

## Litany for Grieving Sisters

And what of her fate is in fact a social death . . . ? Does it also provide a critical perspective by which the very terms of livability might be rewritten, or indeed, written for the first time?  
—Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim*

SHE WANDERS THROUGH THE RUINED city with the child cradled against her chest. Her arms enfold like a shield against the doubt about whether we can love one another. She has watched the enemy drain all life from her brother. She has cursed the police as they traced a chalk outline around the body of her neighbor's son. Her mother was slain with pruning shears in her hands and the calla lilies still uncut. After the protest, after an afternoon spent chanting "we are fighting for our lives," her sister disappeared.

Her sister was consumed by the slow death of toxins.  
Her sister was taken alone in her cell.  
Her sister perished calling for help.  
Her sister died overwhelmed by grief.

Her sister cried out, "I am not afraid to die." Anticipating the arrival of the police, she held the shotgun and nestled a frightened boy in her arms, comforting him, whispering softly in his ear, showing him how to be brave and not afraid to die. "What are they here to do?" she asked. They have rehearsed the answer. She has prepared for this moment and invites us to act as witnesses, to gather with her, to have her back at the last hour, to stare down her assassins, but we are robbed of this too. The state wanted her to *lie unwept and unburied. No mourners, no tombs, no witnesses.* The ones who love her are not allowed to behold her death, to see how courageous she has been before the grenades and the sharpshooters. To listen for the laughter as she shouted, *This is but a drink of water to what I have already suffered.*

This toil-worn woman has learned to meet death with her back straight, no matter how afraid. She has never known herself separate from grief. Grief doubled and multiplied. So many are gone, but she is still here. She takes no

joy in this fact. Even meager survival is cruel. She wants to die, so she can be in the company of all those she has loved, so she can stay with the child forever.

She is not the last sister on earth, but this is how it feels, as she makes her way through streets filled with death. There is nothing to persuade her otherwise. Grief and despair, not reason, drive her, push her forward. Time has fallen away, and the only reliable measure left is one step forward, then the next, as she cuts a blind path through the labyrinth of the city. She will search for him. Nothing will stop her. There is no one left to protect, and she remains trapped in the graveyard of the world. She would prefer *to sew herself into her own shroud*.

She cries out, but there is no one to receive her cry or to meet her call, only the silence of the desecrated city. Refusing the dead world, recoiling from the pile of corpses, she looks away from the carnage and moves ahead, trying to take in as little as she can without stumbling. Is this a dream? Is this the prophecy? Has she always known that this was to be her fate? That she would be left behind to witness the ruin of the world, to lose everyone she has ever loved and be forced to continue, to persist in their absence?

She is weathered: the rounded shoulders, the abraded flesh, the turned-down mouth, the blank glassy eyes mark her like rings on a tree, etch the damage done by successive centuries in her face and gestures. The body burden of slow death and undocumented extinctions. She is not thirty, but the dead weight of the world has depleted her. She doesn't say, I am so tired, Lord. She doesn't call to Jesus. If only she could appeal to some divinity for the sake of the child, for the fate of her brother, or strike a bargain or offer her life in exchange. . . . But she keeps the gods out of this. *Let us not mention the gods*.

She is not a mother, and yet she has mothered. She is sister and mother, *two in one*. To mother in this world is to be defeated, and the ones conscripted or willing to assume the maternal function are destined to mourn as much as to nurture. Filial love is no less bound to tragedy. *Her crime will be her devotion*. Care will swallow her whole, steal her last breath, crush and destroy her. Her love trespasses the law that decrees her and her kin unlovable, ungrievable. The law breaks them, and, in turn, they break the law.

She holds the child closer, as if to prevent the infant from seeing the destroyed world, to shield the little one from the disaster that has already claimed her. It is this impossible desire, the unreasoning love of a grieving sister intent on protecting a child already shrouded, that propels her forward. She can remember a ginger cake in the shape of a heart. She can see the words scrawled in the attic and recall her mother's words, *I am shrouding my poor children, what a task for a mother. I know what grief is. I can bear more*. The black morning has come.

Harlem is still and quiet. She wonders if anyone else is alive, if brother man might be alive? She knows not to wait for rescue; no one will come in

search of her. It never crosses her mind that he will come looking for her. *She must be the man. She has taken the place of nearly every man in her family. She must carry it all*, she must shoulder the burden until she is exhausted. It is too late to save the child or the threadbare life that had been theirs. Everyone in the building and on the block is gone. Yet strangely the buildings are untouched, indifferent and stolid, as if waiting for the new occupants, as if this destruction has been desired, as if natural disaster were the plan.

This grieving sister—  
the ones slain  
the ones still holding on  
worn away to nothing and used up  
undone by the vision of their father in a chokehold  
the recurring nightmare of their sister's murder after the 9-1-1 call  
the best friend gunned down on the threshold of her apartment  
marooned on the bridge  
trying to save her children in the storm—  
is not to be spared.

She has lived with the knowledge that she has been condemned, and her death like theirs will be premature and untimely. She fears that she will never be free of:

the image of men struggling for the last breath  
women abandoned and bereft  
women left for dead in the streets  
martyred girls in Sunday dresses  
the boy slain with his favorite candy still clutched in his hands  
the sneakers dangling from telephone lines  
the red ribbons of little girls  
the shattered faces of little boys  
the sounds of fathers sobbing and pleading.

She doubts that she will ever find her brother. Can one be a sister without kin? The perverse lines of descent, the names of fathers withheld and erased. X-ed by shame and incest. Absconded. Captured. Gone. She is no father's daughter, no mother's child, but a stranger in the house, an eternal alien. In the search for him, she makes a perilous claim, if only to ward off *a permanent lovelessness* that she cannot avoid or escape: to be a brother's sister, a brother's heart, a brother's savior, a brother's undoing. Is hers the labor of a mother, a sibling, a daughter, a sentinel, or a lover?

If he is alive, will he blame her for what has happened, for everything they have suffered? Is it her duty to repair the ruin of the world? Blame—she surely deserves because she is alive, the child is dead, all the others are gone. Isn't she responsible for the future that they can't secure? Care can't unmake the world or reverse the death sentence. Her failure is the only grand thing about her. It is outsized, monumental. After all, aren't the living obliged to answer to the dying? Heed their claim? How can the world take everything and let her live? Why should she? She is not indifferent to loss or to the absence of headstones and ruins, the missing signposts in water, the toll of the weather.

*Isn't this her tragedy*—the inability to save or protect anyone? Is the loss of brothers inescapable? Or the murder of sisters in their homes? By whose hand? *A hand like her own*. It is foreseen and inexorable; it is the reason she can never escape or elude the charge of negligence and destruction. Is her love the trespass, one that always anticipates punishment? Too thick. Too fierce. Too ardent. She has been judged and her fate decided. The hush of the city is the condemnation, the censure. What might she demand? Not life, not kin, not recognition, not sovereignty. Why am I still here? she asks. Brother, where are you? Need she always fear for the ones she loves? Why must she be forced to assume the loss certain to break her? How much is she required to bear? All that she can withstand.

The bundle is held tight against her chest. It would hurt too much to utter a name. *Child* is all she can manage. *Mama's baby* would wreck her. And *mine* is foreign to the tongue. Is there a taxonomy for tenderness? For beholding?

On a beautiful afternoon in the long summer of murder  
shortly after noon in the plague year  
in the sultry air of Black August  
in the heat of June  
in the season of ice  
near the gazebo  
walking to the apartment door  
in the garden  
on the front steps  
on a jog  
in the driver's seat  
on the BART platform  
in the stairwell of the projects  
in the back of the patrol car  
on the uptown train  
on the Texas border  
on a quick run to the store

on the sofa bed at grandma's house  
in the hospital waiting room  
in the church basement  
in the living room  
on the way home  
in the ambulance  
in front of the bodega  
in the middle of the block trying to make some change  
in the grocery store with a container of orange juice  
with a broken taillight  
with arms in the air  
with the children in the backseat  
in the center of the square  
across from the state house  
in a tree not far from school  
in the passenger seat  
at the end of a date  
in the shelter  
at a stranger's door  
in protective custody  
in the parking lot  
on the bridge  
in the house of a friend  
right outside the club  
two blocks away from the house  
up the street from where she stay.  
*By whose death I died and still lived.*

The no-longer mother, the not-wife, the kinless sister, the lost daughter, the not-woman, the not-man, the nobody, the cipher, the matrix—she is still here. She roams through the silent city with the lifeless bundle, the tiny corpse that she refuses to think of as one. *Kinship exists in this precarious zone between life and death.* No matter, she conducts herself as if some other arrangement might be possible, as if the child might live, as if the crisis of mere survival, replayed endlessly in anticipated loss or premature death, might be averted. Finding him, whether dead or alive, allows her to refuse what the state demands. She pledges that he will not be unwept and unburied. That love is not senseless, even if it could promise nothing or save no one. For grieving sisters, what other choice is there? For them, love is not yet exhausted. It is a web of relation without proper terms or certain outcome. It is an end-of-the-world tale with *its own promising fatality*. It is a story that blossoms in the black morning.

## Notes

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- Livability rewritten: Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (New York, 2000), 54–55.
- This is but a drink of water: Dionne Brand, *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (New York, 2000), 21, 24, 302. These are the words of the enslaved rebel Thisbe repeated by Marie-Ursule, one of the novel's protagonists.
- To sew yourself into your own shroud: Sophocles, *Antigonick*, trans. Anne Carson (New York, 2015), 5.
- I am shrouding my children: Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself*, ed. Moira Ferguson (Ann Arbor, 1997), 61.
- I know what grief is: Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. Richard Emil Braun (New York, 1990), 48.
- She must be the man: Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, 62.
- No one she loves will sigh over her (There is no one I love who sighs over me): Sophocles, *Antigone*, 55.
- Permanent lovelessness: Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, 60.
- By whose death I have lived and died: Sophocles, *Antigone*, 43, 56.
- Beholding: Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC, 2016); Ross Gay, *Be Holding: A Poem* (Pittsburgh, 2020).
- Its own promising fatality: Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, 82.