

NINA LYKKE

## Queer Widowhood

**THE FOLLOWING TEXT** is an autobiographical account of the death of my beloved. Her death caused me to metamorphose from queer femme to mourning widow. The text is an excerpt from a longer manuscript that is an autoethnographic exploration of queer patienthood, cancer death, widowhood, and mourning. My beloved was ill for four years. Together we worked intensely to avoid her dying from her cancer. We succeeded in getting her liver cancer stopped, even though the prognosis for this kind of cancer is bad. (Current Danish statistics tell us that 62% of women with primary liver cancer, hepatocellular carcinoma, die within the first year, while only 9% survive for five years.) However, another primary cancer, a lung cancer, supervened. This was discovered too late and caused the death of my beloved. The four years were an all-absorbing process, in a bodily, emotional and intellectual sense. The mourning is also all-absorbing. Now, a year after the death of my beloved, I write about this all-absorbing process, not because it is “over,” but because I would like to publicly share and discuss my need to insist on the process of mourning.

With my insistence on queer widowhood and mourning, I want to resist neoliberal, health-normative and individualist culture, which fetishizes personal happiness (Ahmed 2010) and requires that we ignore vulnerability, unhappiness and loss and instead look for a bright future with ever-new accomplishments. When a close companion or relative

dies, you are expected after some time to “move on,” “forget,” “make a new start,” etc. But even though a year has passed since my beloved died, I am not happy, and I do not feel any urge to “forget.” On the contrary. I am still deeply in mourning, and I consider autobiographical writing about my mourning to be a way of resisting neoliberal celebrations of happiness. Through an auto-phenomenographic (auto-ethnography with a phenomenological approach, Allen-Collinson 2010) exploration of my autobiographical writings, I also want to align my work with queer investigations of negative, gloomy, sad and dark emotions and affectivities. I want to follow Ann Cvetkovich’s (2012, 14) suggestion that “resting in sadness without insisting that it be transformed or reconceived” might open up productive possibilities, personally, politically and theoretically. Cvetkovich makes the suggestion in relation to her analysis of her own state of depression. Mourning is a different kind of emotion, even though there might be overlapping issues between mourning and depression. But I do think that “resting in sadness,” as well as creating queer spaces for the public sharing of such negative feelings, likewise suggested by Cvetkovich (2012), are also important when it comes to queer widowhood and mourning the death of a beloved.

Against the background of my wish to resist the culture of happiness and to create a public space for resting in sadness, I also consider it important to use the term *widow* when talking about myself. A widow is defined as a mourning woman and, defining myself in this way, I publicly mark out a discursive space for my mourning. In some societies and historical periods, widows have worn special clothing. In this way the widow’s state of mourning was signalled to those around her. The widow’s weeds were an ambiguous social tradition, though, which often turned out to be oppressive, but which sometimes also gave the widow the right to demand respect for her state of mourning. This last aspect is one that I can use as inspiration in my project of resistance. Today, mourning is often considered to be a primarily private affair, but it becomes public when, for example, at my workplace I ask for permission to go on “mourning vacation” to mark the anniversary of my beloved’s death.

I not only identify as a widow, though, but also as a *queer widow*, and a queering of the figure of the widow, of course, adds layers of complexity to my project. What is a “queer widow”? As iconic figures in western cultural histories, both the widow and the widower are embedded in centuries of heteronormative discourses, myths and narratives. The term “widowhood” is profoundly linked to ideas about the death of one of the spouses in a heteronormative marriage arrangement. The icons of the widow and the widower make up a binary pair, and each of them has their specific set of culturally different mythologies, shaped by their historical entanglement in societies with many kinds of hegemonic and structural gendered inequalities. Like the mythologies of the mother-in-law and the stepmother, that of the widow is also closely linked to misogynous cultural-historical narratives and images. In literature, paintings, films, drama, etc., the widow often appears as a suspect character. The crime fiction genre is full of examples. Doesn't the mourning of the widow appear a bit faked? Isn't she a bit too merry and sexually active? Isn't she a bit too power-hungry and a bit too quick to move in to act in the power vacuum opened up by the death of her husband? Did she perhaps kill her husband herself, because she has a same-sex lover hidden in the closet, ready to jump into the marriage bed as soon as the corpse is carried out? Across many cultural traditions, the widow is defined as a woman *without* a (live) husband, and therefore, as character and figure, she is always already queer. This is a queerness that in patriarchal mythologies stigmatizes her, whereas, in more alternative narratives and imagery, perhaps it transforms her into an interesting and positive figure. However, oftentimes, the latter, more positive approach to the figure of the widow does not prevent fiction writers from constructing plots in which the queerness of the widow ends up as a matter for the police. The story of the lesbian couple who see the murder of the married partner's husbands as the sole path to making their dreams of happy cohabitation come true has been cultivated for years in both popular culture and the yellow press.

This conventional queering of the widow is, of course, of no use in my project of creating public space for queer mourning. In these profoundly

heteronormative discourses on the queer widow, queering and mourning become opposed to each other. Either the queering deconstructs the mourning (the queering “reveals” the mourning as “inauthentic”) or, vice versa, if the mourning “proves” its “authenticity,” the “proof” “disclaims” the queering.

The inherent ideas about widowhood – female or male – as discursively linked to the loss of a partner of the opposite sex, leave me, and many others who mourn the death of their same-sex or genderqueer partners, in a discursive vacuum. I would like this vacuum to be filled with different stories. Since the death of my beloved, I have experienced that long-forgotten, classic coming-out issues are suddenly returning to my life. When I talk about my mourning, and do not explicitly mention that my dead beloved had the same sex as me, people who do not know me and my beloved automatically assume that she was a man. When I gently make my interlocutors aware of the misunderstanding, I sometimes encounter the well-known effect of breaking the taboo of the “L”-word: my interlocutors are caught by a feeling of unease, and the situation becomes awkward. Sometimes, it is also obvious that my interlocutors start thinking desperately about whether or not they misheard what I said, when I refer to my deceased partner with a woman’s name. People often seem to wonder whether it might not have been my daughter or my mother that I was talking about, while the taboo of the “L”-word makes them feel too embarrassed to ask.

There is a need for much more visibility of queer widowhood beyond the frameworks of heteronormativity. To me, however, the figuration of *queer-femme-inist widowhood* is even more important to interpellate with my autobiographical writing and autophenomenographical explorations. To mourn the death of an intimate companion or relative is a process immersed in affective embodiment, and to mourn the death of your beloved is profoundly entangled in bodily love and sexual desire. My mourning is shaped by my queer-feminine love for the queer-masculinity of my beloved. Moreover, it is formed by our shared, deeply felt feminist commitments, which also include a quest for queerfeminist materialist philosophical alternatives to the ontologies of life and death

that are cultivated by Christianity and dualist traditions in western philosophy. When I take inspiration from Ulrika Dahl's (2014) exploration of the meanings of queer femme-inisms, i.e., feminisms related to the queer femme figuration, I make queer-femme-inist widowhood a pivot of my book; it is intended as a prism, crystallizing all these personal, political and theoretical commitments.

In my manuscript, analytical chapters alternate with autobiographical ones. In the following pages, I present one of the autobiographical chapters, dealing with the norms surrounding death and how to resist them. It starts with the death of my beloved, and ends with her funeral ceremony and our spreading of her ashes over the sea. My narration about the events which took place in between these two points in time highlights my encounters with some of the many norms surrounding death – heteronorms, but also the norms of the Christian tradition and the ways in which they are performed in Denmark, where I and my beloved lived together, a country where the State and the Lutheran-Evangelical Church are not legally separated. It was important for me and my close family to try to displace and disrupt these norms. It was hard work in a situation where all of us, myself as well as close family and friends, were in a vulnerable situation. But, with help from family and friends, we succeeded and, for me, it became a story of alternative ways of doing queer widowhood.

With my story, I want to contribute to a vitalizing of the figuration queer-femme-inist widowhood. As the feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti (2002) emphasizes, we need affirmative stories that can create visions and new figurations, rather than staying exclusively in a critical mode. Figurations include critical approaches to society here and now, but they are also political fictions and feeling-thinking-desiring visions about something different (Braidotti 2002, 3–7). I assume that, among the readers of *lambda nordica*, there are others who also have different stories of queer widowhood. I believe that a sharing of these stories might lead to new figurations and visions. By first and foremost presenting a story here rather than a theorization, I also want to sustain the point made by Cvetkovich (2012, 16) when writing about her depression,

that the “what” must precede the “why.” Or, to put it differently, in the kind of autophenomenographic exploration of emotions and affectivity that I am undertaking in my book, I think that poetic truths are needed as a first step toward new ontologies of life and death as a vibrant continuum rather than a decisive break.

## I.

You are lying dead in our double bed that, a week ago, Eigil and Carl moved down to the dining room for us, because you could no longer walk up and down the staircase to our bedroom. You died at 4 o'clock this morning. Eigil and I were together with you. The night nurses had visited us just a short time earlier. We had talked with them about your breathing – that it had become so easy now, totally different from how it had been during their visits yesterday morning, where you had been gasping for breath for hours, suffering from severe difficulty in breathing and from what in the professional language of the nurses is called “secretion rattling” (i.e., when the lungs are filled with phlegm that the patient is too weak to cough up herself). Now there was no rattling or rustling any more, only a fine and peaceful breathing. Almost as if you were no longer ill. The skin of your face had a new tinge of transparency, but your facial expressions were very calm. It seemed as if you were in a dream world without anxiety or pain – but a world where you still had contact with ours. Before the night nurses came, I had been sitting alone with you and whispering to you that I loved you. I had kissed you gently on your forehead and hands, and once more told you the story of our meeting among the oysters. You have always asked me to tell stories, and I recalled Berit's words that the hearing works till the end. So I kept prolonging the story. At the same time I had gently moistened your palate, tongue and lips – the way we had done it all day, with the help of a small piece of foam rubber soaked in water. Your mouth was open, but when you sensed the water, your lips closed desirously about the foam rubber, and you breathed a light sigh of relish; it was as if you followed my moistening move with your tongue and lips in desiring pleasure as in a kiss with the tongue.

When the nurses had left, Eigil and I had once more shored up the many supporting pillows which we had put around you, and made sure that you were half sitting with good support behind your back so that you should not start suffering from difficulties in breathing again because you were lying too flat. We had also turned you partly to one side to avoid bedsores. It was the doctor who had attended to you several times who had given us this tip. So since then we had taken good care to regularly turn you partly around. You had been turning toward the edge of the bed during the latter part of the evening, where first I, and later Uffe, had been sitting at your bedside holding your hand. The whole day and evening we had all taken turns sitting next to you, holding your hands. It was as if it was important for you to sense that we were there even though you were in a deep sleep due to the morphine. You reached for us, if one of us moved a hand away for a moment. Now, the nurses had left and we were all about to try to get some rest – I next to you – and so we had turned you toward my side of the double bed. I could then continue to hold your hand through the night, and should you start moving in your sleep, you would fall toward me, and not slide out of the bed. It took some time to get you sitting comfortably amongst the pillows so that you did not slide too far toward the foot of the bed, losing the support from the elevated bedhead. Eigil put his arms gently around you in order to make sure that there were no dents from your sweater that could make it uncomfortable for you.

Suddenly you looked different. The skin of your face became even more transparent, and it was as if your mouth, until now wide open, closed partly in a smile, while your eyelids opened a bit so that we saw your dreaming eyes. But at the same time, it was also as if your countenance congealed. “I think she has died!” Eigil said hesitantly. Then we saw two big waves under the skin of your neck where your artery was. So you had not died, we said affirmatively to each other. We tried to check your pulse. We listened to your mouth. But no more breaths came. The only sound left was the mechanical murmur of the oxygen apparatus. We kept standing with our arms around each other, looking at your smiling mouth and your almost closed eyes. For a very long time. We

were as if in a trance – in an unbreakable circle, you, Eigil and me, in a moment which would last forever. At some point we understood that we had to extend the circle. We turned off the oxygen apparatus and called Uffe, Rikke and Naja, who had gone to bed a bit earlier. We said to each other that it was good that you had found peace. I phoned the night nurses, who returned and confirmed that you had died. They took out catheter and morphine drips, and we lowered the bedhead so that you were lying flat. As I wished, your hands were put casually on your duvet, not folded in a Christian gesture. The nurses suggested that we light some candles at the bedhead. But I gently rejected this suggestion. You hated candles due to the polluting particles they emit. Instead, I took a big painted stone from the table in the corner – the one Asker, our oldest grandson, found at the beach and painted when he was three years old that time when, many years ago, we took him on a vacation together with us for the first time. We put the stone next to your pillow. The nurses left again. We sat down around your bed – and we sat like this for a long time. For a very long time. An endlessly closed circle.

## 2.

Since the others left, to perhaps try to sleep a bit or to take a walk and pull themselves together in the fresh snowy air outside – and to give me peace to be alone with you – I have walked up and down the room between your bed and the record player. Kathleen Ferrier sings Orpheus' lament to deceased Eurydice (from Gluck's opera): *What is life to me without thee?* and, sobbing, I join in. *What is life to me without thee? What is left if thou art dead?* The second time this chorus line is repeated, Kathleen Ferrier cries it out with an enormous, accumulated pain in her beautiful voice. I cry out together with her. Loudly. I put the record on replay again and again, walking up and down the room, singing and sobbing. Sometimes I sit down next to you, look at you, hold your hand, kiss your forehead and your lips, whisper to you that I love you. I keep on and on. Walking. Crying. Sobbing. Singing. Putting Kathleen Ferrier on "replay." Sitting next to you. Kissing you. Whispering to you. Again and again. I cannot leave the room. I have to be next to you. We



are one flesh, indeed, and perhaps you still need my help, my wishful thinking tells me. *What is life to me without thee? What is left when thou art dead?*

### 3.

Hours have passed. How many is not quite clear to me. But it is morning now, and action is required from the widow. She has to break out of her trance, cease walking up and down the floor, stop the sobbing, the record player and the singing, Kathleen Ferrier's as well as her own, detach herself from kissing and whispering together with the deceased.

### 4.

I call the general practitioner who is going to issue the death certificate. He will pay us a visit a bit later. Eight hours must have passed before he can formally declare you dead. Uffe, Eigil and I divide close family and friends between us. The tidings of your passing away are texted and phoned to those closest to us. I also have to find an undertaker. I consult the local telephone directory. I look at the ways in which the different undertaker firms present themselves. The photos of the undertakers, advertising their businesses with ingratiating smiles on their lugubrious faces, chill my spine. A funeral is a very intimate thing. The dead body is left to the care of the undertaker. S/he is responsible for putting the body in the casket, keeping the deceased stored until the funeral ceremony and arranging burial or cremation. Can I entrust these people, who are sending me these undertaker smiles from the pages of the telephone directory, with the care of my dead beloved? How can I make sure that the firm I choose does not have a homophobic staff that I definitely do not want to allow to paw over you, watch by or even come close to your dead body? How do I avoid ending up with people who have no appreciation whatsoever for our wish to organize a funeral totally without Christian symbols or rituals? What if they find it bizarre or perhaps even offensive that I want to give you a queerfeminist materialist funeral? What if I have to combat their reluctance? An old memory pops into my mind. I remember how, many years ago, I organized my grandmother's funeral

and had to accept that a priest officiated over the sprinkling of earth at the coffin together with me, even though my grandmother was a cultural leftist atheist who, at a young age, had resigned from the Danish National Lutheran Evangelical Church. Back then, people were not allowed to organize a funeral totally without the presence of the National Church. Today, this has changed, and fortunately the interference of the Church can be totally avoided. But nevertheless, it is easier to do so if the undertaker is cooperative rather than reluctant.

Until last night I have been absorbed by my efforts to ensure that no representatives of the healthcare system should violate your wish to die at home in your own bed on your own conditions, and that none of the norms and taboos that surround dying persons should infringe your right to self-determination until the very end, or counteract your need for empathic care. I succeeded in this and, despite my state of deep mourning, I feel happy about that. But while I am browsing the columns for undertaker firms in the telephone directory, it bursts upon me that not only the dying person, but also death itself is pervaded by norms. As a queer femme-inist widow, I will have to be critical and alert if I am to avoid being taken by surprise here. I understand that it is high time to put my vulnerable, trancelike state of mind on stand-by.

It helps me to emerge from the trance to imagine that all the undertakers in the telephone directory are critical genderqueers who, in a gigantic fit of carnivalesque laughter, have got the camp idea to dress up as if they were members of the Christian-Democratic party before the photographer arrived. Of course, there is nothing they want more than to help me organize a queerfemme-inist-materialist funeral. This joke, which also makes our sons and daughters-in-law laugh out loud, gets me back into action mode.

## 5.

Naja knows a female undertaker who organizes alternative funerals. I call her. She is ok to talk to, and we agree that she will come to us the next day. She suggests a casket of basketwork, made from ecological willow. In the advertisement, there is also one made from seagrass. They

both look beautiful in the photo. We prefer the seagrass casket, because it fits well with our wish to spread your ashes over the sea and the story about going down to the oysters, which means a lot to us. However, it turns out that the Danish Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs has not yet approved the seagrass casket to be used for cremation. We wonder what the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs thinks could be the problem with cremating you in an ecological seagrass casket? The undertaker says that there are many battles to be fought and many traditions to be overcome in order to make room for alternative funerals. The National Church and the Christian tradition still have a firm grip on death. We decide on the willow casket, which also looks fine. We also say yes to a blue urn, which the undertaker tells us is well suited for spreading ashes over the sea. The urn is made from ecological materials that dissolve in water, and it can, therefore, be committed to the deep as it is. We have both signed a statement about our wish to have our ashes spread over the sea – a statement that now has to be formally approved by the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs. It is obvious that it is not meant to be easy to do something that is outside of the norms of the National Church and its traditions.

Our reason for choosing to have our ashes spread over the sea is that this procedure ensures that the urn is handed over to close relatives and companions after the cremation in order for them to take care of the spreading of the ashes. With your characteristic sense of humour and inclination for surprising solutions, even in extreme situations, you suggested some years ago that we should choose this option when you died. This was when we were confronted for the first time with the fact that you were seriously ill from cancer and perhaps would die soon. Back then, you tried to console both me and yourself through a joke: “When the ashes are to be spread over the sea, it’s possible for the relatives to have the urn handed over to them, and then you can keep it in the double bed next to you instead of me,” you said. Later it struck me that there was one more advantage linked to the spreading-of-the-ashes-over-the-sea option. If I myself also signed a statement that I wished my own ashes to be spread over the sea, then our sons could have my urn

handed over when I died, and if we kept a small portion of your ashes, then they could mix our ashes and spread us together. What started as a joke shaped up into a concrete idea, and now I am sitting here opposite the undertaker with all the documents ready. We agree that, when she gets the urn from the crematorium, she will put a small portion of the ashes in a different container, which I can keep with me. Our sons have promised to mix it with my ashes when I die. The rest of your ashes, the undertaker will put in the blue urn, which she will also hand over to us. We will lower it into Limfjorden in the northern part of Denmark, where there are some very famous oyster beds.

## 6.

Our female undertaker asks if we will help with dressing you and putting you in the casket. Eigil and I say that we would very much like to take part. The undertaker tells us that only very few of her customers want to participate in this. But she is really happy that we want to do it. She considers the dressing as part of saying goodbye to the body of the deceased. We start thinking about what it will be pleasant for you to wear during your transition. We go for clothes that are both casual and elegant in the manner in which you liked to dress. We end up with a dark red woollen sweater, a shining green silk jacket, which I gave you for Xmas, your favourite black jogging trousers, black terry-cloth socks and your warm sheepskin slippers. The undertaker shows us how to dress you. The clothes have to be cut open at the back, and draped over you. But the sleeves have to be pulled over your arms, and the socks and slippers are also put on in the usual way. We work carefully and gently with your body. Sometimes the undertaker lends us a helping hand. But she makes a point out of giving us space and time so that it is Eigil and I who are primarily doing the dressing. When we have finished, we will lift you from the bed to the willow casket, using the sheet you are lying on. Even though you were so emaciated by the end, your dead body is still heavy. But Uffe comes to help us. He and Eigil each take their side of the sheet and lift you gently from the bed to the casket.

Then we all – family and close friends – gather around you. The casket

is still open. We find things to put in there with you, telling each other that perhaps you will need them on your journey. I consciously avoid using phrases such as “saying goodbye” and “taking leave.” Instead I talk about your “journey” and your “transition.” Indeed, the fact that you are dead does not mean that you are not physically present any more. Considered from the point of view of materialist immanence philosophy, you will keep on being present, only in other material shapes – as dead body, as ashes, as sand at the bottom of the sea, and perhaps as a grain of sand in an oyster pearl. I have written a love letter to you earlier in the morning. It is about the miracle and our coming reunion among the oysters at the bottom of the sea – i.e., the story that we have developed together during recent weeks. Carefully, I push the letter into your hand. Uffe puts an imprint of his hand from a long time ago when he was attending kindergarden, under your green silk jacket, right next to your heart. We provide you with a box of liquorice pieces of the type you loved and felt sorry that you could not eat during your last few years due to the diet that illness forced you to keep very strictly. The next oldest grandchild, Sofus, puts a box of toothpicks into the casket. He has never seen you without toothpicks ready to hand, he says. We play music for you and for ourselves. I have chosen once more to play Orpheus’ song to Eurydice, “What is life to me without thee?” performed by Kathleen Ferrier, and moreover Patti Smith’s “Horses” with the wild rhythmical ride “to the sea, to the sea.” Uffe plays Nick Cave’s “Into my arms,” which ends with the beautiful verse:

But I believe in love,  
and I know that you do too,  
and I believe in some kind of path,  
that we can walk down,  
me and you,  
so keep your candles burning,  
and make her journey bright and pure,  
that she will keep returning,  
always and evermore.

I kneel down beside the casket, whisper soundlessly that I love you and kiss your mouth, your forehead and your hands – painfully aware that this is the last time before your transition to another form. You are so cold, so cold. I have read about the “the coldness of death.” It is a cliché. But to sense this coldness when I touch you, my love, is devastating beyond words. Your mouth still bears the scent of the raspberries that you so much wanted three days ago. I spoon-fed you with raspberries back then, and you chewed them with desire, but you could no longer swallow, so they have been in your mouth since then, filling my nostrils with their sweet fragrance, when I put my face close to yours. The raspberries are a bit fermented now. So our last kiss is shrouded in a fine bouquet of raspberry wine. Then all those present take the soft, white cotton cloth that lines the lid of the willow casket, and cover you gently with it. We close the lid, and together we carry you down the staircase and out of our house, to the waiting hearse. We push the willow casket into the hearse and close its back door. There is a mist of rain on the rear window of the car. The undertaker waits while, with our fingers, we draw hearts, kisses, lesbian signs, and other things on the misted pane. Then you drive away from us together with the undertaker. Standing with our arms around each other, we wave, cry and blow you many, many kisses.

## 7.

Uffe, Eigil and I spend quite some time on the death notice. Instead of an asterisk (a symbol of the star of Bethlehem) for the day of birth, and the cross for the day of death, we decide that we want a triangle (symbolizing the womb and the Delta of Venus) on your birthday, and a sign of infinity (Möbius strip) on your day of death. Furthermore, we want a picture of an oyster illustrating the text that says that you have left for the eternal oyster banks. An arts designer, Kim Lykke Jørgensen, whom we know, finds a very beautiful oyster vignette and makes a layout for us ready to send to the advertising company that will prepare the notice for print. Both the triangle and the sign of infinity can be found on standard computers so we do not expect them to cause problems for the layout people. Nevertheless, it does not seem to be easy to get what we

want. A lot of proofreading and phone conversations are needed before the pre-programed computers in the advertising company succeed in doing the right thing, and only as far as the death notice in the Danish newspapers is concerned. A renowned Swedish newspaper, *Dagens Nyheter*, in which, due to my job in Sweden, we also want to publish the death notice, ends up telling us that they cannot get hold of the triangle and the sign of infinity. In contrast to Denmark, State and Church are separate in Sweden and, in both countries, the press should in theory be independent of both State and Church. Nevertheless, the computers in *Dagens Nyheter's* department dealing with death notices seem only to have two alternatives – either the Christian star and cross or nothing! The death notice is therefore published in *Dagens Nyheter* without signs before the dates of your birth and death; the oyster vignette, which we forwarded in the ready-made layout, performing as the only alternative visual cue.

## 8.

It proves to be difficult to find a place for the funeral ceremony. We want a non-ecclesiastical room. Our undertaker has a colleague in the vicinity who has such a room. But we want to find a place with more atmosphere. Immediately, it strikes me that Odense Secular Convent for Noble Women, a very beautiful old building five minutes' walk from our home, would provide a great environment for the ceremony. We can walk to the convent through the park that borders our garden. It would be very beautiful to be able to carry you in your casket along the path in the park where we have walked so many times together, and, seen from a feminist perspective, the building has an interesting history. It dates back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the noblewoman Karen Brahe reorganized it as a library and a school for learned women. Karen Brahe's Library is known to hold the largest and oldest Danish collection of books in the national language. The books were moved to a secure national archive at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the building was used as a foundation for women for over 250 years, until the city council took over the responsibility for it in 1972. Women's

groups in the town have tried for years to put political pressure on the city council to make it restore the building as a museum dedicated to the learned women of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. My dead beloved was the first chairwoman of the association, the Karen Brahe Society, which gathered the women's groups under a joint umbrella to work toward this goal. Today, the building has been very beautifully restored. But the city council has handed the responsibility for the restored building over to the university instead of establishing a museum. So we can speak about half a victory and half a defeat for the feminist project in the shape of a museum dedicated to the learned women that I and my beloved, together with several women's groups, once tried to make real. Nevertheless, I, Uffe and Eigil – enthusiastically backed by our female undertaker – feel that one of the large and beautiful old rooms in this particular building would be a perfect choice for the funeral ceremony. The present chairwoman of the Karen Brahe Society – a former student of the Centre for Gender Studies at the university, the founding group in which I and my beloved many years ago also very actively took part – turns out to be very enthusiastic about the idea as well. But, due to the fact that the university is responsible for the administration of the building, the chairwoman cannot give us permission to use it without the agreement of the rector of the university. I tell her that, when speaking to the rector, she should emphasize that the funeral ceremony is planned to take place on a Sunday, so we will not disturb the normal university activities taking place in the building. I also say that she can tell the rector that, of course, we are willing to pay a fee for the use of the rooms. Moreover, I suggest that she should remind the rector that, before her retirement, my beloved was employed as a professor at the university for more than thirty years. Finally, I say that I think she should argue that my beloved many years ago was the first chairwoman of the Karen Brahe Society which worked hard for years to make the city council undertake the restoration of the building, from which the university now benefits. Having gone through all these arguments, the chairwoman and I feel totally sure that the rector cannot decline our request. But decline is precisely what the rector does, the chairwoman sadly tells me several phone conversations later.



The vice-rector, with whom she first spoke, had seemed positive, but after having talked to the rector, he had later – somewhat crestfallen – called her back with a definitive “no.” We can get permission to hold a memorial ceremony for you in the building, but the rector will not allow us to take your dead body inside it. The rector’s argument against organizing a funeral ceremony with the casket inside the building is that it could create a precedent. Perhaps, after this, all the other employees of the university will want to have their funeral ceremonies in the Secular Convent for Noble Women. What a ridiculously incoherent argument! If we are granted permission to organize a memorial ceremony in the building, couldn’t this also create a precedent? Why is it so important for the rector to keep, not your mourners, but your dead body out of the building? Is he afraid that its presence will contaminate the learned halls? And even worse: if he does not fortify himself against the attack, will you through your dead presence in the building in a vampirelike gesture lure all other employees of the university to become obsessed by the idea of participating in the contamination? Or does the rector perhaps fear a posthumous victory for the learned feminists of the 18<sup>th</sup> century – that suddenly after 300 years their work at the margins of cultural history will start to ignite the imagination of the university’s employees to such an extent that everyone will want to hold their funeral ceremony in the salons of the learned women?

After the last phone conversation with the chairwoman, disheartened, I have to accept the fact that we will have to try to find other solutions than the buildings of the Secular Convent for Noble Women. After many more phone conversations and negotiations, paradoxically, I end up getting very kind and sympathetic help from the Church to carry out the non-ecclesiastical funeral ceremony, which the university has declined to host. There are several historic buildings adjacent to the park that borders our garden. In one of these, the City Archives are located, another is the cathedral. I try the City Archives first, but the lecture hall of the Archives can only be borrowed for public, not private, events. However, a friendly employee of the Archives suggests that I contact the cathedral. She understands that I am looking for a non-ecclesiastical

room. But, she tells me that the cathedral, indeed, does have a very beautiful old chapel, which is not used for ecclesiastical purposes. So I call one of the priests, and ask her if I can borrow or rent this chapel. I do not hide the fact that I want to arrange a non-ecclesiastical funeral ceremony in the chapel. To my surprise, the priest shows great sympathy toward my request, and puts a lot of effort into helping me. She talks to the other priests as well as the dean of the cathedral, who all give their permission. After this, the chair of the Parish Council has to be asked, too, because without the Council's consent, it is not possible, the priest tells me. After several hours of work, the priest calls me back with the happy news that I can borrow the chapel. She also tells me that she and the chair of the Parish Council had said to each other that Jesus no doubt would have said "yes." So, with the blessing of the Church, the Parish Council and even Jesus, we have now gained access to a beautiful old and empty room, which we are permitted to fill completely with our own non-Christian symbols and rituals. The chapel is located within walking distance of our home. So we will be able to walk with your casket from home through the park and the convent garden right outside the cathedral, directly into the chapel.

Friendly employees of the cathedral help me with advice about the heating of the chapel and other practicalities. They also clean up the chapel well in advance, so that, on the morning before the funeral, we can bring extra chairs, loud-speakers for the music, a beamer and screen for the slideshow, flowers and other things that we are going to use for the ceremony. The cathedral employees pose interested and sympathetic questions about our alternative funeral ceremony. Among other things, the ecological willow casket attracts a lot of interest. So in this environment, we are met with openness and given plenty of room for diversity.

## 9.

We create the funeral ceremony ourselves, together with close family and friends. The female undertaker acts as a sparring partner, but she is impressed by our creativity. It is as though the work with the program for the funeral gives us the opportunity to translate our immense

feelings of sorrow into an excessive collective act of love. We prepare to start with a memorial with speeches, readings and a photo cavalcade with pictures of you, followed by a present-giving and a ritual of transition. Everything is going to be accompanied by specially selected music, some of it from operas that you loved. Our creativity becomes so excessive that we end up with too many program features. A couple of days before the funeral ceremony, we have to cut the program down in order to make sure that we do not exceed the ninety minutes we first scheduled together with the undertaker so that she would not have problems afterwards in actually reaching the crematorium with you at the agreed-upon time. But, nevertheless, we make it a priority that the event as a whole will be organized as a very collective process where all the participants have an active role to play, if they want, but where people can also just take part as onlookers if they prefer. Close family, friends and neighbours who will participate actively in the transition ritual, for example, are invited to bring gifts for you, which perhaps – or perhaps not – will be useful and nice for you to have to hand during your transition. The gifts are to be put in a basket, placed next to the casket in the chapel; after the funeral, the undertaker will take the things from the basket and put them into the casket with you. Those who want to are also invited to partake in the carrying out of the feminist materialist ritual of transition which I have spent much time thinking through – philosophically, choreographically and practically. To ensure that everything works out as planned, and that the time schedule is followed, I have made a logbook, which we go through meticulously at a big family meeting the evening before the funeral. Everybody – children as well as grown-ups – each take responsibility for their special functions, speeches and other program features. At the preparatory meeting, I also explain the ritual of transition, and show the props that are to be used in it. Everybody is very enthusiastic about the ritual, and say that they really want to contribute to it. We adapt it so that everybody gets a role in it, and it becomes even better.

On the day of the funeral ceremony, it is rainy all morning. But just before the undertaker drives the hearse with your casket up to our

house, where the funeral procession is to begin, the sun breaks through the clouds. The willow casket is covered in dark red roses, witch-hazel branches and oyster shells. The oyster shells have been brought to the undertaker directly from Glyngøre Shellfish Company at the Limfjorden – as a gift from the owner of the company, who knows that you loved to eat oysters. As we walk through the park and the convent garden, we take turns to carry the casket and form the funeral procession behind it. It is difficult to avoid stepping on each other's heels as we carry the casket, but we get better eventually.

In the rotunda in the middle of the park, we unexpectedly meet a group of young jugglers. They yield, looking a bit uncomfortable and shy, when they catch sight of our funeral procession. Two of the grandchildren tell us afterwards that they also saw a dancing dog in the rotunda. It makes me sad that I did not manage to signal more clearly to the young jugglers that their presence was ok. I am also a bit annoyed that I did not notice the dog at all. Because what is a queer-femme-inist funeral ceremony without tricksters? Therefore, I am also pleased when one more tricksterlike event occurs a bit later during the ceremony in the chapel.

We reach the chapel. We prepared the computer and brought it to the chapel earlier so that the undertaker, who has driven the hearse across while we walked through the park, can easily start the music as we approach the door. So as we enter the chapel, the first piece of music fills the room: Richard Strauss' "Four Last Songs." I, our sons and grandchildren carry you into the chapel, while the ten-metre-high painted brick vaults reverberate with the opera singer Jessye Norman's great and dramatic voice. We place you and the willow casket in between the many flowers and candles that we set up when we prepared the chapel in the morning. (Due to your dislike of candles emitting polluting particles, we have asked the undertaker to provide special candles with a very low degree of emission.) On top of the lighted globe, which the cathedral employees kindly asked if we wanted to borrow, there is a cross. To cover this, we have brought with us the Mother Trickster figure that we have always had on top of our Xmas tree instead of the Bethlehem star. We accepted

the kind offer of the cathedral employees because in our context the globe could signal transnational solidarity and anti-xenophobia, and the Mother Trickster figure is big enough to cover the cross completely. So from the corner of the chapel, the globe is now shedding its magnificent candlelight, which turns warm and reddish when it meets the ancient red brick walls and the red floor tiles of the chapel. We sit down on the chairs that we placed in half circles earlier around the corner where the casket is now placed, and I am just about to welcome everyone.

I stand up, but before I can begin my welcome speech, the heavy old wooden door of the chapel is shaken so vehemently that it is flung open with a very loud noise. My first thought is that it is people related to the church who do not know that we have permission to be in the chapel, and that I will have to go and tell them. But the undertaker, who is sitting closer to the door, jumps up even more quickly than me. She looks outside, but there is no-one out there. So it must have been the wind. But only moments before, when we entered the chapel, there was no wind and the sun was shining. Was this yet another trickster?

I make my welcoming speech, underlining that we, the circle of close family and friends who have organized the funeral ceremony, wish to see it as a celebration of your transition rather than as a farewell in a conventional sense. I also explain that, after the cremation, your ashes are going to be spread over the oyster banks of Limfjorden, and that my ashes, mixed with the last part of yours, are to be spread in the same place when I die. It means a lot to me to actually say this out loud here at your funeral ceremony; the performativity of the words makes it more real.

A photo series, accompanied by Daniel Johnston's strange and genderqueer voice singing the song "Something lasts a long time," shows you as a feminist, activist, researcher, politician, fiction writer, mother, grandmother – and as my beloved life partner. One of my favourite photos of you serves as icon for the series, and remains projected onto the chapel wall during the whole ceremony. It is a photo that I took of you, standing on the top of the Sicilian volcano, Etna, during one of our vacations. You stand there, looking very dykelike, sending me one of your

radiant smiles. Behind you is a landscape of solidified lava waves. Dyke on a volcano. The showing of the photo series is followed by beautiful and loving words of remembrance. A son, a sister, and an old friend from the feminist movement and gender studies make speeches. A daughter-in-law and a grandchild read their own poetic texts. Each from their perspective, all express their deeply shared sorrow and love to you, and each have their own words of mourning and redemption. As the last feature of the memorial part, we sing together – an old Danish song chosen by the youngest grandchild, Zakarias. It is nice to sing out loud together – and we have cut out a verse with explicit Christian metaphors. When we reach a line in the song talking to a “you” whose beautiful dreams will come true, when deathly cold winter has turned into springtime, the meaning of the words suddenly becomes very concrete and palpable to me, and for the first time during the ceremony, I am about to cry. My voice breaks. I turn away from the circle of mourners and bend over the casket, kissing it and whispering once more to you that we will meet among the oysters at the bottom of Limfjorden.

Now the ritual part of the ceremony starts. As I have chaired the first memorial part, I am also leading the ritual. All the family members who took part in the planning wished it to be like this. I considered beforehand whether I would be able to carry it through without bursting into tears and in this way displacing the focus from the ritual to me, which I definitely want to avoid. But I always knew that I could do it, and now I feel carried along by the love and compassion vibrating in the chapel.

The first part of the ritual is the gift giving. I give a signal to the grandchild, Sofus, who is taking care of the music with the precision of a DJ. The chapel is filled with Delilah’s song of seduction “Mon cœur s’ouvre a ta voix” [My heart opens to your voice] from Saint-Saëns’ opera *Samson and Delilah*. It is the opera singer Elīna Garanča who is singing. It is a very sensuous song of love. Throughout the years, you have played it for me many, many times. No-one speaks now. The voice of Garanča clings seductively to the vaults, caresses the columns, embraces the casket and the gift givers, who without words get up from their chairs and walk silently to your casket, putting their gifts into the basket at its foot.

I reimagine the seductive sound of your beautiful dark voice. *Mon cœur s'ouvre a ta voix.*

Once more I give a voiceless sign to the DJ grandchild. He understands immediately and lets Delilah fade out, and in fades instead the opera singer Anna Netrebko as the high priestess Norma who at night in a holy grove, surrounded by a choir of priestesses and other Druids, sings the song “Casta Diva,” a prayer to the moon, the Druid goddess, from Bellini’s opera *Norma*. This aria, too, you and I have often listened to together. After a long foreplay, conjuring up the moonlit night, Norma sings her prayer to the goddess, lingering, as if dreaming, but also conscious of her authority and her collective responsibility as high priestess. Sometimes the choir joins her, momentarily breaking up the long solos. Gently moving back and forth to the music, I immerse myself in its lingering and authoritative rhythms, leading the ritual with slow movements of my hands. I feel like an orchestra conductor who indicates rhythms and transitions from one part of the ritual to the next. But, as in a well-organized orchestra, the participants know precisely what each of them has to do, so what I signal with the movements of my hands is the timing, the rhythm, the accentuations. First, the three members of the fire group come forward. The universe is created in fire, so fire is the beginning. The fire group lights candles and puts the matches in an oyster shell placed next to the casket, while the three members say, “From fire you come, fire you become, from fire you shall return.” The air group comes next. Fire and air are closely entangled. In a toyshop, I bought small tubes to be used for blowing soap bubbles. These are the ritual props of the air group. The soap bubbles are blown to hover over the oyster shell, “From air you come, air you become, from air you shall return.” Now I call the three members of the water group. Life emerged from water. Water therefore comes before earth. The water group sprinkles water over the oyster shell and says, “From water you come, water you become, from water you shall return.” The three members of the earth group get their cue to come forward with their ritual props: a box containing earth and small spoons. “From earth you come, earth you become, from earth you shall return,” they say and take turns to put a spoonful of earth into

the oyster shell. The last group is the body group. I myself am a member of this group, together with our two sons. Our ritual props are pearls. Two natural pearls are included, which a jewellery designer gave to us as a gift – he did not want payment for them, because he was moved by the story of our ritual. These two pearls symbolize my beloved and me, and the joint metamorphosis of our ashes to become grains of sand in Limfjorden, which we hope one day will turn into pearls in an oyster. As well as the two natural pearls, we have a box of beads, bought in the toyshop. We put the natural pearls and some of the beads into the oyster shell, while we say, “From fire, air, water, earth, body you come, fire, air, water, earth, body you become, from fire, air, water, earth, body you shall return.” The part of the ritual performed by the body group – me and our two sons – is thus meant to bind together all the earlier parts, as the oyster shell now contains traces and remains of all its elements. After this, we invite all the funeral participants to take the remaining beads and put them in the shell or next to it, once there is no more space inside it. Finally, the oyster shell and the remaining beads are placed in the basket together with the gifts so that the undertaker can later put all of it into your casket. The funeral ceremony is now over. While the *Aquarium* part of Saint-Saëns’ *Carnival of the Animals* is playing, we – I, our sons and grandchildren – carry the casket out of the chapel to the undertaker’s waiting hearse. We put new flowers on the casket, and I kiss the lid one last time. Then the undertaker drives away with you. Once more we stand there waving our hands, holding each other, crying and blowing kisses after you. Now your transition begins for real.

## 10.

Your funeral ceremony took place in February. We picked up the urn with your ashes at the undertaker’s some days later. A warm day in July, your 77<sup>th</sup> birthday, we gather again – close family and friends, this time at the Limfjorden in the northern part of Denmark. In a fine old schooner, which we have rented, we set sail for the waters just off the island of Fur. Here we lower your blue, ecological urn into the water, placed in a blue fishing net and with a ballast of oyster shells and beach stones.



We let go of the line – our last tie to the one you were before...  
With a gurgling, slobbering slurping, the obscenity of which I know you  
would love,  
the water swallows your blue urn.  
Swaddled in a seablue fishing net on a bed of oyster shells and beach  
stones,  
You sink to the bottom of the Limfjorden  
at the base of the cliffs of Fur,  
close to habitats of oysters.  
The birth of Venus from the womb of the cliffs  
in a reverse shot.  
Roses gently rocking on the waves.  
Somebody spots the head of a seal, enjoying the warm sun.  
Naja reads from her story about a devil-may-care Karen Blixen  
We sing “You are so beautiful and gorgeous.”

P.S. I have kept a small part of your ashes to be mixed with mine some day. I have touched it. It is white and fine and soft. A paper with the coordinates marking the place where we let your urn sink into the water is in my drawer. Uffe and Eigil, too, know where it is.

## **Acknowledgement**

Warm thanks to Elizabeth Sourbut for linguistic revision of the text.

**NINA LYKKE** is Professor of Gender and Culture at the Unit of Gender Studies, Linköping University, Sweden. She is co-director of an international Centre of Gender Excellence, GEXcel International Collegium for Advanced Transdisciplinary Gender Studies, as well as scientific leader of a Swedish-International Research School in Interdisciplinary Gender Studies, InterGender. She has been scientific director of the Nordic Research School in Interdisciplinary Gender Studies, managing director of the European Feminist Studies Association, AOIFE. She has published extensively within the areas of feminist theory, intersectionality studies, feminist cultural studies,

feminist technoscience studies, including the following books and edited volumes: *Between Monsters Goddesses and Cyborgs* (1996, with Rosi Braidotti), *Cosmodolphins* (2000, with Mette Bryld), *Bits of Life* (2008, with Anneke Smelik), *Feminist Studies* (2010), *Theories and Methodologies in Postgraduate Feminist Research* (2011, with Rosemarie Buikema and Gabriele Griffin), and *Writing Academic Texts Differently* (2014). She is managing co-editor of the book series *Routledge Advances in Feminist Studies and Intersectionality*. Her current research is a queerfeminist, autophenomenographic and poetic exploration of cancer cultures, death and mourning.

## REFERENCES

- Ahmed, Sara. 2010. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Allen-Collinson, Jacquelyn. 2010. "Running Embodiment, Power and Vulnerability: Notes Toward a Feminist Phenomenology of Female Running." In *Women and Exercise: The Body, Health and Consumerism*, edited by Eileen Kennedy and Pirkko Markula, 280–98. London: Routledge.
- Braidotti, Rosi. 2002. *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Cvetkovich, Ann. 2012. *Depression: A Public Feeling*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Dahl, Ulrika. 2014. *Skamgrepp: Femme-inistiska essäer*. Stockholm: Leopard.

## SAMMANFATTNING

Huvuddelen av texten är en självbiografisk och poetisk beskrivning av min älskades död och mina queera möten med den mängd av normer – kristna normer, heteronormer och så vidare – som omger döden. Den introduceras av ett kontextualiserande förord med teoretiska reflektioner kring queer änkedom och sörjande. Texten är ett utdrag ur en längre självvetnografisk och självfenomenografisk studie av queert patientskap, cancerdöd och änkedom. Att studien är självfenomenografisk innebär att min självvetnografi inspireras av fenomenologisk metod och inriktas på frågor om förkroppsligande och affektivitet. Genom mitt betonande av queer änkedom och sörjande tar jag

avstånd från den nyliberala, hälsnormativa och individualistiska kultur som fetischerar personlig lycka och kräver att vi bortser från sårbarhet, olycka och förlust. I linje med detta kopplar jag mina reflektioner och mitt poetiska, självbiografiska skrivande till queera undersökningar av negativa, dystra, sorgsna och mörka känslor och affektiviteter och följer queerforskaren Ann Cvetkovichs (2012) tes att detta ”att vila i sorgsenheten utan att kräva att den förvandlas eller uppfattas annorlunda” kan öppna fruktbara möjligheter personligt, politiskt och teoretiskt. Jag ser också mina reflektioner och poetiska skrivande som queerfemme-nistiska, i enlighet med queerforskaren Ulrika Dahls (2014) tankar om ”femme” som en feministisk figuration. Mitt sörjande formas av min queerfeminina kärlek till min älskades queermaskulinitet och även av vårt gemensamma, feministiska engagemang och sökande efter queerfeministiska materialistiska filosofiska alternativ till de ontologier kring livet och döden som utvecklats av kristendomen och dualistiska traditioner i västerländsk filosofi.

**Keywords:** queer widowhood, autophenomenography, norms of death, queerfemme-inism, feminist materialist funeral and transition rituals, queer mourning