

# How Writing Touches



How Writing Touches:  
An Intimate Scholarly Collaboration

By

Ken Gale, Ronald J. Pelias, Larry Russell,  
Tami Spry and Jonathan Wyatt

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

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# INTRODUCTION

## **Forging a loving space**

When the five of us started writing four years ago, following the third International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry in 2007, we wondered to ourselves what it was we were embarking upon. There is a sense in which our formation as a writing group appeared to have come out of nowhere. However, our process was congruent with others' work, especially that fostered by Jane Speedy at the University of Bristol, where a culture of collaborative writing communities had been encouraged and groups had formed in similar ways to ours (e.g., Speedy et al., 2010). Jonathan and Ken had been writing in this environment since 2004 and were undertaking a collaborative dissertation.

Bristol, in turn, draws from established feminist, psychotherapeutic and participative inquiry traditions of networking and nurturing community (e.g., Davies and Gannon, 2006). The process of meeting at a conference and beginning to write has been rehearsed in previous texts about women's ways of knowing and feminist networking (see, for instance, Belenky and Goldberger, 1997). Such practices and systems will, at some level, have influenced—or given permission to—our process of becoming a writing group.

This book begins with questions: What is it seeking to achieve? Why is it important? What is its pedagogical intent?

The book spans a number of different themes, particularly, perhaps, that of loss. However, its foundation comprises the ways in which writers come face to face with one another through language. This book embodies a way of moving with others into a space of intimacy, forged through language and consummated with an annual dinner and drinks at the International Conference of Qualitative Inquiry in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois.

Although there has been contact between pairs or more of us backstage, the work has been performed on a well-lit group stage, each writer committed implicitly to the group's identity as a five and the dynamics this brings. "Sitting at the table" is one of our familiar metaphors, where members sometimes struggle to articulate insecurities, desires, differences, regrets, and love. (We do not use that word, you know the one we mean,

sitting over there in that last sentence—vulnerable, exposed in the harsh lights of academic inquiry—with confidence, if one can ever use *that* word with confidence). At times one writer will address one or two others at this table, but they do so with the rest as witnesses to, and participants in, the drama.

Our being with one another is enacted through writing. Readers will find themselves invited to join a group of scholars enjoying and burdened by words, sent within and attached to emails. This is writing as inquiry (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005) into group process, writing as inquiry into intimacy, writing as inquiry into friendship and love. Indeed, ours is “friendship as methodology” (Tillman-Healey, 2003): “Inquiry that is open, multivoiced, and emotionally rich, friendship as method involves the practices, the pace, the contexts, and the ethics of friendship” (p. 734). One could substitute the word “love” for “friendship”, and it would ring true for that which we aspire to within this book.

In the vein of Ron’s (2004) *Methodology of the Heart* or Ruth Behar’s (1996) *Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart*, this book presents hearts open, hearts broken. Our engagement is an intimate collaborative scholarly praxis. Within such a praxis, intimacy, collaboration, and scholarship engage one another. An intimate collaboration in scholarship can lay one bare in the academy, where vulnerability may be viewed as a lack of intellectual acumen or professional naiveté. In “Performing Writing” Della Pollock (1998), offers encouragement:

“to write in excess of norms of scholarly representation, to write beyond textuality into what might be called social mortalities, to make writing/textuality speak to, of, and through pleasure, possibility, disappearance, and even pain. In other words, to make writing perform.” (p. 79).

This writing praxis performs us into being with one another in ways that have transformed our personal and professional lives and continues to do so, in a Deleuzian process of becoming (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004)).

We began with a tentative investment in, and later fell into a kind of literary love with, one another. There was a tripping, a stumbling, a stuttering into a methodology in love with words, writing, and the constitution of the group.

This book talks of love as method, and it is *writing* that calls on and embodies the intimacy, the sensuality, the productive forcefulness, the “affective alliance” of which Pollock (1998) speaks:

“It is the performance of writing writing, pressing on through hyper-aesthetics and the enclosure of writing within writing, into ‘affective alliance’ with writing itself. In citational performativities, love comes home to language, and language to desire, each renewing itself in the other-texts and other-bodies without which it is nothing.” (p. 95)

Talking of love as methodology raises the stakes. “Love” is contested and problematic within the academy; radical, even. We are taking together different action from that which is expected from a group of academic writers; and, by presenting this work, we are encouraging others to do the same.

Each of us, at different times and in different ways, has found ourselves more or less comfortable with talking of a methodology of love. Yet, we keep returning to it, looking to “thicken” its description (Geertz, 1973), not wishing to let it go as we forge its meanings in our writing lives together.

### **The space in between**

We each contribute our scholarship through each other’s presence. It is possible to recognize Tami’s research into the aesthetic imperative in performative autoethnography. One can hear Ron asking the question of our writing, “What work does it do?” Larry’s presence leads us to write in terms of the sacred and of ritual. The Deleuzian collaborative writing that Ken and Jonathan have undertaken together, between-the-two, is woven into the strange and wonderful space that we create between-us-five. However, we pass the glass, we share the work. Deleuze writes of collaborations with others:

“What mattered was not the points—Felix, Clare Parnet, me and many others, who functioned simply as temporary, transitory and evanescent points of subjectivation—but the collection of bifurcating, divergent and muddled lines which constituted this book as a multiplicity and which passed between the points, carrying them along without ever going from the one to the other.” (Deleuze and Parnet, 2002, p. viii)

What matters in the writing in this book is less the points than the shapes, the spaces between writers, the meanings made through collaborative writing.

Through the writing we find our linguistically made bodies in the *in-between*. In that space, there is a clearer sense of the blurring of boundaries between the material and discursive body. Some might argue

that though words matter and that autoethnography is a profoundly ethical practice, the (f)act of the material body, the color, gender and health of the body trumps, in a sense, any linguistic representation. However, in our linguistic-made-material experience in this group writing, self, other and context travel somewhere between the somatic and the semantic. The body does not stay on the page. The material body made linguistic in the in-betweenness of selves jump(s) back off the page and embodies the fellow writer/reader. We find our selves, our embodied performativity changed, affected, reworked through this jump on and off the page. That jump is sometimes troubling and contradictory, signaling somehow a lack of agency, which we long both to hold onto and to relinquish within the group's writing life.

Such a space in-between, in the borderlands between loving and liminally intense words and bodies, is a place of comfort, of intensity, and of vulnerability; and it is fraught with the possibilities of confusion and pain. The inchoate, the heterogeneous, the subjective, the loving, is messy. Ron (2007) writes elsewhere:

"I must let my body speak with its heart exposed. I must be raw, raucous, rabid...I must cry out, cry in. Then I must ask the reason. I must be sure I can deal with the mess after I spill my guts" (p. 193).

Though seldom feeling "sure", we seek the wisdom that comes in attempting to deal with the mess. We continue to work at how a methodology of love functions when people are experiencing pain within the collaboration, when the borderlands shift differently, uncomfortably for some and not for others, how the pain can be recognized, validated and/or constructed by the group as a point of inquiry. We wonder how we respond if one of us does not want, is unable or chooses not to take a seat with the rest of us. Is it necessary that all are seated all the time for the collaboration to continue? Can one get up, go away, and come back? In nomadic inquiry (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004; Gale and Wyatt, 2009), nomads may get lost as borders and landscapes shift and change. Nomadic journeys toward meaning can be lonely, even (and maybe especially) when those one loves are right next to, right in-between.

In this book we invite the reader to look over our shoulders or to draw up a chair, to listen in as we go about the business of becoming present to one another. The reader may see five writers struggling to make connections, questioning their abilities to meet the challenges they set for themselves, and pushing forward with their own way of caring. We present a potential model or way of being to consider, one that has proved to be a generous and generative gift for the five of us.

## Beginnings

In the first stages of conceptualizing this book, we suggested to one another that we each construct preparatory words that might lead the reader into this space of intimacy. There is no neat story of how this group came to be writing together, but instead a messy series of overlapping, felt tales. This exchange follows, each of us writing in response to what the previous writer(s) has/have written. Ron begins:

“The invitation, offered at the 2007 International Conference of Qualitative Inquiry, came as a compliment. Four scholars, two from Britain (Jonathan and Ken with whom I had limited history) and two from the U.S. (Tami and Larry with whom I had a long personal and professional relationship), wanted me to join their beginning writing circle. Caught in the flattery of the moment and social awkwardness that saying no can sometimes bring, I gave consent without really having much of an understanding of what I was taking on. I knew we were to exchange writing, but that was about all. I left the Conference wondering if the idea to write together would materialize. Shortly after I arrived home, however, Jonathan’s story of Petra, a patient from his clinical practice, appeared in my email. Jonathan, I learned, had read the Petra tale to Larry and Tami at the Conference and had shared it with Ken on another occasion. That tale became the impetus for and signature of our writing circle. It was our first entry. More importantly, it established how we wanted to be.

The Petra story is a tale about a woman who is struggling to deal with the loss of her child and about Jonathan who is struggling to provide her adequate care given institutional constraints and his own capacities. Jonathan’s story calls Tami forward to share her experience with the loss of her child. Jonathan’s and Tami’s initial work established two informing logics: (1) write with a deep concern for others and (2) write allowing a vulnerable self to emerge. They modeled a narrative stance, a way of being, that became the group’s adopted mode. They showed us how we might write to one another. They gave us permission to do what they had done. That doing might best be described as a methodology and ethic of care.

As the method developed through our writing, several procedures emerged. First, we carried an obligation to write. We often embraced the demand, but at times it felt like heavy burden. The longer I failed to write, the more I sensed I was letting the group down, that I wasn’t keeping my end of the bargain, that I was betraying friends. Each of us experienced the push and pull of our lives outside the group, but each of us found time to write, to reach out, to fulfill the obligation. Second, we wrote allowing our

emotional and vulnerable selves to be present. We shared what we were feeling, sometimes about matters outside the group and sometimes about matters within our own circle. This guarded and unguarded openness seemed both risky and honest. Third, we created a caring space by being non-evaluative, empathic, and generous with each other. There are no entries where we censor, condemn, or chastise anyone in the group. Instead, we strove to hear what each other was saying, to lean into each other's writing to find its heart, its resonance and echoes. We applauded each other's efforts, perhaps to a fault, but with the consequence of creating and maintaining a safe place for us to be. Fourth, we wrote, as best we could, tapping into our literary sensibilities. Words were carefully chosen as we tried to evoke what we were experiencing. We tried to create our worlds, full of the rich complexity that life offers, full of the images that carry material power in our lives, full of figures of speech that offer precision and temporary control to the chaos of daily life. We tried to proceed not just as caring friends or scholars curious where our writing might lead us, but as creative writers. Fifth, we allowed ourselves to be constituted through our writing. As we wrote about caring, we became more caring people. As we claimed we mattered to each other, we acted with concern and love. We became what we wrote—a community of friends who remain committed to one another and who are filled with the joy of each other's presence.

Jonathan responded to Ron's writing:

"Ron's story of our beginnings and how our way of being developed carries resonance for me. I identify with Ron's perception of the tentativeness of what we were committing ourselves to. I knew that I was excited by the prospect of writing with Tami, Ron and Larry, each of whom I had spent at most only hours with but to whom I was drawn; and within a group context with Ken, who had been my writing partner for three years.

Larry, Tami and I had written alongside each other at Ron's 'Performative Writing' workshop at the 2007 conference. It was my first encounter with Larry and I had met both Tami and Ron before at previous conferences. Ken was present at Ron's workshop but in another group. We five found ourselves going for a drink together afterwards. Ken and I drank Blue Moon, malt beer with a slice of orange (an exotic experience for us English), which was to become a motif in our writing. There were later conversations at that conference, in the Illini Union café, during shared attendances at conference sessions, and, just Larry and I, on a walk around the campus after I found him wandering in the wrong direction to the final formal event of the conference. When we found our way there,



we sat with Tami. I have a memory of Tami suggesting, in between speeches, that we might write together.

At the cookout later that evening we three stood with Laurel Richardson and Lee Jenkins, and I read the early draft of the story that Ron refers to. Tami, Larry and I took the conversation about writing together further via email after the conference; I spoke to Ken; Tami talked with Ron; and we became five.”

Tami picks up from Jonathan’s story of how we started, suggesting less definition about what happened when, a blurring of timings and chronology:

“I’m not quite sure how to begin an introduction to this project because it seems, somehow, continuous, that it has somehow always and already been a part of the way I think and work with words, as if I have always had these four people with me, in me, beside me as we struggle, languish, and love with words. We exist for me in a ‘liminal intensity’, with one another; we are not ‘of’ one another but exist in the in-betweeness of one another. A liminal intensity, which, itself, is a phrase that was created in a rhizomatic exchange between us. One could search through our text and find the exact place in space and time that this term was first used, but wherever the term is found, there were threads and roots of tissue and sinew tied to it, leading from it, webbed around it in such a disposition of betwixt, that finding a point of origin for it would be far less satisfying than just living in the thick of it.

But, of course, we do have a demographic history that is also linear. I’ve known Ron for over 20 years, Larry for only a bit less, and Jonathan and Ken I met nearly 5 years ago. We have histories that do and do not overlap; we know things, important things, about one another that the others don’t. And all of those lines and things seem to negotiate themselves as we write in the dark together (another familiar metaphor in our writing), feeling our way around our bodies of words, making bodies with words.”

Ken, writes ‘alongside’ Tami in response to Ron and Jonathan. Their accounts were posted simultaneously:

“As I think and feel my way into trying to introduce our work together, I recognize the power of the image of ‘leaning’. Ghosts of the past that so luxuriantly inhabit our future. That small nascent group silhouetted on a hill. The tall man reading from fluttering leaves of paper, leaning into his writing. The woman both troubled and warmed by the words, leaning into the comfort of the shoulder of her dear friend. I sense now his spiritual leaning and the tears welling in his eyes. These inclinations, these

proclivities, carry such force. It is the leaning into the telling of this tale and the subsequent affects and interpretations that first created the materiality of our group, our becoming, our between-the-five. As Ron says: 'That tale became the impetus for and signature of our writing circle. It was our first entry. More importantly, it established how we wanted to be.'

I remember my inclinations at that time. Not present in that moment of initial union, my coming to the group troubled me. I remember using the imagery of the child turning up late for school, not knowing the other class members, feeling unsure of where to sit or what to do, to try to convey the insecurity that I felt in those early writing moments. I had read 'Petra' and Jonathan and I had shared thoughts and feelings emerging from that story, but this was different. As the story was told and recounted, I sensed the significance of the reading moment on that breezy slope, under the tree on the final evening of the conference; something important had happened there. I sensed the emergence of a Deleuzian 'plane of immanence' with its 'haecceities, affects, subjectless individuations that constitute collective assemblages' (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004, p. 294). My own troubled insecurities about my writing self destabilized me from the outset: 'Am I up to this?', 'Can I do this?', 'Is there a place for me here?' All these questions raced through my mind as I tentatively entered this space. At that time I had not read those words of Deleuze when he says of the plane of immanence, '(n)othing develops, but things arrive late or early, and form this or that assemblage depending on their compositions of speed' (op. cit). At that time I had not come to realize or acknowledge what Ron describes as the establishment in our writing of two 'informing logics', one that we "write with a deep concern for others" and two that we "write allowing a vulnerable self to emerge".

I am so warmed by this. I feel the heat generated by this 'coming to writing' (Cixous, 1991). I am gratified that my individuating, constantly changing, 'subjectless' self was not given the concept of the 'methodology and ethic of care' at that moment of fragile and hesitant entry into our writing. Instead, I feel that I have lived and grown within our work together. At the same time our writing has become a writing together, a between-the-five, where folding and unfolding has become the motif for our 'acts of activism' (Madison, 2010), where our performative selves have always shifted; a one and a four, a three and a two, a five and an infinity. So the involutions of our plane of immanence constantly compose and organize changes in form, meaning, feeling and affect that become the creative evolution of the assemblage of our collective and multiple selves in this group."

Finally, this is Larry's take on our beginnings, following on from the four previous writings:

"There was something magical about our writing process and product as we stumbled through the dark to find our way together. The wisp of narrative that we followed into the shadows was Jonathan's carefully observed and deeply felt work with a client, Petra. Jonathan's writing was substantial, but our commitment to accept his narrative as the first breath of our dialogue—the intonation—was sheer faith in a harmonic pattern we might find together. It was a matter (if matter is not too weighty a term) of improvisation. Jonathan's handling of the situation, like his handling of the language, was inspiring, and we took our breath from his, breathing in as he was breathing out. The gesture of his story pointed to something in the distance, and we followed a not-yet-visible course. The impulse moved from one of us to another, and we shaped it in passing. Although our writing was often marked by self-disclosure, it never felt indulgent because our basic impulse, from the story of Petra through the many subsequent stories of loss, had been shaped by Jonathan's attitude of listening. Even in our own stories, we were listening for larger themes and resonance with each other and perhaps a shared compassion for the hard work of living. Having listened so intently in that first story, we continued to listen carefully to each other and, finally, to ourselves. This attitude accounts for the quiet tone in those letters back and forth and for the intimacy into which we slipped. Perhaps it was the quiet of each individual study and the pale light of each computer screen framing the question of what to write, but we found ourselves composing from still and private recesses of our experience.

The quality of our listening was not bound by the words we heard in each posting. It was more than a careful study of the words. Jonathan had modeled an openness, which we slowly took up. In the same way that he began to examine his environment on the basis of what Petra had told him, we, too, found ourselves opening to a wider view. As he wondered at the effect upon her of the posters in the clinic waiting room, we took what we heard from each other and looked at familiar scenes we had not known could pierce us to that depth.

The writing became a performance of shared vulnerability. We each cleared a working space, tending individual plots, but not as though we were solitary workers. Like the blind whose hearing has become acute, we strained for the nuance in the stories as they trained us to listen closely. It took time, but eventually we realized that the silence of writing was not a void; the words were not lost. I'm not sure whether we knew this before we gathered again at the QI conference where we read aloud writing from

that previous year. The auditory rush of that performance confirmed the sounds we had imagined as we read each other's texts. It was as we imagined, but it was not imaginary. For each of us, it was the sound of those four other voices that made it possible to write and then keep on writing in this intimate vein. We have coaxed stories out of each other in the security of these caring voices. Now we write in anticipation of a sensitive reception. It is an ineffable response we have offered each other since Jonathan first listened to Petra. For our quintet of writers to arrive at this form, there has been a spaciousness, a range of felt experience that is not only allowed but also encouraged. And so we found that the scope of a shared autoethnography has room for a more generous exploration of self."

There are different, meandering, complementary takes on this project's beginnings and what they mean to us; how something drew, and continues to hold, each writer.

The 'something' might include an awareness that this work matters, as Ken's reference to Madison hints at, that this collaboration has significance beyond the personal enrichment that it brings. When Denzin and Giardina (2009) argue that there is a need "for a militant utopianism" to work towards imagining a better world and for scholars to "adopt methodologies that transcend the limitations and constraints of a lingering politically and racially conservative postpositivism", we wish to align ourselves with them. We see our work in this book as a contribution to imagining "a world that is caring, loving, and truly compassionate" (p. 12).

### **Bodies of text, textual bodies**

Though the intimacy, collaboration, and scholarly processes of this work may exist in methodological praxis, the voices in this book are textually distinct and separate. The reader will clearly see who is writing where and when upon the page. Between and within these voices, however, each speaks and exists with one another. We moved into a "figure of relation", as Pollock (1998) writes, emerging from between lines of difference, moving inexorably from one's experience to another's, "reconstituting each in turn" (p. 87). We are not 'of' one another inside a nostalgic blur, but rather our writing exists between ourselves where we might hear one another talking under our breath, or witness a sharp intake of breath, breathing into the sighs of one another, or taking one's breath away altogether. We lean in to one another, "feeling our way," writes Ken, "through rich and dangerous words." And we feel the intensity and weight of such leaning, sometimes as love, sometimes as obligation, and

ultimately as an investment and commitment to writing one another into a performative being on and off the page.

The chapters that follow are the pieces, in chronological order, which we exchanged between us for the two years from June 2007 to April 2009. We presented edited versions of these at the International Congresses of Qualitative Inquiry in May 2008 and 2009 respectively (Gale et al., 2008, 2009). The writing was not, of course, organized into chapters as we wrote, but we have arranged them in this way here. We indicate who is “talking” at each point and, where we judge it helpful, we offer an introduction in our first person plural voice at the top of each chapter. We begin soon after our returns home from Champaign-Urbana in May 2007, when the reading of “Petra” to Tami and Larry and those first discussions of writing together had taken place.



**PART I:**

**JUNE 2007-MAY 2008**

# CHAPTER ONE

## GETTING STARTED, JUNE-AUGUST 2007

There were two and three-way emails between Larry, Tami and Jonathan, between Jonathan and Ken and between Ron and Tami, upon our return home from the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry in May. These concerned establishing who had spoken to whom and what had been agreed. The following writing, from Jonathan, was our first contact as a group of five.

### Jonathan

Greetings from sunny Oxford, as Ken and I enjoy some time to beaver away at our dissertation, meeting occasionally and relishing the space that a few weeks' study leave has given us.<sup>1</sup> Summer vacations approach and, mindful, Tami, Ron and Larry, of yours ending when ours begin in early August, I thought that I would write to you now rather than wait till the end of August, in follow up to our post-QI<sup>2</sup> discussions about collaborating ahead of next year's event.

Are you still on for doing something together? For spinning a web of writing across states and ocean? I hope so.

If you are, here is something that I offer for us to spin off, away from, into, under, over. It is a short piece of writing that already has a history amongst us in different configurations. Tami, Larry and I shared it, unfinished, standing together at the cook-out on the Saturday of QI. Ken and I have since folded it into our writings together. For Ron it will be fresh. This positioning may be something we can write into: inclusion and exclusion? Our differently shared histories? The writing may have lost its moment and we may not find energy in it, but here it is, for us to play/work with, for us to respond to, to pick up, in whatever way we feel inspired to do, maybe only one of us, maybe more, and for us in turn to

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<sup>1</sup> Ken and Jonathan were in the process of completing their joint doctoral dissertation at the University of Bristol, UK.

<sup>2</sup> "QI": The annual International Congresses of Qualitative Inquiry at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA.



spin off that new writing, and so on; with writing that, as Tami said in her original email to Larry, Ken and me, is “under no pressure to do or be or look ‘good’ in any manner that may squelch whatever direction we might want to go in the stream of narrative with one another.” (I like the word “squelch”.)

Or this attached writing may not spark anything, and we can write about that absence of spark, perhaps, and start there, or somewhere else.

How does this seem, friends?

### **A counseling story: Petra<sup>3</sup>**

I tell Petra that it’s been a privilege. She looks down for a moment, then lifts her eyes—hazel, intense—her long hair slipping back slightly in the movement. She mouths the words “thank you”, and I quickly say, “So, I’ll see you in a few weeks then”, as cover for the tears I feel gathering at my eyes. And I wonder to what extent my suggestion of meeting again in a few weeks’ time, when today was our final session of six, was to address my need as much as hers.

When she leaves I remain standing, looking out of the window at the September afternoon. The view, of bushes littered with fast food containers and cigarette packets, a quiet suburban road and houses behind, is drab; the sky, grey. Today is indistinguishable from yesterday and will probably be so from tomorrow.

I cannot face writing notes yet. I carry Petra’s story. I long to write it. I am full of her. (The notes will feel routine, a chore, and I do not want that now.) Today—again at my prompting—we have talked about her writing her story during the time before we next meet. I hope that she writes. I already want to read the outcome, though I have kept this desire to myself.

I replay our fifty minutes in my head: Today is Wednesday. She came at midday. She was low. She described how, on Saturday, she had been at home in her flat, waiting for her younger sister—Petra is twenty-eight—to arrive from abroad. She waited all day. Her sister did not arrive and she received no word. They had not seen each other for many weeks and Petra was looking forward to their meeting. Although she had woken determined to be positive, to make something of her day, she found herself sinking. Her sense of loss, a constant presence this past year, rose to meet her.

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<sup>3</sup> A version of this story was first published as part of Gale and Wyatt (2009). At the time of writing, Jonathan worked as a counsellor of adults within the UK’s National Health Service.

Her sister did not contact her until Sunday morning and arrived, eventually, later that evening. Petra told me that she was not angry with her sister—this is how it is and she is used to it—but, by then, having again spent the day alone, she was close to despair.

A knock at my half-open door. I turn from the window and Sarah gives me a message about someone I'm seeing later that day. As she goes I notice a steady stream of older patients heading to and from the nurses' room for flu jabs. One man, uncertain about which room, turns towards mine briefly before registering, from the posters offering advice on breast feeding and healthy eating for children, and my lack of uniform, that this is not the place. We smile at each other and he moves on. I look again at the posters. On other days this room is used for the baby clinic. The posters cover the boards and walls: a series of smiling mothers of different races and ages, babies latched on, feeding happily; salutary cartoons alerting parents to hazards in the home, like the father carrying his baby who trips over the unseen dog and topples in mock horror; and a selection of grinning, toothy children and instructions on how to preserve baby's teeth. I sit down in shock. Did Petra notice? Of course she did. How could she not? She is not the first patient whom I have seen who has lost a baby and I have often worried about the reminders that this room must carry. With Petra this must have been cruel. She made no mention, nor did I see her notice them.

Ever since she had been a young child she had known that she would never have children. Her medical condition, which she continues to control through heavy medication, meant that she could not consider it an option, with the consequences for her, and for any baby she might bear, being too dangerous to contemplate. She had therefore grown up preparing herself for this reality and apparently reconciled to it. It was as if she had managed to close the lid on that part of herself and place the box into the archives.

Then, at 27, she met someone at work and the relationship progressed. She conceived.

Initially, aware of the implications, and afraid, she considered a termination. But something beyond the biological had been born inside her. The archived box had been retrieved.

Her partner accompanied her to endless consultations with her specialists.

At eight weeks she had a scan.

Her baby had died.

Four days later, a Sunday, she had a brief operation to remove the "genetic material". Next day she rested at home, alone. She had told her

family about neither the pregnancy nor its loss. Her partner was at work. On the Tuesday she too returned to work.

Over the weeks that followed she experienced her partner as unwilling or unable to communicate with her. He ended the relationship. They continue to see each other in the office every day.

I stay seated and my door remains open. In a few minutes I will need to vacate the room for the doctors' monthly meeting. This space is the largest in the building and sees heavy and varying traffic. I gather my laptop and other items together. I will be back later this afternoon for two further patients.

I carry Petra with me into the greyness outside. This "possessing" of her is a good feeling that I am not anxious to be rid of. I am aware of resonances, and why, in part, she stays with me: the vivid memories of fifteen years ago, of to-ing and fro-ing to the hospital, of raised hope and fierce sadness before, finally, relief and joy. But the echoes do not account for all of it, for this powerful need to tell a story about Petra.

Armed with notebook I settle to coffee in town and, as the small, blond boy next to me in the blue tracksuit talks to his attentive mother about Mrs. Honey, his teacher at playgroup, I begin to write my way into Petra, and into me; and the scrawled beginnings of a narrative become another way in which I will continue to bear her until I see her again.

I am outside my room, looking the short distance up the corridor towards the glass paneled waiting room door. (I always wait here rather than inside. I think it is a gesture towards connection.) She will open the door and see me. I will probably become aware of her first, notice her walking towards it through the glass.

I am expectant.

Expectant.

I see her. I can't tell, initially, from her face, gait nor quiet greeting, how she is.

It has been six weeks, during which time I know that she planned to take a month's leave to return home to the northeast and head, alone, for the Northumbrian coastline she loves.

We sit, catch each other's eye, and I wait for her to begin.

My child is named.

He is formed within and I have named him.

I have carved him into the packed, damp sand,

Gathered fingers feeling him form in the roughness,

Water collecting in the furrow of each letter.

I have sat on rocks, drawn my coat around my belly against the cold,

And watched the incoming tide inexorably approach,  
 Water sweeping in to shroud him.  
 I have written him and I have written to him:  
 Of the hopes and plans that I had for him,  
 Of how I would have been for him,  
 Of the love I would have given.  
 When she leaves I shut the door and, standing, close my eyes; then  
 settle to her notes.  
 I prepare myself for my next patient. I think that I am ready.

## **Tami**

### **When and where I enter**

I am stealing “When and Where I Enter” from the book title by Paula Giddings (1984) who talks about the ways in which Black women do and do not, can and cannot enter into various cultural systems and dialogues. Though my situation is surely different, I find that it aptly describes where I am in relation to Petra’s story, and Petra’s story through Jonathan.

Most of you know, though you may not know this Ken, that we lost a child in childbirth. I entered Jonathan’s story through his reading of it whilst four or five of us gathered in a small circle at the QI barbeque. The sun was going down and Jonathan’s voice, Petra’s pain, our lost son swirled around this circle like specters and angels at once. My heart still seizes a bit at the memory of this telling. It is as if two performances capture me: one of Jonathan’s telling, the other of Petra sitting, talking, crying, leaving.

I confess that I haven’t engaged the text yet in print. My heart is feeling that familiar grip at the thought of spending time with the story in the experience of my own reading.

And then there is the fact that this story which took me to places in my own experiences of loss that my writing has not taken me, that talking with other women has not taken me, was written by a man. The loss of a child is such a biologically gendered experience; yet, the story exists with a multitextured empathy. But maybe this is partially why I find myself entering the story from a different space and time than I have before.

Just some beginning thoughts.

## Ron

With connection comes responsibility, a burden dressed in “shoulds”, an obligation of proof that demonstrates caring is genuine. Yet, life conspires with its rules and regulations, with its practical demands of putting food on the table, with its seductions on behalf of lethargy, with its learned inadequacies. Seldom do we give the only thing we have worth giving, an empathic presence. So we story ourselves into approval hiding what we know to be true: We are not always what we should be.

When I read Jonathan’s account of his thoughts and interactions with Petra and Tami’s tentative and quiet reminder that she lost a child at birth, I am caught in the thorny and sad realization that I did not demonstrate my genuine care. Jonathan’s and Tami’s stories implicate me, each in their own way.

Jonathan, a person with whom I’d say I have a beginning professional friendship, offers a moving description of his patient, Petra, a woman who is struggling to hold her life together after losing a child and then her partner. I feel for Petra, perhaps most because of the power of Jonathan’s writing, but I do not take her on as a social obligation. She serves, instead, as Burke (1938) would have it, as “equipment of living,” a lesson to be learned by encountering literature. She goes into my file marked, “Life is hard,” and functions as a reminder of what a person might be experiencing in such circumstances. I know my understanding is deeply limited, but I leave Jonathan’s text believing I know more than I did. I also leave Jonathan’s text in regard to Petra letting myself off the social hook.

Jonathan’s story, however, is not just about Petra—it is equally about his own feelings. I read Jonathan’s tale with an evaluative edge. I applaud the way Jonathan allows himself to be filled with Petra, to live with her, to carry her beyond the counseling session. I applaud his recognition of the constraints under which he must work—limits on the number of allowed counseling sessions and his willingness (need?) to add another session beyond what the rules and regulations dictate. I applaud his recognition that the pictures of nursing mothers on the wall must be a cruel reminder for Petra. I applaud his ability to enter Petra’s world, to see what she must be seeing. I applaud this good man and I say to myself, “That is how a counselor should be.” I do not, however, applaud myself.

When Jonathan’s email arrived, I quickly read the story he sent, acknowledged its arrival, and offered quick thanks for his moving tale. Then, I let it sit. It became another thing on my “to do” list. Jonathan, the person I met on the page, became Jonathan the author who had created a text that required my response. I was drawn to other tasks and let Jonathan

fall away. I did not, for instance, respond to Jonathan individually (my email went to the writing group). I did not respond to Jonathan's difficult struggles with Petra. I did not ask if there was any way I could be there for him. I did not offer any counsel for the counselor. And as I write this, I have my saving narratives: Jonathan's story was not asking for such a response; I do not know Jonathan well enough to position myself that way in relationship to him; I do not have sufficient background to offer anything that might be helpful to Jonathan; and so on. In short, I left Jonathan, fixed as author and counselor, in that coffee shop alone with Petra. I did not provide the opportunity for one more session.

Tami, a person with whom I'd say I have a long, rich, and loving friendship, shares her personal response to Jonathan's tale. It is a story I know and expect. I have been privileged to sit with Tami as she related her feelings about the loss of her child. I have witnessed her performances that put on display what such a loss might mean. I have seen tears fall from Tami's eyes. I have felt Tami's pain. But as I reconstruct the history of my responses to Tami, I am confronted with my poor display of caring. I've said, "Oh, Tami. I am so sorry," and truly meant it. I've held Tami in my arms, trying with a hug to say I understand and that I am here for you. I've carried Tami in my thoughts. Yet, all such responses feel insufficient, a perfunctory nod in the face of overwhelming pain. But here too I've allowed myself saving narratives: Others are there for her—Barry, her husband, and Elyse, her dear friend; as a man, I can never fully understand what such a loss might mean; the distance between St. Cloud and Carbondale made it difficult for me to do more; and so on. Such narratives are proof that I have not met the obligation of our connection.

So, again, I say, "Tami, I am so sorry." I am sorry not only for your loss but for how I have been. When the dark times come, whether from the past or from the future you have yet to meet, I will be a better friend. I will be there, beside you, offering whatever I might have of value to you. I will write the poem of our connection. More importantly, I will try to be with you, in writing, in words, in full. I will be present, if my presence matches your desire. With your permission, I can find a saving narrative I can trust. Our connection is an obligation I embrace. My caring is genuine.

## **Jonathan**

I've had this email in my "drafts" box for a few hours. Now I must click "send":

It is like this for me, today: