a dead baby, the intended outcome of pregnancy leaves a gaping hole in the usual post-delivery dialogue.

Is it a boy or a girl? What is the Apgar score? Who does she look like? Is she healthy? How is her latch for breastfeeding? Does she need any time in the neonatal nursery? When can we be released to go home?

The words dissolve before they can be uttered, and all of the actors in this shadow inverse of a healthy birth search for a script with far fewer rote lines.

My daughter's stillbirth in 2006 dropped me into an underworld where the standard language I used to navigate things before suddenly no longer fit my life experience, and as a writer, that left me untethered.

If information would have satisfied my questions, I would have had all that I needed; when I got home from the hospital, I had sheets of information about the causes of stillbirth, defined by the medical community as pregnancy loss occurring between 20 weeks and delivery. In contrast, I had no stories about what this type of loss really means. I knew a great deal about the structure of umbilical cords (and what could go wrong with them), autopsies, and genetic anomalies, but nothing about how others had stared into the abyss of burying a baby and lived to tell the tale.

I assumed that a collection of stories like this existed somewhere, so I sought this book in the library and online. I kept thinking perhaps it would appear on a different shelf or at the top of the next search returns. But it didn't.

And so I determined to make one myself.

At the time, as a successful freelance writer, I naively believed that making this book would be relatively straightforward. Yet other things—like having a baby—had seemed simple before. And they weren't.

Writers, it appeals to me, have odd relationships with words; we commit narratives to structure, memories to the page or pixel, and words to print. Words, these tiny units of meaning, are at the same time powerful and transformative as well as transient, slippery, and erasable.

When a person writes a true story, especially a narrative about a personal trauma, she confronts the profound shortcomings of language.

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My second daughter, Beatrice, was very much wanted, and my pregnancy had been textbook perfect for the first 35 weeks. There were no signs that anything was wrong. The doctor issued no warnings and there were no alarm bells to trigger extra precaution. Just the week before Beatrice died, the nurse practitioner assured me as we listened to the baby's heartbeat through the doppler that I'd hold her in my arms very soon.

How could I find the words to describe the throat-clenching, cold-sweat panic I felt when just one week later the doppler resounded with silence?

After she was born and buried, I tried to make sense of what had happened. I tried writing simple declarative statements:

The doctor said he was sorry. I drove to the hospital. I called my husband. The ultrasound technician showed me the image. My daughter had died. I had to deliver her body.

The words were clinical, like an autopsy. The story of my baby and my loss was stripped of its significance, the facts subsuming the tragedy and emotion of her death. In other words, I could transcribe the timeline, but it didn't express what I most wanted to tell.

However, when I tried to capture the emotions, I careened into the maudlin, sensational, and overtly personal. That didn't suit, either.

I discovered that using embodied, somatic language did a better job. I experimented with embodied writing, literally writing the physical forms and feelings of my body before Beatrice's death, through labor, and in the weeks that followed:

breastmilk blood amniotic fluid cord contractions labor stretchmarks lochia tears

When I tried to find words to describe her absence, psychological and spiritual terms appeared on the page. I filled my journal as I attempted to name the lacuna created when Beatrice's umbilical cord knotted off and killed her slowly. I wrote about the pit, the hole, the shadow, the silence, the emptiness.

But all of these various linguistic and compositional tactics ultimately fell short, even when I tried to weave them together in one coherent piece of writing.

All the signifiers in the world—well written, well edited, well published—could only point to the signified: my dead baby.

If Beatrice's story had stayed bound within the pages of my diary, I could perhaps forgive myself as a writer and better accept the limitations of the account. Yet that wasn't where I wanted Beatrice's story to live; I wanted to share it by putting it in context and conversation with stories by other people who had also experienced stillbirth.

After working through many drafts, I finally decided to write about how my grief process impacted my relationships both with friends and acquaintances who had suffered miscarriages and stillbirths as well as those who had not. When I finally got my essay into a form that I felt communicated my isolation in an accessible and true way, I began submitting the book proposal for *They Were Still Born: Personal Stories about Stillbirth* to publishers.

Over the next nine months, sixteen publishers rejected the book; but in November 2009, I got word from Rowman & Littlefield Publishers that they wanted to publish my book.

As I worked on the manuscript, which includes 20 essays by other writers who had stillborn babies, it appealed to me that I served as the mother and the midwife for these stories. And surprisingly, I realized that the resulting book would be at once both living and dead, like our children.

The words and stories in *They Were Still Born* came to life. When they were finally published, they could circulate through the world, touch and be touched, get retold, and be repurposed by others. However, in another sense, our stories died because they became closed off from our own hands; unlike in the case of a blog or a website, writers can't update or correct a printed book in the future.

Once *They Were Still Born* came out, reviewers responded. Readers bought it and posted comments online. Libraries acquired copies. And people who I have never met read about the most intimate and heart-wrenching experience of my life.

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I don't think of her every time I hear a baby cry. I don't feel a pang of grief when I see a butterfly. I can pass a cemetery without immediately conjuring her face.

But there are also ways in which my daughter Beatrice has irrevocably changed me, even though I do not actively grieve her death anymore. When I hear that an acquaintance is expecting, I'm happy for them, but I have to bite back advice I've learned the hard way. "Don't set up the crib," I want to say. "Put the car seat in the car, but don't set up the crib until you're really, really sure you're bringing a baby home with you." Again, the experience of having a baby die inside me alters not only my perspective and way of being in the world, it also impinges upon what I speak and how.

Even now, when I look at my two living daughters, my heart can see her ghost, growing with them. She would stand a head above Charlotte (born just ten months after Beatrice) and a head below Evelyn, who was not yet 2 when Beatrice died. My three brown-haired brown-eyed girls, a matching complete set of matryoshkas.

More than ten years after Beatrice died, I no longer walk around with a gaping wound, my uterus aching. But not a single one of the days I have lived since she died has ended without her passing through my mind. The sun has not set on a single day without me wishing she somehow could have lived.

Over the months I worked on writing and editing the book, I was pregnant with my fourth baby, this time a boy. As he grew from another dream into a reality inside me, I perched the laptop on my burgeoning lap and molded words and ideas with my fingers.

Sometimes people who knew about my book project asked me how I handled reading, writing, and editing narratives of loss while pregnant, and I understand why they asked. I'm sure it seemed to them like a morbid and upsetting project to work on when expecting another baby myself.

What these people didn't understand, however, is that spending time with narratives of babyloss couldn't remind of Beatrice. Simply put, that couldn't happen because she wasn't something that I ever forgot. I didn't need the book project to recall that my healthy, beautiful daughter had died inside of me or that it could happen again.

In reality, working on the book helped me to channel love for Beatrice—and even my anxiety about another stillbirth—into something useful, productive, and tangible.

On October 30, 2010, my son, Calvin, was born in the same hospital where I delivered Beatrice. *They Were Still Born* was delivered to my doorstep two weeks later.

It was a year of wonders.

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I've always believed that narratives help people—both writers and readers—make sense of the world and our place within it. Toni Morrison, reflecting on the power and importance of narratives, writes, "First of all, I must trust my own recollections. I must also depend on the recollections of others. Thus memory weighs heavily in what I write, in how I begin and in what I find to be significant."

Like other marginalized communities, people who share their stories of miscarriage, stillbirth, and infant death frequently find themselves stigmatized or judged for content that makes others uncomfortable. Even worse, our stories may get ignored or dismissed as overly-sentimental or too personal. These stories bring out the absurd, the tragic, the horrifying, the vulnerabilities we all share as humans.

Twenty-first century Americans don't do a good job talking about many things, and I believe that death, especially the death of a child, is one of the hardest subjects we confront. Even though—or perhaps because—they are hard to read, narratives like those in *They Were Still Born* are significant. They give readers insight into the meaning-making importance of telling stories, and pull back the curtain on an often overlooked or misunderstood human experience.

Because I was so happy with my book when it was first published, I've been surprised by the dissatisfaction I feel now that my essay is six years old. After all, the events on which I reflect in my narrative have not changed in the intervening years. Yet when I read it, the words are woefully incomplete. At public readings and presentations to health care professionals, the words of my essay give me access to the feelings of the pain, darkness, and loneliness I experienced when Beatrice died. However, the overwhelming sensation is that I'm reading someone else's story. The narrative's author is someone I used to know, and know intimately. I can channel her, like a wispy younger sister I pity for her youth and inexperience. I feel compassion for her because she is wounded and suffering. From her limited positionality on her grief journey, she really is doing the best she can.

But I also feel a little bit impatient with this other Janel. At odd moments, I have to suppress the desire to reject her, to commit an act of erasure. Intellectually I know that this narrator isn't actually someone else—she is me, and the story she tells is a story we share—yet she does not know all that I know. When she stands on her paper platform, telling our shared trauma, she does it in my name, too, even though it is no longer the story I would tell.

> In the years since Beatrice's death and birth, I have come to see her death as one tiny piece of the human story. It is a huge part of my story… but the details about my pregnancy with her, the particulars about how and why she died, and the specific ways in which I grieved have gradually faded. They've grown vague and fuzzy around the edges (I never would have believed that could happen, but it has). (*They Were Still Born: Personal Stories about Stillbirth*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2010.)

I am removed even further from my loss than when I wrote this passage (ten years out instead of four). And this realization about the "vague and fuzzy around the edges" aspect of my memories about the "particulars" is even more true now than when I wrote it in 2010.

If I were to write a new narrative about Beatrice today, I would write a different story. So I have had to make peace with the older version of my narrative. I'm learning to see it as a pinprick of light, a pure representation of who I was and what sense I made of the senseless death of my daughter at the time that I wrote it.

Even though I feel a disconnect between the story as I wrote it then and the way I feel now, I still long for my daughter, still write about her and about how I remember her.

Other contributors to the book have told me that they feel similarly—that they have learned an acceptance, even a love for ourselves and our stories, as we change. Grief changes us because love changes us.

And grief is love.

A prevalent theme in babyloss literature is a deep fear that other people will forget our babies. In telling and retelling stories about our dead children, we make meaning. We keep them alive, in a sense. That's essentially what all stories do, regardless of their subject.

By talking about our babies and describing how it feels to live without them, we imbue their short existences with significance.

As time has passed, I find myself talking about Beatrice less and less. She is no less a part of my life than before, and I still think of her often. But I don't feel the same need to talk about her absence, and I don't need anyone else to validate her life or her death. She has become like the air around me or like a lyric that never quite leaves.

I learned how to sit with Grief, almost as if she was an old friend with whom I'd fought but then reconciled. There's a comfort there, a familiarity, a closeness. I have survived something horrible and lived to embrace life anew.

In the ongoing process of writing about writing about my daughter's death, it appeals to me that my daughter's afterlife is somewhat analogous to the afterlife of my essay in *They Were Still Born*.

Like with Beatrice, I brought into the world my best effort: a combination of experience, a product of love, and the very best I could do.

I know that my story is beautiful. It is true. It is no longer under my control. And it is heartbreakingly incomplete. Even if I could go back and rewrite my story for *They Were Still Born*, it would only temporarily bring the narrative back into alignment with my current perspective; ultimately it would seek, again, release to the world.

The story that I'm so sure I want to write today would, for a few days or weeks, feel like it expressed the essence. Nevertheless, even if it seemed perfect when I completed it (and it hardly ever does, as any writer can attest), as time passes and I grow further from the moment in which I wrote it, the same frustrated wistfulness would creep over me. I would grapple with the inadequacy of it and start to tinker. I'd replace a word, slash a sentence, rewrite an entire passage in an effort to get closer to what I meant.

I'm learning to accept that one story can never capture both the beauty of my baby and the lifelong grief I carry over her death. (Of course, no one story can ever truly capture all of anything.) The narrative I wrote about the aftermath of Beatrice's death shows an important part of my story, but it can't possibly express the evolving reality of life after stillbirth.

And so the cycle continues: remember, reflect, write, revise, release, regret, revisit, rewrite. I iteratively write this story again but each version again recedes as I continue living without her.

Unlike the stories I tell about her, I can't change what happened to Beatrice.

She is my daughter. She died. She will always be my daughter, and yet there is nothing about her short existence that I can change now. Bound by time, I can no more return to the time leading up to her birth than I can make her again a living, breathing girl. I cannot return, hold her one more time, sing her another song, bathe her, dress her. I cannot feel her movements again. I cannot live the months of my pregnancy again, this time knowing it is all the time I will ever have with her.

My daughter is unattainable, except through memory and narrative, and even those means are limited and frustrating: slippery, uncontainable, unreachable.

So maybe that's why it seems so important to get the story right. Perhaps the impossibility of bringing her back is why I'm drawn, again and again, to try put into words the meaning of her life on my own life.

I can't have her.

What I can do is keep writing, trying with every attempt to better understand and better express why she matters.

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