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Literary Collections

Sorrow's Company: Writers on Loss and Grief
DeWitt Henry, editor
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"The British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott began an autobiography that he never finished. The first paragraph simply says, 'I died.' In the fifth paragraph he writes, 'Let me see. What was happening when I died? My prayer had been answered. I was alive when I died. That was all I had asked and I had got it.'" Anatole Broyard, who quotes the above in his essay "Toward a Literature of Illness," notes that when he first became sick his initial impulse was to write about his illness: "Storytelling seems to be a natural reaction to illness."

The fifteen essays contained in this volume examine the varying effects of grief and loss. Debra Spark chronicles the passing of her sister in straightforward prose: "She died of breast cancer at age twenty-six, a fact which I find unbelievable, a fact that is (virtually) statistically impossible." William Gibson lyrically records his mother's decline and death at the close of a full life. Gordon Livingston relates his grief after the death of his youngest son from leukemia: "…the one person who loved me without reservation is gone." Whether chronicling grief for a spouse, sibling, parent or child, these essays are at once personal and universal.

The text is divided into three sections. The first, "Leave-takings," commemorates the "last words to, from, and with the dying." The second section, "Bereft," immerses the reader into the world of fresh grief. The third section, "Legacies," connects the living and the dead with physical objects, memory, and imagination.

Henry offers these essays as a form of ritual, as a way to honor life, love, and sorrow. The elegant writings of Jamaica Kincaid, Margot Livesey, Ann Hood, and others, offer the reader a peerless perspective on loss.

Rebecca Maksel