

Beneath the Skin of Sorrow

IMPROVISATIONS
ON LOSS

Nnenna Freelon

Beneath
the Skin
of Sorrow

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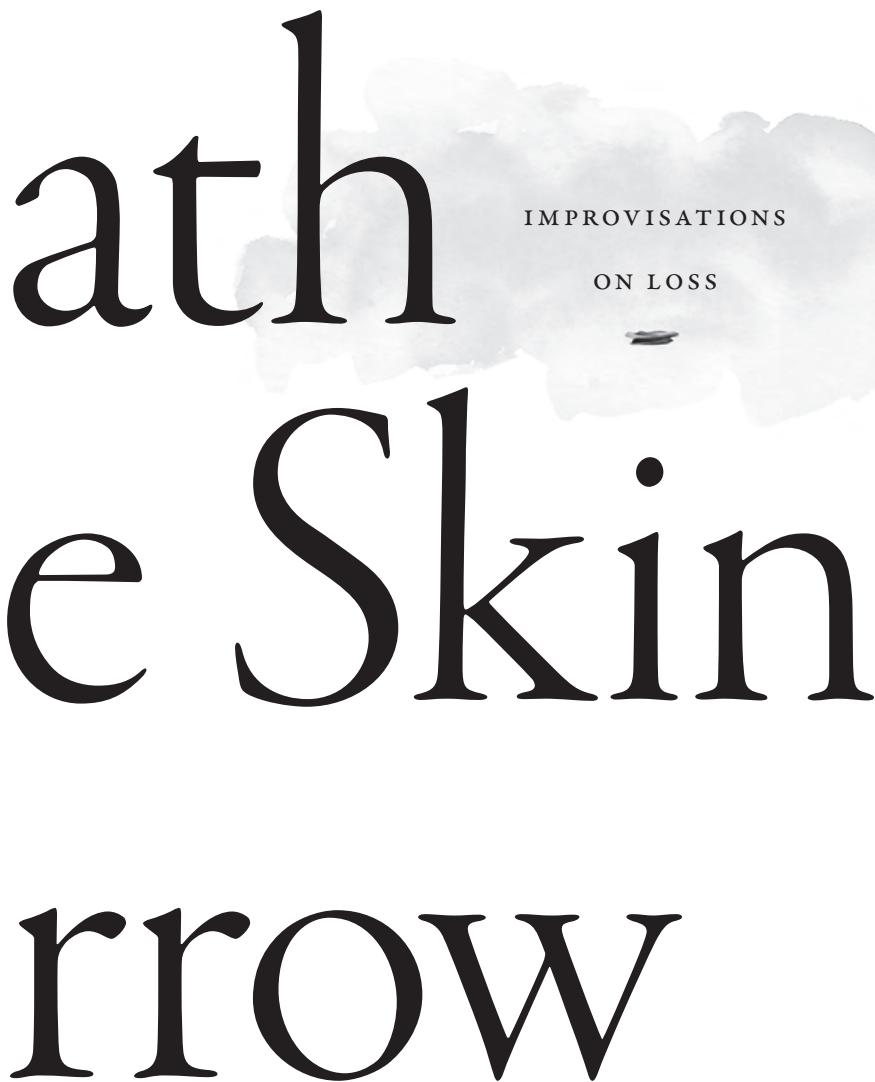
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Duke University Press Durham & London 2025

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Project Editor: Lisa Lawley

Designed by Courtney Leigh Richardson

Typeset in Garamond Premier Pro by Copperline Book Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Freelon, Nnenna, author.

Title: Beneath the skin of sorrow : improvisations on loss /
Nnenna Freelon.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2025.

Identifiers: LCCN 2025001021 (print) | LCCN 2025001022 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478029113 (hardcover) ISBN 9781478061342 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Freelon, Nnenna. | Grief. | LCGFT: Poetry. |
Prose poems. | Personal narratives. | Creative nonfiction. |
Autobiographies.

Classification: LCC PS3606.R44425 Z46 2025 (print) |

LCC PS3606.R44425 (ebook) | DDC 811/.6—dc23/eng/20250627

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2025001021>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2025001022>

COVER ART: Tissue ink mono/photoprint by Maya Freelon, 2025

(mayafreelon.com); starry background

courtesy Adobestock/jenteva.

INTERIOR ART: Maya Freelon, tissue paper and ink, 2005–2019;
author portrait courtesy Tanisha Walker.

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FOR PHIL

whose love still whispers

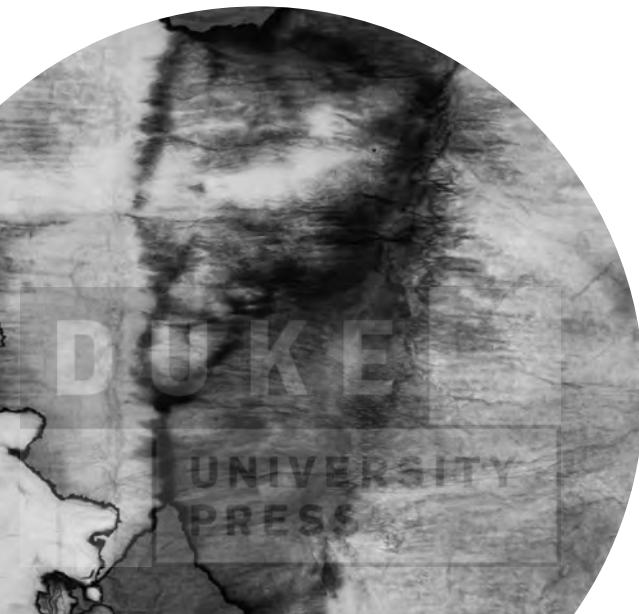
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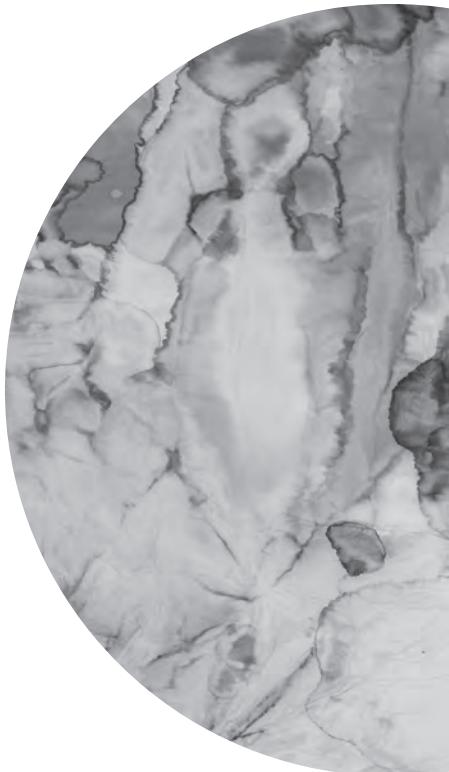
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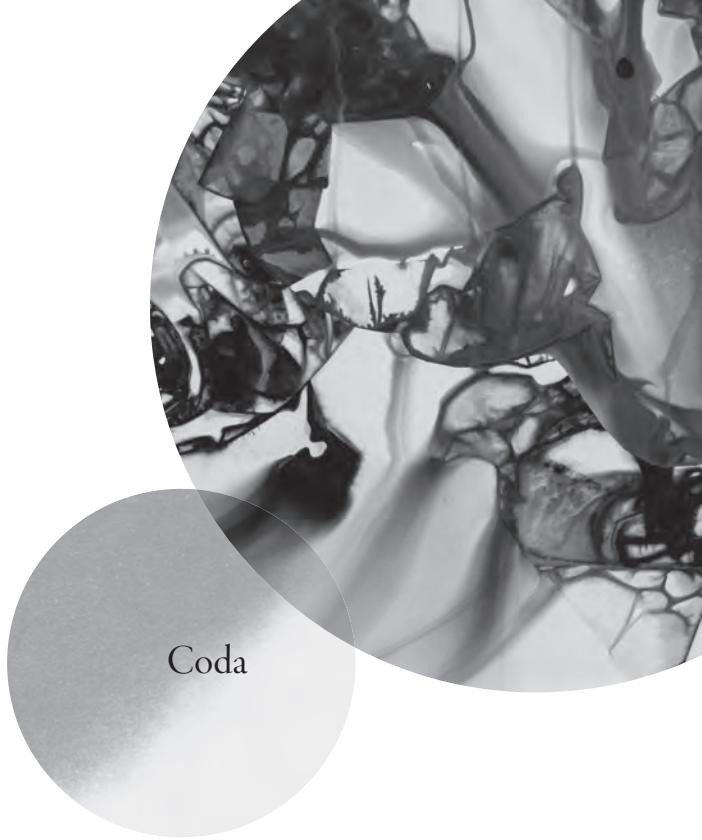
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PRELUDE

I had no idea the tools I learned as a jazz musician would become a lifeline in the sea of sorrow. My deep experience of loss led me to study an unfamiliar repertoire, to compose new melodies, to learn to sing in the dark, to swing in rhythm with sorrow's underlying pulse, and to find the notes of joy and hope in its cadence.

But mostly, I learned to listen patiently and more deeply than ever before.

I came to write this book by way of great grief. We'd been married nearly forty years when Phil, my beloved husband and soulmate, passed away from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) in 2019. Six months later, my sister, running buddy, and best friend Debbie died from lung cancer. Compounding the absurd reality of these losses, Basie, my dog and sole remaining companion, died on August 9, 2019, one month to the day after Phil.

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These layered losses were like a peeling away of self. Who am I now? A widow? A sister-in-loss? A singer with no song and no voice? Is there even a word for one who mourns the special kind of love that only a dog can offer? Those questions played on repeat, like a needle stumbling on an annoying scratch in an old soul record.

Gone was my joy and desire for life. I'd lost the ability to read or sing or improvise. The inner melody that had vibrated inside me since childhood went silent. My life broke into two parts: **BP** (Before Phil) and **AP** (After Phil). I struggled to make sense of these two eras. I was exhausted.

Jumbled phrases and bits of song tried to take form in my head, but I ignored them, assuming this was part of the grieving process. Yet the fragmented melodies and story remnants with their hidden messages wouldn't let me rest. They had stories to tell. Story fed song as song nourished story. And I listened. Intently. Deep listening allowed me to experience grief's resonance in places I didn't expect it. Slowly, in the months that followed, I began to gather pieces of a newly arranged self. And along the way, I regained pieces of my musical sensibility. It all felt strange, unfamiliar, and inharmonious. I had to sit with these feelings of discomfort as they began to perform, and to hear them with a spirit of curiosity and improvisation.

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Since I was young, I'd always kept a diary. Writing was a way to keep counsel, to question, to create safety in the currency of words, but these musings—whether reckless, outrageous, or mundane—were private, meant for my eyes only. Thundering grief rolled through me, flattening everything in its path, my writing included. Swallowed whole, my entire life was sorrow-bent. I wrote to console myself, to find my way through the heartbreak. It didn't seem a path to rediscovery at first, but in time, writing gave rise to a new creative practice informed by, not in spite of, grief. Pushing against the visible weight of sorrow with words and whispered song allowed me to write and sing from a place made more precious by loss. I soon learned that my particular grief contained the universal. Everyone at some point experiences loss.

Beneath the Skin of Sorrow bears the sting of memory. It twists and turns through song and lays itself bare in the bones of prose, following the path of the awful ache and the awakening imagination of my broken heart.

The journey of grief is a unique process; I'm learning that creative paths are often overlooked when we think about engaging grief. This book called me to testify as Black woman, wife, widow, writer, singer, mother, grandmother, sojourner. I found that creative, improvisatory tools were the most authentic and sustainable for navigating the crosscurrents of my grief. I hope this book can help others find ways to swing with the unfamiliar rhythms of grief and to rest in between the pulses. One thing is certain: Your grief experience is your own; it belongs to you, and you cannot mess it up.

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My mourning bowl was literally filled to the brim. It birthed my award-winning podcast *Great Grief*, as well as my album *Time Traveler* and a sixth Grammy nomination. In this book you'll read stories, essays, poetry, recipes, and lyrics colored by the beautiful and terrible tempo of grief. The musings in this collection are meant to be read in a manner that suits the reader. Nothing will be lost if you decide to flip to a page and experience a particular meditation, or story. These are refrains on the observable universe of grief. As such, they may be experienced as individual or sequential moments.

I approached this book as a composer might, by thinking about the collection as a large work in four movements. Although I've read about grief being described as unfolding in five stages, my musician's heart experiences it more as overlapping waves resonating in connection with something much bigger—something akin to love.

Grief is a mystery for sure, and each layer feels a certain way, holds some identifiable feeling like a key signature. Each of these pieces are revelations of my personal journey, evidence of having created some breathing space for my grief.

I grouped the musings together by their particular emotional heft rather than when they happened in the timeline. I borrowed the titles of well-loved jazz compositions in an attempt to reach for the feelings they contained. The four movements:

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U N I V E R S I T Y
P R E S S

First Movement

“Round Midnight” explores my arrival on grief’s shores and my sudden realization of the shift from wife to widow. Here in the darkness of grief is where I first felt sorrow’s wail rising in song and story.

Second Movement

“Stolen Moments” is a collection of musings on how grief reshaped my worldview. It’s about looking at the world in the half-light of loss. Grief is a shapeshifter; the rules of time and space don’t apply here. These reflections explore grief’s resonance in extraordinary and mundane moments.

Third Movement

“A Love Supreme” contains meditations on joy and sorrow, the invocations of change, and the cadence of loss. The underscore of the past plays while the refrain of *what is* repeats. Reflected in our losses, there are treasures that grief can offer—if we can bear to look.

Fourth Movement

“Time Traveler” centers places of imagination and memory. These are new dreams and fictions and fables wrapped in personal experiences. Here, I write to affirm myself and find a way back to a sense of trust in the unfolding of life as it is now.

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Some folks say grief is like a season, but that's not true. If it were, I could anticipate grief's end. I could look forward to the time when this emptiness will be over and done. What I've learned in my brokenness is this simple truth: The act of grieving is a living journey, one informed by love. By creatively engaging with your feelings and honoring sorrow, you acknowledge yourself as fully human. Doing so may allow you to become your own instrument of loving-kindness.

Believe me, I know that improvising may feel risky, navigating with no script or set of instructions. I've learned that hiding from or ignoring Grief encourages her taking up way too much space. We're building a new relationship with our grief every time we take even the tiniest step. I'm honored to have you take this walk with me. Let's begin.

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RUBATO

Rubato in Italian literally means “robbed time.”

In music, it denotes the freedom to freely interpret a particular musical phrase or passage. Grief altered the music of my life. It required that I *freely interpret* a new set of rules, sing in a new key signature. It was necessary to engage with this new tempo of grief even though there were times when it felt totally impossible to do so.

