

**Dani Netherclift. *Vessel: The Shape of Absent Bodies*. Upswell, 2024.
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Because I watched my mother unexpectedly die 822 days ago, in the kitchen of the home we were sharing, I delayed opening my review copy of *Vessel: The Shape of Absent Bodies* for as long as I could. The sadness brought on by the existential “rupture” (Netherclift 169) of witnessing a loved one pass so suddenly and at such close range made it feel like a monumental task.

In the opening pages of *Vessel*, Netherclift offers a meditation on time and mortality. The year, the date, the time of day, the time of death, the time it took to die: small details that become fixations in a grieving mind. There is often an anxiety to grief that strives passionately to fix and locate it. Scouring the event for something to pin down, such as the exact millisecond of death, offers the hope of something knowable and concrete in the place of an amorphous absence. Netherclift kept a diary around the time of her loss, writing:

The 2nd of January 1993 is the only page in that book that is completely blank, before the diary ends.

I did not believe that day could end as it did. I possessed a childish belief that

- a. Bad things could not happen to me/the people that I loved, and
- b. that everything would be all right.

I have lost this innocence. (61)

Netherclift was 18 when she watched her brother and father die, which strikes me as a cataclysmic age to be unearthed by loss. The loss she speaks of here, however, is not just the loss of loved ones, but a loss of innocence. A loss of innocence, in its various forms, is a deeply human experience—one that every culture has built rituals, customs, and practices around to guide those left behind, or those who have ventured into spaces from which there is no return. This boundary, as Netherclift underlines, is like a geological event: “[T]he line in the earth that marks the border between the Cretaceous and Tertiary periods of time” (61). Repeating patterns in *Vessel*, both in image and text, extend to iterations of grief, loss, and change in nature. Profound shifts mark human bodies and minds like geological striations, pinpointing moments in which everything changed. With its meditative quality that elaborates on a state of being more than it recounts a story, Netherclift’s lyric essay expresses repeated patterns of grief and grieving that connect the reader to Netherclift, and more broadly to a human community and natural world replete with loss.

I came to *Vessel* mired in the after-effects of loss. In this mirroring, the text occupies a space of ritual—at least insofar as we might consider “ritual as an organizing principle ... [that] could link the pattern of an individual’s life with that of society at large, and, beyond that, with Nature” (Ross 6). The elegy is a ritual practice, and the elegiac essay bears traces of that practice. *Vessel: The Shape of Absent Bodies* reads as an expression of a fundamental, life-altering chasm; one that, in being witnessed and shared with others who know or may come to know the shape and crevices of that very rupture, becomes a communal and arguably sacred practice above and beyond its existence as a story or essay.

Weaving her own narrative with empty envelopes from the trenches of WWI and newspaper clippings of reports of drowning, Netherclift considers death across an array of generations, cultures, and contexts. There is a shared humanity in this, and ultimately, at the heart of the book: grief comes for us all in different forms. Dani Netherclift’s brother and father died on 2 January 1993. My own mother died on 2 June 2023. In reading *Vessel*, I was—in an

earnest, perhaps cloying gesture that says more about me than about the book—moved mostly to hold Dani’s hand and say that I am sorry. That it was not her fault. And that there was nothing she could have done differently. Conceivably, I am simply saying it to myself. Or perhaps I am wishing she were saying it to me.

But Netherclift is more analytical, less twee, than such a gesture implies. *Vessel* is a return to the scene some decades later, an examination of grief transmuted in bodily forms. For Netherclift, who was never able to view the bodies of her brother and father, writing *Vessel* was a way to “transform the bodies of my father and brother into bodies of text and enact a sense of closure” (Barton and Netherclift). Despite the differences from my own experience, in which I was physically embroiled in the moments of death, a drive to materialise the loss is valid, at least for me personally, and potentially more broadly, too. We arrange objects around the dead like cairn stones; boxes put away, letters sent, photos mounted, protective rituals over belongings never to be touched again. There is arguably no real comfort in this retelling or recollection, because the shape of absent bodies is, in the end, an abiding emptiness that resists fulfilment. It perhaps means nothing except that we are alive and that we exist as part of larger, historical experiences of loss and trauma. The enactments and re-enactments of closure continue indefinitely.

Beyond *Vessel*’s hallowed purpose as a testament to the dead, it is—as Netherclift describes it—an elegiac lyric essay. In “The Lyric Essay: Truth-Telling through Reader Participation” (2022), Beth Peterson provides an overview of the lyric essay through a survey of the definitions at hand. She returns—as many before her have done—to a 2007 issue of *Seneca Review*, wherein multiple authors lay out enduring, and now widely accepted, definitions of the form:

Brian Lennon calls the lyric essay an act of “negation.” Eula Biss titles her short piece “It Is What It Is.” Dionisio D. Martínez terms the lyric essay “a story with a hangover.” Marcia Aldrich writes in her article that it “does not narrate a story so much as express a condition. . . . Its incompleteness is Romantic, revealed in lyric fragmentation, the infusion of imagination into the debris of fact, where the world’s last woman picks among the ruins.” (391)

Before the text of *Vessel: The Shape of Absent Bodies* begins, three short endorsements are tucked demurely between the cover and title page. While all effusively describe the meditative, lyrical quality of the work, poet and academic David McCooey situates it in the history of the “lyric essay,” championing author Dani Netherclift’s prose for both its triumphant illustration of the form and the ingenuity of its deployment. Netherclift describes her work similarly, coining the term “elegiac lyric essay” during her doctorate research (Barton and Netherclift). *Vessel: The Shape of Absent Bodies* is a well-written essay that contains multifarious insights for the reader. Beyond that, however, *Vessel* is sacred in the sense that it is guided by a hallowed purpose—above considerations of form and genre, *Vessel* is a testament to the dead.

This is a monumentally sad text, but there is a stillness to it: a serenity or acceptance that is underwritten by the meditative, lyrical quality of the work. And for those who have lost someone, the text becomes a practice of searching for traces of our own loss and experience, for signs of kinship, for assurances that while the emptiness cannot be filled, we are, at the very least, perhaps not alone in simply living with it.

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