In the spring of 1846, Nancy Dorsey of Piqua, Ohio, sent a letter to her sister vividly describing the death of her infant daughter and her struggle to come to terms with her loss. A transcription and scan of the original letter follow this page.

All are welcome to a panel discussion of this emotional letter, the universal experiences of death and grief, and healing after a loss.

Join in the conversation together with grief counselors, historians, and local community members. Peer counselors from GrieveWell, a local nonprofit that supports people in grief, will be on hand as we explore these topics and the emotions they raise.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 20  12-1:30pm
VIRTUAL MEETING

Please register online (myumi.ch/Lqoje) or call 734-649-3370.
Contemporary Issues Discussion Series
Death and Grief
October 20, 2021
Virtual Zoom Meeting

The William L. Clements Library collects and preserves primary source materials for the study of
American history, makes them available for research, and supports the investigation of our nation's past.

The letter transcribed below comes from our Women's History Collection, which is comprised of
individual letters, documents, and other handwritten items related to women, predominantly from the 19th
and early 20th century. Nancy McCorkle Dorsey was around 28 or 29 years old when she wrote this letter
to her sister Mary Jane McDonald. She updated Mary on her health, the health of her mother, and their
sister's recent motherhood. She also vividly described the death of her 0-3 month-old daughter Lucretia
and her struggle with grief. The passages reflecting on her loss begin near the end of page two of the
letter.

Note: In the following transcription, punctuation and capitalization have been revised to assist the reader.
Images of the original letter follow the transcription.

Nancy Dorsey's letter to her sister, Mary Jane McDonald; Piqua, Ohio, March 1846:

[Page 1]
Piqua March 1846
My dear sister

For the last three weeks I have intended
writing to you, every day something would prevent. Untill
all this last week, I have been unable by a very
obstinate pain in my breast & side, or rather soreness in
my breast. I have worn a tartar plaister\(^1\) for the last
4 days & nights, which has relieved the soreness in some
measure but not entirely. I will have to have a blister\(^2\)
applied to my side to-morrow, unless it is better
in the morning. I think my side was strained
or injured last Sunday week by lifting little Mary.\(^3\)
I felt very sick with acute pain for some time
but it passed off[f] thro' the day & I forgot all

\(^1\) Medicinal tartar spread on a bandage and applied to the skin.
\(^2\) Topical medicine applied to the skin to raise blisters, possibly with the intent of reducing inflammation.
\(^3\) Mary Louise Dorsey was Nancy's 2-3 year-old daughter.
about it until a few days ago. On Monday morning about 4 o'clock I awakened with severe pain & every symptom of Pleurisy\(^4\) for which the Doctor treated me with entire success, for I was well enough to go at 10 o'clock to hear Dr Rice preach. But it returned next morning as bad as ever & has continued so every day, about the same time in the morning. It is discouraging but I hope it will [not] return again so severely as the tartar has made my breast very sore which ought to draw the pain away. I am very anxious to get better on Sarah's\(^5\) account as she is looking every day to be sick and is so distressed about my not being able to be with her. Mother\(^6\) has been sick to[o], taken with what I expect will likely be her death, something like an apoplectic fit.\(^7\) She became nearly blind & was so for nearly two hours. Every minute she thought it would pass off but finally her feet, hands & almost her whole body became cold & her head very hot. She sent for Godwin\(^8\) who fortunately was in the house. He went & bled her\(^9\) as soon as he could get her into bed with mustard to her feet & ice to her head.

[Page 2]

It was some time before she could see very well. He kept her in bed all day, giving her active medicine. She soon got better but has not yet recovered. Her

\(^4\) Sharp, stabbing chest pain, especially when breathing.
\(^5\) Nancy's sister, Sarah.
\(^6\) Nancy's mother, Margaret McCorkle.
\(^7\) A sudden neurological malady; "apoplectic fit" may refer to a stroke.
\(^8\) Nancy's husband, Godwin Dorsey, a physician.
\(^9\) Bleeding was a medical procedure used from antiquity through the 19th century, in which physicians attempted to cure ailments by removing blood to balance the body's "humors" (yellow and black bile, phlegm, and blood).
head did not feel right. Her neck has been well blistered & she lives very low, nothing but crackers & hot water or very weak tea. It is reducing her to about half her size & will be the only way to keep those fits from returning. Godwin says if she had went a half hour longer she would have had a real apoplectic fit. It alarmed us all when we found how bad she was. Sarah had gone home to stay untill she was over her confinement.10 She is now grieving because she had moved, for you know Mother will always be on the move when any thing like that is going on the excitement or if Sarah should not get along well will be very injurious to her. Mother would have her home on her own account, as she was not able or willing to be with her or do much for her in an other person's house—besides, their family was so large, if Sally [i.e. Sarah] had been housekeeping it would have been different, poor thing she laments all the time that such is not the case, as her & John would both feel better in their own house. He dont feel at home at Mother's nor she at his Father's. How I wish it was over, it seems I could bear it better if it was myself. She does not know what she has to bear. But if we have such excruciating bodily agony in bearing a little mortal into this world, it is far greater anguish, to see the little immortal take its never-returning flight, to see its little spirit striving to be gone, to see the stretching limb

--- Death and grief passage begins

10 The following sentences are confusing, but they appear to regard Sarah and her husband John moving between their parents' households during Sarah's "confinement" (the period immediately preceding and during childbirth, and postpartum recovery).
the heaving heart, the faint cry, Oh sister sister
it is agony such as you have never yet been called
to bear. It seems as if my heart will burst when

[Page 3]
its dying hours in all their freshness return to my
mind.\(^{11}\) As its illness was severe & short, its last
moments were dreadful. Oh how much it suffered is known
only to God, but it was a long contest. It was from 4 o'clock
untill after six in the agonies of death, every breath
it drew I prayed may be the last. Its little arms
were often thrown over its head, while every feature
would be distorted untill we would think its
little frame would be torn in pieces, & untill
the last breath, it sent out a feeble cry, what a
struggle. It seemed to me angels were hovering
oe'r it, waiting & witnessing the scene, waiting to
carry the pure soul to God who gave it. You cannot
imagine what I felt, that in a moment more
my precious babe who was so dear to my heart,
so sweet, so interesting would soon know more
than all the learned, the great, good, or wise
it left here on earth, nevermore to feel a pang
or shed a tear. It made me feel how selfish,
how wicked it was to wish to keep it here, when
Jesus loved it as well as I, & could be far more
tender, far more kind. But as he wept at the tomb
of his friends, so does he allow us to weep for the loved
& the lost—not lost, but gone to await our coming.

\(^{11}\) Nancy's loss was very recent; she wrote this letter within 0-3 months after the birth and death of her daughter
Lucretia Walker Dorsey.
But Mary, how desolate seems my room, my bed, my arms, my heart. It almost overcomes my better feelings sometimes. I long to press again those sweet lips, to inhale her sweet breath & to see her little outstretched arms & sparkling eyes. When I had left her for a while she was exceedingly attached to me for two months before her death & was not contented with any one else except her father & of course she was in my arms almost constantly. You will judge how much I feel the void. But I do desire to feel that God in his righteous judgment has done all things well, & only may I be prepared by His Holy Spirit for an entrance into that blessed abode where she is now forever praising God is all I desire. Sometimes I have thought that this present sickness may be the beginning of my last sickness on earth—we never know how any illness will end. I do desire to feel that I love my Savior more & more & have the witness of the Spirit witnessing unto my spirit that I am a child of God. Oh sister will you not pray that I may have brighter evidence a more confident hope that I am indeed brought from death unto life? I am afraid sometimes that I have not true religion, that the hypocrite's part will be mine. That Christ will at last cast me off. You always seem so calm & firm in your faith & views, have you ever any doubts or fears? Often I think perhaps my Father in Heaven has given me as much as he sees fit, perhaps I am longing for what would make me to[o] confident or make me trust in my own strength too much. All I do at such times is to pray Lord I believe help thou my unbelief.
But sister do pray for me as you pray for your own soul.
My paper is out & I am not half done. But I
have written in much pain tartar is very severe.

[Page Margins]:

The children all send their love to yours. Give mine & Godwins
to your husband. We reed. his kind & affectionate letter. Write soon.

If I get better I will write again soon, as soon as Sarah
is confined in particular. Your affectionate sister Nancy

Dear Mary I feel much better this morning. I wrote this letter on
Sunday, for I felt so very bad that it was not unlikely I should
have been confined to my bed, so I could not keep from writing.

Dr Rice's preaching was blessed by the Spirit to the awakening
of number[s] to their sins—nearly all the Young family,
the old man A[ ] & all the girls, Elliot's two daughters & many
others. They still continue to hold meeting[s].

Great numbers have been contverted in the
Methodist Church W. Leawell, Mrs Hart Collin & John,
Jordon, Matilda, Mitchell & many more. Mary Dayton
was baptized in our Church on Sunday last.

Mother is better.

[Address]:
Mrs Mary Jane McDonald
Care of Rev D. K. McDonald
Cincinnati
Ohio
In the last three weeks I have intended writing to you every day something would prevent me till all this last week, I have been unable by a very obstrucive pain in my head & sides, or rather some very severe pain in my side. I have worn a bandage for the last 4 days & nights, which has relieved the pressure of some measure but not entirely. I must have to have a blister applied to my side. As-Moreover, unless it is better in the morning I think my side was stretched or injured last Sunday by lifting little Mary. I felt very sick with acute pain for sometime but it passed off the 2nd day & I forgot all about it till 4 or 5 days ago & Monday morning about 10 o'clock. I awoke with severe pain & every symptom of Perjury for which Dr. Doe treated me with rational means, & I was well enough to go out to talk to hear & be feeds but it returned next morning as bad as ever. It has continued so every day about the same time in the morning it is discouraging but I hope it will return again so severely as it has before, has made my breast very sore which ought to draw the pain away. I am very, very anxious to get better you know & account as she is looking every day to be sick and is so disappointed about my not being able to be with her. Mother has been sick to take it with what I am about will likely be her death something like an apoplexy yet she became merry. I spent 2 of the two hours every minute the thought it would pass off but finally the great hands I almost be whole body became cold. I had very hot I sent for Barnie. Fortunately she in the house he went & took her as soon as he could get him into bed with mustard to her feet & ice to her head.
Page 2: Nancy Dorsey's letter to her sister, Mary Jane McDonald; Piqua, Ohio, March 1846.

It was some time before she could see very well. She kept her in bed all day giving her active medicine. She never got better, but has not yet recovered. Her head did not feel tight. Her neck has been very blistered & she has never done nothing but sweat from the heat & from the hot water or sea salt. So it is reducing her to about half her size. I will be the only way to help those fits from returning. Doctor says if the 's got a half hour longer she would have had a real apoplectic fit. It alarmed us all when we found how bad she was. Sarah had gone home to stay until she was over her confinement & she is now giving. Because she had moved for you. Now Mother will always be on the move when any thing like that is going on the excitement or if 's back should not get along well will be very injurious to her. Mother should have her own house on her own account as she was not able or willing to be with her or do much for her in another person's house besides the family was so large & they had been house keeping it would have been different. Poor thing she hasn't to all the time that she is not the case. As she & 's could both feel better in their own houses. He don't feel at home at 's nor she at Father's. how I wish it was over it second I could bear it better if it was myself. She does not know what she has to bear. But if we have such a great God to us an agency in being a little mortal in this world, it ain't so great anymore, to see the little moments take its never returning flight, to see a little spirit striving to be done, to see the throbbing limb of the hearing heart, the faint cry, The sister sister love she is agony such as you have never yet been called to bear, it seems as if my heart will bust when my
its dying hour in all their freshness to my mind, as it always was before. Its last moments were dreadful, Oh! it suffered is known only to God, but it was long contest it was from 3 o'clock till after 7 o'clock in the agonies of death, every breath it drew I prayed it to last, its little arms were often thrown over its head, while every feature would be distorted until we would think its little frame would be torn in pieces. In the last breath, it sent out a feeble cry. I thought it to be as the angels were hovering about it waiting to carry the pure soul to God Who gave it, you cannot imagine what I felt that in a moment more my precious babe who was so dear to my heart was lost so interesting. Would have been more than all the known the great goods of this world it left here on earth, necessary to feel a pang or shed a tear, it made me feel how selfish and how wicked it was to wish to keep it Here when Jesus loved it as well as I. It could be far more tender far more kind, but as he wept at the tomb of his friends so does he allow us to work for the loved one lost, not lost but gone to await one coming. But may how absolute seems my room, my bed, my arms, my heart; it almost overcomes any better feelings. Sometimes I long to preach again those sweet lips to inhale her sweet breath, to see her little outstretched arms and sparkling eyes when I had left her for a while she was exceedingly attached to me for two months before her death it was not contented with any one else except her father of course she was in my arms almost constantly you will judge how much I felt the void, but I do desire to feel that God in his righteous judgment has done all things well, only may I be prepared by this Holy Sheet for an entrance.
I am afraid sometimes that I have not been as obedient as the Holy Ghost would have me be. I have always been so calm and firm in my faith. I believe you have every confidence in me. I think perhaps my Father in Heaven has given me as much as He sees fit, perhaps I am longing for what would make me more confident or make me trust in my own strength too much. All I do at such times is to pray to God. I believe half those my inability but sister do pray for me as you pray for your own soul. My paper is out & I am not half done. But I had written in much pain too and it is very uneven.