



***Grief Suite*, by Bobbi Lurie**

Cincinnati, OH, CW Books, 2010

71 pages

Reviewed by [Mary Kasimor](#)

The art on the front cover of *Grief Suite* is a wood cut of a person, or perhaps better described as an image of a person. The image is skeletal and frightening, as I perceive grief in its most basic form. The figure looks through slit like eyes, and appears to me as a genderless medusa figure. Despite the front cover art presenting such a compelling image, it is difficult to view because of the uncontrolled grief in its raw and skeletal appearance. It also appears to be an x-ray of a person's essence, with all its deep and shadowy sorrow. Bobbi Lurie's wood cut gives the reader a first look at what to expect from the poems in *Grief Suite*.

Every one of Lurie's poems is about grief. I have reread her book several times, and I am struck by how I cannot escape the heavy sense of grief; it continues to pervade my consciousness after I have put the book down. Despite the fear that I have about these poems—reading them is like touching fire—the beauty of the poems are profound and significant. Grief is one of the most personal emotions that a human can feel; it is too enormous to make sense of, and perhaps for that reason, it is an emotion that is also very public as we try to understand its power. As I read the poems in *Grief Suite*, I was reminded of the many ancient Greek and Roman myths and epics about grief and tragedy that humans have struggled to understand over the centuries.

Memory plays an important part in Lurie's poems. If humans could forget, we would not feel grief. It is the curse of memory that continues to nurture our grief. If we didn't have memory and grief, what would we be as humans? Certainly there would be nothing of the divine in us. Through these poems, Lurie does show the reader the divine and the flawed qualities of human beings that enable grief to be a part of our nurture and our nature. In fact, so much of a person's grief is based on nurture; all that we remember of close familial relationships becomes part of our shared and personal grief. However, as many ancient documents have pointed out, our nature is grief and sorrow as we have fallen from the grace of the divine.

The first poem in *Grief Suite*, titled "Traveling North," seems to be about a close relationship, whether it is about the narrator of the poem and a relative is not clear, but the person who is referred to as "you," had a close relationship with the narrator and has died. The poem does not seem to hold the feelings of grief so much as memory, but there is an intertwining of both these; grief relies on memory. What is also interesting about this poem is that it takes place in Iowa, and here "The cornfields are memories." In the next sentence we are told, "You cannot remember anything." The "you" is the person in the poem, and the narrator describes to us how she has interacted with the "you." The relationship is not there, except as a disembodied consciousness. "You" is the shepherd, and the narrator is the sheep being lead to slaughter. Iowa seems to be a location that would hold memories because of all the space in the farm fields without much human communication and contact that would help a person heal or forget. The narrator's grief is caught up in a movement that "you" makes throughout the poem, that of moving his hand to strike and brushing hair from his brow. The repetition of that line is a reminder of that person, that "you" is the reason why the poem was written. Lines in the poem suggest that the relationship was violent, but despite that, the narrator feels a sadness or grief toward the memory of that person. The power of this poem is in what it suggests to me, the reader. The grief is there, but it is understated, as in the line, "The way the word porch clings." The grief is more about what is not said, in what is suggested and in the gaps, rather than what the poet tells the reader.

Many of Lurie's poems in *Grief Suite* are more traditional in style. The images in the lines are beautiful and/or striking, and that works well with the concept of a book of poetry about grief. There is almost a heroic sense of tragedy in many of her poems. However, she has one poem that I consider experimental in structure and in the way in which it is rendered. The title of the poem is "Purity Becomes a Kind," and as the title of the poem sounds fragmentary, the rest of the poem also has abrupt starts and stops, accompanied by fragmenting in the way that the poem is physically set up on the page. The poem starts and stops, and then trails off, as though there is nothing left to say. The poem ends with this

With the poem ending without any words, I can only surmise that words cannot express the feelings that the poet wants to express. However, what she does not say is as powerful as what she could say, similar to what the poet is doing in "Traveling North," except with even more gaps. The poem has a kinetic feeling of moving forward through symbols, rather than words. The symbols that Lurie uses in this poem both hurl the reader forward and hold the reader back with a tentative energy of sorrow/grief. I am using the word experimental to describe this poem; the poem contains very few words, but uses symbols and space to express the emotions of the poem. Although this poem seems devoid of emotion, the emotion is very much within the poem, and it is taut with emotion; the sparseness of language in the poem gives it a sense of distillation or purity.

In most of the poems from this collection, the narrator and the poet seem to be the same person, or at least, they have the same voice. In a collection that deals with such emotion, it would be very difficult to separate the narrator of the poems from the poet. One of Lurie's longer and most ambitious poems, "Codependent Nation," is written in first person; however, despite the personal narrative, the poem is about the impersonal nature of the narrator's life, and she is reduced to being "a spoke in the wheel." She also tells the reader that her grief is "my codified grief," which means to me that the grief follows a certain pattern that has been considered acceptable within the norms of grief. Her real grief goes beyond the standards in which society allows her to express her grief. She sees her escape as "the field lined with machinery/into what they called freedom." Grief is proscribed and she does not understand the society's proscription; it leaves her both mentally ill and seeking clarity. Because she is rebellious, her waiter/marriage counselor/husband left her emotionally bereft, with no way of dealing with her grief. In truth, how do human beings accept grief? I don't think that Lurie can give me an answer; the

last line in that poem is “what am I doing here.” Another question that the narrator asks at the end of the poem is, “and who would take my body now.” This question almost comes as a surprise because there is such a separation of body and mind throughout the poem. However, after she has grieved the end of love, the end of marriage, the end of life, she mourns the end of sexual desire for her body. The grief is intense and very physical, and our culture/society/world have set up acceptable ways to express our grief, but often that is not enough. Grief is beyond our physical and emotional capacity, and Lurie shows us its endless despair in the poem, “Codependent Nation.”

In another deeply personal poem, “This Amputated Place is My Soul, Lord,” Lurie expresses her grief in a prayer, explaining to the Lord the range, depth, and hopelessness of her grief. It is, in my opinion, the most personal of all the poems in Grief Suite. The narrator is “Lost in a skull of thoughts,” which is the rumination of grief, the monotony and self-affirmation of grief that has no outlet. Her pain is tangible in this poem; she uses images that reach the level of mysticism, or perhaps it is simply the stark intensity of grief. She tells her Lord that “It’s a suffering, Lord/Suffering without a tongue, without a song.” Despite her ability to create poetry, to create a song, that is not enough, and it does not give her the relief from the grief that she feels. She is still immersed in the grief, and perhaps this expression of pain is cathartic, but the intensity of this pain takes over any catharsis. Art, whether it is visual art, music, or poetry seems to best express our deepest emotions; however, there is no guarantee that the art will act as a cathartic relief. In fact, it may intensify the emotions of grief, and this poem seems to do just that, despite it being art.

Lurie changes voices in one of her poems. The poem, “Waking in Old Age,” is about that exactly— the voice of the narrator is someone who is trapped in her old age. This is one of my worst fears, and Lurie expresses much of what I am afraid to even consider, and I know that I am not alone with my fears of old age. In this poem, Lurie presents the grim scenario that many of us have seen or imagined. In the worst nursing homes, the residents experience “...the fear of no one visiting/echoing halls, pale green walls,/the ever-present urine-ammonia stench...” She tells the reader about the nurses “crude humor,” then “pulling too hard on my arm.” She uses scenes that are often described about nursing homes, but because they are so grim and visceral, they continue to resonate and fill us/me with foreboding. Living out one’s final days in a nursing home is something that we, as human beings cannot help but grieve about, realizing that this may be our/my final fate. Lurie reminds the reader of the carelessness and cruelty in which we treat our elderly. She tells us about the eternity of old age, and that nothing seems to change in the nursing home environment. There is a staleness to it that is described in this line: “The jar of cashews on my nightstand/is three years old.” In this poem, I feel the powerlessness of the elderly who cannot even throw out those things that are no longer needed or wanted, or that are simply finished. This is the grief of those who continue to live, even though their lives are virtually over; they see that there is no longer any purpose to continue living, but they live within the grief of continued existence. This poem offers no relief from forced existence, except at the end when the narrator tells us, “I hear the old man shuffling, mumbling down the hall,/coming to visit/and I am safe again/for he will sit/and hold my hand.”

The poem, “Waking in Old Age” describes the grief that results as the body and mind deteriorate from aging. What intensifies the grief is the spiritual element, which is shown through the physical connection that we have as human beings and the grief of our eventual physical separation from each other. Another concept that Lurie expresses in this poem is the grief that people of post-industrial societies feel as people’s lives have been extended without any purpose, other than simply to continue living in a culture that does not value life for life’s sake. The term “warehousing” is used when describing incarcerated felons; Lurie’s poem is about another kind of warehousing.

A poem, "Will the Mourners Please Rise" although brief in words; in fact, the poem contains only thirteen words, asks at the end, "Is it fatal to live without love?" Based on Lurie's other poems, the question asked could just as well be, "Is it fatal to live with love?" Pain and suffering seem to be what human beings continue to experience, and those feelings are almost beyond human endurance. I am reminded of that as I have read *Grief Suite*. By experiencing love and happiness, we have set ourselves up for experiencing even more grief than we think that we can handle as human beings, and that seems to be one of the dilemmas of also being human. Lurie does not give the reader any solutions—after all, this is a book of poetry; however, she gives us a full range of how grief is experienced in the poems that she has offered to us.