Encounters with Time: Arrested Time in Contemporary Maternal Grief Narratives

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Abstract

Despite a 'boom' in the publication of grief literature since the late 1990s stories addressing the ongoing impacts of a child's passing for a mother or maternal figure have been difficult to tell and rare to find. However, in recent times, such narratives have become more prolific, resonating with developments in grief psychology that perceive grief as adaptive and enduring. Additionally, narrative theory has expanded the boundaries of storytelling, allowing for 'unnatural' representations of time and temporal progression to express subjective experiences of loss.

This thesis examines the representation of maternal grief in three narratives published during the 2010s, focusing on maternal subjective experiences of the passage of time. The selected narratives are: *Blue Nights* (2011) by Joan Didion, a memoir about the death of her daughter Quintana; *Wave* (2013) by Sonali Deraniyagala, an autobiographical account of the trauma following the deaths of her sons and family members in the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami; and *Where Reasons End (*2019) by Yiyun Li, a novel expressing an enduring relationship between a mother narrator and her deceased son. These narratives share a sense of disrupted temporality, as the narrators experience a stalling of linear time caused by the loss of their children. The immobilisation of temporal progression challenges Freudian-influenced stage models of grief that prevailed in the twentieth century and marginalised maternal grief stories.

The writers analysed create differing impressions of 'kinds of time' that undo aspects of 'real-world' knowledge of temporality. Didion's framing metaphor of twilight represents the stalling of time, where the narrator resists the reality of her daughter's demise and the inevitability of death by dwelling in a liminal site, the 'blue' moments between day and night. The rupturing effect of the tsunami plunges Deraniyagala into a suspended state at the site of trauma. Between the wave and the outgoing tide, the present is extended until her loss is eventually claimed. However, Yiyun Li does away with time altogether, resulting in the detemporalisation of its protagonist through a fictional narrative method, where language becomes an 'invisible landscape'. The ethereal animated conversation between the mother narrator and her deceased son transcends time.

This topic holds significance for feminist interests and predicts broader societal incorporation of diverse cultural understandings of grief and perceptions of relationships between the living and the dead. Analysis of selected narrative and linguistic features of the texts will show how absence is felt, and how it is made meaningful in and by language.

Acknowledgements

> It's one of the facts of life that people die … and when they die, I feel as if a bit of me has been cut out, and it's painful. Grief continues … the price of love is grief when they die.
>
> (Margolyes)

This work about the strange 'other' world inhabited after the loss of a child, when time stands still, is dedicated to my loving son Joshua who lives in my heart. Joshua was diagnosed with an illness just before his second birthday which indicated he was not expected to live beyond his late teens. Although the nature of his condition meant I had many years to anticipate his premature death, when it (*un*)expectantly happened, I found I was puzzlingly unprepared. I struggled to comprehend the loss, and more profoundly, I was not able to name or articulate the distortion to my world the loss carried with it. It was like I dwelled in dual realms. On the one hand, my world carried on, but on the other, I remained drifting and detached from reality, isolated by my grief in a strange 'other' world.

I would like to acknowledge the contribution of my sister Hannah who instigated my interest in literature about the phenomenon of arrested time for those grieving the loss of a child. Out of the blue[1] in 2021, ten years after the death of Joshua, she shared the citation of Denise Riley's book *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (2019), which became the catalyst for this thesis. After a decade of wondering if I could accurately articulate my particular experience of maternal loss and its altering effect on time, Riley's innovative discussion about her experience of the disruption to time when her son died was a 'Yes!' moment of recognition. At last, I had found an expression of a sensation similar to my own. Three things struck me. One is that Riley acknowledged the intention to share her findings about the phenomenon of a-temporality to offer "one tiny sliver" of "relief" (Riley, qtd. in Baraitser 341) to those who may feel similarly. Two, by broaching the possibility of the literature of consolation, Riley speaks for those like me who have also "struggled to speak about this vivid state" (16) of arrested time. And three, having started

[1] My use of this idiom containing reference to the colour blue is intentional and links to ideas presented in the chapter investigating Joan Didion's *Blue Nights*. Not only does it signify the unexpected message, but its visual resonance also suggests an intuition or sensation of something ethereal which is of relevance to my investigation into sensations of disrupted time in maternal grief texts. Quoted in Åtland, Joan Chevalier (1996) in *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols* (1996) describes the colour blue as both "[i]ndifferent and unafraid, centered solely upon itself, blue is not of this world: it evokes the idea of eternity, calm, lofty, superhuman, inhuman even" (103). See Kusek (2017 and Åtland (2022) for investigations into blue's significance.

a dialogue that resounded with me, I wondered what other writers had contributed to the conversation Riley offered.

I also acknowledge the bravery and perseverance of those who, like Riley, have published their stories about experiences of losing a child. In my research into the sensation of arrested time, I have found a growing, albeit still small, body of work on maternal mourning published in the last twelve years where unconventional narratives of the time of grief are being told. My investigation coincides with the publication of *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* which I believe marks the turning point in the burgeoning body of literature for those grieving the loss of their children.

I must also acknowledge the diversity of grief. Variables in the experiences of grief such as one's relationship with the deceased, gender, age, social background, or culture are wide-ranging. My scope for this work is limited to Western (usually British or American) understandings of grief, death, and time. I aim to identify methods by which Western published writers deal with the subject of maternal grief to represent encounters of alternative ways to be *with*, or *in* time after the death of a child. Its discussion of the presentation of time as a revision of normative modes of thinking about the time of grief will be of interest to grief writers, feminists, researchers of English literature and narrative, and those who have lost loved ones. I must also recognise the diversity of those who choose to mother a child in my definition of 'maternal grief' and 'mothers'.

Immense gratitude is offered to my supervisor, Jenny Lawn, whose unending patience and supportive skill cannot be measured; to my partner, Lee, whose encouragement kept me going through the difficult moments; to my mother, Jenny Stewart, for her fastidious proofing; and to my whānau, whose love preserves Josh's presence in all our lives.

Finally, I acknowledge that this work is personal and challenging, but represents a shout-out to Joshua wherever he is, and validation that it is okay to keep our children with us, even if they no longer walk, or in Joshua's case, *roll,* on this Earth.

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List of Abbreviations

BN	*Blue Nights,* by Joan Didion
BPP	*"*Beyond the pleasure principle*",* by Sigmund Freud
MM	"Mourning and Melancholia*",* by Sigmund Freud
TL	*Time Lived, Without its Flow,* by Denise Riley
WRE	*Where Reasons End,* by Yiyun Li

Introduction

Grief Representations – Cut off from the Temporal Flow

> I want to try, however much against the odds, to convey only the one striking aspect: this curious sense of being pulled right outside of time, as if beached in a clear light.
>
> (Riley, *TL* 18)

When reading accounts of child loss, one of the most striking elements is the shared experience of time not flowing. As an English teacher, a yearly batch of student-written short stories that contain the cliché, "… and time stood still" crosses my desk. The phrase "time stopped" appears to be a common response to reports about death or dramatic events, such as an editorial about Covid-19 from the *Otago Daily Times* of March 2023 titled "Lockdown: When Time Stood Still". Phrases associated with time not moving are represented again and again in literature by grieving parents, such as when Riley describes the "acute sensation of being cut off from any temporal flow that can grip you after the sudden death of your child" (*TL* 13).

Denise Riley's written encounter of time distorting after the rupture caused by her son's death, *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (2012), despite her acknowledgement that it was problematic to "convey", opens a dialogue about the "curious" phenomenon of arrested time, to which I will contribute. Upon reading Riley's innovative book, I came to understand that much of the grief literature I had encountered previously, such as self-help psychology or non-fiction publications about those who have overcome loss, while often of interest or comforting, did not always resonate. The often overly optimistic or sentimental stories, with their focus on 'closure' or medicalisation, did not align with my experience. This discrepancy perhaps illustrates the neglect or marginalisation of maternal grief experiences in the predominantly contemporary Western material I consumed. Since its publication, Riley's observations have generated interest, and correspond with a *re*surgence in grief stories. This thesis will explore representations of temporal disruption in maternal grief writing published since 2010. In particular, it will focus on the rupture of time in the aftermath of the death of a child. I will also show how the works examined re-evaluate the prevalent 'stage model' approach to grief and embrace a fresh literary response to loss.

The writers I read in this thesis craft various representations of time, distorted from linear patterns in their narrative modes to respond to, and make sense of, maternal loss. Through these representations, they contribute alternatives to stage models of grief. My scoping of grief literature reveals that both recent fiction writers and memoirists craft narratives where presence and absence are as one in arrested time. Riley's first-person account of grief, for example, illustrates this duality as a "doubled sense of time" (*TL* 82), where, after *his* death, she still senses her son's presence. While it is accepted that death disrupts one's relationship with the world and others around us, the writers I study also show that stage models of the time of grief are inadequate at describing this disruption. They suggest that having formed and sustained a relationship with their children, the bereaved can continue their relationship after the death of their loved ones, rather than letting go and moving on. This illustrates an adaptation to the timeline of grief and narrative that can be arrested, enduring, or both. Further, it is also observed that contexts of trauma associated with child death may also stall the flow of time, denying the memory of the rupture or the relationship with the loved one until such a time that the ruptured memories are reclaimed. Representations of the sensation of disrupted time triggered by the death of a child in the grief accounts examined in this thesis resonate with current academic literature concerning the temporality of grief.

To examine representations of temporal disruption in maternal grief writing, I will focus on two grief memoirs and one novel, examined in chronological order of their publication: *Blue Nights* by Joan Didion (2011), *Wave* by Sonali Deraniyagala (2013), and *Where Reasons End* by Yiyun Li (2019). These texts will illuminate my investigation into how literature represents the experience of being unfettered from time's linearity by the rupture of losing a child. My texts all share stories of grieving mothers. While I began this investigation focusing on Western works, two of my three primary texts are by authors of Asian heritage. Although space limits my discussion, it would be fascinating to explore how Li's Chinese background and American education, along with Deraniyagala's Sri Lankan heritage and English education, influence their grief narratives. Their Asian heritage potentially expands literary traditions and narrative understandings of time, adding a unique dimension to the cultural construction and experience of grief.

I will draw from a wider range of works to explore how temporality is increasingly represented or understood as plural and continuing in the domains of philosophy, narrative theory, grief psychology, trauma theory, and literature. These sources will contextualise my interpretations of disrupted temporality and the problematisation of narratological methods that capture interrupted experiences of time. I will support my findings by selecting from secondary critical material, particularly from feminist studies, to support my findings.

The concerns of this thesis, temporality and grief, are both matters that continuously challenge the imagination of a diversity of writers. Significant and complex, both these phenomena can be understood and contested in manifold and shifting ways. I set out specifically to investigate how temporality and grief intersect to represent the experience of arrested time for mothers whose child has died. In what ways do post-2010 grief writers develop and use narratological tools and methods to immobilise linear time? How do representations of arrested time describe the sensation of grief as enduring, a continuing interpersonal relationship after death? To what extent does the phenomenon of stalled time offer consolation or solace? On the subject of maternal mourning, how do the memoirists and fiction writers studied in this thesis counter or contribute to their respective genres? What conclusions and speculations as to social and cultural reasons underlying the rise of maternal grief narratives can be made? And finally, what are the future potentials of the written word to further emancipate the diverse voices of those who wish to represent the rupture of time caused by the death of a child?

To attend to these framing questions, the next three sections will provide contextual and conceptual background for the formal readings of selected grief literature that follow. “Contemporary Understandings of Grief: Grief Theory from Freud to Ratcliffe” will provide a brief precis of the development of understandings of grief in psychology and society from early twentieth-century Freudian theory through to the present moment. The section “Arrested Time, Ekstasis and the ‘Extended Now’” will seek to define how the term ‘arrested time’ caused by the death of a child is understood and applied to grief literature examined in this thesis. The concluding contextual section titled “Temporality in Maternal

Grief Literature: Didion, Deraniyagala, and Li", will introduce the three central texts by discussing the intersection of contemporary women's memoirs, and the blending of memoir and fiction within the genre.

Contemporary Understandings of Grief – Grief Theory from Freud to Ratcliffe

Western representations and frameworks of grieving and its literature from the nineteenth century to the present moment, whether creative or theoretical, have evolved through three broad stages of social and theoretical change. To develop a context for the formal readings of maternal grief literature that follow, this section will investigate the understanding of the psychology of grief from Freud's works to recently published material. It will also explore the development of the genre of grief writing and illuminate how those who produce creative works about the experience of maternal grief write *in* or *about* time to illustrate the disruptions to life when a child dies. But first I offer a definition of grief, which is a troubling phenomenon to discuss and define.

While grief can encompass various forms, such as the loss of a job or a home, in this thesis, I use the terms 'grief' and 'grieving' specifically to describe the emotional experiences of a mother or maternal figure following the death of a child. However, what exactly grief is can be problematic to define. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines grief as:

> Mental pain, distress, or sorrow. In modern use in a more limited sense: deep or violent sorrow, caused by loss or trouble; a keen or bitter feeling of regret for something lost, remorse for something done, or sorrow for mishap to oneself or others.

Derived from Latin *gravare,* to burden, make heavy, and, *gravis,* weighty, grief is associated with oppressiveness or heaviness (Grief). A clue to the understating of the enduring nature of grief observed in current grief literature is found in an obsolete usage of 'grief': "a bodily injury or ailment; a morbid affection of any part of the body; a sore, wound; a blemish of the skin; a disease, sickness". This definition suggests that grief is something painful that lingers, echoing Freud's idea from over a century ago that "profound mourning, the reaction to the loss of someone who is loved [is] painful" (243), and it can "behave […] like an open wound" (252). Grief and its expression in mourning are also awkward to define because of their subjectivity, experienced within the context of the environment associated with the loss. Interestingly, defining grief has proved to be a challenging task as it encompasses not only a temporal dimension but also a spatial one. Avril Maddrell, a social geographer, in her essay "Mapping Grief" (2015), draws our attention to the concept that grief possesses emotional and affective spatial dimensions. Her

examination of embodied psychological spaces enlightens discussion about how grief is culturally constructed and experienced, both individually and collectively (166). Maddrell demonstrates how the intangibles of "grief, mourning and remembrance" can be mapped across multiple contiguous time-spaces (167).

While grief is a personal response to death, it is complicated by the reality that it is socially formed and controlled, as is the genre of grief writing which has particular conventions. Prominent bereavement scholar Margaret Stroebe (2018) confirms that grief is "a complex phenomenon relating to the variety of psychological, behavioural, social, and physical reactions following the death of a loved one" (97). Eugenie Brinkema (2014) explains the often conflated distinction between mourning, which is public, and grief, which is private, in her work *The Forms of the Affects*, which explores representations of extreme emotions across various spaces and filmic art. Brinkema clarifies that grief is a "private passion (feelings, sentiments, experiences)", and that mourning is a "public manifestation of that interior state to the outside world (rituals, customs, shared beliefs)" (72). Grief is understood as something other than a single sensation. While exactly what grief is continues to be the subject of sustained debate, it is generally considered a combination of a range of feelings and/or emotions that mourners experience over time, which could be understood as a process. In *Grief: A Narrative Account* (2011), narratologist Peter Goldie explains that grief is a process where the parts "hang together […] through the coherence of a narrative of the process – a narrative of a grieving" (123–4). It is an "unfolding pattern over time", not an "oversimplified" account of grief as a "feeling" or "kind of mental state or event" (119). Best explained through psychology, we will now turn to a summary of the historical evolution of grief theories and models.

Understandings of grief in nineteenth-century Western society and literature are well documented by other writers in this field For example, in her formative work *Death's Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve* (2006), Sandra Gilbert suggests the period was generally one marked as being shared, publicly expressed, and socially prescribed. Also, there was a fundamental understanding that love between parents and children, and between lovers, is eternal. However, the end of the 1880s

marked significant changes to the ways in which Victorians understood and experienced grief and mourning.

Sociologist Tony Walter (2007) traces how experiences of grief in the twentieth century arise out of, and respond to, changing social conditions since the decline in Victorian social mourning at the beginning of the 1880s in America and Great Britain (123). In English-speaking countries, Walter observes an increasing social denial of grief and the growth of professionalism surrounding grief, as seen in the funeral business. This has led to criticism of protracted mourning, which Michael Jacklin (2013) has described as "a morbid self-indulgence" (82). Social expectations denied the bereaved space to grieve in private, in fact, grief became something hidden so that '"no one would guess anything had happened"' (82). Walter explains that modernity, characterised by urbanisation, results in the rise of individualisation and the nuclear family, which transform understandings of grief from a *social* phenomenon to a *private* experience. Rather than a shared and socially prescribed practice, mourning transitions to private "professional" and medicalised grief services, where expressions of grief are personal, challenging former public expressions of grief and rejecting notions of spirituality to assist in mourning (125). Walters also suggests that the evolving belief in rationality and futurity, deems the emotional traits of "madness" observed in grief to be at odds within an economy organised on rationality and quickly found "closure" (126–127).

The transition into the twentieth-century orthodox Western discourse of grief is dominated by a Freudian-influenced understanding that the bereaved are encouraged to work through their grief emotions, returning to normalcy eventually. In the foundational essay "Mourning and Melancholia", Sigmund Freud proposed two types of grief. Firstly, *"mourning"*, the reaction to the loss of a loved person which is "overcome after a certain amount of time", and "*melancholia*", a "pathological condition" where so-called "normal" mourning is protracted (242–243). While Freud recognised that mourning and melancholia shared the same attributes, such as a profoundly painful dejection, a cessation of interest in the outside world, or disturbance of self-regard, melancholia represents a refusal to let go of the lost object for a "prolonged" period (244–45). The goal of mourning in this sense is to detach from the attachments and memories of the lost object, through a process in which "when the work of mourning is

completed[,] the ego becomes free and uninhibited again" (244). Freud's grief psychology continues to form the core of normative thinking about the phenomenon of grief, which influences what is told in literature about the loss of a child.

Joan Didion illustrates her understanding of Freud's influential work in *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2007*)*:

> There were, I also learned from the literature, two kinds of grief. The preferred kind, the one associated with "growth" and "development", was "uncomplicated grief," or "normal bereavement." … The second kind of grief was "complicated grief", which was also know in the literature as "pathological bereavement" and was said to occur in a variety of situations. (Didion 48)

As Didion alludes, this dichotomous framework of grief can be interpretated as value driven and producing an anxiety about expressing experiences of grief that do not fit expected norms, as the writers I discuss later illustrate. However, the legacy of Romanticism's idea that relationships with the dead are enduring and deny closure can interestingly be sensed by Freud himself, who noted the ambiguity of grief. While "Mourning and Melancholia" has a prescriptive and normative element, Freud's essay can also be read through an alternative lens which emphasises the understanding of grief as an extended wish for the loved one to stay, and hence the denying or at least extension of closure (242).

The twentieth century also sees the development of professional expertise through one-to-one consultation and the publication of materials written by experts on how to deal with the "work of grief". The goal of this development is orientated towards helping the individual mourner adjust back into society (quickly) after the loss of a loved one. These materials have multiplied, along with grief therapy and bereavement counselling, now commonly situated in institutions like schools and companies to enable individuals to fully function and participate soon after the loss of a loved one (Walter 127). As such, Freud's legacy of distinguishing abnormal from normal grief is endorsed by various stage models of grief work, such as Bowlby's four phases of mourning (1980) and Kübler-Ross's stages of dying (1969). While providing a method to articulate a variety of emotions associated with grief, such rigid models impede the understanding and experience of grief as something enduring.

Amidst the development of twentieth-century grief psychology and the rise of stage models, a contradiction arises in the form of alternative timelines for expressing grief. Despite being sidelined, these alternative timelines have persisted concurrently and informally alongside linear or stage models of grief. Tony Walter explains that Romanticism's concept that love between parents and children is eternal, remained highly influential throughout popular twentieth century notions of grief. The understanding that love continues beyond the grave is illustrated by mourners questioning whether or not to let their lost loved ones go or to express grief publicly. Likewise, contemporary love songs and engravings on tombstones expressed love in sentimental terms (127). Indeed, in his work *Bitter, Bitter Tears: Nineteenth-century Diarists and Twentieth-century Grief Theories* (1983), Paul Rosenblatt questions the acceptance of grief work as a dominant principle to analyse descriptions of how people dealt with grief. For example, he contends that, although emotional responses were found to be similar over the two centuries, people in the nineteenth century we not 'expected' to detach themselves, their memories, or their hopes from the deceased. Rosenblatt also contends that grieving a significant loss may recur with intensity throughout a lifetime and that people commonly experience a sense of the presence of deceased persons were close to them, challenging the idea that we 'let go' of the dead after a certain period of time (123–126). Walter notices that there are other contradictions to grief's linear timeline throughout the twentieth century understanding, which also create ambiguity. For example, the stoic containment of grief by the generations who encountered the industrial scale of death in the World Wars can be contrasted with later generations "of peace and affluence", where death is noticed as unusual and tragic, and when it happens, only happens to the aged (128). The post-war generations also experienced greater leisure time to express the pain of grief, so mourning becomes increasingly public. But what remains in the latter part of the century is an ambiguity in Western society about the parameters of grief. The supposed rational and predictable order of societal concerns contrasts with death's unpredictability and its disruption to the "individual's psychological order" (128), resulting in linear explanations of temporality as found wanting. These influential frameworks from the last century are broadly criticised, as we will see, for fostering personal isolation and a "denial" of death (125). For instance, Walter cynically suggests, that goal-orientated grief detaches individuals from emotions of loss, making them once again

"autonomous individuals, [for] the dead, like the old and like the past, are to be left behind" (126). Freud's legacy as the notion of stages or a timeline applied to grief is challenged for its "implicit[ness] in silencing the bereaved" (127), disregarding the variation of experience and expression of grief in the cultural sphere. In the context of this thesis, I would also criticise these frameworks for impeding expressions of maternal grief in literature. Recent grief literature now not only imagines and understands the potential for a multiplicity of encounters with time, but it also engages with developments in academic fields such as psychology and philosophy, which perceive of grief as an adaption to the life-altering experience of the death of a loved one, and as a continuing relationship between the living and the dead.

New ways of grieving developed with the shift towards mass communication and globalisation from the 1990s, offering attention to the contradiction between grief's timeline towards closure, and the idea of enduring relationships with the dead. For example, the unity of previously isolated mourners is seen by the recent proliferation of mutual online 'help groups'. The valuing of shared experiences breaks from a reliance on the language of modernist psychology and norm-based pathologising, derived from professional expertise (129). Mass media also enables "virtual mourning" to occur, where massive public responses to deaths such as that of Princess Diana, the 9/11 attacks, or the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami are expressed through global news reporting, the internet, and social media, which have become a phenomenon of the new millennium (130). Communication in the twenty-first century sees the spread of nostalgia for tradition and heritage and a celebration of diversity, allowing for personal choice and identification with individual communities that take precedence over religion and the 'grief experts' that normalise social scripts about death and dying. Importantly Walter explains that meta narratives of Western religious traditions and pathologised grief psychology of the previous hundred years are deconstructed (129).

Changing social and political sensibility instigated by technological advances brings with it a re-evaluation of stage models of grief. While it is generally accepted that grief is a process of some kind, theorists reappraise what is considered the 'end' point of grief. The understanding of grief as containing a range of symptoms has fallen out of favour in grief psychology, according to Margaret Stroebe, "due to

growing concern about the danger of pathologizing grief, and in acknowledgement of the fact that positive aspects are now considered by some to be part and parcel of reactions to loss" (67). Although, as we have seen, the notion that relationships between the dead and living endured to some extent in Western culture, the most important development for mourners and grief professionals this century is the understanding that not everyone 'lets go' of their dead. The publication of *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*' (Klass et al 1996) marks a new concept for mourning and a break from prescriptive stage models of grief. Grieving becomes individual, based on personal relationships with the deceased, allows for a flourishing of unique ways to grieve. The timeline is altered so that "people do not work through grief; grief works through the person" (Walter 130). In "Grief Memoirs and the Reordering of Life" (2021), Maïté Snauwaert discusses how a range of contemporary memoirists resist the working through the grief model (872). As we will see later, writers counter a culture that smooths over grief and insists on a swift recovery based on the discontinuation of a relationship to the deceased. Memoirist Roland Barthes, for example, comments in *Mourning Diary* (2010 translation):

> *It is said […] that Time soothes mourning – No, Time makes nothing happen; it merely makes the emotivity of mourning pass.* (101)
>
> Not to suppress mourning (suffering) (the stupid notion that time will do away with such a thing) but to change it, transform it, to shift it from a static stage (statis, obstruction, recurrences of the same thing) to a fluid thing. (142)

At the present moment, it is realised that there is more than one way to grieve. Discourses around equality and multiculturalism further contribute to the flourishing of individual understandings and presentations of grief. Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut (1999) question the "grief-work hypothesis" in bereavement, critiquing its failure to account for the dynamic nature processing of grieving and its disregard of cross-cultural and historical knowledge. They propose that grief can be understood as a "dual process", where mourners are both emotion- and task-orientated, oscillating between working through painful feelings and learning skills to get on with life through what they name as "adaptive coping" (199). This alteration of the temporality of grief opens new opportunities, not only for those experiencing grief but also for its expression in literature, which is what this thesis now turns to.

Today, as we will see, instead of grief being considered as a time to move from, it is valued as a time of recognition and adaption after loss. A time where new ways of living with the world and the dead are discovered. This is the shift in sentiment away from normative stage models of grieving that encouraged me to write this thesis, as it motivated Feminist Sandra Gilbert to write and publish the memoir *Death's Door* about her journey with grief after her husband died. Gilbert writes:

> It was thus in reaction against my intuition of a pervasive social imperative to silence, isolate, or forbid mourning that I was driven to assert my grief, to name and claim my sorrow and my children's pain and above all my dead husband's suffering. (24)

Importantly, the formal devices and structures that writers in the present moment employ to express disruptions to time brought about by the loss of a child realise this shift away from singular and linear representations of time. This move warrants evaluation because it can enrich our understanding of the shifting dynamics in the genre of literary consolation.

One of the important influences on my own approach is the work of Matthew Ratcliffe, whose *Grief Worlds: A Study of Emotional Experience* (2023) will be used to further highlight my claim. He delivers a counterclaim to the understanding that grieving is about the trajectory of 'working through' a process. Ratcliffe is interested in grief's disruption to one's relationship with the world and others (living or dead) which he believes has been overlooked by theorists such as Goldie (35). He proposes that grief involves recognising and responding to a disturbance in one's world caused by the disruption, discontinuity, and incoherence of loss (37). Ratcliffe accepts that grief is a process of some kind that takes time, and as such it has a temporal structure. However, rather than working through grief with the aim of 'letting go' or 'closure', it is a process that concerns three elements. First, the comprehension of the loss; second, a response to that loss; and finally, an adaption to the loss, which today is more likely to be understood as a continued interpersonal relationship with the loved one after death (39).

Arrested Time, Ekstasis and the "Extended Now"

> […] you can never prepare for this new reality in which you have been dunked … "the moment": that feeling of months which on examination prove only to have been days.
>
> (Barnes, *Levels of Life* 77)

To establish a contextual framework for the subsequent formal analyses, the following section examines Denise Riley's insights into arrested time, Grace Cowtan's thesis on suspended time in literature, and incorporates perspectives from different scholars. These include Mark Currie who introduces the concept of "being outside oneself"; Brian Massumi and Lauren Berlant, affect theorists contributing their ideas of "intensity" and "extended now" respectively; and Lisa Baraitser's feminist approach to arrested time as a "Time of Maintenance" from *Enduring Time* (2017). These sources shape the understanding of disrupted temporality and its problematisation of narratological methods that capture interrupted experiences of time.

I begin this exploration of arrested time with reference to my trigger source, Denise Riley's critical and creative work *Time Lived, Without Its Flow,* which delves into the altered state of life experienced while mourning of the loss of her son.[2] Riley, an established poet, philosopher, and writer, contributes a personal and philosophical discussion of grief's disruption to time, that resonates with my experience of grief's sensation as a 'fold in time'. First published in 2012 and republished to include an introduction by Max Porter in 2019, *Time Lived* presents a series of journal entries, written by Riley in the wake of her son's death, that record her grief experience. The second part of the book turns to Riley's philosophical reflection on her experience. With "astonishingly sparse" published material to echo or emulate (15), Riley critiques her journalled personal encounter with arrested time. In this section, Riley documents observations that weave two paradoxical threads of thought together. On the one hand, she sometimes

[2] There is debate about the genre of Riley's work. Max Porter's introduction to the 2019 edition of *Time Lived, Without its Flow* calls the writing style "essayism" (*TL* 6). A perusal through the list of some 60 citations of Riley's book in Google Scholar suggests that "Time Lived, Without Its Flow" defies categorisation. Butler (2020), in "*Time 'is' the Person: an essay on Time Lived, Without Its Flow"* claims, "I am not sure how to describe this essay since it has a phenomenological focus – the experience of finding time arrested in the aftermath of the death of a child – but it is neither pure philosophy nor a collection of poems" (331). Other attempts to define the genre include Marina Thomas – "maternal memoir" and "cathartic essay" (72). Judith Butler – "essay" (331). Bell – "long essay" (324). David James – "consolation memoir", unorthodox "extended dialogue", "narrative" (219-220). G Colby – "essay" (2), "experimental writing" (4).

depicts the sensation of "being cut off" and dislocated from flowing linear time and "plunged" into a "private non-time of pure stasis" (15) after the sudden death of her child. On the other hand, Riley observes that the intention of conveying this sensation is problematic, questioning how this "striking condition [could] ever be voiced" (14). This dual sensation turns out to be difficult to describe.

Despite being problematic, Riley persists in defining the altered temporal state after her son J's death.[3] She depicts a self-awareness of time flowing in a forward motion, per conventional Western thought, while simultaneously perceiving it as halted, speculating that this sensation is the only way to cohabit with her loved son, for whom time has stopped. Riley writes:

> After its sudden disappearance, your temporal intuition becomes violently altered by the scooping away of that doubled sense of time that you'd lived in before, if without always being aware of it. Yet in this same moment of subtraction, the dead one, although now sheared away from your old conjoined temporality, now comes to re-inhabit your newly arrested time vividly, as an incorporated presence. In a shared a-temporality. (*TL* 82–83)

Riley finds a personal articulation of the sensation of being out of flowing time. Thus, maternal mourning becomes a state of being to *live with* the lost child, rather than a sentiment to *get through,* as we may expect to find in normalised grief memoir.

Riley wonders why it is difficult to convey the sensation of arrested time and postulates that the limitations of language in articulating the death of a child are its cause. Riley makes three main assertions. She contends that the familiar metaphor of linear flowing time is inadequate for the telling of the sense of a-temporality she was thrust into after her son died. Language, she muses, slips from linear time after profound loss. She also observes that the cultural scripts that name the death of a child as "unimaginable" further reinforce the inadequacy of language to articulate this experience. Expression of this sensation, Riley fears, risks further isolation because "coming so close to your child's death is already quite solitary enough" (18). Moreover, Riley is surprised to discover a scarcity of vocabulary to write about the familiar event of the death of a child (17). An interesting example Riley finds is that there is no specific noun in the English language to describe the parent of a dead child, equivalent to terms such as "orphan" or "widower" (17).

[3] "J" is what Riley uses in place of the name of her son. "J" is not mentioned until the entry *Five months* after, when "J disappeared" (TL 23). Riley makes it very clear that her intention is not to write about death and her son but to focus on the "altered condition of life" (*TL* 13).

Building on these insights, Riley turns to a select group of writers who have explored similar concepts to better articulate her unique experience of arrested time, which she suggests is astonishingly sparse (15).

First, Riley draws on phenomenological philosopher Merleau-Ponty to validate her depiction of the strange 'other' world experienced after the death of her son, where one simultaneously continues and detaches from it. Merleau-Ponty's insight that we are multifaceted temporal beings, inhabiting "kinds" of time concurrently, justifies the dual nature of her experience (Merleau-Ponty qtd. in Riley *TL* 14), as does his theorising that "it is not of the essence of time to be not only actual time, or time which flows, but also time which is aware of itself" (66). Merleau-Ponty confirms Riley's hypothesising that flowing time "had never been much like a clear stream … it had always been thick – active, changeable, and formative" (*TL* 56), a realisation brought about by her son's abrupt death. This temporality of non-linear "a-chronicity" as a method of solace enables Riley to plunge into a personal "landscape of brilliant clarity" (57) in the time-space of her deceased son (60), which is not to be mistaken for a "smoothing-over of what is lost" suggested by consolation literature (74). The inconsolable gap that remains, even when mourning has subsided, can be thought of as the "overlapping of the living with the living and the living with the dead" (84), an idea Riley associates with Freud's thoughts about the untimely death of his daughter Sophie as "the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not want to replenish" (Freud qtd. in Riley *TL* 74).

Riley's exposition also draws heavily from a line in Emily Dickinson's grief poem #937, "But sequence raveled out of sound" (Dickinson qtd. in Riley *TL* 70) who metaphorically depicts the difficulty in articulating loss. In this poem, Dickinson compares the orderly sequence of thoughts to a ball of yarn that, due to mental disturbance, cannot be knitted together into a coherent sequence but instead rolls out onto the floor. Not only does this line of poetry confirm for Riley that "sound is the natural ally of shelter for the sequential" flow of language, but the perception of the noun "sequence", where sound is embodied as a vessel that would usually hold sequence, is divorced from it (71). Dickinson's pun on the word "sound", meaning whole or complete, alludes further to the complexity of expressing grief. The linguistic component of the metaphor confirms that the representation of rupture is problematic because the sequence of events cannot be easily articulated linguistically as it is "out of sound", and out of verbal reach (Ford 69).

Riley additionally portrays the disrupted temporal experience of a grieving mother as out of the "rhythm" (*TL* 73)' and 'incongruous' with prevalent linear structures in Western society, as seen in her 2016 poetry collection *Say Something Back*. Her poetry echoes this notion that words lose their linear connection and rhyme: "To make rhyme chime again with time / I sound a curious lilt" (62). Riley concludes that the altered temporal experience after the death of a child frustrates conventional writing practices that rely on the metaphor of flowing time. Riley writes, "narrative language had sustained you in time. Its 'thens' and 'nexts' had once unfolded themselves placidly. But now … your language of telling has left it" (*TL* 54). Despite Riley's recognition that the sense of futurity, which sustained her writing, now eludes her, she employs alternative methods to depict the profound sense of being immersed in arrested time. In doing so, she enriches the genre of consolation writing. In this light, Riley's text holds significance because it permits a departure from the marginalisation of consolation works judged solely for their soothing effect or sentimental appeal, or as Katherine Ibbett terms it, the "therapeutic model" of providing solace (Ibbett qtd. in James 10). Unlike typical sentimental works, Riley's text takes on a more philosophical tone, delving into the deep aspects of loss rather than merely eliciting sentimentality from its readers. By broadening the genre's function to consider narratological methods, as David James suggests in *Discrepant Solace* (2019), the reading experience of consolation literature can be enhanced, encompassing an appreciation for the diverse ways the phenomenon of loss can be expressed. "Even in palpably traumatic, poignant, or ethically disturbing works" (11), consolation can present us with what Sianne Ngai (2005) in *Ugly Feelings* calls an "unfelt but perceived feeling". Consequently, consolation becomes more than just a by-product of our "sympathetic identification with the feelings of characters"; rather it becomes an aesthetic experience that offers solace, therefore, holds critical significance (Ngai 28).

How then does Riley use narratological features to communicate her particular experience of maternal mourning? Feminist scholar Judith Butler contends that through a series of figural descriptions, Riley communicates the "vividly physical perception" (*TL* 51) of arrested time in the style of consolation literature, which echoes James' proposal. Riley's poetic language "allow[s] for the arrival of philosophical formulations as well as for modes of literary consolation" (Butler 335) on the subject of maternal grief. This is valuable because it provides a tool for observing the ebb and flow of language in examples of

maternal grief. Feminist writer Georgina Colby in the essay "Imaginary Intimacies" (2016), illustrates how Riley can "breach impassable structural barriers to telling" (2) using figurative language. Compared to abstract painting, Colby proposes that Riley's language offers new forms of figuration of death through a method of "experimental textual practice" (1). Colby also perceives Riley's observation that death seems to cause "a collapse of the simplest referring language" (*TL* 65) as a "crisis", affirming that conventional language structures cannot accommodate death, and fail to account for the sensation of being arrested in time (Colby 7). Significantly, of *Time Lived*, *Without Its Flow* Colby claims Riley avoids the perceptual habits of time and offers an impression of a-temporality as it is perceived and experienced by a grieving parent (9). Thus, Riley's book offers redress of the marginalisation of grief stories while attending to feminist concerns. According to feminist scholar Miriam Thomas in "The Mother Becomes Time" (2018), which builds upon Kristeva's concept of 'women's time', Riley's sensation of arrested time is experienced as diverging from, and at times, in conflict with, the everyday linear time (71).[4]

As a form of solace, Riley depicts arrested time in grief as a slipping between time. At the margin where maternal mourning occurs, it provides the opportunity to stall time, so we can be "in the company with our dead for as long as we don't notice them as really separate from us" (47). In arrested time, Riley has 'space' to imagine and sense a new way to re-carry and care for her son after his death, rather than 'working through' and 'moving on' without him. What we read in the lines of *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* are the considered thoughts of Riley's personal "wager" about how one can write about the experience of arrested time after sudden maternal loss when language slips away (Riley, qtd. in Baraitser 341). By bringing these threads from philosophers and writers together, Riley consolidates a new voice to articulate grief. Thus, *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* illustrates evolving perceptions of temporality and grief in academic fields such as psychology and philosophy.

Grace Cowtan's thesis *"In No Time": Representations of Suspended Time in Contemporary Literature,* published in 2022, addresses the evolving ways in which we perceive and engage with time in the twenty-first century. She asserts that conventional linear narrative approaches no longer adequately

[4] Although a discussion of Kristeva's concept is beneficial as it helps define language as "the enunciation of sentences (noun + verb; topic - comment; beginning - ending)" within linear time (Kristeva cited in Thomas 75), Riley makes it clear that this state is is not experienced "as a female biology of cyclical repetition," as Thomas alludes, "but [as] a very different phenomenon … a historical time; the times of the child are contained and sheltered within your own time" (Riley *TL* 81).

capture temporal experiences. Drawing on theories in phenomenology, narrative, and affect studies, Cowtan broadens our understanding of a-temporality in contemporary literature and grief writing. Cowtan argues that these representations lead to the "detemporalization of its reader", fostering an affective interpretation and novel ways of "being *in* and being *with* time" (iv). In the context of maternal grief literature, Cowtan theorises that time may be perceived of as arrested or as a continuing bond between mother and deceased child. Analysing a range of grief fiction and non-fiction texts, Cowtan illustrates how suspended time defers closure in recognition of the unknown aspects of grief and reveals the plurality of time through temporal absence or suspension. Moreover, Cowtan's thesis demonstrates how the genre of grief utilises suspended time to establish a connection between the living and the dead within temporal disjunction. Importantly for my requirements, its perspective aligns with Riley's observation of arrested time and contributes to the ongoing discourse on temporal and narrative dimensions within Western literature.

Cowtan's assertion that conventional linear narrative approaches inadequately capture temporal experiences can be further understood by examining the phenomenon of *ekstasis*. A topic of debate that runs throughout the philosophy of time, ekstasis enlightens the concept of arrested time. Ekstasis, from Greek ἔκστασις, means ecstasy, "to stand outside of or transcend [oneself]" illustrates distortions of time consciousness. By indicating a "trance-like state of self-estrangement or detachment", subjects are removed from the present moment they inhabit (Cowtan 8). The concept of ekstasis can enlighten a reader's comprehension of the sensation of arrested time after the death of a child. In *About time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (2007) narratologist Mark Currie argues that the reliance on linear understandings of time creates a "depresentification" of lived experience (30). Although concerned predominantly with fictional genre, and perhaps beginning to extend outside the realms of my research, Currie's theorising about alternative modes of narrative helpfully broadens Western understandings of representations of time. Currie argues that:

> When we read a novel we make present events that are in the past, and when we live life we often do the opposite: we live the present as if it were already in the past, as if it were the object of a future memory. [...] It is possible that the reading of narrative fiction, in instructing us in the

> presentification of the past, also robs us of the present in the sense that it encourages us to imagine looking back on it. (30)

Affect theorist and English Literature scholar Lauren Berlant's discussion of the "extended now" relates ekstasis to contemporary social conditions. Espoused in 2007 in the article "Cruel Optimism: On Marx, Loss and the Senses" and later elaborated in their distinguished 2011 text, *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant builds on the concept of the consciousness of arrested time as ekstasis. Berlant's theory critiques the cultural narrative of the optimistic pursuit of the "good life" (1), a sentiment linked to success and fulfilment, removing individuals from the present. This future-oriented outlook, according to Berlant, leads to adverse outcomes, including depression. Although grief is not a concern in *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant provides a lens for understanding disruption to temporal experiences of time akin to Riley's "altered condition of life" (*TL* 13), and my sensation of a 'fold in time' following the loss of a child.[5] The "extended now" is an affective state before narrative time, capturing a preconscious realm of possibility shaped by personal and public concerns, with changing and permeable boundaries (4). The affective structure of optimistic attachment involves repeatedly returning to hopeful fantasies, expecting desired emotions with each revisit (2). The depiction of a better future, which may be speculative or unachievable, can disrupt typical perceptions of linear time. Applying Berlant's "extended now" to grief suggests that while one acknowledges the finality of death, it is simultaneously experienced as an impossible reality, creating a complex temporal disjunction, and offering the possibility of union between mother and deceased child.

Another affect theorist who aids my discussion of arrested time is notable theorist Brian Massumi. His discussion of "intensity", proposed in *Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (1995), extends my understanding of arrested time as something profound and *felt*, albeit difficult to express:

> Intensity would seem to be associated with nonlinear processes: resonation and feedback which momentarily suspend the linear progress of the narrative present from past to future. Intensity is qualifiable as an emotional state, and that state is static-temporal and narrative noise. It is a

[5] I find the phrase "extended now" an effective oxymoron, which is not only a very clever use of words for arrested time, but it creates an almost 'tactile' image of time, which for me, reinforces the puzzling nature of disrupted time during grief.

> state of suspense, potentially of disrup-tion. It's like a temporal sink, a hole in time, as we conceive of it and narrativize it. (86)

To emphasise Massumi's concept, Veronica Patterson's autoethnographic piece *Comfort Me with Apples* (1997) contemplates the first-hand experiences of grief after the death of her newborn daughter Megan. Using imagery reminiscent of Massumi's simile, "like a temporal sink, a hole in time", Patterson perceives the instant her baby stops breathing as a "crack in the world whose sides reseal seamlessly" (90). Thus, beautifully articulating time standing still, whereby resealing itself, the crack generates a moment of being out of time with the world and liminal, due to the spatial resonance of the imagery.

Finally, Lisa Baraitser's *Enduring Time* (2017) represents a particularly notable contribution through its investigation into psychosocial practices and affective states of "a peculiar form of time – time that becomes suspended and cannot, or will not, flow" (179). Baraitser goes further than articulating the sense of arrested time; she also offers helpful consideration as to its purpose which can be applied to the experience of grief. Offering a feminist lens to my investigation, *Enduring Time* converses with interdisciplinary theory to address the temporal, ethical and affective dimensions of care, to further enlighten our understanding of the sensation of arrested time after the death of someone you relate to as your child (2). Challenging and reassessing a cynical sensibility of our time, Baraitser questions established assumptions about time and considers the possibility that change could occur *in* time, rather than through *passing* time. By countering time's forward motion, Baraitser's concept of an "elongated present", or "care without ending" (183), gives credence to the experience of folds in time or moments of stasis. *Enduring Time* imagines a range of modes of "time *not passing"* that run in diverse ways to teleonomic time (3), not stopped or deadened time, but a directional or purposeful mode, a changed form of time.

Of direct context to my thesis, Baraitser also frames this altered experience with evidence from Denise Riley's *Time Lived, Without Its Flow.* Riley writes of this altered form of time:

> A sudden death, for the one left behind, does such violence to the experienced 'flow' of time that stops, and then slowly wells up into a large pool. Instead of the old line of forward time, now something like a globe holds you. You live inside a great circle with no rim. (31)

Present time pools up as if in a rimless container, resisting the linear flow; however, it is not deadened, but dualistic. Like a "pocket", or 'fold in time', suspended time has the possibility of spilling over its

permeable rim into moving time (Baraitser 2). "If time can be lived without its flow", Baraitser asks, then "what are our capacities to go on caring when time has pooled?" (3). Baraitser is a key referent because she offers an alternative and hopeful reading of expressions of grief, which, in my experience society still finds somewhat taboo.[6] Baraitser offers an amendment to feminism's maternal time, critiquing Julia Kristeva's theory of 'Women's Time' (75) to suggest that suspended time is "queer time", an opportunity to attend to, and care for, those times that are marginalised by current understandings (75). *Enduring Time* also considers Riley's work closely to aid an understanding of the psycho-corporeal perception of arrested time, which Baraitser describes as "crystalline" (88), an expression I have observed others such as Riley employ (*TL* 34). Baraitser's being *in* time offers a vantage point from which to reconsider modes of life deemed linear and can be utilised as a position from which to consider the experience of arrested time after the death of a child. What is the effect of this phenomenon of time not flowing, and how can its purpose be understood as a time of care for the grieving mother, and perhaps even the legacy of the child who is lost?

Temporality in Contemporary Maternal Grief Literature: Didion, Deraniyagala and Li

In this section, I introduce the three texts that I have selected for close critical analysis. Through the readings of the memoirs *Blue Nights* by Joan Didion and *Wave* by Sonali Deraniyagala, and of Yiyun Li's novel *Where Reasons End*, I seek to demonstrate an array of representations of dwelling in arrested time that simultaneously resist, and yet exist alongside, time's linear chronology.

Associated with this description of time standing still is the disclosure from writers that it is also difficult to speak of or write about the encounter of an altered sense of time when experiencing grief. This is a challenge even professional writers, such as Riley, Didion or Li, encounter. The harrowing nature of child death disrupts the sensation of flowing time and proves difficult to write about, and maternal feelings of loss, in particular, resist description. Maternal writers also observe that there is little literature

[6] As I edit this thesis, this news report illustrates that the death of a child may still be something we shy away from in the media. Regarding the death of her seventeen-year-old son Shane last year, the late Sinéad O'Connor is reported to have said: "But you know the way your kid, unfortunately, passes away, it isn't good for one's body or soul to be fair. But anyways, let's not dwell on that" (qtd. in Carroll).

to explain their sensations of altered temporality in grief. What I have observed, however, is the gradual emergence of stories by mothers, being told about arrested time after the loss of a child. This development perhaps allows us to deduce that while maternal grief resists closure, it can find expression. Peter Goldie observes that the emotional experience of "one's grief might be ineffable, in the familiar sense that it cannot be expressed in language, but it does not follow from this that it cannot be expressed at all" (131). We find, however, that social and cultural attitudes limit its expression. Although a "memoir boom" (Rak 3) had already been thriving for some twenty years when Didion wrote her grief memoir *Blue Nights*, much of the work published, and its critique, still judged works against a normative standard of autobiography, perhaps explaining a lag in memoirs about the experience of a child that has passed.[7]

The "boom" in memoir publication from the end of the last millennium however gradually opened opportunities for a wider sharing of the challenging subject of women's grief writing. Memoir writing encompasses a diverse body of works, stretching from commercial and autobiographical self-help books to literary, sometimes even experimental, manifestations of the genre. The subgenre of grief memoir developed from the popular genre of life writing (Smith and Watson 127) and includes works by established literary authors (such as Didion), but also by celebrities or unknown literary novices. William Cornell (2014) argues that the inclusion of ordinary people's grief stories in the memoir genre redefines autobiography by including previously marginalised voices. This shift enables expressions of maternal grief to be published. The last ten years have also seen a growth in critical works about grief memoirs that attest to the shifts in how its genre is understood.

An exploration into the legacy of memoir will provide context for my later readings. Traditional autobiography ideals, similar to the psychology of grief, are aligned with modern (and subsequently, neoliberal) notions of rationality and linearity. Smith and Watson's formative work in *Reading Autobiography* (2010) contends that several movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth

[7] According to Julie Rak in "*Boom!: Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market*" (2013), the memoir boom took off "when the production and public visibility of American and British memoirs by celebrities and by relatively unknown people sharply increased" (3). See also an earlier work, Ben Yagoda, *Memoir: A History*. Penguin, 2009 for discussions around the context for the rise in memoir publishing from 2010. Also, in *The Rise of the Memoir*, Alex Zwerdling (2016) suggests that the genre of memoir has become pervasive in contemporary society and found a receptive audience. Evidence of the explosive growth and study of this field is seen in the publication of anthologies such as the *Encyclopaedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, edited by Margaretta Jolly (2001).

centuries influenced perceptions of personhood that prompted a surge of interest in autobiography. The prevailing narrative, dominating Western autobiography up until the 1960s, centred around the idea of the "great man". This canon privileged a culturally valued set of attributes considered "the best" and "timeless" (5), including writings of such men as Augustine of Hippo and Rousseau. Typically, these works were written by "Great American" men, late in life, reflecting teleological patterns and established norms of higher culture. Writing about death was taboo because it conflicted with notions of progress privileged in these works, according to Sandra Gilbert. However, the proliferation of personal stories about death we are experiencing today addresses this limitation. Smith and Watson argue that in the last forty years, counter canons have emerged, reconfiguring what can be included in autobiography.

With this development in mind, how is the 'modern memoir' redefined? The features of what constitutes a memoir today are ambiguous, attracting academic debate. In her recent work *Artful Truths: The Philosophy of Memoir* (2021), Helena de Bres defines it as "a selective, not necessarily linear, account, focused on the inner life of, often, a nonpublic figure". Rather than aiming for comprehensiveness, it narrows in on a particular aspect of the author's experience, "a relatively brief period, specific event or select time" (11). The twenty-first century memoir balances genders, a departure from the male dominated modernist memoir era, when, as Virginia Woolf cried in 1940: '"There's never been a woman's autobiography. Nothing to compare with Rousseau"' (qtd. in Wiley 263). Contemporary memoirs contrast in both their narrative style and subject matter with conventional "authoritative" autobiographies and testimonies. Importantly as we will see later, modern memoirs experiment with life writing, focusing on the author's inner life rather than their societal role (de Bres 11). As de Bres has observed, the reimagining of memoirs since the 1990s has addressed a gender imbalance in published works, which in turn has paved the way for experiences of maternal grief to be imagined and shared.

The increasing prevalence of women's grief memoirs represents a particular, multifaceted form. Kathleen Fowler (2007) describes this form as a combination of narrative, reflection, literary consciousness, social analysis, and the story of the griever, as well as the deceased (536). Fowler notices the beginnings of literary analysis on women's grief memoir, which at the time included well-known writers such as Jamaica Kincaid, Joan Didion, and Ann Patchett. Fowler also suggests that studies such as

Nancy K. Miller's *Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent's Death,* which examines the impact of gender associated with parental loss, or Sandra Gilbert's examination of the literary treatments of the theme of death (527), confirm this development. At the heart of grief memoir is the defining death, and the loss and grieving associated with it. Fowler suggests that the memoir tries to convey the essence of the person who has died (although I disagree as we move closer to the contemporary moment). The central theme that regularly recurs in grief memoirs, and of note in the ones that will be examined, is the sense of finding oneself navigating uncharted territory after the loss of a loved one where "the boundaries of reality have been blurred; life is a labyrinth of facing mirrors and deformed images" (Allende, qtd. in Pabel 75).

Another central concern in contemporary memoir is the representation of time which is disrupted by the death of a loved one and is of key significance to this thesis. Sven Birkerts in *The Art in Time of Memoir: Then, Again* (2007) makes an important contribution to the concept of temporality in grief writing. He suggests that the main function of memoirs is to uncover, through a sort of "circular search pattern […]", connections to life experiences, making them meaningful when viewed from a distance. Although each memoirist employs individual methods to assemble the "puzzle" of experience, Birkerts surmises that they "use the vantage point of the present to gain access to what might be called the hidden narrative of the past" (8). This observation that grief work is represented as "nonsequential" and "circular" is useful as it suggests a realignment of the process of grief as being something other than a linear working through, the key contention of this thesis.

With the re-evaluation of memoir writing, the line between fact and fiction is transparently blurred. Memoirs often incorporate invented or enhanced material and can employ novelistic techniques, just as the novel can incorporate 'non-fiction' elements. In *Memoir: An Introduction* (2015) Thomas Courser proposes that memoir can be considered a form of literary art, and there can be an uneasy relation between their artfulness and their supposed factuality (16). Conversely, realistic novels often take the form of memoirs. In practice, it is not always easy to tell whether a particular narrative is one or the other, because there is no clear boundary line between them. Although Courser claims that both the novel and the memoir are "mimetic", he clarifies that, distinct from the incorporeal world of fiction,

"memoir presents itself, and is therefore read, as a non-fictional record or re-presentation of actual humans' experience. Fiction does not; it creates it" (17). We will see this dilemma playing out in all three texts I study, all of which mix critical and creative methods, but particularly in Li's novel, which has been understood by many, despite its fictional label, to be a grief 'performance' of fact.

Finally, while the consideration of grief as disruptive of time and space is not a new concept, the last decade has presented new opportunities to write of the altered experiences of time which characterise maternal bereavement experiences. Kathleen Higgins proposes that unexpected child death reconfigures and disconnects sensations of time and space from the "flow of socially acknowledged time". The grieving subject is left searching for a space from which to locate the deceased and to try to restore some sense of normalcy and recovery in "intersubjective spatiotemporality" (Higgins 54). Higgins also suggests that the death of a child is an overwhelming experience which has a "twofold altered" aspect. Not only is the child lost, but what remains is altered too, causing the time-space continuum to seem uncertain. Rather than sensing time and space as seamless or extending infinitely, the subject feels as if the deceased has slipped outside it. Hence the paradox, because to imagine the deceased is to see the person as embodied, dwelling within time and space (55). Current grief psychology revises stage models of grief. Dennis Klass, Phyllis Silverman, and Steven Nickman (1996) illustrate that grief resists closure and is represented as a continuing bond. They contend that one can come to terms with loss without having to relinquish ties with the deceased. Matthew Ratcliffe's assertion that grief is a time of recognition and adaption to living in the world, and with the dead, also illustrates an understanding of grief of the present moment. This important reshaping of normative grief models that, "often forestalled, medicated and pathologized" grief from the "human", is also celebrated by William Cornell. Particularly evident in the memoir, "human space" is being increasingly made for grieving our lost children (Cornell 309).

The scoping and selection of texts suitable for this thesis topic was a time-consuming and challenging process. First, as articulated by Riley and others, before 2010, there was little in the way of literature about arrested time, and even less from the subjectivity of grieving mothers. Second, there are multiple ways of noticing and representing time, several of which can be located in a single work. Third, temporality is a vastly complex and debated topic that requires reading across several disciplines from

philosophy, psychology, sociology, narratology, and literature. It was necessary to scope deeply and read widely, to allow me to narrow down the aspects under discussion. I will show how each writer represents the encounter of grief as disruptive to time, but in different ways and by various methods. These texts were selected for this study because they illustrate a consciousness of linear time disrupted by grief, represented as an arresting of time and/or as a liminal space/s. These works not only offer first-hand accounts of the loss of a child through the expression of particular experiences of disruptions to time, but also problematise their experience of rupture. The authors critically examine their own experience through various philosophical, psychological, and literary understandings of grief and other grief literature. How the authors in this study employ language and structure to embody and animate the phenomenon of grief is worthy of examination because it enriches our understanding of the ever-shifting dynamics of the genre of grief writing.

Joan Didion's memoir recounts her adult daughter Quintana's twenty-month illness and eventual passing. Didion engages with her grief from the 'blue nights' spent in the ICU with her dying daughter. The bedside becomes a liminal space, stalled in time, from which Didion wrestles with feelings of maternal guilt, the realisation of her ageing and our inevitable death. Sonali Deraniyagala's account explores the seven years of rupture after the deaths of her children and the rest of her family in the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean. Overwhelmed by the disruptive effect of trauma, Deraniyagala's memoir *Wave* tells of grief from distinct locations inhabited after her loss. From the stalled site of trauma on the shore in Yala, transformed by the incoming and outgoing tsunami, Deraniyagala's gradual uncurling from the 'afterwardness' of unclaimed trauma, to the acknowledgement of lost memories of her loved ones, retrieved by lingering in spaces once shared, ends with some sense of solace. In Yiyun Li's novel, the protagonist mother imagines a life with her son during the autumn and winter months after his death from suicide. Yiyun Li's narrating mother in *Where Reasons End* tells a story of grief from an 'invisible landscape'; a borderless space of internal consciousness made only of language. Li's method of writing about the interruption to time caused by loss through a timeless and animated conversation between mother and child is not meant to represent any temporality at all. Challenging the expectations of grief

literature perhaps more than Didion and Deraniyagala's, Li resonates with modern understandings of grief as a personal adaption to loss and as enduring through its impossible scenario.

Chapter One, "Living Together in Time: *Blue Nights* by Joan Didion: 'Child loss is affectively overwhelming, and death tests the very limits of discourse'", will explore Didion's methods of representing consolation. It will investigate the framing metaphor, 'blue nights', followed by an examination of stalled time narrated from the liminal sites where Didion reflects on her daughter Quintana's illness, subsequent death, and the inevitability of the passage of time. Chapter Two, "Between the Wave and a Hard Place: Trespassing in the Past – *Wave* by Sonali Deraniyagala", will consider the memoir's treatment of time through a trauma lens. It will examine the process of grief after insurmountable loss and follow Deraniyagala's reclaiming of memory. This chapter will end with consideration of the anticipated enduring nature of Deraniyagala's relationship with her loved ones in death, and their presence in absence. Chapter Three, "Spoken into Reality: *Where Reasons End* by Yiyun Li", offers an investigation into how maternal grief is presented in an example of fictional literature. It will explore Li's creation of arrested time as an 'invisible landscape' through its experimental narrative methods and intertextual allusions. It will consider how dialogue is employed as a method of stalling time, and, finally, it will observe how Li's novel functions as consolation through its protagonist's expectation that she will experience a 'timeless' relationship with her son.

Chapter One

Living Together in Time: Joan Didion's Blue Nights

> *What greater grief can there be for mortals than to see their children dead*. Euripides said that.
>
> Didion, *Blue Nights* (13)

At its core, Didion's melancholy memoir *Blue Nights* explores the fear, grief, and loneliness that floods those of us struggling to find solace after devastating personal loss. It wrestles with the feelings of inadequacy, failure and guilt experienced by parents, and the consequences of our decisions when the child we love is ill or dies. Didion also invites readers to contemplate the inescapability of death and the tragedy of premature demise, a human reality for which we are ill-prepared. It challenges methods of solace, such as trusting in trinkets to preserve memories of the departed, or the strategy of "maintaining momentum" (165) as an antidote against the pain of loss. Essentially, *Blue Nights* recognises our mounting "frailty" (109) as we age, and the inexorable passing of time. We are also prompted to recognise the eternal experiential bond between mother and child, countering twentieth-century stage models that depict a gradual severing from the departed.

The writing of *Blue Nights* was prompted by the illness of Didion's adopted daughter, Quintana, who died of pancreatitis just twenty months after the passing of Didion's husband, John Gregory Dunne. The narrative threads its way through Quintana's wedding, adoption, and idyllic summer days, all beautifully described, yet haunted by Didion's parental guilt for failing to fully comprehend her daughter's quirks and obsession with death, and ultimately, her fears of death. Oscillating between memories and the narrating present, in a nonlinear fashion, snippets of Quintana's life and hospitalisations are punctuated with scholarly critique and repeated images and phrases as Didion blends personal and scholarly reflection in an attempt to find a way to carry on without her daughter. Didion reflects on her experiences with Quintana, delving into the complexities of motherhood, her fears, and perceived failures. Parenting concerns which permeate the narrative are drawn attention to by flashbacks to Quintana's adoption in the 1960s and Didion's anxieties about her parenting methods. She also explores

Quintana's abandonment issues due to her estrangement from her biological parents and the ever-present undercurrent of illness in her daughter's life.

While Didion's narrative may initially appear fractured, there seems to be a deliberate sequence to the thoughts she shares in its pages. From midway through the text, the narrative shifts its focus primarily to Quintana's hospitalisation and the subjects of her daughter's demise. Triggered by Quintana's hospital bed beside which she sits, Didion repeatedly circles back to her anxiety about ageing and her struggles in reconciling with the changing of seasons, her hospitalisation anxiety, and depression. Quintana's story becomes increasingly elusive as Didion ponders the loss of her role as mother and thoughts about ageing and eventual death gain precedence. As suggested in Didion's citing of W.H. Auden's poem "Funeral Blues", with the lines, *"Stop all the clocks/ cut off the telephone"* (Auden, ctd. In *BN* 156), Didion's overwhelming grief and her fears of her inevitable death are realised as a stalling of time. Near the end of the memoir, there appears to be a glimmer of hope as Didion dwells on the vitality of her contemporary Sophia Loren and focuses on her own work in the theatre. The antidote to her struggle to come to terms with her fragility and impending mortality she discovers is "Momentum" (173), keeping busy with her work and play. However, this hope is short-lived, as she sustains an injury from a fall, causing her memory to falter, and she finds herself in the wrong hospital. Attempting to avoid thoughts of death, Didion recalls Quintana's repeated refrain not to dwell on the subject. In a flashback to her daughter's funeral, she reminisces about other friends who have passed away and Quintana's final day alive. Contemplating the void left by Quintana's death, *Blue Nights* concludes on the nihilistic notion that when Didion herself dies, everything will be gone.

While much praised, *Blue Nights* was also criticised by some at the time of its publication for not sufficiently focusing on Quintana's life. *Blue Nights* offers a selective and looping account of the time before and after Quintana's death, focused on Didion's own "inner life" (11). I believe however, that by turning the narrative away from Quintana and disclosing her reflections about ageing, fragility, and death, Didion meditates on the universality of the grief story, projecting/figuring a form of enduring love that forever dwells in between the space of night and day with the living and the dead. Thus, Didion turns her

daughter's story into something universal and eternal as conventional memoir norms do not reflect Didion's experience of loss.

Blue Nights is thus about the inevitability of passing time and the realisation that we all age and die. However, it is also Didion's testimony that death should not happen, especially to her daughter, so the memoir works to stall time to make it not so. As the opening passage of *Blue Nights* demonstrates, the title of the work also provides its framing metaphor for the ambiguous and dualistic nature of the time of grief. Connotations of sadness and pain associated with the colour blue can be thought to signify the eighteen months of stasis and heartache spent by Didion at Quintana's bedside in several hospital ICU wards before her death. [8] The word "nights," which can refer to the darkness and sorrow that loss brings, alludes to Didion's aching loss for her loved child. In a lyrical preface, Didion expands on the connotations of the title when she describes the quality of the light:

> *In certain latitudes there comes a span of time approaching and following the summer solstice, some weeks in all, when the twilights turn long and blue. This period of the blue nights does not occur in subtropical California, where I lived for much of the time I will be talking about.* (Didion 3)

Imagery is employed by Didion in this preface with care to portray impressions of the texture of grief and the effect of passing time. The colour blue is described ethereally in its comparison to *"Cerenkov radiation thrown off by the fuel rods in the pools of nuclear reactors or Chartres on a clear day*." However, the colour blue also serves a disjunctive purpose, contrasting the beauty of Chartres with the sickly and toxic connotations of Cerenkov's radiation. Twilight is both a liminal, lingering hiatus in time and a moment that signals the gathering darkness. Didion describes this "*span of time*" with the term "gloaming" (4), an ambiguous moment when time stops turning, but as Didion learns, is continually revolving without our ever noticing it: *"the end of promise, the dwindling of the days, the inevitability of the fading, the dying of the brightness"* (4). The movement from day to night suggests the end of light – or the end of life – that for Didion, creeps up on her as she observes her own "frailty" (25). As Didion makes it clear that time and

[8] Interestingly, blue is seen as a contradictory colour, its dual nature suggesting both darkness and light (life and death). This antithetical nature of blue is examined by Robert Kusek who studies the narrative of grief and death around the motif of the colour blue and its cultural contexts. He contends that *Blue Nights* represents a rejection of the resolution of grief seen in normative understandings of loss, in favour of an eternal bond between mother and child through its focus on both life and death (171).

death are also clearly going to figure in this text, she also introduces verbs such as *"reverberates"* and *"echoes",* which foreshadow the winding, nonlinear repetitive style as Didion's memoir circulates thoughts from past and present.

This chapter pursues the questions: How does Didion's work contribute to conversations about grief in the contemporary context? To what extent do the narrative strategies of "autocritical" storytelling, such as metanarrative and scholarly engagement, embrace maternal grief as a phenomenon that is estranged from linear models of grief and time? Additionally, in what ways does Didion's introspective "motherhood memoir" illustrate a reimagining of grief literature? By attending to these questions, we will perceive how Didion pioneers a new form of memoir that voices personal maternal loss in a way that previously avoided full representation. By stalling time's forward motion, Didion speaks from a mode of "time *not* passing", allowing for purposeful attention on self-care before ultimately acknowledging the reality of her child's passing and the inevitability of her future death.

This chapter opens with a critical literature review that explores how *Blue Nights* diverges from conventional expectations of memoirs. It delves into the interest among feminist critics who observe the continuous sensed presence of Quintana as a departure from linear expectations of time and examines how Didion's prose and subject matter contribute to our understanding of psychological trauma. The chapter will then shed light on how critics compare *Blue Nights* to Didion's earlier memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking.* The analysis will then turn to the language and purpose of Didion's framing metaphor, the extended twilight referred to as "Blue Nights". It will then examine the structure and function of Didion's methods of consolation as she navigates the terrain of grief and loss. Finally, the chapter embarks on a set of formal readings to uncover how the stalling of time is represented through liminal sites that Didion encounters or remembers during her grief. Ultimately, it will become evident that her distinctive style and voice distort temporality to represent the profound loss of a child.

Fragmentary Consolations: Critical Debates on Blue Nights

This section examines how critics engage with the questions: How does Didion's work mark a new direction for the grief memoir genre from the beginning of the second decade of this century? To what extent do the strategies Didion embraces represent the experience of maternal grief as a phenomenon that disrupts the linear flow of time and resists description? And, in what ways does Didion's memoir illustrate a societal understanding that the relationship between mother and child endures beyond death? We can address these questions by considering *Guardian* reviewer Emma Brockes' (2011) somewhat harsh comment that "*Blue Nights*, while a failure in conventional terms compared with *Magical Thinking*, is in some ways a more accurate depiction of a woman unravelling" (21). While experienced in the craft of writing and having previously authored a highly acclaimed memoir, Didion encountered difficulty when attempting to address the death of her daughter as she anxiously states in *Blue Nights*, "What if I can never again locate the words that work?" (110). Didion's literary methods differ from the normative memoir approaches to remembering the dead, allowing her to express the overwhelming emotional and psychological rupture the loss of her child instigates. Importantly, by presenting grief as a stalling of experience, challenging closure, *Blue Nights* voices the mother's story which, as Brockes alludes to, has been sidelined.

Critical discourse about *Blue Nights* concerns Didion's resonance with current psychological theory around themes of grief, and its representation of motherhood and loss which is of interest to feminists. A main source of dissatisfaction among critics is that *Blue Nights* diverges from normative expectations of memoir and the timeline of grief, particularly in its denial of resolution. Some argue that Didion withstands a set of "thematic/formal characteristics" that Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson identify as having emerged in the early twenty-first century (*Reading Autobiography* 138–14). Robert Kusek (2017) explains that *Blue Nights* defies the genre because it does not document Didion's experience of losing Quintana, nor does it adhere to the conventional course of her grief work, showing little interest in finding resolution usually expected of the genre. Kusek also points out the absence of Quintana's memorialisation in the manner usually seen in memoirs. When Didion asserts, "memories are not solace […] memories are what you no longer want to remember" (*BN* 64), Kusek argues that "the memoir is deliberately anti-

commemorative [and] at odds with the very principle of remembering" (Kusek 176). While scattered anecdotes from Quintana's life are interwoven throughout the narrative, which Kusek suggests, "reveals an autobiographical impulse at the heart of the story" (177), they seem to serve as opportunities for Didion to steer the story towards herself rather than fulfilling the act of commemorating Quintana. Didion's turn to her growing "frailty" and contemplation of her failure to confront the certainties of ageing, illness and death dominate the memoir. Didion writes: "At the time I began them I could think of little other than the inevitable approach of darker days" (*BN* 25). Thus, Kusek concludes that *Blue Nights* is an unconventional instance of "death writing", autothanatography that largely "represents oneself through representing the other" (177). Kusek's comment highlights Nancy K. Miller's (1994) poignant assertion that "autobiography – identity through alterity – is also writing against death twice: the other's and one's own" (12). Kusek observes that Didion deviates from the genre's "consolatory and therapeutic function" (179). He aligns Didion with memoirist Diana Athill, who declares at the ending of *Somewhere Towards the End of 2009*, that "there are no lessons to be learnt, no discoveries to be made, no solutions to offer" (Athill, qtd. in Kusek 179). Didion's final page leaves a sense of vanishing or fading away, as the line "Vanish. Pass into nothingness" illustrates (*BN* 188). Ultimately, *Blue Nights* offers no "lessons", "discoveries" or "solutions", if that is what a reader is hoping for (Kusek 179).

Other critics highlight Didion's dual focus on herself and her daughter, deviating from the characteristics of normative grief memoirs. Heike Hartung (2021), although more concerned with ageing than maternal grief,[9] critiques the contradictions in Didion's "unorthodox [and …] ambiguous narrative" (92). While linked to maternal loss, *Blue Nights*, Hartung observes, is an autobiography about mourning, ageing, and frailty. Hartung notes a "paradox" in *Blue Nights*, where it delves into illness, ageing and death, while juxtaposing positive associations of blue nights, "which are then qualified by the warning" (Hartung 92). The first descriptive chapter sets the tone for the "blue hour" while the second chapter (like a second beginning), introduces Quintana in a "dramatic visualization" of her wedding day remembered

[9] Hartung is concerned with the discriminatory practice of ageism and how Didion's media presence, on the one hand, is seen as exceptional and as counteracting socially constructed discrimination towards those of age, but also that Didion embodies the contradictions characteristic in the discourse of successful ageing as she represents the positive age stereotype of the resilient older woman who is 'allowed a certain visibility to tell us how to grow old gracefully' (Segal qtd. in Hartung 81).

by Didion from seven years earlier (Hartung 92). Characteristic of Didion's narrative style, Hartung shows how the different topics, times, and places, such as the memory of the wedding, turn to the death of her husband and Quintana, before turning to her realisation presented by way of rhetorical questions, that she too is ageing and nearing death. Repetitive sentence structures, questions or short declarative sentences or paragraphs, dramatically reinforce this sudden realisation, but also flow with a lyrical quality. Hartung comments that this rejection of the developmental narrative fits with "Didion's view of ageing" as being a surprise for she does not notice its gradual development (Hartung 92).

Feminist academics examine the framing metaphor of "blue nights" as representing the continuous sensed presence of Quintana, rather than the inevitable passing of time. In her work "Mother Matter: Transcorporeality in Carole Maso and Joan Didion" Jenn Shapland reads *Blue Nights* as a "matrifocal narrative", where "the mother, rather than the child or partner", takes centre stage as both the "narrating consciousness and the protagonist" (312). While acknowledging Didion's reputation as not particularly associated with feminism (323), Shapland demonstrates that Didion's utilisation of repetition and nonlinear prose methods, where Didion revisits certain phrases, images, and scenes as refrains, challenges the emphasis on linear and future-focused approaches that can govern normative grief narratives, often maintaining patriarchal norms (313). Thus, Shapland's exploration of Didion's methods reveals grief as a continuous bond between the living and the deceased, contradicting the notion of a linear "working through" (323). Through a discussion of language, genre and boundaries, Shapland explains that the liminality highlighted in *Blue Nights* becomes an affective connection in time and space of mother and child. Shapland claims that Didion's reflective and theoretical exploration of the grief experience is liberated from the constraints of heteronormative future logic to offer a simultaneous portrayal of a mother's past and present experiences (315). Framed by the spatial description of "blue nights" at the memoir's opening (315), Shapland contends that its "unusual brightness" illustrates the clarity with which Didion senses the presence of her lost daughter. Shapland's work is particularly helpful in shaping my discussion about arrested time in Didion's memoir.

Some critics interpret *Blue Nights* through a psychological or trauma lens. For instance, Kathleen Vandenberg (2017) identifies Didion's fractured grieving self and unconventional narrative structure as

indicative of pathological grief. Similarly, Catalina Florina Florescu (2013) examines the loss of the representation of the maternal role as a symptom of psychological trauma. Florescu considers how aspects of Didion's montage style and content, such as tidal and seasonal imagery, repeated motifs of photographs and mementos, and the colour blue, illustrate trauma. Florescu calls upon aspects of Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) to maintain that Didion's repetitive narrative represents a traumatised self (240). Florescu also suggests that Didion's turn away from Quintana's story to impart her fears and loneliness illustrates that Didion's "reattachment to maternity is irreversible" (241), and implies that with the death of her child, Didion is removed from the recognised social role and function of motherhood to an isolating one of "motherlessness/childlessness" (231).

Finally, a richly-debated topic that engages critics about *Blue Nights* is its comparison to Didion's earlier memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking*, which concerns the untimely death of her husband, John Dunne. While *Blue Nights* is received positively, several critics compare it less favourably to Didion's former memoir, which is widely renowned and praised as a universally 'relatable' view of grief. In *The Year*, especially when Didion ponders the "vortex effect" (110), her discussion of memory, although painful, brings her back to a place of grounding and presence. However, with *Blue Nights*, Didion finds herself at the hands of some critics who deem her work 'troubling'. One criticism is that *Blue Nights* lacks the literary finesse of her earlier memoir. Britt Peterson (2012) notes the unique style of *Blue Nights* in comparison to Didion's earlier work as "hesitant, ruminative, sometimes querulous" (123). This sentiment is echoed by Lev Grossman (2011) who describes its fragmented structure of "out-of-sequence Kodachrome glimpses" as discordant to what an audience may expect from a memoir. Nonetheless, Grossman acknowledges the difficulties Didion encountered writing this memoir and regards her facing up to painful memories as a strength of the work (55). Rachel Cusk (2011), comments that *The Year* engages with the "universal and ordinary" human experience of the death of a spouse, and Didion's beautifully articulated private experience of bereavement is a testament to the literary skills which few could emulate. However, while acknowledging the tragedy Didion faced, Cusk suggests that Didion engages in a taboo subject untouched by the form and style of prose of her earlier memoir. Cusk points out that Didion resorts to repeating patterns which create a "numbness" in the reader and speculates that

it might be the chaos of child death that prevents Didion from finding the form of her earlier work. Repetition, according to Cusk, highlights Didion's struggles to revive the style of her previous book. Cusk argues that Didion's failure to own her material, which leads readers to observe her grief, rather than share in it, is a "piteous and exposing process" that places a moral burden on the reader. (np.) While Cusk's criticism may appear harsh to some, she suggests that it is no "surprise" that Didion is unable to create order out of the cruel experience of loss in such close succession.

Another criticism in its comparison to *The Year of Magical Thinking* is that *Blue Nights'* melancholy never finds the resolution achieved in her earlier work. Lawrence Frascella (2011) suggests that Didion's search for truth in *Blue Nights* takes on a connotation of guilt that is not found in *The Year*. In mourning the loss of Quintana, Frascella indicates, that Didion embodies a "cool detachment". (np.) The prolonged illness of Quintana, which was referenced in detail within *The Year*, gives way to Didion's fears and ponderings of possibility in *Blue Nights*. [10] In *The Year*, Didion seems to eventually make peace with the memories of John to find resolution, while in *Blue Nights*, she shows that some tragedies inflict too much pain and cause too much frailty to move past the period of mourning. Overall, Didion's attempt to translate maternal mourning and grief in the same universal sense as *The Year* is unavailable for tragedy of this scale and immediacy, which makes her memoir uncomfortable for some readers. In terms of the usefulness of this debate to this thesis, it is perhaps the uneasy reception of some critics that acknowledges the freeing of truth-telling of grieving mothers which has previously been marginalised.

Methods in her Madness: The Language of Anti-Consolation in Blue Nights

Didion's grief account is different to what we might expect from a memoir in that it neither memorialises the life of Quintana nor works through feelings of grief towards consolation. While *Blue Nights* can be read as an account of Didion's daughter's illness and death, documenting the direct effects of the hospitalisations and death, it also embraces a fragmented, looping, non-linear narrative style and

[10] I believe that Didion's efforts to withhold certain information while exposing other feelings, make *Blue Nights* much more representative of the battle between public and private bereavement as Didion discusses in her previous memoir.

employs metaphors. These stylistic choices gesture to a deeper, more complex exploration that goes beyond a straightforward narrative arc. This section will consider how Didion engages in the language of consolation by examining the language and style habits of *Blue Nights.* Didion's memoir highlights the impact of grief on the perception of time, and her unconventional narrative style further presents time as something other than flowing in a linear direction. The fictional moments in *Blue Nights*, atypical of its genre, are aspects of form, not content, which Didion employs to free narrative from the limitations of linear structure and so pursue an alternative personal truth (Currie 20).

Strikingly, Didion's memoir does not celebrate her life with Quintana through memories, because for Didion, remembering triggers the pain of loss. More traditional memoirs typically revolve around treasured or celebrated memories of a person's past life. In *Blue Nights,* however, memories serve a contrasting purpose. They do not console Didion as her friends suggest but serve to sadly remind Didion of what is lost. Didion confides that memories are "what you no longer want to remember" (64), as they can become uncontrollable recollections that trigger the pain of loss. Kathleen Vandenberg (2017) notes that in *Blue Nights,* chronology is disrupted by the "associative […] linking of events", rather than following a causal sequence. We see this when Didion's thoughts shift from memories of Quintana to other aspects of her past, and then back again (54). This reflects Didion's unique grieving process, which defies expectations of a clear division between absence and presence. The sentimental treasuring of memories and "objects for which there is no satisfactory resolution" (47) will not console her grief.

Furthermore, Didion juxtaposes sentimental and repeated motifs of flowers with their decayed versions, defying expectations of solace. Initially promising to follow grief memoir conventions, Didion introduces positive imagery of growth and celebration when discussing Quintana's past in the opening pages. By employing a repeated motif of flowers, which frame *Blue Nights* at its start and end, associated with key moments or locations in Quintana's life, such as her wedding day or their Brentwood home, Didion draws attention to important rites of passage that pay homage to her daughter's life. We see this immediately in chapter two when Didion remembers Quintana's wedding day "seven years" before the narrating present of "July 26 2010". The first celebratory image of the flower "leis worn by the bridesmaids" is paired with the "white stephanotis" woven into Quintana's hair, presenting a nostalgic

scene, one that appears appropriate in a grief memoir (5). The stephanotis motif is repeated ten times in the first twenty pages and reappears on the penultimate page. Shortly afterwards, we learn the significance of the stephanotis when Didion attaches the motif to place. When the family lived in Brentwood Park from 1978 until 1988, there "was stephanotis growing outside the terrace doors". These nostalgic and "sentimental" images of flowers from the past seem to Didion only "like yesterday", while her choices seem appropriate to include in a memoir (7–8). Early family life in California is associated with happiness and health is celebrated by Didion.

However, just as the reader has time to conjure happy images of Quintana's past, they are immediately undone with opposite images of decay, endings, or death. When the family moved out of the Brentwood house, the new owner "pumped" the house with herbicide, "which killed the stephanotis, killed the mint, and also killed the pink magnolia" (12). Didion creates a violent scene here, made more forceful by the repeated word "killed". This historical moment is sealed with the cynical comment that "the termites, I was quite sure, would come back. The pink magnolia, I was also quite sure, would not" (8). From the New York home, Didion again alludes to memories of flowers, but is careful to remind readers that "Brentwood Park was then. New York was now". She immediately ages the image of pink magnolias and stephanotis into "stiff dead leaves" (13). In what could be described as 'anti-nostalgic', Didion associates blissful memories with Quintana's death. Memories of her daughter remind her of Quintana's passing, the passing of time and eventually, her death. The stalling of nostalgic memories becomes her antidote to accepting these harsh realities. Didion rejects further traditional tropes of sentimentality found in memoirs such as dresses and photographs, both traditionally thought of as nostalgic emblems of positive times past, but in Didion's case flipped into something like the "stiff dead leaves".

Does *Blue Nights* provide consolation despite its departure from typical grief memoir conventions? To explore this question, I will briefly turn to Adina Storia's essay, "The Traumatic Structure of the récit de mort: Camille Laurens' '*Philippe*'" (2018). Storia analyses Camille Laurens' memoir concerning the perinatal death of her son through medical negligence. This analysis offers insights into how Didion's narrative style is shaped by the challenges and contradictions inherent in conveying child loss through conventional storytelling methods. Storia suggests that narratives of child death themselves

represent what Emma Wilson (2003), defines as a “limit experience”, thus extending the act of such an event (Wilson qtd. in Storia 607). Child death is “affectively overwhelming” and defies the expressive capabilities of conventional language and narrative. Storia’s investigation suggests that written accounts of the death of a child are complex due to the shattering of self by such a loss. Hence the written form is characterised by “hybridity”, the blending of different narrative elements and styles such as autobiography, non-fiction, and fiction to represent the complexity of the author’s emotional and psychological experience. Elements such as hybridity and fragmentation, which Didion also utilises, overcome the boundaries of linear storytelling in expressing grief (606). Storia claims further that when a mother writes of the experience after such a loss, it is a form of “(self)analysis” which exposes the wound caused by the death experience in a way that not only relays the situation of the death but also the reflection of it from the mother's perspective (606). The urgent tone and fragmented writing style identified in *Philippe* are also seen in *Blue Nights*. Both authors share a style characterised by juxtaposition, intertextuality, the weaving of subjective narrative with objective medical discourse, and the use of short, repetitive quotes from literary sources. The written text becomes a testimony of the traumatic experience which the reader, in the role of listener, shares with the writer. These fragmented and disjointed stylistic choices illustrate the unrepresentable nature of child loss and the challenge of expressing it coherently (610).

Consequently, *Blue Nights* does not serve as consolation or psychoanalytical ‘grief work’. As Storia observes of Lauren’s text, Didion’s memoir is “neither elegiac nor therapeutic” (606), a point echoed by narratologist Mark Currie who also highlights an asymmetry between narrative and time (20). Storia explores child grief's unnarratability to suggest that unlike parental loss, into a “chronological progression”, child loss has an achronological nature which disrupts the sense of futurity (605). This observation aligns with Currie’s argument that traditional linear understandings of time are inadequate for portraying human consciousness and can hinder a writer’s ability to represent time truly. Currie explains that writing inherently possesses an “already-there-ness”, where the future is already known within the narrative, which contrasts with the unreality of the future in real life (21). This makes it challenging to write about a dead person (object), who has no future. Although Quintana was thirty-eight

at the time of her passing, Storia's comment that child loss, even though common, is still the "most unexpected and non-sensical of deaths" in contemporary, medicalised society is credible (605). This perspective reveals Didion's engagement with mortality, revealing that her story is too traumatic to be fully comprehensible, perhaps explaining why it offers little solace.

Although Didion's methods appear to seek little consolation, there does seem to be an expectation of a continuing bond with her child. Didion employs the framing metaphor of the extended twilight not only to allude to the passing of time, which she stalls, but also to indicate the expectation of a continuing bond with Quintana after death, as alluded to by the heavy and solemn blue which saturates the memoir. On reading the closing pages of *Blue Nights*, I cannot help but notice how this 'ethereal' period is illustrated as a dual time for mother and child. Like the line from the lullaby "Bye Baby Bunting", a refrain repeated throughout *Blue Nights*, the ending is repetitive and lyrical. Similar to that of a sonnet, the last fourteen lines suggest a union between mother in child that is counter to a linear and singular narrative. The employment of epanalepsis, exemplified by "fade as the blue nights fade", coupled with the epistrophe of "lost" and the anaphora of "what is lost", appears to "pass into nothingness". However, this persistent repetition, along with the weighty silences about Quintana that refuse storytelling, appears to convey not only a denial of the termination of Didion's time with Quintana but also a rejection of the conventional expectation of closure; not only in the story, but also in the Freudian sense of working through grief. Didion's reflections and questioning about ageing and death find an answer akin to the 'volta' in a sonnet, signified by the word "yet" at the beginning the final two lines of *Blue Nights:* "Yet there is no day in her life on which I do not / see her" (188). The deliberate grammatical error employed by the pronoun "her life" instead of 'my' implies a connection between Didion and Quintana, an enduring bond that surpasses the boundaries of life and death, depicting them indistinguishable from each other.

Didion's methods also emphasise the cyclical and repetitive essence of maternal grief, connoting mother and daughter's entanglement outside time. In Chapter 25, Didion's remark, "I became seventy-five", and her daughter's refrain, "I became five", underscore the continuity of their bond. Similarly, when Didion recalls Quintana's birth at the age of "thirty-one", she evokes a sense of timelessness, for the

repeated phrases “Only yesterday Quintana was born” and “Only yesterday, Quintana was alive” condense time (135) and act to sustain a connection with Quintana after her passing.

Literary allusion is another method employed by Didion to evade the linear progression of time. When Didion asks whether the “dying of the brightness can be evaded”, she references actor Robert Duvall’s remark that he exists “nicely between the words “action” and “cut” to evoke this possibility (Duvall qtd. in Didion 149). Also, the recurring refrain of the lullaby “Bye Baby Bunting”, which appears at intervals (often in italics), serves to keep Quintana vital. It also symbolises a parent’s deep love for their child and possibly also the innate fear of losing them. By describing a timeless space where she coexists with her child, Didion illustrates a contemporaneous sense of grief, a sensibility to which other writers also allude. Finally, when Didion’s life plunges into blackness the moment Quintana dies on “August 26, 2005” (157), and the “light outside was no longer blue” (158), the line, “Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone” from W.H. Auden's poem *Funeral Blues* heralds the rupture her daughter’s death instigates (Auden qtd, in Didion 157).

Didion’s pronounced intertextuality mirrors the incomprehensibility of her grief experience. Didion wavers between personal narrative and objective discourse from diverse sources such as literary texts, dictionaries, medical reports, and fragments of text from Quintana and John’s novels, poems, and drafting. This intertextual and fragmented dimension replicates the fragmentary experience of loss, enabling the capacity of her grief to be represented formally. Through these literary citations, Didion exposes the anger, pain, confusion, and sense of loss that a single narrative could not convey, as emphasised by Cathy Caruth’s (1996) claim that “traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experience, which need to be integrated within existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative language” (153). Lauren Berlant further helps us understand Didion’s style by acknowledging that, “trauma [by] definition dissolves the rules of continuity that stabilise self-knowledge over time and mostly because ultimately no one else can witness one's own story” (43). Didion employs unconventional methods in *Blue Nights* that defy standard expectations of memoir and the pursuit of consolation. Rather than offering solace, these literary techniques allow Didion to convey emotions and experiences that a linear and singular narrative could not capture.

Liminal Sites of Grief

We get the sense from the title *Blue Nights* that the *"end of day will never come"* (4). Caught somewhere in the dusk, where time is forever "expanding, contracting, [and] burrowing back into itself" (37), Didion stalls time, avoiding the reality of Quintana's death. Although Didion acknowledges that there will eventually be a time when the impossible desire to want her child back will pass, it is not inside the pages of her memoir. Leaving the denouement open, Didion disrupts time again, creating a sense that the intertwined lives of mother and daughter will endure. In death, a certainty that Didion only realises when faced with her daughter's mortality, she will finally be able to let go, united with Quintana in timelessness. The following discussion examines how Didion employs liminal time-spaces, which foreground the consciousness of time as a tangible threshold between life and death.

In its broadest sense, liminality refers to any in-between place or moment, or a state of suspense. In grief, it is an affective site in time and space shared by mother and child. For grieving mothers, it functions to keep their children close, "in the company with our dead for as long as we don't *notice* them as really separate from us" (Riley, *Time Lived* 47). Joan Didion's representations of grief in liminal space is a revised mode of narrativisation in grief memoir. In her earlier memoir about the death of her husband John, after a period of "magical thinking" she is able "relinquish" the dead and find conclusion:

> 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. (Didion 71)

However, no such futurity is found in *Blue Nights*. Didion's deferral of closure is narrated through a net of spatial metaphors, locations that frame and alter the experience of time. Didion maps a 'new cartography' in *Blue Nights*, reconfiguring time, and space to house her grief in a number of sites of suspended disbelief, which include the ICU, ice floes, and the Booth Theatre.

The "ICU overlooking the river at New York Cornell" (157) is a framing site where her narrating voice most often writes of the illness and eventual death of her daughter. Quintana spent twenty months in four different ICU units before her death on August 26, 2005, at Cornell Hospital in New York. Later in the memoir, Didion also describes her own admission to the ICU. Two aspects of their description remain

indelible: the similarity of the units and that chronological time remains "elusive" (17). Twice, Didion tells readers that the ICU units "were all the same" (15, 101). They shared the same "blue-and-white printed curtains. The gurgling through plastic tubing. The dripping from the IV line, the rales, the alarms. The codes. The crash cart" (101). Death becomes ever-present in the blue nights as the narration come to realise that Quintana's state, "no longer sentient but alive, not dead" is temporary. The medical jargon used to describe these moments emphasises the sense of the ICU as a liminal zone between life and death where Quintana exists as if "warehoused somewhere" (26). We learn that as "*time passes"* (17)*,* but moments "blur" and "fade" (102), as does the sense of time whilst she is there, stalling time's forward motion. This is salient because it is not until Didion looks back on this suspended time in the ICU with Quintana, when she is admitted to one herself in Chapter 28, that she comes to realise that the blue nights could not "last forever" because we all pass away eventually.

The ICU, as a site of suspension, allows Didion re-identification with the past that shields her from the present horror of Quintana's illness and the likelihood of her death. The blue nights that she observes from the ICU deviate from the typical expectations of a grief memoir in that they immediately introduce a contradiction between night and day, creating a non-space that is liminal and in-between. This space Didion shares with her daughter at times feels suspended between their past life, the present unconscious moments, and a grieving future (which is the present). It is a space that allows "the gloaming" to exist metaphysically. Didion is stuck in this virtual site of timelessness as she grieves the loss of her child … and at the end, it is in the "blue nights" she remains. Didion writes in poetic prose:

> In the hospital there was no day or night.
> Only shifts.
> Only waiting. (148)

The white space left on that page that surrounds these three short lines works to bring attention to this revelation and the loneliness it induces. Didion realises that while she had been staying in the hospital, the "year's most deeply blue nights" had passed without her noticing (148), a stalling and denial of the passing of time. Didion, who laments that she cannot accurately articulate this sense of stalled time, refers to others who have. She references footballer Kris Jenkins, who vividly describes the temporal disruption caused by a knee injury: "'Have you ever had a moment where everything in your life just

stopped? […] So fast, but in slow motion? Like all your senses shut down? Like you're watching yourself?'" (Jenkin qtd. in Didion, 149). Didion proposes that this stalling of time she experiences might serve to dull the pain associated with acknowledging Quintana's death and the inevitability of her own.

The melancholy image of slowly flowing "ice floes" which appear towards the end of the memoir, although ambiguous, represent another metaphor employed by Didion to evoke a sense of stalled time. Five years after Quintana's death, an image of a mother and baby bear "cuddling on the ice floe" (153) triggers Didion to recall previous first-hand experiences with ice floes and begin ruminating about her daughter's history of health issues and the passing of time. While recuperating at home after a serious fall which resulted in Didion being admitted to the ICU, she finds herself "thinking exclusively about Quintana" (150) and recognising that she "still need[s] her". Leafing through "*Baby Animals and their Mothers",* a gift from Quintana, a postcard depicting mother and baby polar bear embracing on the Arctic ice falls from within its pages (151). Characteristic of Didion's increasingly lyrical style, Didion writes in repetitive prose that has an ethereal, enduring quality:

> In the first year of Quintana's hospitalisations I had watched the ice floes from her hospital windows: ice floes on the East River from her windows at Beth Israel North, ice floes on the Hudson from her windows at Columbia Presbyterian. I think now of those ice floes and imagine having seen, floating past one or another slab of breaking ice, a baby polar bear and its mother, heading for the Hell Gate Bridge. (Didion, 153)

One cannot ignore the tragic pessimism and sentimentality evoked by the symbolism of mother and child together, in limbo on the broken ice. There is no guarantee the fated pair will ever get to a destination; they are doomed together floating into eternity. Although the water they float on is associated with movement, flowing time, there is no indication they will stop or anchor anywhere. They are stagnant. The repetition of "ice floes" functions to freeze or stall this sentimental "cuddl[le]". The property of ice confirms the sensation of time frozen as evoked by Baraitser's words, "the felt experience of time *not* passing" (2). Crystallised water is rigid and motionless, symbolising stagnation and an absence of life. Like an old silent film stuck on replay and repeat, this moment denies any sense of Didion letting go of her loss, sealing them together for ever.

We see this enduring connection further when Didion imagines showing the image of the bear and its mother to Quintana as if she were still present. Didion links the postcard with the poignant repeated motif of Quintana's much earlier and possibly suicidal words, "*just let me in the ground",* a sadness she would rather not recall. Didion writes: "I resolve to forget ice floes. I have had enough of ice floes. Thinking about ice floes is like thinking about the transporter being called back to take her to the morgue" (153). This morbid allusion to Quintana's cold, dead body triggered by the ice, conjures the sensed presence of Quintana in the timeless image of mother and child doomed together on the ice floe. She would much rather stall its movement and imagine Quintana as still present. Yet, as the reader infers, the ice will eventually melt, and they will be merged for eternity in death, as alluded by their "cuddling", a point that is reinforced by the four-fold repetition of the French phrase "câlin sur la banquise", 'cuddling on the ice floe'. The "ice floes" that have been outside the window all this time of waiting in the ICU become the site 'outside of time', cohabitation in life and death -- a liminal experience she shares/ed with Quintana.

There is something contradictory about Didion's reflection in this section of the memoir. Why is it that only two pages after revealing "I no longer imagine the transporter being called to take her to the morgue" she is "thinking" about the transporter again (153)? While contemplating this ice floe metaphor, Didion as subject is set on a park bench in Central Park. Significantly, this was dedicated to Quintana's memory. The bronze plaque reads, "Quintana Roo Dunne Michael 1966–2005 *… In summertime and wintertime"* (154). The association of Quintana's hospital wheelchair, with the morgue transporter, and the ice floe all symbolically function to represent floating in timelessness. For Didion, she is left floating in fate, knowing that she too will be united with Quintana forever, sealed by Didion's repetition of *"In summertime and wintertime",* evoking life's cycles. *Blue Nights* resists the traditional chrononormalacy of working through grief to resolution through this felt experience of time not passing and presentation of a multiplicity of temporalities (Berlant 4).

Once Quintana dies, Didion moves to another liminal time-space, the Booth Theatre, where her adaptation of *The Year of Magical Thinking* is staged. If we read *Blue Nights* as a performance of Didion's grief, then the section which is set in the Booth Theatre, and marks a turning point in the work, represents

a ‘performance within a performance’.[11] As Didion gets busy with life after Quintana’s funeral, she stalls her grief between the curtains of the Booth Theatre stage. Her former memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking* works its magic again, but this time its re-enactment on the stage vividly animates Quintana.

Didion’s attempts to disrupt time are instigated by the events in Chapter 30, the day after Quintana’s funeral. After placing Quintana's ashes in the wall at St. John the Divine, she notices that there was only “one” space left on the wall, the other three taken up already with engraved names of her mother, husband, and daughter, and comes to realise, that in time, her name will fill the last remaining space (164). Associated with this moment is the painful repeating dream of “evensong bells” ringing and the cathedral doors being “closed and locked”, harbingers of what Didion describes as a “darkening” (164), the end of Didion’s framing metaphor “blue nights” (4). This marks the passing, the inexorable progress of time which Didion acknowledges. However, moments after leaving the ashes, she avoids “thinking about” its significance. Rather than wondering herself where the dream may go, she evades the truth and asks her readers to “imagine” instead (164), confirming the denial of not only Quintana's death, but her own too.

Within days after the visit to St. John the Divine, in a new, numberless chapter, in a method to stifle her deathly dreams, Didion gets busy. In the white space between Chapters 30 and 31, she promises herself that she will “maintain momentum” (165), a process of moving forward she feels obliged to follow because it is the socially accepted “imperative” (165) which, as she notes with slight sarcasm, was “echoed all the way downtown” (165). Maintaining momentum becomes the antidote to the acknowledgement of the “end of blue nights”. At first Didion made herself busy travelling the country promoting her book *The Year of Magical Thinking,* but when “further effort was required” (166) to successfully sustain momentum, she began creating a stage adaptation, a play version of the memoir. Didion comments that, “as ways of maintaining momentum go this one turned out to be better than most” (166) at housing her grief, as the play opened within a year. She provides a list of eleven reasons why she “liked” the process of each performance. Wrapped in the repetition of each show, Didion feels

[11] Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in their chapter *A History of Autobiography Criticism, Part I: Expanding Autobiography* Studies, expand the concept of performativity in memoir and autobiography (1).

safe “backstage”; the “weight[y] stage doors”, “secret passages” and the presence of security guard “Shubert” outside create sanctuary for the grieving mother. Meanwhile, the routines of evening meals shared in the space backstage, where sit “the little improvised table with the checked tablecloth … and the menu that read “’Café Didion’”, provide sanctuary from grief (167–168).

The Booth Theatre stage itself becomes the site of Didion’s denial, which, I suggest, illustrates an arresting of time where Didion can suspend the reality of Quintana's death (165). The narrating Didion is completely self-aware that she is trying to “trick” time, stalling the reality of Quintana’s death so she “does not have to be dead” (167). Didion self-consciously describes herself in the role of observer of the play throughout this section. With Didion as subject, readers can see in these heartbreaking moments the grieving mother’s denial as she shelters in the recreated past world bound to her daughter (and husband) as if Quintana is still alive. In the dark location above the stage, while her play comes to its own resolution below, she is suspended above in an arrested site where Didion, as the subject in the memoir (a play within a play effectively), can imagine her daughter is still alive. By sitting in suspension while her own past life plays below, Didion performs her personal grief publicly too. Both spectator of her past and participant in her present, Didion as the narrator becomes aware of time consciousness as we can see:

> I liked watching the performance from a balcony above the lights.
>
> I liked being up alone with the lights and the play.
>
> I liked it all, but most of all I liked the fact that although the play was entirely focused on Quintana there were, five evenings and two afternoons a week, these ninety minutes, the run time of the play, during which she did not need to be dead.
>
> During which the question remained open.
>
> During which the denouement had yet to play out.
>
> During which the last scene played did not necessarily need to be played in the ICU overlooking the East River.
>
> During which the bells would not necessarily sound and the doors would not necessarily be locked at six. During which the last dialogue heard did not necessarily need to concern the vent.
>
> *Like when something dies, don’t dwell on it. (*Didion 167–168)

Didion writes in a narrative style of rhythmic and lyrical repetition, counteracting the ambiguous progress narrative of successful grieving through its looping and stalled method (Hartung 93–4). The repetition of the preposition “during” significantly elongates the sense of deferral that is represented by Didion. While

Didion circles back to other, often repeated memory fragments from earlier in the memoir. Didion converges together reminders of the cathedral where the ashes of her loved ones are stored, her own mortality, the ICU location where Quintana dies when the oxygen "vent" ceases to function, and Quintana's observation about grief with the words, "*don't dwell on it"* (168) – all merging into a single site of denied grief. Suspended "above the lights" Didion purposefully places herself as if in the timeless space of the universe, where past and present converge, and the future is arrested.

When the season of *The Year of Magical Thinking* comes to its predictable ending, so too does the illusion that Didion can hold off the reality of Quintana's death by maintaining momentum and animating her on the stage. At the end of the final performance, Didion tells how Vanessa Redgrave, the play's sole performer, places a bunch of "yellow roses" (168) on the stage just beneath the closing prop, a "photograph of John and Quintana" together. Lit by a single "ghost light" (170), the memorial scene was alight in an otherwise blackened theatre, until the following morning. Didion felt "relieved" that the crowd left the theatre "slowly" so that John and Quintana would not be alone, and that the roses offered them comfort. Also, the keeping the ghost light alive could be seen as a denial of "the darkening" and the reality of their deaths. Interestingly, the "ghost light" immediately draws our attention to the fact that John and Quintana are dead, for only their spirits remain. A ghost light is a single bulb left on whenever a theatre is dark and research suggests that it may function to "chase away mischievous spirits" or keep the ghosts that inhabit a theatre, "happy and contented" (Wilson). Didion's actions appear to be sentimental, for of course none of these actions will keep her lost loved ones alive. What is important in terms of this thesis is that by housing her grief on the stage, Didion holds onto, and keeps alive, the moment before she absorbs the truth of Quintana's death.

Not only does the Booth Theatre create a "magical" make-believe space to stall time, but it also rejects a linear "working through" model of grief in its refusal of denouement. However, Didion's meta narrative tells us that she had always known that the magic of maintaining momentum could not delay her grief forever. "When the play closed" Didion tells of how "maintaining momentum had been at a certain cost. This cost had always been predictable but I only that night began to put it into words" (170). Finally, however, Didion comes to recognise that the methods of maintaining momentum and stalling the

reality of her daughter's death every night on the stage are a "misapprehension" (165) and inefficient at providing solace. Sadly, Didion learns that there is no way to permanently *trick* the time of grief or avoid the inevitability of death. The "predictable cost" of keeping busy comes to a head when she collapses and ends up in hospital (170) after closing night. From this point on, Didion comes to recognise that mortality is final and eventually death finds everyone.

Conclusion

Time is stalled in *Blue Nights*, and through the recognition of it as having stopped, albeit temporarily, Didion comes to realise the truth that ageing and death cannot be avoided, even when a child's death happens out of orderly succession. Writing in the genre of what Heather Hewett identifies as the "motherhood memoir" (195), the overwhelming trauma of Joan Didion's loss tests her literary prowess to its very limits. Stalled in time beside her dying daughter's ICU bed, Didion defies the reality of Quintana's illness, and after her death, suspended above the stage production of an earlier "magical" life when Quintana breathed, Didion confronts the forward motion of time which fails to account for her specific experience of loss and mourning. Didion's meandering introspection, identified as "autocritical writing" by academics Justine Dymond and Nicole Willey (13), rejects consolation's healing balm to contemplate the profound impact of losing a child on her identity and focus on what the loss of Quintana means for a mother, rather than creating a memorial or celebration of the life lost, as would be expected within traditional memoir form. While the stalling of time in *Blue Nights* appears to serve the purpose of allowing Didion to eventually acknowledge that her daughter has passed as she will one day, it ends melancholically, avoiding working through and resolution of grief. Other, memoirs concerning maternal grief also end without clear resolution, but the purpose of stalled time can differ. *Wave*, by Sonali Deraniyagala, which will be examined next, illustrates how stalled time can be a symptom of immense trauma, but the delaying of time, which can be intentionally created by the memoirist, can also be an aspect of the process of working through grief.

Chapter Two

Trespassing in the past: Sonali Deraniyagala's *Wave*

> They are my world. How do I make them dead? My mind toppled.
>
> Deraniyagala, *Wave* (34)

Wave: A Memoir of Life After the Tsunami (2013) follows Sonali Deraniyagala's grief story, beginning on Christmas holiday with her family in her home country, Sri Lanka, where tragedy strikes with the devastating tsunami. Along its course, readers learn her backstory and memorialised details about her husband, Steve Lissenburgh, and their two children, seven-year-old Vikram and five-year-old Nikhil, known as Malli (little brother), who all perished in the waters. Based in London, the family used to take bi-annual trips to Sri Lanka, Deraniyagala's home country. On the last of these trips, while vacationing near the coast at Yala National Park, the family attempt to flee the tidal wave by jeep but are overwhelmed. Deraniyagala loses her grip of her sons' hands, and they disappear into the sea with her husband, while she is propelled through the fast-moving tsunami waters and managed to survive. The fabric of her life is indelibly altered. In the immediate aftermath, though the exact time remains unclear due to amnesia, readers learn that Deraniyagala is physically injured, traumatised, and wandering an unrecognisable landscape; her husband, sons, parents, and friend gone. What follows in the next nine chapters is a seven-year account of unravelling from the depths of despair and a wish for death, through trauma and denial, towards a gradual resurrection of lost memories and a piecing together of herself as she progressively learns to find a way to want to live, although never finding, or wanting to find, 'closure'.

On the recommendation of her therapist, Deraniyagala, an Oxford University graduate and economist, began journalling her experiences six years after the tragedy. Although her work did not start with the end in mind, the memories from these journals are written into what has become an acclaimed memoir. It could be said that *Wave* satisfies common expectations of grief genre due to its pathos of sentimentality, commitment to successful 'grief work', and despite the horrific trauma, the memorialisation of those who were lost to the wave's catastrophic impact. For example, Rachel Beanland

(2015) claims that *Wave* serves as "bibliotherapy" for parents grappling with grief, because Deraniyagala offers hope that they too will eventually heal from loss (66). Having been accepted as a popular work, *Wave* is at variance to the other texts examined in this thesis, which are regarded as literary works by established authors. *Wave* was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, won the PEN/Ackerley award, and found its way onto several bookseller lists, including the *New York Times* and Goodreads.

Wave is largely told in chronological order with flashbacks to Sri Lanka in the 1970s and England in the 1980s. Deraniyagala recalls and reconstructs memories as both the experiencing subject and narrator in a meditative and self-reflective style. Through this approach, she pieces her fractured self together, reflecting on the process of grief, which is left unfinished. A more careful observation of the ebb and flow of the memoir illustrates an integrative narrative structure common in autobiography. The first three chapters chronicle the trauma as a stalling of time, disjointed delays, and disbelief. The following section represents a cautious uncurling of memory, while the final two chapters signify an adjustment to loss, a discovery of a new way of being. Weaving throughout this three-part structure, Deraniyagala crafts a sense of traumatic conflict through binary opposition. A clenching denial meshed in darkness and death is juxtaposed against a process of blossoming acknowledgement that allows for light, nourishment, life, and healing. While this flow towards a sense of life is linear, Deraniyagala's progress towards healing unfolds hesitantly, often curling back into the darkness before finally embracing the light and accepting the loss she has endured. Deraniyagala acknowledges that the pain of loss is perpetual. Instances of bleak sadness and recoiling will always accompany her as she navigates through life without her loved ones, although their presence remains "near" (228).

The sudden, unprecedented nature of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami event and the complete lack of readiness intensify its impact, serving as the rupture that shatters the fluid perception of time. Deraniyagala's first-hand encounter with death and destruction on a massive scale, coupled with her own near-death experience, attests to tremendous traumatic suffering. In his book *The Time of Memoir*, Sven Birkerts (2008) suggests that category of "traumatic memoir" appears as a distinct sub-genre of grief literature. This subset demands that writers employ a range of strategies of presentation due to the ineffable nature of psychological disruption on a tremendous scale. Birkerts proposes that traumatic

memoir aims to reflect and counterbalance the destructive force of trauma, diverging from the objectives of "lyric memoirs" which prioritise self-reflection and recovery over time (145). The rupture of trauma perceived is a 'break', leading to the disruption of the normal progression of grief's timeline, alters a writer's "impulse for expression" (Birkerts 145). Accordingly, the following chapter delves into *Wave'*s exploration into the impact of maternal grief within an overwhelmingly tragic context, registering the rupturing effects of massive loss on the chronological experience of time. Deraniyagala's experience and processing of trauma is represented as a gradual recollection of intricate and progressively sentimental personal memories from 'before', which were erased by the rupture of the wave. As demonstrated in *Blue Nights*, death can stagnate time, making it seem as if standing still. However, Deraniyagala experiences the loss of not just a single child, but both her children, husband, parents, and almost her own life in the catastrophe. This unprecedented event creates a unique and "bewilder[ing]" (12) disturbance to the fabric of temporality, challenging the expression of its ebbs and flows. How can one adequately represent and articulate the incomprehensible disruptions caused by such immense loss? This chapter seeks to unravel the complexities surrounding this question, shedding light on the inexpressible aspects of grief that emerge in the aftermath of an unimaginable tragedy.

Solace Beyond the Unthinkable: Healing Potentials and Multidisciplinary Perspectives

There is multidisciplinary curiosity in Deraniyagala's narrative in the realms of philosophy, psychology, sociology, ecocriticism, and postcolonial literature. These diverse perspectives reveal how *Wave* serves as material addressing not only grief and trauma, but themes of identity, transformation, and the power narrative can play in healing. Many academics are interested in Deraniyagala's literary methods that find solace. Philosopher David James, in the introduction to his book *Discrepant Solace* (2019), considers how and with what literary tools Deraniyagala manages to write out her grief, despite the sense that traumatic experiences like hers may be impossible to adequately represent. James argues that contemporary grief literature, which he labels "*words of solace"*, transcends mere consolation, challenging common assumptions that the pursuit of solace through literature *emphasises* the depth of

loss (1).[12] James suggests that storytelling helps process trauma, and that the methods employed by writers employ to re-experience traumatic affect is of critical interest. Accordingly, James contends that Deraniyagala finds some sense of solace through retrospection as her response in her 2013 interview attests: “remembering has been the huge consolation, or it has been making it tolerable, even more than tolerable” (Deraniyagala, “A Better Quality of Agony”).

James also contends that it is not only through the memoir genre, but Deraniyagala’s particular literary form, which allows for solace. Of central interest to this thesis are Deraniyagala’s methods of arresting time within her storytelling. Her detailed descriptions of nature that unfold throughout the memoir, James suggests, structurally suspend, and withstand, the “prevailing motion of events” (James 40). Through intimate descriptions, Deraniyagala compresses and misshapes the “impossible truth” of her loss (*Wave* 186), resisting what happened. Through her “descriptive specificity” and “forensic approach”, James suggests (2), Deraniyagala challenges established expectations that memoirs should be emotionally restrained. He argues further that by not avoiding the pain of her grief, stylistically, her book flows from restraint to elegiac lyricism, making it worthy of literary interest. Deraniyagala’s style supports the argument that the rupture of trauma can indeed be communicated effectively in writing (4). It also indicates that *Wave* goes further than valuing experience, a characteristic of contemporary memoir, and, as Tony Walters suggests, expresses a resistance to the language of modernist psychology that pathologises deviations from the norm, including Deraniyagala’s extended experience (129).

Academics have also explored *Wave* as a resource for discussing grief in psychology. For instance, William Cornell (2014) questions whether works like *Wave* can offer alternative theoretical and therapeutic models to challenge conventional grief stage models, which prioritise rapid recovery (309). He argues that unresolved grief performances should be acknowledged as *part* of the grieving process, highlighting how *Wave* illustrates a personal method of finding solace that does not freeze one's internal world, but allows for gradual healing (308). Instead of suppressing memories, he suggests that solace is possible amid "despairing disorientation" by embracing life's fragility and beauty, such as Deraniyagala’s

[12] While acknowledging the criticism of some about the ethical ramifications of works of consolation which may represent “aesthetic treachery”, more harm than good, James finds that consolation literature tracks the experience of loss and also maps the “affectively rocky ground” that is to be dealt with in the future (2).

meditations on the natural world. This approach, reminiscent of Freud's concept of "transience" (Freud, 'On Transience', 305–307), as Cornell suggests, offers the potential for individuals to create something solid and cohesive from their mourning experiences. Thus, memoirs like *Wave* play a crucial role in helping individuals find their voice of mourning and meaning, allowing them to accept the irreversible loss of loved ones while still holding them within their internal worlds (Cornell 308).

Similarly, sociologists Nina Jakoby and Fiona Anderau (2019) address a research gap connecting bereavement literature and disaster studies which *Wave* intersects. They emphasise the memoir's valuable insights into the emotions of grief and its social nature. Their analysis highlights the role of narratives in self-construction, offering a framework to reassert order after catastrophe (86). They challenge the societal norm of viewing grief as an illness and emphasise the importance of recovery, contradicting modern values (88) which might judge Deraniyagala's extended mourning as beyond acceptable timeframes (96). The argument that *Wave* deviates from grieving norms by resisting closure and promoting a sense of "rediscovery" and a continued bond with the deceased (105), will be applied in this chapter.

English literature scholar Pallavi Rastogi (2014) likewise examines how *Wave* and other tsunami narratives serve as therapeutic tools, providing comfort to both writers and readers (145), a quality distinct from factual reporting. Rastogi observes Deraniyagala's healing journey through writing, emphasising its therapeutic quality in aiding her healing rather than working as social commentary on the catastrophe. Rastogi also proposes that Deraniyagala's classic PTSD responses, such as experiencing nightmares and turning to alcohol, illustrates how writing is a safe space for processing traumatic experience and mourning her loss. According, Rastogi examines how *Wave* explores memory as a means of healing and hope.

Exploring *Wave*'s contribution to postcolonial literature's understanding of catastrophe is English literature scholar Geetha Ganapathy-Doré's (2013) analysis of contemporary narratives by women authors about the Sri Lankan tsunami. Her primary focus centres on the tsunami as a critical moment that prompts reflection on the fragility of existence in the post-colonial context. She too observes a significant shift in twenty-first century autobiographies such as *Wave*, where the focus has transitioned from the

identity crisis that emerged in the previous century, to a new emphasis on the vulnerability of physical and bodily integrity (2). Through a feminist lens, Ganapathy-Doré illustrates how female protagonists grapple with the transformation of their lives by grief, akin to the narratives of Holocaust survivors, but generates sympathy for individuals in extreme distress rather than remembering collective trauma (2). Furthermore, Ganapathy-Doré explores the role of writing memoirs as a mode of subaltern agency, which, as she astutely observes, serves as Deraniyagala's speech act, liberating her from shame and self-imposed isolation (6).

Finally, and of contemporary importance, Chitra Sankaran (2019) examines *Wave* through an ecocritical lens. She argues that despite widespread destruction, Deraniyagala finds perspective and balance. Sankaran contends that Deraniyagala's narrative navigates apocalyptic and pastoral elements while addressing personal loss and large-scale environmental damage (373). Sankaran suggests that *Wave's* narrative illustrates the futility experienced by an individual devastated by the tsunami, whose significance and magnitude cannot be grasped. Time gradually causes Deraniyagala to come to terms with nature, the cause of her loss, and the source of her solace, bridging the gap between the span and value of a human life, against the vast span of evolutionary time (378). Thus, Deraniyagala 's journey provides a meaningful framework for readers, portraying nature, despite its role as "agent of misfortune", as her companion (379). As will be examined further in the last section of this chapter, Deraniyagala establishes a unique relationship with the land and seascape, the very place of her trauma, despite, or perhaps because of, her profound loss (378).

What sets Sonali Deraniyagala's memoir apart from Joan Didion's, and as will be subsequently revealed, from Yiyun Li's literary work, is the overwhelming intensity of the traumatic event that precipitated her grief. This distinctive characteristic deems it appropriate to analyse the disruption of time in Deraniyagala's narrative through a trauma paradigm. Such an approach will enlighten the profound implications of trauma on the perception and representation of time. For the purposes of this chapter, I will draw on Cathy Caruth's (1996) definition of trauma from her influential work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, which describes trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic event" (11).

Caruth's trauma theory builds on Freudian understanding of trauma as discussed in the formative work "Beyond the pleasure principle" (1920). Freud's observations of World War I soldiers revealed instances of them reliving battlefield experiences as haunting nightmares. This unwitting re-enactment stresses the incomprehensibility of threatening events. As a result, Freud posits that trauma involves the delayed recognition of threat, often lacking direct experience of the event at the time it occurs (12). Trauma, Freud argues, inflicts a "double wound", disrupting the experience of time, self, and the world. Unlike a physical wound that heals, trauma remains largely concealed from consciousness until it imposes itself repeatedly through nightmares and repetitive actions (30). Caruth extends Freud's ideas, emphasising that the grieving voice in nightmares is a re-enactment of the unclaimed experience of trauma.

In *Unclaimed Experience,* Caruth contends that trauma's narrative extends beyond the encounter with death or evidence of survival. She posits that trauma is not constrained to a single violent act but resides as an "unassimilated" experience which returns to haunt the survivor later on as a belated experience or "latency" (4, 17). Emerging from PTSD theory, Caruth's hypothesis enhances the understanding that trauma disrupts the linear progression of time. Developing Freud's concept of "too soon", Caruth's trauma theory also suggests that the abruptness of the traumatic event prevents full experiential processing. Thus, the "unclaimed experience" disrupts boundaries of place, time, and embodiment (4).

Effective trauma processing is arduous, requiring the claiming and integrating of the unclaimed experience. This can be realised through re-enactment, a re-living or re-experiencing and performance of the initial trauma. While Caruth's theory is played out in *Wave,* we will also see, as noted by Jakoby and Anderau, that Deraniyagala is portrayed as taking an "active role" in distancing herself from memories also, thus stalling the integration of the unclaimed trauma experience further. In my own discussion, I will draw on this point, demonstrating how Deraniyagala's memoir not only recounts personal trauma, but also serves as a performative medium to articulate and process it. Re-enactment through narrative, while harrowing, plays a critical role of experiencing and processing trauma.

Lastly, Caruth accentuates memory's centrality in trauma theory. Traumatic memory oscillates between recollection and erasure, expression, and silence. Telling these memories creates a history inscribing the past while simultaneously erasing some parts. In *The Trauma Question*, Roger Luckhurst (2013) describes this exchange between trauma literature's form and content as a "narrative/antinarrative tension", positioned between "narrative impossibility" and "possibility" (80, 83).[13] As demonstrated subsequently, Deraniyagala's memoir serves as a vehicle for processing the aftermath of the tsunami and her profound loss.

The ebb and flow inherent in the structural arrangement of *Wave* can be perceived as intentionally repetitive as it re-enacts the trauma experienced. While the memoir's trajectory is generally chronological, its frequent re-enactment of the spinning blackness of the tsunami's force aligns with trauma theory's concept of "repetition compulsion", from which Deraniyagala's memoir desires to be free (Birkerts 145). Deraniyagala's impulse to piece herself back together influences the shape of the presentation of her story. As will be evidenced, the trajectory of Deraniyagala's grief work over the memoir's seven-year period employs gradually fading repetition of the past horror of the wave's aftermath as it flows towards its conclusion, gradually offering some semblance of consolation. Nevertheless, *Wave* ends firmly with Deraniyagala's acknowledgment that she will never be entirely free of moments when she is once again drawn into the vortex of trauma, like that felt when the wave first brought its destruction.

In the light of Caruth's analysis, this chapter will explore processes of stalling, uncurling, and enduring in *Wave* which depict profound disruptions to temporality after overwhelming loss and reflects the hesitant restoration of memory and embodiment in the aftermath of tragedy. The overwhelming trauma instigated by the catastrophic tsunami event disrupts the conventional progression of time, prompting a re-evaluation of the relationship between grief, memory, and narrative. "Stalling" investigates the initial impact and aftermath of the tsunami where the "too soon" nature of the event

[13] Caruth (1995) questions the narration of trauma, which, in her account, might not only attempt to tell the incomprehensible story of trauma, but it might also distort the "truth" and dilute its powerful effect (p.153). According to this view, trauma demands a special mode and means of representation that textually performs trauma and its "incomprehensibility" through, for instance, gaps, silences, the repeated breakdown of language, and the collapse of understanding (see Caruth, 1995, 153–55).

plunges the protagonist into a dark temporal state of delayed disbelief. “Uncurling” examines Deraniyagala’s hesitant journey towards acknowledging the past and restoring the fractured self through her detailed and sensory prose which functions to nourish memories and truths of her departed children. Deraniyagala also grapples with survivor guilt and a fear of confronting the truth which stalls the forward march of time. “Enduring” explores the representation of the enduring presence of her loved ones that establishes a maternal and lasting bond transcending death. Finally, I will discuss the significance of the ending of *Wave* from a feminist perspective.

Stalling – Spinning in the “Too-soon”

The wave asserts its “white foamy” presence immediately (Deraniyagala 3) as it “climbed all the way up to the rim of the sand where the beach fell abruptly to the sea” (3). Although its threat is not recognised at first, from the unexpected instant the wave crashes across the land, Deraniyagala describes its overwhelming impact as befuddling of her senses and consciousness. Like the swirling currents of the tsunami waters, Deraniyagala’s sense of time is spinning to comprehend how one minute her boys are playing with Christmas presents on the hotel veranda, unalarmed by the “white curl of a big wave” in the distance, but then the next “splintered minute”, they are running from the “suddenly furious” and “menacing” wave (5). Then, Deraniyagala’s body is “spinning fast” and propelling along in the “unrelenting” wave, turning over and over again in the “whirling” and “swirling” waters (8). Experiencing terrible pain that “burn[s her] brain”, she feels as though she must be dying (10). When the waters stop churning, and she finds herself in an unrecognisable landscape, Deraniyagala’s mind is spinning still to make sense of the “knocked-down” (11) world that is like “the end of time”. Bewildered, she wonders if she is “dreaming, but fearing, almost knowing” she is not (12). And this is where the dilemma of the memoir hovers, between the moment the water subsides, and she is rescued from the “sludge” (12). This section investigates the initial impact of the tsunami through a trauma lens and examines the rupturing effect it has on the protagonist’s embodiment and sense of temporality. Through an examination of the exposition, it will firstly how that the initial speed and force the tsunami engulfs the land exemplifies the trauma concept of “too soon”. Secondly, it will examine the initial aftermath of the wave, which lasts six

months, through Caruth's trauma concept of "overwhelming experience" (11) which remains "unassimilated" by Deraniyagala. We will see that Deraniyagala becomes removed from the moment she inhabits (Cowtan 8), unable to assimilate the reality of the death and destruction the tsunami brings.

The premise of trauma narrative is that the abruptness of the traumatic event instigates a psychological response that prevents one's full experiential processing of it. Deraniyagala's memoir is framed by the sudden arrival of the wave and its catastrophic progressive invasion of the land. In contrast to the tragedy that is about to be unleashed, the story begins as a typical Boxing Day morning for Sonali Deraniyagala and her family in Yala until she notices waves further up the beach than "normal". Then, like a viciously approaching army, the personified waves are "charging […] suddenly menacing" (4). Efforts to escape their reach come too late, as exemplified by her husband Steve's final disbelieving expression as they are engulfed: "A sudden look of terror, eyes wide open, mouth agape. He saw something behind me that I couldn't see. I didn't have time to turn around and look" (8). Chitra Sankaran succinctly captures the protagonist's state in this instant as a "narrative moment […] akin to a caesura, a deep holding of one's breath, the calm before the storm" (375) – a description which not only depicts disbelief, but also foreshadows the action of being underwater.

The experience of time, from first sensing the wave to its impact on the land, is magnified in the "splintered minute" (5) as its narration struggles to keep abreast of the advancing disaster. As the wave tracks up the beach, over the hotel grounds and finally overwhelms their jeep, it takes just four short pages. Deraniyagala's response to the disbelieving event in the moments before the wave hits is reflected in the language that creates a sense of urgency and breathlessness. This not only mirrors the speed of the event but mimics the panicked and discombobulated nature of her psychological response. In the first person present, the narration unfolds in staccato sentences, like a sports commentator, reporting every "then" and "next" of the rapidly developing catastrophe. The voice is punctuated with the repeated word "now" which works to extend the moment, as we will see in Li's time of "now and now and now" (Li 154), drawing attention to time's chronological march. As well as commentary, it includes questions like, "What is happening?" (7), that try to make sense of the strangeness, while the repeating adverb "suddenly" and indefinite pronoun "something" reinforces the disbelief. Imagery functions to further accentuate the

velocity with which the event unfolds. Present participle verbs like "sloshing" and "rising" stress the movement of the water as it submerges everything in its path, while other verbs such as "tilting" (7) work to personify the goliath threat of the wave and suggest psychological instability. The critical moment the jeep is overwhelmed is heightened by Deraniyagala's sentence fragment "On my side" which functions as a compression of the sentences, "Because it turned over. The jeep turned over" (8), connoting her incoherent mental state. The repeated phrase "jeep turned over" (8, 9, 31, 113) emphasises the moment her children are lost to her forever, pinpointing, in trauma terms, the moment of 'rupture'.[14] We will see that this is vital for my thesis because immediately after surviving the tsunami, Deraniyagala will describe the feeling of being in a "stupor" or dreamlike trance (29), which implies the arresting of time caused by the tsunami's rupture that comes "too-soon." This stalling, which represents the phenomenon of ekstasis, presents the protagonist as if she is standing outside herself.

As well as the unexpected appearance of the wave, when Deraniyagala is swept away by the tsunami waters, its "unknown chaos" further prevents the full experiential processing of it. Felt experiences depict the immediate danger the protagonist is in, while imagery further intensifies the unbelievable nature of the event. Like the "backwards and forwards" movement of her body (8), the narration oscillates between commentary about what is happening to her body, and Deraniyagala's efforts to make sense of it. The hyper-awareness of time she experienced only a split second before being engulfed by the wave, is replaced by a consciousness of how quickly *her body* is moving. Travelling at a "speed she does not recognise" (8), the reality of the moment is difficult to appropriate. As Deraniyagala is submerged under the water and curled like a spinning ball, the plot continues at the same dazzling pace, developing a sense of confusion and disbelief. The subject of focus, however, has shifted from the wave to her body as we are made aware of the experience of physical "pain" by this single word that heralds the new setting (7). Not only does she feel crushed by an unrecognisable weight of the water, but she is "shoved" through branches and "smashed" into debris (9). Although she is conscious of the "unrelenting" pain she feels, she is cognitively unable to process what is causing it. For instance, the water

[14] It is a moment she grapples with, illustrating maternal guilt "some mother" (113) but also disbelief, "That jeep turned over in the surging water, and in all those minutes after, I have no idea how long, I didn't think" (113)

"doesn't feel like water" (7–8). This confused psychological state is best demonstrated by the actions of her pinching herself "again and again" to check whether she is dreaming or dying. The physical sensation heightened by the "nip" on her thigh (9) perhaps demonstrates Brian Massumi's concept of "intensity", of being outside oneself. Mixing tenses further shows a disrupted sense of time: "Just now I was with my boys. My boys. If this is not a dream, I must be dying […] But how can I be dying? Just now I was in our hotel room" (17). Although in a continual state of being pulled along in quickly moving water, her mind is delayed. A little like the image of her body curled and spinning, there is no logic to what she is experiencing, so she gets nowhere. Embodied as in a "state of being" (86), rather than experiencing a process, the too-soon nature of the event will remain unassimilated.

From her rescue, through a half-hearted attempt to find her family, to her journey to Colombo and the following six months in the care of relatives and friends, Deraniyagala's narrative exemplifies the experience of unassimilated trauma caused by the rupture of the tsunami. When Deraniyagala sets foot on terra firma after an unspecified period, the transformed world she encounters leads to further psychological rupture and disbelief reflected by language that portrays fractured thoughts. Immediately, readers are struck by the impression of a profoundly changed world through Deraniyagala's employment of all the senses to describe the rupturing effect. In a state of complete bewilderment, she wonders if she might be trapped in a dream as what she sees is unrecognisable; the trees are "toppled", and everything is like a "bog-land". At the same time, her body feels unbalanced as she slides in the mud, "bent-double", unable to straighten (11). After an unspecified period, the shouted words "*'Muhuda goda gahala'*" lead her to deduce that "something dreadful had happened" (11–12). Injured, she resists help and refrains from voicing her reasons for staying at the site because to do so would acknowledge her family's demise and "make it too real" (14). Sometime later she wonders: "Was it real, what just happened, that water?" Yet her assertion that she "wanted to stay in the unreal, in the not knowing […] in my stupor" (14), reflects a psychological incapacity to comprehend the magnitude of her experience. Later, between her rescue and journey to Colombo, Deraniyagala's experience oscillates between dazed inaction, and a half-hearted search for her family as a stalling mechanism. Hints regarding their fate emerge subtly through references to clocks (23, 28–30) and shifting light (24, 29), but the passage of time remains elusive,

mirroring Deraniyagala's bewildered mental state. Her refusal to look at bodies near her hotel at Yala and her avoidance of inspecting the bodies inside the mortuary function to delay the reality of learning her family are ”were dead” (22). Although she reluctantly postulates the grim reality that there are no survivors (25), she leaves Yala for Colombo before she is sure they are dead, working to delay the truth further. Unable to assimilate the reality of the experience, Deraniyagala's embodiment disrupts the linear motion of time that would acknowledge her loss.

Throughout this section, Deraniyagala's fractured psyche finds expression in a disjointed narration that repeatedly turns to memories of her children or made-up scenarios, another method of stalling time’s progression. For instance, when she sees a wet and frightened girl being carried into the museum, she fleetingly imagines her boys “wet and scared” (14). Similarly, when she sees the hotel masseur, she recalls Malli sipping "Sprite wearing a Santa hat”. Yet she "quickly shuts out these thoughts” unable to bear thinking about “yesterday now, not in this madness, not if they were dead" (20). Later, as she senses it's five o'clock, she remembers Vik playing cricket with his father, and although she hears "Vik”, she cannot bring his face "into focus", unlike earlier in the day when, she could see them "clearly" (21). This signifies a period of editing and filtering, and moments of imagination where her family is thriving, as a sort of defence mechanism from the truth.

Deraniyagala filters out what is overwhelming, denying the reality of time’s forward motion through auditory imagery. We see this in the final pivotal hospital scene in Yala when a truck loaded with the dead arrives and the collective howling of survivors “crack[s] into the numbness” of her mind (23). Her estrangement is made apparent by the paradoxical statement that the howling “was telling [her] that what had happened was unthinkable, but I didn’t want this confirmed” (25). Later, on the road trip to Colombo, Deraniyagala confesses a desire to “somehow *stay* suspended” in confusion “forever”, thus avoiding the inevitable “truth” of tomorrow (29). The delusion that Deraniyagala can somehow stall time finds manifestation in the extended memory of her son Vikram as she wakes while still travelling in the van. Woken by a “crunching” in her ears, Deraniyagala senses her son:

> It was Vikram eating a pack of crisps. The slow crunch, crunch and the rustle as he took a single crisp out of the pack, savoured it with his eyes, lowered it into his mouth, and munched. And he repeated it until the last little smashed-up piece of crisp was gone […] Then I could see him,

> sitting on a pillow on my bed wearing his school clothes, grey trousers and bright red sweater. (Deraniyagala 30)

The palpable sensations of Deraniyagala's illusion merge present and past to confirm Geetha Ganapathy-Doré's (2019) claim that the disturbance to her sense of time represents an inability to cope with disruption, discontinuity, and absence. Deraniyagala cannot make a break between before and after the tsunami, staying suspended in time (4). Her son is still felt as present; his absence caused by the "too soon" trauma remains unprocessed and unassimilated. As we will see, Deraniyagala is unable to comprehend the trauma because the very idea that they, "just vanished" when the "jeep tipped" is a rupture she cannot assimilate (36).

"Stalling" spans six months of recovery in Colombo in the care of family and friends. We learn that Deraniyagala has an army of supporters as she recovers physically from physical damage and infection brought about by her experience. She finds out her parents, and oldest son, Vik, are dead and an extended four-month search for her son Malli culminates when his identity is confirmed through DNA testing of his remains. This loss instigates a period of incessant drinking and drug-taking to combat the terrible nightmares and avoid the truth that her family are all dead. Housed in the darkness of her room, she mourns her lost identity as a mother and is fearful about moments in the future when she will experience things once shared with her children for the "first time" without them (39). Deraniyagala makes a clear differentiation between her past, "before that life ended" when the tsunami hit (36) and the present. What is most felt about this period is Deraniyagala's death wish, repeatedly expressed.

Deraniyagala actively delays the acknowledgement that her boys are dead by lingering in the horror of the tsunami, which, as suggested by Jakoby and Anderau, distances her from memories of loss that trigger grief. She tries to evade sleep, in a kind of erasure to keep the truth of her family's deaths at bay. She worries that if she sleeps, she "will wake believing everything is fine […] Then I will remember. And that will be too awful (31). Wishing she could "stay suspended in [her] confusion" (29) rather than accept the truth, she takes sleeping pills and engages in "frenzied drinking" to "tame the pain" (37), but these "shifts between momentarily forgetting and relearning the truth all over again when she is sober" (91) fail to deny the "real nightmare" of her experience (47). A victim of trauma, Deraniyagala unwittingly

re-enacts the pain of the moment of rupture, which she cannot quite grasp (Caruth 2). Unable to make a break between before and after the wave, Deraniyagala delays the reality of her loss, actively extending her time in the "unreal" (14) by gazing at horrific images of the tsunami on the internet for hours, as if in a suspended state at the site of trauma between the wave and the outgoing tide. She self-harmed too: she "stubbed cigarettes" on her flesh and googled ways to kill herself to avoid a "deeper deadness" that haunted her (36, 48). She continues to deny the "too real" tsunami and her loss (31). Like the "nip" on her skin when she is submerged earlier, she has to "prod" herself when she tells others that her boys "couldn't have survived" because she does not believe her words (31). Later, she shuns the "needless proof" of the event when she "looked away" from the mirror when she saw "purple bruises" on her face (32) and refuses to name the tsunami: "Something came for us. I didn't know what it was then, and I still don't" (32–3). She does not even "wail" as expected when she finds out her son Vik is dead (33). Deraniyagala's disbelief, a central element of Caruth's theory, is also affirmed by her persistent questioning about the inexplicable nature of the tsunami's devastation. "How can something unknown do this?" she asks. "How can my family be dead? We were in our hotel room" (33). Instead of confronting the evidence, she opts to "make believe everything is fine", thereby suppressing the traumatic memories as a coping mechanism.

Oscillating between recollection and erasure importantly illustrates Caruth's contention that memory plays a significant role in trauma theory. This structural arrangement reveals further insights into her fractured psyche. Amid descriptions of events from this period and reflections about her traumatic experience, Deraniyagala divulges intimate details about her boys, such as Malli's favourite story, "The Gruffalo" (34), and vivid memories of her boys, like hearing her children calling her "Mum" (43). However, she quickly supresses these details, recognising that they evoke a sadness she cannot "endure" (35), so she is compelled "to prise them off" (43). Forced to reposition herself, she is determined to separate her lost family from the world she inhabits, because -- as Jakoby and Anderau observe -- "with only hazy memories. There is nothing to grieve *for"* (Jakoby and Anderau 91). It is also possible to further understand Deraniyagala's hesitation about acknowledging memories by considering Freud's premise that mourning is a process of "reality-testing" (Mourning 245). By remembering aspects of her life with her

children, Deraniyagala checks again and again to make sure her feelings are real and that her children are truly gone, but by denying this process of cataloguing memories, she delays the reality of her loss further.

In sum, Deraniyagala's response to trauma aligns with Caruth's notion of "afterwardness", where the traumatic experience disrupts one's sense of time and reality. We have seen that Deraniyagala's state of disbelief and denial caused by the unexpected arrival of the tsunami disrupts the boundaries of place, time and embodiment, housing Deraniyagala in a stalled latency denying the truth of her loss. As victim, Deraniyagala filters out "the original" trauma by repression of some of the experience as if some of it is experienced "indirectly" (*Unclaimed* 15–16). To survive the "brutal truth", she makes her memory "murky". (Deraniyagala 114). William Cornell (2014) explores the solace function of this stalling strategy and suggests that her response avoids total "collapse into unending unremitting grief" (306); thus, arrested time is Deraniyagala's self-care. Yet, like the resurrected image of Vik crunching chips before she arrives at Colombo, a hopeful transitioning from trauma is foreshadowed and remains vital. In the "magical" description at this section's close, maternal love is marked by Deraniyagala's nurturing of a tiny turtle egg, warm in her palm (50), presaging healing through reconnection with the seascape.

Uncurling – Letting in the Light: Trauma, Transience and Truth

From Chapter 4, eventually, grief leads Deraniyagala back home to London. While struggling with the truth she avoids confronting it directly and stalls visiting her family home. Yet later, a trip to the English countryside in 2007 becomes a turning point. There, between the hedgerows and bathed in golden sunshine, she lets the "light in" (78). Longing to "linger" with her lost loved ones (81), this moment, arrested in time, marks the beginning of the second phase of her memoir. After London, she relocates to New York where she continues to wrestle with shame and guilt, mourning the loss of her role as a mother. A visit to sub-Arctic Sweden reignites her connection with the ocean, sparking tender flashbacks of her boys. Upon returning to London five years after the tragedy, a visit to their family home unlocks stalled memories of her children for the first time. Deraniyagala is hopeful that healing may be possible, despite still feeling her grief reactions "are not normal" (115). She confronts her loss on a subsequent visit to Colombo in 2010, and as memories flood back, the narrative provides insights into her

past, her relationship with Steve, and their family life as the boys are born. “Uncurling”, which I identify as a ‘warming’ of memory, culminates where the memoir began, on the shores of Yala. It describes, in beautiful, extended prose, a pair of sea eagles “gliding the air thermals with such graceful abandon” (160), symbolising her healing journey, having revisited the site of her trauma. However, this pair are not her son Vik’s eagles; they are the second generation of smaller birds, still learning to fly. They perhaps memorialise her children, but also metaphorically represent her mourning process as she learns to tolerate life after traumatic loss and restoration of normal flowing time. Deraniyagala’s psychological state remains arrested in a sense of disbelief about what has happened, as she travels around the world between 2008 and 2011. However, this darkness and disbelief gradually give way to light as she nurtures her fractured psyche with memories and connects with nature, enabling a sensing of her sons’ presence.

Reaching for and pushing away memories of her children is Deraniyagala’s method of recounting her trauma. A careful approach to remembering stalls their flourishing, thus avoiding overwhelming sadness. In the following reading from Chapter 5, the central theme revolves around mothering, shame, and guilt. It commences in New York, where Deraniyagala is cowering in bed in her apartment, “inconsolable” as she was four years earlier in Colombo. The “brightness of this new city” and the sight of school children trigger profound sadness to the point where she wishes to be “killed” (99). In a reflective passage, she ponders why she cannot “grasp” the reality of being their mother, and why she erased memories of this role. She reveals a hesitancy to grab these memories with all her “heart” like when they were alive. Yet, she struggles with the poignant question, "how can I bear to do that in this void?” (115). “Loitering on the outskirts” of reality, allowing sensory memories of motherhood, such as the sensation of carrying “Malli’s weight” in her arms after he falls asleep in the car (115–116), briefly enter her consciousness before she shies away from them. Unable to reintegrate memories of her past life in her present Deraniyagala remains estranged as she searches for a way to live in her new reality. In contrast, by the end of this chapter, Deraniyagala’s identity as a mother has returned, restoring her sense of self, and to some extent, the continuous order of past and present events as postulated by Giddens (Giddens ctd. In Jakoby 91). On the deserted shores of a frozen lake in sub-Artic Sweden, Deraniyagala depicts a

pristine wilderness and light symbolically mimics a period of "clarity" when she re-establishes the truth of being Vik and Malli's mother. She writes:

> Immersed in that endless white, I knew I was their mother, my horror dormant, or not that relevant even. I burned with the knowledge of Malli's coziness on my lap. I allowed myself to know how his legs curled around me as he sat squeezing the hump of his toy camel, which blared out an Arabic pop song that irritated before long. And this was different from my usual hesitant, misty remembering. Perhaps that shimmering emptiness melted my defences and untangled my mind and untwisted my heart. But I was startled by my boldness in trespassing so wholly back into that life. (115).

Reminiscent of Riley's "brilliant" landscape (*Time Lived* 60), or "*Chartres on a clear day"* (4) in Didion's *Blue Nights*, Deraniyagala is plunged into the temporality of her sons as a method of solace, thus disrupting the sense of linear chronology. Counter to earlier in the account, when she actively sought to blur or repel memories of her children by keeping them distant and "misty", she observes her corruption of the order of time by "trespassing so wholly back into that life" before her boys had died. The negative connotation of the word "trespassing" not only suggests her awareness of tricking time, but that her method perhaps defies societal expectations of moving on from grief as she has alluded to repeatedly in *Wave* as a "slip" up (79, 80, 87, 89, 113) or her statement that her "reactions are not natural" (114).

Deraniyagala reveals not only a hesitation to remember her children because to do so is painful, but she also illustrates a self-consciousness throughout *Wave* that there are certain expectations to adhere to when grieving, rules she does not always follow, and rules she feels shame about. For example, in this chapter she reflects feeling humiliated that her pain may be "outlandish, not palatable to others" (103) so dupes herself (and others) that she even experienced such great loss. While having coffee with a university colleague at Colombia in her role as researcher, her conflict is demonstrated when she reflects that, "I find I almost believe this story, so deft have I become at my trickery". When she berates herself as "mad" at her pretence of not being a grieving mother, and should come out with the truth, but does not (107), we wonder what role social norms about grieving play in her grief process.

Immediately after the description of nature in Sweden in the closing pages of Chapter 5, the narrative takes a turn towards a reintegration of her fractured self when the truth about what happened in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami is revealed. The story of the man who found Deraniyagala by

the lagoon near the hotel where her family were lost as they were fleeing the wave, tells that she was "Spinning in that mud […] spinning. Like you were in a trance. Maybe you were spinning in the water and couldn't stop?" (Deraniyagala 120–121). By sharing this story in the third person rather than directly, the truth is witnessed by not just Deraniyagala, but the readers. This is significant because by seeing herself subjectively in a trance-like state from the outside, she is able to begin healing from her trauma, foreshadowing the following section when she learns to tolerate the absence of her boys: "by knowing them again […] I can recover myself when I dare to let the light in" (130).

Deraniyagala structures the experience and processing of her trauma as a gradual recollection of intricate and progressively sentimental personal memories from the 'before', which were erased by the rupture of the wave. Deraniyagala's hesitant progression towards an acknowledgment of the past and restoration of the fractured self, will be examined through binary opposition of dark and light, a motif of transition, but also of arrested time. In Jakoby and Anderau's (2019) research on identity, autobiography, and loss, they affirm that loss ruptures the symbolic order of past and present events that are required to form the idea of self, making it discontinuous. They concur with sociologist Anthony Giddens that loss destroys the subjective meaning of daily life and the "underlying 'routine reality'" required for continuity over time and space for reconstructing sense of self and for biography (Giddens in Jakoby 85). The death of her children and family disrupts Deraniyagala's ontological security, her sense of self. Without it, she cannot carry basic emotions such as hope and trust. This situates her in a sort of limbo for much of the memoir. Unable to adjust to the outside due to time's disruption, Deraniyagala cannot imagine a future by interpreting the past. Nonetheless, a reworking of the past does gradually happen through meditations on nature and resurrected memories of her boys.

The death of a child reconfigures one's basic appreciation of time and space, according to Kathleen Higgins (2021). Disconnected from the "flow of socially acknowledged time", space is a sphere of frustrated efforts to situate the lost child, with areas "unpredictably drenched in affect". This is important to my study of Deraniyagala's narrative methods because, as Higgins argues, "aesthetic practices" ease the transition towards restoration of normalcy after loss by recovering one's bearings in "intersubjective

spatiotemporality" (Higgins 54). Deraniyagala's methods to hesitantly uncurl her grief through arrested moments of beautiful imagery that "linger" in the light serve this purpose.

Despite the painful absence of her children, Deraniyagala's methodical and detailed descriptions transform into flowing and lyrical prose, providing solace akin to a "painkiller" (Wave 37). David James traces how *Wave's* descriptions evolve from "spare, shard-like glimpses" through "clipped, declarative syntax" – as we have already seen at the exposition where narrative methods reflect the horror and suicidal darkness of Deraniyagala's post-wave aftermath – to "incrementally prolonged, lusciously recounted moments of everyday family life before the wave shattered Deraniyagala's world, thus releasing the narrative from sadness" (James 3). The mental effect of the process is reinforced by the register and syntax of the telling, which James suggests mimics an "unclenching" over time, as Deraniyagala pieces together her world. Lyrical moments, such as a "cautious, granular appreciation of a frosty garden at dawn both acknowledges and audits the scene's percolating solace" (3), suggest the powerful affective quality of Deraniyagala's methods. It is "the uplift accompanying such observations, that synchronise *Wave*'s style with Deraniyagala's discovery that recollections, though periodically torturous, keep her "buoyant" with the details they recover (3). Moreover, by finding a vocabulary to communicate emotions that are "fierce and poignant, macabre and mundane" (3), Deraniyagala depicts the violence of grief that refuses to condone sorrow as ineffable. Deraniyagala's reconciliation of her *before* self and *after* self is re-dramatised within the pages of the memoir and the act of writing itself. Through the process of gathering details from the past to write about, she can reconstruct herself (5) and heal from trauma by resurrecting unclaimed memories of the time before the tsunami.

Furthermore, the time and language lost to the stalling effect of trauma is recoverable ultimately. Deraniyagala's memoir illustrates the sustaining power of memories, as well as the role of writing itself in negotiating a path through trauma. Memories of earlier life sustain Deraniyagala as she eventually rejects a life in limbo, no longer "loitering on the outskirts" of the past (*Wave* 103). Writing allows Deraniyagala to keep her loved ones near and bring them to life affectively. By fostering her own recovery through the trauma to find some sort of conclusion, she learns that "I can only recover myself when I keep them near.

If I distance myself from them, and their absence, I am fractured" (207–208) – hence illustrating grief as an enduring relationship, rather than a letting go of the deceased.

The detailed descriptions of nature that unfold throughout the memoir work to structurally suspend and withstand the "prevailing motion of events" (James 40). While Deraniyagala compresses and misshapes the "impossible truth" of her loss (*Wave* 186), the intimate descriptions she immerses her readers in allow her to rest in disbelief about what happened. Through this enfolding of time, which holds critical significance, *Wave* challenges assumptions about the expressive meaning of solace in writing that deals with seemingly inexpressible catastrophes. In countering critics who would suggest that the rhetorical and vivid imagery in memoir writing works as a distraction or "aestheticizing antidote" from the pain of loss, James argues that Deraniyagala detaches consolation from "distraction, appeasement, and soothing repair" (40). She embraces description and acknowledges the incompletion of consolation, enabling a genuine exploration of the truth of grief and its disruptions.

This transition through moments lingering in nature as a reprieve from disbelief and trauma, however, has been foreshadowed from the very start but will become more profound as Deraniyagala describes the aftermath of the tsunami. For example, after an unspecified time, although still in the fast-moving water, Deraniyagala, is "floating" on her back (10) and a refrain from the confused intensity is rested for a moment is presented. For the first time Deraniyagala uses the repeated refrain of nature imagery, which will come to represent hope and solace within the memoir. Captured in lyrical imagery, a flock of flying storks, "painted" and beautiful, lifted her "out of the mad water", albeit for a moment. This familiar scene, one she had shared with her son Vik, is linked with survival and hope as we learn when in the moment Deraniyagala reflects, "I can't let myself die here in whatever this is. My Boys" (10). It will be scenes such is this that materialise later in the text that will come to represent the healing of her fractured psyche and take her out of the horror of trauma into a place of increasing calmness.

Enduring – Intertwined Worlds: Presence in Absence

For the greater part of the memoir, Deraniyagala rejects entangled temporalities, seeking oblivion rather than connection, but towards the end of her memoir, a duality of time is recognised. Arrested time is illustrated as a solace in which to seek refuge from the enormity of loss by keeping memories distant and "misty" (115). However, by alluding to her relationship with her boys Deraniyagala encounters a new kind of relationship with time, one that connotes a new "[e]ntangle[ment]" (115) with her boys in a time where there is "presence in absence" (Fuchs 44). In a phenomenological sense, "trespassing" (115) is a metaphor for mothering. This figure suggests that Deraniyagala expects to continue with that role in the present, something that in linear time is only possible if the bond between mother and child continues. Likewise, the pain of trauma and loss felt will never entirely dissipate either.

Corresponding with this observation, Grace Cowtan theorises that in grief literature, time is considered as relational, and it is through this relationality that arrested time is established. Because the grieving had "formed and sustained" a relationship with the absent other, it continues to be shared after their death, allowing for the temporalities of presence and absence to intertwine (209–210). Deraniyagala utilises a structure of the denial of memories to stall the inevitable truth that her children have died by repeatedly enfolding past and present in timelessness, thus suspending time as a reaction to grief's affective reality. But the repeated refrain, "there is a difference now" (132), illustrates a revised attitude towards remembering by the end of the memoir. Now actively able to retrieve memories of her past life, she is no longer fractured. Essentially, she can balance past and present, though she also understands that "if I distance myself from them; and their absence, I am fractured. I am left feeling I've blundered into a stranger's life" (208).

Regarding the completing of a memorial project like writing a memoir, Fuchs observes that, "only now the past has really become past, and the dead have really died – which is precisely the condition of a new, symbolic form of their presence" (Fuchs 59). In *Wave*, that form is that they will always be present. Deraniyagala writes in the final pages of the memoir:

> Seven years on, and their absence has expanded. Just as our life would have in this time, it has swelled. So this is a new sadness, I think. For I want them as they would be now. I want them to be in our life" (207).

Thus, recovery is seen in a different sense to the normative aim of recovery. It is "rediscovery" and "balance", "not disappeared or faded away", because feelings of yearning for family and loss of self remain. Shock and disbelief have gone during the writing; she has "rediscovered" her family and experiences (Jakoby 93), arriving at a "new sadness" which she describes as "distilled" grief. As we have seen, in *Wave* the maternal love Deraniyagala feels for her boys is often associated with nature. It is possible we can theorise that it is natural to be conjoined with one's child after death in an enduring, timeless relationship.

Conclusion

Sven Birkerts (2008) suggests that the "pain and psychological injury, when raised to the level of trauma, create discontinuities in a life that often require different strategies of presentation" (Birkerts 145). Critically important, grief works like *Wave* are significant because they present feelings that seem indescribable, creating new possibilities for innovative expression in the field. Deraniyagala's work defies what may seemingly appear the inexpressible emotions of maternal grief. By extending the "analytical literacies for approaching affective description" (James 5), Deraniyagala, like Riley, Didion and other contemporary writers, can represent intense emotional or affecting worlds that were previously thought to resist representation. Thus, she contributes to the fraught task of rendering emotional and physical devastations into legibility. With regards to chronology, Deraniyagala looks backwards, not forwards, as she continues ties with her boys on into the present – a clear consensus of how one should openly talk about grief and how it should, or should not, be framed (Jakoby 100).

Chapter Three

Spoken into Reality: Yiyun Li's *Where Reasons End*

A parent should never be a child's biographer.

Li, *Where Reasons End* (109)

Hauntingly, tragically sad, and elusive, Yiyun Li's novel *Where Reasons End* explores the themes of motherhood, grief, and consolation. It is structured as an imagined and enduring conversation between a lone mother and her dead son, Nikolai, who chose to end his life at the age of sixteen. It blends memory and imagination, fiction, and reality, in an endeavour to find a recipe that attends to unanswerable questions in the face of death and some measure of solace and healing. At its core, it is a meditation on the bond between a mother and her child, and the profound grief that arises from the rupture of that bond. Li invites readers on an exploration of the complex and enduring relationships between mothers and children, and of the ways in which we grapple with loss in the face of profound tragedy through its representation of disrupted time and its imaginary setting, freed from the bonds of time and space. In essence, Li's novel is an extended conversation in the mind of a grieving mother with her departed child – something that many grieving parents experience. For the purposes of fiction, it makes no difference whether the conversation is imagined or actually held; it still "takes place". However, contemporary culture tends to pathologise such experiences. Li's novel engages in haunting, a phenomenon established in grief narratives such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, where the haunting presence of Sethe's dead child, Beloved, embodies the unresolved guilt, grief, and trauma she carries with her. These stories depict the struggles to find solace after profound loss, shedding light on the complexities of grief while highlighting its inadequacies and capacities.

There are two characters in *Where Reasons End*: the unnamed mother protagonist, and her son Nikolai; not the boy's real name, but "a name he had given himself" (6). It quickly becomes evident that Nikolai chose to end his own life shortly before the novel begins, and that the invented world, "made up by words" (9), where the mother, a writer, imagines their conversations, is a method of connection with her lost son. Missing her son immensely, she contemplates the nature of grief after such a tragic

bereavement during episodes of daydreaming, triggered by memories or referents of place. In an endeavour to seek solace from the numbing pain, she imagines an extended conversation with him as she speculates on the shortcomings of the language and consolatory traditions of grief and Nikolai's demise. This is her experiment to see whether their encounters will lessen the numbing pain, for possibly even believing that, "in the direst situation there is a bright side if we let words like love and hope work their magic" (101). Rather than anger or blame, this mother shows compassion and empathy towards Nikolai's choice to end his life. However, she does worry about parenting mistakes and missteps, and her failure at having not seen her son's pain. This element of regret is a recognised trait of parental grief. The pair affectionately debate grammar, grief, perfectionism, memory, and time. Their exchanges do not build into anything conclusive but swirl around, avoiding the overwhelming emotion of loss bubbling under the surface from the mother. Thus, their conversation can be understood as a stop bank to hold back the flood of grief.

Li constructs a tension in *Where Reasons End* between chronological time and the subjective perception of time's passage. Structurally, *Where Reasons End* is divided into sixteen chapters, one for each year of Nikolai's life. It begins in the seven weeks after Nikolai's death, as the season turns to autumn. Chronologically, the story winds its way through Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year, ending ambiguously around January tenth. However, the imaginary conversation -- the 'present' conversation -- between mother and son takes places in ekstasis from time and space. Through the temporality of the changing seasons, the narrative shows the inexorable passage of chronological time, while also inhabiting time as a repetitive cycle. This apprehension is disruptive of time, which is manifested as fluid, yet still, circular, fragmented, and interwoven. Despite this complexity and elusiveness, there are observable patterns in the way time is structured within the narrative. Some chapters are linked to specific moments, such as driving past the street where the mother last remembers her son alive, or preparing for celebratory events, serving as triggers for the mother's grief and her recognition of the inevitability of the passing of time.

The protagonist's daydreaming, most often an imagined conversation with her deceased son, reflects a cadence that aligns with current grief psychology patterns of adaption and endurance. The first

three chapters read like an exposition, where readers are introduced to the narrator's unique experience of losing a child "to an inexplicable tragedy" (5). As she wonders about and attempts to define the parameters of the illusory world, she now finds herself 'in' with her son after his death. This phase of narration represents a mix of disbelief and recognition, defining her profound loss. Chapters 4 and 5 frame the 'rules' of her daydreaming, acknowledging that consolation and traditional grieving approaches do not adequately offer relief. For the mother, the only conceivable way to house her grief, which does not seem to fit the mould of traditional loss, is through the imagined conversation with her son, thus justifying the creation of this made-up world. Chapters 6 to 8 concern a mix of reactions from the protagonist that illustrate the rupture instigated by her son's death. The emotions of sadness, anger, pain for the irrevocable loss, and parental guilt are portrayed. Although such feelings are revisited throughout the work, starting from Chapter 9, there is a shift in the flow of questioning as she comes to accept that she "will be sad forever" and the possibility that she will heal is "wishful thinking" (89–90).

More than anything, it is the passing of autumn into winter that mirrors and triggers the mother's pain, the realisation that "death if invincible" (78) and Nikolai is not returning to life outside of the imagined banter with him. This new understanding is followed by her search for "facts" through consolation practices to ease her pain, but also to normalise her sense that the "willful" talking with her son in her imagination, is "lunacy" or "insanity" (87). The mother grapples to find a way to live with this acknowledgement, while continually assessing language and consolation traditions that prove inadequate for her specific grief. Chapter 11 marks a change in Li's protagonist which corresponds with the first snow of the new season. Consumed by feelings of hope and fear, the protagonist is torn between holding onto her son and the prospect of letting him go, hoping that things will improve if she eventually does. The final three chapters, from Christmas through to the New Year, depict her changed world as she wonders where the dead go eventually and how to keep their presence alive. The last chapter possibly signals the end of searching for reasons to explain her son's suicide – a time "where reasons end". Yet, *Where Reasons End* closes inconclusively; there are no answers to her questions or remedies for her pain. However, in the vein of Freud's words about his daughter's untimely death, "that's the way it should be. It's the only way to perpetuate a love we don't want to give up" (Freud *Letters* 386).

This section pursues the questions: How does Li's work contribute to contemporary conversations about grief? To what extent do the strategies embraced by Li represent the experience of maternal grief as something estranged from linear models of grief and time, an experience which we have to acknowledge as difficult to describe? And in what ways does Li's novel offer a reinterpretation of grief literature? We can attend to these questions with Nan Da's (2019) suggestion that by writing in fiction, Li creates a lyrical form of memoir that frees the work from termination, allowing for a reinterpretation of grief as enduring, and avoiding societal and institutional rules that have traditionally stifled the voices of grieving mothers (800). Li's sometimes experimental novelistic methods allow *Where Reasons End* to connect with s "something extralinguistic, something real" (McLaughlin 212) that has previously avoided representation. By presenting grief as a virtual site outside of time and space, the time of grief is sensed as an arrested encounter in "timeless ness" (Li, *WRE* 6). Li's fictional dialogue offers an imaginative exploration of "shared ekstasis" – where subjects become removed from the moment they inhabit – and the *fiction* itself, refusing conclusion, becomes a site of consolation or solace (Cowtan 218), and represents an enduring connection with the lost child.

In this chapter, I will analyse debates about the genre of *Where Reasons End,* in the light of similarities between the situation in the novel, and Li's own life experience. I will then move on to consider how Li creates an invisible landscape to house loss, in a reading of the novel's representation of grief as a space that sits outside the bounds of linear time. I examine the structure and function of the 'imaginary' conversation between the narrator and her dead son as a method of consolation by considering how Li's reliance on dialogue and intertextuality engages with current theories of grief practices. The chapter concludes with a reading of Li's methods to imagine the story as "never ending" and a consideration of what purposes are served by the lack of resolution. Ultimately, Li's distinctive fictional style and voice distort temporality to represent the profound loss of a child and the enduring nature of grief, setting it apart from the memoirists and contributing to a reimagining of grief literature by emphasising the comfort derived from keeping the memory of the departed alive through ongoing conversation.

Many reviewers of *Where Reasons End* identify tensions between biographical truth and storytelling, speculating that it is more 'autobiographical' than Li acknowledges, and seek a term to categorise its genre. Although published as fiction – marked clearly by the subtitle, "A Novel" – some of the central elements of characterisation and narration carry strong echoes of Li's own life experience. Consequently, the term 'autofiction' has been associated with the novel. Born in China, Yiyun Li now resides in the United States and writes in English, winning the PEN/Jean Stein Book Award for *Where Reasons End.* In 2017, Li published her memoir, *Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life*, an account of her breakdown and two suicide attempts. Not long after its publication, the elder of Li's two sons, Vincent Kean, died by his own hand.

The term autofiction is broadly equated with the designation of texts as having "something to do with the self and with fiction" (Lawlor and Effe 1). However, there is much debate about the application of the term autofiction as a genre, given its association with an expanding range of meanings and practices that can contradict this simple etymological assertion. The elements that characterise autofiction identified by Effe and Lawlor include "a combination of real and invented elements; onomastic correspondence between author and character or narrator; and stylistic and linguistic experimentation", although they also warn that none are "unique or defining" of the genre (1). These elements could certainly be identified in *Where Reasons End* if we disregard Li's representation that her work is fictional. Indeed, the narrating mother (also a writer) reveals to her son Nikolai, "I was almost you once, […] and that's why I have allowed myself to make up this world to talk with you" (*WRE* 9), maybe alluding to Li's own suicide attempts. To embellish this point further, Effe and Lawlor also refer to the concept of a "double pact", the "oscillation between" or combination of autobiographical and fictional modes of reading that further complicates an understanding of autofiction. Li's work is an interesting example in this debate because for readers to buy into the "double pact", they would need to disregard Li's insistence on its fictionality.

Reviewers have taken subtly different approaches to the designation of *Where Reasons End.* Rachel Cusk (2019) makes the case that *Where Reasons End* is an autofictional work. In her examination of the merger of fictional and non-fictional elements in Li's novel, she suggests that the publisher's

description of the book as a novel is a strategy that "has become a norm of autofiction" (np). Cusk suggests that Li's work cannot be understood without its "autobiographical basis" (np) and is perplexed by the publisher's choice to market *Where Reasons End*, which Li openly states is related to events in her own life, as fiction when she "has adamantly defined her fiction as the product of pure invention" (np). Emily Bobrow (2019) takes a more nuanced approach, finding middle ground between fiction and autofiction to categorise the amalgamation of truth and fiction in Li's work. She surmises that Li "turns a tragic personal loss into a profoundly intimate work of fiction" (1). Bobrow celebrates the sense that in the novel form, Li is liberated to include emotional content that she might otherwise avoid if she were writing as a memoirist. Bobrow also observes that Li's earlier non-fiction works exude a remoteness and abstraction caused by Li's proclaimed aversion to "drawing attention to herself" (1) in the first person, which Li explains in her memoir as "melodramatic" (Li qtd. in Bobrow 1). Like others, Bobrow implies that marketing plays a part in Li's and her publisher's "discreet[ness] about the book's inspiration, to better reinforce that [it] is indeed a novel", citing its dedication to Li's own son as to its truthfulness (1). With regards to genre, Bobrow declares that through fiction, Li has avoided sentimental tropes typical of suicide stories evoked when protagonists "go hunting for excuses and justifications […] that can explain what went wrong" (2). While it is possible that the decision to categorise *Where Reasons End* as fiction was based in a marketing decision to shelter Li from visibility, Bobrow suggests that readers of works designated as fiction are freed from the "gloomy interiority" that "memoirs often demand […] from their readers: absolution for flaws, sympathy for travails, admiration for triumphs" (2). Li's experimentation with grief writing traditions, Bobrow claims, transforms "life" into "art" (2), a dilemma further highlighted by C. Thomas Courser's discussion in the book *Memoir: An Introduction* (2015). Courser proposes that memoir has evolved into a form of "literary art", incorporating invented or enhanced material, and often using novelistic techniques. They thus generate an uneasy relation between their artfulness and their presumed factuality, which Courser terms "artifactuality" (16).

Li's book has also attracted attention because some critics say its fictionality acts as a shielding device from Li's solace. Child suicide, which is sometimes considered taboo, is understood as a problematic topic to engage with in both academic and creative contexts. Li's novel engages with

questions of suicide such as: what are grief's specific effects and how does one register the challenges experienced when someone dies of suicide? Child psychotherapist Maria Papadima acknowledges the dilemma of articulating profound loss and praises the role played by novelists such as Li in articulating difficult emotions. Although Papadima treats the novel as a retelling of Li's own story, her analysis of how Li recreates a conversation between a mother and son to overcome the fact that she cannot connect with him through "flesh and blood" (Li, *WRE* 64) is important because it affirms novelistic methods to tell of grief. While conceding that youth suicide can never be fully prevented or understood, Papadima proposes that Li's novel, through its articulation of "*particular* loss" (Papadima 102), provides some acknowledgement for therapists or their clients of these frustrations through its storytelling. Fictional accounts of grief such as Li's are legitimate methods of making meaning from loss, and thus play a role in grief therapy. In an interview, author Valeria Luiselli points out that, "fiction has a role in the way we reckon, the way we understand and approach the world" (qtd. in Papadima 101) confirming Papadima's position. The social constraints of memoir are possibly avoided when written into fiction, unexpectedly rendering the articulation of the complex emotions associated with *particular* grief experiences such as Li's, more truthful and accessible for those interested in the effects of loss.

My preferred reading of *Where Reasons End* is to honour Li's intentions and understand it as a novel. Though the novel may well be mimetic of life, it is a *created* expression of a mother's grief encounter, *not* a non-fictional representation of actual experience. I am influenced in this approach by Cowtan, who reads the narrator's loss of her son as "only *representative* of Li's personal loss" (Cowtan 217–218). In her discussion of "transpersonal a-temporality" in *Where Reasons End,* Cowtan identifies the quandary of defining Li's genre and proposes that, rather than engaging with grief through the facticity of memoir writing, Li relocates autobiographical loss within the fictional genre of novel and asserts its fictionality. To signal a degree of distance from Li, I will refer to the mother character as 'narrator' or 'protagonist', distancing this character from Li. Furthermore, for my particular interest in this specific experience of maternal grieving, it is not necessary nor helpful to pin the events, words and feelings expressed in the text to Li's own personal situation. In my view, the "artifactuality" of Li's novel has been mistakenly identified by some as reality, as a seamless *re*-presenting of the truth. For example, literary

critic Terry Hong, known for her focus on Asian-American writers, interprets Li's novel in psychological terms, suggesting that the fictionalised relationship in the book represents a wish for the protagonist's son to be alive. The “impossible conversations” that Li writes of through her grief, Hong explains, are Li’s “salvation”, a defying of the loss of her son’s memory as she brings him back to life (70). By contrast, it is my belief (and hope) that Li’s decision to write into fiction the grief experience of a mother dealing with a child’s death by suicide purposefully liberates maternal mourning, debilitating assumptions and judgements, whether they stem from conventions of grief memoir, and judgements in memoir, social attitudes, or institutional psychology.

An Invisible Landscape

In stark contrast to the very precise settings of *Blue Nights* and *Wave, Where Reasons End* is almost completely devoid of physical or geographical markers. Li also deprives readers of a sense of the characters’ physical traits. The novel is thus a surprising and sometimes “befuddling” (29) work to encounter, perhaps much like the rupture wrought by the loss of a loved one. The novel’s setting is ambiguous, presented as both tangible and incorporeal. Immediately at the novel’s exposition, the narrating mother is “surprised” and happy to hear from her son Nikolai who calls her “Mother dear” (3). Likewise, Li’s readers are surprised by the way the boy just *appears* from nowhere, without context or description. With no physical location to grasp onto, the narrator’s comment that “all” she can do is hold on to her “attentiveness” of his presence “now” (19), shows that the hold she has on him is a realm that exists purely by sensing him in her thoughts. The narrating mother acknowledges that her son is actually “*Nowhere*” (6) because he is dead, but she is “making up stories to talk with Nikolai” because “where else can we meet but in stories now?” (56). Stories are, at least, a “step towards somewhere” (11).

As alluded to in the conversation the mother invents, defining grief has proven to be a challenging task as it encompasses not only a temporal dimension, but also a spatial one. Of particular significance in the examination of spatiality in Li’s work is environmental historian and scholar Kent Ryden’s concept “invisible landscape”, which essentially expands the definition of a geographical map to include what is *not* seen in a physical landscape. Maps, he suggests, fall short of being able to capture

"important intangibles of place: meaning, essence, and character" (Ryden 37). Ryden proposes that stories, the imaginative words that tell us about the heart of a place, create this "invisible landscape" (52). His premise is that there are two distinct geographical terms: "Modern 'space' [which] is universal and abstract", and 'place' [which] is concrete and particular" (37). Similarly, in *Where Reasons End,* the narrator finds the socially conventional grief "roadmap" insufficient to way-find through grief work. She frees herself from the emotion-laden *places* that are attached to the tangibles that remind her of Nikolai in favour of an abstract *space* to "meet" Nikolai in "omniscience" (*WRE* 12–13).

The narrator specifically rejects the concept of the place in/after death as given within the conventions of both Buddhist and Christian religions. We see this concern playing out on the forty-ninth day after the death of Nikolai, where Buddhist understandings dictate that the soul of the dead leaves this world for its next life. The narrator seeks solace for her feelings of sadness and apprehension she will forget Nikolai and lose him forever. Though sceptical, she wonders whether Christian and Buddhist traditions of "other worlds", or an afterlife, inhabited by the dead, who keep "their senses with an intensity that no living body could achieve" (51), are real. However, the son's words, "whether I'm here or anywhere is not decided by some tradition you don't even believe in" (50), confirm the insufficiencies of religion to address her grief. By denying religious traditions about the hereafter, the mother reveals that the only connection and communication with Nikolai is via the virtual site created by her fiction, illuminating the inadequacies, but also the capabilities, of bereavement.

Instead of envisaging a religious hereafter, the invisible world shared by mother and son is defined as "aftertime", the title of Chapter 13 (129). The dialogue becomes a 'living space' of temporal exteriority for the imagined pair. Li's narrator seeks not only companionship with her son Nikolai, but also wishes to gain a sense of control and order from the chaos experienced in her grief by setting some ground rules for this new territory, as a way of "knowing and remembering him now" that he is no longer living (39). Such rules include how to use language to define their respective locations in space. The narrator acknowledges "confusion" about what tense to use to speak to Nikolai: "Yet what makes *was* different from *is*, *has been* from *will be*? Timeless is this world we are making, tenseless is its language" (12). The present tense narrative created by "is" and "making", sits in contrast to the past tense "was"

and “met”, a mix of tenses that creates the acknowledgement by Li that this world is outside the bounds of linear progression of time. Without differentiation between “tenses”, the idea that a mother’s relationship with the loved one is eternal in the virtual interpersonal zone, is reinforced. Recognising that in her world she cannot be happy, like the Larkin poem she knows suggests:

> What are days for?
>
> Days are where we live.
>
> They come, they wake us.
>
> Time and time over.
>
> They are to be happy in.
>
> Where can we live but days?[15]
>
> (WRE 18–19)

Nikolai reminds her that, “days are not the only place where we live” (19), alluding to the malleability of time and even the writer’s imagination.

Nikolai’s “location” in “aftertime” is equally elusive. He tries to hide, slips away, and comes back again. This is evident in the chapter “The Trespassers” (20) when the conversation turns to an attempt to define the parameters of their union in a space which they shape together, highlighted by the narrator’s explanation that it is “not dreaming, not hallucinating, not running away together, not running away separately, but running into each other constantly. Finding a way to be when it is difficult and impossible to" (25–26). However, when Nikolai suggests that their encounter is an “inhumanly possible” space, not intended for the living, he deems their union as fantasy. Although the mother carries her son with her in “love and memory” (29), it is not enough for her personal circumstances. So, she goes to the “extreme” to keep him “alive”, intruding into Nikolai’s mind by imagining him as still present. She imagines that “in a moment of haziness […] there was no reason that the tree lined street” on which she last waited for him, “would not bring Nikolai back again as unhurried as a grey heron” (28). The significance of Li’s allusion is clear. It would indeed be ‘good luck’ or ‘good fortune’ if Nikolai came back to life, and his return would

[15] I find it interesting that Li chose to omit the final lines of Larkin’s poem “Days” which reads, “Ah, solving that question / Brings the priest and the doctor / In their long coats / Running over the fields” (Larkin, 17). “Ah,” which begins the second stanza, perhaps suggests that the only way out of the *days* in which we live, is through death (last rites of the “priest”, or alleviation of suffering by the “doctor” or psychiatrists in “long coats”. I wonder whether Li omitted this stanza purposefully to reinforce the endless conversation between the fictitious mother and her dead son, as the end of the poem connotes the inevitability of death, which the mother avoids.

herald 'peace' from the turmoil brought about by Nikolai's death. [16] Through their imagined conversation, she conjures him back, thus violating the rules of temporality (and the laws of physics). Her invasion of the metaphysical is described by Nikolai as "trespassing" (29), a term Deraniyagala also uses. Nikolai suggests that the time of grief "should remain private only for those who are no longer in our world" (27). Thus, the narrator breaks "common fact" that he is gone. Ultimately, the conversation revolves around the premise that she should "STAY OUT" of the part of her mind where memories of Nikolai are housed (30). However, despite her son's protests, the chapter ends with the confession that she has "acquitted" herself of being a trespasser in her own mind, for "to love is to trespass" (30). Here again, Li alludes to the permeability of time and the transcorporeal relationship between mother and child. The pair's life together in ekstasis is separate from the mother's material life outside their conversation, and it endures because it represents the rejection of things based on memory. Li illustrates that materiality is painful through the narrator who avoids "concrete and particular" (57) things associated with Nikolai. If, as Ryden suggests, fiction can be considered like a map, "an approximation and distillation of real life" (Ryden 49), then perhaps there is more truth to the narrator's acknowledgement that her "made up" storytelling is "sometimes […] realer than the real", despite Nikolai arguing that "the dictionary would disagree" because "what you make up is always unreality […] relating to nothings" (*WRE* 35). The mother's fiction therefore reaches beyond the particular objects and places that signify loss and trigger anguish, into something universal and eternal for herself and the future readers of her book (if it is ever finished). The whole point of her "stories" (35) is to free herself from the "*res"*, the facts, and "things" from her past life that "ambush" (92) and threaten to pull her into insanity. The landscape the narrator creates is her method to "articulate something of the ineffable" of the rupture caused by the death of her child that is "non-or more-than-representational" (Maddrell 169). The invisible landscape is also her method of avoiding the "embodied emotions" that Maddrell suggests are connected to specific sites and contexts which trigger in place but are perhaps "ameliorated" in space (169).

[16] In North American culture, the symbolism of the Heron includes good luck and prosperity, particularly for the tribes of the West Coast of the U.S. because they are associated with bountiful fishing. Generally, where there are herons, local hunters can find fish (https://www.uniguide.com/heron-meaning-symbolism). In addition, for the Cherokee and other tribes, the heron symbolises harmony and peace. Li's Chinese heritage perhaps is connoted here as in China, herons are also a symbol of good fortune because "heron" (lu) and "good fortune" (lu) are pronounced the same (https://philamuseum.org).

The keeping of mementos as a method of solace is a specific point of the narrator's scepticism in the material expression of grief. For instance, she feels uneasy about keeping a "memory book" (72), similar to the way that Joan Didion criticises the coveting of mementos of the dead in *Blue Nights*. The narrator fears that time will rob her of memories of her son as she confesses to Nikolai that they are "starting a memory book", despite being sceptical about its usefulness. She agrees with Nikolai that, "everything in life fades or gets erased" (74). Although humans are "driven by the desire to fight against our fadeable and erasable fate" (75) by keeping mementos, she finds in her own experience it is not helpful. In the "The Perfect Enemy", the family moves to a new house without Nikolai. The narrator initially believes that holding onto things of Nikolai's such as his *Tintin* or *Peanuts* books (70,) will provide solace. However, she comes to realise that possessions will not fill the "void" left by his death (72). She distinguishes "emptiness" from "unclutteredness", realising that sentimental mementos will not alleviate the pain of overwhelming loss. Instead of relying on material things, the narrator finds comfort in "willfully sustaining" her connection with Nikolai through "mere words" (45). By engaging in conversations with him, she can alleviate the aching "hollowed-out heart" (71). Although she admits that sometimes their discussion is banal and just a "way to delude herself" (71), she cherishes these interactions. So, while in death Nikolai does not get a "minute older" (154), in their conversation, she contends, "time stands still … for us" (71).

Lewis Carroll's *Alice* stories, which Li alludes to from Chapter 1 when Nikolai, "a runaway bunny", first appears from "hiding" (4), provide an intertextual frame which parallels the a-temporal housing of the mother's grief. It also highlights the elusive or fantastical nature of the connection the mother has with her son. Li's mother is caught grieving in a 'new' timeless space, while Alice is trapped down the elusive 'rabbit hole' where she literally does not fit. *Alice* reminds readers that the mother's conversation is a figment of her imagination. Like Li's fiction within a fiction, which is framed as an imagined daydream conversation in "nowhere ness?" (6), we can consider Alice's journey in Wonderland as a dream. Carroll's story is book-ended by dreamlike states. Alice feels "sleepy and stupid" just before she follows the White Rabbit and falls "down what feels like a very deep well" at the beginning (Carroll 2–3), and the story ends with Alice waking from a "curious dream!" (189). Similar to Carroll's protagonist, Li's narrator engages in a

dreamlike conversation with herself, and the plot winds around riddles, arguments, and paradoxes, characterising the protagonist as without control and in uncharted territory. Furthermore, both authors highlight the disruptions to time by inventing their own narratives. Li's intertext draws awareness to the parallel between the grieving narrator's writing of a book to deal with her grief, and Alice's imagining of the book she will write herself into, to escape the impossible situation of being stuck in the White Rabbit's house. Alice thinks that writing herself into a story may offer the "comfort" of never getting "any older" although realises that the downside of this "trick of time" would be she would "always to have lessons to learn" (Carroll 44). What is interesting about Alice's conversation is that it is with herself. She ponders, questions, and answers herself as if two people, drawing attention to the fact that Li's narrator is also effectively having a conversation with herself. Alice's judgemental answer, "Foolish Alice!" (47) to herself about becoming ageless, mirrors Nikolai's response, "That's silly", (51) to his mother's question, "what if when I speak tomorrow, nobody replies?" striking a chord that mother and son are one in this argument. Framing her fiction transparently through a fabled children's story like *Alice* perhaps provides a shield for Li to examine her own unanswered questions about suicide and death and deems tellable a story about unacknowledgeable grief. However, the structure of Li's setting is as intangible as Carroll's fantastical and surreal world "down the rabbit hole". Recognising the absurdity of their situations, neither *Alice* nor the mother can clearly articulate their predicaments. The narrator's story, like Carroll's satire of social customs in *Alice,* is reduced to an absurdity (Matthews 115–116), challenging grief customs that are insufficient for the narrator's needs. Just as Victorian etiquette is revealed as arbitrary in Alice's exchange with the Caterpillar, the narrator acknowledges that her own consolation methods, like the social norms she questions, may also be judged as absurd, for "the world might think [she] was becoming unhinged" (*WRE* 5). But at the same time, there is an acknowledgement that even seemingly impossible words "sometimes" offer comfort, such as the Caterpillar's words to Alice from atop the mushroom that, "*Its wrong from beginning to end",* or from the Red Queen to Alice, *"It takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place"* (95).

Remaking a life in words

The invisible landscape which the pair share is interpersonal and constructed solely from speech. Through the characters' playful chitchat, readers learn that the setting for this interaction is a figment of the narrator's imagination, like a ghost whose presence is felt but not seen. In Chapter 7, the narrator says: "We once gave Nikolai a life of flesh and blood; and I'm doing it over again, this time in words", even though she admits that the recreation of Nikolai's life in words is her greatest single "delusion" (62, 64). Towards the middle of the novel in the chapter, "Catchers in the Rain", it is made clear that this realm is constructed elusively from speech. Nostalgically longing to restore her past relationship with her son, the mother asks Nikolai, "what, my child, can I catch now, when all has become invisible?" He replies, "words, mother dear […] we will be catching each other's words, don't you see?" (48). There is no context or setting for this discussion other than the reader's recognition that the mother speaks for both characters. Present only in thought and unable to read physical or sound cues that would normally connote emotions, we learn of the limitations of this space which denies sentimentality. For example, when the mother broached the subject that they had moved into a new house, which "Nikolai had fallen in love with" she "couldn't tell if he was annoyed or bored or sad or angry" (44–45). In moments when Nikolai ceases his chatter, the narrator acknowledges that their exchange is only "sustained" by words, "floating, gravity-less, missing one another or, words, clashing without warning" (45). In this world void of sights, she is not even able to see if "he shed tears", for they "would be like weather to him, intelligible because they were concrete memories" (45), denied in their shared liminal world. Dissimilar to sentimental feelings and mementos that do not help to alleviate grief, the world of words the narrator has created will outlast the physical sensory body. Unlike the images and sounds which she worries will inevitability decay and fade, words are enduring. In this way, by framing her novel in an imaginative dialogic of ekstasis, where time is done away with altogether, Li allows the grieving mother to find some solace.

Despite acknowledging the inadequacy of words of solace, the mother improvises and relies on them because they are the only means available to keep her son present. Li's imaginary context within the fictional world of language can be considered a *personal* mode to locate some sense of solace, an

alternative method of condolence writing consistent with Matthew Ratcliffe's 2023 *Grief Worlds*. The narrator explains:

> Imagine writing a letter of condolence, I said, like this: I know my words are not enough to express my devastation at your loss and my words will not do much to alleviate your pain, but these words are all I have. […] These words are all I have and we must make do with them, believing, both you and I, in the largesse of even such paucity. (100)

This imagined world of "words" is seen as a compromise; in/by describing the fictional world as "pauc[e]" (100), the narrator illustrates that it is insufficient to fully contain the grief she carries. The narrating mother demonstrates her power to control the grief encounter because "time points only in one direction", whereas "a mind goes in many directions" (169–70). The suggestion that one's imagination can alter time, or in the narrator's case, refuse it altogether, reinforces the fictional mode of the conversation. The words they use to construct their space are slippery and sometimes fail to accurately capture the mother's grief experience. For instance, in the conversation about condolence letters, the narrator is "ambushed" by something unnamed on her journey to work, which triggers "tears" (92). Nikolai suggests she should "dispose" of the unnamed emotion because it is just a mere "possession", but she protests that "life is not a disposable thing" (94). She candidly admits that vocabulary such as "loss, grief, sorrow, bereavement, trauma" cannot "precisely" speak of what plagues her (93), for the "dictionary is limited" (94). Unable to name her disposition, she is not likely to be able to get rid of it either. In their timeless world, "unfettered" from the burden of holding onto her pain, or letting Nikolai go "forever" (21), the mother endeavours to work out the "rules" using a language that is also free from accepted grief conventions. She acknowledges that the tangible metaphors of consolation such as "wound" or "healing and scars" are inadequate to describe her feelings of loss, which are "fatally inconclusive?" (33). Such metaphors will not "heal" her inconsolable pain, and nor does she "wish" to close the gap and move on without him; she is inconsolable. Instead, she imagines the conversation she is having with Nikolai as "unfinished" (34), emphasising the endurability of her grief experience.

The narrating mother's desire for the other's voice is an unusual instance of the literary technique of apostrophe. Lauren Berlant determines that narrative can create a conscious moment of animation where the subject suspends themselves in the optimistic potential occupation of time and

space with the object of desire (34). Through the rhetorical mode of apostrophe, which Berlant explains enables a subject extraordinary observational power to create an imaginary performance of intersubjectivity, making possible their closeness to the object (34), we can further see how Li creates a plural liminal space for mother to cohabit with her lost son. In this discussion, I am influenced by Barbara Johnson's article, "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion" (1986), which investigates the political rhetoric of abortion. Johnson offers a reading of the poem "The Mother" by Gwendolyn Brooks that can help to enlighten the effect of apostrophe in *Where Reasons End*. Johnson's hypothesis concerns foetal personhood, which fits within the parameters of my study, as prenatal loss can be included in a definition of maternal grief writing. Johnson summarises that as long as the poem's speaker addresses the lost child (in Brooks' case, the aborted foetus) directly, they can avoid the emotions associated with the end of life. Apostrophe is the direct address, or the giving of life to an absent, dead, or inanimate being by a first-person speaker, usually in lyric poetry (Johnson 29–30). It is effectively realised by Li where the narrating mother imagines "flourishing" with her son in a paradoxical consciousness, thus enlarging the boundaries of proximity they can inhabit (Berlant 35). In apostrophe, the displaced interlocutor, in Li's case, Nikolai, is animated in speech, imagined as present by the writer, and by the narrating 'I', in a conceived present moment of ekstasis. In this sense, the interlocutor taking the role of 'you' is only real through the performance that takes place; they are not actually there. Li's dialogue is a "form of ventriloquism" where the speaker gives voice, life, and human form into the addressee, turning its silence into "mute responsiveness" (Johnson 30), which the action of speech marks confirms. The fantasy of their conversation is seen poignantly with the narrator's ironic exclamation, "Stop putting words in my mouth!" (*WRE* 121) in the chapter "Inertia" (reinforced by this chapter being the book's longest), where they discuss feasible reasons for Nikolai dying of suicide.

Language in this zone is both a means of communication and an object of discussion. While only a little of their conversation actually consists of revisiting shared memories, much of their discussion is simply word play, where language itself is the referent. Mother and son share conversation about language (the building blocks of this landscape) and enjoy word games, etymology contests and puns as an excuse to expand time, hanging on together. It occurs to the mother that things, like the autumn

leaves falling on the ground in her physical world, are not visible to Nikolai in her imagination; hence she can make up stories that are no longer attached to tangibles because "seeing is by intuition" (38). Typical of their meeting in semantics, for example, is their play on the word "endear" and its various connotations, which evolves into a conversation about names for those to whom they have close connection. The mother tells Nikolai: "You have to get the name right when you find the person hard to endear" while at the same time thinking, "Endear […] what an odd word. Endear. Endure. En-dear. In-dear" before asking Nikolai, "can you out-dear someone?" (3). Riddles such as this not only indicate the intimacy of the mother and child bond, but also create the texture of their invisible world, even though they are puzzling. Words fail to accurately capture the mother's angst as she wonders whether one can ever lose their connection (neologism "out-dear") with a loved one. Many other words are treated to the same type of etymology contests and semantic scrutiny. Examples include "grieve", "waylay", "nostalgia", "sentimental", "unfollow", and "afterlife", which all, as the book progresses, point to aspects of the mother's wayfinding as she rationalises the process and bodily experience of discovering a route through the time and space of grief.

Li's chapters begin with banter between the pair, concerning matters such as the weather or a visit to a car dealership. These starters slowly build into something more substantial through a discussion of the meanings of words, literature, music, or memory. The conversations address the novel's central concerns that weave their way through the text: Nikolai's life and death by suicide, the nature of life after the loss of a child, and the traditions of consolation that appear ineffective for such a devastating bereavement. For instance, in the chapter "Forever", readers witness their repeated 'battle' of words. When the conversation changes to words, how "a life's story can be told by the simplest of nouns" (81), the mother remembers the first time the family bought "blueberries" (82), triggering memories of Nikolai's subsequent love of them. However, this short-lived story quickly turns back to their debate about nouns and adjectives, rather than as a shared memory worthy of reflection. Consequently, the chapter ends with the comment that "forever" should be included in a dictionary, even though the mother had taken it out, for "all words are indispensable" (90). Their focus on grammar, affirms the power she retains to elongate their conversation, her preferred method of maintaining an enduring

relationship. Readers are only left with the feelings of the characters which they live through; unanchored like these two souls who cannot see or hear one another – somewhere made up or being made up, for there is no tangible voice. The core of Li's work, the to-and-fro of their conversation, is all they have of each other.

Through their imagined situation, Li takes the opportunity to evaluate the sentimentality she finds in consolation literature and remind readers of what grief is. While the mother rarely openly grieves or expresses anger, when she does, Nikolai quickly counters with wit. He challenges her emotions and makes her reflect on herself and her feelings. For instance, he berates his mother for feeling like a "freak", calling it "self-pity unrestrained" (55). Nikolai also criticises the "mathematically" impossible language of 'self-help' books, which he believes cannot assist "a million" different selves because grief is individual (87). They both agree however, that there is no adequate language for the "unspeakable" nature of loss (86), opposing the analogy that self-help literature is "like planting new trees", which offers "universal stakes" for those in mourning (88). Through their imagined dialogue the narrator doubts the effectiveness of consolation methods found in "self-helpy" literature, the narrator questions why she should stay unaffected and present when death has left such an indelible impact (87).

Li's work is in tension with conventional grief literature, which seeks to keep the dead alive through memories that will inevitability fade and get lost, embodying "the quintessential never-lastingness of good old time" (156). Not even "Proust", one of the most celebrated memoirists, can "immortalize" memories that eventually disappear (70). Nikolai's pun on Freudian or stage understandings of mourning, which she sceptically calls "good grief", highlights its ineffectiveness (73–74). Li deliberately engineers the conversation to illustrate the mother's concern that if she works through the process of grief, she will lose her son forever – something she vehemently denies.

Maternal grief in the time of "now and now and now and now"

What is really at stake in Li's novel, I believe, is its representation of eternal maternal love. Lisa Baraitser's concept of temporal suspension as a site of transpersonal experience contributes to the discussion about consciousness of maternal time as plural. By "*not* moving on" the narrating mother

maintains a bond “with the future of another” (Baraitser 92). As the ‘other’ is her dead son, an enduring stasis with him can be imagined, because his future has been terminated. Baraitser’s analysis, although it places emphasis on disruption of maternal time between *living* subjects, can illustrate that transpersonal temporality does *not* conclude on the death of a child, but rather transforms it into a shared a-temporality, a site of love. Time’s plurality can be applied to Li’s novel because the structure and content of their language *is* the abstraction of a double sense of time. The ’Invisible landscape’ is a realm beyond change. Outside of time and space, it exemplifies maternal love and the child's eternal presence in the mother's heart, even after death. By “bridging” the gap between the sadness the mother feels “now”, and the possibility of improvements at a “later” point in time, the mother creates an extended "now and now and now and now" (Li, *WRE* 154).

Grief psychology now widely accepts that after the loss of a loved one, a relationship continues between the living and the dead, and that the ‘process’ of grief is to adapt and discover a new way of living with the dead rather than moving on from the deceased. Cowtan claims that the continued relationship is created by its dialogic narrative form. This form actively denies the linear temporalisation of narrative, which defers the closure that narrative usually assumes. As suggested by David James in *Critical Solace*, this denial of closure serves as “consolation’s own acknowledgement of incompletion” (501). The words of the dialogic exchange function in bringing life to the dead son, but they also link to the heritage of consolation literature for the grief stricken. Instigated by the “crisis” of the death of a loved one, the narrating mother initiates a reimagined “reciprocity” between the living and the dead (Berlant, *Cruel* 52), thus confirming the concept of their enduring relationship. Li’s grief writing enables the dead to exist and evolve alongside the living, “whose consciousness of time they are maintained” (Cowtan 291). In recent grief literature, this psychic creative consciousness is sensed as arrested time, evoking the connection between the living and the dead within Li’s discourse — a maternal sharing of interpersonal time (282–283).

As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the concept of ekstasis is particularly significant to narratives about maternal grief. Joan Didion’s memoir represents a stalling of time, where the grief for the loss of her daughter is housed in imagined moments between night and day. Sonali Deraniyagala’s

grief experience signifies delayed and repetitive time caused by the trauma after losing her family and surviving the tsunami in *Wave.* While these memoirs show that grief cannot be separated from the places where grief is endured, in contrast, Li plunges her readers into an interpretation of how this phenomenon is felt as detached from a site of memory, in a space detached from reality. This concept is probably at the heart of the lively debate in *Where Reasons End* about the efficacy of employing nouns or adjectives in attending to the complex terrain of grief the pair engage. As she grieves, the mother senses she is "detached" from the tangible site of loss, and the "things" (nouns) associated with it such as Nikolai's "tennis racquet" or "sheet music on the stand" (76). To guard against the overwhelming sense of grief she suffers in the real-world time, where the "sentimental" things it holds constantly remind her of life before Nikolai's death and threaten to make her sadness "an eternity" (76), she makes up one freed from it. Sentimentality, akin to the language offered in the self-help books they evaluate, becomes "The Perfect Enemy", for it threatens the mother's sanity and is described by Nikolai in adjectival terms as: "Embarrassing. Humiliating. Mortifying"' (76). Nikolai's query regarding the effect of removing time from sentimentality is offered in yet another word play: "What happens to sentimental when you take time out of it?" His answer to his own question — "You are left with gibberish … time is in the middle of sentimental?" (76) — stresses the significance of temporal considerations about the experience of grief. Stripped of emotional wording, the narrative portrays an overt sense of anguish which is difficult to express; however, the mourning mother can go some way to represent the raw and visceral experience of the rupture of losing Nikolai and the "emptiness"' she endures (72). Her preference for concrete nouns, and his for adjectives, remind readers that the mother is tangible, while Nikolai is speculative.

Maternal grief can be transcribed as a felt experience. Grace Cowtan (2022) contends that the unity between mother and child in suspended time creates a consciousness of time that is closely tied to the body. This consciousness is most pronounced in the mother's body, as it is formed in relation to, and with, the other (272). While recognisable bodily features of the mother remain unarticulated in the novel, readers are party to specific emotional experiences associated with grief, such as the mother feeling characteristically "benumbed" or suffering from "heart aches" (Li, *WRE* 107). However, some of her distress is far more palpable. When the mother admits, "I want yesterday and today and tomorrow, all

with Nikolai in it" (53), she wonders whether with "patience" and the passage of time, her longing and anguish will ease. But noting that the root of the word "patience" is derived from the Latin "*to suffer* or *suffering"*, they explore the etymology of other words that link temporality with pain, such as "nostalgia: *home* plus *pain"* (54). Their study culminates in the recognition that loss hurts and is enduring, which is exemplified by one of the most visceral descriptions in Li's novel, where readers cannot shy from the embodiment of maternal grief:

> How do you compare sadness that takes over like an erupted volcano to sadness that stays inside one, still as a stillborn baby? People talk about grief coming and going like waves, but I am not a breakwater, I am not a boat, I am not a statue left on a rocky shore, tested for its endurance. (56)

The narrator's denial of physical representations of the mother further highlights that the love and longing for her son is enveloped in the body of language itself. If we recognise that the "primary space of mourning is embodied by the mourner" as Maddrell suggests, we can illustrate that the narrator carries her grief "*within"* her body (170) in the stories she makes up to talk to Nikolai. The narrator's grief experience allows for the presence of her dead child in the plural emotional geography crafted by the language of her imagination; she "cannot *not* write" (57l) to keep him close. Before Nikolai died and "reality and unreality were separated like night and day, darkness and lightness", she lived with him, "nearby, his smile and his voice in [her] head". Lost to her, he is only tangible in her dreams, like the one of him "wearing his favourite blue-striped T-shirt". However, by continuing to edit her story of them together, she chooses to dwell with him in "unreality" so she can live with him "over and over again" (139).

In *Where Reasons End,* readers hear the voice of the lost child; indeed, it is integral to the function of the novel. In this regard, Li's work contrasts with the narratives by Didion and Deraniyagala, where the voices of their dead children remain peripheral to the narrative. *Blue Nights* ends with Didion fearing that Quintana will "vanish. Pass into nothingness: the Keats line that frightened her. Fade as the blue nights fade, go as the brightness goes" (188). A bond with her daughter is anticipated in the final line, although the caveat is that this will only eventuate when Didion succumbs to death herself. In *Wave*, having rarely conveyed the voices of her children, Deraniyagala alludes to them near the end where,

seven years after her loss while sitting in the garden in New York, she can "hear them, jubilant, gleeful, on our lawn" (227–228). While she senses that "their absence has expanded", it is clear that they will live on in her memory, now that her time is restored, and she is no longer "cradled by shock" (207). By contrast, the voice of Nikolai is essential to the premise of the plot's union of mother and child after death. Nikolai's voice is heard throughout the novel, and as there is no real resolution, readers anticipate that his voice will be heard by the mother indefinitely.

Conclusion

Where Reasons End is an important reinterpretation of grief literature, illustrating the endlessness of grief and the sense of emptiness that comes with it. Without a solid footing to find meaning or navigate through grief, a sense of spacelessness is created, overcoming the limits of language and the difficulty of articulating the complexities of child suicide. Li's novel rejects the finality of death as the narrator creates an illusion of her son's presence, allowing for a continued relationship with him where he is "there all the time" (57). The non-resolution of grief is Li's articulation of the inability to find meaning or resolution in the face of the tragedy of her son's death and as a means for consoling him, and herself, that he will never be lost to her. *Where Reasons End* affirms that a mother's love for her child is "timeless" and that "forever" can be its "end point" (12). This grief story was never meant to be an "unfold[ing]" (5) of what happened and why with the aim of moving on, because "a mother's job is to enfold, not to unfold" (5). Thus, Li disrupts temporality through the representation of the traumatic rupture of the death of a child, which "exists in a temporality of its own which is not dependent on the laws of time of the real world" (Alber 205).

Ultimately, this is a work of consolation that explores intricate temporal dimensions and reinterprets more conventional modes of grief literature that impart stage models of grief. Through Li's experimental narrative that undoes chronological time, she attends to the "fatally inconclusive" (33) experience of child death, imagining a timeless plural world that provides solace. By distancing the protagonist's speculation about grief from conventional 'grief work' or 'stages,' Li challenges the idea that holding on to lost loved ones is an illness. The immensity of maternal grief resists both language and closure, as the narrator expresses the unspeakable in the only way possible for one who experiences loss

as “a wound that stays open always, always, and forever” (85). As an act of consolation, it supports the notion that grief is enduring, and loss is “a permanent part of our life” (74). Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “Argument”, which appears as an epigraph, frames Li’s denial of conclusion through Bishop’s pleading to argue “endlessly”, denying the “conversation of teleology” (Da 802). Thus, Li actively opposes conventional norms of mourning genres, embracing her personal experience of grief rather than adhering to societal expectations to let go, for “there’s nothing wrong with parents wanting to prolong the childhood of their children” (*WRE* 27).

Finally, the disruptions to time brought about by the rupture of child death that Li acknowledges through an alternate speculative mode of temporal presence in her novel, highlight the capabilities of consolation literature. Through its fiction, Li creates a “temporal distortion which cannot be reproduced” in her “lived experience” (Currie 85). *Where Reasons End* illustrates that even her story is inadequate in answering the “whys” of grief, particularly about the pain of attending to rupture caused by the suicide of a child. In contrast, through an ‘invisible landscape’ unencumbered by materiality, Li creates a *trick in time* that acknowledges the possibility of narrative to embody a sense of a continuing relationship with the deceased, ensuring that memories endure rather than fade over time. Li resists linear modes of telling, where “every moment is the curtain call to the previous moment”, preventing climaxes that act as “vacuum cleaner[s] of time” (27) by erasing the past. The inadequate understanding that comfort comes from keeping the dead alive in our hearts and minds through memory is overcome by keeping the conversation going. For, with a nod to the title of Li’s book, if one stops looking for “reasons” to engage with our lost children, then our fears they will be lost forever will eventuate. However, if we find “no reason” (29) to terminate the conversation, then our relationships with our lost loves will endure, avoiding endings “where reasons end”. [17]

[17] Not only does Li’s grief story endure because it is a work of fiction, but its publication also predicts it will be read again and again, ensuring the livability of the dead child.

Conclusion: Living with Inconclusion

This disruption within narrative and temporality in grief literature makes a significant contribution to how we understand maternal grief today. While Li reminds us of the pain of losing a child through the narrator's bleak metacommentary that "a parent should never be a child's biographer" (Li, *WRE* 109), we learn from all three extraordinary writers, that some of us find solace in the imaginary spaces we invent to locate loss. Through personal consolation, we hold onto the ones we have lost closely. Those of us, like Didion, Deraniyagala and Li, who eloquently manage to publish on child loss contribute to the increasingly rich legacy of grief literature.

We have seen how the loss of a child ruptures the conventional Western representation of time as linear and singular. The memoir *Wave,* which began as a therapy diary to explore the writer's loss, illustrates the time of grief as a 'working through'. Despite the arrested and repeated moments of trauma, it culminates with the acknowledgement that grief work is never done and ties with those who have passed endure. In *Blue Nights*, there is no doubt that her daughter has passed, but Didion offers no working through of grief, only the bleak recognition that she too will die eventually. Both stories hint at the possibility of a relationship continuing after death between a mother and child. However, pushing what grief writing can imagine further, *Where Reasons End* distinctively depicts the experiences of loss as an enduring plurality of love and connection after death through the enfolding and merging voices, beautifully articulated by Li when mother and child *together* acknowledge that "life is not lived in metaphors" (24). Their conversation depicts the embodied nature of grief to suspend one at "any juncture of time-space" (170). The topography of grief in all these works is deemed more than a container of the past or a backdrop for maternal grief, but a montage of language, challenges and questions that mediate the social processes, rituals, and temporalities of mourning (Maddrell 170) to negotiate their particular grief experiences. They also arouse the interconnection between mother and child, denying the finality of death, thus reflecting, and contributing to, current sensibility in society and psychology about the time of grief.

The sourcing of texts to deliver my criteria for this thesis indicated some interesting, challenging patterns in the literature on grief. Many works that I considered for examination, but opted not to include, would be valuable to revisit. There is a growing body of works of fiction concerning the death of a child that are narrated from the subjective point of view of a child sibling and are polyvocal, which would yield interesting observations if examined. A notable example is the fascinating story by Marieke Lucas Rijneveld, *The Discomfort of Evening* (2020). Told from the point of view of Jas, the ten-year-old younger sister of Matthies who has drowned, the story concerns the erosion of familial relationships due to the death of a child. Through Jas, we learn of maternal grief through her observations of the mother who is characterised as "frozen" under the ice like a "hibernating frog" (90). Descriptions of the impact of maternal grief found in this novel are striking and original. We see the mother's dry and wrinkled skin is like a "bird's nest" as though "she's a jigsaw puzzle that's losing more and more of its pieces" (146–147). Her eyes appear "deeper in their sockets … like my old flat football is sinking further and further into the manure pit next to the cowshed" (63). Illustrations such as these of the delayed and decayed, compressed sense of the time of grief of the maternal character are worthy of further examination. Alarmingly, the novel ends as Jas tips herself into a hole in the sea ice to be with her dead brother, "here everything is pitch dark and …icily silent" (87). Resolution is withheld by Rijneveld who challenges the psychology of 'working through' in this story. *Sing Unburied Sing* (2017) by Jesmyn Ward has three narrative voices, including thirteen-year-old Jojo and Ritchie, a child ghost from the past. It builds on the genre of 'haunting' literature such as works like Toni Morrison's influential *Beloved.* In an amalgamation of past, present, and future voices, it gestures towards post-human liminality as a site of black power (Lillvis) and predicts rich results if explored. Finally, we see the burgeoning selection of popular fiction that involves grieving mothers who reside close to the ocean such as *The Salt House* (2018) by Lisa Duffy, Kit De Vaal's *The Trick to Time* (2018), and *Tides* (2022) by Sara Freedman. It might be fruitful to examine this new subgenre of fiction which Alice Bloch (2022) has coined "sadness-on sea" (in a tongue-in-cheek way) (16).

One area worth further exploration for critics and academics is the evolving concept of motherhood in contemporary literature. By acknowledging Didion as an adoptive mother, Shapland (2015) introduces a new model for queer family and queer motherhood. Shapland observes an expansion

of what constitutes mothering, challenging it as a presumed instinct influenced by patriarchy (312). This expanding perspective is evident in the literature I have examined for this thesis, as well as in society's broadening view of acceptable motherhood. A recent *Guardian* books review noted that three out of six shortlisted Booker finalists from last year centred around mother and child relationships (Cosslett 2022). Female fiction writers are creatively exploring maternity beyond societal taboos. As well as the texts presented in this thesis, recent examples include Rachel Yoder, *Nightbitch* (2021) and Elena Ferrante's *The Lost Daughter* (2006), readapted for the screen by Netflix in 2021. The unspoken truths of the female body in its location of 'otherness' are being confronted by contemporary literature.

The shared threads that run through Didion, Li and Deraniyagala's beautiful, albeit uncomfortable works, are the overwhelming sense of love mothers have for their children and the fear a mother has that they may fail to protect their child from harm; these threads show the puzzling dichotomous nature of parenting. To finish I will end with a vignette from another text that deserves further investigation, but sadly did not fit into my thesis, *Mother and Child* by Carole Maso (2012). A poignant novel that "wonders" like Didion, Deraniyagala and Li, "if there was some limit to heartbreak, or a way to become immune to it" (244). At the scene of a destructive earthquake that has killed thousands of children, Maso creates a moving illustration of heartbreak, where "a mother sits next to the rubble of what was once her child's school and waits. She refuses to move. Weeks passed, months" (256), her love unyielding and timeless, a testament to the enduring power of maternal affection. In Maso's fantasy, an "indestructible child" is imagined, "retrofitt[ed]" with "steel rods and supporting braces" as protection from future catastrophes (254–245), while the omniscient narrator asks readers to envisage a world where mothers' hearts are made from "stainless steel" (256) with the premise of building immunity against the pain of child death. But readers already know there is no immunity to a mother's grief, for earlier Maso reveals that "part of the child's body remains in the mother long after the child is born" (244), and long after the child (or mother) dies. As the writers examined have alluded, Maso expresses the rupture that death brings through this somewhat deranged vision that maybe only creative works can expose so eloquently, but also shows the bounds one's imagination may go to shelter from the reality of grief. With no way to realistically shelter from loss, the authors demonstrate the extent to which imagination can shield one

from the harsh reality of grief. These authors recognise that in the face of loss, imaginative thinking may be the only way to cope with the loss of a child.

The closure of this study leaves me with a sense of satisfaction that there is an interesting and flourishing body of material about the sensation of arrested time in maternal grief literature. The realisation that my experience of living in a 'fold in time' after the death of my son Joshua is not abnormal, but rather a phenomenon shared by others, is both comforting and increasingly widespread.

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