
GONE
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TODD MEYERS

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PROJECT EDITOR: LIVIA TENZER
DESIGNED BY COURTNEY LEIGH RICHARDSON
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for Stefanos

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PROLOGUE

This book represents an attempt to write through the grief that follows overdose death and what surrounds it. If it has any purpose, it adds a tiny but dense counterweight to writing that places the political economy of addiction ahead of the veracity of loss. It is essay and ethnography, conjured and churned. I have no easy answer for what to do with the disturbances that encounters with others produce. I committed to my notes a record of certain moments—moments in the moment or moments immediately following words spoken and observations made. But I am left wondering why the light of these encounters enjoys more attention than the shadows they throw. I took touch and with it kneaded in the dreamlife that comes after. The field and its record-as-ethnography occupy that place where the nightmare and the feelings it stirs in the first moments of waking are indistinguishable.

I defend the necessity of contact and the mess it creates. I can never escape the need of ethnography, the more-ness it promises and abuses. I believe the ethnographer is an important instrument of contact and interpretation, but somewhere along the way this instrument has been assigned a single task, namely the collection

of words. Words fail grief not because they are unable to hold the experience, but because when received they are assumed whole and unbroken, not as words as much as captured facts. —and writing grief, reduced to reporting these facts with a puzzling mix of neutrality and inscrutability, does not acknowledge, as Denise Riley writes, this "altered condition of life."[1] I care about something stirred in encounters, a record that calls on the same intensities the sayer invites the hearer to join. I am guided by a hope that by joining I might give expression to a form of living that sheds light on what that form does and denies.

What follows is not one story but many. You might ask, and rightly so, *What is there left to say?*—or better, *What is there left to know?* I was cautioned early in my inquiry that grieving of this kind was always more or less the same. I was told that what distinguishes this form of grief from others is the intensity of regret, unease, and shame that characterizes it. I thought, *What loss doesn't already traffic in such worry?* But I underestimated what it takes to offer even a hint of how unwieldy this grief can be for those who remain.

I agree there is something particular here, something about drugs and dependency and the weight they carry, or rather the weight they require others to carry. There is also something hard and necessary about positioning oneself along the breakwater between the flattening totality of addiction and harm, and the love and rage that sit on the other side of grief. I may know loss, but I also know that this gives me little clairvoyance or access to the wild and inventive shape it takes in other lives. The swirl of grief that surrounds fatal overdose invites understanding as a ruse; it twists efforts to find relief. Not once but again and again, tirelessly, unforgivingly.

But I continue to stick my nose into lives and deaths that are not my own and tell myself that what I am seeking is one story with many voices. In the pages that follow, each story is carried by the same three names, each committed at once to their differences and likenesses. In this way I do not challenge this grief's special character, nor do I attempt to correct the misattribution of sameness, nor do I seek to put on display the assortment of experiences that surround this all too ordinary form of death. If all stories share a common thread, so be it. I allow myself to be taken in by the claim that every word drifts to a single point. I let the slippage between the singular and the plural test that claim. I give the whole endeavor over to those individuals generous enough to talk with me about loss, again and again, layer by layer, together.

—always together.

NOTE

1. Denise Riley, *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (London: Picador, 2019), 13.