

SPECTER

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This dissertation is a collection of poems preceded by a critical preface. The preface considers the major changes within the elegy from the traditional English elegy—the touchstone poems for this genre being Milton’s “Lycidas,” Shelley’s “Adonais,” and Tennyson’s “In Memoriam”—to the contemporary elegy and argues that many of these changes showcase contemporary elegists’ active refusal and reversal of the time-honored traditions of the form. The preface is divided into an introduction and three sections, each of which recognizes and explores one significant alteration—or reversal—to the conventions of the form as established by early English elegists. The first discusses the traditional elegiac tradition of consolation in which the speaker, after displaying a series of emotions in reaction to the death of a loved one, ultimately finds comfort in the knowledge that the deceased lives eternally in heaven. This convention is contrasted with a common contemporary rhetorical movement in which the speaker not only lacks comfort by the end of the poem, but often refuses any kind of consolation, preferring instead to continue his grief. The second recognizes and explores the traditional elegiac tradition in which the speaker, listing the virtues of the beloved, replaces the real, historical person with a symbol which represents what society has lost due to this death. This convention is contrasted against a common contemporary theme in which the speaker, in an attempt to evoke authenticity, portrays the deceased subject not as a romanticized symbol, but as a real human being. The final section discusses the definition of the traditional elegy as a reaction to the literal death of a loved one and contrasts this with the more fluid contemporary understanding of the elegy as a poem about loss—either a literal or metaphorical death—and a poem which need not display conventional aspects of mourning but rather a wide variety of responses to the problem of loss.

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Pleiades: A Journal of New Writing: “The Death of a Gulf Coast Town”
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PART I

GIVE ME THEM BACK AS THEY WERE, INSTEAD, / WITH FAULTS AND ALL, I CRIED:
REFUSAL AND REVERSAL OF TRADITION WITHIN THE CONTEMPORARY ELEGY

Introduction

In “Elegiac,” Stanley Plumly asserts that “everything an elegy is supposed to have” can be condensed into two simple elements: “a death” and “a response to that death” (31). Though there certainly needs to be a clear understanding of what has been lost, the purpose of the elegy has always been to depict the second part of Plumly’s definition: a “response” to the loss. This is what makes an elegy an elegy; it is the human reaction to death, the act of mourning. Over the past several centuries, elegists have adopted a set of conventions, fundamental rhetorical moves within their poems which serve to illustrate the emotional turmoil which comes in the wake of loss—what are now referred to as the “stages of grief”—and depict what exactly mourning should look like in verse. But for many contemporary elegists, these conventions—which were employed for several centuries—are no longer adequate to represent their experience of mourning. Many contemporary elegists seem to represent the grieving process not only differently than traditional elegists, but often in a way that refuses—and even reverses—the time-honored conventions of the form. The reason for this change is likely due to a number of factors including a movement from a religious-based society—one that ensures life after death—to a secular society which cannot make that same promise, as well as a new and modern understanding of life and death which comes in the wake of modern tragedies such as World Wars I and II and the Holocaust, in which lives were lost by the millions and, perhaps, individual life began to seem less precious and more expendable. But perhaps the most significant reason for the movement away from the conventions of the elegy and toward a more flexible understanding of how one can respond to death in a poem has to do with a change in audience. Traditionally, elegies were public poems, written by the poet to express a grief that was shared

by a community. Because of this public aspect, the elegy took on a ceremonial tone; as the poet read his work, the audience could share in their collective reaction to the death of the poem's subject as well as death in general. Over the past century, however, the elegy has become less about public ritual and more about the individual poet. The act of mourning in verse, then, is no longer a ceremonial act, but rather one that depicts a private psychology, a personal—and thus idiosyncratic—response to death.

In *The Making of a Poem*, Mark Strand and Evan Boland identify the elegy as a “shaping form,” which, as opposed to verse forms such as the sonnet, ballad, and villanelle, relies purely on sense rather than sound, creating for the poem its “environment” rather than its “architecture” (165). Strand and Boland agree with Plumly's definition of the elegiac form, recognizing that, in terms of sense, the elegy must present a response to death, but they delve deeper into the history of the form to specify what exactly this response has entailed for centuries. They identify three crucial elements which are present within the traditional elegy: the speaker “mourns for a dead person, lists his or her virtues, and seeks consolation beyond the momentary event” (167). Indeed, in traditional English elegies such as Milton's “Lycidas” and Shelley's “Adonais,” the speaker, often taking on the persona of a shepherd, bemoans the loss of a close friend, extols his merits, and, ultimately, achieves some kind of solace, usually finding comfort in the knowledge that the loved one, while gone from the earth, now resides in heaven eternally, and thus, has triumphed over death. “So Lycidas sunk low but mounted high,” Milton's speaker asserts in the final lines of “Lycidas” (172). Though he has drowned and thus lies “beneath the watery floor” (171), Lycidas' soul—his true essence—is not dead, but instead rejoices with the saints in heaven who “sing, and singing in their glory move, / And wipe the tears for ever from his eyes.” Therefore, as Lycidas has overcome death, so too does the speaker overcome his grief, vowing

that he will “weep no more” for his lost friend who can no longer be touched by earthly sorrow and pain (180-182). Likewise, in Shelley’s “Adonais,” written in response to Keats’ death from tuberculosis in 1821, the speaker is able to find comfort after a prolonged period of mourning when his deceased friend’s soul is seen not as a lifeless corpse, but rather “burning through the inmost veil of Heaven.” The speaker takes comfort in knowing that Adonais has triumphed over death and now dwells in the heavens “like a star” that “Beacons from the abode where the eternal are” (493-495).

Though the speakers in traditional elegies do find a sense of peace and healing, this ultimate consolation by no means comes easily, and, in fact, it is the extended emotional journey which leads to consolation that serves to shape a poem into the traditional elegiac form. As Peter Sacks recognizes in *The English Elegy*, the conventional elegy portrays the complicated process of grief with all the emotional stages that come between initial shock and final healing. The traditional elegist must, then, enact the “work of mourning,” a term which Sacks borrows from Freud (1). The conventions exhibited within the elegy—many of which Sacks lists in his book—serve to showcase these different emotional stages, which take place during the long and difficult process of grieving. The traditional elegiac speaker, for example, frequently utilizes repetition and refrain, enacting denial and the need to be assured that the loved one is, in fact, really dead. There is also usually a shift from denial to anger, which leads to a period of rage in which the speaker curses his predicament and expresses a need for vengeance. Similar to the reiteration found within the denial phase, the speaker often utilizes repetition when expressing his anger, which frequently comes in the form of repeated questions—usually directed at the god or gods whom the speaker feels are responsible for the loved one’s death. Through these questions, the elegist expresses a need to blame someone for the death of the loved one, and often for death in

general. As Sacks notes, the underlying question in these passages seems to be a desperate “Why will no-one or nothing save us from this death?” (22). These common elements—as well as many other elegiac conventions recognized by Sacks—serve to enact what both Sacks and Freud refer to as “healthy mourning,” in which the speaker withdraws himself from the lost object—in this case, the dead person—and experiences “a reattachment of affection to a substitute or symbol of that object”—for the elegist, this “symbol” is the poem itself (Sacks 6). As D.A. Powell asserts in “The Elegy’s Structures,” “Talking against death, the [elegy] continues—as a living entity—to inhabit the space once occupied by the beloved” (85). The “work of mourning” is showcased throughout the elegy, and the finished product—the poem—becomes an artifact which replaces the lost love and, if successful, becomes immortal, and thus immune to the fate of the beloved.

Modern and contemporary elegists, however, seem to recognize a fundamental problem which comes with the idea of “healthy mourning.” As Jahan Ramazani argues in *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy To Heaney*, Sacks’ model of successful or “healthy” grief is inadequate in the 20th and 21st centuries where modern warfare, industrialization, urbanization, and the shift from faith in religion to faith in science have made for a more skeptical society. In this modern era, “we need elegies that, while imbued with grief, can hold up to the acid suspicions of the moment” (2). Ramazani argues that because of these suspicions, modern and contemporary elegists tend “not to achieve but to resist consolation, not to override anger but to sustain it, not to heal but reopen wounds of loss” (3). In other words, contemporary elegists strive for the exact opposite end-point that traditional elegists reach: they do not achieve any kind of peace or relief in the aftermath of death. Though not every modern and contemporary elegist actively resists consolation—Seamus Heaney’s work being a notable

exception to Ramanzani's assertion—this is certainly the dominant mode of 20th and 21st century elegies, and one which serves to reverse one of the fundamental practices of the traditional elegy. But, interestingly enough, a movement from grief to comfort is not the only traditional elegiac element which has been rejected by poets throughout the past century. Due to a desire for a more accurate representation of grief, one which represents an individual, inward response to death rather than a community ritual, two of the necessary elements—identified by Strand and Boland—which constitute the traditional English elegy are actively refused and one is altered significantly by modern and contemporary elegists. No longer must the speaker move from pain to healing. No longer must he list the merits of the beloved, turning the deceased into a “symbol” to replace the real, lost person in an act of “healthy mourning.” And though the elegist certainly still mourns the loss of something, this mourning does not need to be in response to the death of a close friend, lover, or family member—or even the literal death of a person. Instead, modern and contemporary elegists recognize that there are many different forms of death and many different reactions to loss. The process of grieving, then, can take on varying shapes depending on the particular situation and the pain of loss does not present itself in one “successful” way, as is suggested by the dominant rhetorical moves of the traditional elegy. Just as death does not elicit the same response in every person who loses someone or something he holds dear, so too does the “work of mourning” differ significantly from person to person and situation to situation.

I Had Not Been Here Then: Refusing Consolation

Perhaps the most significant change from the traditional elegy to modern and contemporary elegies is not only the absence of consolation or respite from sorrow by the end of the poem, but often the elegist's refusal to reach that place of ultimate healing. It is not just that the poet speaker cannot find comfort, but that he actively resists it. This might be, in large part, due to what Larry Levis recognizes as "the guilt of surviving," in which the poet recognizes, with a sense of shame, that "so and so is dead, and [I] am alive" (96). In "To Bhain Campbell," John Berryman exemplifies, in just five short lines, the way in which the contemporary elegist often refuses consolation in the aftermath of heartbreaking loss:

I told a lie once in a verse. I said
I said I said I said "The heart will mend,
Body will break and mend, the foam replace
For even the unconsolable his taken friend."
This is a lie. I had not been here then.

Here, the speaker argues that one cannot—and should not—claim to understand the pain of losing a loved one until he has experienced it first-hand. Though his younger, more naïve self wrote of loss—asserting that after grief comes healing, as most traditional elegies argue—his older, more experienced self knows differently. But the speaker adds to the sense of guilt and overwhelming sorrow by blaming himself for his naiveté. Rather than stating that he didn't understand the realities of loss and the severity of heartache which he now comprehends, he recognizes his previous assertion that "The heart will mend" as "a lie" (1-2), making this falsehood an intentional act rather than the result of youthful ignorance. In other words, he

recognizes that he had no authority to make the claim that one can overcome the death of a loved one because this is, in fact, not true. He does not simply argue that his experience of death is different and more traumatic than others' experiences of a similar event, but rather that anyone who states that one can heal after a tragedy of this nature is lying. More importantly, he distinguishes his act from simply talking about the aftermath of a death. Rather, this is a lie he told "in a verse." The fact that his assertion came in the form of a poem somehow adds to its consequence as well as its permanence: he does not claim that the poem "was a lie," but rather, that it "is a lie," as if his words cannot be recanted, but live on. Indeed, readers have been taught to understand the elegy as "a living entity" (Powell 85), a piece of art that, if successful, can become a symbol that replaces the beloved and allows him to live on after death. As Shakespeare claims in "Sonnet 55," when a poem about a person is read and memorized, it becomes "a living record" of that person, which allows him to do what he could not do in life: "'Gainst death and all oblivious enmity / Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room, / Ev'n in the eyes of all posterity" (8-11). However, though Berryman seems to accept the idea of the "living nature" of the form, he recognizes this as a negative aspect rather than a positive aspect, as what is being perpetuated by the form is not a "living record" of the deceased's memory, but rather a harmful "lie" that gives false hope to those in crisis, promising something which is, in fact, not attainable. By referring to this lie as "in a verse," Berryman is also speaking directly to the tradition of the elegy and its inability to provide an authentic representation of grief. The speaker was attempting to represent a reaction death within the tradition of the elegy, and though he promised consolation, as many traditional elegies do, he found that this response to death did not match his own personal experience. In other words, the tradition failed him, and he was left with "a lie." He further adds to the characterization of his past self as ignorant—and even arrogant—by

noting that he repeatedly asserted this lie: “I said / I said, I said, I said.” Not only does this poem almost mock the oft-used element of repetition within traditional elegies, but the stark contrast in length paired with the decisive, simplistic tone of the poem, seems to speak against the declarations of healing present in so many well-known elegies of centuries past. Traditionally, the elegy is “a poem of considerable length” and one which dwells “with some melancholic grandeur on feelings of regret” (Parini 129). The speaker in *Lycidas* mourns for 193 lines, while Shelley’s lament for Keats in “*Adonais*” is 495 lines in length. After all, a person cannot mourn the death of a loved one quickly. It is also important to note that because of the elegy’s traditional role as a public lament, this “melancholic grandeur” added to the ceremonial tone of the poem. But rather than using artifice and elevated language to perpetuate “a lie,” Berryman’s speaker asserts his truth in 5 lines of stripped-down plain-style. For Berryman, the traditional elegiac convention of overcoming one’s grief is not an accurate portrayal of his experience. He knows now that the heart will, in fact, *not* mend and he will *not* find solace after losing his friend. He says that he was naïve when he thought differently because he “had not been here then” (5). Now that he has experienced first-hand the loss of someone he cares for, he does not hope for peace or comfort because he knows that neither are possible. This poem, like so many contemporary elegies, becomes an almost anti-elegy, refusing the defining elements of the tradition in order to strive for a more honest depiction of loss than what the traditional form offers. Berryman takes this criticism of traditional elegiac portrayals of the mourning process a step further in “*Epilogue*,” where he not only recognizes his inability to heal after the death of a loved one—in this poem, the subject remains unnamed—but also the futility of any attempt to express his sorrow. Rejecting the tradition of the elegy altogether, Berryman’s speaker does not

attempt to find solace or even to express his unrelenting anguish in words, as he ends the poem with a stark resignation: “Nouns, verbs do not exist for what I feel” (6).

Dylan Thomas, writing two decades before Berryman, recognized a similar inadequacy of the written word to achieve a sense of solace in the face of death. In “A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London,” Thomas notably breaks with elegiac conventions, both in terms of the subject of the poem—this is an unnamed child and presumably one whom the speaker never met—as well as the resolution. Responding to the child, who died as a result of firebombings in London by the German soldiers during World War II, Thomas’ speaker refuses not only to overcome the grief he feels at the loss of this innocent person, but to even attempt to put his suffering into words in hopes of healing. He resists the act of mourning altogether, as is apparent in the title, knowing that the process will not lead to any kind of peace or understanding. Rather than attempting to express his grief using the conventions of the elegy, he reverses the tradition altogether, vowing to never “mourn // The majesty and burning of the child’s death” and claiming that any attempt to create “an elegy of innocence and youth” would only “blaspheme down the stations of breath” (12-18). Thomas’ speaker witnesses the impersonal attitude of the natural world, noting the “unmourning water / of the riding Thames,” which, like the rest of nature, continues its cycles and movements, oblivious to the tragedy (22-23). Though this realization depicts a certain coldness inherent in the natural world, Thomas feels a kinship with the river—which also refuses to mourn the loss of the child—and recognizes that the child is just one of countless others who have died before her, as she lies now “Deep with the first dead” (19). Similar to Berryman’s simple and unadorned tone in “To Bhain Campbell,” Thomas’ speaker ends the poem by stating, “After the first death, there is no other” (24). Literally, of course, he is speaking about the child he names “London’s daughter”—once a

person has died, he cannot die again—but this statement also makes a profound argument about those left behind to experience the sorrow of loss. After one experiences the death of a loved one—or, in the case of this poem, a death which affects him deeply, even without knowing the child personally—he will never heal and return to the way he was before this loss. Like the child, the mourner’s innocence is lost forever, and the part of him who perhaps believed that, as Berryman writes, “The heart will mend,” has died with the loved one. Thomas’ speaker refuses to mourn because he recognizes the inadequacy of this emotional process to lead to anything other than further suffering. Unlike the elegists of the previous centuries, Thomas recognizes an inherent futility in the elegy itself, knowing it will not bring comfort or healing.

In a series of elegies written for his late wife, the poet Jane Kenyon, Donald Hall also confronts his unwillingness to heal after the loss of his beloved. In “The Wish,” the speaker, with heartbreaking self-awareness, understands that his wife’s “ghost” is “weary” and wants to be laid to rest, but he cannot bring himself to find peace, as this would mean letting her go, a second loss which he cannot endure. Not only does the word “ghost” suggest the wife’s presence as unpleasant—a haunting—but the word “weary” implies that she does not want to be “kept” by the speaker at all. Hall’s speaker knows that his continued suffering is for himself and not for his lost love, but he cannot bear the thought of losing all that he has left of her: his grief. Though his wife cries “Oh, let me go” over and over and tells him that by continuing to suffer, he cannot “undo / the grief that you / weep” (5-7), he still holds on to his pain and continues to “keep her weary ghost inside” of him (2). The ghost of his lost spouse serves to articulate what is, in fact, his own internal voice, that which he knows subconsciously, but cannot face. The ghost confronts him, telling him that he only wants to keep her “deep in your dark” in order to “perpetuate my dying” (3-4). By reliving the death over and over, the speaker knows he will

never find peace or healing, and thus, will not forget—and thus abandon—the woman he loves. Though he is not truly living, but rather “enduring” the day, each night he sleeps only “to watch her dying reenacted” (11). Rather than seeking a sense of comfort and relief, as traditional elegists do, Hall’s speaker begins to fear an eventual recovery from his anguish, as her body begins to “grow smaller” and “Her face recedes, her kiss grows colder” (17-18). This depicts not only a refusal, but a reversal of the elegiac form. Instead of welcoming this vision of possible relief, the speaker ends the poem saying, “I hear you cry, as I reach to hold her, / ‘Oh, let me go’” (23-24). In stark contrast to traditional elegists, who, in their healing, welcome “fresh woods, and pastures new” after a period of “successful mourning,” (“Lycidas” 193), Hall’s speaker falls in line with many modern and contemporary elegists, whose speakers’ view healing as a kind of affront to the beloved and who fear that by finding solace, their love is somehow proven to be fickle or untrue. Therefore, in “perpetuating” the death of the loved one— by refusing any kind of healing—the lost love can live on, if only in the suffering of those left behind.

Not Nobler, Just There: A Movement from Symbolism to Realism

Though the understanding of the elegiac craft as futile and the wish for a mourning which does not succumb to healing are relatively new dilemmas facing elegists throughout the last century, one fundamental difficulty inherent in the form—both traditional and contemporary—is the problem that comes with taking a loss which is so significant to the individual mourner, the poet, and allowing that pain to resonate with any and all who read the poem, when, clearly, the subject was unknown to most readers during his life. One important aspect of the traditional English elegy is that “the grief the poet expresses is rarely a private one,” but rather it is “a cultural grief” in which “the lamented and lost subject” is “shown to be possessed of social virtues” (Boland 167-168). Because of the need to show the subject’s death as having cultural significance, rather than simply personal significance for the speaker, often the actual human being is lost and is instead replaced by a symbol, one which society as a whole can relate to and mourn. Rather than simply showing what the speaker himself has lost due to this person’s death, the poet must show what society has lost. Peter Sacks recognizes this necessary move from real person to loaded symbol, arguing that one of the most fundamental practices of the traditional English elegy involves the listing of the beloved’s virtues, which, in turn, transforms him from a real, historical person to an idealized figure, a symbol which represents not only what the speaker has lost due to the death of this person, but what the community has lost as well. The beloved often becomes a kind of paragon of society, someone who embodies the virtues that everyone in the community should strive to attain.

In “Lycidas,” Milton’s speaker states, “For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime, / Young Lycidas, and hath not left his peer” (8-9). Lycidas, who has no “peer” and thus cannot be

replaced or regained, is not only a loss for the speaker, but for all who are denied the chance to know him and be transformed by his virtuous nature. Lycidas, a shepherd like the speaker himself, can no longer feed his flock—a metaphor with obvious religious connotations, especially because Edward King, the subject of Milton’s poem, was studying to be a priest when he drowned. The speaker describes those who could have been touched by Lycidas in life, relating them to his sheep which are now left untended: “The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed, / But swollen with wind and the rank mist they draw / Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread” (125-127). Because King has died, those who could have been under his care will now be left “hungry” and diseased because King was what Milton claims is now a rarity: an uncorrupted clergyman. Throughout the poem, Lycidas is transformed from a drowned shepherd to a heroic, spiritualized protector of the people, a Christ figure. But through this transformation, the readers lose the actual man, Edward King, as he becomes a symbol for much needed virtuous and honorable people in an otherwise corrupt world. Similarly, in Tennyson’s “In Memorium,” Arthur Henry Hallam is transformed from the Hallam of history, the actual person whom Tennyson knew and loved, to the Hallam of faith, a symbol of goodness and honor who serves almost as an embodiment of God himself. Tennyson states that the man he “held as half-divine” (XIV, 10) was a source of faith for many who knew him:

we saw

The God within him light his face,

And seem to lift the form, and glow

In azure orbits heavenly-wise (LXXXVII 35-38)

There is a sense throughout the poem that Hallam had become a source of faith for people when the traditional source of faith—Christianity—had lost its power. Hallam himself becomes a Christ-figure who embodies God on earth. Tennyson writes that Hallam was “thrice as large as man,” suggesting that he was not simply human, but almost divine and was, in fact, looked at this way my many (CIII, 42).

This transformation from the beloved as real, actual human being, to a symbol for what has been lost by society due to the person’s death, is something that Sacks discusses not only as an important convention of the traditional English elegy, but also as an example of what Freud called “healthy mourning,” wherein the bereaved withdraws his affections from the dead person and reattaches those affections to a substitute symbol, an object—which is the poem itself for the elegist. The problem that elegists of the 20th and 21st centuries seem to recognize—and one of the fundamental reasons that this transformation from actual person to idealized symbol seems to be so often resisted by contemporary poets—is that there is not one way of “healthy mourning” and that grief differs dramatically depending on the object lost, the relationship of the speaker to that object, and even the circumstances of the loss. Modern and contemporary elegists seem to understand, as they move away from the conventions of the traditional elegy and “healthy mourning,” that there is not a set way to respond to death and that each situation demands something different from the form. But one thing that seems consistent in most modern and contemporary elegies, and which is closely related to the freedom the elegist feels to mourn as he sees fit, is the refusal to transform the lost object into a symbol. There is an increasing desire among elegists to depict the lost person—or object—as he was in life, not as some dehumanized, romanticized symbol. When a person, such as Edward King or Arthur Henry Hallum, is transformed into a god-like manifestation of morality, much about this person’s real life and

legacy is lost, and many elegists of the last century seem to want to desperately hold on to what was real about the person being described. In this way, modern and contemporary elegies often exhibit a sense of authenticity—both in terms of the subject of the poem and the feelings of those he left behind—that traditional elegies, even despite their beauty and complexity, seem to lack.

Derek Walcott perhaps offers the best example of this shift and most direct rejection of the transformation of the human to the divine within the traditional elegy. Walcott, like many contemporary poets, strives instead for a reversal of elegiac convention: a move from idealization to accurate representation of the lost. In his poem, “Sea Canes,” the speaker addresses the earth directly and laments the death of so many of his friends:

Half my friends are dead.
I will make you new ones, said earth.
No, give me them back, as they were, instead,
With faults and all, I cried. (1-4)

In these four short lines, Walcott sums up one of the most significant refusals of tradition made by contemporary elegists. The speaker does not want “new” or transformed friends; he wants his loved ones “back, as they were” in life, “with faults and all.” This is what many contemporary elegists strive to do, to “bring back” the dead by depicting them in everyday situations which certainly may show their virtues, but does not make them into larger-than-life figures who exhibit a kind of perfection no real person can achieve. Walcott’s speaker ends the poem by saying he wishes to “bring those we love before us, as they were, / with faults and all, not nobler, just there” (21-22). He does not want to depict those he loves as “nobler” or better than they were in life, but instead, “just there,” exactly as they were. By listing the dead person’s merits—especially in the traditional language of the elegy, which is elevated and grandiose—and thus,

turning him into a symbol for what society and the speaker have been deprived of as a result of this death, there is a certain amount of inaccuracy, and the real person—the origin of that symbol—is lost. Walcott points overtly to the change that many modern and contemporary poets embrace, which is a move towards portraying the lost loved one as a real person, “with faults and all,” not an idealized symbol.

In her book *What The Living Do*, Marie Howe exhibits the refusal of convention which Walcott brings to light in “Sea Canes” in several elegies written for her brother, John, who died of AIDS in 1989. Rather than openly listing his virtues, Howe emphasizes the “everydayness” of her brother, the very thing that he is deprived of in death. Like so many elegists of the past century, Howe asserts a powerful need to recognize the lost within the everyday. Her depictions of John are not particularly noble or dignified, but rather quite mundane:

He was a little taller than me: a young man

but grown, himself by then,

done at twenty-eight, having folded every sheet,

rinsed every glass he would ever rinse under the cold

and running water. (“The Gate” 4-8)

Here, John is portrayed as he was most of his life: an everyday person doing everyday things. He is not a dehumanized symbol, but rather a real person who is loved and missed by his sister. Instead of creating a character that is distant and unrelatable to those readers who did not know John in his lifetime, Howe’s description does just the opposite. It is the very fact that John is

portrayed as a real human, completing household chores that we have all completed ourselves, which makes him so relatable. He is not a Christ-figure or symbol of the virtues we ourselves should strive for, but a person, like so many we know and love, and indeed, like us. Through John's ordinariness, we see our own mortality and that of those we hold dear. Rather than feeling distant, readers can sense a profound connection to John, as well as an appreciation for those activities—and perhaps relationships—which, like washing dishes after a meal—we may take for granted. Howe continues her recognition of the simple moments that John is deprived of in death, and which, when she catches herself experiencing them, cause her to miss him the most. In the titular poem of the collection, Howe speaks directly to her lost brother:

Johnny, the kitchen sink has been clogged for days, some utensil probably
fell down there.

And the Drano won't work but smells dangerous, and the crusty dishes
have piled up

waiting for the plumber I still haven't called. This is the everyday we
spoke of.

It's winter again: the sky's a deep, headstrong blue, and the
sunlight pours through

the open living-room windows because the heat's on too high in here, and
I can't turn it off.

For weeks now, driving, or dropping a bag of groceries in the street,
the bag breaking,

I've been thinking: This is what the living do. And yesterday, hurrying
along those
wobbly bricks in the Cambridge sidewalk, spilling my coffee down
my wrist and sleeve,

I thought it again, and again later, when buying a hairbrush: This is it.
Parking. Slamming the car door shut in the cold. What you called
that yearning.

What you finally gave up. (1-11)

Here, not only does Howe's speaker—presumably the poet herself—recognize that those moments of “the everyday,” which she and her brother spoke about before his death, are the times she misses him most intensely, but she also realizes that she grieves for him during times of frustration and annoyance. She finds herself thinking of him when she participates in mundane activities such as “buying a hairbrush” or “parking” because he will never again get to do these things—the activities which make up most of our lives. But she seems to mourn most severely when she catches herself in moments of irritation: “spilling my coffee down my wrist and sleeve,” “waiting for the plumber I still haven't called,” “dropping a bag of groceries in the street.” These are the times when the speaker's frustration with the everyday hassles of life give way to grief—and, of course, to guilt—as she realizes that she is annoyed by the very things that her brother can never experience again. This is perhaps a description of what Larry Levis identified as “the guilt of survival,” and Howe's honest account of her mixed emotions—

irritation, guilt, sorrow—in light of the loss of someone she loved dearly, serves to remind us of John’s, and her own, humanness, as well as the persistence of her grief. John is not made to be anything other than he was: a person living every day the best that he could, like we all do. She does not only talk about the positive aspects of John’s life or the negative (though she references both), but she makes a point to remember the neutral aspects of his life, those things that are neither good nor bad, but just are. These regular, uncharged moments make up most of life and, because of this, these are the very moments which cause her to grieve her brother most acutely—these are the times she is reminded that he is really gone.

At several key moments in *What the Living Do*, Howe takes her depictions of John’s humanness a step further, not only presenting him during mundane activities, but also describing the unpleasant, and painfully realistic, effects of his illness, which he endured during the final years of his life. In “A Certain Light,” Howe describes a scene in which John, emaciated due to his illness, becomes sick after taking his numerous medications to fight the progression of AIDS:

He had taken the morphine and prednisone and amitriptyline

and Florinef and vancomycin and Halcion too quickly

and had thrown up in the bowl Joe brought to the bed—a thin string

of blue spit—then waited a few minutes to calm himself,

before he took them all again. (4-8).

A stark contrast to the god-like pillars of strength and beauty presented in many traditional English elegies, John is not only depicted as notably *not* valiant in this description, but instead

weak, sickly, and exhausted. The irony lies in the fact that though Howe refuses to idealize her brother with a long list of virtues as many traditional elegists do, it is in the very act of showing him in this weakened and wasted state that she portrays the exact qualities that seem to be lacking at first glance. John is not strong in the physical sense, but he is strong-willed, refusing to give in passively to death, but rather “fighting” death with all of his might, which, in this case, comes in the form of “calming himself” after retching and taking the pills he needs to take again, even knowing that they will make him feel horrible. In this way, John is indeed brave and noble and valiant, but we, as readers, are able to discern this not through the overt listing of his qualities, but rather through a realistic portrayal of how he lived during his final months of life. Throughout Howe’s collection, John is not the traditional strong, valiant, “masculine” figure before his death. Instead “He was all bones and skin, no tissue to absorb the medicine. / He couldn’t walk unless two people held him” (“A Certain Light” 15-16). Even in his weakened state, the reality of his illness becoming painfully apparent to both the speaker and the reader, Howe describes John as “Handsome” (27). He is handsome because he is real, not a fictionalized, idealized person, but an actual human facing the horrors of death.

Donald Hall aligns himself with Walcott and Howe’s dedication to authentic depictions of the lost throughout the series of elegies written for Jane Kenyon. In “Summer Kitchen,” Hall depicts his late wife much like Howe describes her brother—by striving to present her as she was in life rather than creating a romanticized, and ultimately fictional, character. In the poem, Hall makes an important claim which lies at the heart of this contemporary refusal of tradition, the shift toward accurate representation within the elegy. He begins by describing a memory of his wife cooking dinner: she “stood at the sink” and “crushed garlic” (1-4). The speaker watches as she “tasted the sauce from her fingertips” before telling him, “It’s ready now” (8-9). Though this

seems very much like a regular scene from a regular day—and it certainly is—this moment comes to mean much more than that to the speaker, who is now left to grieve his wife's death. He ends the poem by saying, “We ate, and talked, and went to bed, / And slept. It was a miracle” (11-12). This is precisely why many contemporary elegists resist the traditional convention of idealizing, and thus transforming, the beloved. The miracle lies in the very fact that the person—who is now dead— was, at one point, *real*. Hall, and many other contemporary elegists, does not feel that in order to make the beloved's life a miracle he must turn that person into someone, or something, which never existed. The miracle was that the person was alive and that there was love between the speaker and the beloved. Unlike most traditional elegies, which end with the beloved dwelling eternally in heaven, contemporary elegists do not seem to desire to move beyond the material world, the world of what we can see and experience, in order to make life miraculous.

Neither Father nor Lover: Expanding the Definition of Loss

Perhaps the most apparent change in the elegy over the last century has to do with the very event which elicits the poet's response, the impetus for the elegy itself. All elegies are poems of loss, and it is fair to say that most are written in response to a specific death rather than the idea death in general, but unlike traditional elegists such as Milton and Shelley, contemporary poets are far less concerned with a narrow definition of death, the literal death of a person. Though many contemporary poets—such as Hall, Howe, and Walcott—do write poems in response to the loss of a loved one, the subject matter of the elegy has expanded to include a variety of different situations and relationships. This is probably primarily due to the fact that the elegy, no longer on a public stage and meant to serve a ceremonial function, has moved inward, depicting the poet's individual and idiosyncratic response to loss, which can come in many forms. As Strand and Boland point out, the traditional English elegy depicts the process of mourning in response to the death of a person, someone who was close to the speaker in life. "Lycidas," "Adonais," "In Memoriam," and most other traditional elegies, were written as a direct response by the poet to the death of a close friend (though a few traditional elegies, such as Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" do not explicitly identify the subject). But modern and contemporary elegists have expanded their ideas of exactly who—or what—the lost subject can be. In fact, the lost object need not even be a person anymore—the elegist can mourn a pet, a relationship, his past, even a place he will never return to. Furthermore, rather than one understanding of "healthy mourning," in which the speaker undergoes a series of emotional stages and ultimately reaches a sense of peace and healing, the type of mourning presented in recent elegies depends on a variety of factors: what the lost object is, the poet's relationship to that object, and the circumstances of the loss. Modern and contemporary elegists provide readers

with a variety of different responses to the problem of death and grief, allowing us to identify and understand the varying forms that death—and mourning—can take.

In his poem, “Elegy for Jane,” Theodore Roethke contemplates the difficulty with mourning the loss of a person whose relationship to the speaker is not clearly defined. Rather than a close friend or relative, the epigraph tells the reader that the subject of Roethke’s poem is his student, who died as a result of being “thrown from a horse.” He begins speaking about the girl almost as a lover would, listing her beautiful qualities: “I remember the neckcurls, limp and damp as tendrils, / And her quick look, a sidelong pickerel smile; / and how, once startled, the light syllables leaped for her” (1-3). He describes her as like “A wren, happy, tail to the wind” above whom, when she sang, the leaves’ “whispers turned to kissing” (5-8). After the first stanza, however, the speaker’s tone shifts to that of a father-figure: “Oh, when she was sad, she cast herself down into such a pure depth, / Even a father could not find her” (10-11). He then states the essential grief of the poem—and of any elegy, for that matter—saying, “My sparrow, you are not here” (14). In this single line, Roethke manages to identify what all elegies are essentially about, regardless of the subject: the speaker has lost something and must face the realization that the lost object is “not here” anymore. This address also serves to further the speaker’s confusion about his relationship to this girl, as “my sparrow” could be a nickname used by a father or a lover. Though Roethke’s speaker expresses an intense desire to “nudge” the girl “from this sleep,” (18), he feels a sense of guilt because, though he speaks his “words of love” over her grave, he recognizes that he “has no rights in this matter,” being “Neither father or lover” (20-22). The speaker is the girl’s teacher and, as such, has felt for her something which is in between romantic love and fatherly love. In order to further express his uncertainty about his feelings and rights to address the dead girl, Roethke utilizes free verse, something uncommon for

the formal poet. The poem's meter and stanza form are irregular because the speaker is uncertain about his role as a mourner and his feelings for the deceased girl. Though not the traditional subject for an elegy, "Elegy for Jane" depicts a man's reaction to the death of someone he cared for, a death which causes not only grief, but also triggers emotions which remain elusive to both speaker and reader.

Though perhaps more certain than Roethke about the emotions he feels in response to the death of an important person in his life, Frank O'Hara explores his reaction to the death of someone whom he never actually met in "The Day Lady Died." Resisting not only the conventions of the traditional elegy in terms of subject matter, O'Hara also pushes the limits of the form in terms of shape and momentum. Written as an elegy for Billie Holiday—known as "Lady Day"—who died in 1959, O'Hara writes a full 24 lines before he even mentions the death that is so central to the poem. This is in stark contrast to conventional elegies, where the death of the lost is addressed right at the beginning of the poem and throughout the entirety of the poem. "I weep for Adonais—he is dead!" Shelly's speaker begins (1). In the first four stanzas of "The Day Lady Died," however, the speaker simply recounts the events of a seemingly normal day, telling the reader exactly where he was—in New York City running errands in preparation for a dinner party—on this very specific date and time: "It is 12:20 in New York a Friday / three days after Bastille day, yes / it is 1959" (1-3). The majority of the poem consists of the speaker's ordinary, and rather boring, day until the final line of the fourth stanza, when, at the he asks the "tobacconist at the Ziegfeld Theater" for a "NEW YORK POST" and sees that it has "her face on it" (23-25). Because of the title and the date, the reader is well aware of who "she" is, but she remains unnamed in the poem. The realization that Billie Holiday has died prompts the speaker to experience a vivid memory in the final lines of the poem:

and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of
leaning on the john door at the 5 SPOT
while she whispered a song along the keyboard
to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing (26-29)

It is no coincidence that the speaker describes his reaction to hearing Billie Holiday sing live at the 5 Spot as though he “stopped breathing.” Similar to the common figure of speech, she was such an amazing performer that watching her “took his breath away;” however, because he has just learned of Holiday’s death, this phrase can also be taken to mean that part of him died with Billie Holiday—she was that significant in his life, even though he did not know her personally. Mirroring the unconventional pacing of this poem is the fact that the speaker’s experience of the events in the poem differs so drastically from O’Hara’s himself—the elegist—as well as the reader. Because of the title, both the poet and the reader know before the poem even begins that it is an elegy. This is not an ordinary day, but rather “The Day Lady Died.” The speaker, however, is unaware of the significance of the day until he sees the news story about Holiday’s death. He does not know that he is speaking an elegy, in fact, until the poem is more than two thirds complete. Like Roethke, O’Hara purposely pushes the limits of the elegy to express the very real kind of grief that one experiences when a person dies who had a profound impact—however distant—on him.

Even when modern and contemporary poets follow the conventions of the traditional elegy in terms of their relationship to the subject, such as writing about a lost friend, relative, or lover, they do not always present a poem of praise and adoration as traditional elegists do. Even though poets such as Milton, Shelley, and Tennyson certainly display anger when portraying the “work of mourning,” as Sacks points out, their anger is almost always directed at a god or gods

whom they blame for the loss of the beloved. Traditionally, the emotional outbursts directed at the deceased person himself are those of grief, anguish, love, disbelief, and pity. These, of course, are not the only emotions a grieving loved one can feel towards the lost. Like the mourning process, relationships are complex and the feelings one has for a person in life do not automatically become positive after the person has died, especially if there was strife in the relationship prior to the death. Sylvia Plath depicts the complicated—and negative—emotions she felt for her late father in her famous elegy, “Daddy.” Rather than praising her father, who died when she was only 10, Plath’s speaker takes on an intensely accusatory tone—though the reader is never quite clear as to the reason for her anger—and expresses an almost uncontrollable anger towards him. Addressing her father directly, she states that though she wanted to “kill” him, he “died before [she] had time” to do so (7). She tells him that she could “never talk” to him in life as she did not speak German, his native tongue, and found that when she tried, her tongue “stuck” in her “jaw. // It stuck like a barb wire snare” (24-26). After describing his German heritage, she goes on to compare him to a Nazi during the Holocaust and herself to “a Jew” in “Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen” (33). In an almost purposeful rejection of the elegiac convention of transforming the deceased into a god-like symbol, Plath’s speaker claims that her father was “Not god but a swastika” (46). She then calls him a “brute,” a “Fascist” and “a devil” (48-54) before ending on a disturbing image of his gravesite:

There’s a stake in your fat, black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always *knew* it was you.
Daddy, Daddy, you bastard, I’m through. (76-80)

In stark contrast to the traditional elegy, Plath not only refuses to praise her father, but depicts him as a vampire, devil, and monster, showcasing emotions that are quite the opposite of those usually expressed in elegies. The speaker does feel some of the traditional emotions of “healthy mourning” throughout the poem. At one point, she tells her father, “I tried to die / And get back, back, back to you” (58-59). But rather than love or grief, the majority of the elegy depicts the overwhelming rage, blame, and disgust she harbors for her father. Still an elegy, the poem expresses very real, if disturbing, emotions in response to the death of a parent, but Plath pushes the boundaries of the conventional elegy by writing an almost anti-elegy. Certainly the poem depicts a reaction to parent’s death, though it’s not the reaction one would expect to find within the form.

Similar to Plath’s speaker in “Daddy,” John Berryman—a fellow confessional poet—depicts passionate and unabashed anger directed at his late father in “Dream Song 384.” However, unlike Plath, who never reveals the exact motive for her hatred, the reason for Berryman’s fury is clear: his father chose to end his own life when Berryman was just a boy. Like many traditional elegies, the speaker directly addresses the deceased at his gravesite, but rather than presenting an image of a weeping son praising his lost father, Berryman’s speaker says, “I stand above my father’s grave in rage” (2). He then envisions what he would do if he had access to his father’s coffin:

I’d like to scabble till I got right down
away down under the grass

and ax the casket open ha to see

just how he’s taking it, which he sought so hard (11-14)

Though this is a disturbing depiction of a son's grief, it is also understandable and very human, as the speaker describes the heartbreaking circumstances of his father's death: "this dreadful banker's grave / who shot his heart out in a Florida dawn" (7-8). The speaker feels abandoned by his father and is furious that he would tear "his page / out" of his own son's life (5-6). As an adult, the speaker blames his father for abandoning him, claiming that what he "sought so hard"—death—is now a reality. Rather than a place to praise his father's life and to extol his virtues, the gravesite becomes a sad and painful reminder to the speaker that his father chose to leave him behind. The gravestone, instead of appearing adorned with signs of love and grief "slants, flowerless."

Like the relationship the elegist has to that which he has lost, as well as the circumstances of that loss, so too does the lost object itself become more flexible in poems which defy the conventions of the traditional elegy. Many poets have come to recognize that grief results from all kinds of loss, not simply the death of a person. Donald Justice recognizes this acutely in an elegy written for the past, aptly titled "Thinking about the Past." The speaker begins by listing several images of time passing and once beautiful and strong things succumbing to decay: "My mother's face all smiles, all wrinkles soon; / The rock wall building, built, collapsed then, fallen; / Our upright loosening downward, slowly out of tune" (2-4). He realizes that now that all of these things are gone, becoming "fixed into place" within his memory (5). He then recalls several memories from his youth, some seemingly mundane moments that have, for some reason, stuck with him:

The red-haired girl with wide-mouth—Eleanor—

Forgotten thirty years—her freckled shoulders, hands.

The breast of Mary Something, freed from a white swimsuit,

Damp, sandy, warm; or Margery's, a small, caught bird— (6-9)

Many of these moments, such as the exposed woman and the girl with “wide-mouth” seem to recall a time when the speaker was youthful and sexually virile, a time which, like the memories he cannot relive, has passed. The final image of the “small, caught bird” depicts a sense of being trapped, which is how he describes the memories themselves. “Darkness they rise from,” he says, and “darkness they sink back toward” (10). He then recalls two friends who have presumably died, one from smoking and one from war: “O marvelous early cigarettes! O bitter smoke, Benton! / And Kenny in wartime whites, crisp, cocky” (11-12). Thinking of those who are no longer alive, the speaker mourns the fact that youth and health do not last. In the final line of the poem, Justice lists those things which trigger his memories, which bring those moments and people he has lost up from the “darkness” of his mind once again: “Dusks, dawns, waves, the ends of songs...” (14). The poem is 14 lines in length and contains slant-rhyme, which suggests that it is in dialogue with the sonnet form as well as the elegy. True to the subject matter of traditional sonnets, it is certainly a love poem to the past. And like most elegies—traditional and contemporary—it is a love song to that which cannot be recovered. But rather than ending with the deceased in heaven, Justice's speaker recognizes that it is “darkness” where the past resides. His memories are all that remain of the people and places of his past, and when he is gone—a truth which is inevitable as he recognizes the eventual loss of everything—his memories will die as well. He does not seek ultimate consolation, but rather recognizes the fleeting joy that comes with his memories, while they remain.

Throughout the last century, the elegy has changed drastically. It is not only a move away from the conventions of the form which marks the contemporary elegy, but it is the active refusal of convention—which often yields to a reversal of tradition—that gives the contemporary elegy

its rhetorical force. Strangely enough, while resisting the very conventions that define the form—a movement from grief to consolation, idealizing the deceased, and defining death in the most literal way—the contemporary elegy relies on that which it resists. In his essay, “One Body: Some Notes on Form,” Robert Hass argues that free verse poetry only makes sense in the context of traditional forms that utilize meter (163-164). In other words, a free verse poem gets its power from resisting what came before it. Similarly, much of the contemporary elegy’s strength comes from the poet’s—and reader’s—understanding of the elegiac convention. Because one of the key moves of the traditional elegy is for the speaker to find consolation after the death of a loved one, the direct refusal to do so speaks evocatively about the contemporary experience of grief. Rather than focusing on the “work of mourning,” the emotional process that occurs in the aftermath of loss, many contemporary elegists instead opt to portray a single moment within the grieving process, often a moment when eventual healing seems impossible. In these moments, the idea that the “heart will mend” does certainly feel like “a lie” and the attempt to write a poem which expresses true sorrow does seem impossible (“For Bhain Campbell” 1-2). In this way, contemporary elegies often depict an authenticity of experience that traditional elegies do not. By refusing sentimentality when describing the lost and describing the person as he was in life as opposed to an idealized image, the contemporary elegist attempts to reanimate the dead, allowing him to live on eternally within the poem, not within the heavens. Rather than focusing on the afterlife, contemporary elegists feel a desire to focus on life itself, what it is that is left behind—and remains in motion—after the loved one has passed. Within the contemporary elegy, there seems to be no lasting resolution, no one place for the mourner to rest. Instead, the experience varies from person to person and situation to situation. Perhaps this understanding of mourning as a varying experience is what allows contemporary poets to explore their reactions to a wide

variety of deaths rather than simply the death of a loved one. By recognizing different types of loss and different relationships to that which is lost, contemporary elegists have expanded the form to include poems about nostalgia, lost loves, and the deaths of those to whom they have little—or no—personal connection. And rather than simply being a poem of praise, the elegy can be a poem of almost any reaction, as long as what is being reacted to is loss. In this way, Stanley Plumly's seemingly over simplistic definition of the elegy as a poem which includes "a death" and a "response to that death" ("Elegaic" 31) may, in fact, be the most precise definition of the form as it is understood presently. The elegy is still a poem of loss, and often, though not always, it is a love poem to something which is "not here" anymore ("Elegy for Jane" 14). But the "response" to that loss depends on the elegist's distinct and personal experience. The contemporary elegy is no longer a poem in which "a cultural grief" is displayed (Boland 167). It is not the public experience of death, but the personal experience of death which is at the center of the elegy, and many contemporary poets seem to recognize that the conventions of the past do not accurately portray their experience with grief in the present. Therefore, they seek to depict their personal experience as authentically as possible, which often comes in the form of refusing, and even reversing, the traditions of the elegy.

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PART II
SPECTER

I.

Dorm Ghost

Johnson Girls' Dormitory, Sewanee, Tennessee

They said she walked the third-floor hall
and warned those of us just moved in
to watch at night for shadows passing
beneath our doorways: sliding, smooth.

They said she'd been a matron young
and hanged herself, or fallen, or passed
from fever—the story always changed. But
however it was she died, we were certain

it was tragic, *not her time*, and we called
to her from midnight séances and with
a Ouija board my roommate stole
from home. We circled ourselves once

with candles on the floor, begging her
to show herself to those who dared
to look. A girl across the hall swore
she'd heard her calling from the basement,

another claimed she'd seen a blackened
figure in the side yard, wandering, alone.
I looked for her an entire year, my first
away from home, but never found

what others somehow had: proof
that she had stayed, that she was with us
all that time, watching from whatever distant place
we could not touch, though we were desperate to.

The Boy

He was wearing cowboy boots—dark red—too large
for his own feet. He was no older than four, and the boots
clapped the cement as he hopped from the curb to the street

and up again, crunching bottle caps, empty cups, litter tossed from cars. I knew
the corner where he stood, had seen it on my way to work, at the far
end of town beneath an overpass—desolate, dangerous.

When I woke you to tell what I had seen, you shushed me,
it was just a dream. I listened and heard your breath steady once again,
your back turned away from me, who would not be calmed.

For weeks, I scanned the newspaper, looking for the story of a boy
disappeared, lost and found or never found. I didn't know what else
to do. You teased me that I thought he was my own, a child

never born, and I think I half-believed you, lying in the dark
that night, driving to the corner the next day, wanting
him to be there, calling for him, whose name I did not know.

Lorca, 1935

Federico García Lorca looks at me,
his shirt unbuttoned, his face half-concealed
by an afternoon shadow, a cloud perhaps,
long evaporated now, drifting past
an open window in La Huerta de San Vicente.
His hands barely touch piano keys,
but he does not look at what he plays,
he looks directly at me, his head slanted slightly
to one side. The music, then, must be in his head,
tiny notes like drooping flags scattered
inside his memory or maybe his fingers press
and release automatically, instinctively gliding
across the keys well beyond this single
moment captured and framed on my bedroom wall.

But where did those notes go? Were they released
from their prison at the moment of his death
and floating now somewhere waiting to be collected
or never collected again? Did they dissolve,
dissipate like the cloud, the shadow that covers
one eye peering out at me from the confines
of a bordered poster, one I bought years ago
on a visit to his summer home outside Granada?

It was dusty, I remember, and the dust
hung in the air and crept through open doors
and windows. Now a caretaker sweeps
the hardwood floors over which visitors tread
in a set path through the living area,
the kitchen, a study room. *Notice the drafts
in his own handwriting and, in the corner,
an original sketch by Salvador Dalí.*
But did the floorboards creak the same when
the items inside were not on show, but simply
the possessions of a family in a home
that had no reason to be visited by strangers?

His shirt sleeve is rolled on one side, his hair
combed back. He appears to be caught
inside a mundane movement, an uneventful summer
afternoon, but something about the concentration
of his gaze and the seriousness of his downturned mouth
indicates to me, seventy-one years later,
that he expects to be remembered

(continue stanza)

this way, with soft light pushing in to illuminate
the part of his face not darkened by shadow,
reflecting off of the ivory keys and forming
a crescent beneath his hands, a cradle of light.

Waiting for the Pope, New Orleans, 1986

She must have woken early, fumbling along the counter in the near light
for her purse. In New Orleans for the first time, she was young,
already a mother, but very young, and when she threaded
the streets, she did not know where to turn, only to look
for the name of a plaza, for a crowd of people, surely gathered,
waiting to see the pope pass by, on his way to the Saint Louis.

She smocked dresses for her girls, and once a year, she met with others
who did the same, displaying their designs, cable stitches
and flowerettes, subtle trellising along the necklines, their silk thread hems.
This year, she heard the pope was there and knew she had to see him.

An hour in the foggy cold before she heard the clap
of hooves on cobblestone and saw above the knot of heads
his cart come into sight. Some called out names or illnesses, dangled rosaries
from upturned palms, his hand grazing fingertips, sliding over the crowd
like a disembodied sail as she pushed through to the curb,
taking from her purse a creased photograph and holding it outright.

When he saw it, he looked down, and motioned his blessing—
like pulling an unseen thread through the space above the two faces,
the braided hair, the collars lined with bullion roses.

Sister

Twelve years of sharing a bedroom, of hearing your measured breathing in the night,
the tap of your stiff toe to the hardwoods as you perfected ballet positions,

whispering to yourself as you lengthened your neck, curving your back just so—
first, second, third. . .

Some nights we listened to our mother play hymns on the piano downstairs, pillows pressed
to our mouths so she could not hear we were awake,

hours past bedtime. And when our father read to us from books with words too big
to understand, I watched you brush your hair, pretending to listen.

I knew you were counting each brushstroke
until you reached two hundred.

When mother deemed you old enough to wear makeup and took you
to the department store counter to find the perfect shade of loose powder,

I did not think you needed it. I was aware of how very delicate
your pale wrists looked in the mirror as I sat behind your wooden vanity,

listening to you explain the proper way to blend foundation, in small circles
with the fingertips to avoid lines, a light concealer tapped just beneath the eyes.

Even when you moved across the hall,
the door slamming shut each time you went downstairs, leaving a hint

of perfume on the landing—the name of which I could not pronounce—
I listened for you.

And the summer you stopped eating, and I began to notice
clumps of hair along the bathroom floor, I hated you for the first time,

not because it was your doing, or because it was always you
they worried for, but because even with tubes budding from your thin wrists, the chirp

of the heart monitor like a metronome, your greasy hair matted with sweat,
you were the beautiful one.

Coming Home

It's mostly how you left it:

 a dried corsage pinned above the headboard,
 photographs from high school dances lined

along the bureau mirror where

 you stood before class each morning
 fixing your hair, practicing chance encounters

with boys whose names you've long forgotten now,
 like the importance of the lavender ribbon tied
 securely to the front-right bedpost or

the reason for the words scrawled in white-out—

I hate my life!—in the inside of the middle dresser drawer.
 What's missing now, along with old clothes boxed

and sold the summer you left for college

 and the trophy case stored to make room
 for your mother's elliptical machine,

is the dull throb, something like a pulse, everything

 inside of you waiting to break free, promised, somehow,
 to be met with an endless flurry of beauty, love, possibility.

The Bird

The dead bird lay in the yard for days
before I covered it with an empty flowerpot,
afraid to look. A clump of feathers, a wing
or tail, stuck out beyond the terracotta lip

and I pushed it under with a broom handle,
satisfied in its vanishing. This, a crude
and guilty burial, a thing I did not want
but did not throw away, now a fixture

in the grass beside the driveway. The winter came,
ground froze, the pot settled into the dirt.
For many months, I forgot to see the makeshift
headstone, the little bird's grave, until—

headed back from the car, arms full of grocery sacks,
for some reason, I looked—and turning it over
with the toe of my boot, I saw the bird again,
laid out as if arranged by hand, half buried,

stripped clean, wings extended in arrested flight,
and whether sad or beautiful, I could not decide.

Talking with my Mother

I am sitting at her dining room table, the old one
with etched grooves from years of homework rushed
before breakfast, a check written for the dented bumper
the summer I turned seventeen, a nail polish stain
for which I was grounded from a dance that seemed, I remember,
decisive and, somehow, final. I am telling her about a fight I had
with a friend, how clear it seems to me that I am right
and noble and justified. And as I talk, I am watching her respond,
leaned against the chair back, eyes closed, fully concentrating, it appears,
on what she is hearing or on what she will say
and how she will say it—arranged in front of me like a place setting
with pieces to pick up and turn over, or else to leave uninspected
for another fight, another time when I'm opened
and feeling honest because those days come far apart and not often
now. My mother is perfect. But I have said, and not long
ago, that I hated her: words spoken out of turn, that mocking tone
she took that left her calls unreturned for weeks, the fear of becoming
the things I fear and recognize. And yet—we seek each other out.
I find myself believing that with my mother it is all one or its opposite:
that she is perfect or wicked, wise or thoughtless, kind or spiteful.
But lately, I have come to see that she is all of this, not wholly one thing—
that we are what we must be, what we want to be, what we hate to be
but must accept or overcome or never overcome. We are wild
in our pursuit of virtue, but forget it in an instant and are returned
to loss, to guilt, to hunger.

After Hearing of a Friend's Mother's Death

*There are children in the morning
They are leaning out for love
And they will lean that way forever*
—Leonard Cohen

They said it was a sloppy job:
her feet still on the ground, extension cord
slung over the garage door track.

It wasn't that she broke a fall
with the noose, but that she just sort of
leaned into it—*leaned into it*—the way one might

lean against a railing for balance
or a loved one's shoulder in love-wracked
boredom. And she was drunk, they said,

which wasn't a surprise, but still
she had managed to toss the cord,
a desperate lasso aimed at what exactly?

And still she was able to lean—as if
to overhear a conversation whispered,
a bit of gossip that, at first, entertained you

in that way you wished it didn't, before
taking root, only to bloom in another place
at another time—unconnected, distant—

only to return to break
you open as if you had been there
cheering her on. As if you

were the one to blame.

Vera

I can still picture the black shoes of my great aunt,
her muscular legs, no ankles to speak of, planted firmly
in the grass behind her house. Some Sundays after church,

my sister and I made the long drive with our parents to see her.
No children of her own, no grandchildren, my mother would say
on the way, as if hers was a loneliness we could ease, or undo.

After iced tea, always set out before we arrived,
my great aunt would send my sister and me running
through the backyard around her, as she stood, fixed

in one place, casting her arms this way and that,
trying to catch us running by, reaching for an elbow,
the back of a knee, reaching to grasp us squealing, not wanting

to be caught, held tight and kissed. We laughed, my sister and I,
and ran, and eventually forgot those Sunday afternoons,
as Vera got older and sicker, as they all do—

those great aunts, those neighbors and distant cousins,
those old women who leave brief memories, the faintest smell
of powder, their hands as strong as men's, grasping for us as we run.

II.

The Death of a Gulf Coast Town

We are all there, gathered
around the television flashing
images of storm swell, downed power lines,

roofs peeled back like paper wrappers,
the few who refused to leave plucked
one by one from the tops of their houses,

from the beds of their pickups driven out
to higher ground, now left to flood and rust
among tree trunks snapped and shredded

to the pith. A gas station's siding is stripped away
and we watch it flutter and twist and disappear
into the gray that is both sea and sky,

and my mother knows it well, that stretch
of beach, now flooded, where as a girl
she used to play, patting gobs of sand

and piling them one by one into a wall,
then defying her brother, three years older,
to knock it down, which he did with one

swift kick, later sent by their father
to apologize and help rebuild, my mother,
not yet my mother, nodding silently

and sucking in air to stop her crying,
her brother, now dead seven years, his children
far away, her father, too, and now,

the town she both remembers and forgot
long ago is sinking, the waters rising to cover
the fence line of her elementary school,

the baseball diamond, the souvenir store,
where, as a child, she spent hours
selecting the perfect present.

Thermometer

She broke it in the mid-afternoon
and, unknowing, swept the pieces of glass
and silver liquid puddle up
with a broom and dustpan. Later, the clink
and crunch of the error still on her mind,
she researched the proper disposal
and, learning, gasped—half the night,
on hands and knees, flashlight held steady,
she searched for glowing orbs, small
as pepper flakes, easy to miss,
and picked up those she saw with roll
of masking tape, as she had read to do.
She placed the straw-end of the broom
into a trash bag and tied it tight, gathered
the glass from the thermometer she had
used for all four of her children—reading
for years the climbing line in order to decide
what she needed to do: a cold rag
on the forehead if low, a hurried drive
to the hospital if too high. Now, decades later,
her children grown, she opens slowly
the windows and turns on the fans, allowing
the pieces she could not find to evaporate,
become harmless as before they were released
from their glass cage, from what had always
given her comfort, until she learned
it could do more harm than good.

My Father at Sixty

It's November and my father has fallen
on the floor and cut his head.
He didn't notice until morning,
the blood streaking his pillow and shirt.

He thought he dreamed the thing: the falling,
the lying still, the getting up and back in bed.
He's called me to come and get him
and drive him to the doctor's because

the cut is deep and won't stop bleeding.
And I've arrived to see him pale
and worried and, in this way, different.
I've thought of him always as young,

several years behind my friends' fathers,
having married early, still in school,
younger then than I am now, my father,
in the passenger's seat, his bandaged head,

the same father who's rebuilt cars
for three decades, wielding grease-flecked
hands beneath a hood to force an engine back
to life, and I recall the gasp and sputter

and sudden roar in the driveway of our house
as a motor caught at last, his voice raised
above the noise, calling out for us to look.
Now, in my middle age, my father tense

beside me, I see him as he really is,
as he must be, changed by years, in need
of those he taught not to need, but to do
for themselves, and to never, not ever, pity him.

Stretch of Texas Highway

The adults were evidently carrying the two children.

—Waco Tribune-Herald

Muted hum of tires rolling over pavement
spattered with tar lines, fading tire tread streaked
along the median, and his eyes are old and tired.

Thin whisper floating up through the radio
and he has heard this song before, he thinks,
and tries to remember the sound of her singing
along, but he can't and so he stops trying.

An hour later, he exits, pressing the pedal hard,
thinking *c'mon bubba, let's go* up the hill he knows
so well now, and the engine groans and pushes

and then there they are, so white in the headlights
at first he mistakes them for deer as he slams
the brakes, but it's too late, too late,
and a thud like a fist to a cheekbone, crunch
of glass and the rise and fall but the car won't stop,
keeps moving, floating almost, though the tires
smoke and screech and finally, silence.

A ringing in his ears like heavy static
as he grabs for the handle but doesn't want to find it,
wants to remember the name of that song, the sound
of her singing though he thought nothing of it
then. And when he steps out, there are four of them,
scattered, four of them, two very small,
blood soaking through clothes and swelling
pools on the pavement so sickly gray.

And he can't think now, he can't think of anything,
staggering into a pool of light gathered silently
beneath the headlights, and calling out for who,
he doesn't even know, calling into the darkness
that threatens to consume everything it touches,
that rises at his feet like a black-water flood.

Cousin

She talked about drugs, hard drugs, those
with names like chemicals, sharp in their saying,
bringing to mind fumes rising from a spoon
or pipe like heat off pavement, in waves,
which was fitting. She lived in Albuquerque
and that was how I pictured it: heat rising.

She'd ask, *Have you ever tried any?*, and I'd say, *No*
but I've heard of it, which, of course, I hadn't.
I had a sense, even then, that she was lying.
We were twelve at the time and she'd never
been high, and drunk only once, at her father's wedding
to a woman named Debra who insisted Carmen

call her *mom* even though she wasn't.
Carmen came to stay that spring, her clothes
fitting a little too tight, or oddly large
on her small frame, like boys' clothes. She said
she liked the smocked dress my mother had made me
for Easter, and when my mother overheard,

she bought one like it— light blue—
for Carmen to wear to church since she hadn't
packed a dress. I remember looking out
my bedroom window with Carmen cross-legged
on the trundle beside me, our eyes on Debra yelling
and gesturing wildly at my mother because

she had dressed her child like me,
like a spoiled brat, though Carmen wasn't
her child and we knew it. *We really just met*,
Carmen said then, dropping the curtain to veil
the women stiff-standing on the porch,
squared shoulders. I remember being very glad

in that moment that I had never met
my parents, but had known them
all along: their faces, their hands. But Carmen—
afterwards riding away in Debra's minivan. Carmen,
who later went to rehab, I heard, and then to jail. Carmen,
who walked a line I never knew existed before her,

(new stanza)

who told me what huffing was and how to touch
a boy “down there.” Carmen, so full of lies I longed
to believe in secret, the way I half-covered my eyes
at the moment the man smashed the window in the movie
I wasn’t allowed to watch: the girl screaming, running,
me wincing as the knife plummeted, though I knew it wasn’t real.

At the Viewing

The old women wait in the sympathy line,
shuffling their feet or walkers to move
forward after someone else passes through

the cluster of family members, patting backs
sincerely when giving firm, old lady hugs
and smelling like the perfume

my grandmother used to wear, their gray-white hair
still and short. And they wait, or they pass through
the line, and most have brought casseroles or potato salad

and one a batch of yeast rolls, having waited all day
for the dough to rise before packing them one by one
into the serving basket. And they wait and smile

and wave to those they know, who are gathered
in the parlor outside the sanctuary,
and some cry, the thin, loose skin beneath their eyes

flushing red, a cry they've cried before,
and they hug the family members, and they turn
to me and tell me that she was really something,

that she loved my sister and me, and they grasp
firmly my outstretched hand, damp tissues
wadded in palms, nails painted, dresses pressed.

Nativity

after Claudia Emerson

You must have wanted something, I said,
having just lost your mother, now assigned
by siblings far away to break up the house—
to keep what was wanted and donate the rest.

But each item I suggested you refused, perhaps
not wanting a reminder of those last years,
the hard ones, the dying. Not the mantle clock,
still ticking, striking the hours as we worked,

not the state spoons she loved, the fashion magazines,
the teakettle. Nothing was enough, you said, until—
until, sorting the hall closet, I uncovered
the nativity set you remembered, hand-carved

and painted, though chipped in spots: an ear here,
a finger there, a cow's horn gone. But you
arranged it perfectly, there on the floor.
Mary's blue robe faded, her arms held out,

Joseph's crook, the wise men kneeling, the child
in the center, treasured by all those around.

Burial

*She was claustrophobic all her life, my mother
tells me, sitting on my back porch, watching the day
wane first behind my alley. She hated elevators,
phone booths, tanning beds, and you know she loved her tan.*

And with this, I know my mother admits her guilt—
the form her mourning takes—at allowing her own mother
to be buried in the cold, packed earth, in a narrow,
rigid box smaller even than the spaces she feared in life.

*I know it doesn't matter, my mother sighs, but I know,
to her, it does, thinking herself weak for not standing up
to her father, for not demanding something more fitting,
less fixed, the very last gift she could—but did not—give.*

And my mother does not tell me, but I sense
she has woken in the night, as I have, with an urgent need
to claw her way out of what, she does not know, to rip away
what chokes her, what pushes her chest to the bed with such force

she believes the house has caved in on her. *Promise me—*
she pauses. And I do.

The Stray

We had fed her seven years before
suddenly she was gone. Not much
a part of our lives, we thought,
until her absence upset us both.

I sent you out to look, to call her name,
I set out tuna to entice her home and watched
the bob and arc of your flashlight beam
nearing from the darkness of the alleyway.

Two days, and we began to smell
the acrid stench of rot beneath the house.
We opened windows, turned on fans,
anything to keep the truth obscured.

A week, and I held a light to guide you
as you laid your stomach to the ground
and pushed yourself below the porch.
Why did we have the need to find

what we already knew was there?
Not just to remove it, I think, but to see,
and because of that seeing, to know,
and because of that knowing, to break.

Waking

When I woke, I did not know what time it was. The light
from the porch lamp filtered through the blinds' plastic slats,
slanting across the floor, the headboard, the point

of your elbow as you slept, face down, your hands
beneath your pillow. I looked at your arm, the one closest to me,
traced the empty space above it with my hand: a scalene triangle,

like the one I'd studied in high school geometry, learning
to calculate carefully the length of each side,
multiplying what I knew, dividing what I didn't,

now a shadow sliding from my hand's slow movement
in the middle of a night many years after high school,
now a recollection of a lesson not thought of in years.

The longcase clock in the hall sounded the hour.
I thought it was much earlier than it was.

III.

After

After the break-up, the crying, the months of not speaking, the box
at the back of the closet labeled “Do Not Open” leering at me each time

I got out my good winter coat or high-heeled boots, you called.
And you said, I’m sorry and I said, For what? And you said, All of it

and moved back in: your socks rolled in balls in the sock drawer,
messages for you on the answering machine, the How was your day?

Mine was good, how was yours? All of it, all over again.
The waking in darkness to recall you there beside me, your back

turned, and getting dressed the next morning for work,
eyeing that box, slid now to the corner of my side of the closet,

I open it one day alone and run my finger over a picture
your mother took, a birthday card, movie stubs, that ring

that promised something.

The Freeze

We didn't see it coming. The ice,
 three inches deep, lined the driveway,
the road to town—your car's tires
 stuck in place. Nowhere to go.

The weatherman had warned of snow,
 which came, covering the backyard,
the clothesline with forgotten socks,
 stiff frozen. But it was the ice

that kept us in the house for days.
 We played cards, gin rummy
on the floor beside the fire, a round
 of Bolshevik that you took easily,

your hand much faster than my own.
 We cooked whatever food we had
already: stale muffins from a box,
 pancakes without syrup. At first

we laughed about the pairings,
 the lazy way we wore pajamas
when walking out to survey
 what refused to change.

But when we had had enough
 of what was left of us before
the storm, silence set in and lingered,
 and we no longer teased or played.

Too much time together, you reasoned
 before chipping at the ice
behind your car. I watched the way
 you lifted the shovel and heaved

it downward: awkward, frantic.
 And on the fifth day, when the ice began
to thaw and your tires moved, finally,
 in a slow, grinding spin, I knew

what would somehow still
 surprise me when the season turned.

Buenos Aires

January 2009

I told myself the place
 would make a difference:
 busy, humid, distant, utterly
foreign. For a month, we walked
 or trotted, trying to catch a subway car
 or train to take us to whatever site
we had settled on that day: *cementerio*,
 museo, jardín botánico. The heat
 was piercing, solid as the ice.
Most nights we ate late, midnight
 or one, leaning our elbows against
 the table to hear the other clearly, to watch
the stream of people outside, oblivious
 to the hour. The home we made was small—
 two rooms, a balcony—but there,
so many miles beneath the everyday
 that had defeated us, I thought
 I felt the change I wanted, a release
like the pop of breaking ice in early spring,
 the water below still moving as it has
 all through the frozen months,
the whole long year.

Call

You didn't call for days, so when
the phone's low chime pealed, finally,
from the other room, I had already guessed

what it was you had to tell—
another woman, too many drinks, you didn't
know how it had gone so far. In truth,

I stopped listening long before
the muted click of the receiver severed
you into silence, before what I know

you likely said next: how sorry,
how stupid. I was lost then
inside some other thought, long forgotten

now, a list of the next day's chores
perhaps, the dinner on the stove. But when
I hear, years later, of your marriage to who

I suspect is her, the questions I should have
asked arrive. What was it she had to give you
that I didn't proffer? How is it

that there are women who hold
some unnamed thing—some caged and ready
thing—only to release it of themselves

for those who are desperate to grasp at it
as if it were a crazed and fitful bird,
one that has been missing all along?

The Move

The first night I spent in this house, alone
 again after years of you, I heard a distant wailing
 rising through the dark, startling me from sleep,

soon followed by another, and then,
 with mounting speed, the clatter of metal wheels
 over tracks I had crossed myself the day before—

the hollow rhythm echoing across
 the stilled town. For days, while unpacking my things,
 boxed carelessly the way one does in haste, I listened

as the trains passed, filling the unfamiliar rooms
 with sounds that would not be ignored, wishing only
 for the silence I had hoped would, by then, be mine.

I complained, but the locals insisted I'd grow
 accustomed to the noise, and the thought sunk sharp within me:
 that, given time, I could get used to anything.

Flu

I had been coughing for days, waking groggy
in the night to my own dry hacking, my throat raw,
my stomach muscles sore from it—

3 a.m., my fever spiking, stumbling foot-heavy
to the bathroom to pee, suddenly light-headed, then,
on the floor, hitting my head hard against the side of the tub,

I called out for you. But you had been gone
for months by then, my slow remembering,
thinking *this is what it is to be alone*

and lifting myself up, walking cautiously back
to bed, my fever breaking that night, sweating
through the sheets, tossing them aside in fitful sleep.

Calle de los Suspiros

Colonia del Sacramento, Uruguay

We had taken the morning ferry over,
 across a river wide enough to seem a sea,
 your hands, held outward, formed a delta

as we stood against the railings on the deck.
 After disembarking slowly, a wait in line,
 another country, somehow different, and yet,

the same, we moved among the crowd
 like tourists. What to remember? The day was slow
 and hot, and I recall now asking you to smile

in a picture on the well-known road, cobblestoned
 and cracked, your careful balance as you made your way
 beneath the sign, the words bleached-out from summer heat.

That photograph remains, silent as they are,
 in a box unopened in my garage. And though
 I haven't looked, I know what I would find:

an arm held out beside a wall, that smile
 I wanted, your eyes half-closed, fighting, I remember,
 against the sun behind me: that bright, that strong.

Reunion

I watched you in the bar's low light,
dimmed to make us look better
as we begin feel stronger, less afraid.

I watched your hands darting quickly
among the empty glasses, the closed tab—
your name signed in haste.

You were there, but you
were also missing, the way a swallow
leaves its nest in the rafters of a bridge

but does not return the next year.
The caked mud splits and crumbles. Maybe
the swallow has died—a winter finally that cold.

Or maybe it has only forgotten the past
safety, the perch so steady it could alight
off it, even that very last time.

IV.

The Nuns at St. Agnes

St. Agnes Roman Catholic Church, Detroit

The nuns at St. Agnes play backgammon at 9—
begin silent hours at 10—and by 11, they lay
their heads on small, clean pillows and linger

for a moment in prayer, before sleep comes,
like a wave to lift them from the stone walls,
from the songs they've sung together all day.

The courage it must take—to let in
that kind of silence, an engulfing quiet
that swells—and lives—and becomes—

Portent

In 1779, Lord Lyttleton claimed that he was tormented by the spirit of his jilted mistress. She committed suicide in despair and returned to foretell the day and hour of his death. His friends, fearing for his sanity, set all the clocks forward. When the appointed hour passed without incident his lordship retired to bed much relieved and cursing himself for being a superstitious fool. At the appointed hour Lord Lyttleton expired in his sleep from a fit.

And so, the clocks set forward, they congratulated
themselves over sherry and song, released
from what they were afraid to fear, satisfied
to refuse what he said was inescapable as death.
In the din, they did not hear the faint cry,

the gasp for air, only later saw the wrung
and sweat-stained sheets, the fists clenched fast,
the blood-filled eyes flung open—their defeat
that visible. But each, in turn, sensed,
if only for a moment, relief—not for their own lives

spared, but for the promise fulfilled,
the worry deserved, and a notion so brief,
it hardly existed at all: if she remained,
they would as well, the clock hands never closing
in, but aimed outward, charging always ahead.

The Zoo

The zoo is depression, you say. And I say, No, no it isn't, thinking
of the new elephant exhibit, huge and spread over acres, built

to simulate a natural environment. These are raised in captivity, I say,
they wouldn't survive in the wild, but you are lost

in thought, you scoff and frown most of the day, through the camel ride
(afterwards the man lets me feel its hump, softer than expected,

a slight give to it, as if it were some other body part—a breast
or ear—bendable, familiar), and even through the giraffe enclosure

where I buy a \$5 leaf of lettuce to hold out to a black and roving tongue: an offering.
My fingertips graze the tongue's rough edges, the afternoon sun spreads heavy

across the land, across the two of us moving along the ground, across the bush
and shrubs, across the zoo's new monorail gliding silent past orangutans, wallabies, kudu.

We are the children of those before us, all doing the best we can, whether kept
or free. We can only ask forgiveness, can only feel the sun's heat lap against our faces.

The Orange Grove, Spain 2005

For Bethany

Pulled over off the highway on a dirt road
cutting into miles of orange groves, we counted
one, two, three, before ducking beneath
a loosened fence line, sure we hadn't been seen.

Inside the silent orchard, we searched
for perfect fruit, sun ripened globes
glinting in the midday heat, branches bent low
beneath the weight of what we intended to steal—

or *borrow*—we laughed—certain this was a lesson
we could not pass up. Sitting cross-legged
in blue shade, we peeled the skins and let them drop
at our sides. It was then you spoke of him

more freely than you had before. Distance,
you said, had begun to blur facial features,
the dip and rise of his voice on the phone,
those phrasings you loved, his hands in gesture.

Four thousand miles west, on a continent
swung out against a date line, an ocean—
the cherry blossoms bloomed as if in unison,
as if to frame the Arlington National,

those bleach-white graves lined evenly
along the green he passed each day. His thoughts
were elsewhere, typing letters late
at night, telling of his job, the new apartment,

that place he liked to eat, asking
about your life there, what you saw,
who you met in that foreign land where
the orchards spread out for acres,

ours dimmed finally in the waning light
of evening. And walking back to the car,
smiling, tired—we were caught.
After a few questions, the groundskeeper laughed.

(*new stanza*)

When we offered to pay, he waved his hand—
his pardon that abrupt—and then began
to tell in broken English how each tree
is planted alone, apart from the others,

to give it *room to grow*, he motioned outward,
a breaststroke in midair, *to give it space*.
But—he leaned in, and with fingers intertwined,
explained that the roots connect

anyway, that the trees are made sturdier
because of this. That, even from a distance,
each grows around another, a strength
you could not see, but understood immediately.

Last Night

I heard a flutter in the bushes, loud
 enough to startle me from sleep, and fearing
an intruder, I yanked the blind cord hard
 to see beside the porch a seizure of feathers:

a duck, its wings stretched out against the hedge
 and curb, its low, insistent coo forcing me
outside to see what I could do to ease
 a suffering I didn't understand. Barefoot,

shin-deep in shrubs to get a better look,
 I heard another sound—fainter, sharper cheeps,
which seemed to come from everywhere. And then,
 there they were: the little ducks, just hatched, charging

through the ivy toward my feet. She wasn't
 hurt at all, but single-minded in her post,
calling, as each called back and fell in line
 behind her, setting off into the road.

I paused—fearing a late-night driver
 who wouldn't see this march. I followed.
What else was I to do? From a distance,
 I trailed their route, so straight a course

I knew it had been planned. Through darkened
 parking lots, we advanced. The mother turned
to warn me several times; she didn't need
 my help. I slowed my pace, but shadowed still.

Ten minutes, and I saw stone steps, a gate: her aim.
 She hopped up easily and waited, calling, but
the ducklings didn't follow—the curb too high.
 They answered her plea, hurtling themselves again

and again into the wall they could not crest.
 Slowly, I eased myself beside them
and, six times, I raised a bird to meet her, each body
 soft as cloth, no weight against my palm.

(new stanza)

The mother watched, cautious. When all had scurried
to meet her, they bobbed below the fence
and faded into dark. I pushed the gate door hard,
clawed the lock, strained to see their movements, their plan,

but there was nowhere I could go.

Itinerary

I knew when you asked me to go with you
that it would never happen. The offer was too
honest, too clean for what I knew
to be the way these things worked out.

But refusing disbelief, I bought a travel guide
and we planned our days: the walk through Central Park,
an afternoon at the MOMA, dinner at the place
you worked in college. The marks I made

are still in the margins of the book I should
throw out. *It does you no good*, my mother has said,
and she's right. It serves only to remind me
of a promise broken, an instinct I fought to ignore.

The fault is mine. And so, I've kept it on my shelf,
not for the lesson it teaches each time I pass
its dog-eared pages and bent-worn spine, but
for the earnest hope that's written there—

first in pencil, then in black ink that will not fade.

Surgeon

Three Fridays in a row he took me out.
First, for drinks—though I learned then
that he does not drink. Then, to dinner,
and the last, to a museum—open late—
strolling the marble halls, whispering
about a painting I liked: a spaniel confronting
a heron, bare-breasted Nature nursing
her children. And he listened—

if not interested, then, at least,
polite. And I asked about his patients,
their injuries and deformations. He explained
how he grafted skin—like patching denim—
and how some sutures dissolve, enveloped
by the body, while others need to be removed.

We kissed twice and once, lost in something
that felt like lust, we touched
each other, fumbling, in the dark and slept,
shifting, not ever quite asleep or comfortable.
He brought my bra back in a paper sack,
and then, he did not call again.
This was not love, the surgeon and me.

He told me once of a woman's life
he saved, a burn victim, how she
had set herself alight and begged to be let go,
and I envied her for this, receiving,
though unwillingly, what only he could give.

Duelo a Garratazos

Two boys fighting knee-deep in ground, slinging clubs like rock filled sacks, aiming for the side of the head, the center of the chest, a shoulder socket, anything to knock the other back, out of his planted stance, each facing chapped lips, sun-darkened foreheads, thumbnails with dirt packed beneath, blood seeping from the temple of one, down the length of his neck, soaking his undershirt, the other holding an arm to block his face, though halfheartedly, as though he knows it will do no good, a fist clenched tight with rage, or else a kind of monotonous resentment.

And I know nothing of this landscape, the siren-green field mottled with shadows from clouds merging overhead, the faces of these men, these boys, are unfamiliar as I sling my bag across my body, shifting the weight I've carried with me all day, up *huertas* and along the *paseo*, stopping for coffee near the train station, reading the list of names on the *Once Eme* monument, four years ago already—carrying books from a secondhand sale through the *parque del buen retiro* where chubby-faced babies with hands outstretched gaze at me from their strollers and I wonder if they think in Spanish yet, or else in a language soon to be forgotten, pushed out of soft heads, from behind wide eyes peering at me without pause, by words that will grow familiar in time.

These boys were children, too. Once. Though perhaps only in Goya's imagination—growing from nothing into faint pencil marks, light enough to be rubbed off with a thumb, the soft side of a fist, later filled in with paint, glossed, trapped in the act of beating another who, like himself, grew from Goya's troubled thinking, frenzied thoughts like heated rain, pulsing through his shoulder sockets, his frantic arms, splayed out over canvas no longer blank.

Las Meninas and Perro Semihundido

after B.H. Fairchild

We are at the Prado in Madrid, and he says,
what do you think? and I search the entire
expanse of canvas, see the sidelong glance
of the princess, the attentive crouch of her
ladies in waiting, the reflection of the king
and queen as they enter the room,
and it occurs to me that I cannot find
anything of myself in this piece of art,
technically perfect as it may be.
I have been taught to look for something more.
This is the first photograph ever taken,
I am told, *it captures a single*
moment in so many different lives, but now
that I am below it, considering
the glare of the finish, I am not convinced
of its reality. *It's beautiful,* I say,
because I know I should,
and I turn to him to smile,
but he is lost in the sea of faces,
Velázquez's concentrated gaze,
the downcast eyes of a nun and the court jesters
(one nudging a tired dog on the floor).

The late afternoon light filters down
from skylights above, gathering in pools
on the marble floor and making the room
look bigger and more important
than it is, and I think of how very far
I am now from my own room a half world off
from here, the corner light that flashes yellow
over indifferent traffic and the sound
of cars driving past. And then I remember
this morning, fragments of light gliding across
his back as he got out of bed
and stepped quietly into the hallway,
not wanting to wake me.

We leave Velázquez behind and step out
into a maze of enormous hallways full of voices
and movement, a group of school children
passes, each holding hands to form a chain.
We descend the wide, stone staircase

(continue stanza)

and enter a much narrower room. Inside,
I float past Goya's dark paintings
and in a tangle of monstrous, contorted faces,
something smaller takes my eye and I am pulled
into dull color and empty eyes as a small dog
looks up into sand raining down.
His face is crumpled, his upturned eyes hopeless.
Finding something I recognize
on this unfinished canvas, I study every detail
and want to know just how he feels
in this moment or what Goya thought
of that feeling when he painted this little dog.
What are you thinking?
he asks, and I begin to tell him.

The Dowser

Like one who hunts for water, she sought
those who could not be seen, a surge
of energy, she said, or magnetic pull, which
forced the dowsing rods she clasped to shudder

faintly, or sometimes pitch, as if another
grabbed their ends—*this*, she said, *a sign*.
But whether fearsome or kindly, a curse
to know, or gift, she could not tell them that,

those who came to watch her dowse the dead—
their dead—who brought questions and demands,
and cried for want of closure, or for the belief
that they had found it, a lingering existence

enough to prove that the living are yet loved,
that there beneath the dry, hard earth—a sea.

Notes

“After Hearing of a Friend’s Mother’s Death”: The epigraph comes from Leonard Cohen’s song, “Suzanne.”

“The Death of a Gulf Coast Town”: The title of this poem is an adaptation of the title of B.H. Fairchild’s poem, “The Death of a Small Town.” The epigraph comes from the same poem.

“Nativity”: The phrase “break up the house” is taken from Claudia Emerson’s poem, “Breaking Up the House.”

“Calle de los Suspiros”: *Calle de los Suspiros* is a road in the town of Colonia del Sacramento, Uruguay. It translates to mean “The Street of Sighs.”

“Portent”: The epigraph is adapted from a passage in Paul Roland’s *The Complete Book of Ghosts: A Fascinating Exploration of the Spirit World, from Apparitions to Haunted Places*.

“*Duelo a Garratazos*”: The title of this poem, which translates to mean “fight with clubs,” comes from a painting by the same name by Francisco Goya which is on display at the Museo del Prado in Madrid, Spain.

“*Las Meninas* and *Perro Semihundido*”: The title comes from the name of two paintings on display at the Museo del Prado in Madrid. “*Las Meninas*,” or “The Ladies in Waiting,” is by Diego Velázquez. “*Perro Semihundido*,” or “Half-drowned Dog,” is by Francisco Goya.” The

first two lines of this poem are adapted from the first two lines of B.H. Fairchild's poem,
"Beauty."