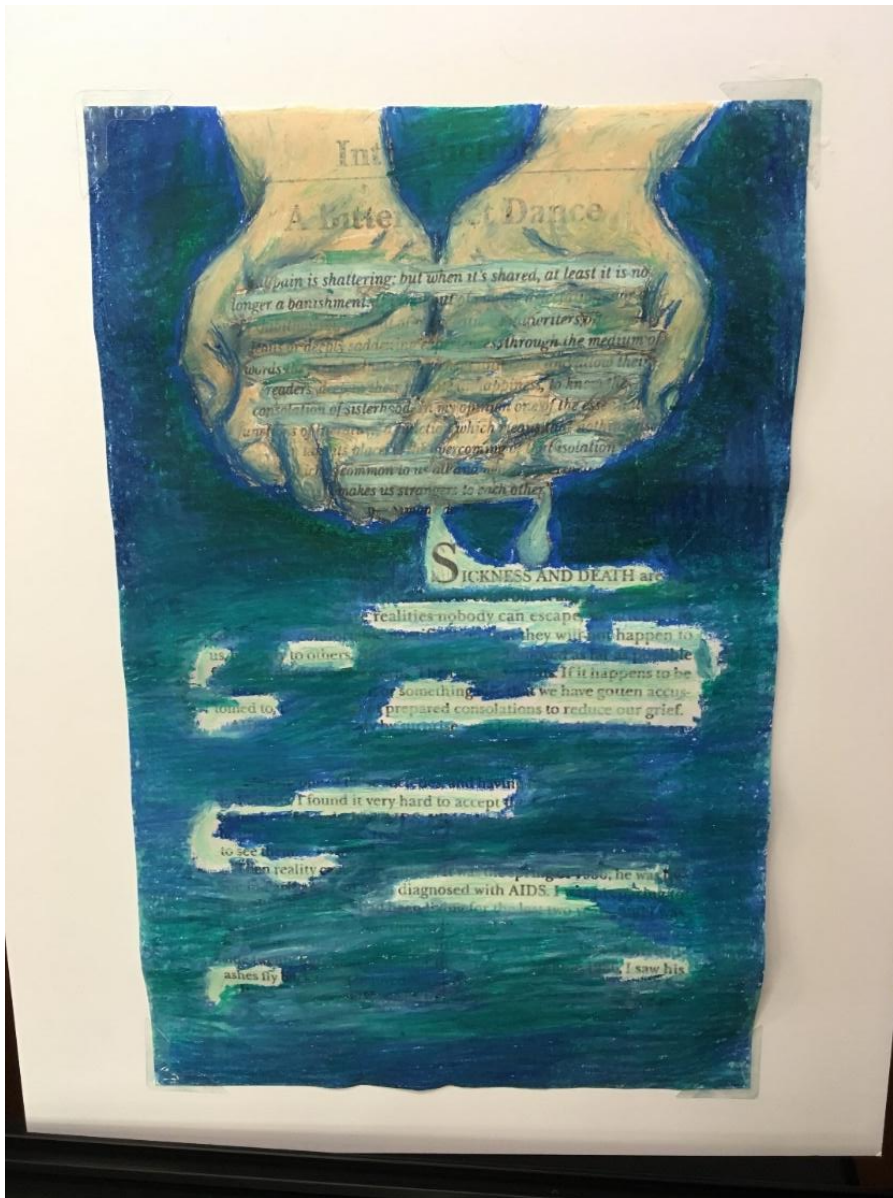


Love, Loss and the Phenomena of Caregiving: An Analysis of *The Giver*

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The Giver, photographed in Perkins Library by Carolyn Im

Inevitability and universality are pervasive themes in *The Giver*, a piece by Carolyn Im on display at Duke University. Part of an exhibit inspired by Tom Phillip's *A Humument*, *The Giver* focuses on elucidating the experience of caregivers in times of a loved one's sickness and death, inviting rumination upon how networks of care impact everyone involved.

Tom Phillips's *A Humument*, is a "de-composed and re-composed" version of W.H. Mallock's *A Human Document*, "a collaboration and collision between language and the visual, and between Mallock and Phillips" (Kidd, 2012).

Similarly, *The Giver* reworks a page from the introduction of a novel edited by Ines Reider and Patricia Ruppelt: *Matters of Life and Death: Women Speak About AIDS*, which contains a collection of writings by women affected by HIV/AIDS, either by having the virus, or by caring for loved ones (Rieder & Ruppelt, 1989, p.iii). Unlike *A Humument*, which only involved Mallock and Phillips, *The Giver* involved an expansive collaboration between Im, Reider, Ruppelt, the unnamed woman whose narrative was used in the introduction of the novel, Maria de Bruyn, who contributed the archives from which the novel was selected, and social theorist Simone de Beauvoir, who provided the quote included on the page. Im states "the sheer number of people involved in making *The Giver* is a metaphor for the often-extensive networks of care that surround and are indubitably affected by an individual's sickness and death." While this statement provides a look into Im's rationale in selecting the text to rework, the message requires contextual knowledge of the collection of narratives from which the page was taken, which is not provided within the exhibit or piece itself. The intended message therefore is extremely subtle and largely inefficacious to viewers passing by. However, those who choose to research the page after viewing, myself included, are rewarded with a nuanced yet thoughtful representation of how illness affects everyone, whether infected or indirectly affected.

The original narrative of the document encapsulated a caregiver's experience as her friend Michael, living with HIV/AIDS, progressively deteriorated and passed away (Rieder & Ruppelt, 1989, p.iii). Most of the narrative focused on Michael's status of health, undermining the gravity of the caregiver's own struggles during and beyond Michael's death. Im states that she "wanted to use *The Giver* to transform the narrative from a caregiver's reaction to a friend's illness to a catharsis of self-expression and poignant elucidation into love, loss, and the inevitability of the two sentiments."

In viewing the narrative left uncovered in *The Giver*, Im achieved her intentions by covering all mentions of Michael's name, centering the piece on the caregiver's

suffering and reflections. In fact, the only references to Micheal in *The Giver* are from the phrases “he was diagnosed with AIDS” and “I saw his ashes fly,” two succinct statements that serve as examples of the caregiver’s musings on sickness and death as “inevitable realities no one can escape,” a reflection included earlier in the piece. In using first person to describe Micheal’s cremated ashes in the statement “I saw his ashes fly,” *The Giver* allows the caregiver to directly shares her experiences and tribulations whilst framing Micheal’s death as an example of her emotional engagement and sacrifice beyond his passing. The *Giver* provides a window into how caregiving, as a “moral endeavor that is at once deeply personal and social” greatly impacts the status of a caregiver’s emotional and mental health, as demonstrated by the phrase “I found it very hard to accept, too see reality” included in the piece (Livingston, 2012). The repeated use of first person stresses the notion of providing the caregiver an outlet to directly share her sentiments, struggles and journey.

In focusing on the visual aspect of *The Giver*, the piece features an oil pastel representation of hands cupping water trickling through fingers. From a more cynical perspective, the water dripping through the hands seemed to allude to a sense of Sisyphean futility in which “sickness and death are realities nobody can escape,” a statement included in the language portion of *The Giver* within a water droplet on the page. The use of metaphor paralleling trickling water with the inevitability of certain life experiences is pervasive throughout both the visual and language components of the piece.

However, in looking beyond the overt message of death of loss both written and represented in the piece, *The Giver* also denotes a more positive notion: the universality of caregiving, which is often symbolized as a pair of outreaching hands. The hands in the piece are a representation of the caregiver within the context of social networks of care, who despite the inevitability of suffering, illness, and death, represented by trickling water, seek to take part in a process that is “crucial to patient well-being and at the core of humanizing empathy” (Livingston, 2012).

Although a caregiver will indubitably experience oscillations of emotional highs and lows tied to their loved one’s state of health, Im suggests “this phenomenon is an unavoidable result of human compassion and empathy.” *The Giver* blends suffering and sadness with the underlying love and compassion necessary to generate the unhappy emotions in the first place, creating a nuanced yet revealing glimpse into how illness and death impact the caregivers who endure through and beyond their roles.

Works Cited

1. Kidd, J. (2012, July). Every Day of my Life is Like a Page. *The Literary Review*, (400).
2. Livingston, J. *Improvising Medicine: An African Oncology Ward in an Emerging Cancer Epidemic*. Durham: Duke UP, 2012.
3. Rieder, I., & Ruppelt, P. (Eds.). (1989). *Matters of life and death: Women speak about AIDS*. London: Virago. iii. Maria de Bruyn Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library (Box 12), Duke University