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# Grief Is a Circular Staircase:

Traversing Mourning through Obsession in Richard Siken  
and Bob Hicok's Poetry

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“Grief is a circular staircase / I have lost you,” writes Linda Pastan in the final lines of “The Five Stages of Grief” (196). Contrary to what the title may suggest, the poem challenges the popularised misunderstanding of the Kübler-Ross model of grief as a ladder where one moves linearly from one step of mourning to the other<sup>1</sup>: from denial to anger to bargaining to depression, until one reaches the door of acceptance and walks free. The speaker instead cycles the stages without success, clinging on to what they have lost. This experience of grief may thus be more satisfactorily described in terms of Freud’s understanding of it: grief is long and repetitive, the speaker of “The Five Stages of Grief” concludes, an ouroboros in some cases not of rebirth but of melancholia, at the end of which, one finds its beginning, one phrase only: “I have lost you.”

This same structure of thought is echoed in the works of Richard Siken and Bob Hicok, who have dedicated entire poetry collections to exploring mourning as an obsessive act (*Crush* [2005] and *Elegy Owed* [2013] respectively). Hicok himself admits: “By and large, I will write the same poem over and over” (Hicok and McCullough 8). An analysis of the poems “Straw House, Straw Dog” and “Elegy to unnamed sources” from these collections, through a Freudian lens, reveals the congruities and disparities in how each poet unearths their mourning over the death of a loved one — for Hicok, his wife, for Siken, his long-time partner; how grief is personified in the crumbling of the principal pillars of meaning: time, space, language; how the dead haunt these poems, anchored solely on the fixation of the speakers.

Pivotal in this analysis will be the phenomenon Freud names “Melancholia,” which one might call the pathological equivalent to regular mourning. As with all mourning, he notes how every thought and ounce of energy of the melancholic individual is funnelled into recalling the memory of the deceased. Where the experiences diverge, however, is in the self-deprecating nature of melancholia. He defines it as:

...mentally characterized by a profoundly painful depression, a loss of interest in the outside world, the loss of the ability to love, the inhibition of any kind of performance and a reduction in the sense of self, expressed in self-

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<sup>1</sup>Elizabeth Kübler-Ross’s theory initially mapped the grief of dying patients, and even so, it has been widely criticized (Corr 72-74).

recrimination and self-directed insults, intensifying into the delusory expectation of punishment. (244)

Thus, to experience melancholia is to attach so intensely to that which one has lost, that one becomes incapable of letting it go, even as it consumes and diminishes one's very identity. The grieving person locks their loved one inside themselves so completely that they come to identify with them and develop a pathological tendency towards self-deprecation (Freud 249). Indeed, Hicok and Siken construct the poem as a sepulchre for their beloved that can only be housed under the roof, and at the expense of, their own body and mind.

This theme, as well as the tonal differences with which it is explored in the poems, are evoked in the titling of the collections. Hicok's *Elegy Owed* calls upon the tradition of the elegy (from the ancient Greek "ἔλεγχος," meaning dirge; "Elegy"), which conjures a melancholic, reflective, and most importantly, funerary undercurrent, which the poems at once honour and subvert with Hicok's characteristic humour. "Owed," in turn, sets the groundwork for the feelings of obligation, guilt, and regret that permeate "Elegy to unnamed sources." By this alone, the reader is primed for this exercise in keeping the moment of burial suspended in time and space through compulsion.

Similarly, *Crush*'s dual meaning of "infatuation" and "destruction through force or pressure" ("Crush") serves to create a through-line between the act of loving and obsessing over someone, and physical violence (Kempnaers 915-916). The fact that Siken's speakers blur the lines between desire, death, and pain so often is not coincidental; as Kempnaers writes, it likely derives from the poet's own lived experience as a gay man in a heteronormative society: "The poems thus testify to the traumatic experience of existing in a world defined by the comforts of heteronormativity, which shapes the way bodies are approached, the way particular lives and their potential of fulfilment is perceived, and the way desire is conceptualized" (927). Siken's speaker's grief is complicated by this inescapable tension, shame, and guilt imposed on him by societal expectation.

As is conventional with intimately confessional lyrical poetry, both poems feature speakers adopting first person pronouns making apostrophes to the one they have lost in the second person ("I've tasted your ashes twice"; Hicok 35; "I don't really blame you for being dead"; Siken 32). The title "Elegy to unnamed sources," however, refuses to reveal to whom the poem is dedicated, with the speaker adopting

the role of a news reporter citing an anonymous source to protect their identity (speaking only of “unnamed sources”). Who is this lament for, the reader is called to ask. Is the speaker protecting his beloved or himself by not daring to call the name, afraid of what apparition it will bring forth? The question lingers as the poem unfolds, the dead remaining hidden inside it.

“Straw House, Straw Dog” plays into this idea of building an edifice for the object of loss to reside in, as well. The house, a symbol of the ego and mind of the speaker, becomes a central, recurring place in the story of the poem, as does the symbol of the dog (“There’s a black dog and there’s a white dog, depends on which you feed / depends on which damn dog you live with”; 32) The dog is the embodiment of the speaker’s grief. Mourning is animalistic, instinctual, tangible; as much physical as it is mental. The choice of the animal as that of the dog grants this metaphor another dimension: grief is faithfully and eternally by his side, almost a friend.

The speaker subverts the popular story of the two wolves fighting inside man and returns to the motif of this elusive “you” feeding the dog, keeping the grief alive (“Here you are [...] feeding ice to the dog”; 31; “you’re still feeding / the damn dog”; 32). The two dogs transform into Mourning and Melancholia personified, battling for the speaker’s soul. In addition to feeding the dog, this “you” appears to be living with it. That is a quality the reader has come to associate with the speaker, particularly since “living with” has connotations to chronic illness which echo the sentiment “you are a fever I’m learning how to live with” (31). At the same time, the speaker is identified with the “dog,” grief itself, through the act of consuming ice, in which they both partake (“I swallowed crushed ice / pretending it was glass and you’re dead”; 31). Hence, Siken blurs the edges of identity between mourner and mourning, mourner and object of loss.

Hicok’s speaker likewise personifies grief and names it a friend, while demeaning both it and himself:

Grief is punch-drunk  
 stupid, that’s why we get along, we have the same  
 empty IQ, the same silhouette of a scarecrow  
 challenging lightning to a duel. (35)

The humorous aspect of his self-ridicule serves as a coping mechanism that establishes distance between the situation and the speaker experiencing it. Siken, too,

uses absurd imagery and language (“you can’t have your sweater back”; 32), not merely to satirise and emphasise the meaninglessness of a reality devoid of his beloved, but to gain some control and distance from the weight of it.

The poets ensure the reader remains at an imbalance. Certainty of meaning is rarely granted (not, at least, until the poem descends into decay in the case of Siken, as I will later discuss), and instead the reader is left to decipher some truth — for there is no ultimate one in poetry — through clues in the form of poetic devices. Hirshfield explains:

One reason we need slant and lie in poems is to lure us past our own not entirely unuseful timidity and desire for safety. Imagination’s transgressions of fact awaken a permeability that extends both inside and outside our own skin. The frontiers of our daily and ordinary forms of self-knowledge are limiting, well-barricaded, and often dislike disturbance. The poem, meanwhile, is a thief in desperation, working the tumblers of the real, hoping to spring open some hidden and not yet knowable lock. Disturbance of complacent security is what it seeks. (15)

Positioning the poems behind walls of absurdity, humour, and half-confessions allows the artistic voices behind them to ring more authentically. It yields privacy to the speaker, while at once connecting the reader more directly to the currents of feeling in each poem.

The physicality of mourning as an exhausting, repetitive, and utterly pointless act, is described in “Elegy to unnamed sources” with one such absurdist metaphor: “a man chopping down wind, / [...] with calluses / and an untied anchor falling though the ocean of his body” (35). The speaker is performing a meaningless labour: perpetually fighting unbeatable, untouchable forces of nature, a manifestation of some higher power, like that of fate, against which he is powerless. The callouses signal his continual effort and physical strain. He is as unsupported in this endeavour as an anchor in free fall through the bottomless pit of grief in his body. He is alone.

Another unifying element between the poem is that of the “straw.” It is more prevalent in “Straw House, Straw Dog” where everything is fashioned out of it. The ego, the building materials of the universe appear to be flammable and devoid of substance. They inevitably catch on fire; the violence is unavoidable. In an earlier cited stanza, Hicok offers a similar metaphor — although on a smaller scale — of himself hollow, made entirely of straw, self-destructively demanding to be set aflame.

These are perhaps allusions to T.S. Eliot's straw-made, empty "Hollow Men" who likewise roam the world numb and devoid of purpose (Eliot 65-70).

In both poems, one finds vivid imagery struggling against the inability to say the unsayable (Meena 18). Tension is born of language's failure to wholly express the speakers' internal state. To combat this — or perhaps to surrender to it — the poets employ stream of consciousness. The loss of meaning they are experiencing is expressed through disjointed language and ever-shifting and reiterative imagery. Each time an image is repeated, it is reconstructed, its meaning never stable. Siken accentuates this through his use of spacing between the words, giving them the sense of being scattered, broken upon the page.

I watched TV.      I had a Coke at the bar.      I had four dreams in a row  
where you were burned, about to burn, or still on fire.

                         I watched TV.      I had a Coke at the bar. I had four Cokes,  
four dreams in a row.

Here you are in the straw house, feeding the straw dog. Here you are  
                         in the wrong house, feeding the wrong dog. I had a Coke with ice.  
I had four dreams on TV.      You have a cold cold smile.

                         You were burned, you were about to burn, you're still on fire. (31)

The speaker appears to be in a fevered state between sleep and wakefulness, recalling fragments of dreams and reality. Fabrication, dreams, and memory blend into one another so as to fog any clear understanding of the real. They become a mirror of the speaker's internal state. Dreams for Freud are focal to unlocking the truth of the unconscious, and here Siken explores that intensely. Words and imagery are repeated and stitched together to draw associations which imitate the obsessive thought process of the mourner. The cold sensation of the Coke, for instance, is repurposed as the cold, dead smile of the ghost of the departed haunting him. Meaning is at once created anew, revealed, and undermined through these repetitions.

In the excerpt above, the speaker's obsessive dreams command time to remain at a stand-still at the moment of the body being burned during the process of cremation ("You were burned, you were about to burn, you're still on fire" ties into the latter "You wanted to be cremated so we cremated you"; 31). The linear flow of time is disrupted and flattened to allow for a perpetual funeral in the name of the beloved, which reflects how trauma suspends the soul at the point of terror



still dead” (32), echoing Freud’s claim of melancholia as a state of “sleeplessness, rejection of food, and an overcoming of the drive [...] which compels everything that lives to cling to life” (246). As it unfolds, the poem appears to be decomposing, reflecting the speaker’s own crumbling psyche.

Herein lies the central difference between the two poems: while they both explore feelings of helplessness against the destructive and obsessive force of melancholia (“what a stark easel the sky / never asked to be”; Hicok 35), the poets unearth different core emotions and subsequently adopt different tones. Siken, as I’ve shown, adopts a feverish, dazed tone. The poem reads more like a hallucination, what Freud would describe as “clinging to the object through the medium of hallucinatory wishful psychosis” (244). Siken seeks to make the audience uncomfortable, to share in the feeling of overwhelming unfairness of losing someone — especially when the act of loving them even alive was so frowned upon. Scattered throughout the poem are words with connotations of “wrongness.” In one of the most telling lines of “Straw House, Straw Dog,” he writes: “You are a fever I am learning to live with, and everything is happening / at the wrong end of a very long tunnel” (31).

The speaker of “Elegy Owed” is instead stilted in speech, as if he’s speaking through fog. He is pleading with the beloved for some kind of forgiveness. Regret permeates the poem and the whole collection; in “Good-bye” he writes: “there isn’t a / sentence / that isn’t a plea” (108). The speaker creates these poems as pleas for a forgiveness that might finally dispel his guilt. This regret is mingled with a feeling of obligation to remember and honour his beloved: “I owe you an apology, an elegy” (36). In fact, this obligation and guilt appear to be the only driving forces anchoring him to life. The poem begins: “Took a day off from breathing / to see if that would be like talking to you” (35) suggesting that to breathe, and thus, to exist, is an arduous task for the speaker from which “days off” are required. He tries quitting breath itself, willing to be asphyxiated — to die — at the mere chance of speaking to the person he has lost again. By the end, however, he has resigned himself to “live / as the only bond between” the memory of her life and the reality of her death (36). He has already alluded to this state earlier in the first part of the poem with the image of “a dead tree that has a living shadow / made of God and crow shit” (35). The contrasting elements of death and tree (usually signifying life), life and shadow, God (immortal divinity) and crow shit (death-related defilement), point to the bizarreness and absurdity of his existence amid grief. The speaker takes the form of a living shadow,



existing only because of the object it shadows, the tree that has died, his loved one. His one purpose from this point on is to honour and keep her memory alive, become an eternal crypt for her soul through his art, body, and mind. Siken's speaker does not reach any conclusions. Instead, the speaker seems to be lulled back into an uneasy sleep, soothed in his agony by the image of his lover reassuring him (32). The poem seems to imply, *this is but a brief respite from the cycle of mourning which will resume shortly*.

In "Straw House, Straw Dog" and "Elegy to unnamed sources" alike, grief is a perpetual obsessive mental and physical state for those experiencing it, which obtains a life of its own. As Vern astutely describes, the past is assembled into "an unfinished house [...] some skeleton without a closet" to which we cannot resist returning to "each of us outfitted with his own private kit of obsessions and memories" (30). The apparitions of the loved ones are not allowed to rest, and neither are the mourners, who are plagued by their present absence, and as Freud suggests, internalise this loss to the point of self-destruction. The poems reverberate with emptiness in the wake of a loss of meaning; time is suspended at the moment of burial, space collapses, language is stripped of all inherent purpose and employed with increasing self-awareness, so it may unlock meaning in its repetition alone. Through this self-reflexivity and compulsion to return to the moment of catastrophe, the poets draw concentric circles of mourning. Where Siken's circles are dazed and fevered, often turning violent, Hicok's are paralysed, foggy, pleading. Yet, both skilfully portray the fragile psyche and internal monologue of a person experiencing melancholia. Both create poetry that houses human pain and helplessness beyond the bounds that language can touch.

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