

Amulet

by Louise O'Connor [Foott]

Included in Anamnesis publication 2013

For Sartre, things that are absent are as important as those that are present in defining who we are and how we see the world.... Sartre describes how he approaches a cafe for an appointment with Pierre. He enters the cafe, expecting to see Pierre. All that is there is mere background to the anticipated meeting. When Pierre is not there, Sartre's relation to the cafe is altered – all is unsettled, and cannot become fixed and focused because the *raison d'être* of the cafe (for Sartre, on this occasion) is missing:

(Sartre, 1956/1943: 42) in Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009: 19-20

*Louise describes how she approached a point in her life for a meeting with Laura. She reaches that point, expecting to see Laura. All that is there is mere background to the anticipated meeting. When Laura is not there, Louise's relation to life is altered – all is unsettled, and cannot become fixed and focused because the *raison d'être* for this point in her life is missing: Laura absent haunts her life.*

Laura absent is the measure these days. Laura absent is the filter through which everything is viewed, the filter that has brought life into sharper focus than ever before, but in so doing has blurred all that went before it. Who am I in this place? How am I? What is this place that is at once the same and yet so very, very different?

“There are no words.”

There are no words when your baby dies – your daughter(s), your son(s). You are neither a widow nor an orphan. You have held death in your body, in your arms, and let it go. There is a silence around your life that belies the dark, heavy weight of emotion screaming through your veins.

When Laura died there was simultaneously an emptiness and intense clarity to words as I tried to voice my loss. There was an absence of the words I needed to convey the enormity of our loss, but at the same time there was a physical reality to the meanings of words. I physically knew what it was to be heartbroken. My heart ached with a pain I have never before felt. A 'dead' weight. And what could it be, only a dead weight?

“All that happened a lifetime ago.”

In the depths of grief, being creative was not an option it was a necessity. Our child had died. Our beautiful creation no longer lived, but the urge to allow her space in our lives lived on. In this place of no words I wrote like I had never written before desperately searching for words to contain how I felt, desperately searching for words to try and explain to others how I felt, desperately searching.... I now know more than anything, for Laura.

Words and music were gathered together. Maybe we would find her there. Images and objects were (and continue to be) collected and arranged to somehow capture the essence of a daughter whose physical presence in our lives was so brief, but whose impact and on-going presence in our lives is so overwhelming.

When I heard about the Amulet project I was very keen to become involved and have a structured space within which to create something for Laura. I like collaborating and working with people and looked forward to a place where Laura could be a focus. When Laura died very few people gave us gifts for her. Why would they? She was dead. She was all gone. No favourite toys lying around. No stray socks. No evidence of her movement through our lives. I think my interest lay in creating an amulet for her, creating something new, allowing her space to move through our lives and not be perpetually still.

What I anticipated from the project and how it proceeded were, however, at variance. The Amulet project was about identifying an existing amulet rather than creating something new. This was a significant struggle for me. How could I narrow my child down to one object? Here I was struggling daily with her stillness in our constantly moving lives and now I was having to identify just one object from this stillness to represent the child who had quite literally blown my world apart.

As I found words I talked to Marie and explored ideas for amulets that would allow Laura the space I needed her to have and would still fit within the parameters of the project. Much of my response to the project was gut response and words took their time to follow. As an artist it was a struggle to hand over artistic license. As a collaborator it was a struggle to hear Marie's words and not hear my interpretation of her words. As a mother it was a struggle to allow someone to have opinions about how my daughter be represented. As a bereaved mother it was and continues to be a struggle to allow the art just be art and not be my daughter because, in her absence, she is everywhere.

How do you write about art when the reason for the art is the absence of someone? The death of someone? How do you hold the loss in one hand, in your hand, your heart and step back to explore the art and the process of its making?

Ironically these days I feel like I am always a spectator so stepping back from a situation should come more easily. I am a spectator on the 'before' life that most people are still living. I struggle with the desire for others to understand my new world, the awareness that real understanding only comes from living the life and the relief/ disappointment that comes from this realisation.

"I do not want you to know the pain of infant loss."

"I do not want to feel alone in this place."

And so there is the struggle with the art; the excitement of participating in a project that acknowledges my daughter's life, the real difficulty with the fact that this is art, collaborative art, and the focus is on the artist and the making and the art, much less the need to understand this life and loss. Or so it seems.

On a few occasions I heard this project described as 'ground-breaking' and, of all my struggles, this was the biggest. Why? I am not sure that words have formed around my gut reaction yet.

Ground breaking is what happened immediately before we buried our child.

The Amulet Project is a significant project. Giving voice to loss is always significant. Giving creative expression a role where loss goes beyond words is important and valuable. Giving parents an opportunity to acknowledge their loss through creative collaboration is brave, brave for parents and brave for the artist they are collaborating with. Tentative? Yes. Exploratory? Yes. Ground breaking? For whom?

My experience of the Amulet project was very different from what I initially expected from it. Through the process of considering an amulet and the challenges that came with that, I have reflected more on the place we allow Laura in our lives.

In this unsettled 'after' life with its melee of feelings and words, Laura is a part of our journey onwards. She is in the way we love each other now. She is in how we live. We do not live without Laura. We live with her ever-present absence. And that is not to say our lives are lived with the constant question: What if? What if? What if? It is to say she is present in how we notice each other, how we hear each other. Laura is there in our sadness, but in our happiness too.

She is present in the smell of roses. She is in the air when we wander coastlines together (or alone), in the ripples of tide and sand. She is in the tiny cowrie shells found in a hidden inlet near a remote strand, and she is in the moments spent searching for those shells. She is in the heart shaped stones we all have got adept at finding and she is in the looking for them and the want of looking for them and the offering of these stones to others and ourselves.

Louise is a mother, educator, artist and writer.