Helen Acklam, ‘What It Is To Be There’:

A Personal Exploration of Grief through Somatic Creative Practice & Engagement with the Land

Written by:

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Content note: This booklet contains descriptions of stillbirth.

Helen Acklam is a British artist based at BV Studios, Bristol. Since returning to full-time art practice in 2012, she has participated in exhibitions, collaborations and residencies in London, Sussex, the South West and South Wales. Her approach is interdisciplinary with a focus on the intersection of painting, sculpture and installation. During lockdown, Acklam began her project 'What It Is To Be There', a personal exploration of her feelings of grief and shame surrounding the death of her baby in the early seventies, using soil taken from the gravesite. This booklet will provide an introduction to the life experiences that fed into this project, its creative practice and artworks, and the interdisciplinary creative research that grew out of it.

What It Is To Be There

Helen Acklam grew up in Bridgend, South Wales, a town at the base of three coal mining valleys, and went to school opposite a working mine in the Ogmore Valley. An only child, she was adopted by Welsh Presbyterian parents; her mother a deputy head teacher and her father a head teacher and a Chapel deacon. It was shameful and shocking for them when Acklam became pregnant at 15, and her baby, Gail, died at birth. Acklam was not able to see nor hold Gail, her midwife deciding it was best because the baby was disabled with spina bifida and hydrocephalus. Her family and community treated both the pregnancy and the death as shameful secrets, too difficult to be discussed, and only men attended the funeral. Gail was buried with her grandparents at a cemetery in Pontycymer in the Garw Valley.

Acklam realised during lockdown that she needed to revisit this period of her life. Visiting Gail's grave for first time, she felt compelled to take a few

handfuls of soil, even though she didn't know what she would do with it. She explains:

> I don't plan what I do, but try to be spontaneous, following my impulses. It is only after I've made something that I start to understand why – why that material, that process – and find some meaning. Fundamentally, I think with my hands and body. They are slower than my mind and free from judgement; they can tell a different kind of story.

figure 1: The hole that Acklam dug at Gail's gravesite.

She has since made several trips back to Wales to dig deeper into Gail's grave and take large buckets of the earth back to her studio. She wrote the poem 'last dig':

She
returns
lies
reaches slowly
stretches
claws

picks
tugs
squeezes
touches
aches
surrenders

her
shoulder presses
body cold
eyes sore
full hands full
jaw
eyes
throat
mouth full

it is
cold
wet
claggy
dank
close
everything

back to birds
distant traffic
the bark of a dog

the last dig

Acklam spent 2020–21 exploring the material, sifting the soil, removing the coal, debris and organic matter, and refining it until she extracted some clay. She hung the wet clay in cotton pillowcases or muslin for the final fine sieving. At times, her artistic practices stirred up memories and images. For example, when she was working with the largest muslin sack, there was something about its human size and how it was held in place with the clamps and wires that made Acklam think of ‘legs in stirrups’ and the feeling of being trapped and pinned down. The pillowcases that hung from the ceiling reminded her of ‘gigantic, leaking breasts and swollen, pregnant bellies’.

figures 2 & 3: After sorting and sifting the earth, Acklam hung the wet clay in sacks which slowly dried out and hardened.

This process culminated one evening in January 2022. Alone in her studio, Acklam had a strong desire to cover herself in the earth from Gail's grave:

> I had prepared buckets of clay and coal pigments mixed with fish glue and laid out large sheets of cotton rag paper. I had intended to make marks, gestures with my hands. Instead, I took off my clothes and spent time applying the pigments to my body. It felt ritualistic and that some part of me knew what to do. I wanted this pigment to enter my skin and some part of me to enter this liquid. It felt primitive, painful, ecstatic and a release. I don't have a memory of what happened, in terms of what I did or thought, but I remember the feeling responses of my body. Because the work is immediate and direct, it's important that I record what I make and do. So I have a video record of the event, taken with a camera in the corner of my room, and it is also documented on the paper works.

figure 4: Acklam covered herself in the pigment extracted from the earth from Gail's grave and recorded the material traces of her movements.

figure 5: Traces of the movements. Pigments prepared from the soil and coal on cotton rag paper.

figure 6: Searching for form, Acklam made a series of wire shapes which she covered in paper and latex. Because of their light weight, they respond to movement and airflow in the room.

figure 7: the sculptures that emerged from the muslin and cotton sacks were shaped by the process.

Collaborative Research: The Ideas Exchange

In late 2021, Acklam became interested in developing her work into interdisciplinary practice-based research; she contacted Dr Lesel Dawson, an Associate Professor at the University of Bristol who is researching the relationship between grief and creativity, and Dr Julian Brigstocke, a Cultural Geographer from Cardiff University who is interested in embodied experiences of place and landscape. Acklam, Dawson and Brigstocke secured a small grant from the Brigstow Institute at the University of Bristol to collaborate on a project that would explore the relationships between grief, creativity, memory, and place, fostering the cross-fertilisation of ideas and methodologies across and beyond academic disciplines.

The project had three main components:

- **a studio and site visit** that enabled the three core collaborators to explore Acklam's site-specific activities and start preliminary conversations about the intersections between their work, life experiences, and wider research questions.
- **a workshop** that brought together thirteen researchers, artists, curators and writers who share an interest in the project's themes. The participants were introduced to Acklam's work, exchanged ideas and methodologies and considered future collaborations.

1. Studio visit – March 2022 at The Garage, Bristol

The ideas exchange began with Brigstocke and Dawson visiting Acklam's studio. Through seeing and touching the objects, Brigstocke and Dawson were able to deepen their understanding of Acklam's life and creative practice and make connections between them.

The three collaborators discussed ways Brigstocke and Dawson's research intersects with Acklam's work. Brigstocke reflected on how Acklam's practice connects to geographical work engaging with non-representational theories, place, and new materialist agencies. He explained that Acklam's work offers a

novel perspective on issues relating to the materialisation of memory, the embodiment of emotion and affect, and the performative potential of soil, mud, stone, and other material elements in evoking and understanding landscapes of grief. These grounds are shared, and it is striking how Acklam's moving exploration of a deeply individual trauma, by engaging creatively with its materials and grounds, immediately creates connections to broader societal issues and environmental devastation. Acklam's work has an organic, lively feel to it, which is especially interesting given the use of (mostly) inorganic materials. These materials themselves acquire a kind of agency in her work: guiding, summoning, directing, leading, perhaps even making demands (on her, perhaps, and certainly on the viewer). In this way, place itself – displaced, transfigured, and rearranged – makes itself felt in profound ways. This is a presence that feels deeply ambivalent. Brigstocke also wondered what the significance is of the fact that it was during the Covid-19 pandemic that this buried trauma resurfaced in ways that enabled it to become an object of conscious critical and creative reflection for the first time.

Drawing on her work with bereaved parents and research into the relationship between grief and creativity, Dawson reflected on how art can allow us to return to traumatic memories and engage with them in a new way. Explaining that grief therapists and researchers stress the need for grief to be witnessed and acknowledged, she observed that the family, midwife and community's response to Gail's death as a shameful secret would have made it difficult for Acklam to process her bereavement. The sense that Gail should not be discussed would also have inhibited Acklam from expressing her continuing love for her daughter as she moved through her life. Her art project in many ways facilitated these essential processes, enabling her to express her grief, connect to Gail in physical material ways and have her continuing bond with her daughter witnessed.

Dawson was moved by Acklam's impulse to take soil from Gail's grave when she first visited the site and reflected on our common need to find material

ways to connect to those we love who have died. Acklam's artistic processes also reminded her of earlier mourning practices where grievers sometimes put soil on their faces or heads.

Dawson was struck by the vibrant liveliness of Acklam's art, observing that it evoked aspects of pregnancy and birth. She remarked that 'the large muslin sacks which held the wet clay as it dripped and dried – slowly changing, taking shape and becoming itself over time – seem to recall the process of gestation'. As Acklam walked around the studio and approached the translucent sculptures suspended from the ceiling, Dawson noticed the way 'the floating, creature-like forms revolved and danced, responding to Acklam's breath and movement' with a 'delicate, lively responsiveness'. She thought that the clay sculptures that had formed in the hanging sacks also seemed 'to evoke organic, living things, textured and tactile' and enjoyed touching and holding them; they seemed bodily like 'a mouth or vulva', but also reminded her of 'sea-creatures. Or shells, protectively curled up towards themselves'.

2. Site visit to Pontycymer, Garw Valley, South Wales – April 2022

The site visit to Pontycymer, the village where Gail is buried, gave Dawson and Brigstocke a feel for the place where Acklam grew up, enabling the three collaborators to consider the geography (physically, culturally, and politically) and explore the ways Acklam's experiences were shaped by and intersected with it. They walked around the village, valley and cemetery, shared stories and thoughts, and discussed how life events and cultural context impact the ways we cope with life and death.

Acklam wanted to record how the experience would leave its mark on both the land and the walkers, with each person taking something away and leaving something behind (materially, emotionally and intellectually). To this end, she wrapped one of each of their shoes in a lino sheet. She explained that bits of soil would stick to the lino sheet and bits of the sole would fall off as they walked, creating an imprint of the day in both the ground and the newly fashioned sole.

figure 8: Acklam wrapped one of each of their shoes in a lino sheet. The lino would record the exchange of particles and marks picked up from the ground, and the lino and hessian left behind.

figure 9: Brigstocke and Acklam walking together with lino soles.

figure 10: Lino after a day's walking.

figures 11, 12, 13: The lino plates were then developed into intaglio prints.

Brigstocke and Dawson reflected on the site visit in written responses addressed to Acklam.

Julian Brigstocke:

> The day has left me thinking about…
>
> Depths and surfaces. How who we are is tied up with what we bring up from the depths, and what we return to them. How fractures in the earth, in a community, in a self have to be continually surfaced and resurfaced and patched up. We can stick a patch of grass on top and pretend the fracture is not there, or we can find new ways of surfacing a wound.
>
> The reverberations between the story of what happened to you when you were 16, and the story of how you were treated when building the new gravestone. The removal of the old stones you wanted to keep. The lingering authoritarianism. A community founded on extraction. Extraction of coal (that is, of material that was itself once alive). But what else was extracted, what other forms of life? What was extracted from the community in doing so? What are/were the spiritualities of extraction? (Mud as a symbol of renewal… the opposite of sand, which is a symbol of decay and decline…)
>
> The materialities of the grave (mud, stone, paint, flowers, landscape, a body, a coffin). Mud: a nourishing medium, full of life, but also an unstable, slippery surface. (The lino shoe – it was very smooth, I wondered if we'd all slip over if we hit any muddy patches). The mud you took from the graveyard – its ambivalence – it is the ground that your baby has become part of, but it is also part of the place itself, of the community, of the landscape. (The mud that you used to cover your body with – was it smooth and soft, or stony and abrasive, or both?) I think about how many other bodies, how many other stories, how many other losses are also part of this patch of land. (That thought doesn't diminish the importance of your story, or your daughter's.)

Lesel Dawson:

Our day together talking about Gail and Steph (and the time in your studio, Helen) made me think about what gets buried when grief is not acknowledged and allowed expression. It seems to me that while the sadness remains, we lose parts of ourselves and segments of time.

When we got ready for our walk in Pontycymer, I took a childlike delight in our matching shoes and in us looking different – curious and unreadable. It gave me a sense that we were on the same team. And I liked feeling I was making something just by walking.

Our discussions brought home how our experience of time resists linearity. This made me think about a passage from Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*:

> Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space. […] I began then to think of time as having a shape, something you could see, like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another. You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away.

It seems to me that we are like the soil: constructed of layers of memories, feelings, and thoughts that can be unearthed, turned over and recompacted. Our bodies, like the earth, carry our memories – the events of our lives mark and shape us, leaving imprints, debris, and foreign objects. Spaces, scents and sounds can bring up what is buried or forgotten.

When we climbed the hillside and looked at the landscape below and the places where the mines used to be, I was struck by the human patterns of digging, and the difference between covering up objects to hide them and planting things so they can grow. When you described all the ways the town had changed, it made me think about how we can stand on the same spot of earth and feel both the past's distance and proximity. The current landscape – with its mountain bikers and birdsong – was both bigger and smaller than the one you remember (I imagine your childhood town as a claustrophobic, isolated place with streets and houses blackened by coal). And yet we could still see ghosts of the coal mines now covered over by grass, shining greener than everything else as they pool across the landscape like vivid jungle lakes – a living example of how past activities

remain imprinted on the landscape or mixed in the earth so that nothing is ever lost. Not completely.

I felt the power of your primitive urge to take the earth from Gail's gravesite and to lay on (and in) the ground. Gail's grave felt like a powerful way for you to connect to your memories and former self – how digging into the gravesite was a way of digging into time. And it spoke to me about our need to connect physically to those we love who have died: to find tactile, material ways to hold them and carry them with us. I love your delight in the permeability of bodies, landscapes and spaces, and how your awareness of what it means to be a body allows you to mix with / be joined to the earth and to your daughters. We may be stardust, but we are also mud and plants and plastic microbeads.

I'm struck by your love and care in restoring your family's grave. Gail's grave. Tidying it may have begun as a means to tend to your grief, but it is also a tender and maternal form of caretaking, connecting you to the earth and to Gail as you fuss over the patch of ground, worrying about it, nurturing it, and making things grow.

I noticed the proximity of my birth to Gail's (10 April 1972).

Although your current creative works began in grief, for me they feel immensely generative and fecund: when we were in your studio, I kept seeing images of life as I looked at the hanging muslins of clay that leak, solidify, and gestate; the delicate floating objects that respond to your movement and breath; the markings of your hands and body on the canvas which look alternatively like physical traces of birth or of sex – and how, after rolling in the earth from Gail's grave, you held the orange sea-like clay creature in your arms, in the way that you did not get to hold Gail and in the way I wish that you had been held.

I feel a strong sense of you holding your daughters, of carrying them with you, of materialising them in your work, works and words. You have planted their stories in me too, and they grow.

Workshop – May 2022 at the University of Bristol

The workshop brought together artists, curators and academics from different disciplines. It began with Acklam introducing her work and her somatic response to grief using material and process. By focusing on a personal lived experience of disenfranchised grief, the workshop aimed to open up conversations about death and bereavement in a way that destigmatises grief and promotes compassion and understanding. It also aimed to explore links between physical and emotional places and consider how geography interacts with thinking, feeling, materiality and memory. The workshop participants discussed Acklam's work and explored their common interests, offering ideas for future interdisciplinary collaborations.

figure 14: Acklam shares her work from 'What It Is To Be There' at the workshop

The group completed feedback forms at the workshop (and signed consent for us to share their comments). Here are some extracts:

- Participants were inspired by each other's different approaches and the interdisciplinary working environment, which valued each person's experiences, knowledge and expertise.
- Participants were moved by Acklam's story and welcomed the opportunity to talk openly about grief. One commented that they found Acklam's presentation 'emotive, visceral', and another commented that it was 'stimulating and moving'. Her work and account of her experience – and

also the way she talked about the relationship between personal narratives and communal grief – resonated with some participants' own experiences of grief and death. One comments that they were 'inspired and grateful to be around [this] discussion on grief' and another reported that the work opened up ideas on creativity and grief as 'embodied processes' that allow us to explore the 'relationship between communal grief […] and personal narratives'.

- Participants also reported that the workshop made them think in new ways about 'personal and ecological grief' and how we can explore these ideas 'through soil and cycles of life and death' in which the soil acts as a 'kind of archive'. They reported thinking about how the project explored the connection between 'the body/gut' and 'soil memory' and how storytelling could be used to explore the connection between food, digestion and soil. One participant felt that the workshop offered an excellent place to begin exploring the 'non-duality' of the relationship between the 'organic and non-organic'.

New shoots: Outcomes of the ideas exchange

Acklam is continuing her inquiry into practice-based research and is developing a PhD proposal that will build on her work. Prof. Louise Steel, Dawson and Acklam have been awarded a Research Development Award on 'The Generativity of Materials: Creativity, Memory and Place' from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David as part of the Impact Accelerator Programme (RIAP) supported by Research Wales Innovation Funding. This will enable them to develop further research and explore generative collaborations with the workshop participants and others.

Bereavement support after the death of a baby

A Child of Mine – Help for Bereaved Parents (www.achildofmine.org.uk); Helpline: 07803 751229

Antenatal Results and Choices (ARC) (www.arc-uk.org); Helpline: 0845 077 2290 or 0207 713 7486

At A Loss (http://www.ataloss.org/find-support/search)

Child Bereavement UK – CBUK www.childbereavementuk.org); Helpline: 0800 02 888 40

The Child Death Helpline (http://childdeathhelpline.org.uk); Helpline: Freephone 0800 282 986 or 0808 800 6019

The Compassionate Friends (www.tcf.org.uk); Helpline: 0345 123 2304

Cruse Bereavement Care (www.cruse.org.uk); Helpline: 0808 808 1677

Lullaby Trust (www.lullabytrust.org.uk); Bereavement Support Helpline: 0808 802 6868

MAMA Academy (https://www.mamaacademy.org.uk/)

Miscarriage Association (https://www.miscarriageassociation.org.uk/); Helpline: 01924 200799

Petals (www.petalscharity.org)

Sands (https://www.sands.org.uk/); Helpline: 0808 164 3332

Tommies (https://www.tommys.org/); Helpline: 0800 014 7800

For further resources, see: https://www.sands.org.uk/usefullinks & http://www.ataloss.org/find-support/search.

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