

**Megan Nolan**  
*productive love*

Written in response to **Tai Shani**, *Tragodia*

Intimacy is exclusivity, and surrounding the positive creative work of intimacy is the negative, necessary absence of others - those we choose not to let in but also those we have lost, or who never materialised in the first place. There is no bond whose context is not loss.

In *Tragodia*, Tai Shani looks at the world-building exercise of sustained intimacy and at death coming in the edges of that world, a beautiful landscape dotted with teeth and bones and matted hair and death masks. These are not jarring or antithetical to the cohesion of the city they make up, they are the building blocks.

Imagining death is a release valve from intimacy, your own death and the death of those you depend upon. Imagining violence is a way to interrogate who we are and what we could be. "Could I do that?" we think to ourselves, at each new act we learn is possible. Young people cultivate interests in serial killers and details of concentration camps not just out of unseemly titillation but because they are still trying to understand the limitations of what people do to one another (there are none, they find). I remember that when I was seven the 19 year old British nanny Louise Woodward was tried for accidentally killing the baby in her care. After becoming aware of the case through blanket media coverage I somehow found a way to relate to Woodward very strongly, and for years afterwards felt threatened and uncomfortable in the presence of babies and small children, lest I somehow be taken over by what had taken her over and hurt them.

Many children are practised at creating the deaths of their parents over and over again, testing the limits of their pain, bringing themselves to tears in sacred experiment. A proof of love, certainly, but also the beginning of escape.

"Thank god for walls and doors" each of the women say in *Tragodia* - child, mother, aunt and grandmother. Privacy is another way to object to loss. Furious with a person for their ability to leave us, we lust over ways to punish them, ways to prepare. When you have no power, the power to withhold becomes all important. In the solitude of your rebellion you imagine other sorts of people you might be without the bonds which make you who you are, without the "precious dependency" which defines you. "These are a medieval vision of the soul as resembling a castle, formed of a single diamond or a very transparent crystal, and containing many rooms, just as in Heaven there are many mansions." says Oedipuss the cat; the soul contains many rooms, housing many potential selves, potentially free.

Communion with other people is not the only way to access joy in the world, but, without it, the other joys become harder and harder to recognise. The pleasure we might take from inhuman but natural things - the ocean, an animal - is eventually lessened without a human witness to our witnessing. By and large, we need each other. The need for other people is the most pressing one we have - except the need for total freedom from them, and everything we do is an attempt to reconcile these unhappy facts.

For the most part, we are children who lose parents. We are children who spend much of their lives dreading and anticipating this loss, though not without something akin to curiosity or even hope about what lies on the other side of that loss. For that severance surely marks a new kind of adulthood, a new kind of aloneness, no matter how late in life it comes. Perhaps this is why imagining the death of the parent - from the safety of a world in which they still very much exist - can feel so satisfyingly tender, filled with a sadness which is sensual and interesting - in the same way that unrequited love is not entirely without pleasure.

In *Tragodía*, Tai inverts the mourning child and gives us a ghost child orbiting the women she has left behind. The ghost child traverses the terrain of an ageing face which seems to take up the space of a whole sky. That the inversion concludes with communal suicide by the elder women of the family unit brings to my mind another great act of child-parent inversion. The writer David Vann in his 2011 book *Legend of a Suicide* rewrites scenes of his childhood in an act of seething retaliation toward his father who, in reality, took his own life. In the book, Vann changes history so that he, the teenage self he was, was the one who did so. He imagines a world in which his father, forced to become the survivor now, is made to deal with the physical aftermath of his child's death and to carry and bury the body.

In Vann's work the inversion felt like an act inspired by anger, but here in *Tragodía* it feels more like an act of love, an expression of the profound consideration Tai has lent the dynamic of this bond. Turning it gently this way and that, probing from obtuse angles to see it more clearly. Mother says, nearing death, "There is nowhere for me to deposit all this unproductive love I have amassed for you. It will calcify in me in your image, like a teratoma, unformed, metabolized twin. Hair, teeth and nails, some orifices, enough anthropomorphic, organic matter to cast a resurrection spell." But the idea of unproductive love seems argued persuasively and romantically against by the glorious incontinent explosion of feeling which follows it, the ghost child turning from her immediate intimacy and addressing every thing she sees:

"In the ambulance on the way to the hospital, aware of this approaching death, I said goodbye by saying I love you; I said

I love you mum  
I love you my aunt  
I love you grandmother, Eve  
I love you Oedipuss  
I love you new leaf  
I love you metal railing  
I love you Portland stone  
I love you jackets  
I love you hair  
I love you electricity  
I love you crisp packet  
I love you sky  
I love you sky  
I love you rubber  
I love you kin  
I love you engine acceleration  
I love you ladybird"

..and on and on until we sense that the intensity of feeling which has lived in the contained quarters of mother, aunt, grandmother, cat for so long is being willed to become universal in an act of deep generosity. We see that the beloved face the ghost child has been orbiting is no longer total, and beyond it the stars and the unending everything wait.