**‘A Perfect Choreography of Ruination’:**

**Resisting Tragedy in *The Boy Who Fell Out of the Sky:***

***A True Story (2006)***

**We might say that as soon as the question “What is lost?” is posed, it invariably slips into the question “What remains?” That is, loss is inseparable from what remains, for what is lost is known only by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read, and sustained.[[1]](#endnote-1)**

Described as ‘part memoir, part autobiography and part anatomy of a crime,’[[2]](#endnote-2) *The Boy Who Fell Out of the Sky* represents a valuable contribution to the literature of trauma, particularly in an era increasingly exercised by the threats—both real and imagined—of global terror. The memoir concerns the years which follow the death of the author’s older brother, David. As a passenger on Pan Am Flight 103, he was one of 270 people killed in the Lockerbie bombing of December 21st, 1988. In addition to detailing the psychological and emotional repercussions of this crime, Ken Dornstein is equally concerned to provide a full account of his brother’s life in his text, not simply because he wants it to function as a *memento mori*, but because he strives for a better understanding of precisely who and what has been lost. Despite their bond, many details of David’s experience, particular as they relate to his College life, erratic history of employment and his travels, are unknown to his brother. In order to resolve these uncertainties Dornstein seeks for what Judith Butler, following Freud, describes as the ‘something … hiding in the loss, something … lost within the recesses of loss.’[[3]](#endnote-3) If it is to be uncovered at all, this ‘something,’ is located in the many traces David left behind and it is through an examination of these remains that Dornstein is able to compose a more complete biography of David than would be possible were he working from memory alone. This ensures a better comprehension of David’s life but also allows Dornstein to narrate—if not fully to ameliorate—his own trauma. In this respect, a biographical impulse becomes the means by which Dornstein is able to approach what Cathy Caruth defines as the ‘double telling’[[4]](#endnote-4) which is so intrinsic to the articulation of trauma, namely: ‘the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival.’[[5]](#endnote-5) For Dornstein, however, the attempt to master ‘the experience of not knowing incited by losing what [he] cannot fully fathom,’[[6]](#endnote-6) proves to be a long and unpredictable undertaking. It produces a text in which the subjective and mournful “I” of the narrative increasingly gives ground to the lost br/other, an enigmatic figure who moves from a spectral presence to a more distinct, if never fully embodied subject, as his history is narrated.

Although Dornstein’s extensive search for that which is ‘lost within the recesses of loss,’ is a sign of intense grief and trauma, it also functions as a powerful means of connecting and reconnecting with David and thereby, paradoxically, of denying his absence. It harks back to Dornstein’s initial response to the news of David’s death—an outright refusal to associate his brother with the Pan Am disaster. In subsequent years, such disavowal also leads Dornstein’s numerous attempts to hold together the severed fraternal bond, most noticeably by undertaking a series of journeys—both literal and metaphorical—which retrace paths once taken by David: ‘It’s what David would have done, I thought. *It’s what I should do*. This was the new logic that would govern my life.’[[7]](#endnote-7) Since it originates in the powerful trajectories that his bereavement provokes, this ‘new logic’ gives *The Boy Who Fell Out of the Sky* a distinct shape and form: a psychic pattern which operates according to the notion of return and which inevitably creates numerous repetitions and doublings within what is a complex and generically hybrid text.

As both a testimony of loss and account of David’s history, *The Boy Who Fell Out of the Sky,* it can be said, blurs the distinction between the autobiographical and biographical, just as it so frequently troubles the boundaries between self and other. It is also remarkable for the particular nature of the relationship between the brothers in question that it dramatizes. Dornstein’s articulations in the text inevitably operate in an ironic and uneasy relationship to those of his brother, who aspired, above all, to be a great American writer. Indeed, the narrative acknowledges, as a tantalising possibility, that the violence which took David’s life also destroyed the manuscript of his first completed novel. An intense, charismatic and sometimes volatile figure, David is conjured not only through his brother’s varied attempts at remembrance and recollection, but also through his own words. These are drawn from the many letters, journals, manuscripts and fictional fragments that this artist ‘coming-to-be’ (82), left behind. They form what Dornstein, who serves as their chief archivist and executor, describes as the ‘Dave Museum,’ (11). At first, he believes that he must salvage something worthy of his brother from these texts, turning the disparate fragments of David’s endless labours into an integrated whole. When he is thwarted in this task, Dornstein chooses instead to incorporate some of these words into his memoir. Selected, edited and arranged by Dornstein, these prove integral to his own text and ensure, once again, that the intimate connection between the brothers holds true. At the same time, these writings show aspects of David’s artistic development and are offered as evidence which might help resolve a central conundrum raised by David’s history: *‘Was he a troubled artist? Was he just troubled?’* (100). It is in order to explore this issue still further that Dornstein also documents the ‘debilitating psychological crisis’ (101) which beset David in the years leading to his death. This concern with what he categorises as ‘last things’ (47) leads eventually to the creation of the ‘Dave Oral History Project’ (180).

For this work, Dornstein visits the places once associated with David. He reminisces with his brother’s friends, lovers and acquaintances (including the neighbour who, according to David’s writings, sexually abused him as a child). While these encounters illuminate the more obscured parts of David’s existence they also produce a somewhat uncomfortable doubling of the brothers. Dornstein forms romantic attachments to David’s former girlfriends (one of whom he eventually marries). This particular form of repetition leads him to consider his own predicament in Scriptural terms. As he negotiates what is, symbolically at least, an incestuous attraction, he finds himself ‘caught, roughly speaking between Deuteronomy and Leviticus’ (59). While the latter forbids his desire, an obligation to marry your brother’s wife in the event of his death is sanctioned by the levirate marriage that Deuteronomy decrees. Seen by Dornstein as a curious and antiquated dictate, it is nonetheless significant because it speaks of a duty to stand in for the dead. This fraternal substitution of self for lost other in turn reflects the admittedly ‘dangerous’ (56) strategy, deployed by Dornstein himself, in the earliest stages of his grief. His impersonation of the dead, or ‘trying to be David’ (56) by means of imitation and emulation, represents yet another way in which he seeks to maintain an unbroken kinship with his brother.

In her account of the differences between mourning and melancholia, Marcia Cavell highlights the ways in which melancholia represents a response to bereavement in which loss is refused and the lost object or its substitute is incorporated into the psyche. Mourning, on the other hand, represents a movement back into the external world of objects, rather than the absorption of the other into a self-enclosed system of meaning:

The melancholic behaves much like the mourner, with the difference that whereas in mourning the world has become poor and empty, as Freud says, in melancholia one experiences the poverty in oneself. Both the melancholic and the mourner have suffered a loss; but the love of the first was highly ambivalent, and he denies the loss. He will not or cannot make the mourner’s affective moves. Instead he makes a ghost of the lost object, preserving it in phantasy by repetitively acting out its return (one thinks of Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*), or by transferring its significance, its very significance, on to someone else; or he takes the lost object inside himself, again in phantasy, with the result that now his anger against the object is turned against himself. While the one who has mourned is free to find a new and genuinely gratifying love, the melancholic is condemned to a form of passive repetition.[[8]](#endnote-8)

In this classic psychoanalytic model, melancholia is seen to be a more trenchant, pathological form of grieving. Indeed, Dornstein’s text, the decades it covers and the multiple ways in which the surviving brother is bound by and to his loss, from his initial refusal to acknowledge David’s death to the many subsequent ways in which he denies the severance of the fraternal bond.

Even though Dornstein appears endlessly to conjure David’s presence, through processes of return, incorporation, doubling and repetition, these strategies are eventually exhausted and the separation of the two brothers finally admitted. As he comes gradually and belatedly to extract self from other, Dornstein moves beyond his often paralysing grief to achieve a necessary autonomy—as a writer and, at the close of the narrative, as husband and father. This process is not only recorded within Dornstein’s writing but also signalled by his successful completion and publication of the text itself. For, unlike the brother who authored copious and invariably incomplete works, Dornstein *does* make it into print. The publication of his memoir, therefore, also enables him to escape the forms of textual and psychic entrapment to which both he—and his brother before him—have been subjected. For Dornstein, then, a recapitulation of his brother’s history is inextricably and inevitably linked to the catharsis his narrative enacts: it not only records a life lost but also enables a movement from melancholia to mourning and beyond.

**Icarus Ascending**

As Dornstein writes in his notes to the text, its title is derived from W. H. Auden’s ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’ (1940), which, in turn, takes its inspiration from Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (c. 1560). The appropriateness of this connection between the death of David and the myth of the falling boy is affirmed by David himself, since his writings abound with ‘images and references to falls’ (349)—both metaphorical and literal. For him, as his brother notes, the idea of the fall was a useful means of ‘reaching for a graphic way to describe a loss, a falling-short of some grand goal.’ A writer playfully obsessed with and often confounded by language, David elsewhere articulates the view that, ‘[t]here is only a one-letter difference between Falling and Failing, but in that one letter is the whole of the world,’ (350). Although it is a powerful trope with many nuances, ‘falling’ has a lexical proximity to ‘failing’ and therefore also represents ‘the whole of the world’ to a writer who is so frequently enamoured of the possibilities of language and equally fearful that he will never fulfil his creative potential. However, while David is able to articulate his artistic struggles through his language play and can even identify a ‘world’ of difference in a single letter, his brother is much less able to pinpoint the language which will enable expression. Indeed, it is not simply the language but the form itself which eludes him when it comes to the question of how to tell the story of David’s life and death.

The allusion to Auden’s poem and the Bruegel painting, in which the labouring farmer continues to plough his field, oblivious to the drama played out in the harbour beyond, is invoked early in *The Boy Who Fell Out of The Sky.* It opens with Dornstein, home from College and perusing the headlines about the Lockerbie crash. He is as yet unaware of his brother’s involvement:

I have come to think of the impact of my brother’s death in dramatic terms; a curtain dropping on my youth, a terrible storm that left me ship-wrecked, the start of a new life. But this language came much later. Events unfolded in a much more everyday way: The phone range and my father, home early from work, answered it. (4)

If the language that might enable Dornstein to shape this pivotal moment comes much later, Dornstein is unable, initially at least, even to associate his brother with the catastrophe he reads about: ‘it was intolerable for me to have a personal connection to this story, so I simply decided not to’ (5). Refusing David’s place in this story, Dornstein is equally uneasy with the narratives that follow, including a newspaper feature which headlines with ‘[a] Tragic Twist on a Young Writer’s Life’ before going on to detail David’s fate, along with that of his ‘brilliant first novel’ (9). Yet even though he rejects the tragic arc of such a narrative, Dornstein is unsure how, or even if the story of David’s life and death can be ordered. He understands only that David’s history, like that of Icarus, fails to adhere to the traditional coming of age tale: ‘We know this story: A boy heads off into the wild to kill a bear, and he returns to the village a man. But in this case, the boy did not come back’ (9). While he is able to discount the narratives which do not fit his brother’s tale, Dornstein is much less able to alight upon the form which will enable its telling. Just like the poet and artist before him, he is concerned with the question of how, if at all, to represent the drama of the falling boy.

This task is, of course, made still more difficult because the idea of the fall is so often used by David himself, whose fears about writing, in particular, lead him to dramatizes his fate in precisely those terms. As he contemplates his younger brother’s potential to eclipse him, David muses:

He’ll be *the one* … I’ll be the brother who was mighty highly influential, but he’ll be the one. Am I skeered of this? Skeered of falling out of the picture? Yes. It seems that falling is a major fear of human beings: falling in love, falling into debt, falling into disrepair, falling apart, falling for a joke, falling from grace … But I will make my own way. (169)

In contrast to David, who uses a form of free association to encompass the multiple significance of falling, his father chooses, in a letter offering advice to his son, to highlight one version in particular. For Dornstein, Sr., the myth of Icarus has a heuristic function. He uses it to bring aid to a potentially falling, or failing son:

Remember Daedalus. He was an inventor, artist, architect who was captivated by hard problems and was driven to find solutions, but he was also realistic and prudent and he recognized limits beyond which even he dared not to venture. Daedalus tried to convey a sense of these limitations to his son Icarus, but Icarus flew too high, the wax on his wings melted, and he was lost forever in the depths of the sea. Maybe with Daedalus in mind you might alter the scope of your writing. (229)

Since David’s creative pursuits have not yet led to any marked success and indeed seem to foster self-destruction, David’s father suggests that the scale of his ambitions needs to be redrawn. With the story of Daedalus and the fate of Icarus in mind, David is urged to emulate the former, lest he come to suffer the fate of the overly ambitious son, a boy whose exuberant embrace of freedom brought about his demise. Identifying the dangers to which David—who seems to be suffering from periods of mental instability—is exposed, his father tries, like Daedalus before him, to protect his son by suggesting his flight be curtailed.

If David’s father identifies with Daedaelus in the Icarus myth and urges his son to less perilous forms of creative endeavour, the aftermath of David’s fall leaves his brother to ponder the question of whether David’s artistic ambitions would, in other circumstances, ever have been realised. In particular, he fears that the reams of unfinished writing will not fulfil the expectations of those destined to stand in judgement on David’s self-proclaimed literary genius:

I feared what David had feared: that what was inside those notebooks, what was typewritten on all those loose sheets, was not good enough to justify all of the big noises he’d made about it. I feared that the grand plan had never been realized and that David had hidden this fact from himself in a mass of paper. (10)

Despite sharing David’s anxieties, Dornstein’s first impulse is to piece together these literary remains, to ‘finish whatever it was that he had started to write’ (12). However, just like his brother before him, he finds himself caught in a textual labyrinth, unable to create a whole out of the many pieces left behind:

But the more I read, the less clear I grew about what that really was. There were notes about how a number of his different stories might be fitted together into a larger work, but there was no evidence that he’d ever attempted it. And this map he left, once I tried to follow it, led only to imaginary places. (12)

Such lack of clarity regarding his brother’s designs makes Dornstein’s task almost impossible. He is, however, able to find an appropriate literary association, along with a useful pun, to reflect the burden of David’s remains:

As I dragged the chests down the steps, I thought of the part in *Ulysses* when poor old drunken Paddy Dignam’s coffin is being taken out of the house, and Dignam’s son hears the *bump, bump, bump* of the coffin coming down the front stairs. I thought about how a writer’s body of work is often called a corpus. Those chests were awkward and heavy as a man. (144)

Dornstein’s difficulty with this unwieldy ‘corpus’ is further exacerbated by the ways in which David’s own presence is felt in the writing he has left behind. His fiction encompasses multiple autobiographical traces, and is characterised by a distinctly self-conscious, postmodern representation and scrutiny of self. In David’s writing there is a tendency towards self-aggrandisement, a belief that his genius has gone unrecognised, articulated through ‘wildest fantasies of posthumous fame’ (180). At other times, he agonises over whether he is mistaken about his own value as a writer. These alternating moments of egotistical posturing and self-doubt find their expression through fantasies in which artistic identity is as likely to be erased as elevated. Most striking of these elaborate fantasies what Dornstein categorises an ‘adolescent romance’ (14) in which David imagines his own tragic death. In preparation for this inevitability, he arranges his own ‘literary estate’ for posterity, believing that a tragic early death would ensure his literary greatness’ (13). Thus, David’s archive includes notes addressed to imaginary scholars, and ‘for the biographers’ who will eventually peruse his works, but who come rather belatedly to recognise his brilliance. In anticipation of this event, David helpfully composes a preface for what he envisages will be the first of many volumes of his posthumously published work.

At times, David’s mode of narrating the self represents unnervingly prescient discourse for his brother to negotiate. In one scenario, it is a fantasised air-crash that brings about David’s demise, an idea to which he returns in one of his notebooks, aptly titled, *The Fall Journal*:

A fictional autobiography. The idea? An unknown young writer dies in a plane crash leaving behind lots of notebooks and bits of stories, and the narrator sets out to piece it all together into a story of the unknown writer’s life. (148)

David’s idea for this particular ‘fictional autobiography’ represents a somewhat unnerving portent for his brother who is, like his imaginary counterpart, destined to compose the story of the ‘unknown writer’s life.’ Immersed himself in the ‘last things’ (47) of his brother’s life, Dornstein tries and repeatedly fails to alight upon a form adequate to this task: ‘I have started this story a hundred times in the years since David died, but never finished. Let me begin again’ (8).

What follows is David’s first description of his brother, conveyed in in an appropriately juvenile form. His words return him to his younger self and the conventions associated with the fairy-tale:

Once upon a time, I had a brother. He was older, bigger, wiser, more daring, more passionate, better spoken, and much better looking. He travelled farther away from home than I ever imagined I would. I admired him. I was nineteen when he died, a sophomore in college. Now I am in my mid-thirties. I have some memories of my brother, but not as many as I’d like to think. And each time I check, I seem to have one fewer. If at first I found it hard to believe that David was dead, now I find it hard to believe that he ever lived. David’s life has come to seem like a story I made up, a fairy tale, no more real than words on a page. I sometimes find it dispiriting to think that this is what a life comes to, that this is how it ends. But I can imagine David smiling about it. Words were his life. And now the words he left behind would be more vital than ever.

David was a writer. (8)

Drawn initially to the intimate letters his brother has sent him and which repeatedly plead for a reciprocal epistolary response, Dornstein finally answers his brother’s confidences. In so doing, he attempts yet another, albeit more mature mode of articulation:

I tried to be a journalist, reporting the story of the aftermath of David’s death. I was writing for a very small audience—just David, really. I thought he’d want to know all of the details. I thought he’d be pleased to know that I’d picked up his pen, that his notebook was once again filling up with words. It felt good to respond to him in the way that he’d wanted me to for so long. I wrote for David and after a few paragraphs, I began to write in his style as well. It was code, all very private between the two of us—the notebook as direct line between us. (15-16)

Later, Dornstein will follow this journalistic performance by assuming other guises—ethnographer, scientist and detective—all of which allow him to approach David’s death with a professional detachment. In this instance, however, his strategy of distancing self from other falters because the writing begins to take on David’s style. Thus the exclusive connection between the brothers is reasserted through the very medium which is supposed to record their separation. This early absorption into David’s artistic world represents a dissolution of boundaries which culminates in the ‘Awful Eulogy’ (16) Dornstein goes on to deliver at his brother’s memorial service. In preparation for his speech, Dornstein relies on an old and incomplete notebook of his brother’s, to which, in the immediate aftermath of the crash, he has added his own words:

This was a mistake. For one thing, the sheets were difficult to decipher. I had used the backs and fronts of pages, covered every inch with ink, stuck Post-it notes all over to squeeze in one more thing. Some sections were obscured by big patches of blood that had dried, brown and crusty. (One night, while writing at David’s desk, I had started to cry. To stop the tears, I pressed my face hard into the desk; something snapped out of place and my nose started to bleed over the words.) (16)

For his eulogy, Dornstein returns once more to this book, now supplemented by his own inscriptions and indeed his tears and blood. The result is:

filled with references to things David had written to me in letters, lyrics to his favourite songs, passages from books I knew he’d read—nonsense speech at times, free-association, and lots of wordplay in David’s style. It was not an appreciation of David so much as an impersonation of him. And it was long, tremendously long, a river of words. It felt as if David were alive as long as I spoke, so I kept going … (16).

The unfinished performance rambles on for forty-five minutes, until the intervention of Dornstein’s father brings it—and David’s attempt to forestall death through improvised and unending speech—to a halt. When these denials of death, the private communication carried out on the unused pages of the notebook and the more direct and public act of ventriloquism clearly fail, Dornstein retreats into a lexical silence. He neither writes in his brother’s notebooks, nor talks about him for years.

After eight years, Dornstein’s first impulse to keep death in abeyance through the written and spoken word, to ‘reverse, repair or undo the wrong,’[[9]](#endnote-9) takes on a different but no less critical cast. This time, a physical journey to Scotland becomes the means, not simply of keeping his brother close but of preventing his death. Still unable to acknowledge his brother’s death, he finds himself re-energised by the belief that a visit to Lockerbie ‘could still save David’s life’ (17). Travelling anonymously, Dornstein eschews any public acknowledgement of what for him is a private grief. As he speculates, ‘Maybe when someone you love dies among a mass of other people, you want some experience that feels singular, even if you have to manufacture it yourself’ (21). For this trip, which he conceives as a ‘mission,’ Dornstein adopts an ‘ethnographic approach’ (24) to the disaster. On his travels he collects the ephemera associated with the mundane life of the town, in a futile attempt at ‘defeating death with a grocery list’ (25). Eventually turning his attention to the crash itself, Dornstein contemplates, from a scientific perspective, the effect of the bomb blast on the plane and its passengers. Such a forensic examination of an event described as ‘a perfect choreography of ruination’ (31) also marks out the first section of his narrative, which is primarily concerned with ‘last things’. Yet, as Dornstein himself acknowledges, such a fixation with the place and manner of David’s death represents a means of refusing the more painful remembrance of his brother’s life:

Over the years, I had found a less painful way to miss my brother, by not missing him at all, just trying to document what happened to his body after a bomb exploded on his flight home. It was possible to occupy myself for years with the last things of David’s life without ever having to think much about David himself. (50)

In Lockerbie town, he is able to see for himself where his brother fell to earth and meets some of the people closely associated with the disaster. However, although such proximity does not enable him to comprehend the event, his visit does bring the crucial knowledge that, regardless of his efforts, David’s last moments can never be grasped: ‘I might come closer to the experience of those who died on Flight 103, but I will never arrive’ (46). His narrative is thus arrested by the impossibility of adequately representing his brother’s fall and a realisation that even his recourse to scientific reconstructions of the event cannot breach the gap: ‘There was no real connection between the way David had died and the way he had lived his life: even if some poetic interpretations suggested themselves; there was no meaning to a fall six miles down to the ground, just pain,’ (325).

Although this realisation—derived from forensic and scientific knowledge—suggests that Dornstein has come closer to admitting his brother’s death and even those aspects of it which can never be known, it does not signal an end to his disavowal. Instead, his denial takes another form. Since his brother cannot be located in Lockerbie, Dornstein assumes the role of a detective who must decipher the clues in order to solve the mystery of David’s whereabouts. This fantasy neatly dovetails with Dornstein’s new job as an assistant to a private investigator, in which he is often tasked with aiding the search for missing persons. This occupation inspires Dornstein’s interest in insurance, or more specifically, the history of accident faking. When he turns his research into a book it is clear that he is drawn both by the simulated injuries for which renumeration is falsely claimed as well as the wider question of whether an authentic injury can ever be adequately compensated.

Thus, Dornstein’s first publication, an academic study of the history of faked accidents in America, takes its impulse from a desire to construct a book: ‘as a kind of memorial to David. This was his dream, after all—writing a book and getting it published—and I would see it done for the both of us, the Dornstein boys finally making good’ (134). This project in turn forces Dornstein to acknowledge that his forays into the library, in pursuit of tomes that have been left unread for decades, represent an extended form of displacement, albeit in the guise of research. Even as he seeks out these ‘misplaced’ works, under the pretext of ‘saving these long-dead-and-gone souls from the ranks of the totally forgotten’ (135), he lacks the insight that will come to him only after his work is complete. His research, he comes eventually to understand, ‘really was about the most important forgotten writer on my shelf—David—but I never stopped to think about it this deeply.’

Before Dornstein is able to confront his brother’s loss and so acknowledge separation, he follows his brother’s trajectory—and that of David’s mythical counterpart—with a metaphorical, rather than literal fall. This occurs when he has almost completed his first book and is therefore poised to deviate from his brother’s path: ‘David had never crossed the line from the great things he had imagined to something he could actually point to—but I would’ (125). He has also renewed his uncertain relationship with ‘K’, his brother’s former girlfriend:

I carried my not-quite-finished manuscript of a book that was not quite what I had hoped it might be, and I was seated next to a woman who was not quite mine, and maybe never would be. It had been not quite a year since I passed David in age, and I was no longer on solid ground. I was the cartoon character who speeds off the cliff and just keeps going forward—feet moving, pedals turning, doing fine until, some distance out, he looks down.

My fall, like David’s, began at thirty-one thousand feet. (139)

In the collapse that follows, Dornstein returns to the ‘Dave Archive,’ now relocated to his new apartment, where, once again, he sets about his investigation of David’s life through his works. As he approaches this weighty corpus, he is ‘stung’ by a review of his own first book, in which the critic inadvertently identifies the problem shared by both brothers—verbal entrapment: ‘Dornstein gets buried under an avalanche of material he amassed’ (145). Ironically, it is precisely to avoid a repetition of this entombment that Dornstein returns to the archive. With a renewed determination, he studies these literary remains for the light they might shed on the lost brother and artist. While he no longer seeks to complete David’s work for him, Dornstein does take from the writings the materials which will ensure David has a voice in the narrative he will go on to compose. In this respect he also fulfils one of his brother’s desires, recorded in a letter: ‘*To be re-membered! Put back together from scattered parts. Organs, limbs regathered … to hold together over time …’* (155). Such retrieval not only saves something of David but also enables Dornstein to avoid the suffocating ‘avalanche’ this writing represents.

**Divergence**

For Dornstein, the aftermath of David’s death, so carefully delineated in *The Boy Who Fell out of the Sky,* involves a long and exhausting movement. It takes in a disavowal of death and a refusal of the separation it enforces, a detailed examination of who and what has been lost, and eventually, an acknowledgement of how grief itself transforms the one who mourns. In their account of ‘inexpressible mourning’, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok describe a process of encryption which is reminiscent of Dornstein’s response to his loss:

The words that cannot be uttered, the scenes that cannot be recalled, the tears that cannot be shed—everything will be swallowed along with the trauma that led to the loss. Inexpressible mourning erects a secret tomb inside the subject. Reconstituted from the memories of words, scenes, and affects, the objective correlative of the loss is buried alive in the crypt as a full-fledged person, complete with its own topography. The crypt also includes the actual or supposed traumas that made introjection impracticable. A whole world of unconscious fantasy is created, one that leads its own separate and concealed existence.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Yet while Dornstein’s account shows the many different ways in which such encryption is carried out, it also shows how decryption—the uncoupling of self from other—is also made possible. The means by which this is achieved, appropriately enough, given the centrality of the written word, to the lives of both brothers, is the composition and publication of *The Boy Who Fell Out of the Sky*. If, at the start of his journey, Dornstein is compelled by his trauma to refuse his loss, the text itself eventually becomes the repository—or crypt—which holds both David and the grief his absence has compelled. It functions as a memorial to David and testament to Dornstein’s grief at his loss. Although Dornstein struggles, like his brother before him, with the written word, the results are very different. Whereas David’s artistic impulses floundered in apparent misdirection and incompletion, Dornstein creates out of the fragments which make up the story of David’s life and death, a textual whole. At the same time, the cathartic potential the narrative embodies is augmented still further: its successful completion and publication confirms the divisions between the writing brothers.

Bound together by their shared childhood experiences, Dornstein is only partially witness to his brother’s creative and psychological struggles during the period in which David seeks to fashion his identity as a College student and apprentice writer. For his part, David’s attitude towards his younger brother combines a sense of solidarity with an increasingly overbearing stance. When he begins to doubt his own abilities and to relinquish his dream of literary celebrity, David tries to mentor his younger brother so that he will occupy the place of artistic genius in his stead. In this new drama, David casts himself as the ‘inspirational figure from somewhere in your past who helps you to where you’re going even if he doesn’t make it there himself’ (174). While the bond that exists between them allows for the younger brother to accommodate many of David’s demands, eventually he refuses such manoeuvres. A separation of the brothers—individuation rather than duplication—is set in motion by Dornstein’s refusal, finally, to perform the many roles his sometimes overbearing brother assigns him. Indeed, once Dornstein begins to assert his own autonomy, David is quick to recognise the signs of their division, which he notes as the *‘divergence I currently experience from my brother’s nature*’ (266). From this perspective, Dornstein’s grief and the text in which it is inscribed, recapitulate a process of fraternal doubling and, more crucially, divergence that began before David’s demise. Although it begins with a refusal of separation, thus arresting a process of differentiation already underway, it comes eventually to admit absence and division. This time, such differentiation marks a movement away from melancholia. It entails not only an acknowledgment of how the connection between the brothers has been violently severed through a callous act of terror but also an account of the trauma that results. For, as well as the event itself, *The Boy Who Fell Out of the Sky* is concerned with a radical transformation of the subject. As Judith Butler suggests:

Perhaps, rather, one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance. There is losing, as we know, but there is also the transformative effect of loss, and this latter cannot be charted or planned.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Whilst such a transformation cannot be ‘charted or planned’, as evidenced by Dornstein’s struggle to alight upon the correct form for his narrative, *The Boy Who Fell Out of the Sky* does bring together many generic forms to create a new kind of text. Far from constituting a simple attempt at scriptotherapy, its ‘fragments shored against ruin’ are drawn from multiple sources, including detection, science, elegy, testimony, art, literature, memoir, the *kunstlerroman*, meditation, confession and not least, biography. What is more, its publication and the positive critical reception which followed suggest that even though fulfils David’s predictions for his brother it achieves this end. In this respect, it carries as well as eclipses the fallen boy.

In one of his recollections of his brother, Dornstein ponders a photograph taken shortly before David’s death. This image becomes an object of desire for those left behind, for whom it provides a visual confirmation of their understanding of his death:

A few months later, these would be the photos that everyone wanted. David’s bronzed body and flowing curls seemed to tell the whole story: Beautiful boy cut down in his youth. (279)

For Dornstein, however, this image represents something other than it would appear. He knows that the ‘bronzed body’, has been burnt by the sun after David fell asleep on a beach ‘reading *Tristram Shandy’*, and that the damage done almost required his hospitalization. From his perspective, the image does not tell the ‘whole story’, although it does satisfy a collective desire for David’s death to cohere. In writing *The Boy Who Fell out of the Sky: A True Story*, Dornstein is himself drawn to the tale of youthful hubris that the Icarus myth bespeaks. In so doing, his narrative both describes the tragic arc of that myth while, at the same time, resisting its gravitational force.

1. David L. Eng, and David Kazanjian, ed. *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley, CA.: University of California

   Press, 2003) 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Claire Sutherland, “Review,” *Herald Sun* (*Australia*), April 15, 2006, p. W.25 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004) 21-22. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, Theory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. *Unclaimed Experience, 7*. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ken Dornstein, *The Boy Who Fell Out of the Sky: A True Story* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 2007) 15. All subsequent references are to this edition with page numbers in parenthesis included in the main body of the text. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Marcia Cavell, “Keeping time: Freud on the Temporality of Mind,” *The Analytic Freud: Philosophy and Psychoanalysis,* ed. Michael P. Levine (London and New York: Routledge, 1999) 95. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Sandra Gilbert, “Writing Wrong,” *Extremities, Trauma, Testimony, Community*, ed. Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002) 261. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, “Mourning and Melancholia,” *The Shell and the Kernel,* Vol. 1,ed. and trans*.* Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 130. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. *Precarious Lives,* 21.

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    **Sutherland, Claire. “Review.” *Herald Sun* (*Australia*). April 15, 2006. W.25. Print.** [↑](#endnote-ref-11)