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## Mourning the Mamalith: A Graphic Response to Grief

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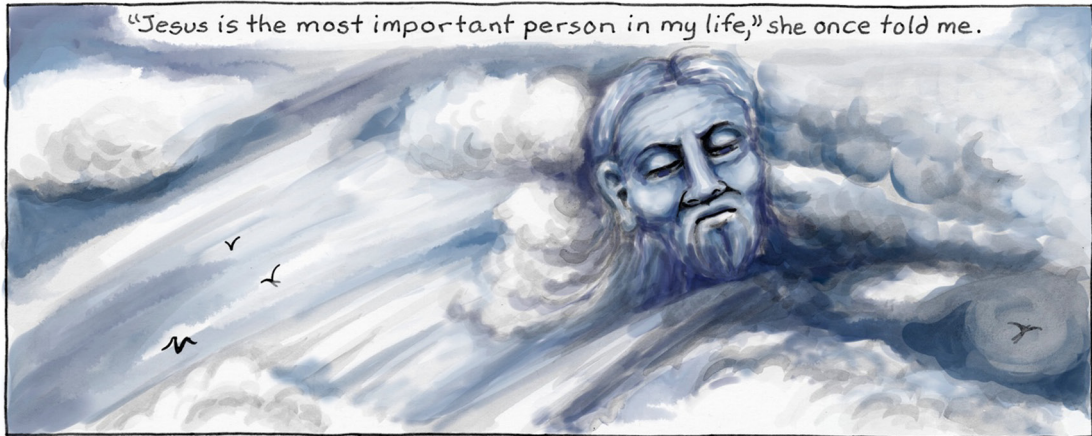
“I love you so much,” are the last words I said to my mother on the telephone on Valentine’s Day, just a few days before she died. Our love was as complicated as it was deep. My mother’s dogmatic fundamentalism left little room for me, her queer only child. I have spent a lifetime unraveling a brutal family history that caused her to cling to religion, to love Jesus above all else, including family. My mother was born in Germany in 1938, violently displaced during partitioning in 1946, then abandoned in an orphanage for several years. Years later, she fled to the United States with me to escape an abusive marriage. My mother’s life and her death have prompted this graphic research. How can one develop a resilient sense of self and belonging despite traumatic origins? Is it possible to inhabit a new place and to make it one’s home without, however inadvertently, causing oppression and grief for those already living there? This piece serves as the Prologue to the graphic novel *Queen of Snails: A Graphic Memoir* (forthcoming November 2022), where I examine this tangled history in depth.

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Always subordinate to my mother's divine love affair, my mortal relationship with her was difficult. At key moments throughout my life, starting in infancy, when I needed her care and protection most, she was often absent.





The day after Gracie's birth in Nebraska, hospital staff in Tucson, Arizona, took my mother off life support. She had never regained consciousness after her fall. Nevertheless, I felt very connected to her in the final hours and days of her life, as though the barriers between us had begun to fall away.



The day my mother died, my wife and I walked to the top of Santa Fe, our home town, and found ourselves at the Cross of the Martyrs at sunset. The monument commemorates Franciscan priests, killed in the Pueblo Revolt against colonial oppression in 1680. The Christian cross, symbol of hope and redemption for many European colonizers and immigrants, is a dark symbol of brutality and genocide for many Native Peoples.

Two months later, my wife and I drove to Nebraska to pick up little Gracie. At ten weeks old, she was a wee five-pound runt.

She grew very quickly after we brought her home, despite her rough start.



She was healthy and exuberant, and continues to thrive.

Nevertheless...

...during Gracie's first weeks with us, I had recurring panic attacks and nightmares about her tiny, vulnerable body and spirit.

What if I can't protect her?!?!



After one such sleepless night, I called my dear wise friend, Leslie, who also happens to be a therapist.



LESLIE, I FEEL SO SO SO SAD!! I JUST CAN'T SHAKE THESE THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS!

Oh, sweetheart, you're GRIEVING! You're not just healing your own relationship with your mother, but your ENTIRE MATERNAL LINEAGE. You must look at everything on a deeper level now, even though you've worked through these feelings before.



Of course my nighttime anxiety wasn't about Gracie, but about my own vulnerability when I was very young, and about INHERITED vulnerability and trauma, passed down through generations of people who suffered displacement, violence, and abandonment.



A baby mammal is a baby mammal. There is no hierarchy. Across species, we are not so different. We seek safety, shelter, warmth, belonging ~ HOME.





Is it possible to build a strong home that transcends one's history and culture? Not without first carefully examining those inherited structures, so that one doesn't unwittingly create a REPLICA, and not without recognizing and protecting the most wounded and woundable parts of ourselves, our families, and our world.

Despite our differences, my mother was my ANCHOR POINT. My identity was entangled with hers, colored and circumscribed by our shared past. In many ways, I defined myself in relation and in reaction to her biases, beliefs, and behaviors. Her death also incited the death of who I had been, and induced my liberation from the oppressive structures she supported so vehemently.

I RELEASE YOU, MOTHER.  
MAY YOUR SPIRIT, TOO,  
BE FREE.



## Conclusion

Mother is anchor, a connection point across space and time. I perceive the death of my mother as a weight suddenly lifted; I am set adrift. This liberation is not without sorrow and fear (the falling with no parachute, the sudden change in gravity—it pulls now, harder and faster, time accelerates). I must update my understanding of familial history and my place within it. I have so long defined myself in relation to her, in reaction to her. Now what? This short comic looks at the mysterious connection between processing childhood vulnerability and trauma, more-than-human and human interdependence, and psychosomatic healing. As I've done in some of my previous work, by materializing thoughts as drawn and written sequential vignettes, I hope to gain and share insight about the mysterious dynamics of embodied cognition.

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**Author's Note**

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**Editors' Note**

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**Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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**Reference**

**Burdock, M.** 2022. *Queen of Snails: A Graphic Memoir*. Graphic Mundi. Forthcoming in November 2022.

