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Essay by Mercedes Lucero

Writing When Words Aren't Enough

Next week, TW's new "Writing and Faith" issue launches, a mini-edition about an increasingly timely topic. Here, Mercedes Lucero dives into one of the ultimate questions: How do you find meaning when words desert you?



The call lasted for three minutes. I've looked at the phone records. I stayed on long enough to hear his voice tremble, thinking, *I have never heard my uncle cry before.*

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It was mid-spring of 2014, and I was finishing my first year of a rigorous doctoral program in Kansas. My uncle was calling me from Arizona, and his voice at that moment felt too far away. After hearing that my cousin had died, I only said, "Okay."

Or at least that's what I think I said. I don't remember. I only remember that when I hung up the phone, I turned back to my notes and books to prepare for a presentation the next day. I went along as if nothing had happened. I put the memory in a place that knows no time or boundaries, which exists beyond logic. Three minutes is enough time for the body to go numb, although I'm certain it takes much less.

I didn't know then that I'd already begun the process of growing fragile, of coating my skin with a numbness that would stay with me for the rest of that spring. I was 25 at the time and understood too little of what it meant to lose people.

A friend died by suicide later that month. And within days, a family member (I'll call her Laura) also attempted suicide. I spent many weekends making the two-hour drive from Kansas to a hospital in Missouri to visit Laura. These trips became a ritual. Driving through long, empty stretches of Midwest land. My name on the sign-in sheet. Car keys and Chapstick in the plastic bin. The walk down the hallway to her room. Laura, under cotton blankets on the bed.

She always had a coloring book in front of her, with markers and crayons scattered and nestled in the folds of her blankets. She'd hand me a marker when I arrived, and we would spend the visiting hour filling in mandalas and other patterns. We didn't speak about what had happened; we colored in silence, as if we understood that the only way to speak was through shades of blue and lavender.

The loss and near-loss of three people in my life in a short span of time were too great to put into words. One month can fill an entire cosmic calendar when time doesn't exist. When there is no time, there is no story—no beginning, middle, or end.

Phrases like *It was their time to go* and *Time heals all wounds* surrounded me, and I grew to hate them. Language has always been incompatible with grief. Grief doesn't fit cleanly inside an ordered set of symbols. The paradox, of course, is that while I and so many others use writing to heal and understand, I'm also reminded that some wounds remain open. Some things cannot be understood.

I shed no tears that spring, even at the funerals. I, the "sensitive" and "emotional" one, did not cry, not once, as if my being had already evaporated. During the months that followed, what did I say? How did I talk to people? I must have used some type of language to understand such loss. And yet, that whole year I had no words that could translate what I was feeling into something I could comprehend. I carried all this with me, as if there were a separate self I neither addressed nor acknowledged.

But the heat—I remember the heat, moments where my skin felt hot, the kind of burn that rushes through right before fainting. I once felt so hot sitting at my desk at home that I stood and went to the bathtub, laying down in it, fully clothed, just to feel something cold on my skin.

By the next day, I chose to forget this, too. For years, I kept these moments in neat little boxes somewhere in the past. I compartmentalized.

So easily, I became soft clay. Growing up, I'd struggled with my own depression, went through years of therapy and medications to overcome the everyday panic I felt. I delved into a world of herbal remedies, morning meditations, and affirmation Post-It notes. Moving through each day like this took, and still takes, an incredible amount of energy. Each day feels delicate.

During that spring when I was losing people, I worried I would also lose myself. The process of grieving after loss straddles a line between life and death. Suicide makes this line harder to locate. That spring, I felt the line dissolving, observing how easy it would be to step over it. Death was my constant, a mirror reflecting my life back to me, in all its delicateness. I still don't know how to write about this.

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What flowers did I place in the casket that afternoon? How many times did I call hotline after hotline so someone could tell me what to say? To tell me *I* would be okay? Why was I afraid to let anyone see me reading books on how to grieve? And how long did I spend in rooms with closed doors attempting to force myself to cry? Why was it so hard to cry in the first place?

Words became a kind of sand to me—a sand I used to fill up these empty spaces. Even now, as I write this nearly three years later, I see only symbols that are never close enough to what it is I'm trying to understand. I still feel guilty for not crying, for not having the right words, for my inability to explain, for the way my feelings seemed to vanish. But words are the only tools I have to give voice to a time in my life that remains silent and elusive. I ache to unburden myself with them, and so I wrote—and I write. I choose to embrace the impossibility of this paradox.

I turned to narrative. I turned to stories. At first, I used fiction to keep myself at a distance, but I've found that if there is a flame, I will always move closer to it.

I shifted to essays and blurred lines between poetry and memoir. I placed my memories in forms of writing that resist clear definition. I put pieces away, not looking at or thinking about them for months. And always, I wondered: *Are these stories mine to tell?*

I shared some of my writing with close friends and family who'd experienced that spring. So much of what has emerged, though, I will never share. Some pieces were published. Some strangers thanked me. Others claimed I'd aestheticized tragedy.

I claim no one's experience except my own. I write only to know how the bathtub felt on my skin in the darkness. To retrace those nights I read Whitman aloud to myself when I couldn't sleep for months. During those afternoons, I walked and walked for hours, not really knowing why I wrote. I remember the moment a single butterfly hovered about me, a reminder that I was not so alone in these woods.

Art Information

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Mercedes Lucero is the author of *Stereometry* (forthcoming from Another New Calligraphy) and the chapbook *In the Garden of Broken Things* (Flutter Press, 2016). Her writing has appeared in *The Pinch*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Heavy Feather Review*, and *Curbside Splendor*, among others. She is also a *Glimmer Train* "Short Fiction Award" finalist and Pushcart Prize nominee.

Mercedes says the Walt Whitman poem referred to in this essay is "To a Stranger," in which the final line reads "I am

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to see to it that I do not lose you.”

For more information, see [Mercedes Lucero's website](#) [5] or follow her on Twitter [@loose_arrow](#) [6].

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