

Reversing a Vanishing

Using creative arts to counter the mid-century mandated forgetting of stillbirth

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Poetry and art by siblings of babies lost long ago

History

The vanishing

The era of mandated forgetting

Theory

Postmemory

Creative works

by other siblings

- poetry
- visual art

by me

- two poems
- a photographic collage



The Shortest Story, Sarah Clement, 2025

The Vanishing



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Timeline for the UK

Memory as a healer
of traumatic grief

Ultrasound
New grief theories
Emotional expression
Feminism
Parents & professionals challenge practices
Guidelines
Lower stillbirth rates
SANDS
Media
Cold cots
Care pathways
First memorial
Brief Lives Remembered
Historic stillbirth debate
Media coverage of mass graves
Calls for PM apology

Earlier times 1918 1945 1970s 1985 1989 2004 2020 2025

The Era of Mandated Forgetting

High stillbirth rates
Ideas on limbo & non-personhood
Post war grief minimisation
Death institutionalised
Erasure as protection from traumatic grief
Birth in hospital

Autoethnography

- writing, research and theory rooted in my personal & family experience

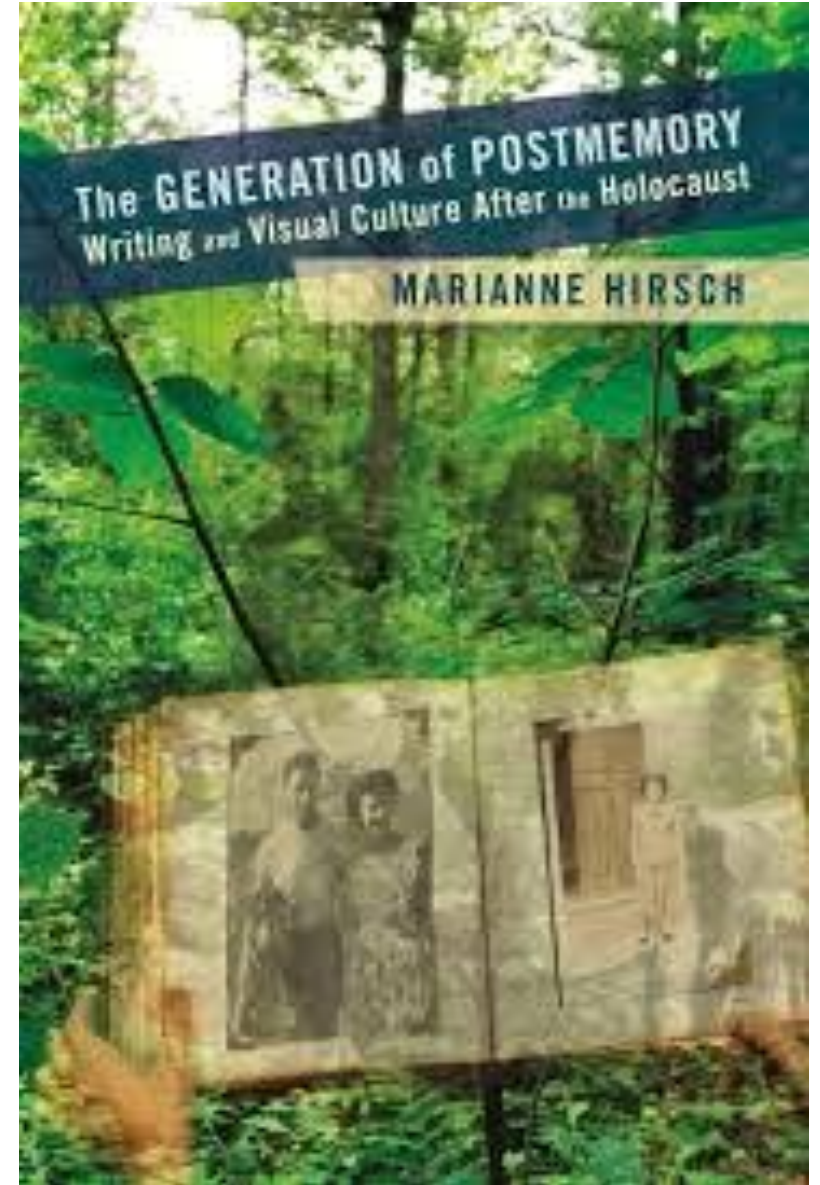
- 1960 My parents first child, my brother Stephen, was stillborn
- 1971 My mum told me about this brother
- 2009 I found my brother's grave
- 2023 I began writing a family memoir & social history of stillbirth.
- 2025 I was awarded an Arts Council grant to develop poetry and artwork in tandem with writing my book



Postmemory

‘the relationship that the “generation after” bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they “remember” only by means of the stories, images and behaviors among which they grew up ...

Marianne Hirsch, 2012



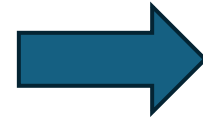
Generation 1

Traumatic
events



POSTMEMORY

E.g.
child hears
parents'
fragmented
stories and
silences
or
feels haunted
by an absent
presence.



Generation 2

POSTMEMORIAL WORK - making creative works

Reanimating past lives

Commemoration

Act of witness

Making anew

Piecing together

Act of empathy

Working through

Seeking justice

Stillborn 1943: Calling Limbo

Derry O'Sullivan

But I'm telling you, little brother
whose eyes never opened

...

Limbo is the place your mother never left,

...

where she strains to hear the names of nameless children
in the barking of dogs, each and every afternoon.

The White Book

Han Kang

Swaddling bands

Newborn gown

Salt

Snow

Ice

Moon

Rice

Waves

Yulan

White bird

‘Laughing whitely’

Blank paper

White dog

White hair

Shroud



Sharing the Gift of Elanor

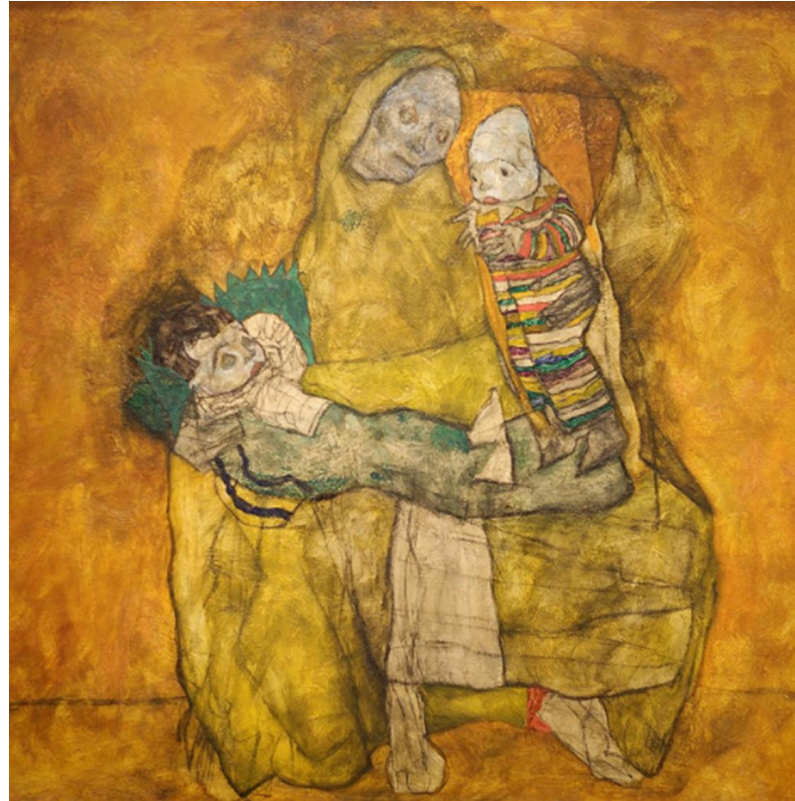
Bella Milroy

1986, 2015

Birth Rites Collection



*Mother at the Cradle and
Child Sitting on the Floor*
Vincent van Gogh, 1881



Mother with Two Children
Egon Schiele, 1915



I Redo, Louise Bourgeois
1999-2000

My poetry

I-poems - each line begins with the word 'I'

Invented by
Carol Gilligan, 2003

- Found poetry / arts-based inquiry
- Made from other people's words from
 - Researcher's own qualitative study or
 - public testimony

On the Listening Guide: A voice-centered relational method.

 EXPORT  Add To My List    Request Permissions  

Database: APA PsycBooks Chapter

[Gilligan, Carol](#) [Spencer, Renée](#) [Weinberg, M. Katherine](#) [Bertsch, Tatiana](#)

Citation

Gilligan, C., Spencer, R., Weinberg, M. K., & Bertsch, T. (2003). On the Listening Guide: A voice-centered relational method. In P. M. Camic, J. E. Rhodes, & L. Yardley (Eds.), *Qualitative research in psychology: Expanding perspectives in methodology and design* (pp. 157–172). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/10595-009>

Abstract

The *Listening Guide* is a method of psychological analysis that draws on voice, resonance, and relationship as ports of entry into the human psyche. It is designed to open a way to discovery when discovery hinges on coming to know the inner world of another person. Because every person has a voice or a way of speaking or communicating that renders the silent and invisible inner world audible or visible to another, the method is universal in application. The *Listening Guide* method comprises a series of steps, which together are intended to offer a way of tuning into the polyphonic voice of another person. This chapter details the steps involved in

The Lostling Archive

Public testimony from women whose baby was stillborn between 1945 and 1985

A work in progress (n = 50 so far)

- Newspaper interviews, stories and letters
- Radio & TV interviews
- Documentaries
- Research in articles, books and theses
- Oral history documents
- Stories on charity websites

A collective voice



Combining I-poetry with the coupling
form

found poetry followed by a
response verse that
'acts as an asymmetric mirror of
the original'

Karen McCarthy Woolf, 2014



Forgetting and Remembering

I was told to forget

I have never forgotten

I shall never forget as long as

I live

I remember when [inaudible]

I remember the moment

I can remember a terrible silence

I remember them saying 'Don't worry, you'll have another'

I remember dissolving

I remember screaming

I remember everything

I could not remember

I keep remembering

*

i remember Mum's rememberings

i remember because she's no longer here to remember what she remembers

i keep remembering

i keep the remembering

Knowing and learning

I knew something was wrong

I asked questions which were mostly avoided

I later learnt that a decision was made to tell me nothing

I was finally told my baby was dead

I knew, without being told, that my baby was dead

I somehow knew

I looked up at the doctor

I said what is wrong? what is wrong?

I said oh no

*

i knew something was wrong

i was eight when Mum told me about the baby who died

i looked up at Mum

i think what

i said – all

i could think of to say – was oh

My artwork, *Patchwork*

Patch of ground

The **work** of discovering and making

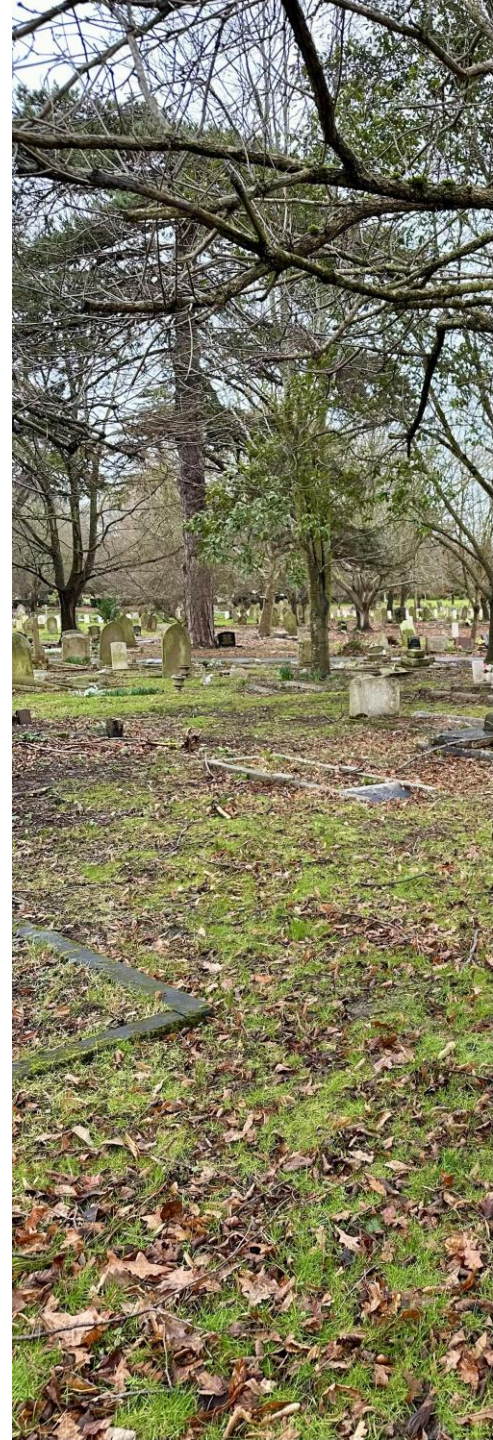
Patchwork – quilts as memorial
items

To **patch** is to repair



The work in *Patchwork*

- Find a Grave database, area R, 1384 records
- 60 unmarked graves of 88 stillborn babies
- Mapping out locations using cemetery plan
- Using headstones as landmarks & pacing
- Taking photos – June, November, and April
- Creating a photo collage





Reflecting on Hirsch's concept of postmemorial work

Reanimating past lives
Commemoration
Act of witness
Making anew
Piecing together
Act of empathy
Working through
Seeking justice

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Thank you for listening

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Reflections on postmemory, creative work and stillbirth long ago

- **Reanimating past lives** – making the lost and invisible become ‘real people’
- **Commemoration** – ritual, a marking, remembering in public & with others
- **Act of witness** – this happened, this is what it was like, invitation to look, hear, feel
- **Making anew** – not repeating trauma, using metaphor, elaboration & imagination
- **Piecing together** – from the fragments of postmemory, sense-making, repair, framing & containing
- **Act of empathy** - imagining oneself in the place, minds and emotions of the parent or baby or both
- **Working through** - processing grief & trauma through the work of remembering, discovering, making, writing & research
- **Seeking justice** – highlighting injustices, making issues more thinkable and speakable, creative works as a form of justice