

Grief and consolation

by [Jill Peláez Baumgaertner](#) in the [October 20, 1999](#) issue

*New Fields and Other Stories: On a Child's Death*, by Saul Bennett

Saul Bennett, the president of a Madison Avenue public relations group, was driven to write poetry by the death of his 24-year-old daughter. At one moment this promising young woman sat at her desk complaining of a headache; the next moment she was dead of a brain aneurysm. Bennett's poetry (*Christian Century* was the first to publish him, in 1996) tells the whole story—from the terrible first phone call to the selection of a coffin, the encounter with a plot of too-green grass at the gravesite and the disposal of her clothing some months later. The poems follow the years' passing. The present finds the poet sitting in a shack behind his house, confined as close to his dead child as he can get:

The place has nothing in it,  
nothing: stone floor,  
cracked;  
raw walls;  
eaten away foot  
wide plank ledge—my desk. I stand.  
Moving newspaper soft black copy pencils  
without erasers from my old days  
I compose, revise in fine point fountain pen  
green, harvest,  
bury, reluctantly, overripe  
darlings, dreaming  
out the unwashed shallow window  
that won't open. Around,  
the box mustn't be much  
more than six feet. There  
we converse in her element. There I feel nothing  
comes between us.  
Nothing

This is poetry that reveals the rawness of grief, that over and over again stuns us with the stupefying awareness that one who was once alive is now dead. We read on, because this terrible news feels so familiar. It voices the unspoken fears of every parent.

Underneath the poetry is the unasked question about God's silence ("God doesn't tap my shoulder," the poet writes), interwoven with the shadow cast by the Holocaust on any contemporary Jewish writer's work. Bennett has a scriptural sensibility, a constant awareness of the puzzles of faith and of his own grounding in them.

In "Jesus Matinees" he describes the curious Wednesday afternoon "parole" of Catholic students, dismissed an hour early from their classroom in Queens for midweek catechism—"a canny swap of Byrd's tale of his schlep / over the Antarctic or Vasco de Gama's / spice routes for Jesus matinees." In many poems Bennett's Jewish experience is accompanied by references to other faith connections—a Quaker meeting house in Manhattan or a descendant of Jonathan Edwards. During Yom Kippur services, Bennett ponders his daughter's death in the context of the line, "The Dead are a return race," the title of the rabbi's sermon. With a pen borrowed from a young mother sitting nearby, the author wonders at the words, "Resurrection" and "Revelation."

From a neighboring balcony seat  
The mother who slipped me  
Her pen minutes before asks  
Holding her child's hand

What thing am I writing  
This writing proscribed holiest day?  
When I reveal this poem's  
Stem her daughter seated she says

Is 6; her son would be  
8 had he not at 5 months  
Died. He then too is seen  
Returning, bounding at the breast

Of my child dead a year  
At 24 pilgrim footed hurdling the opening slowly  
Gigantic white holy holly rings.  
*The Dead are a return race.*

A peculiar knowledge of the gospel marks many of the poems, particularly the last, "The Coming of the Second," which muses on a particular "second coming"—the afternoon mail delivery of bygone years, which held out the promise of some surprising, hoped-for piece of mail. At four or five in the afternoon, "these scarcer drops . . . packed the magic to infatuate well before / you ever met; not knowing the next but hoping for more / of the enchanting unsame you barely could see / teasing through the tiny snout of the midget cell." The surprise he now imagines is a letter that reverses the announcement of his daughter's death:

A soft bond bed of scripture black-on-cream  
identical at first to its four  
or five line ancestor: *The family of Sara Bennett  
rescinds with joy its late acknowledgment of sympathy.*  
—*O is there ever more!*  
*Our death we wish to stress is now a dream.*

The author uses poetry as a way of working out his loss, of naming it, of coming to some sort of reckoning with its injustices. But Bennett's poems travel far beyond the therapeutic. His is a poetry not only of grief but also of an enduring resonance. "More God knows than I why," he says—or, upon looking at a very small photo taken shortly before his daughter's death: "this 1 / by 3 silly promo freebie / across my universe / trained, unrehearsed / down, up, floating / upon its subject, she / my successor, muted, is / God's true instrument."

Using alliteration, convoluted syntax, shortened lines and stop-and-go rhythms, Bennett creates a unique idiom. He separates nouns from verbs with relentless phrases which pull you through the poems, which refuse to let you go. A Bennett poem is uniquely his. And yet it also shows the fingerprints of a tradition—the work of e. e. cummings, Gerard Manley Hopkins, William Carlos Williams, even John Donne. These poems about heartbreak are also about finding a route to consolation. Like all great poetry, they connect with something larger—larger even than their own sense of horrifying loss.