



TIME
LIVED,
WITHOUT
ITS
FLOW

Denise
Riley

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Time Lived, Without Its Flow

DENISE RILEY

PICADOR

I'll not be writing about death, but about an altered condition of life. The experience that not only preoccupied but occupied me was of living in suddenly arrested time: that acute sensation of being cut off from any temporal flow that can grip you after the sudden death of your child. And a child, it seems, of any age.

Because I'm considering a state that's not rare, but for many is lived daily, I shan't be having recourse to an exceptionalist diction of 'trauma'. And whether this state might be considered to fall within the compass of 'pathology' doesn't greatly bother me here, although my inclination's to avoid that judgement. Certainly someone could produce an account of this freezing of time as an act of dissociation, or a borderline psychotic effort to erect a shield against the death's reality. Or someone else could produce neurological accounts of the brain flooded with its own – this time, biochemical – defences. But I want to avoid offering my amateur speculations about existing theories. Instead, while hoping not to lapse into melodrama or self-regarding memoir, I'll try to convey that extraordinary feeling of a-temporality.

But how could such a striking condition ever be voiced? It runs wildly counter to everything that I'd thought we could safely assume about lived time. So this 'arrested time' is also a question about what is describable; about the linguistic limits of what can be conveyed. I'm not keen on conceding to any such limits. Yet it seems that the possibilities for describing, and the kinds of temporality that you inhabit, may be intimately allied. For there do turn out to be 'kinds', in the plural.

This stopping of time can, for those who find themselves plunged into it, be lived. It turns out, surprisingly, not to be necessary to live only inside a time that runs in a standard movement. You discover, on the contrary, that you can manage well enough inside your private non-time of pure stasis. That such an experience is not uncommon, I'm sure, as I've listened closely for several years to what bereaved parents say in meetings, in online discussions, or in private encounters – and this in two countries. Yet any published mention of this seemingly a-temporal life is rare. Before speculating about its absence, I want to insist that such a prolonged cessation of the flow of time is not contained by the well-worn metaphorical remark that 'time stopped'. There's nothing that feels either familiar or metaphorical in living out this condition in which

time, perhaps for years on end, is arrested. The weak metaphor of 'time stopped' would sap the force from a description of this new state. Once you're plunged into it, the actual metaphoricity of our usual accounts of the passage of time is laid bare, for now you realize that the real espousal of figurative speech would be to maintain that time inevitably 'flows'.

Hard to put into words, yet absolutely lucid as you inhabit it daily, this sensation of having been lifted clean out of habitual time only becomes a trial if you attempt to make it intelligible to others who've not experienced it. The prospect of recounting it in a written form stayed, for me, both repugnant and implausible for well over two and a half years after the death. You can't, it seems, take the slightest interest in the activity of writing unless you possess some feeling of futurity. The act of describing would involve some notion of the passage of time. Narrating would imply at least a hint of 'and then' and 'after that'. Any written or spoken sentence would naturally lean forward towards its development and conclusion, unlike my own paralysed time. Why should you even dream of explaining how, after an unexpected death, you might find yourself living in this profoundly altered temporal state? The risks of trying are clear enough: you'd resemble the survivor of the 1960s who bores everyone with tales of his inexpressibly memorable acid trips – then, as if worse were needed, you'd top it off with the layer of unassailable pathos due to your status as the mother of a dead child.

Nonetheless, however commonplace this condition of being 'outside time', when you're first in it, it's so quietly astonishing that you can't do other than take a cool interest in how you might characterize it. This, for several reasons. Because to concede at the outset that it's 'indescribable' would only isolate you further, when coming so close to your child's death is already quite solitary enough; because it's scarcely rare, for immeasurably vast numbers have known, and will continue to know, this sense of being removed from time, and so your efforts might well be familiar to everyone else who's also struggled to speak about this vivid state. Or perhaps it's also a kind of vanity, my hope that describing it might ring true for others who are in the same boat.

There's no specific noun for a parent of a dead child; nothing like the terms for other losses such as 'orphan' or

'widower'. No single word exists, either, for an 'adult child' – an awkward phrase which could suggest a large floppy-limbed doll. For such a historically common condition as outliving your own child, the vocabulary is curiously thin. The same phrases recur. For instance, many kindly onlookers will instinctively make use of this formula: 'I can't imagine what you are feeling.' There's a paradox in this remark, for it's an expression of sympathy, yet in the same breath it's a disavowal of the possibility of empathy. Undoubtedly it's very well meant, if (understandably) fear-filled. People's intentions are good; a respect for the severity of what they suppose you're enduring, and so a wish not to claim to grasp it. Still, I'd like them to *try* to imagine; it's not so difficult. Even if it's inevitable, or at any rate unsurprising, that those with dead children are regarded with concealed horror, they don't need to be further shepherded into the inhuman remote realms of the 'unimaginable'. So I want to try, however much against the odds, to convey only the one striking aspect: this curious sense of being pulled right outside of time, as if beached in a clear light.

My own instincts here happen to run in favour of de-dramatizing; but to properly de-dramatize, first you'd need to admit this strangeness fully into the compass of the discussable. Perhaps there may be at least a half-tellable ordinariness here. This demands witness. I'll offer some of that, if hesitantly, as I'd rather have steered clear of all autobiography. A few of my notes are reproduced below, though they can walk around only the rim of this experience. At times they loop back on themselves, for one effect of living inside such a temporal suspension is that your reflections will crop up all over again but as if, on each occasion, they're newly thought.

What follows is what I set down at the time at infrequent intervals, in the order that I lived it.

Two weeks after the death:

In these first days I see how rapidly the surface of the world, like a sheet of water that's briefly agitated, will close again silently and smoothly over a death. His, everyone's, mine. I see, as if I am myself dead. This perception makes me curiously light-hearted.

You share in the death of your child, in that you approach it so closely that you sense that a part of you, too, has died that instant. At the same time, you feel that the spirit of the child has leaped into you. So you are both partly dead and yet more alive. You are cut down, and yet you burn with life.

One month after the death:

This so-called 'work of grief' is turning out to be a shatteringly exhausting apprehension of the needed work of *living*. It demands to be fully lived, while the labour of living it is physically exhausting – like virulent jetlag, but surging up in waves.

The notes and emails of condolence have stopped arriving and I've acknowledged each of them. Yet after all this ritual and effort, he *still* hasn't come home. What more does he want?

So intricate and singular a living thing can't just vanish from the surface of life: that would run counter to all your accumulated experience. The day after his death, studiously wiping away what you realize are the last tangible traces: tiniest bits of his hair from the edge of the washbasin. This solid persistence of *things*. So then, the puzzle of what 'animation' is; of exactly what it is that's been crushed.

This instant enlargement of human sympathy. It's arrived in me at once. His death has put me in mind of those millions whose children were and are lost in natural disasters, starved, drowned, or systematically obliterated in wars; no wonder that bitterness and a loss of hope have filtered down the generations, with the resulting disengagement of those left alive. Millions disorientated, perhaps, by this quiet feeling of living, only just, on this near side of a cut between the living and the dead.

At the death of your child, you see how the edge of the living world gives onto burning whiteness. This edge is clean as a strip of guillotined celluloid film. First came the intact negative

full of blackened life in shaded patches, then abruptly, this milkiness. This candid whiteness, where a life stopped. Nothing 'poetic', not the white radiance of eternity – but sheer non-being, which is brilliantly plain.

Five months after:

Apparently almost half a year has gone by since J disappeared, and it could be five minutes or half a century, I don't know which. There is so very little movement. At first I had to lie down flat for an hour each afternoon, because of feeling crushed as if by a leaden sheet, but by now I don't need to lie down. This slight physical change is my only intimation of time.

Knowing and also not knowing that he's dead. Or I 'know' it, but privately I can't feel it to be so. These fine gradations of admitting the brute facts of the case, while not feeling them; utterly different, though, from supposing that he's still alive somewhere else in this world. This isn't some ambiguity designed to blur the hard fact. Nor is it an imperfect anaesthetic.

This knowing and not knowing is useful, for it allows the truthful richness of all those shades of acknowledging and dissenting. Half-realizing while half-doubting, assenting while demurring, conceding while finding it ludicrously implausible – so many distinctions, all of them nicely in play. To characterize such accurate nuances as my 'denial' of his death would be off the mark. Yet who is policing my 'acceptance' of it?

What a finely vigorous thing a life is; all its delicate complexity abruptly vanished. Almost comical. A slapstick fall.

There's no relation, simply, between your recall of the courageously optimistic dead and your knowledge of the fall of sudden blackness. But you struggle to hold both in mind at once. You try to slot together the snippets of evidence – coffin, ashes, silent house, non-reappearance of child – to become fully convinced by the deduction that you have conscientiously drawn.

My head can't piece together the facts of a coffin under its roses and lilies, then the sifting gunmetal-grey ashes, with this puzzling absence of the enthusiastic person who left home to work abroad for a few days but has still not walked back in the door.

Not that I have *delusions*, as such. But a strong impression

that I've been torn off, brittle as any dry autumn leaf, liable to be blown onto the tracks in the underground station, or to crumble as someone brushes by me in this public world where people rush about loudly, with their astonishing confidence. Each one of them a candidate for sudden death, and so helplessly vulnerable. If they do grasp that at any second their own lives might stop, they can't hold on to that expectation. As I do now. Later everyone on the street seems to rattle together like dead leaves in heaps.

Wandering around in an empty plain, as if an enormous drained landscape lying behind your eyes had turned itself outward. Or you find yourself camped on a threshold between inside and out. The slight contact of your senses with the outer world, your interior only thinly separated from it, like a membrane resonating on a verge between silence and noise. If it were to tear through, there's so little behind your skin that you would fall out towards the side of sheer exteriority. Far from taking refuge deeply inside yourself, there is no longer any inside, and you have become only outward. As a friend, who'd survived the suicide of the person closest to her, says: 'I was my two eyes set burning in my skull. Behind them there was only vacancy.'

I work to earth my heart.

Six months after:

A summer has gone, a cold autumn is setting in, but I've no sense of my time as having any duration, or any future. Time now is a plateau. I only know whether an event came before or after the date of the death. If there was a death. I didn't see the body. His body. Not that the sight always helps to anchor your belief in the fact. What a lumpish little word: 'dead'. And 'died' seems an increasingly silly verb. 'Dead', used of the lively J, strikes me as not only unlikely, but mistaken. A prematurely coarse verdict. Like John Donne's phrase; 'her death – which word wrongs her.' ¹ Instead I want to say 'since he vanished'. That seems far more accurate. It's better conveyed in French or in Italian, where without any affectation you could call someone's death 'his disappearance', or you might naturally say that 'she has left us'.

Immediately J vanished, I fell into a solidarity with other bereaved parents: an imagined solidarity, because at that stage I didn't know any. I sought them out, online and in meetings

and one-to-one, and I listen ardently to how they try to live on. So I can hear that everyone testifies to this wish once they're in the safe company of others in the same boat: the hope for their own rapid death. Yet I can't allow myself this comforting prospect, as I won't abandon my surviving children. Any more than I'll abandon the dead one. I never abandoned him in his life, and I've no intention of starting now, 'just because he's dead'. What kind of a reason would that be? I tried always to be there for him, solidly. And I shall continue to be. (The logic of this conviction: in order to 'be there', I too have died.)

A vicarious death. If a sheet of blackness fell on him, it has fallen on me too. As if I also know that blackness after his loss of consciousness.

This state is physically raw, and has nothing whatever to do with thinking sad thoughts or with 'mourning'. It thuds into you. Inexorable carnal knowledge.

The plainest simplest horror from which the mind flinches away: never to see that person again. The purely *cognitive* violence of it. Now you understand those ideas of the migration of spirits, or of reincarnation: to try to soften that blow. Or no, not to soften it – but to provide something for baffled cognition to grasp at.

I've decided that this slow head of mine has to be left alone to *not* manage to make its impossible deduction. Meanwhile I'll try to incorporate J's best qualities of easy friendliness, warmth, and stoicism, and I shall carry him on in that way. Which is the only kind of resurrection of the dead that I know about.

I am inching along. But not forward, or in any other decipherable direction. If it's crabwise, then it's without effective pincers. This deep tiredness, as if sharing his grave; although actually most of that dead boy was poured as fine charcoal powder straight into the sea.

Nine months after:

Now it's thirty-nine weeks, the duration of a pregnancy, since he vanished. As if a pregnancy had by now been wound backwards past the point of conception and away into its pre-existence.

What do the dead give us? A grip on the present instant in which we're now relentlessly inserted. Not in a contemplative sense, but vigorously. A carnal sensation. If to be dead is to

exist outside of earthly time, then this tough-minded energetic 'living in the present' is also the life of the dead. My new ability to live in the present joins in that timelessness of being dead. Or the nearest I can get to it.

Ten months after:

This 'skewed' perception of time – isn't it perfectly to be expected? Nothing exceptionally distorted, but a common human experience which could be recognized through being described. How might you save the strangeness of this immobile non-time from being considered pathological; an evaluation which would further isolate its dwellers? But your democratizing impulse here can succeed all too well, as some hearers will comment briskly on your descriptive efforts, 'You mean, like the feeling of disturbed time you get after a bad break-up, or if you lose your job – well, surely that's a common experience.' And then, aside, 'She's becoming a real death bore,' they'll recoil, shaking their heads. Or so you fear. Is this the famous hypersensitivity of the bereaved at work in you?

No tenses any more. Among the recent labels for temporality is 'time dilation', referring to our perception's elasticity, its capacity to be baggy. But are there any neurological accounts of this feeling of completely arrested time? It feels as if some palpable cerebral alteration has taken place. As if, to make the obvious joke, your temporal lobes have been flooded and are now your a-temporal lobes.

I'll try again: a sudden death, for the one left behind, does such violence to the experienced 'flow' of time that it stops, and then slowly wells up into a large pool. Instead of the old line of forward time, now something like a globe holds you. You live inside a great circle with no rim. In the past, before J's idiotic disappearance, the future lay in front of me as if I could lean into it gently like a finger of land, a promontory feeling its way into the sea. But now I've no sense of any onward temporal opening, but stay lodged in the present, wandering over some vast saucer-like incline of land, some dreary wide plain like the banks of the river Lethe, I suppose. His sudden death has dropped like a guillotine blade to slice through my old expectation that my days would stream onwards into my coming life. Instead I continue to sense daily life as paper-thin. As it is. But this cut through any usual

feeling of chronology leaves a great blankness ahead.

Now you expect another death – a remaining child's – to be announced to you at any moment, and you try to steady yourself for it. It's not so much fearfulness as a life poised in acute suspension. You're tensed for anything. No plans can be made for any future, so you must try to inhabit this present with equanimity and in good heart. This might sound like stoicism's programme. But it's no philosophical stance, nor is it valour that dictates your new approach to living; only your realization that now a familiar apprehension of passing time has been barred to you. Nothing, then, like the happier notion of 'seizing the day'. On the contrary: *there is no time to seize*. The former slim and orderly temporal line has been blown away, as if it had been reduced to ash as efficiently as your child's corpse.

'Only in the present moment is our happiness': the stoics' pronouncement. The irony is that now you've succeeded brilliantly in living exclusively in the present, but only as the result of that death. To endure, yes, but when the usual passage of time is in shards? What does your old philosophy of endurance mean, when there's no longer any temporality left in which to wait it out?

Impossible, caught in your sheltering space of no-time, to grasp that your child's dead when they stay so vividly present. As if they themselves haven't the least intention of lying down gracefully with folded hands.

Unanticipated death does such violence to your ordinary suppositions, as if the whole inductive faculty by which you'd previously lived has faltered. Its textbook illustration was always 'Will the sun rise tomorrow?' But now that induction itself is no more, the sun can't any longer be relied on to rise. And my son does not rise. This silly pun alone can reliably work its mechanical work.

For the first time you grasp that inhabiting the drift of time is a mutable perception; one which can stop, leaving you breathing but stranded, stock still. From this unexpected vantage point, you discover that the perception of a 'flowing' time must have been secreted by and then exuded from the mind, like a silkworm spinning out its silken thread from its jaws; but now its conditions of production, whatever they were, are destroyed. There's nothing of the intellect in this revelation. It stems entirely from visceral sensations.

You could try to describe this being outside time by using a string of negatives: you live in the breathlessness of sensing that everything might halt at the next heartbeat, you've no conviction that your small daily plans (which, comically, must still be made) will ever bear fruit – those negatives are true but unhelpful. For this state of a-temporality isn't experienced negatively. It is lucidly calm as it fills up your horizons. Though a novel element to you, it brings an unanxious and energetic simplicity. A crystalline life, concentrated in the instant, and pleased enough with it. This new time of yours may, in fact, be the time of the dead themselves.

Eleven months after:

At almost a year since he died – or he 'died', for the plain assertion of his death still sounds foolishly melodramatic – I read endless online papers in cardiac pathology. Eventually I try to stop my reading, then am overwhelmed by whirring 'what ifs': what if one of his doctors had noticed J's (in retrospect, blindingly evident) heart failure or had taken his fainting episodes seriously; what if I'd known to draw the right conclusions myself from the signs that I, living with him daily, could see; what if the proper diagnosis had been made, what the surgical options might have done, was it better for him to have died not knowing about his cardiomyopathy, or would he have wanted to have had more years, if impaired... All my furious study and speculation is the uselessness of thought trying to rewind time, to master what cannot be mastered. And *this* thought does nothing to stop it.

In your imagination, you will endlessly witness the instant of your child's dying. But the accompanying struggle to realistically assess your degree of responsibility for the death needn't entail your 'masochism'. It seems vital to not flinch from the former, while not sliding into the latter. And to get that distinction clear, just for yourself, will demand a forensic labour. To take responsibility; the word means, to weigh things up. That testing the weight doesn't have to be a labour of guilt. Does it?

I had wanted un-frightened company. And yet I could sit alone, and needed to sit alone, to translate his autopsy report from its original Spanish with an online medical dictionary to hand, in a coolly determined rush of concentration. The living person was rather squeamish and he would not have cared for this. Needs must. I read on rapidly about the discovery of the