

Autoethnographic Literary Nonfiction: I Just Want to Go Home â?? Moving, Loss and Unacknowledged Grief

Description

The AutoEthnographer

â??For our house is our corner of the world, it is our universeâ?¦it is our cosmos in every sense of the word.â?•
The Poetics of Space, Gaston Bachelard

AUTHORâ??S MEMO

In these autoethnographic sketches, I trace the trauma of being uprooted from my beloved childhood home and how, what I experienced, was trauma and loss that has gone unacknowledged by anyone but myself. Rambo (2007) asserts â??Identity, who we see ourselves to be from moment to moment, is continuously established, maintained, and transformedâ?• (p. 537). I chronicle my experience of â??losingâ?• homes and the elusive search for security.

I.

My father is waiting in the driveway, with the station wagon running. The back window is broken and the snow blowing in is heavy and wet. My siblings and I, with my mother leading, are inside, taking a last walk through the house. We all march down the cellar steps. There is a large blackboard on a wall in the basement where we play school; my brother, the oldest, and bossiest, is always the teacher. My mother, in her Catholic school Palmer Method, writes a note welcoming the new family to our home. Our home. I resent this, and feel a heat of shame throughout my body. I know I shouldnâ??t feel this way, but I canâ??t hold it back. We trudge back up the basement steps for the last time, and close the front door behind us. We wonâ??t, of course, ever enter the house again. This finality fills me with dread. I feel as though someone is stuffing cotton wool down my throat and packing my chest with it. In

the car, my mother heaves a sigh that I try to interpret as my father, with great care in the falling snow, backs out of the driveway. With my camera I snap one last photo of our home, which I truly believe will be lonely without us.

The old twin home, built in the early 1900â??s, is solid and stoic in the falling snow. The windows, unadorned with curtains, looked like eyes opened wide with astonishment at our departure. Our neighbors do not say goodbye, even though our houses are attached to each other. What did you expect? my mother snaps, and in an instant I feel that heat of shame, which feels all too familiar, come over me. I am told that I am lucky to be moving into a single home in a good neighborhood, and I consistently hear how hard my parents worked for it. I make note that I always seem to expect what I donâ??t deserve. I am told I should be grateful, and that feeling sad, is proof that I am not. I make an emotional note to myself, a volta in my thinking, that will forever inform my sense of feeling secure in the world. My whole world consists of life within those walls, and I feel as though I am an embryo cut off from my life sourceâ??that the beating of my heart has slowed down to conserve resources that I will need from that point on. I lacked insight into my own feelings, and encountered impatience, anger and disbelief when I attempted to talk to my family about it. Forward momentum, moving up in the world, should not be questioned. My grief, instead, was put on trial, delegitimizing feelings I could not control, assuage or reason. I felt the way I felt. I was 15 years old the day that we moved in a snowstorm.

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> Being spatially challenged, I lay in my bed that night, trying to map a route from my new house to my old house, but I couldnâ??t. I couldnâ??t situate myself literally or figuratively in my new neighborhood. That cotton wool feeling overtook me once again, and I lay in my bed listening to the wind and blowing snow, feeling like my heart was on some treacherous journey all its own.

II.

The first night in our new house, a large single home in a development, I turned 15. *No one called it my birthday.* It was snowing heavily, the last day of January. My heart felt like lead. Simple things confounded me in our new home. For instance, I did not know how to work the shower, since Iâ??d never used one. The house Iâ??d just inhabited less than 12 hours ago, had an old-fashioned claw bottomed bathtub, an original from when the house was built in the year 1900. Attached to the spigot was a rubber shower hose, precisely for bathtubs, sold in the hardware store back in the day. My father rigged it with string to avoid slippage and leaks. My parents purchased that house, the only one Iâ??d ever known, on a busy industrial street in a largely Italian-American neighborhood from the unlikely Italian Presbyterian minister who was on the brink of retirement and who was looking to move to sunnier climes.

My mother, loving but never the most patient, was brusque as she showed me how to balance the hot and cold water in the shower with the glass doors, then showed me how to wipe down the tiles and the doors when I was finished. Eventually that evening, I managed the shower which was the perfect cover for the jagged and heaving crying I did as the too hot water hit my face like needles piercing my skin. Nothing could have held back those tears. Being spatially challenged, I lay in my bed that night, trying to map a route from my new house to my old house, but I couldnâ??t. I couldnâ??t situate myself

literally or figuratively in my new neighborhood. That cotton wool feeling overtook me once again, and I lay in my bed listening to the wind and blowing snow, feeling like my heart was on some treacherous journey all its own. My parents, downstairs, spoke without lowering their voices, while they emptied boxes, both of them having little tolerance for disorder.

My older brother set up his room with great energy, though I have no memory of how my younger sister coped. The snow was relentless, and to make matters worse, It was horribly inauspicious that at 2am my parents received a phone call that my cousin was found dead, freezing, in his car. It was an avalanche of feelings I could not in any way handle, and my world began a spiral that would go unabated for 40 years. That it would begin in the house that held so much promise for my hard working parents, a step up from the lower-middle class rented homes that was their childhood and young adulthood experience until they married, mired me in a guilt so profound I would never trust my own feelings again. This move signaled a *tempesta* for me, a storm I simply could not calm, no matter how hard I tried. These intense feelings coupled with the â??cotton wool feelingâ?• that I can now identify as severe panic attacks, aid the foundation for a nearly *unbearable* longing for a home in which I felt I felt safe and secure. It would elude me for a long, long time.

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III.

An early and ill-advised marriage at the tender age of twenty-one led me back to the edge of my old neighborhood, the neighborhood of my beloved twin home, at my insistence. Nevertheless, my husband and I lived in an apartment complex that felt foreign and uncomfortable to me. It would not take long before I realized that â??in the vicinityâ?• was a poor substitute for the home that I had lost. I tried hard to re-create a feeling of belonging, but was clearly still only on the outskirts of my old, beloved neighborhood and on the dangerous edge of a marriage that took me away from my parentsâ?? house but did little else. An eventual divorce and years of apartment living with one careless and absentee landlord after another with my four children further eroded my sense of security, to say nothing of my childrenâ??s experience(s). A second marriage led me to a home that my new husband purchased a year before we married, and made me feel like an afterthought in the process. I felt, for the seven years of our marriage, like I was living in someone elseâ??s home. That he reminded me of the fact that I contributed nothing to the actual buying of the house canceled out the security of living within it.

Too many nights, once again, I laid in bed, with the feeling of cotton wool covering my nose and mouth. I experienced the destabilizing and terrifying feelings of that first move, when I was 15 years old. When the marriage ends, as so many second marriages do, I scrambled to find a place to live. A family member who owns a house that he rents evicted the family living there so that I could move inâ??this solves an immediate problem, but gives me no joy as I think of the familyâ??s displacement. He gives them thirty days to vacate, and once again, the guilt roils within me. Meanwhile, I continue to live in the house that my soon to be ex-husband owns, as he rents an apartment for himself on a monthly basis probably knowing I would be gone soon enough. But when I return home from work each day, I find things moved around the house, dishes in the sink, items gone missing. I know the

psychological torture he is deliberately inflicting. I am terrified at night and flinch at every sound. Our beloved dog, Miso, a sweet-tempered Shih-tzu, is my only comfort and I fear losing him, too. I fear loving everything. Loss has become an intimate of mine, the one constant in my life. The divorce is not amicable. I have something to fear, but for the life of me, I cannot name it.

> I step over the threshold of the front door, feeling something like a new bride, and straight through the house and into the backyard. I whisper a quick prayer of thanks.

IV.

During the Covid pandemic, an opportunity presented itself and I left the house that was my ersatz refuge after my second divorce and purchased a home right around the corner, a house that is, in many ways, like my beloved childhood home. It is a strange and confusing time and the world seems to be holding its collective breath, but the chance to finally own a place to call my own gets me through.

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At settlement, I sign papers in a large board room with a mask, everyone 6 feet apart. I am not the age of the average home buyer. I am no longer raising children. The house, regrettably, has thirteen steps to the second floor that I wonder how I will be able to navigate in ten years, but I live in the moment, something I have never done, because I feel it is the only way, and, in a strange way, I feel like it is finally my time. After the signing the copious amounts of paperwork, and feeling like a bit of an imposter (who am I to buy a house at my age?), I go to what is now my new home and revel in its sturdiness, a home built by Italian-immigrants 125 years ago, and made of heavy stone. A house that would be cool in the summer and warm in the winter. I step over the threshold of the front door, feeling something like a new bride, and straight through the house and into the backyard. I whisper a quick prayer of thanks. My new neighbor, a short sweet woman opens her back door, introduces herself and wastes no time telling me (as the well-meaning often do) that the large tree in the eastern corner of my deep and narrow yard needs to be cut down. *Welcome to the neighborhood,* I think. I smile and thank her. â??You have a nice new fence, Iâ??d hate to see a storm crush it because that old tree fell on it!â?• I canâ??t afford to have that tree cut down, plain and simple, but I add it to the list of things that will inevitably cause me future concern. I assure her it will be a priority as soon as I can manage it, but I know it will never really happen.

It is early April and still cold, but I press my feet into the grass, willing myself to feel it firm beneath my feet. This is my personal vow of stability. It has taken such a long time for me to make this happen for myself. For too many years I have been at the mercy of others for my security and stability. This is a game changer.

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V.

My parents are each in their 80â??s. They have lived in their beloved house for 45 years, a split level home in a beautiful development that is experiencing a turnover with younger couples replacing the senior citizens who raised their children generations ago. My father still cares for the outside grounds, which are impeccable. My parents home signaled to us this is what hard work will get you. Eventually, the house became too much for my parents and, in fact, had been too much for a few years, and my siblings and I urged my parentâ??s to sell while they were still healthy and could move to a place they would enjoy. Surprisingly, at least to me, they are ready. There are some half-hearted offers, none of which are acceptable and which hurt my parents who cared for the house so lovingly.

My cousin arrived one day to tell my parents that it would be his honor to buy their house. He is newly married and his wife is pregnant. He tells my parents how much he and his wife love the house which quietly amazes me, since that house spelled nothing but displacement and disorientation for me. All of the usual arrangements are made. My sister finds a beautiful place for them to live in an upscale 55+ community. My mother who can no longer negotiate steps without severe pain will no longer have to. My father will no longer be a slave to the house, a role all homeowners play to a large degree. No more worries about cutting the grass, painting rooms, faulty plumbing, a heater on the fritz. In the process of cleaning out their house, everyone has a memory they express. I feel the tenderness expressed and feel that familiar guilt for feeling about the house in the way that I do. My grown children have trouble dealing with the fact that they will no longer have access to that house which holds so many memories. My daughter, a photographer, begins to document my parents in their home and the way in which they have inhabited it.

One Sunday, we arrive just as they have finished dinner. They leave the table to settle downstairs. My daughter begins to photograph their dishes, napkins, my fatherâ??s wine glass, and even the leftover raviolis on the platter. She wants to capture it all. She begins to cry. I plunge my hands into the soapy water and begin washing the dishes as my parents turn up the television downstairs in the family room, where we all used to gather after Sunday pasta. They are speaking to each other in animated tones, ready and excited for what comes next. I envy their enthusiasm, the assuredness that the next leap, like the one they made so many years before, will be a successful one. They treat the move like an adventure, the next logical chapter in their story together. There is a snowstorm on the day they move to their new home, exactly like 45 years ago, which they take to bode well for them.

> My neighbor opens her back door and shakes her finger at me, half-joking and half-serious: *Cut it down, I am telling you!* she advises, once again. But I know that I will *never* cut it down. It is a symbol of resilience to me. It has been here longer than I have and will remain after I am gone. *Let someone else sever its roots, but it wonâ??t be me.*

VI.

The selling of my parents home and the buying of my own, finally and miraculously, provides a release from a cycle of nearly unmitigated pain, of feeling completely unmooredâ??feelings I feared would be perpetual. Buying my own home allowed me to create for *myself* the security I desperately wanted and

needed for so long. I realized that I could only give that gift to myself. Now, my parents are safely and happily ensconced in their new place, which is both beautiful and manageable for them. I envy the trajectory of their livesâ??. They did everything the way it was supposed to be done, but also seemed to have the sort of emotional resilience I wished I had inherited. In comparison, my life has been a roller coaster of tentative housing, bad decisions in the form of failed relationships, guilt over the inability to process my own feelings while my grief remained disencfranchisedâ??*unacknowledged*â??all while raising four children on my own.

VII.

My vow of stability ensures that I will not let myself down. It reminds me that where I am is where I want and need to be. The old tree in the eastern corner of my yard stands stoically, much to the consternation of my neighbor, and has weathered the crazy hurricanes in my area that global warming promises. After one particularly nasty storm, I venture into the backyard to pick up branches that have flown everywhere. My neighbor opens her back door and shakes her finger at me, half-joking and half-serious: *Cut it down, I am telling you!* she advises, once again. But I know that I will *never* cut it down. It is a symbol of resilience to me. It has been here longer than I have and will remain after I am gone. *Let someone else sever its roots, but it wonâ??t be me.* A sense of safety in an impermanent and transient world is the lesson Iâ??ve needed to learn for a long time. I am alone now, but I am home. There are beginnings in every ending and proudly, I am here for it.

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CODA

Iâ??ve attempted to tell, in autoethnographic sketches, the story of a persistent and palpable grief that has dogged me from the age of 15. I felt compelled to tell this story much in the way my mind remembers it and my emotions processed itâ??as sometimes cold, hard facts that I attempted to force myself to deal with. It would be many, many years before I could connect and name, and therefore experience conceptual understanding of what I had been suffering for so long, which was *disenfranchised grief.* Doka (1989) describes disenfranchised grief as â??â?¦the grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supportedâ?• (p. 4). I experienced a very deep form of self-blame, unabated, in which I felt that there was something inherently wrong with me that I was grieving what was seen by others as a positive move in life and that there was nothing to grieve in the first place. Kauffman cites self-blame, internalized disenfranchisement, and the â??inability to utilize sources of comfortâ?• as just some of the byproducts of disenfranchised grief (p. 72).

Reading Hermannâ??s (2011) account of the foreclosure of his familyâ??s home was like a revelation to me. It validated my feelings, feelings that my family largely dismissed, refused to understand, and only grudgingly recognized, since clearly the home was large, beautiful and in a very desirable neighborhood, so it was a move â??upâ?• for everyone. But, as Hermann asserts, â??Houses are insignificant buildings. Homes are notâ?• (p. 508). Further, he states, â??Home encompasses and symbolizes the family relationships and life courses enacted within those spaces.â?• That family

relationship was marred by the inability of my family to understand what I was going through, with the added feeling that I had no control over what would and could happen to me at any given point in timeâ??that decisions would be made, ostensibly within the family unit, without anyone asking me how I felt. It is important to note, of course, that my protestations, if I had been asked, would not ever have prevented the move, but it would have provided the listening space I desperately need to come to terms with how I felt.

Moving away from a beloved home at a tender age was traumatizing, in part, because that home was the only place in which I felt safe. I had an extremely quiet and introverted nature, which, among other factors, caused a deep loneliness and made me the victim of extreme bullying by both classmates and teachers. This, I know, altered me in ways that I found impossible to not only endure, but to describe. I often had no words to use that would express exactly how I felt without the attendant extreme shame, often keeping me in a dark place I could not extricate myself from. Our family home, humble as it was, was like a bulwark against the world, my safe place, literally and figuratively. The insecurity I felt, unfortunately, leaked into my future life, as I experienced home insecurity as a young divorced mother of four children (a very real stigma), which heavily influenced me to marry a second time, only to experience, yet again, the loss of a home that was never mine to begin with.

I now know that, unfortunately, there are hierarchies of loss, in which society tells you in explicit and implicit ways, *what* and *how* to grieve. Where does grief go, if it has no outlet, if you cannot signal with your emotions that you need understanding for what you are going through? For me, my grief was not only *disenfranchised*, but would remain *unresolved* for many years, leading me to unconsciously perpetuate that loss through losing home after home until I could come to terms with it. Doka affirms that â??The very nature of disenfranchised grief creates additional problems of grief while removing or minimizing sources of support,â?•(p.4)â??a double-jeopardy scenario. This knowledge coupled with my own experience has made me more human, more aware of suffering locally and globally. I am not the arbiter of anyoneâ??s grief. I regret that society serves as a gatekeeper to what it deems justified to grieve. Iâ??ve learned never to question a lossâ??either real or perceived. I will never say, for example, in response to someoneâ??s grief: â??*He was no good for you anyway!*â?•â??but, instead, listen to the subtext, the words, observe the look in the eyes and hold a space for what, I intimately know, needs to come out into the light of day.

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