**Learning to Grieve:**

**Situated Learning and Mourning Rituals with Cross-Cultural Youth**

Peter Cariaga | AYME 2024

There was no funeral.

No flowers.

No ceremony.

No one had died.

No weeping or wailing.

Just in my heart.

*I can’t…*But I did anyway,

and nobody knew I couldn’t.

*I don’t want to…*But nobody else said they didn’t.

So I put down my panic

And picked up my luggage

and got on the plane.

There was no funeral.

—Alex Graham Jones, “Mock Funeral”

**Introduction**

How do we learn to grieve? In one sense, no learning seems necessary: grief is an individual, often unbidden emotional response to loss. We enter the world crying (a response to an abrupt transition that is arguably our first experience of loss) and we recognize loss when we feel it, even from a young age (broken or left behind toys come to mind). In another sense, though, grief is a deeply social, culturally conditioned practice that we learn through participation. We pick up from others the acceptable forms of grieving (outward and inward), the sanctioned rituals for mourning (individual and communal) and, importantly, the kinds of losses that merit public or even private expressions of grief (and, by extension, the losses that do not). It is this second sense of grieving that I explore in this paper.

One particularly challenging form of grief is what has come to be known as migratory grief. Not limited only to those who undergo dangerous travel in pursuit of better economic prospects, migratory grief is an experience common among many who move from one country to another. Although it is still an emerging area of social scientific research, migratory grief is generally understood as “distress associated with losses due to migration.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Migration-related losses, in turn, may be interpersonal (being physically distant from friends and family), material (familiar foods are unavailable), or abstract (having a sense of not belonging).[[2]](#footnote-2) In many ways, migration-related losses are about what a migrant leaves behind.

The poem above reflects the difficult reality of migratory grief among transnational youth, more commonly known as Third Culture Kids (or TCKs).[[3]](#footnote-3) How does one grieve a loss for which there are no socially prescribed ways to grieve? Over the past nearly 20 years, I have gradually come to answer that question: through academic research, through working with TCKs, and—importantly—by learning how to process and grieve my own experience as a TCK. This paper comes out of years of working as a practitioner and student researcher with TCKs at private university-based camp that I call No Strangers, which ministers to teen and young adult TCKs.[[4]](#footnote-4) Drawing on autoethnographic reflections, theories of grief, and the reflections of study participants, I explore pedagogical practices for helping young people grieve in a way that utilizes the rich resources of their faith tradition.

**A Camp for People Like Me**

In the spring of 2006, Mary, the director of the Third Culture Kids (TCK) group at Midwest University informed several college students, including me, that we would be having a camp for TCKs that summer—right there, on campus—and she wanted me to attend. I had known the term “Third Culture Kid” for less than a year at that point, having only encountered it when I arrived at Midwest from the Philippines and learned about a student group that several of my missionary kid peers had joined. It turned out to be more than missionary kids, though they were the majority; there were people whose parents were military personnel, international business professionals, and others whose work required them and their families to live abroad. I had grown up thinking so much of my own missionary kid experiences were mine alone, yet in the TCK group I found people that I could fully identify with. In that group, I felt at home. Camp would start the day after I would arrive from a trip to the Philippines to see my family, but that didn’t matter. I *had* to be at this camp.

The camp, known as No Strangers, is aptly named. When TCKs meet each other, there is often an instantaneous sense of kindredness. This is the case for missionary kids, regardless of which countries they have lived in, but the recognition happens across sectors as well. Some have described this phenomenon as a “reunion of strangers,”[[5]](#footnote-5) the phrase that gives No Strangers its name. The name also reflects a core conviction of Mary Hartman and the group of her colleagues who decided TCKs needed a camp: getting TCKs into the same room with each other was what helped them understand themselves more fully, and in some cases even heal.

There is plenty that TCKs need healing from. Research as far back as the 1930s has documented the difficulties that American missionary kids face upon “re-entry” to the US.[[6]](#footnote-6) More recent research on TCKs in general shows that moving to their passport countries (it is only *back* to those countries for some; many were born and raised elsewhere) tend to face common sets of problems, such as questions about cultural identity, a sense of homelessness, difficulty with cultural adjustments, and other issues.[[7]](#footnote-7) One of these issues is migratory grief, and its impact can be devastating on TCKs, often because it’s not recognized as grief in the first place.[[8]](#footnote-8) Kenneth Doka’s notion of “disenfranchised grief” is helpful for seeing the kind of grief TCKs experience. The “grieving rules” in a given society and/or particular subculture or people-group determine what “counts” as grief, as well as how it can be expressed and who can express it.[[9]](#footnote-9) Some individuals can internalize these grieving rules, leading them to self-censor their expressions of grief or not acknowledge their reactions as grief per se.[[10]](#footnote-10)

I felt this kind of grief firsthand growing up, even if I didn’t know how to express it. One story should suffice:

It’s November of 2003. I’m sixteen years old. We’re packing up the apartment in Texas. I’m moving slowly because I don’t want to pack up again.

This will be my fourth move in four years. We’d left the Philippines in 1999 thinking it was for good. By the end of 2001 we moved back to Cebu, then six months later we were back in Fort Worth. Each time we’d packed our lives into *balikbayan* boxes (they’re lighter and cheaper than suitcases). I was getting tired of packing.

This time I’ve been in Texas for over a year. I’ve invested myself in a local church youth group. We went a year without a youth minister but somehow the teens kept things together. I’m a leader there now; I actually feel like I belong. I also have a girlfriend. She knows I’m leaving; I know I’m leaving. I haven’t really cared. I’m happy. I’ve put down roots.

Now I’m being uprooted—again. The flight’s in a few days. I need to empty my closet; we all need to empty the apartment. We’ll spend the last few nights at my grandmother’s house. That’s where we’ll load our lives into boxes and leave what doesn’t fit—again.

I don’t want to have to pack up my life anymore. I want to just be normal for once. I want to be like the other youth group kids. I have meaning and purpose here. I have hopes and dreams, and they’re all getting dashed and the pieces tucked into boxes or left in a shed. I’ve been uprooted before, but this time is the worst. And I’m sick of it. So I pack slowly, if I pack at all.

Dad comes into the room and sees I haven’t packed the closet. (I think I’d been taking a video game break.) He’s stressed and breathing hard. He looks at the closet and puts his hands on his waist. “*Crap*!” he yells. It’s the closest I’ve heard him come to cursing. He demands I pack up the closet and storms out.

I don’t want to pack up again.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Many TCKs have similar kinds of experiences, the kind that (often unintentionally) tell them that what they have lost is trivial or unimportant, and above all that it is not worth outwardly grieving. Such messages might come from parents (e.g., “You’ll make new friends”) or simply be part of the culture of the organizations (such as a missions agency) or larger systems (such as the US military) that TCKs are part of (e.g., “Around here, everyone moves”).[[12]](#footnote-12) These TCKs experience disenfranchised, migratory grief, even if they don’t have the language for it. Mary Hartman and her colleagues had seen this in several years of working with college age TCKs. They knew that dealing with grief would need to be part of the No Strangers camp.

**Growing as a Griever**

At some point Mary and the other camp organizers decided that the middle day of No Strangers should be Grief Day, one dedicated to talking about, legitimizing, and expressing the migratory grief that TCKs experience. Again, I remember little of Grief Day that first year, other than that it was hot; I had to do something that afternoon outside of camp, so I missed the discussion session on grief (though I had heard a version of it at TCK group during the school year). What I do remember is that our small group of fifteen or so campers was subdued that evening. They had been doing hard emotional work, one organizer said. Part of me envied them. I got the sense they’d learned to do something that I hadn’t.

Over the next few years, though, I learned, too. Although I missed camp in 2007 and 2009, and my memories of the Grief Days of 2008 and 2010 are hazy, I began to build a capacity for grieving, and doing so *as* a TCK. The distinct shape that Grief Day eventually took between 2007-2010, with a consistent structure of programming year after year, was helpful, but the element that was most formative for me as a griever was what came to be called the “Grief Ceremony.” This ritualized time on Grief Day was where participants were given space to outwardly express grief. It was the practice of the Grief Ceremony that formed a *habitus* for grieving, the “structuring structure” for an activity that, as TCKs, many of us were unfamiliar with.[[13]](#footnote-13) This habitus did its work on me; I not only became competent at embodying the role of a griever but, in time, started teaching other TCKs to do the same. In this section of the paper, I offer a description of the Grief Ceremony and accounts of what and how I learned to grieve, told through recollections of specific moments during or related to Grief Day over the last fourteen or so years. Although the narratives are drawn from my own memories and the analysis is my own, I’ve also been prompted by texts written by past participants in the Grief Ceremony, in some ways showing others’ growth as grievers. Their stories complement my own.

The Grief Ceremony

The Grief Ceremony’s actual ritual has changed over time but at the core it is, at least ostensibly, a funerary practice. The camp organizers who first started holding the Grief Ceremony took seriously the poem by TCK Alex Graham Jones, quoted in the epigraph at the beginning of this paper, that declares that “there was no funeral.” There was no funeral for any of the things TCKs grieve, they reasoned, even if those losses can cumulatively carry the weight of a death. They decided that if there were one thing TCKs should be allowed to do on Grief Day, it should be to have a funeral.

Funerals are rituals for marking human passage from life to death. Often they are about comforting the bereaved; Christian funerals in particular (and the vast majority of those who attend No Strangers are Christian) are also practices for religious meaning-making.[[14]](#footnote-14) Yet there is also a public element of funerals that signals transition, not only of person who has died but also of those who remain alive. Though there may be a symbolic element to those who make the transition from one social category to another (e.g., wife to widow),[[15]](#footnote-15) there is also a functional element to funerals in that they invite their participants to embody a certain way of being—that is, funerals invite participants to take on the role of mourners. Funerals have a formational quality to them: it is at funerals that one learns to be a better mourner (or doesn’t), to better embody the role of someone who grieves another human and honors their memory. Expectations differ depending on whether a person is an attendee or one of the bereaved, of course, but both are roles of mourners and feed into each other. Attending and grieving at funerals can teach one, gradually, what it is like to be bereaved; bereavement, in its time, can teach one be a better griever at funerals. The No Strangers organizers likely did not have all these things in mind when they determined that Grief Day should have a funeral, but they at least knew it was important for TCKs to be able to acknowledge and grieve their losses.

While the Grief Ceremony does not resemble a traditional funeral in form (there are “no flowers” and “no one had died,” as Jones’s poem says), it still functions as one in that it invites public forms of mourning loss. The Grief Ceremony has featured two core movements since around 2008, the listing of losses and the release of losses (the latter of which is often the specific ritual that camp staff refer to as “the Grief Ceremony”). During the listing of losses, participants are led into a specially designated room, often with ambient lighting and decoration, and are handed slips of paper and pencils. They are then invited to list what they have lost in the process of migration. After about 15 minutes, an officiant leads participants to an outside area where they will release the slips of paper containing their lists of losses. “Release” has taken a number of different forms, including tying them to helium-filled balloons, placing water-soluble paper in a basin of water, and burning lists in a fire pit. Once participants release their losses, many gather in clusters of family members, former missionary teammates, and/or close friends, often to cry together and hug one another. This continues until all participants have released their losses. It is not a typical funeral, but one that lets participants learn how to grieve.

Listing Individual Losses

On June 7 of this year, I wrote a list of losses that I mourn.[[16]](#footnote-16) They include things specific to this period in my life: family and friends in Oklahoma and Texas that I would be far from in Georgia; the time that my oldest child didn’t get with family in Asia due to the pandemic; the broken relationship between my dad and a dear family friend in the Philippines. I haven’t kept a record of all my loss lists (I wish now I had), but themes from this particular list remind me of things I have listed before—a sense of stability, people I miss in a specific place, things that could have been but now are not. One loss list, which I made outside of camp for a previous project, included tangible and non-tangible losses, everything from the house where I grew up in the Philippines (which still stands but is now so different from its state in my childhood) to the small moments of comfort I felt as a child with my nuclear family. With nine international moves under my belt by the time I was 18 (even if between two countries), I lost a lot.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Other TCKs have lost a lot, too, though. When No Strangers participants come together to list losses, there are always some who take longer than others. The listing of losses is a private affair; a few may share their lists with others (I never have), but for the most part these lists are only for the eyes of those who wrote them. This is important, as many of the losses come directly from a place of deep, often unacknowledged hurt. Though not lists of losses, a collection of written lament prayers from participants in 2015 offers a glimpse into what they’ve lost. One speaks to the migratory losses of stability, community, and even identity:

There is a time to mourn and one to weep, but when is that? I can’t do it in front of [*Name*] or my parents… or the [missionary] team. As you know well, my grieving time is often late at night when all is silent. [. . .] I’m so alone, Lord, and I’m so afraid. My team; my family; it’s far, far away, and I get the awful feeling that I can’t talk to them about my real feelings. Anyone looking in from the outside would see a girl who’s normal, okay and has no regrets or remorse, but it’s not right. I am still in so much pain, and I hate that I can’t place it. I don’t know where home is, or even where you are sometimes, and it kills me. It’s a pain duller and deeper than I’ve felt before.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Another asks plaintively about the friends that they keep “losing,” not to death but to moving:

How many more times must I lose a close friend? Am I doing something wrong? Why do you let me suffer alone in the darkness? Father the only thing I ever wanted in life was someone by my side to call my best friend. [. . .] Will you grant me my desire? Will you end my sorrow of losing one friend after another? Will you put an end to my hopes shattering?[[19]](#footnote-19)

Still another TCK, who longed to return to the US, recounts the shock of recognizing their loss:

The time to move finally come[s]

I say half hearted goodbyes

to people I know. I’m really excited.

I get off the plane and I’m finally

[here]. Finally to America where I’ve

wanted to be. As I leave the airport

I finally realize. I’m leaving all I know

I wish I said

goodbye the right way[[20]](#footnote-20)

The act of putting a loss in writing—by hand, with pencil to paper—can be disconcerting, especially if one hasn’t named it for themselves as a loss before. The first few times I listed losses for the Grief Ceremony, seeing them on the page in coal gray and white made them feel viscerally real (because I had named them), and I didn’t know how to feel about them in the moment. Listing my losses was one thing, but I was still a novice at grieving them.

Releasing Losses Together

In 2008, we started using balloons for the Grief Ceremony. Mary Hartman suggested this would be a good way to release losses: Tie the paper lists to the balloons and let the wind bear them gently away. It didn’t work so well the first time we tried it; the printer paper was too heavy, and some participants had to tie two or more balloons together to get enough lift. No one liked the idea that the losses they were trying to release might come right back to them. We learned, though, and started using lighter parchment paper.

The balloons are special to me because the Grief Ceremonies that used them were the ones in which I learned the most about how to grieve. In 2010, participants had finished listing losses and we were led outside to release them. The sun had just set; we felt the weight of an emotional day as we sat down on some steps in front of a small field on campus. Participants tied their parchment loss lists to the balloons, and one by one they walked to the edge of the field, released their balloon, and then returned to their seat. I remember a nagging thought that there was something missing in that approach. I couldn’t just let the losses go and turn around like that; they named things that were too precious. When I took my turn, I walked to the edge of the field, released my balloon, and then I continued standing. I watched the balloon as it carried my list—a manifest of treasured cargo—into the clouds, the red dot of its body growing smaller and smaller as it flew, until it was part of the night sky. It was only then that I sat back down. I remember feeling still sad, though content and fulfilled. I had grieved well.

I noticed that the next few people who got up—and then many who followed after them—also stood still to watch their balloons fly away. I wondered in that moment if they had felt the preciousness of their own losses, and if they saw in my actions a way to honor the sacredness of the moment. Looking back on it, I also wonder if they saw it as something to try out, a sort of experiment with grieving that they saw modeled and decided to attempt themselves. Perhaps for some, especially the new participants, following my (impromptu) example was their attempt at getting “a feel” for the practice of grieving.[[21]](#footnote-21) Though I didn’t intend to at the time, in retrospect it seems I influenced the very practice I was getting a hang of myself. We were learning to grieve together.

Learning to grieve—individually, communally, and collaboratively—got me thinking about the grief ceremony a religious practice. I noticed that the frameworks our presenters used for talking about grief earlier on Grief Day were informed by their work as professional counselors. This was helpful, of course, and they were clinically and therapeutically robust. Yet the way I heard a number of participants (again, the majority of which were missionary kids) talk about their losses, grief was also a theological issue. Inspired by my seminary forays into biblical lament literature, I volunteered in 2012 to lead a session on Grief Day about expressing grief theologically. What I didn’t fully account for, though, was that I still a novice griever; even after four years of Grief Day, I was still getting a feel for the practice. As I read aloud some examples of contemporary lament, I realized in the moment that the excerpts were expressing experiences of my own that I had never put into words. I stopped speaking. The audience uneasily moved their eyes from my slides onto me. I tried to resume reading and all I could emit were sobs. That was my vocabulary for the rest of the presentation. I don’t know that it benefited the other participants much. So much for collaborative grieving.

It wasn’t until 2015 that I felt I was actually getting the feel for the practice of grieving. I was on a team of four in charge of planning that year’s camp. We decided together that we would invite participants to compose their own laments. I worked with a biblical scholar to present laments from the Psalms, and we allowed participants ample time to write. Their remarkable compositions not only reflected ran the gamut of forms of lament Psalms but also taught me about expressing grief.[[22]](#footnote-22) It was so impactful for all of us, in fact, that one of the other organizers insisted we have an extra session before the listing of losses just to process things more. Processing, in essence, took the form of an oral listing of losses; for nearly an hour participants took turns naming what they grieved with heartbreaking particularity. One young woman, the daughter of a Japanese national and a Black American, broke the reserved manner she had kept so far and wept openly that her family had left Japan, despite the marginalization she faced there for being both mixed race and Black. However painful her life there was, she sobbed, it was part of her, and she didn’t want to be cut off from what made her who she was. In that moment, she taught me an important function of Grief Day: it connects us to the past, tying who we are to who we were, allowing us form continuing bonds with what we have lost rather than simply trying to “move on.”[[23]](#footnote-23) As experienced a griever as I may have been at that point, I was still learning from others. Indeed, we are *still* learning to grieve together.

**Learning to Grieve**

The ways I learned to grieve—as an individual, then communally, then collaboratively by influencing and teaching one another—reflect the ways in which the Grief Ceremony is not only a socializing practice but also a pedagogical one. It is pedagogical in that people learn to act in certain kind of ways through it; it is formative because it invites trying out a certain way of being.

These qualities reflect those involved in the kinds of pedagogical practices that educational theorists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger have called “legitimate peripheral participation.” Taking an apprentice model of learning, Lave and Wenger describe how “newcomers” to a practice are formally introduced (it is legitimate) by “old timers” to aspects of the practice, moving from the lower levels of involvement (it is peripheral) to higher levels, eventually incorporating them into the community of practice (it is participation) and becoming “old timers” themselves who can then initiate others.[[24]](#footnote-24) In the episodes above, I learned the practice of grieving during the Grief Ceremony and eventually functioned as an “old timer” in that I was able to introduce the practice to newcomers. At the same time, I learned from others (even newcomers), and so the community of practice is infused with vitality.

I should mention, though, that there are instances that trouble the overarching narrative of learning to grieve. There have been a number of TCKs who, for various reasons, have not engaged the practice of grieving in the way that I or the majority of participants have. Some have integrated their experiences well enough that they feel more gratitude than grief over their migration experiences; we organizers often invite TCKs in this category to be considerate of those who do need the time to grieve. Others try to present as being integrated but show signs of repressed emotions or discomfort with (or even unwillingness to) engaged in grief-related activities. I recall one participant in 2012, for example, whose balloon did not rise properly and returned to the ground; he popped the balloon with a pocket knife and separated himself from the rest of the group. Still others resist resolution (however partial any resolutions on Grief Day might be) and/or the religious aspects of the practice. One participant’s lament prayer demonstrates this last kind of narrative-troubling example: “It hurts, it [expletive] hurts to be the only one, to be alone, to be years & years of miserable. To have nothing to offer and to be needed by no one and it hurts and it hurts and it hurts and it hurts and it hurts and it hurts and it hurts and it hurts and it hurts and I DO NOT FORGIVE YOU.”[[25]](#footnote-25) All these instances prompt some intellectual humility on my part—“learning to grieve” does not fit the experience of everyone who participates in the Grief Ceremony.

Still, the framework of the Grief Ceremony as pedagogical practice (i.e., it is a practice that teaches) is helpful for understanding my own experience with it. In this autoethnography I have tried to evoke something of the lived experience of taking part in the practice, as well as the specific ways that I’ve engaged the practice and the ways it has shaped my own life. My hope is that it offers some insight into a particular, even peculiar practice, and that it helps account for the ways that, over time, I have learned to grieve.

**Appendix A:  
Autoethnography Research Materials**

Timeline of Moves

1987—Born (Cebu City, Philippines)

1991—Move 1 (Philippines to US, age 4)

1992—Move 2 (US to Philippines, age 5)

1996—Move 3 (Philippines to US, age 9)

1997—Move 4 (US to Philippines, age 10)

1999—Move 5 (Philippines to US, age 12; believed at the time to be permanent)

2001—Move 6 (US to Philippines, age 14)

2002—Move 7 (Philippines to US, age 15)

2003—Move 8 (US to Philippines, age 16)

2005—Move 9 (Philippines to US, age 18; move for college)

Inventory of Migration-Related Losses

1. Loss of My World
   * My house and the Mactan church building
   * My routine
   * The food
   * The place itself
   * Assumptions about the world
2. Loss of Status
   * A recognized category (Fil-Am)
   * My privileged religious status
   * My “earned” status
   * Full membership in the community
   * Status as a missionary kid
3. Loss of Lifestyle
   * Familiarity with the way things are
   * Convenience of transport
   * The central role of church
   * A slower paced lifestyle
   * A multi-lingual environment
4. Loss of Possessions
   * My room
   * My family’s kitchen
   * My toys
   * The VHS tapes
   * The mango trees
5. Loss of Relationships
   * My friends in Mactan
   * Lawrence
   * Lee Paul
   * Altamesa friends
   * Missionary kid friends
   * Banilad friends
6. Loss of Role Models
   * Kuya Aldous
   * Adrian Ding
   * Anthony Pangilinan
   * Lee Paul
   * Hai Cao
7. Loss of System Identity
   * Missionary kid status
   * Invitations to participate
   * Recognition of what I’d done or become
   * Recognition by church leaders
   * Recognition by churches
8. Loss of a Past That Wasn’t
   * More time with Altamesa friends
   * More time with Mactan friends
   * More fluency in Filipino languages
   * A deeper connection to the culture
   * Role models that mirror me
9. Loss of a Past That Was
   * My family as it was
   * What I was with my friends
   * The city as I left it
   * The church(es) as I left it
   * The small moments and things as they were

**Appendix C:  
Individual TCK Laments**

This document is a product of No Strangers, a camp for TCKs that I have been involved in since 2006. During the 2015 camp, I led a session for teen and young adult participants that introduced the lament literature of the Hebrew Bible and the Psalms in particular. After presenting the form of laments (based mostly on Walter Brueggemann’s work),[[26]](#footnote-26) I gave instructions for writing individual laments. Later that night, after discussing with the rest of camp leadership, we invited any participants who wished to share their written lament to let us take a picture of it and transcribe it. We assured them that the pictures themselves would not be shared and identifying details in the laments would be redacted from the transcription.

In transcribing the laments, I have aimed for representing the text as written, including their placement on the page, original wording, and words that were stricken through.[[27]](#footnote-27) Specifically, I use the following conventions:

* [word]—Brackets indicate what the handwritten word seems to be, or a least my best guess of it based on context.
* [*word*]—Italics within brackets indicate a transcriptional note, such as when a word is illegible or when I want to indicate that a seeming error is in the original (i.e., *sic*).
* [w---]—Dashes within brackets indicates my choice to redact word, such as when an expletive is used.
* ~~word~~—Strikethroughs indicate that the word is present in the original text but written over or stricken through.

As promised to the participants, all identifying information has been redacted from the laments, including personal and place names.

**Lament 1**

Why, My God, are you not the same God others claim

to know? Am I the [claimant] in the [wrong] or am I doubting

You. Should I not doubt myself before I doubt You?

The [Universe], Your [Universe], has brought me to this

point, the point in my life when I could even become an

[efficient] person. And I [know] from the best ways to ~~control~~

understand my self [*sic*], but yet struggle with life itself and [*illegible*].

And I have given up everything. My best friend remains my best [friend]

but does not remain in my life. I don’t know if I believe

we only get one chance for love in this life, but I [know]

[mine] is [gone]. I want to claim fault to that but it was not

my doing. I know what I [ache] for now is, as all things, a distract-

tion [*sic*] from my true purpose but I ache for worldly

happiness when I should only ache for efficiency and [betterment.]

I should ache for you but do I?

It is not “where is God;” it is “where am I.”

**Lament 2**

Why, God? Why?

Why do you leave me in the

dark groping for answers?

Why do you send me hardships?

Where can I find you [*sic*] love in

foreign lands?

Things have been lost,

goodbyes have been said,

I have come to a new land

only to return to the old

Why am I here?

What do you want from me?

Can the lost not be found?

Though I have lost sight of

your almighty plan.

I know you are always there.

You have shown me that my home

and [friend] on the earth will perish

but that my home should be place [*sic*] where

You are ~~and that~~ you are the ultimate friend

You will never lose me and [you will] love me for eternity

**Lament 3**

God, how am I supposed

to relate to people who

don’t feel like I do?

How do I know if I am

faking it, or actually feeling this way?

I feel like I’m expected to

feel something negative

that I’m ignoring (or deal

with it). Which is healthy

in some circumstances,

but how do I know if

it’s real? I feel confused.

I feel anxious. I feel like

I should be writing about

past experiences or something,

but those are over and done.

You have helped me. They

are finished. You have always

[*Page 2*]

loved me more than I even I could,

So thank you, and

HALLELUJAH! [*large letters across the page*]

**Lament 4**

I hear the news from my parents.

I’m moving. Rush of excite

ment. Feel no sadness at all.

I start packing the next [month]

I have to pack all my stuff in

two boxes. I throw away a lot of

my things. I throw away many

memories. I feel sad.

The time to move finally come [*sic*]

I say half hearted goodbyes

to people I know. I’m really excited.

I get off the plane and I’m [finally]

hear [*sic*]. [Finally] to America where I’ve

wanted to be. As I leave the airport

I finally realize. I’m leaving all I know

~~My know for a knew life~~ I wish I said

goodbye the right way

I’ve lived in America for a

While. My mom talks to a friend

in the church in [*Country*]. The church

is dieing. [*sic*] A rush of pain [overwhelms]

me. Sadness overwhelms me.

We move again. We move from

a big city to a small town

I’m happy to move. ~~I live in the~~

~~small town for~~

I live in the small town for a bout

a month. I think about moving

Again. I wonder where I’m moving

next. Then I realize I’m not

going to move. My family has

settled down. I have settled down

in this town. I want to move.

But I [don’t] want to at the same time.

I feel sad, I have been [moving]

all my life. I feel een more [sad]

about not moving now.

**Lament 5**

[*Japanese:* God of Heaven], you are a loving God

You are patient, you are merciful

You are jealous for me, never stops fighting

for me.

I’ve failed you so many times and I know

I will continue to do so. Yet, you still

love me.

Take my hand and dance with me

Smile at me and embrace me.

Touch my heart and light a fire in me.

Crush my demons and free me.

Because

In this crazy world you created,

little makes sense.

[*Page 2*]

When I feel like I’m drowning in water

falling from the sky

sinking in sand

I need you. Desperately.

You give us just enough to rely on you.

I’m not going to say that I don’t want it

any other way. But I know you are working

sn me. Show me how to trust you.

Give me the strength to face my demons.

I will build your kingdom and not my

own.

[*Japanese*: Thank you.]

**Lament 6**

The [forgotten] child was born

lost and confused, ~~when~~ she had no home

She prayed to God for family

Granted, God gave her wish.

The child was excited ~~ready~~ and ready to live

But God wanted her come [*sic*] with him

To place [*sic*] beyond her wishes and [dreams]

“My child [leave] your dark place and

Come with me. I [will] give [you] life that is

more and could never be forgotten.[*”*]

The child moved with Him but

found it hard His [*sic*] promises are

~~Beyon~~ not easy to find.

God finds his child list in

dark again so his light

was shining and bright.

A hope is found and the path is open

So Child [*sic*] continued her [journey]

to ~~that~~ promises she

Loved.

**Lament 7**

O maker of Heaven,

ever since I can

remember we have

served you. But yet

it seems every time

we turn around something

new goes wrong. Can’t

we just have a time of

peace? Why did we have

to fly away from our

family? Why does my

dad get fired? Why does

mom get [*sick*]? Why do

we move & my [*siblings*]

want to die? Will this

pain ever fade? Will i [*sic*]

ever be whole? God it

seems as if you are

standing and watching

from a distance. . . but

I know in my head [*heart?*] that

you are always with us always,

carrying us in our

darkest times. You never fail.

[*Sketch of a headband with a flower*]

**Lament 8**

God, I’ve lost my way

I’ve sort of gone astray

please help me in these times

I’ve been ripped between memories

I have regrets

and made mistakes

After being buried in you

I trip again

but I will seek you

and lift my voice up to you in praise

though I might not be where I used to

I will be glad wherever I am

For I know you will [always] be with me.

[*Bottom of page: Author’s Name*]

[*Page 2*]

Dios, he perdido el camino

No se a donde voy

Ayudame en estostiempos

he sido cortado en das por mismemorias

hay cosas que deceo no haser hecho

y cosas que hise mal

despues de ser enterrado enti

me cayo otraves

pero todavia te busco

y levanto [my] vos encanto parati

Aunque no estoy donde antes estaba

voy a estar felis dondesea que este

porque se que siempre vas a estar conmigo.

**Lament 9**

Dear God,

I don’t really know how I feel right now,

the best word I can come up with is

“Haunted.” The lyrics from “Deep calls to

Deep” is playing over and over in my head

and it’s scaring me. “There is a time to mourn/

there is a time to weep…” It’s so sad but so

true… although I don’t believe it. There

is a time to mourn and one to weep, but

when is that? I can’t do it in front of

[*Name*] or my parents… or the team. As you

know well, my grieving time is often late at

night when all is silent. The one time

that words fail me is when I need them

the most, so I use others’ words instead.

I’m so alone, Lord, and I’m so afraid.

My team; my family; it’s far, far away,

and I get the awful feeling that I

can’t talk to them about my real feelings.

Anyone looking in from the outside

would see a girl who’s normal, okay

and has no regrets or remorse, but

it’s not right. I am still in so much

pain, and I hate that I can’t place it.

I don’t know where home is, or even

where you are sometimes, and it kills

[*Page 2*]

me. It’s a pain duller and deeper than

I’ve felt before. I’m arguing with myself

over petty things such as [love], and it only

makes me suffer more. It’s like I’m still

searching for the earthly support I haven’t

found, but I tend to confuse it with [mere]

affection; it’s unimportant. No one understands

how I feel. And I get the eerie feeling

that something horrible is about to happen,

either to me or a loved one, and that also

scares me. I hate who I’ve become. I’m a

liar and a [thief], and I don’t know how

to stop myself because I’m too prideful.

You’ve been whispering in my ear often,

and I get the impression that you’re

calling me to serve overseas, but I don’t

know if I can go through this pain

again, but something in me says that I

want that, because it’s serving you.

Please help, I trust you,

[*Author’s Name*]

**Lament 10**

why is [abandoned] a main [feeling] for me

why did you put me here [o God]

all alone, i can do [nothing] like this

I have no help

all i have is me

i need [someone] to be there

yet when I reach

i find no one

if you gave me one person Lord

alot would change

[Please] Lord be [there]

even when my [heart seems far]

hold my [hand]

for you are there for me

and [won’t] leave

[whenever] i feel

you will never leave

**Lament 11**

I haven’t even tried to talk to you in a

VERY LONG TIME. But here I am talking to you

now. You’ve been cruel to me. There I said it.

Now what? I don’t know what to think or

feel anymore. I don’t know where to go

or who to reach out to or even want to

live. Would all this be different if I’d made

different choices? Now I’m starting over and

it sucks. I’m leaving my friends. If I took my

life tonight, would it be easier then?

It hurts, it [*expletive*] hurts to be the only

one, to be alone, to be years [&] years of

miserable. To have nothing to offer and to

be needed by no one and it hurts and it

hurts and it hurts and it hurts and

it hurts and it hurts and it hurts

and it hurts and it hurts and I

DO NOT FORGIVE YOU.

**Lament 12**

Father,

How many more times must I lose

a close friend?

Am I doing something wrong?

Why do you let me suffer alone

in the darkness?

Father the only thing I ever

wanted in life was someone by my

side to call my best friend.

Someone always with me.

But I have no such person other

than you.

I know I have you father.

I know you will forever be

my friend. I know you will

[Page 2]

be with me always.

But I know you also never

meant for us to be alone

on this earth.

Will you grant me my

desire? Will you end my

sorrow of losing one friend

after another? Will you put

an end to my hopes shattering?

Father help me learn.

Give me more hope.

Stay true to who you are and

what your promises have always

been. [*Drawing of a heart*]

**Lament 13**

O Lord, you are my home.

You are my only place I [truly] come

from and can come to.

Everyone I know knows they’ll stay

put for years to come.

But Lord, you are my father.

You are the one I see when my

Dad is in [*Country*] for six months.

Everyone around me can say I love

you, dad and hear a reply

But Lord, as a lost and lonely child,

You are my father.

O Lord, you are my light

You shine through the inclement

Weather that clouds my eyes &

~~everyone around me~~ mind every around me sees me as

an alien, a foreigner

but Lord, as a girl searching through

clouds for the sun,

you are my light

O Lord, you are my salvation!

You lead me to this country I

feel I belong

Everyone around me accepts me

the way I am

~~But~~ So Lord, as a child thrown

into this crazy whirl of life,

You are my salvation ~~O~~

O Lord, leave me alone

You plucked me up out of the

only place I was happy and

left me to ~~die~~ dry up

Everyone I care for is oceans

away

And Lord, as a girl who’s always

trusted you,

Why me?

Lord, why me? Why my dad?

Why filter his “I love you”s,

his “good night”s through a

pixelated screen

and faulty connection.

Lord, bring him home. Why me?

O Lord, you are my home

~~I have~~ in the hectic life of being a

military brat, you’re there

everyone I see has a clear direction

they’re going

and Lord, as someone who

*needs to be ready to move*

*at seconds* [*sic*] *notice*

You are my home [*larger letters*]

[*Author’s Name*]

**Lament 14**

Dear Lord,

Be my guide, lead the way.

I’m starting a new path. Please

let me be okay. I feel the press[ure]

all around, I feel it everywhere[.]

I want to please others, and I w[ant]

them to know that I care. Give me

patience and give me a sence [*sic*] of

hope. It’s very difficult and the[re]

are things I have to cope with.

Fill me with your grace and love

and all the heavenly things from up

above. Take ~~the~~ away the burden

and make my load light. For you

are the God of all, who is

Powerful and always right.

**Lament 15**

Lord, how long will I feel

like a tourist in my

own home?

When will [*City*] become

more than just a cool

city?

I lose so much feeling

of self-worth when I’m not

serving Your people.

When will I find a job

to allow me to serve

others once more?

My church and my family

were one. Now I feel alone

with [*Name*] on a pew

[Page 2]

surrounded with unfamiliar

faces.

My kiddos were my

daily dose of happiness,

and now they’re growing

up and I’m missing out

on so much.

Lord, you are faithful.

You’ve blessed me with

a loving, supportive husband.

Allow me to feel settled

once more. Remind us that

our home is in you.

My self-worth comes from

You. Your agape love is

my home.

**Lament 16**

I don’t know why

I feel the way I [~~feel~~]

do I just. . . do. I have

this feeling like I

want to cry, but can’t. . .

I don’t know why

I ~~don’t want to~~ [~~eat~~]

have a hole in my

stomach. I don’t want

to eat. . . but I have

To

I want to sleep. . .

but I [*sic*] can’t.

I’m stuck in the

middle, I need your

help God

Amen

**Lament 17**

Abba Father, I stepped out in faith

to follow you. Your hand guided me to a

new land. Why have you led me to a

barren place? I don’t fit here. There’s

too much old for me to be new, [and]

too much new for me to be old. [~~You~~]

How long will you leave me halfway?

How long will I be of both and belong

to neither? When will your hand

return to guide me to the place I belong?

Why must this season last so long? How

far from your presence have I come that

you have left me here? Still I will

wait and trust in you. Do not forget

your servant, but draw me to your heart

until you are ready to lead me on. Though

I grow weary, still I will praise your

name.

**Lament 18**

God, you let me make connections and

grow roots in this place just to move me

again—ripping a part of my soul again.

Why do I have to be American? Why

can’t I just be of everywhere?

Why is my life so confusing?

Even know [*sic*] I don’t get ~~it~~ your plan for me,

Lord,

I will trust you.

I know my “home” will never be a specific

place on Earth.

My “home” is heaven. You are my home, God.

I’m American, but I’m not.

I am yours, Lord.

Wherever I go, Lord, be with me and

guide my steps, [literally].

**Lament 19**

At seven years old I already experienced

multiple cultures.

I knew different types of people and places.

And already had a fuzzy sense of “home.”

Being back in America with my foreign accent

and odd way of speaking was confusing.

Why did people laugh at me?

Not even having enough time to adjust,

I moved again. Why God?

This new place doesn’t feel like home

but neither does the [old] place.

As time went by I finally [found] a

sense of “home.”

However, ~~pop~~ people told me my home was

across the ocean in America.

But America didn’t feel like home.

This place where I looked different and

sounded different from the people

felt more like home.

**Lament 20**

My father, can you hear me?

Why must I be torn apart by the sea?

These memories will never fade

Of times spent with the friends I have made

Across the seas on planes I flew

I know in my heart you’ll see me through

But this burning resentment will

not leave

I can hear him telling me it’s time

to grieve

He’ll comfort me and surround me

with his unfailing love

and I will know in my heart

that he is God above!

**Lament 21**

They don’t understand me, Lord, and

I can’t comprehend them.

I [live] in fear of rejection, yet I’m

afraid to open up.

I yern [*sic*] to leave, [but] I wish to stay.

My life is here, though my life is

there.

Confusion fills my soul, and

I feel alone with my struggles

Lord, You know me fully.

Only You will remain with me till the

day I die and forever still.

I can’t [earn] your dedication, but I

know You’ll never forsake me.

You place me wehre I need to be.

My life is in your hands.

**Lament 22**

I am so freaking tired.

When does the [sighing]

stop?

When am I good enough?

I thought you said, I was

But don’t all these

people speak for you? Do

I really have to keep [trying]

Can’t I just be?

Is it even worth it???

I’m so freaking tired

but I will play this

role. I will trust that

You mean more than I feel

Just please

Let me matter

[without struggling]

1. Yea Jin Chang, Eunju Yoon, and Han Na Lee, “Migratory Grief and Mental Health in First-Generation Korean American Immigrants,” *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 30, no. 3 (2024): 447, <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/cdp0000607>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Anna Renner, Viktoria Schmidt and Anette Kersting, “Migratory Grief: A Systematic Review,” *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 15 (2024): 1, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2024.1303847>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A Third Culture Kid (TCK) is “a person who spends a significant part of [their] first eighteen years of life accompanying parent(s) into a country that is different from at least one parent’s passport country(ies) due to a parent’s choice of work or advanced training” (David C. Pollock, Ruth E. Van Reken, and Michael V. Pollock, *Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds*, 3rd ed. [Boston: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2017], 27). This nomenclature is of limited analytical value but I and others I have worked with find it helpful as an emic (insider) term, and I use it throughout this paper as such. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Names, places, and programs are anonymized throughout this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Pollock, Van Reken, and Pollock, *Third Culture Kids*, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Clyde N. Austin and Billy Van Jones, “Reentry among Missionary Children: An Overview of Reentry Research from 1934-1986,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 15 no. 4 (1987): 322. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Literature on this topic is plentiful. The following is a representative sampling from the past decade: Lauren Purnell and Elizabeth Hoban, “The Lived Experiences of Third Culture Kids Transitioning into University Life in Australia,” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 41 (2014): 80-90; Paul Youngbin Kim et al., “Psychological Experiences of Korean Missionary “Kids” (MKs): A Qualitative Inquiry,” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 19 no. 9 (2016): 1013-27; Virginia J. Smith and Kerri S. Kearney, “A Qualitative Exploration of the Repatriation Experiences of US Third Culture Kids in College,” *Journal of College Student Development* 57 no. 8 (2016): 958–72; Carrie Kortegast and Emily M. Yount, “Identity, Family, and Faith: U.S. Third Culture Kids Transition to College,” *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* 53, no. 2 (2016): 230-42; Scott T. Miller, Gianna M. Wiggins, and Katherine A. Feather, “Growing up Globally: Third Culture Kids’ Experience with Transition, Identity, and Well-Being,” *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling* 42 (2020): 414-23; Hiba Habeeb and Abdalla A. R. M. Hamid, “Identity Orientation and Depressive Symptoms amongst Adult Third Culture Kids at UAE University: An Exploratory Study,” *International Journal of Instruction* 14, no. 3 (2021): 999-1010. Not coincidentally, the issues TCKs experience are similar to those that other migrant populations face. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Banghwa Lee Casado, Michin Hong, and Donna Harrington, “Measuring Migratory Grief and Loss Associated with the Experience of Immigration,” *Research on Social Work Practice* 20, no. 6 (2010): 611–20; Achotegui, “Extreme Migratory Mourning.” For discussions on grief in TCKs’ experiences, see Pollock, Van Reken, and Pollock, *Third Culture Kids,* especially chapter 5; Kathleen R. Gilbert, “Loss and Grief between and among Cultures: The Experience of Third Culture Kids,” *Illness, Crisis, & Loss* 16, no. 2 (2008): 93–109; Peter H. Cariaga, “Reading the Bible, Learning Ourselves: A Contextual Bible Study with Culturally Hybrid Youth,” *Religious Education* 117, no. 5 (2022): 426-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Kenneth J. Doka, *Grief is a Journey: Finding Your Path through Loss* (New York: Atria Paperback, 2017), 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kenneth J. Doka, “Disenfranchised Grief in Historical and Cultural Perspective,” in *Handbook of Bereavement Research and Practice: Advances in Theory and Intervention*, ed. Margaret S. Stroebe et al. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2008), 228-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Peter H. Cariaga, “Grief Like My Grief: A Third Culture Kid Reading of Lamentations” (master’s thesis, Saint Paul School of Theology, 2022), 27-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Lois J. Bushong and Ruth E. Van Reken, “The Powerful Impact of Systems on the Globally Mobile,” in Lois J. Bushong, *Belonging Everywhere & Nowhere: Insights into Counseling the Globally Mobile* (Indianapolis: Mango Tree Intercultural Services, 2013), 205-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Thomas G. Long, *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), xiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969; repr., London: Routledge, 2017), 94-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. While I do not have the physical paper itself, I took a photograph of the list. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Appendix A below for a timeline of moves and list of losses. These materials come from Cariaga, “Grief Like My Grief,” 61-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See TCK Individual Lament 9 in Appendix B below. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. TCK Individual Lament 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. TCK Individual Lament 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Appendix B below for the full set of TCK laments (shared with permission of the authors). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See Doka, *Grief is a Journey*, 15-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 94-98. Perhaps Lave and Wenger’s closest example to learning to grieve is their description of apprenticeship within Alcoholics Anonymous (79-84). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. TCK Individual Lament 11 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See especially Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985). See also Denise Dombkowski Hopkins, *Journey Through the Psalms*, rev. ed. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2002) and Glenn Pemberton, *Hurting with God: Learning to Lament with the Psalms* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. My transcription practices were informed by conventions used for ancient texts, such as those in *The SBL Handbook of Style*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)