

A Ferocious Intimacy: Poetry by Grieving Mothers

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My interest in poetry by grieving mothers grew from a desire to learn more about maternal bereavement. Two women I knew lost children in sudden, horrific accidents. How does a mother live with such profound loss? Bereaved mothers have lifelong grief responses; they think of their children every day (Bennett, 46-7). As a literary scholar and mother, someone whose life has been shaped by motherhood and the written word, I found myself thinking about the death of a child and the relationship between maternal bereavement, grief, and the writing of poems.

I learned about Chanel Brenner's *Vanilla Milk* and Alexis Rhone Fancher's *State of Grace: The Joshua Elegies*, two poetry collections, through the Internet. *Vanilla Milk* was listed for review on the website of *Mom Egg Review*. I reviewed the book and wanted to write a longer essay. Then I discovered Alexis Rhone Fancher's *State of Grace* on the website of *Les Femmes Folles* and learned that Brenner and Rhone Fancher are friends and writing partners who read and support each other's work; Brenner wrote the foreword to Rhone Fancher's book. "Serendipitous," said Rhone Fancher when I told her about my incredulousness at learning of their close connection.

This essay investigates a series of questions. What do bereaved mothers experience after the death of a child? What images and metaphors resonate in poems by grieving mothers? What do feminist scholars say about maternal bereavement? What is the relationship between writing poetry and mothers' grief? Themes that emerge from studying these questions are: the fragility of human life; the inability to control time; the

sensation of grief as both fullness and emptiness and other thematic expressions of the poem as an extension of the mother's body; the truncation of dreams for the child's future; and anger at the cultural expectation that a bereaved mother should "get over" her grief.

This work is intended as an approach to the subject of poetry written by grieving mothers, not as an authoritative response. In any case, read these poets. Their work will take your breath away. The poems say so much about life, loss, love, hope, despair, survival, and pain. Their words are the text, my remarks simply commentary.

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Chanel Brenner and Alexis Rhone Fancher are mothers who write poems about the death of a child. Brenner's son Riley died at the age of six from an AVM (arteriovenous malformation), whose existence was not known until it suddenly burst in his brain. Alexis Rhone Fancher's son Joshua died at the age of twenty-six from cancer. In the preface to *Vanilla Milk*, Brenner writes that after Riley's death, poems poured out of her. Instead of crying, she wrote poems. In *Mothering a Dead Child*, she writes of her fear she won't be able to stop writing poems about him, as if the poems could become the life that has been lost. Rhone Fancher, who had written and published many poems before her son's death, said in an interview that after she wrote *Over It*, "it was like a spigot was opened and poems just kept coming out, over a few years." It's interesting to note that both poets speak of water, an image associated with birth and the laboring mother's body -- the poem as the mother's tears, writing as the birth of the mother's grief.

The death of a child is a confrontation with mortality, with the finiteness and fragility of earthly existence. When children die before their parents, parents undergo a

painful reversal of expectations, a feeling of disorder and a perception that the course of life has been reversed: parents do not expect to bury their children. This theme is addressed in Brenner's poem, *Out of Order*. Riley's younger brother Desmond sits in the car with his mother and father. He points to a cemetery and yells, "I want to go there!" His father replies, "You will someday" (57). Shocking and undeniable, the father's reply points to the sign at the end of the road: everyone dies, your brother died, one day you will die. No candy-coated platitudes can bury this truth.

In poems of maternal bereavement, readers bear witness to the terrible knowledge that death, like life, does not mete out its portions according to standards of justice, fairness, or comprehensibility. During an interview (excerpts of which appear at the end of this essay) Rhone Fancher said to me, "Chanel and I used to have a strange, macabre conversation about whether it's better to lose a son at six or twenty-six. Which is harder? Which is better?" We do not get to choose when we die. Nonetheless, the human mind persists in seeking order and meaning. Thus, the poets' unanswerable question: which is better, to lose the son who didn't have the chance to become a young adult or to lose the son who did? The question, in its doomed effort to comprehend the incomprehensible, holds poets and readers in a viselike grip.

When a child dies, mothers learn quickly and brutally about impermanence. In *The Give Away*, Brenner writes, "Nothing belongs to us, not our hair, not our thoughts, / not our sons" (38). Our bodies, which seem real and solid, material and weighty, are so much more fragile than we care to know or admit. Accidents or illness can destroy us, wreck our lives in the course of minutes or over prolonged years of suffering. Our bodies are not built to last; "a washing machine outlives a little boy," Brenner reminds us (38).

Human lives move toward death. In our minds we remember the past, we create the present, we invent the future. These leaps of imagination help us endure; they are the tools of poetry. But in lived experience, time does not travel in reverse. Yet, the desire to change or control time is often with us. This wish is brought home in Brenner's *Back to the Future*: "Your father wants to know / if we could have saved you." / ... / I say, *We can't go back*, / but your father wants an answer. / He'll invent a time machine" (36).

The irreversibility of time is addressed in Brenner's "Only One," a poem about how Riley is frozen, deprived of a future, "growth stunted / forever at size six ..." (44). Riley's clothes are "little carcasses," a reminder of the immutability of the past and the truncation of his future ("Keeping the Dead," 58). The speaker reminds us that while we can keep the dead with us in memory, their bodies are frozen; they do not grow or become.

The poetry of maternal bereavement reveals that time cannot be measured or controlled by making lists, plans, and schedules. Many of us comfort ourselves with the thought that as day segues into night, another day will dawn with a promise of hope or fulfillment. The death of a child strips the mother of such illusions. "Death makes time / too vast to measure / The sun never sets, / the wildflowers bloom forever. / The double rainbow stretches / for eternity in the cloudless sky," Brenner writes in *The Robot Poet* (22). Death is eternal, and a mother's grief lasts forever.

In Rhone Fancher's poem, "Snow Globe," the frozenness of time is explored. The speaker says: "Despair arrived, disguised as / nine pounds of ashes in a / velvet bag. . . . Better he'd arrived / as a snow globe, / a small figure, / standing alone at the bottom of his / cut short beauty ..." (29). The image of the snow globe is a metaphor for time.

The child is trapped inside a time bubble, his future truncated, his life cut short before he can live it. In “Mahogany Funeral Urn,” the speaker yearns for a movie she can fast forward or rewind in order to alter the sequence of time so she can “make him stick around” (31). She casts herself as a film director who yearns to script a different ending to the story, even as she understands the impossibility of her wish.

The understanding that earthly time is limited is juxtaposed against the desire to script an alternative existence for the dead child. The poet’s dreams for an unavailable or impossible future are imagined in Rhone Fancher’s *My Dead Boy’s Right Arm*. The speaker dreams of resurrection for her son on an imaginary basketball court, the place where he was happiest: “My dead boy is at Staples Center, / a forward for the Lakers / ... passing to Kobe / who passes to Magic / who flicks it back to Josh who / saves the game in overtime with / a bank shot from heaven” (36). Such imaginative leaps, the scripting of a future for the child, an imaginary existence beyond the grave, give voice to grieving mothers’ desires for more time with their children, a desire that is difficult to express in conversation because of its confrontation with endings. Most mothers do not want to imagine the end of their child’s life. Thus the poem becomes a dialogue between the mother and an imagined reader who will witness her grief. The poem is the howl and wail of grief that is too painful to share. The poem simultaneously expresses the howl, the unbearable anguish, and contains it in language imprinted on the page. The poem, unlike the unspeakable grief, can be shared. Poems of maternal grief comprise a testimony, a bearing of witness to the child’s existence and the mother’s anguish.

The constancy of grief as an ever-present companion, appears in Rhone Fancher’s prose poem *God as Ice Cream Vendor*: “I took my heartache to Venice Beach, laid it out

beside me on the sand, loaned it my spare beach towel and your green visor hat. Exhausted, I slept, but my heartache would not; it kept vigil in the August heat, one finger on my grief like an EMT” (39). Grief is represented as overflowing, uncontainable, in Rhone Fancher’s poem, *When You Think You’re Ready to Pack Up Your Grief*: “When friends ask to help, don’t / spread the grief around. / Keep it for yourself. / When the suitcase won’t close, don’t sit on it. / Don’t even try to shut it” (41).

Another theme in these poems is the bereaved mother’s sense of vulnerability and failure. In *Safe*, Brenner writes, “... safe has lost all meaning. / Your father checks windows and doors for me / ... I hold your Mickey Mouse doll / and pretend to feel safe / like you would have done for me” (29). The speaker describes a shift; mothers expect to protect their children; in this poem the speaker invokes a child who comforts his mother with his presence. The poem invokes dual losses: the loss of the child and the loss of the maternal role. How does a bereaved mother comfort and protect a child who is dead? Rhone Fancher, too, invokes the death of the child as tied to a sense of failure, of failing to live up to what the culture expects from a mother. In her author’s note, she writes, “I would give anything to know that he’s okay. That he is aware of my great love for him and my devastation at not being able to save him. I should have saved him. That’s what mothers do” (18). The desire to recreate a severed connection, an umbilicus, is embodied thematically in the poems and through the writing process itself. Women write through their bodies; their texts are continuations of their bodies (Cixous, 888-89).

Grief is described alternatively as fullness and as emptiness, a vocabulary that speaks to the fullness of pregnancy and the emptying out of the mother’s body during labor. A mother’s grief is an embodied grief. Grief is too overwhelming, too full, to be

packed away; the poets employ metaphors to invoke the sensation of feeling empty. In Brenner's poem *Out of Body*, the speaker stares at the gutted fish on her luncheon plate. She understands she is that gutted fish – emptied, flayed – her guts, her womb ripped open. (40). Rhone Fancher describes the sense of being emptied by the death of a child in “when her son is dead seven years.” The speaker says: “a woman is dancing on the moon, / . . . / her feet are cooking. / her arms are empty . . . she thinks there is someone to feed . . . a woman is dancing on a cake plate / in her kitchen. / . . . skates to the bone-white middle” (43). The mother's arms are empty, there is no one to feed, the plate is bare. But there is also fullness, in the waxing and waning of the moon, the ancient symbol of women's fertility. The speaker regards the moon, with “*her* big belly, / . . . lighting the way” (44). Is the speaker learning to balance the darkness of grief and the light of survival? The theme of insatiable hunger appears in Brenner's litany, “I Want” – “*I want, I want, I want, I want -*” (39). The speaker expresses an emptiness that will never be filled. The mother's role is to nurture (the feeding of love) her child. What happens to the mother's desire to love when that child is gone?

Feminist scholars who write from their experiences as grieving mothers report that bereaved mothers have lifelong grief responses (Bennett, 47; Davidson and Stahls, 17). Maternal grief is theorized as so persistent and profound because it involves a death of a part of the self (Hendrick, 34). The pervasive idea that mothers should “let go” of their grief can be profoundly upsetting to bereaved mothers. In the poem “Over It,” Rhone Fancher voices her anger following an encounter with this expectation: “... Two weeks after he died, / a friend asked if I was ‘over it.’ / As if my son's death was something to get / through, like the flu ...” (33). Anger at the absence of empathy is a

theme in Brenner's *Can't Imagine*: "*How are you really doing?* / You don't want the real answer ... " (62). The poets' anger is not just about the impossibility of "getting over it" but the unwillingness of friends and acquaintances to hear and accept what they have to say.

In mapping the terrain of maternal bereavement, feminist scholars note that the parental bond does not end with the child's death (Bennett, 47). Bennett says, "The death of a child results in a journey for a mother, both with their child through an enduring relationship and without their child physically present to hold" (47). Space and time acquire different meanings for the bereaved mother, who, through imagination, ritual, prayer, dreams, or poetry maintains a connection to the dead child (Bennett 47, Hendrick, 38). Still, grief remains.

Poetry by grieving mothers is poetry of witnessing. In discussing the poetry of witness, Cassie Premo Steele writes, "What poetry can do that social science cannot is to engage the hearts and souls and imaginations of readers" (4). Poems by grieving mothers create empathic connections -- with other mothers and fathers who have lost a child -- and with those who have not. Poetry is art that can be shared.

Poetry is particularly effective in giving voice to anguish because it turns chaotic emotions into language. As a nonlinear form, poetry is comfortable with paradox: the paradox that the child is simultaneously dead and alive in the poet's imagination. Too, writing a poem involves a process of ordering. In the preface to her book, Brenner speaks of the process of thinking about words, the placement of words, controlling the words (9). This framing of painful experience by writing a poem accesses the paradoxical properties of language to contain and to express. In the interview at the end

of this essay, Brenner speaks of feeling “deranged” by grief. The word “deranged” derives from the French “deranger.” In French, the verb “ranger” means to tidy up, to put in order; “deranger” is to disturb or disrupt that order. To write a poem is to create order, a structure for overwhelming feelings (Steele, 23). Poet Gregory Orr, who accidentally shot and killed his brother in a childhood hunting accident, writes, “Each of us needs to believe that patterns and structures can be made to exist . . . this ordering response is innate” (16-17). Orr notes that poetry serves the basic human need for order in its elaborate and intense patterns, rhythms, narrative center, and autobiographical “I” (9-99). Writing poems is an ordering response to the traumatic disorder of a child’s death, the derangement of grief.

Poetry pushes back against silence and organizes meaning. A poem is not a child, as Brenner reminds us, “It’s Riley’s second birthday, / . . . / He would have been / eight. / Instead of dead. / Instead of this fucking poem” (76). A poem is a witnessing of the child’s impact, a reminder that he or she lived a life meant something, that was not nothing. The child was and is meaningful to those who loved him or her, even if the child is gone; the poem commemorates the child’s existence and creates a future for him or her in the lives and psyches of reader-witnesses. Writing poetry keeps the memory of the child alive. In *Over It*, Rhone Fancher writes, “ . . . I liked the pain, the / dig of remembering / . . . the steady jab jab jab that reminds me I’m still / living . . . ”(33). The jab sounds like the stabbing pains of grief. Could the jabbing also serve as a metaphor for the writing of poems, the jab of pen on paper, painful but essential to the bereaved mother? In *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Helene Cixous says that mothers write in the white

ink of milk. Rhone Fancher says her poems bleed on the page. Bereaved mothers write in the red ink of blood.

The poems by Alexis Rhone Fancher and Chanel Brenner are offerings of ferocious intimacy – ferocious in their pain and anger, in their exploration of love and longing. Intimacy is established by the poets’ openness to voicing and sharing their experiences and feelings in language at once carefully crafted and emotionally accessible. We might wish to turn away to protect ourselves from the ache and the longing, but we do so at our peril, for to do so is to isolate ourselves from what is human and fragile in all of us.

Speaking with Chanel Brenner and Alexis Rhone Fancher

Author’s note: The two poets were interviewed on separate occasions for this essay and did not hear each other’s responses. I have put their words in dialogue with each other because such a format reflects their collaborative relationship as friends and writing partners. Both have received awards: Vanilla Milk, the Eric Hoffer Award; Alexis Rhone Fancher has been nominated for three Pushcart Prizes and four Best of the Net awards. The interview with Chanel Brenner was conducted via cellphone on February 27, 2016; the interview with Alexis Rhone Fancher was conducted via cellphone on February 29, 2016.

NG: How did your book come into being?

CB: I started taking writing classes when Riley was two. I had always wanted to write, and I started taking classes with Jack Grapes. At that point I was mostly writing prose. The night Riley died I started writing poems. I had written a few poems prior to

that, but that's when I started to write a lot of poems. They just started coming out of me, one after another. About a year after he died, I started looking at all the poems and the story they told.

I was reading other poets at the time who had gone through loss, and I was inspired by the art they created. There was one book by Shelly Wagner called *The Andrew Poems*, about her son who drowned. It was one of the first books I read after Riley died. It was painful but I felt very connected to her, and I realized how much less alone I felt by connecting with other people who had been through something similar to me. I ended up carrying my journal everywhere after Riley died. I would take Desmond to his toddler class. It was at the same school Riley attended. There were a lot of moms who knew about what happened to him, and kids would come up to me and ask me about his whereabouts. I had all these moments that would happen, and I would just sit during the toddler class and write and go to my car and write. It was a way to document what was happening. I didn't want to cry, I wanted to witness it, to make some kind of sense of it.

AF: My son died in September of 2007, and I didn't really write much about it or him until the beginning of 2008, when I started studying with Jack Grapes, a famous writing teacher here in Los Angeles. The very first piece I wrote is now the beginning story in the book, *The Supermarket and a State of Grace*.

I came in and read that piece to the class. It felt scary and good to state my feelings, to see where I was, and then I didn't write any poems about my son for maybe five years. Then I wrote *Over It*, which was published in *Rattle*. The next two poems were *Mahogany Funeral Urn* and *Snow Globe*, which were published in *The MacGuffin*.

I was just starting to submit my work and the reception was encouraging. It showed me there was indeed an audience for these poems. The woman who finally ended up publishing the book, Clare MacQueen, said, “Look, if you ever want to publish these poems, I’m a publisher, send them to me.” I did. There were 12 poems when I gave her the manuscript, and I wrote a few more that ended up in the book and then I was done. It just kind of happened. It was never intended.

NG: Is there something important to you about sharing your experience?

CB: When Riley died, I felt lost in my grief and often alone. I felt that when I shared the poems, I was helping people like me. That is really what compelled me to get them published. It felt like it was something I had to do. I’ve had other moms contact me who have lost children and who read my book. I’ve become friends with many of them. That kind of connection, if it can provide any kind of comfort at all, that’s what it’s all about for me.

AF: So many people have reached out to me. It’s like a club of people who have lost children, from a stillborn child to someone in their 80’s who lost his 50-year-old son. I have received such gorgeous letters from people and phone calls from people who share that grief of losing a child. I think that was a hidden good part of writing the book, being able to reach out and make someone’s suffering a little more bearable.

NG: Do you think writing is healing?

CB: You know, I do think writing is healing. It doesn’t always feel like healing. Sometimes it feels painful. I recently wrote a poem about the night Riley died. I couldn’t have written it two years ago. It was so traumatic, but there’s something about looking at it from a distance and creating a poem or a piece of art. Creating something

beautiful, that has meaning. It reframes the experience. There is also something about the editing process that seems to shift things, to be able to sit there and say, “Okay, what can I change about this? Let’s make it about the writing, not so much about how I feel, but let me find different words.” Keeping the emotional truth, but changing the words. Maybe it’s about control.

AF: People say, ‘I’m so glad you’re writing. It’s such a healing experience for you.’ Forgive me, but that’s bullshit. It’s tearing me apart. I just checked my calendar; I have 10 readings coming up, and reading these poems is just like opening myself up again and again and again. I think it’s a bleeding. Maybe there’s a bit of relief in bleeding all over the page, but no, I don’t think it’s healing at all. To give you a sense of perspective, I wrote and published over 100 poems during the same time period that I wrote the 14 poems that make up *State of Grace*. That’s to give you an idea what those 14 poems cost me in emotion and devastation. I’m a confessional poet and I write from my own life. For me to write, I’ve got to put myself there. If I don’t, I’m really not writing worth a damn.

NG: Can you talk a bit more about what it’s like to read your work?

CB: I remember reading some of these poems in class and just shaking and feeling really deranged. But what’s interesting is that once I’ve read that way, I can usually read them again. I am very connected to the poems, but it’s not as traumatic as reading them the first time.

AF: I am a trained actor; I worked professionally as an actor for many years, so I approach my readings as a professional actor would. I work on my poems; I work on my delivery. I’m able to separate the reader from me.

NG: I'm wondering if you have any favorite poems in your book?

CB: I definitely do. I'd say my top favorite is, "What Would Wislawa Szymborska Do?" I have moments with certain poems where I feel as though I didn't write them. That was one of the poems that's pretty much like the rough draft. It came to me one day when I was on a walk. I read it in class the next day, and that was the same day Szymborska died. It was so unreal. Another is "July 28th, 2012," which won a contest that was judged by Ellen Bass. That was another poem where very little was changed from the original draft I wrote in my journal. Also "I Have 2x the Love for 1 Child," about Desmond [Riley's brother].

AF: Yes, there are some. I love the last poem in the book, "when her son is dead seven years." That was one of the last poems written. I really like, "Dying Young." It was written for my best friend Kate, who died in January of 2014 and was very close to my son, so I wrote that poem for both of them. Everyone seems to like "Death Warrant," maybe because it's so brutal.

NG: I understand the two of you do readings together.

CB: Yes, Alexis has been very inspiring to me. We look at each other's work all the time. Whenever she writes a first draft of a poem she sends it to me; when I write a first draft of a poem I send it to her. She and I support each other. We did a reading called "Turning Grief into Art" at Beyond Baroque [a literary arts center in Venice, California] with Madeline Sharples, a writer who also lost a son.

AF: We met in Jack Grapes's class. Chanel came in and announced her son died and wrote about it. My son had died a few years earlier. The last week of class I wrote a journal entry for class about what losing a son was going to be like for her and after I

read it we decided to go out for lunch. Four hours later we were still sitting there, still talking. She wrote the foreword to my book, which I dedicated to my son and to her son.

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