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All the Small Things: Depicting the Randomisation of Grief in (Digital) Short Fiction

The Large and the Small of it

'[H]e cried in a way that was unique to the moment' (Gibson and Watkins 2018: 9).

Depending on the type of loss, grief can hit like a baseball bat, or a Lego brick embedding itself in the tender underside of a bare foot, or the sharp end of feathers poking themselves through the pillowcase: mostly unnoticeable until hundreds scatter across the carpet, then impossible to return to their former encased state. Grief is different to different people and at different times. There are scales of grief, spectrums of grief that we all slide up and down throughout our lives.

The pandemic has, of course, been a direct cause of grief for many, either through the loss of loved ones, or because of the increased difficulty associated with dealing with all the usual 'big griefs' during lockdown restrictions. Funerals, divorce, mental illness, cancer - all by necessity experienced virtually or 'socially distanced', the usual support networks absent or reduced. Yet we also lost all the small things. Seemingly trivial events, pastimes, habits, the loss of which we only appreciated once they were gone. Listening to podcasts during a daily commute, meeting friends for a coffee or a pint, attending conferences and expos and concerts, hugs and handshakes.

'That's the worst thing […] Nothing can ever be about you. Well, not the worst thing. But the worst thing you can bear to think about' (Clark 2021a: 163).

When my sister was dying of cancer in 2019, I felt that perhaps my grief scale was broken, or stuck. As we sat by her hospital bed, my family inconsolable, I could only marvel at how funny she still was, how *her* she still was. I could not grieve for her, not yet, not while she still made fun of me for going grey, for writing a 'mucky book', for getting temporarily locked in the toilet of her palliative care room. When she died, of course I was sad, but I was saddest for other family members. I did not really have the time or inclination for my own grief. And I thought that since I had been through the funeral, that was the collective grief part taken care of, and the main part of my grieving was over.

Some months later, I found a birthday card she had sent me. Her neat blocky handwriting and the realisation that this was the last thing I would receive from her sent me into a tailspin of sadness. To miss her handwriting when she herself was no longer in my life, to feel so incredibly and suddenly distraught at this tiny loss rather than the larger and more obvious one seemed like an absurdity. And yet it also seemed perfectly in keeping with my own previous experience of grief and the experiences of others I had seen or heard, both real and fictionalised. It was typical of the surprising, random nature of grief and the invisible attachments we have to small details which are only surfaced through loss. In response to this realisation, I wrote a short story called 'Total Transparency' which both was and was not

about my sister's death, and a little later, 'Uncle', a short interactive digital fiction (IDF) which sought to express a big loss through all the tiny losses.

When I read scholar Tia-Monique Uzor's recent tweet about how she had been '[t]hinking so much about grieving as a practice […] How to hold spaces for collective grief [and] how to make room to grieve over the seemingly small things' (Uzor 2021: n.pag), I realised that this was what I had been doing. The collective grief I had sought was not the public ritual of the funeral, but the asynchronous sharing of short fiction. I needed to grieve not only the big, obvious losses of my sister and way of life during COVID, but also all the 'seemingly small things' that come together to constitute my experiences of loss. This article is an attempt to reflect on that process and how complex narrative structures can provide a tool for expressing complex emotions and experiences. It considers grief as a multifarious topic which benefits from exploration via creative practice, situating my own short story 'Total Transparency' within a wider practice of writing about and through grief. It explores the relationship between grief and technology, examining texts by Ross Watkins and Jonathan Nolan which position memories of the dead as 'data', and considers the techniques used in these stories to convey the multiplicity and randomness already established as key features of grief. Finally, it explores randomisation and text generation more explicitly, reflecting on my own IDF, 'Uncle', and confirming technologically aided writing as a tool which further expands writers' expressive capabilities, particularly when depicting complex emotions.

Containing Multitudes

'Moments of clarity, insight, whatever you want to call them' (Nolan 2007: n.pag.).

Kathleen Marie Higgins suggests that creative works can 'provide companionship through loss' (Higgins 2020: 14). The 'companionship stories' Higgins refers to (borrowing the phrase from Arthur Frank) are considered in terms of how existing stories might offer 'guidance and a sense of being understood' or how those suffering might informally tell themselves stories to help them cope (Higgins 2020: 14), but less so with regard to how such stories might be constructed. Higgins observes that '[p]eople ubiquitously turn to aesthetic practices in response to loss' (Higgins 2020: 9) and that the shape and form of these aesthetic practices is as varied as the manner in which grief itself is expressed (Higgins 2020: 10-12). Her reasoning as to why we do this is that we are conceptualizing and managing grief somewhat in the same manner as that suggested by Uzor - to create a sense of 'containment', to use the aesthetic object as a container for otherwise inexpressible feelings, to set aside a specific space in which to grieve (Higgins 2020: 12). Higgins' purpose is not to so much to explore the aesthetic objects themselves as to consider why such objects might 'offer maps of the terrain of bereavement' (Higgins 2020: 14) in times of need. While this is obviously a useful starting point, the more interesting question for me is how a writer might approach mapping grief, a topic which Higgins herself admits is 'large and unwieldy', a site of 'vagueness' (Higgins 2020: 11).

While I did not consciously consider this question when I began these works, I was aware that to self-therapize through fiction that would eventually be published required a degree of sensitivity. The process was for me, but the end product would be for others. Some seventy-five years ago Natalie Cole wrote of the need to 'bring [embarrassing or stressful experiences] out into the open where [they] will fester no more' (Cole 1945: 125) and suggested creative writing as the vehicle for doing just that. However, the writers in Cole's study were children sharing their experiences only with her (and those reading her article all

these years later). As Rachel Robertson and Helena Kadmos observe in their analysis (and construction) of the 'grief memoir', some critics feel that 'private grief should remain private, rather than invite a voyeuristic form of readership' (Robertson and Kadmos 2020: 216). While Robertson and Kadmos are referring specifically to the process of a particular kind of collaborative writing – two writers working together to create a work – for me any kind of writing offers the 'possibilities and benefits of co-creation' (Robertson and Kadmos 2020: 218) because I share Wolfgang Iser's view that it is '[t]he convergence of text and reader [that] brings the literary work into existence' (Iser 1974: 50). Knowing that a reader has experienced a text I have created 'celebrates feelings of sharing and solidarity' while also 'diminishing feelings of isolation and stagnancy' (Robertson and Kadmos 2020: 218-219), but the risk of overshare that Robertson and Kadmos highlight remains. How, then, to share 'private grief' in a way which was respectful, but also allowed the sense of 'co-creation' and 'sharing' I craved?

Opacity and Openness

'He […] thought to tell her she was a good girl, but didn't' (Gibson and Watkins 2018: 4).

My initial solution, in 'Total Transparency', was to provide such a proliferation of small details that even those familiar with my sister's death would be unable to distinguish real images and phrases drawn from my memories from those which were completely fabricated. This effect was further amplified through the use of a magical realist framing device – a woman slowly turning invisible – which could be interpreted in various ways. Setting these descriptions in relief against further 'invisible' details, those which remain unshared, also puts the onus on the reader to construct what is unsaid, thereby further inviting the reader to participate in the text.

'Total Transparency' charts the gradual, literal disappearance of a woman through the eyes of her partner (Clark 2021a: 157-166). The narrator is intentionally without gender and both they and their partner are never named in an effort to allow the reader to 'shade in the […] outlines' (Iser 1974: 51). '"As long as it doesn't hurt, I'm sure it's fine"' the disappearing woman says of her condition, although of course, she may also be referring to grief itself, and the denial and numbness I originally felt (Clark 2021a: 159). Such dual meanings are used throughout, including in the title itself, which reflects both the woman's vanishing condition and the ironic 'obfuscated openness' of the narrative created with the techniques described above.

The woman's partner focuses on the tiny details of her body that they miss, such as '[t]he little mole on her ribcage I loved to tickle' (Clark 2021a: 159) - the literal small things they are no longer able to see and experience due to her condition, acting as an analogue for the many small things we lose when someone dies, or when an experience is taken away from us. In a series of vignettes of the woman's worsening condition and her partners' reactions, I attempt to encompass the many moods and feelings experienced during the gradual loss of a loved one, not only by myself but by others, both real and fictional, thereby further complicating these notions of 'transparency' and 'collaboration'. Robertson and Kadmos suggest that collaborative writing might allow 'both disguise and truth telling' (Robertson and Kadmos 2020: 214) and this certainly seems to be the case in 'Total Transparency', expressed via the protagonist's final bittersweet words: 'I still have a wife. [She's] just invisible now, that's all' (Clark 2021a: 166). A person does not cease to be a sister, or a wife, or a friend just because they have ceased to be. Is this an example of my own feelings

disguised as a character? Or simply an act of truth telling? Either way, it is likely to be a familiar feeling to anyone who has lost a sibling struggling to answer the innocent question "Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

Although I did not know the term at the time of writing 'Total Transparency', it was very consciously a companionship story, or as Ensslin et al. might term it, a story intended for use as 'bibliotherapy'—texts selected for their potential therapeutic effect on the reader (Ensslin et al. 2016: 177). Therefore, my concern after writing was that however 'open' the story might be in terms of inviting the reader to participate and share in genuine experiences of grief, in framing it as the experience of one couple, I was implying 'prescriptive assumptions about a "right" or "healthy" way to grieve' (Gibson and Watkins 2018: 3). This seems to be an issue inherent in the notion of 'companionship stories' – 'providing guidance and a sense of being understood' (Higgins 2020: 14) somewhat necessitates settling on a single understanding or guiding principle, and it was this singularity that I found myself railing against. Ensslin et al. suggest that the creation of narratives (or writing therapy) may be just as beneficial as bibliotherapy. This is because 'it is the cognitive processing of the negative emotions or traumatic events involved in constructing a narrative (structured or unstructured) that conveys health benefits, rather than any one particular approach' (2016: 180). I sought alternate approaches that could provide companionship and agency to the reader, while simultaneously aiding my own processing of my grief.

Grief, Data and Randomisation

'Bereavement is bizarre' (Higgins 2020: 9).

'The futures of grief' is the pairing of an academic provocation by Margaret Gibson with a creative response by Ross Watkins which both engage with the potential impact of technology on the expression of grief. In her provocation, Gibson notes '[t]he human heart's desire to remain connected to vestiges of deceased loved ones' while also observing that nowadays such desires are 'enmeshed in the trajectories, dynamics and adaptations of representational and recording technologies' (2018: 3), a view exemplified in Jonathan Nolan's short story 'Memento Mori' which will be discussed shortly. In his creative response to Gibson, Watkins demonstrates the same distinction between the deceased's persona and their physical body explored in my own 'Total Transparency', but here it is technology, rather than a strange, unexplainable condition which results in the absent loved one's lingering presence: 'Her body was disposed of without ceremony […] he only needed information to map her thought-processes. This was entity data' (Gibson & Watkins 2018: 7). The concept of 'mapping' described by Higgins arises again, but here it is the loved one who is mapped, rather than the experience of knowing and losing them. There is the implication in this statement not only that discrete memories of the individual are privileged over and above the individual as a whole embodied human being, but also that the deceased is reducible to data. This is a concept shared by Nolan (writing as Nathan Nolan) in 'Memento Mori' (and to a lesser extent in *Memento,* the film based upon the short story). However, while Watkins reflects on the effect of recording technologies on the ability to grant a form of disembodied immortality through narratives, Nolan uses the complex structures of data and computerisation to represent the complicated nature of grief and loss. Technology and grief are quite literally enmeshed.

'It's like that computer thing, the Chinese room […] laying [cards] down one letter at a time in a sequence according to someone else's instructions' (Nolan 2007: n.pag.).

In 'Memento Mori', protagonist Earl is stuck in a repeating cycle of grief due to the unhappy combination of his wife's death and his own amnesia. The story unfolds through notes Earl has left for himself in order to keep a grasp on both his loss and his own sense of time. These eventually lead to Earl seeking revenge for his wife's death, but, like Earl, we cannot be certain he has pieced together the random fragments of memory data correctly. His status as an unreliable narrator is evidenced through his uncertainty regarding details which should be conclusive, yet this uncertainty also evokes the experience of grieving. The time of year, Earl suggests, could be 'early spring or late fall' (Nolan 2007: n.pag). Temporally and culturally these seasons are very different, but in Earl's fractured existence, they are randomised cues which have little bearing on his day-to-day experience. 'Any connection with the everyday world and its other inhabitants seems tenuous at best', as Higgins says of the experience of bereavement (Higgins 2020: 9). This lack of certainty is also attributed to Earl's actions 'Maybe then he notices the scar. […] Maybe he begins to cry. Maybe he just stares silently […]' (Nolan 2007: n.pag.) which are in part related to his memory condition, but also reflect the vagueness of grief observed by Higgins, its multiplicity, its state as an array of potential expressions within a possibility space. However, this vagueness is not only applied to descriptions of Earl and his experiences, but to the entire narrative world. Other characters are also described in terms of their potentiality rather than their actual actions: 'Maybe later he'll tell his wife about this guy and his little note. Maybe his wife will convince him to call the police' (Nolan 2007: n.pag.).

Gibson's assertion that '[…] grief's quiet revolution in the psyche and body can bring to consciousness and performative recognition those ghostly genetic and mimetic traces in which the deceased is a felt animation in one's body' (Gibson and Watkins 2018: 3) is quite literally expressed in 'Memento Mori'. As Earl attempts to cling to his memories and understand the loss of his wife, he inscribes 'clues' on his body in the form of tattoos. Earl is indulging in a form of writing therapy which is partial, scattered, and due to his memory condition, faulty, yet he clearly finds solace and stability through this activity, asserting: 'Lists are the only way out of this mess' (Nolan 2007: n.pag). His own body becomes the container for, and database of, his grief. Bodnar suggests of the film adaptation that this practice also questions '[t]he futility of inquiry under the assumption that conclusive statements may be established' (Bodnar 2018: fn12), which is also applicable to the short story and calls to mind once more Higgins' use of 'vagueness' as a necessary descriptor for grief.

The short story is less forthcoming with the circumstances of Earl's situation than its filmic equivalent. The destabilising use of second person fragments in the short story both complicates the reader's relationship with the narrator and their own position in the text, while the eventual reveal that these sections are notes Earl has left for himself further demonstrates the utility of writing as a method of making sense of grief. Both short story and film engage the 'audience by inviting them into the medium as an interpreter and participant in the database of imagination' (Bodnar 2018: np). In *Memento* Earl is renamed Leonard. While there are naturally differences between the two versions of the narrative, the protagonist suffers with the same problem in both short story and film: '[i]n having diverse pieces of information available through the same interface, there is no differentiation made between values of information' (Bodnar 2018: fn15). This is presented as detrimental to Earl/Leonard's grieving process (and indeed, given his memory condition, it arguably is).

However, for my purposes, the lack of differentiation arising from the structure of the database helps to mitigate against the previously identified issue of the companion story as a singular, monolithic experience. If there is no differentiation, no value judgement being placed on each disparate piece of information, then no element of grief can be elevated or privileged above any other. When Gibson suggests '[t]he future of grief is algorithmic and virtual' she is referring to 'how the dead might remain socially and intimately alive' via social media and technological platforms (Gibson and Watkins 2018: 2). Yet I would suggest that grief is also algorithmic and virtual because these complex technologies and data structures finally provide both inspiration for and tools to express complex feelings and experiences.

My overall research project aims to develop a concept of Creativity Amplification (the use of technology to '[increase] our ability to access creativity and convey it to others' (Clark forthcoming 2022: n.pag.). While the initial research focussed primarily on how technology might speed up or automate existing processes (Clark 2021: n.pag.), this current work places more emphasis on how technology might inspire and facilitate alternative narrative structures. As shown in 'Memento Mori' and *Memento,* the database offers collaboration with the reader in meaning-making, multiplicity of expression, and, through random access, a lack of primacy. This technological egalitarianism is coupled with a kind of anonymity, thereby addressing all of my earlier concerns regarding the companion story. Technology provides an alternate means of co-creation, one which combines input from both the reader and the technology platform in order to 'find a new shared voice for expressing the complications of mourning' (Robertson and Kadmos 2020: 222). Multiple different readings are possible, not only through the Iserian re-interpretations seen in 'Memento Mori', which suggests 'no reading can ever exhaust the full potential' of a text (Iser 1974: 55), but also through the textual reconfigurations created by the system. While the full range of potential combinations are accessible to any who would care to examine the source code, the system re-orders key elements of the text on each traversal, meaning no single reading can be considered an expression of 'a "right" or "healthy" way to grieve' (Gibson and Watkins 2018: 3). Similarly, as the narrative is configured according to the reader and the system's criteria rather than the writer's, 'a voyeuristic form of readership' (Robertson and Kadmos 2020: 216) is less likely.

Writing with Randomisation

'[…] it was what was no longer there that was truly upsetting.' (Clark 2021a: 159).

I chose Twine (an authoring tool for the creation of digital hypertexts requiring minimal coding) to create my IDF because, as Ensslin et al. note, 'the accessibility and participatory nature of Twine technology' makes it particularly well-suited to informal therapeutic creative writing usage (2016: 179). Similarly, since '[t]he grieving process is not linear' (Higgins 2020: 17) it seems apt to use a writing tool which permits non-linearity. In order to maintain the 'open' elements from 'Total Transparency'–e.g. the inclusion of the reader in the text–I wrote 'Uncle' in second person. Of course, IDFs also allow for an additional form of inclusion–the reader becomes a reader-player. For example, cycling links (hyperlinks which change as they are clicked and record a variable when the reader-player stops cycling), allow the reader-player to influence key details. In the first scene, the reader-player may choose a name for their uncle via a text entry box, and determine whether the uncle is a blood relative, or a friend of the family with a cycling link (Clark 2021b: n.pag.). This allows for different ways of relating to the story's events, and degrees of role-playing or 'companionship'.

While this element of choice is enacted in my text through cycling and branching links, there are other Twine data structures at work which attempt to embody the 'vagueness' and 'non-linearity' of grief: the 'either' command and arrays. 'Either' allows the creation of a simple list of entries with one being selected at random by the system and displayed in the text. Arrays are essentially small databases containing data supplied by the writer (in this case, individual keywords and short phrases). Each piece of information is fixed in position within the array, allowing the reader to manipulate the text, while still ensuring that relevant related text is displayed. So, for example, if the player selects 'three cheese sauce' as a component of Sunday dinner, it will later be described as 'a rich cheesy sauce' because these two pieces of information are linked in the array. This creates a balance between chance encounters with text fragments and an individualised (rather than entirely random) experience for the reader-player. Like grief itself, 'eithers' and arrays allow for a range of responses which may or may not directly relate to the present moment. They are quite literally 'an array of potential expressions within a possibility space' as mentioned on page 5 of this article as a description of grief.

All the ways in which the reader-player's Uncle might be behaving on each day that they visit him are completely randomised. There is an equal chance that he might be 'sorting a bag of Bombay Mix into its constituent parts' or 'spritzing perfume into the air and walking through the fragrant cloud again and again', or any one of the other twelve options in the activity database the system draws from (Clark 2021b: n.pag.). These activities are carefully chosen, the former intended to represent the meaningless acts of time-filling and self-distraction undertaken when struggling to deal with bereavement, while the latter is perhaps an attempt at reconnecting with the deceased, 'a surrogate for being able to touch the person' (Higgins 2020: 13), or perhaps a method of remembering one of the 'small things'. However, the fact that in algorithmic terms all are given equal chance of appearing means no value judgment is being made. Each is an equally likely way of responding to grief. It also means the Uncle may behave repetitively, or erratically, and differently in one reading to the next. Initially, if the reader-player has not read the description of the work, they may also find his behaviour confusing, or baffling, or frustrating. In this way, the text not only explores the multifariousness of grief, but also the effect this may have on those who are experiencing it indirectly or attempting to support the bereaved. This sense of unpredictability is emphasised further through various elements of both the Uncle and player-character's behaviour being randomised – for example, their moods, feelings and responses. The framework of the narrative is fixed and somewhat repetitive in order to provide a counterpoint to, and further highlight the randomisation. Returning to the Uncle's house over and over in order to simply witness him grieving attempts to bring about an experience of 'collective' grief, bringing the reader-player, player-character, and protagonist into (a) shared moment(s) of grief. It is also a demonstration of the strange behaviour of time during periods of grief – the simultaneous stretching and compressing of the hours. This 'containment' is further reflected via which elements the reader-player is permitted to choose and which are generated. The reader-player may choose how they respond to the Uncle, but not how this makes them feel. Elements of the world around the characters – the weather and the programs on the television and radio - are also randomised in order to create the sense of the world continuing around them despite this moment of grief and stagnation, much like the random passing of the seasons experienced by Earl in 'Memento Mori'.

'Time moves about you but never moves you. It has lost its ability to affect you' (Nolan 2007: n.pag.).

It could be argued that the random generation of text does not necessarily need to have a digital component. The cut-up technique favoured by William Burroughs, 'the selection and re-arrangement of already existing texts' (Lyndenberg 1978: 414) is to some extent an analogue version of Twine's 'either' function. For some projects I would be inclined to agree, but for this one, the cut-up method lacks the element of 'collaboration' or any sense of the 'collective'. For me this is particularly important when writing on grief, because as Robertson and Kadmos indicate, there is 'comfort' in the sense of 'not being alone' fostered by collaborative co-creation (2020: 215). In the cut-up text, any moments of connection with an audience are co-incidental, and while some Iserian co-creation may occur it feels like the pendulum has swung too far in the direction of placing the burden of creation primarily on the reader. A key difference in 'Uncle' is that I am the author of the 'existing texts' and Twine's underlying code is the system by which they are selected and re-arranged (a technological collaboration, or an asynchronous collaboration with Twine's creators). Another equally important difference is that cut-up is intended to be '[s]ubversive, reversible, impersonal and infinitely expandable' having 'no fixed origin or destination, and [forming] a complex network of intersecting texts which suggests and approaches the fullness and anonymity of silence' (Lyndenberg 1978: 414). But like the randomly accessed database, I wish to dip into the cut-up technique to pick and choose the aspects I want to apply to my own work. I retain the possibility of being 'infinitely expandable' while introducing the personal, to maintain that 'complex network of intersecting text' but house it within a narrative which has a fixed origin and destination. That destination is confronting myself and my own grief, as a 'me' character bursts into the text, emerging from the bathroom (so often a location of hidden, contained grief) and admits that like Earl, the 'you' being addressed was actually an 'I' the whole time: 'I need to say this to you. To myself' (Clark 2021b: n.pag.). Using technological rather than analogue structures allows the creation of not a 'negative' poetics but an invisible one. A poetics which, like a lost loved one, is felt rather than seen.

An Invisible Equilibrium

'We will try again. Make different choices. The outcome may be the same. But we will be different' (Clark 2021b: n.pag.).

Of course, it is worth noting that due to the 'invisible poetics' of the piece, many of these features would only become noticeable to a reader-player through repeated traversals of the text. However, it is this potential for multiplicity, for understanding through repeated engagement, and for individuals to have highly differing experiences which I felt was an element of the project where grief was successfully represented. Rather than asking its audience to reconfigure the narrative as a whole, as in 'Memento Mori', 'Uncle' instead asks the reader-player to reconfigure their understanding of the Uncle's individual acts and gestures. Actions that may initially seem strange or repetitive may be given new meaning when the Uncle's grief is revealed, or they may remain impenetrable. Both are equally acceptable ways of engaging with the text and, by extension, of experiencing grief, or supporting someone who is grieving. The invisible is placed on equal footing with the visible. A bibliotherapeutic story cannot erase loss, but it can at least help me feel like I have achieved equilibrium on my loss scale. Hopefully if can do that for others too.

'While […] pain cannot be articulated, the facts leading to a solution can at least be made real in writing' (Bodnar 2018: fn15).

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