



The following notes are from a speech given by Maria Tumarkin at the opening of the Blake Prize at The Jewish Museum of Australia.

Maria Tumarkin is a writer and cultural historian (www.mtumarkin.net). Born in 1974 in the former Soviet Union in a Russian Jewish family, which in 1989 immigrated to Australia. Author of "Traumascapes" (2005), "Courage" (2007) and "Otherland" (2010). Lives in Melbourne with her two kids.

Depart without return

This work was developed by Artist Shoufay Derz when she was grieving for her father.

How does that much-repeated saying go? "In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes." [Benjamin Franklin]

A small correction, if I may. In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except grief, death and taxes. So universal is the experience of grief, so fundamental to being human, so inescapable.

But – if we mention grief, we must mention love. The two are each other's shadows. The two are comrades-in-arms. So one final correction: In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except love, grief, death and taxes.

C.S. Lewis wrote this about grief: grief is 'like a bomber circling round and dropping its bombs each time the circle brings it overhead' (36). Round and round it goes. You may lift your head for a moment, straighten your back, whistle a little innocuous tune, and then in the distance you hear that unmistakable sound again. You know, it's coming.... You know what's coming....

This work is like that. Round and round it goes. Round and round grief goes. Like a bomber on a mission. Like a looping video tape.

Real artists are always ahead of their time – this is their blessing, and, at times, their tragedy. Most importantly, perhaps, this is their job. But we, as a whole, as a culture, have started talking differently about grief in the last few decades. All this language, so dominant, so omnipresent once, about seven stages of grief – about marching through shock, disbelief, anger, whatever else, towards being healed – is giving place to a different language. The language that artists and writers have been using for centuries.

It is not the language of stages, of management, of closure but the language of love and pain, of endurance and surrender, of torment and mystery, the language of the "unending absence" (in the words of Joan Didion) that death brings to the living.

There is a program on SBS called "Insight" – a discussion show presented by the excellent Jenny Brockie, in which studio audience debates a single, usually big and usually contentious, topic.

Last year one of those topics was grief. The audience had a number of the obligatory experts, but the majority were people with the intensely personal experiences of grief. They spoke differently about grieving – this difference was unmistakable.

'I will never, ever get over the loss of my son - ever', said the father of a boy who committed suicide after being bullied

"This is not an illness. I'm not going to get over it. I'm going to live with it", said the mother of a girl who died in an accident.

'In the end you don't want to get over the grief because the grief - grief is love', said a man who lost his daughter.

Grief produces its own time and its own timelessness. The artist is here lying on the bottom of the old boat. The boat is in the river. River is an archetypal image of life, death and rebirth, of a life's journey and of stages of human life, of the passage of time, of time flowing into eternity.

How still is this face? So still at the start that it almost merges with whatever is around it. So still that we cannot be sure if the person in front of us is alive or dead. Could this person, by chance, be both, alive and dead at the same time? Yes, of course. In grief, the person we're grieving for is both dead and alive for us (alive because we cannot fully conceive of them being absent, because they come to us in our dreams, because we see them down the street, because our memories of them feel so acute, so visceral, so shatteringly real; because, contrary to everything, we wait for them to return, convinced that one day they will knock on the door).

"Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it. We anticipate (we know) that someone close to us could die, but we do not look beyond the few days or weeks that immediately follow such an imagined death. We misconstrue the nature of even those few days or weeks. We might expect if the death is sudden to feel shock. We do not expect this shock to be oblitative, dislocating to both body and mind. We might expect that we will be prostrate, inconsolable, crazy with loss. We do not expect to be literally crazy, cool customers who believe their husband is about to return and need his shoes." Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*

In some way, the person who grieves too is both alive and dead (because the death of a person we love takes a part of us with it). They say there is no such thing as a little bit pregnant. True enough. But I suspect that there is such a thing as a little bit dead.

The face in Shoufay Derz's artwork is both human and mythical. It is archetypal.

The silkmoths are fluttering their wings – a still face and insects... Where have we seen this before? For a moment, you may chance, in the imaginary archive of images in your mind, upon a fleeting image of insects overrunning a decomposing body.... Feasting on dead flesh. Moths, worms.... But no, it is not this kind of image. What kind of image it is then? This coming together of movement and stillness, of life and death?

What about this: the images of wild flowers and plants of uncommon beauty blooming in the ruins across the shattered Europe post-WWII – a historic fact; the images of plants of uncommon beauty springing in the bush following Black Saturday. Out of ashes... Out of death.... It is as if nature keeps its most exuberant colours, its most startling shapes, for these moments after devastation.

But there is an overpowering fragility in nature as well. The moths are fragile, transient. Their life-cycle is short and finite.

First the artist, the face, opens her mouth. Slowly. Then she opens her eyes. And, for a second, the artwork doesn't look benign. There is a jolt.

The eyes stare straight at us. The eyes blink. And then the eyes close. Back into the inwardness of grief.

'Death is one unknown that I believe most worthy of creative reflection...'
this is what Shoufay Derz said in a recent interview.

Not-knowing, unknowing, unknown – these to me are the starting points of any real artistic, creative project.

We start in the darkness. I think of this starting point as a dark forest sometimes (and this image of a dark forest seems very potent to me, very apt, because of its mythical power, its place in fairytales and folk tradition, the power this image had on us when we were children) and we find our way out – stumbling in the dark, getting lost, terrified at times and at times enchanted – we literally make a path where there was none before. We make our way towards light, towards illumination, towards a little metaphoric cottage with a thatched roof.

Making a path through the forest is a very different experience to, say, driving your car on a six-lane highway. Yet, I think, in many parts of our culture we are terrified about 'not-knowing'. But how else do you create something new? How else do you come as close as you can to that which is beyond comprehension and articulation? How else do you find truth?

"Truth is not a matter of exposure which destroys the secret, but a revelation that does justice to it." – famous words of *Walter Benjamin*. Revelation that does justice to it. I repeat these words to myself often. Especially when I write.

Shoufay Derz is interested in transience. And in silence. In the field of linguistics, it has long been understood that silence and speech do not stand in total opposition to each other, but form a continuum of forms. I love this idea from philosopher Mikhail Epstein 'Silence', he writes, 'is a form of consciousness, a method of its articulation, and its takes its rightful place alongside its other forms – to think about..., to speak about..., to ask about..., to write about..., to be silent about...'

Silence is not the absence of speech. Not the failure of language. Sometimes it can be the only real way into the full engagement with certain kinds of histories and experiences.

Maria Tumarkin