

‘_____’: Elegy’s Ghost

and

Stranger, Baby

submitted by Emily Berry to the University of East Anglia, School of Literature,
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| Abstract

This thesis comprises a creative and critical exploration of grief, loss and absence in what I call elegiac writing. The critical portion of the thesis, ‘_____’: *Elegy’s Ghost*, marks out the terms of my creative work, by examining how other contemporary writers have addressed these themes and by considering the uses and limitations of ‘elegy’ as a formal category. My particular interest is in writings that embark from a particular loss to explore loss itself as a concept beyond (or alongside) its object and how this manifests in language.

In chapter one I lay the groundwork for my study, which goes on to closely focus on elegiac works by three writers, Kristin Prevallet, Anne Carson and Noelle Kocot. This includes an overview of the history and evolution of elegy, looking at both the literary background and the influence of psychoanalytic writings in the genre, in order to position my argument. I maintain, for example, that Freud’s ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ has been profoundly misinterpreted. I argue that contemporary writers exploring grief often use the term ‘elegy’ ambivalently, as evidenced by their engagement with the concept in their work. My term ‘elegiac writing’ seeks to acknowledge this ambivalence in writings which – in keeping with the ‘vexed experience’ of writing about grief – wrestle with both content and form. Chapters two, three and four are each devoted to examining a single elegiac work, considering the different ways loss can be registered in language through, for example, holes, gaps, negation and obscurity. My poetry collection *Stranger, Baby*, written in conversation with the creative and critical works examined here, is an encounter with my own experience of grief and the process of writing about it. I conclude the critical portion of the thesis by reflexively examining this process and its relationship to my critical research.

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| Declaration

Stranger, Baby was published by Faber & Faber in February 2017. Individual poems from the collection appeared between 2014 and 2017 in the following publications: *BODY*, *Fungiculture*, *Granta*, *Kakania*, *London Review of Books*, *Morning Star*, *New Statesman*, *Poetry*, *Poetry International*, *Poetry London*, *The Poetry Review* and *tender*. A selection of poems from the collection were also published in the anthology *If I'm Scared We Can't Win: Penguin Modern Poets 1* in 2016. In addition, a small prose piece drawing on and adapting my research on Kristin Prevallet appeared in *The Poetry Review* in 2015.

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1 | Signs of the Inarticulable: Contemporary Elegiac Writing and its Forms

This thesis arises first from my interest in my own experience of loss, and in the creative and psychic states that arose when I began to contemplate it; and second from my interest in the writings of others on the subject of loss – specifically writings that seem to embark from a particular loss to explore loss itself as a concept over and above (or alongside) its object. ‘There is the thing itself, and then there is the predicament of its cavity’, writes Karen Green in *Bough Down* (2013), an elegiac work for her husband David Foster Wallace.¹ I wondered what it meant to contemplate loss, to be thoroughly compelled by a bright, blank space, something which was both there and not there – how could it be explained? There is nothing new about this question; as Robert Hass observes in his poem ‘Meditation at Lagunitas’, ‘All the new thinking is about loss. / In this it resembles all the old thinking.’² Perhaps the question retains its charge because it has never been – can never be – adequately answered; we will have to go on thinking. We repeat our themes. What follows is the culmination of a critical and creative project preoccupied by old and new thinking (and feeling) on the subject of loss and the role elegiac writing might play in delivering, manifesting, or facilitating that thinking.

In asking questions about loss and about its manifestations in literature, I am of course also asking questions about elegy, which, however inadequate, remains the only word we have for describing this kind of work. Elegy is generally defined today as referring to a sad poem or song (and increasingly any work of art), usually a lament for the dead; this is a fairly wide set of terms, but – though creative works that use ‘elegy’ in their title or subtitle are manifold – not every piece of contemporary writing that falls into these categories defines itself as such, perhaps *elegy* seems too grand, too old-fashioned, or too elusive for, as Jahan Ramazani has it, ‘rethinking the vexed experience of grief in the modern world’.³ Those who do adopt the term,

¹ Karen Green, *Bough Down* (Siglio: Los Angeles, CA, 2013), p. 169.

² Robert Hass, *Praise* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1981), p. 4.

³ Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. ix.

such as Mary Jo Bang in her collection of poems mourning the death of her adult son, *Elegy* (2007), may do so with ambivalence – a complicated relationship with the expression of their grief echoing the complications of grief itself. Of course there are many writers for whom the notion of elegy is relatively straightforward – this study has no interest in such work except as a point of departure. Rather I intend to explore what I define as ‘elegiac writing’ – creative work which openly struggles with the paradoxes, conflicts and challenges of representing loss and absence, and I use the word ‘elegy’ with considerable ambivalence myself. In such works the notion of elegy itself becomes a placeholder for the loss it aims to represent, which is equally elusive. Max Cavitch writes: ‘all elegies – indeed all mourning arts – are about the struggle to make the most out of some sign of the inarticulable, the trace of the loss that abides in our mostly inaccessible lives’;⁴ I am interested in exploring the ways in which elegiac writing might *represent*, rather than articulate, the inarticulable; how it preserves that ‘trace of loss’. In a mathematical context ‘placeholder’ is defined as ‘a symbol used in a logical or mathematical expression to represent another term or quantity that is not yet specified but may occupy that place later’,⁵ which seems a useful analogy for an understanding of elegy, if we consider that in providing a space for the exploration of loss, elegy seems to strive towards becoming (something that ‘may occupy that place later’), but never quite gets there.

‘A hybrid genre if ever there was one’

It emerges that we are not really sure what elegy means, or that the meanings we have attached to it render it ill-suited to certain applications. Elegy is something, but we don’t quite know what. Karen Weisman, in her introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy* (2010), admits, ‘there is little scholarly consensus about what constitutes an elegy, or how to distinguish between elegy and the broader category of elegiac literature’; surprisingly the handbook makes no attempts to redress this situation, stating at the outset: ‘This volume emphatically does not seek to establish a simple definitive definition, certainly not one that would hold for all periods’.⁶ In

⁴ Max Cavitch, *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 15.

⁵ Collins English Dictionary, def. 1.

⁶ Karen Weisman, *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 2.

Ramazani's study of elegy – one of only a handful of book-length studies of the genre – he chooses not to explore the semantics of the term, leading with the broad definition 'the poetry of mourning for the dead'.⁷ Despite clarifying that for his purposes elegy encompasses 'other kinds of poems, such as self-elegies, war poems, the blues, epochal elegies, mock elegies and lynch poems',⁸ the term for him seems relatively uncomplex. The book's title however – *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* – in relegating 'elegy' to the subtitle, seems to suggest a lack of confidence in its robustness as a formal category.

Ramazani's is one of two texts central to the admittedly sparsely populated field of what we might term elegy studies, the other being *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (1987) by Peter M. Sacks. While other studies have tended to take a cross-section of the genre, looking at particular types or aspects of elegy, these two books strike me as more comprehensive, both aiming to give an authoritative account of where elegy has come from and where it might be going through close readings of particular examples. Their different takes (Ramazani's argument critiquing Sacks's and developed to some extent in opposition to it) represent two key readings of the elegiac mode, albeit focusing on different literary periods: the more traditional (Sacks's) focuses on the redemptive possibilities of the form, while Ramazani's postmodern interpretation finds elegy 'in revolt against consolation',⁹ an expression not only of the inconsolability of mourners but also of their defiance against the idea that consolation might be achievable at all. Tammy Clewell, in 'Mourning Beyond Melancholia: Freud's Psychoanalysis of Loss' (2004), an essay offering a useful antidote to these and other studies, asks, more optimistically, how we might work towards 'an affirmative theory of endless mourning',¹⁰ rejecting both Sacks's problematic notion of elegy as redemptive and Ramazani's argument that modern elegy entails 'sustain[ing] anger' and 'reopen[ing] the wounds of loss'.¹¹

My explorations in the field have been informed by these and several other notable studies (as well as by the creative works I will be discussing), among them W. David Shaw, *Elegy and Paradox: Testing the Conventions* (1994); Melissa F. Zeiger,

⁷ Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, p. 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

¹⁰ Tammy Clewell, 'Mourning Beyond Melancholia: Freud's Psychoanalysis of Loss', *Journal of the American Psychoanalytical Association*, 52/1 (March 2004), p. 56.

¹¹ Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, p. xi.

Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality, and the Changing Shapes of Elegy (1997); Max Cavitch, *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (2007); David Kennedy, *Elegy* (2007); and Priscilla Uppal, *We Are What We Mourn: The Contemporary English-Canadian Elegy* (2009). Various common themes emerge: the question, as mentioned, of whether elegy is consolatory or non-consolatory and indeed what the point of such an assessment might be (a distinction often aligned with the similarly problematic comparison between ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’ mourning); the contradiction inherent in expressing in language the notion that loss is inexpressible and that language is not ‘enough’; and the potential discomfort of the elegist in turning another’s death into, as it were, aesthetic gain. The question of what ‘consolation’ might encompass, however, is not fully explored; there is an assumption in much of the critical theory that consolation entails ‘coming to terms with’ or ‘moving on from’ the death being mourned – but in practice, and in the elegiac writings I consider here, consolation often takes the form of continued engagement with loss. Furthermore, beyond the acknowledgement that the term ‘elegy’ lacks definition, its fuzziness as a literary form has not been closely explored. An exception to this is the essential chapter ‘Forms of Elegy’ in Angela Leighton’s *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism and the Legacy of the Word* (2007), which considers the form’s ‘objectlessness’.¹² Stephanie Burt has written that ‘one of the oldest topics in elegy [is] the inadequacy of human language before death’¹³ – perhaps it is not surprising then that the word used to describe such explorations is itself inadequate. Within this critical framework, the thesis will explore in depth three creative works that I consider elegiac, focusing on one per chapter – Kristin Prevallet’s *I, Afterlife: An Essay in Mourning Time* (2007), Anne Carson’s *Nox* (2010), and Noelle Kocot’s *Sunny Wednesday* (2009) – each of which responds to the death of a person significant to the writer (a father, brother and husband respectively) and expresses, in different ways, an ambivalence about that response and the means by which it is made – that is, an ambivalence about the writing of elegy. I will conclude with an analysis of my own elegiac work and my personal ambivalence towards the term ‘elegy’, considering how my creative work has been informed and enriched by my critical

¹² Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 222.

¹³ Stephanie Burt, ‘Professor or Pinhead: Anne Carson’s *Nox*’, *London Review of Books* (14 July 2011), 33/14, <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n14/stephen-burt/professor-or-pinhead>> [accessed 6 October 2017].

study of the genre, and how it might enhance my own and others' understanding of contemporary elegy.

Because elegy is the only useful catchall term we have for talking about writings on loss and grief, I want to unpick our ideas about elegy a little here – see how much weight it can bear. We don't know very much about elegy's progression through the ages, for example, and how exactly it transitioned from its classical roots as a distinct poetic form unassociated with mourning, to its present-day application, which must account in part for the term's continuing amorphousness. In classical poetry 'elegy' is said to have signified a work written in elegiac couplets – which consist of 'a hexameter followed by a pentameter' – and therefore referred to a form rather than a subject.¹⁴ Catullus' elegy for his brother, 'Poem 101', which is central to Anne Carson's *Nox*, and opens '*Multas per gentes et multa per aequora vectus / advenio has miseris, frater, ad inferias*', is written in elegiac couplets. For Carson such a form represents 'the acoustic shape of a perfect exchange [...] Rhythmically, the elegiac couplet resembles a pendulum: it moves out, moves back, by its own momentum, wasting nothing. Economy of breath in motion.'¹⁵ *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (1993) also finds the elegiac couplet rhythmically gratifying: 'the shorter second line gives the distinctive and satisfying effect of end-shortening or catalexis' (elsewhere in the text 'catalexis' is described as 'one of the fundamental principles of rhythm').¹⁶ Significantly, Carson points out that epitaphs tended to be written in elegiac couplets, an early association of the form with mourning. However, Weisman notes disconcertingly that while 'most scholars of post-classical elegy trace its foundations to antiquity, [...] in the world of classical studies, there is still no consensus on the origin of elegy'.¹⁷ *The Cambridge Companion to Latin Love Elegy* (2013) provides a useful set of references to the endeavours of classical scholars to this end,¹⁸ also indicating that elegy's origins seem to have been obscure even to the Romans:

¹⁴ Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan, eds, *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 321.

¹⁵ Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost (Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan)* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 89.

¹⁶ Preminger and Brogan, eds, *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, p. 321 and p. 174.

¹⁷ Weisman, *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*, p. 1.

¹⁸ Thea S. Thorsen, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Latin Love Elegy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 1–2, nn. 3–4.

The explanation of the origin of elegy as lament is attested in Horace, who writes [...] *[elegy was] first a lament composed with unequally joined verses, thereafter a thought with the power of a granted prayer was included; but grammarians fight over which author first produced little elegies, and the debate is still awaiting its final judgement.*¹⁹

And so it happens that the debate is still awaiting its final judgement today. Furthermore, in *A Companion to Roman Love Elegy* (2007), Barbara K. Gold attests that, even in its classical manifestation, elegy lacked a clear definition:

to what genre does Roman love elegy belong? There is general agreement that we cannot call elegy a genre in and of itself, since it is both too complex to fit into a single category and too idiosyncratic to be called simply “elegy”. As Farrell says, elegy is “a hybrid genre if ever there was one”.²⁰

In the same volume, the cited Joseph Farrell discusses the conflicted relationship between Greek and Roman elegy as a means of demonstrating their fundamental differences, that they ‘are almost entirely different genres’.²¹ The Romans, he argues, ‘creat[ed] out of inherited ingredients something new and unparalleled’.²² As such we might envisage elegy as having been, from its very beginnings, an unstable, malleable and transformative category.

‘I don’t want to talk about it, for fear of making literature out of it’

The three writers under discussion in this thesis engage with the notion of elegy in different ways. While Kristin Prevallet, whose *I, Afterlife* is the subject of chapter two, finds elegy to be ultimately a flexible category broad enough to encompass a variety of forms and modes, Anne Carson, in *Nox*, is more resistant to the term. Although her text opens, and indeed is structured around, the classical elegy ‘Poem 101’ by Catullus, and seems to refer to itself as elegy (‘I wanted to fill my elegy with

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 2, n. 4 (my emphasis, to highlight the quoted text – the original Latin has been omitted for brevity).

²⁰ Barbara K. Gold, ed., *A Companion to Roman Love Elegy* (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 1.

²¹ Joseph Farrell, ‘Calling out the Greeks: Dynamics of the Elegiac Canon’, in *A Companion to Roman Love Elegy*, p. 13.

²² Ibid., pp. 22–23.

light of all kinds'),²³ Carson prefers to describe *Nox* as an 'epitaph'. 'Elegy, I don't know,' she has said in an interview,

It's a difficult form, I would say. It's hard to keep the dignity of the subject without getting your fingerprints all over it. It's very hard to find the right place to stand, to elegize or eulogize somebody. But I thought by making these pages instead of just writing them, it helped me to do that, because making is somehow...I don't know...seems less egotistical, I don't know why.²⁴

It's possible to infer from this that one distinction between epitaph and elegy, at least in Carson's terms, is that an epitaph is something that involves making. Her interest in this subject and indeed in notions of absence can be traced to an earlier academic text whose insights are particularly relevant to *Nox – Economy of the Unlost (Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan)* (1999), in which she considers the significance of negation in the work of the two poets. Carson's choice of words in the quotation above is notable because *Nox*, via being (originally) handmade, featuring smudges, scribbling and other marks alongside cut-out texts, does literally have Carson's fingerprints on it, even though it might retain a certain emotional distance. This brings us to a central discomfort of the topic: that there is no way to write elegy, or about loss, without the writer's shadow falling on it. Elegy, if seen as a subgenre of poetry, is one of the few that bestows a title – elegist – on its creator. Those who write or make art in response to grief are frequently conflicted by the notion that another's loss might be transformed into their own 'aesthetic gain'.²⁵ In his *Mourning Diary*, kept for two years following the death of his mother, Roland Barthes raises this concern: 'I don't want to talk about it, for fear of making literature out of it – or without being sure of not doing so – although as a matter of fact literature originates within these truths' – his final remark highlighting the complexity of the matter.²⁶ Of course *Mourning Diary* is not presented (and presumably was never

²³ Anne Carson, *Nox* (New York: New Directions, 2010), section 1.0. (Since the pages of *Nox* are not numbered, I give the section number in which each quote appears, though it should be noted some sections are several pages long.)

²⁴ Eleanor Wachtel, 'An Interview with Anne Carson', *Brick*, 89 (Summer 2012), <<https://brickmag.com/an-interview-with-anne-carson/>> [accessed 7 March 2016].

²⁵ Clewell, 'Mourning Beyond Melancholia', p. 50.

²⁶ Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Notting Hill Editions, 2011), 31 October 1977, p. 23.

conceived of) as art, though someone with Barthes' publication record would arguably be unlikely to write without some awareness of an audience, even if only a notional or potential one.

One of the pieties of elegy is that 'the dignity of the subject' that Carson refers to can only be preserved if the messy, bereaved self of the mourner is kept at bay, and elegies that are deemed to have succeeded in this regard are praised accordingly; a review of Marie Howe's elegiac collection *What the Living Do* (1999), for example, notes approvingly, 'Despite the fathomless pain inherent in these poems, Howe never succumbs to sentimentality or self-pity'.²⁷ It's worth asking whether the subject really is dignified and indeed who this dignity might be conferred upon, since a person being memorialised is always by definition dead and gone. Before whom does the elegist wish to appear dignified, whose respect are they courting? With this in mind it is also worth asking who is elegy *for*, as W. S. Merwin does in his brief poem, 'Elegy', whose single line reads: 'Who would I show it to'.²⁸ The flat affect of the line, brought about primarily by the omission of the question mark, points to the potential uselessness of the endeavour of elegy, if we assume that its most desired respondent is the person who has been lost, whose reply of course will never come. But perhaps elegy is really about the living. Jacques Derrida, who wrote a number of eulogies during his life for peers such as Roland Barthes, repeatedly acknowledged this. Introducing *The Work of Mourning* (2001), a collection of these eulogies, the editors comment:

Derrida suggests that it is only "in us" that the dead may speak, that it is only by speaking *of* or *as* the dead that we can keep them alive. [...] The dead can and must be only "for us," and everything we receive from and give to them will remain among ourselves.²⁹

The psychoanalyst Adam Phillips comments similarly, 'The dead can answer us only in our own words.'³⁰ Merwin's poem abruptly closes off the space that opens up

²⁷ Marie Howe, *What the Living Do* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, Inc, 1999); from the book's cover blurb, attributed to *Memphis Commercial Appeal*.

²⁸ W. S. Merwin, *The Carrier of Ladders* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), p. 137.

²⁹ Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, eds Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 9–10. (The eulogies have individual translators, named in the text.)

³⁰ Adam Phillips, 'Time Pieces', in *Side Effects* (2006), p. 106.

when a writer – despite what Freud calls ‘reality-testing’ (that is, proof of the non-existence of the lost person)³¹ – continues to ask questions. Carson writes in *Nox*, ‘It is when you are asking about something that you realize you yourself have survived it, and so you must carry it, or fashion it into a thing that carries itself.’³²

Another realm

Today the harmony that Carson describes when discussing the ‘perfect exchange’ of the elegiac couplet might seem antithetical to an experience of grief, and although contemporary elegies may employ formal constraints (though they frequently do not), in fact the elegiac now requires no particular form. Pastoral elegy, which ‘direct[s] itself towards ceremonial mourning for an exemplary figure’, extending from the classical period right through the seventeenth century, is thought to be ‘one of the oldest and most influential species of the genre’.³³ While the pastoral elegy has no set formal properties it could be said to have built up a certain scaffolding via the conventions of its content which include, among other things, ‘extended use of repetition and refrain, antiphony or competition between voices, appeals and questionings of deities and witnesses, outbreaks of anger or criticism [...] and the use of imagery such as water, vegetation, sources of light’.³⁴ Certainly some of these tropes can still be found in contemporary elegiac writing. It wasn’t until the sixteenth century that the term began to be associated with mourning (though not exclusively); by the nineteenth-century Samuel Taylor Coleridge was writing that

Elegy is a form of poetry natural to the reflective mind. It may treat of any subject, but it must treat of no subject for itself; but always and exclusively with reference to the poet. As he will feel regret for the past or desire for the future, so sorrow and love became the principal themes of the elegy. *Elegy presents every thing as lost and gone or absent and future.*³⁵

³¹ Sigmund Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. xiv (1914–1916), trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), p. 244.

³² Carson, *Nox*, section 1.1.

³³ Preminger and Brogan, eds, *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, p. 322.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Specimens of the Table Talk of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (23 October 1833), <<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/8489/pg8489-images.html>> [accessed 6 October 2017]. (My emphasis.)

At this point elegy was still not solely associated with grief, at least not grief about the loss of a person – it seemed to denote for Coleridge an essentially solipsistic, melancholic mode of writing which, regardless of subject, finds itself imbued with loss. His final sentence here makes me think again of elegy as placeholder, that marker of the ‘absent *or future*’ – the hope, however paradoxical, contained perhaps within every elegy, that whatever (whoever) is absent or lost, might somehow be found.

Denise Riley’s recent collection *Say Something Back* (2016) explores, in part, the question of how and why we might address our dead, and what sort of answer we might expect from them. She takes her title from W. S. Graham, a poet whose confidence in speaking to the void and animating it through his address – whether in directly elegiac poems such as ‘Dear Bryan Wynter’, or otherwise – seems to create an artefact that listens as well as speaks. ‘Say something back’ is drawn from the thirty-third ‘implement’ in Graham’s long, fragmentary poem, ‘Implements in Their Places’:

Do not think you have to say
Anything back. But you do
Say something back which I
Hear by the way I speak to you.³⁶

By turning the phrase into an imperative, Riley seems to challenge both the silence of the dead and the notion that the proper trajectory of grief is to move towards ‘acceptance’ of that silence. Her long poem ‘A Part Song’, which mourns the death of her son, is one piece that explores this idea in depth:

[...] And me lamentably
Slow to ‘take it in’ – far better toss it out,
How should I take in such a bad idea.
No, I’ll stick it out instead for presence. If my
Exquisite hope can wrench you right back

³⁶ W. S. Graham, *Implements in Their Places* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977), pt 33, p. 71.

Here, resigned boy, do let it as I'm waiting.³⁷

'I'll stick it out instead for presence' suggests, in its way, that the very act of waiting/hoping might become in itself a kind of presence – rather than 'take in' the loss (and, we might infer, thereby *losing* the loss), the speaker 'stick[s] it out'. We read 'stick it out' figuratively as meaning to 'wait' or 'endure', but interpreted literally it implies a kind of manifestation of the 'bad idea' of the loss: 'No, I'll stick it out instead' – the loss is quite literally presented, made present, while also being kept *as a loss*. Barthes puts forward a similar analysis of his experience in *Mourning Diary*: 'Mourning: not a crushing oppression, a blockage (which would suppose a 'filling'), but a painful availability: I am *vigilant*, expectant, awaiting the onset of a "sense of life".'³⁸ The relationship he proposes between 'blockage', 'filling' and 'availability' accords with Riley's lyrical rendering, whereby the loss is not 'taken in' – which would represent 'blockage', an unwanted 'filling' of the space left by the loss. In both cases this space is left open and available – listening, like a W. S. Graham poem. As Barthes describes it in another section of his diary, we find the mourner 'existing quite *naturally* within this solitude, functioning there, working there, accompanied by, *fastened to* the "presence of absence"'.³⁹

This paradox is central to much elegiac writing. As Susan Howe writes in her elegiac essay-poem reflecting on the death of her husband, 'The Disappearance Approach' (2010), 'Maybe there is some not yet understood return to people we have loved and lost. I need to imagine the possibility even if I don't believe it.'⁴⁰ This 'need to imagine' becomes another important feature of elegy – imagination, after all, being (potentially) limitless. What interplay might occur between imagination and loss? Graham's elegiacs find his voice moving freely in the space that opens up when he speaks to his dead friend in 'Dear Bryan Wynter':

Anyhow how are things?

Are you still somewhere

³⁷ Denise Riley, *Say Something Back* (London: Picador, 2016), p. 7.

³⁸ Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, 8 December 1977, p. 80.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 28 November 1977, p. 69.

⁴⁰ Susan Howe, *That This* (New York: New Directions, 2010), p. 17.

With your long legs
And twitching smile under
Your blue hat walking
Across a place? Or am
I greedy to make you up
Again out of memory?
Are you there at all?⁴¹

The imagined location of Graham's interlocutor remains obscure – he might be 'somewhere', 'walking / Across a place' or simply 'there'; 'Where shall I send something?' Graham wants to know later. That there might be such a place somewhere beyond the poem is made possible by the work of the poem: in the space of the poem there is no disjunct between the imagined and the real – 'am / I greedy to make you up' Graham asks, continuing to address Wynter even as he acknowledges that it is only through an act of imagination that he is able to do this. Adam Piette observes that for Graham 'the page becomes a terrain shared by two time zones [...] the strangeness being that the poet, by inscribing her voice onto the white space, enters into a space between'.⁴² Riley's 'Listening for lost people' feels to some extent like a response to or engagement with Graham's ethos, claiming a space within language where the absent may appear:

[...] to
converse with shades, yourself become a shadow.
The souls of the dead are the spirit of language:
you hear them alight inside that spoken thought.⁴³

In such a space a kind of synaesthesia prevails, where the visual might be apprehended aurally, and vice versa: shadows speak to one other; while – if we read 'on fire' for 'alight' – the souls of the dead might manifest within language as flames which can

⁴¹ Graham, *Implements in Their Places* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977), p. 83.

⁴² Adam Piette, "'Roaring between the lines": W. S. Graham and the White Threshold of Line-Breaks', in *W. S. Graham: Speaking Towards You*, ed. Ralph Pite (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), p. 47.

⁴³ Riley, *Say Something Back*, p. 32.

be heard.⁴⁴ The several meanings of ‘alight’ as both adjective and verb invite various interpretations of this final line; its associations with the conclusion of a journey – given, of course, that this is a poem about the dead – are particularly satisfying. Such definitions include: ‘to get down from a horse or other means of transport; (hence) to finish one’s ride, to stop’, ‘to arrive’, ‘To go or come down; to descend’, ‘Of Christ, the Holy Ghost, etc.: to descend so as to be with or within a person’.⁴⁵ In the space of the poem, ‘that spoken thought’, the dead can remain companions: at the end of their ride they arrive ‘within a person’. Could this be Howe’s ‘not yet understood return to people we have loved and lost’? Max Cavitch contends that ‘Elegy is a genre that enables fantasies about worlds we cannot reach’,⁴⁶ and while I read something faintly critical in the term ‘fantasies’, I think there is a point to be made about transcendence – a way in which the elegiac might allow access to another realm.

The forms of elegy

In the texts I will be discussing in these chapters – texts most readily defined as poetry, but pushing against the perceived boundaries of that form – it seems to me that explorations of elegy often support a wider exploration of the concept of loss; that is, that a literary framework, however loosely applied, might give a writer some foothold from which they can launch themselves, especially when the subject with which they are trying to get to grips is very short on footholds indeed. These are works that may wrestle with their form, or cause their readers to wrestle with it, moving between or straddling what we would usually understand as different forms or genres of writing. ‘I’m entering this open prose area’ writes Howe in ‘The Disappearance Approach’,⁴⁷ a phrase suggestive of a space in which the speaker might find themselves quite at liberty, but at the same time exposed and vulnerable. Ben Lerner, in his polemical *The Hatred of Poetry* (2016), offers a useful analysis of the way departures from the expectations of form can be a particularly appropriate means of signalling loss, via a discussion of the work of Claudia Rankine. Noting that the most

⁴⁴ Oxford English Dictionary, def. 1.A.1.

⁴⁵ Oxford English Dictionary, def. 2.II.2b, 2.II.2c, 2.II.3, 2.II.4.

⁴⁶ Cavitch, *American Elegy*, p. 1

⁴⁷ Howe, *That This*, p. 27.

recent of Rankine's books, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004) and *Citizen* (2014) share the same subtitle, '*An American Lyric*', he writes:

The invitation to read these two volumes as lyric poetry strains against one of their most notable formal features: The books are mainly written in prose. And that prose is "measured" less in the sense of having a poetic prosody than in the sense of evincing a kind of restraint, verging on flatness, exhaustion, dissociation. [...]

The "lyric" is traditionally associated with brevity, intensely felt emotion, and highly musical verse; Rankine's writing here is none of those things [...]. What I encounter in Rankine is the felt unavailability of traditional lyric categories; the instruction to read her writing as poetry—and especially as lyric poetry—catalyzes an experience of their loss, like a sensation in a phantom limb.⁴⁸

By these terms, a form that does not meet our expectations of its particular genre is in a sense haunted by those expectations; we experience – in this case – 'verse's felt unavailability' or 'verse's ghostly presence'.⁴⁹ Rankine's confrontation with the notions and limitations of lyric can be compared to the way notions of elegy haunt much elegiac writing, signifying a form that the text cannot – or refuses to – embody. In Prevallet's *I, Afterlife: An Essay in Mourning Time*, for example, we find a collection of texts that cannot easily be placed in any generic category, including a sequence of short, titled pieces most recognisable as poems under the heading 'Forms of Elegy'.

As I briefly indicated earlier, an instructive analysis of elegy's formal properties emerges in Angela Leighton's *On Form*, in which she notes that unlike most other literary forms, 'elegy is a form defined by content';⁵⁰ as she goes on to outline, like its subject (that is, the dead), it has no form to speak of. She writes:

For elegy is a literary form defined by the body-form which lies somewhere within the container or reliquary of the text; but it is also a form left empty,

⁴⁸ Ben Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2016), pp. 89–91.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁵⁰ Leighton, *On Form*, p. 220.

feeling the hollow shell of its literary objectlessness. It is a word which suits the elegist's need to be writing about someone, formed in the work's verbal memory and imagination, as well as the knowledge that there is nothing there, except the work's leisured and formed movements.⁵¹

Here we find again a paradox, in that the absence at the centre of elegy – its lost subject – becomes its defining feature; impossible, in that case, for it to be very clearly defined. It's hardly surprising then, that elegy's manifestations are so various. As has been noted earlier, besides having no established form, elegy's subject was once not so clearly demarcated either.

Which seems to make it a fitting form for its subject. When psychoanalyst Darian Leader noted the paucity of theoretical work on the subject of mourning, he observed that this did not seem to be the case when it came to poetry and literature: 'It occurred to me that perhaps the scientific literature on mourning that I had been searching for was simply *all literature*.'⁵² This is not a remark robust enough to bear very close scrutiny of course, but nonetheless I think it gets at the idea that elegy might not be so circumscribed. It is perhaps testament to the relatively minimal critical work that has been done around elegy that a seemingly offhand remark on the subject in Virginia Woolf's diaries has been found by several scholars to offer rather an important contribution to the debate:

But while I write I am making up "To the Lighthouse"—the sea is to be heard all through it. I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant "novel". A new _____ by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?⁵³

We can only speculate what it was about her books that Woolf considered (potentially) elegiac – though she subsequently noted that *To the Lighthouse* was the book in which she felt the ghost of her mother had finally been laid to rest.⁵⁴ But

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

⁵² Darian Leader, *The New Black: Mourning, Melancholia and Depression* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 6.

⁵³ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, vol. III, 1925–1930*, ed. Anne Oliver Bell (London: The Hogarth Press, 1980), 27 June 1925, p. 34.

⁵⁴ Virginia Woolf, 'Sketch of the Past', in *Moments of Being: Autobiographical Writings* (London: Pimlico, 2002), p. 92.

what her proposition seems to imply is that she saw a certain flexibility in the term ‘elegy’ in keeping with contemporary approaches to the genre. David Kennedy has written, of Woolf’s comment, that ‘the possibility that a novel might be an elegy exemplifies the particular difficulties in giving an account of elegy written in the last hundred years or so’⁵⁵ – it may, but in a more closely focused study Woolf’s proposition supports an emphasis on forms we might have difficulty categorising, or might want to find a new name for.

Both *I, Afterlife* and *Nox* find themselves particularly at odds with the limitations of genre classification. *I, Afterlife* collects together a series of linked but disparate texts responding to Prevallet’s father’s death by suicide, including poems, lyric essays and images alongside what might be called captions (or it may be that the images caption the text), as well as the transcript of the eulogy the author read at her father’s funeral. *Nox*, a mixed-media work commemorating Carson’s brother, can be seen as both object/artwork and text, being a reproduction of a handmade book that collages together fragments of writing and images from various sources. Since both authors are otherwise known as poets these hard-to-define works have perhaps fallen into the category of poetry by default; what *is* clear is that they are both works produced in some kind of relationship to mourning. Prevallet’s book, it’s worth noting, is published by independent US publisher Essay Press, which (unsurprisingly, given its name) describes itself as ‘dedicated to publishing artful, innovative, and culturally relevant prose’, even though *I, Afterlife* contains sections that appear to be poetry.⁵⁶ Noelle Kocot’s *Sunny Wednesday*, the subject of my third chapter, is a somewhat different proposition in that it is readily recognisable as poetry, using on the whole fairly conventional forms – though Kocot’s frequent use of what we might call ‘one-line stanzas’ (poems made up of single lines separated by a stanza break), is less familiar. The difficulty in defining the collection comes instead from its content: these are poems that are mysterious and riddling, their elegiac element far from immediately apparent.

These uncertainties about form and genre seem significant in the light of my questions about elegy because the experience of loss is regularly one that knocks our

⁵⁵ David Kennedy, *Elegy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 1.

⁵⁶ Essay Press website, <essaypress.org/squeezy/about/> [accessed 29 June 2016].

confidence in language, causing us to resort to platitudes and formulas ('there are no words', etc.). Denise Riley has written – in *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (2012), a text that itself is hard to categorise, falling somewhere between life-writing and essay – of the way in which language 'falters' when we attempt to discuss death: 'And what of the phrase "his body", once there's no "he" to animate and own it? [...] It's as if any death causes the collapse of the simplest referring language.'⁵⁷ She cites a blackly humorous short story by Lydia Davis preoccupied with the same concerns: in 'Grammar Questions', we encounter a speaker wondering at length how to speak with correct grammar about her father while he is dying and in future, once he is dead:

He will be put in a box, not a coffin. Then, when he is in that box, will I say, "That is my father in that box," or "That was my father in that box," or will I say, "That, in the box, was my father."⁵⁸

A similar observation appears in Barthes' *Mourning Diary* – 'In the sentence "She's no longer suffering", to what, to whom does "she" refer? What does that present tense mean?'⁵⁹ – one could find numerous examples of the same concern in other elegiac works; Riley herself explores it further in 'Listening for lost people': "'They died" is not an utterance in the syntax of life / where they belonged, no *belong*'.⁶⁰ Language does not easily accommodate the dead; and yet, there *are* words. Barthes again: 'My suffering is *inexpressible* but all the same utterable, speakable. The very fact that language affords me the word "intolerable" immediately achieves a certain tolerance.'⁶¹

'Freud's early hope'

I, Afterlife, Nox and *Sunny Wednesday* all engage ambivalently with the notion of elegy, by turns repudiating it and embracing it, or refusing to address it directly at all, in keeping with Ramazani's theory that contemporary elegy is 'anti-elegiac'.⁶²

⁵⁷ Denise Riley, *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (London: Capsule Editions, 2012), pp. 54–55.

⁵⁸ Lydia Davis, *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 528.

⁵⁹ Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, 29 October 1977, p. 15.

⁶⁰ Riley, *Say Something Back*, p. 32.

⁶¹ Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, 1 August 1978, p. 175.

⁶² Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, p. xi.

Ramazani's argument rests on his rejection of Peter Sacks's theory that the role of elegy is to lead the writer/mourner towards consolation and thus to the resolution of their grief. Sacks relies on the standard interpretation of Freud's analysis of the trajectory of mourning in his much-cited paper 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917), which understands mourning as a process that resolves itself once the desire for the lost person is replaced with new desires. It's worth spending a little time with Freud here, since his paper – for better or worse – underpins much of what has been written on elegy from the twentieth century onwards. This despite the fact that Freud seems to have been referring really to a rather abstract notion of mourning and these incipient ideas were never subsequently developed. As Dennis Klass highlighted in his pioneering book *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief* (1996) – which presents a model of grief as ongoing, something that is carried throughout life rather than resolved – Freud 'never applied [his] theory to cases of grief after a significant death'.⁶³

In fact Freud's paper seems to me to be primarily addressing melancholia, using a fairly rough sketch of mourning as a kind of counterpoint – 'we will now try to throw some light on the nature of melancholia by comparing it with the normal affect of mourning', he begins; that is, he never set out to say very much about mourning.⁶⁴ That he was mystified by the workings of mourning is evident from another paper, 'On Transience' (1915), in which he admits: 'But to psychologists mourning is a great riddle, *one of those phenomena which cannot themselves be explained but to which other obscurities can be traced back*'.⁶⁵ We might read this as a summary of the objectives of 'Mourning and Melancholia', in which melancholia is the 'other obscurity' which is 'traced back' to the inexplicable phenomenon of mourning. Since we know that 'On Transience' was written after 'Mourning and Melancholia' (despite being published first), it seems likely that Freud did not consider the earlier paper to be the definitive word on mourning, if indeed he felt there could ever be a definitive word on it ('mourning is [...] one of those phenomena which *cannot [...] be explained*').

⁶³ Dennis Klass et al, *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief* (Washington, DC: Taylor and Francis, 1996), p. 11.

⁶⁴ Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 243.

⁶⁵ Sigmund Freud, 'On Transience', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. xiv (1914–1916), trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), p. 306 (my emphasis).

Furthermore, his categorisation in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ of mourning as being either the reaction ‘to the loss of a loved person’ or to ‘the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on’ ought to be another warning sign.⁶⁶ While the loss of one’s homeland or liberty would be devastating and no doubt involve some of the same feelings as those that arise in response to the loss of a loved person, it seems to me that one of the fundamental struggles of the latter kind of loss is the transformation of a real, living being *into* an abstraction (while the loss of something already abstract seems as though it might entail a rather different process). This thesis is concerned with how we manage that transformation – with what happens when, as Anne Carson has it, ‘a body [...] is made into a sign’.⁶⁷

‘Mourning and Melancholia’ was foundational to twentieth-century thinking about ‘appropriate’ grief despite these issues, and despite the fact that Freud’s later experiences – the loss of his daughter Sophie and only a few years afterwards her four-year-old son – proved incompatible with his earlier ideas. Klass quotes the following remarks of Freud’s friend and biographer, Ernest Jones, on Freud’s grief following his grandson’s death:

It was the only occasion in his life when Freud was known to shed tears. He told me afterward that this loss had affected him in a different way from any of the others he had suffered. They had brought about sheer pain, but this one had killed something in him for good.⁶⁸

This is certainly a very different response from that put forward in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, where Freud maintains that ‘when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again’;⁶⁹ and in ‘On Transience’, where he states: ‘Mourning, as we know, however painful it may be, comes to a spontaneous end. When it has renounced everything that has been lost, then it has consumed itself, and our libido is once more free’.⁷⁰ As Tammy Clewell highlights, the context

⁶⁶ Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, p. 243.

⁶⁷ Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, p. 73.

⁶⁸ Quoted in Klass et al, *Continuing Bonds*, p. 6.

⁶⁹ Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, p. 245.

⁷⁰ Freud, ‘On Transience’, p. 307.

of both papers, which were written during the First World War, is not insignificant.⁷¹ ‘On Transience’, in particular, touches on Freud’s feelings about the devastating losses that occurred during that period, and his hope (which concludes the essay) that

When once the mourning is over, it will be found that our high opinion of the riches of civilization has lost nothing from our discovery of their fragility. We shall build up again all that war has destroyed and perhaps on firmer ground and *more lastingly* than before.⁷²

Given that this is a paper on (and in praise of) transience, in which Freud argues that we should not take any less pleasure in beautiful things because of their impermanence, identifying the failure of his friends to follow his lead as being due to the fact that they are recoiling from a ‘foretaste of mourning’,⁷³ it is interesting that his conclusion actually depends upon a rejection of transience and, it might even be said, a denial of death. On this basis, this work, I would argue, rather than lending ballast to the idea that grief itself is transient, in fact prefigures Freud’s later personal encounter with grief as a more permanent condition: the conviction expressed in his theoretical writings that grief conclusively ends when ‘our libido is once more free [...] to replace the lost objects by fresh ones equally or still more precious’ was based on a *wish*, rather than on evidence or experience. ‘*It is to be hoped*’ he continued, ‘that the same will be true of the losses caused by this war.’⁷⁴ Judith Butler, in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), also observed that Freud’s analysis of mourning was reliant on wishful thinking: ‘Freud’s early hope that an attachment might be withdrawn and then given anew, implied a certain interchangeability of objects as a sign of hopefulness’.⁷⁵ Clewell’s ‘Mourning Beyond Melancholia’ presents a useful repudiation of the responses to mourning developed in line with Freud’s ‘early hope’; she argues that Freud in fact revised his theory of mourning in later work, namely *The Ego and the Id* (1923), in which (as she interprets it) he views

⁷¹ Clewell, ‘Mourning Beyond Melancholia’, p. 56.

⁷² Freud, ‘On Transience’, p. 307 (my emphasis).

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 307 (my emphasis).

⁷⁵ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004), p. 21.

the ego itself as ‘an elegiac formation’, that is, the ego is made up of the losses it has sustained and thus registers the ‘endlessness of normal grieving’.⁷⁶

Freud’s later experiences undoubtedly revealed that certain objects turn out to be not at all interchangeable, certain losses rather more intractable – ‘this one had killed something in him for good’. Joan Didion, whose memoirs *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) and *Blue Nights* (2011) explore her experience of losing her husband and daughter in quick succession, puts forward a similar perspective. Asked in an interview, ‘Do you feel like there’s something about grief that’s timeless? Obviously you go on with your life, but there’s a part of you that stays raw’, she responded: ‘Dedicated. [...] It’s always a part of you. No matter how much you reconstruct your life and make a new life. I still think that there is room for part of you to always be aware that this happened. To always have a part of you grieving.’⁷⁷ In *Mourning Diary* Barthes quotes a letter from Proust to Georges de Lauris, who had recently lost his mother:

Let yourself be inert, wait till the incomprehensible power [...] that has broken you restores you a little, I say a little, for henceforth you will always keep something broken about you. Tell yourself this, too, for it is a kind of pleasure to know that you will never love less, that you will never be consoled, that you will constantly remember more and more.⁷⁸

Later Barthes himself comments, ‘We don’t forget, but something *vacant* settles in us.’⁷⁹ This ‘something *vacant*’, Didion’s ‘part of you’ for which there is ‘room’, Proust’s ‘something broken [kept] about you’ – all recall the ‘something in’ Freud that was killed by the death of his grandson, denoting the definite persistence of loss. Grief, or its aftermath, has to be permanently psychically or physically accommodated (*it’s always a part of you*) – that is, *contained*; and yet, as a ‘part’ or a ‘something’, it remains beyond reach of more precise signifiers, a model that is reflected in my reading of the work of Prevallet, Carson and Kocot.

⁷⁶ Clewell, ‘Mourning Beyond Melancholia’, p. 43.

⁷⁷ ‘Joan Didion: Grief Becomes a Part of You’ [interview], <<http://www.beliefnet.com/wellness/health/2006/04/joan-didion-grief-becomes-a-part-of-you.aspx>> [accessed 6 March 2014].

⁷⁸ Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, 29 July 1978, p. 170.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 30 January 1979, p. 227.

At the same time the language of absence often works to establish loss itself as a kind of a container through phrases such as ‘in the absence of’, a construction which gets at its all-encompassing nature. C. S. Lewis, in his reflections on bereavement following the death of his wife, *A Grief Observed* (1961), noted this paradox whereby the experience of loss might seem both internal and external:

Her absence is like the sky, spread over everything. But no, that is not quite accurate. There is one place where her absence comes locally home to me, and it is a place I can’t avoid. I mean my own body [...] it’s like an empty house.⁸⁰

Lewis’s language here subtly but precisely represents his encounter with loss – we see him work to find the appropriate analogy (‘no, that is not quite accurate’) – as something both there and not there. When ‘her absence comes [...] home’, when it is *present*, he observes, he becomes ‘an empty house’. Noelle Kocot, similarly, concludes *Sunny Wednesday* with a poem exploring the idea of being at home in or with loss:

“You” have transformed into “my loss.”
[...] I sleep without you,
And the letters that you sent
Are now faded into failed lessons
Of an animal that’s found a home. This.⁸¹

Here the poem itself seems to become the reliquary that Angela Leighton speaks of, providing a home, or shape, for loss, in the absence of any other way of containing or mapping it. Butler writes:

Freud reminded us that when we lose someone, we do not always not know what it is *in* that person that has been lost. So when one loses, one is also

⁸⁰ C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), p. 13.

⁸¹ Noelle Kocot, ‘The Peace That So Lovingly Descends’, in *Sunny Wednesday* (Seattle, WA and New York: Wave Books, 2009), p. 77.

faced with something enigmatic: something is hiding in the loss, something is lost within the recesses of loss. If mourning involves knowing what one has lost (and melancholia originally meant, to a certain extent, not knowing), then mourning would be maintained by its enigmatic dimension, by the experience of not knowing incited by what we cannot fully fathom.⁸²

This analysis of mourning as encompassing a sequence of losses contained one inside the other, like a matryoshka doll (but one containing an infinite number of smaller and smaller dolls), provides for me an interesting insight into the workings of contemporary elegiac writing. Elegists like Anne Carson might set out to seek ways of knowing what has been lost – ‘I wanted to fill my elegy with light of all kinds’, she explains at the outset of *Nox* – but ultimately it is the experience of ‘not knowing’ that fuels the work. ‘The dead / Ruffle my feathers / With their thundering no’s’, writes Noelle Kocot in ‘Newborn’.⁸³ Carson concludes *Nox* with an acknowledgement that her brother’s loss can never be grasped: ‘He refuses, he is in the stairwell, he disappears.’ C. S. Lewis’s text, similarly, oscillates between this attempt to know what has been lost and the acknowledgement that ‘We cannot understand. The best is perhaps what we understand least.’⁸⁴

‘I may refuse to reveal the truth of what I am mourning’

It has become a truism to talk about the ways that language fails us when we wish to describe experiences such as loss or trauma. In the elegiac works of Carson and Karen Green, as if in answer to this problem, visual images do some of the work that language is deemed insufficient for. Karen Green’s *Bough Down* is a text interspersed with miniature collages that themselves incorporate text that is often obscured or illegible, tracing the author’s experience of grieving the death by suicide of her husband, the writer David Foster Wallace. Discussing the book, Green explained: ‘I really was thinking about language, the power of it [...]. The power of David’s work, for example, which meant so much to people. But when you get as sick as he was, everything loses meaning.’ The interview continues:

⁸² Butler, *Precarious Life*, pp. 21–22.

⁸³ Kocot, *Sunny Wednesday*, p. 63.

⁸⁴ Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, p. 59.

After a lifetime of being a voracious reader and a lover of words, Ms. Green wanted to grapple with the more sinister, trickster side of language. The words on her canvases beckon, but as you get closer, you realize that they are a locked door.

“You can be charmed and fooled by language,” Ms. Green said. “It doesn’t stop, but it’s never enough.”⁸⁵

Perhaps, though, language does more than we give it credit for. I would be wary of discounting the work that language can do, as it were, against itself, such as the opaque words on Green’s canvases, which speak to, rather than articulating, the inarticulable. Prevallet writes, ‘the elegiac tradition as it evolves is perhaps no longer concerned with articulating the unspeakable :::::::::::::::::::: [...]’⁸⁶ – what follows is a long passage of colons as if to indicate that the explanation or clarification that usually follows a colon is indefinitely postponed, while still remaining a possibility. Language figures here as both limited and yet with infinite potential.

Much has been written about the incapacity of language to contain trauma and loss, particularly in relation to atrocities such as the Holocaust. While keeping very much in mind the vast gulf between such experiences and the smaller personal tragedies of individual bereavement (which my work will mainly deal with), it might be possible to take a lead from such writings in terms of exploring ideas about the representation of traumatic loss in language. Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok have written interestingly on this subject in their book *The Shell and the Kernel* (1994), in which they put forward the notion of the ‘psychic crypt’, an internalisation of ‘a trauma whose very occurrence and devastating emotional consequences are entombed and thereby consigned to internal silence’.⁸⁷ Outwardly such a trauma may only be expressed as ‘obfuscation in [...] speech’ and ‘corresponding forms of hiding in language’.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Maria Russo, ‘Coping with an Unfinished Life’, *New York Times* (8 October 2010), <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/10/fashion/10GREEN.html?_r=0> [accessed 16 April 2014].

⁸⁶ Kristin Prevallet, *I, Afterlife: Essay in Mourning Time* (Athens, OH: Essay Press, 2007), p. 50.

⁸⁷ Abraham and Torok, ed. and trans., *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 1 (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 99–100.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

In *Nox*, Carson quotes the Ancient Greek historian Hekataios on the mourning rituals of the phoenix, which suggest another kind of entombment, a necessary ritual:

He makes out of myrrh an egg as big as he can carry. Then he tests it to see if he can carry it. After that he hollows out the egg and lays his father inside and plugs up the hollow. With father inside the egg weighs the same as before. Having plugged it up he carries the egg to Egypt to the temple of the sun.⁸⁹

This egg that ‘weighs the same as before’ even once it contains the body of the father, could be seen as analogous to the way language might seek to carry loss and even be formed by it. We might think of the relationship between *crypts* and *cryptic* and what the impact of loss might be on language’s intelligibility. I am interested in how ‘psychic crypts’ might relate to the kind of gap left by a loss, and the sense that such a gap could remain not through a kind of desperation (as perhaps is implied with these ‘psychic crypts’) but, as with the phoenix, wilfully – a means of honouring or memorialising the loss that gave rise to it. These ideas are useful in informing a reading of elegies that themselves work with gaps, silences, ‘obfuscation’ and ‘hiding’. In the case of Kocot’s elegies, which use language that can seem surreal, obscure and hard to interpret, the idea that mysteriousness might be a kind of signification is particularly instructive. ‘I’ll tell you frankly,’ notes the speaker in one poem, ‘Right now I don’t care what any of it means’.⁹⁰ Similarly, Prevallet writes, ‘I may refuse to reveal the truth of what I am mourning’.⁹¹

Other theorists have written on the ways in which language might be manipulated (whether consciously or otherwise) by a mourner in order to allow them to speak while in another sense remaining silent. Darian Leader has called this ‘borrowed mourning’, citing the story of a Holocaust survivor who was only able to relate the ‘unspeakable points in her own narrative’ by substituting the comparable

⁸⁹ Carson, *Nox*, section 1.1.

⁹⁰ Noelle Kocot, ‘Here, Kitty Kitty’, in *Sunny Wednesday* (Seattle and New York: Wave Books, 2009), p. 13.

⁹¹ Kristin Prevallet, ‘Art’, in *I, Afterlife*, p. 9.

memories or stories of others.⁹² This calls to mind lines from Anna Akhmatova's long elegy on the suffering of people under Stalin, *Requiem* (1963):

Not, not mine: it's somebody else's wound.
I could never have borne it. So take the thing
that happened, hide it, stick it in the ground.
Whisk the lamps away...⁹³

In this case, it is only by conceiving of a trauma as 'somebody else's wound' that it can be voiced. Similarly, psychoanalyst Rachel Rosenblum, in her work on the testimonies of Holocaust survivors, discusses the many imaginative ways in which writers might circumnavigate things too difficult to tell:

[T]here are many defensive techniques which writers resort to in accounts of traumatic experiences: using the words of others, switching from direct testimony to "heterobiography"; switching to another language; communicating through images which the writer simply "captions"; relying on formal games; abstract theorizing. Traumatized writers multiply screens that distance and soften the contours of reality. Their writing is typically an "oblique writing".⁹⁴

The subtext of the above quotation suggests that such an approach is somehow 'unhealthy' – note the term 'defensive' in the first line; Leader by contrast is more inclined to see it as resourceful: 'She was able to make something from how other people had represented their own grief. And we could call this a *dialogue of mourning*.'⁹⁵

⁹² Leader, *The New Black*, p. 78.

⁹³ Anna Akhmatova, 'Requiem', in *Poems of Akhmatova*, trans. Stanley Kunitz (Boston, MA and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1973), p. 105.

⁹⁴ Rachel Rosenblum, 'Postponing Trauma: The Dangers of Telling', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 90, no. 6 (December 2009), p. 1320.

⁹⁵ Leader, *The New Black*, p. 78.

'More than words'

'This is a case in which I need more than words to find the meaning', noted Joan Didion in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, imagining that access to some visual system of image-making might give her more resources through which to express herself.⁹⁶ But language *is* more than words: it also includes spaces and silence – both literal space and the space and distance afforded by metaphor; places for hiding – and many elegiac writers make ample use of these aspects, including Didion. Jeffrey Berman has remarked of Didion's memoir:

White space is also a structuring principle in *The Year of Magical Thinking*. White space surrounding the short one-sentence paragraphs creates a tense, elliptical style that describes but doesn't analyze, a minimalist approach [Didion] uses effectively in many of her books. The prose style reveals a mind fixated on grief.⁹⁷

That white space should be indicative of a grieving mind is seen as self-evident to Berman; perhaps it seems obvious that a mind preoccupied by loss should replicate its internal world on the page. Didion, however (as he acknowledges), has made a feature of white space throughout her writing career. In the essay 'Why I Write' (1976), discussing the genesis of her novel *Play It As It Lays*, she describes her writing process as involving 'pictures in the mind':

About the picture: the first was of white space. Empty space. This was clearly the picture that dictated the narrative intention of the book—a book in which anything that happened would happen off the page, a “white” book to which the reader would have to bring his or her own bad dreams—⁹⁸

Didion's summary of the possibilities of white space at this earlier stage of her career reminds us that what language can convey is so much 'more than words'. Of course

⁹⁶ Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (London: Fourth Estate, 2005), p. 8.

⁹⁷ Jeffrey Berman, *Companionship in Grief: Love and Loss in the Memoirs of C. S. Lewis, John Bayley, Donald Hall, Joan Didion and Calvin Trillin* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), p. 204.

⁹⁸ Joan Didion, 'Why I Write', *New York Times* (5 December 1976),

<<http://www.nytimes.com/1976/12/05/archives/why-i-write-why-i-write.html>> [accessed 13 October 2017].

it is the way that words interact with different kinds of white space – whether literal white space on the page or line breaks, or more figurative kinds of gaps or silence – that allows them to evoke what they do. As John Cage wrote in his ‘Lecture on Nothing’, ‘What we re-quire is / silence; but what silence requires / is that I go on talking [...] and the / words make help make the / silences.’⁹⁹

We might consider words as interacting with space and silence in the same way that music does. In an essay discussing the benefits of music therapy in cases of trauma Julia Sutton and Jos De Backer found that silence was an important part of musical improvisation: ‘Paradoxically, it is only thanks to moments of silence (which acts as a kind of punctuation) that phrasing becomes possible, that sounds become structured and that musical form originates with traumatic patients.’¹⁰⁰ For these patients, silence was an important structuring principle, without which their means of expression would have been diminished. ‘When we listen to music we are also listening to pauses called “rests”’, writes Susan Howe in ‘The Disappearance Approach’: “Rests” could be wishes that haven’t yet betrayed themselves and can only be transferred evocatively.’¹⁰¹ I am reminded also of Gertrude Stein’s exclamation in her play *What Happened* (1922), that ‘silence is so windowful’, hinting at the views afforded by silence and its possible escape routes, as well as its proximity (via her pun on ‘wonderful’) to *wonder*.¹⁰² ‘I would rather wonder than know’, remarks Mary Ruefle in an essay on poetry and secrecy, which will form part of the analysis in chapter four.¹⁰³ In a discussion of W. S. Graham’s line breaks, Adam Piette provides insights into the possibilities of such spaces, arguing that Graham’s enjambment is the point at which his poems become most vocal: ‘If we do not hear this imperceptible vocalization of the line-break, then the lines are potentially voiceless’.¹⁰⁴ The line breaks provide moments of silence without which the poem would not be heard at all; and Graham was certainly – like Didion – a writer preoccupied by the workings of white space, albeit in a very different context. ‘He heard strange roaring white noise,’ writes Piette, ‘a confusion of just-absent voices

⁹⁹ John Cage, ‘Lecture on Nothing’, in *Silence* (London: Calder and Boyers, 1988), p. 109.

¹⁰⁰ Julia Sutton and Jos De Backer, ‘Music, trauma and silence: The state of the art’, *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 36 (2009), p. 81.

¹⁰¹ Howe, *That This*, p. 28.

¹⁰² Gertrude Stein, *A Stein Reader*, ed. Ulla E. Dydo (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p. 269.

¹⁰³ Mary Ruefle, ‘On Secrets: Eight Beginnings, Two Ends’, in *Madness, Rack and Honey: Collected Lectures* (Seattle, WA and New York: Wave Books, 2012), p. 101.

¹⁰⁴ Piette, “Roaring between the lines”, p. 46.

and the sounds of transformation occurring within that strange white space'.¹⁰⁵ Such white space, far from representing a void, is powerfully active: in Piette's description a kind of silent chaos reigns – and its inaudibility requires of poet and reader ever more powerful forms of listening in order for its message to be discerned.

How other writers, elegiac writers, negotiate this 'strange white space' – absence in all its manifestations – and its transformative potential, is the subject that concerns the following chapters. As Angela Leighton has implied, like all forms, elegy too 'outlines a space' and that may be its most basic and most complex preoccupation: "forms" – a word that seems shapeless and purposeless, but still somehow there: a presence, a potential, a variable. It is a word for nothing you can see, but it outlines a space and suggests a search, a loss, a need.'¹⁰⁶ The '____' that for Virginia Woolf could perhaps be called *elegy*. Karen Green writes:

Ultimately, the loss becomes immortal and the hole is more familiar than tooth. The tongue worries the phantom root, the mind scans the heart's chambers to verify its emptiness. There is the thing itself and then there is the predicament of its cavity.'¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Leighton, *On Form*, p. 233.

¹⁰⁷ Green, *Bough Down*, p. 169.

The question of what elegy is or might be and how to contain absence in language preoccupies Kristin Prevallet’s *I, Afterlife: An Essay in Mourning Time* (2007), a work written in response to the death by suicide of the author’s father, and which is presented in various forms – part verse, part prose – a flexibility that is in keeping with its approach to elegy. Indeed the distinctions between the text’s forms as we perceive them as readers – line breaks and stanzas alongside longer and shorter passages of fully justified text – are not remarked upon by the author; rather they move in and out of each other comfortably. As Fanny Howe observes in a cover endorsement, ‘Here we have a convergence between the old forms and the new. Elegy becomes essay. Their horizons converge’.

Taking as its subject the ongoing process of mourning rather than any idea of ‘closure’, the book is an exemplar of the kinds of contemporary elegy that this study is most interested in, and of the continued desire of contemporary writers to engage with notions of elegy, however ambivalently – an approach that has been described by Jahan Ramazani as offering ‘not [...] so much solace as fractured speech, not so much answers as memorable puzzlings’.¹ Prevallet herself writes, ‘the text that is grieving has no thesis: only speculations’.² Her engagement with the constraints and possibilities of language, as well as the lability of the forms she works with, supports the questions raised in the more ‘discursive’ aspects of the text – whereby a state of doubt or uncertainty is permitted to take precedence over empirical forms of knowing. As we have already seen, when the central subject of a book is loss we are confronted with a predicament and a contradiction: how something present (language, a text) can deliver something absent. For Prevallet the term ‘elegy’, with its paradoxical combination of form and formlessness, becomes a useful marker for the many contradictions and complexities entailed in the grieving process and in the process of writing about grief. Prevallet does not ‘submit’ to the constraints of elegy, as Peter Sacks might have it (‘the mourner or elegist must submit to the mediating

¹ Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. xi.

² Kristin Prevallet, *I, Afterlife: Essay in Mourning Time* (Athens, OH: Essay Press, 2007), p. 15.

fabric of language, a tissue of substitutions that may cover a preceding lack³), rather she manipulates it to suit her purposes – for her *elegy* ‘is a word which suits the elegist’s need’, as in Angela Leighton’s analysis;⁴ it does not in fact seem subject to constraints at all. In this case, her ‘need’ seems to be for the ‘lack’ of her father to remain visible, rather than covered. But though her ‘text that is grieving’ reaches no resolution, that is not to say that it is without consolation. Prevallet’s elegiacs fall somewhere between the different approaches described by Ramazani and Sacks – who differ on the question of whether elegy is non-consolatory or consolatory – in that her work ‘hold[s] on to grief’ while at the same time reaching for ‘a certain kind of completion’.⁵ *I, Afterlife* demonstrates that elegy can represent grief as simultaneously resolved and unresolved, and that elegy as a category can be similarly flexible.

‘No moving on’

As has been briefly noted in the previous chapter, Sacks’s *The English Elegy* presents a theory of elegy drawing on Freud’s early theory in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ that mourning comes to a spontaneous resolution once the desire for the lost person is replaced with new desires: ‘The movement from loss to consolation requires a deflection of desire’.⁶ As Sacks sees it, the work of the elegist is comparable to the work of mourning as set out by Freud, and the act of creating an elegy represents the required re-routing of desire for a once living and now lost person into art. Conversely Ramazani has proposed (as we have seen in the previous chapter) that ‘the modern elegist tends [...] not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss’.⁷ Prevallet’s approach seems to draw a kind of consolation from an elegising that allows that such wounds, rather than being reopened, might simply remain unclosed: that consolation can come in the form of remaining unconsolated. Ramazani’s study focuses to an extent on elegies that are characterised by anger and anguish – Sylvia Plath’s ‘Daddy’, for example – whereas Prevallet’s elegy, although it certainly engages

³ Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore, MA and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 18.

⁴ Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 222.

⁵ Prevallet, *I, Afterlife*, pp. 58 and 68.

⁶ Sacks, *The English Elegy*, p. 9.

⁷ Ramazani, p. xi.

with such emotions, takes a more meditative approach. Rather than wrestling with grief, it sits with it, allowing it to unfold. Thus 'Dream', which begins:

I sat.

It was night.

Someone was in the room next door, waiting.

The noise was intolerable.

The unbelievable pulse.⁸

Prevallet's approach is personal but it is also political. Tammy Clewell has argued that Sacks's take on the elegy fails to take into account the ethical dimension: when elegy is considered a redemptive form and the site of personal transformation for the elegist, who or what is effaced in the process? In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler suggests that 'tarrying with grief, remaining exposed to its unbearability'⁹ might lead to greater empathy on a global scale, that the imperative to seek resolution of grief at any cost is attended by violence. She offers the example of the George W. Bush administration's military response to the September 11 attacks, which followed the president's assertion just ten days after the event that 'our grief has turned to anger and anger to resolution [...] and in our grief and anger we have found our mission and our moment'.¹⁰ 'If we stay with the sense of loss, are we left feeling only passive and powerless, as some might fear?' Butler writes. 'Or are we rather returned to a sense of human vulnerability, our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another?'¹¹

Prevallet notes similarly: 'As a political position, I hold on to grief. [...] (Which is better than filling spaces with a false sense of closure. There is no moving on in a world filled with wars.)'¹² Although Prevallet's study is of personal loss, the relationship of private to public grief is alluded to throughout the text, and includes references to 9/11 and its aftermath ('How to memorialize an event that in its wake

⁸ Prevallet, *I, Afterlife*, p. 5.

⁹ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004), p. 30.

¹⁰ Transcript of President Bush's address, 21 September 2001, <edition.cnn.com/2001/US/09/20/gen.bush.transcript> [accessed 20 February 2017].

¹¹ Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 30.

¹² Prevallet, *I, Afterlife*, p. 58.

has left tens of thousands of people dead'¹³), as well as to the institutional handling of her own loss by the police:

In a handout that the police gave my stepmother after my father's death, there was a section on shrine building which stated that in order to get through the twelve stages of grief with maximum efficiency, one should dismantle any shrines.¹⁴

I, Afterlife proceeds in defiance of such imperatives. Instead the refusal to 'move on' becomes, itself, a transformative process.

'This is elegy'

Somewhat against Ramazani's theory that modern elegy is 'anti-elegiac',¹⁵ Prevallet's engagement with elegy is sympathetic and expansive, even if her 'elegiacs' appear to be untraditional. She seems to comfortably situate her work in the realm of elegy, announcing unequivocally at the close of the Preface and just before Part One (itself titled 'Forms of Elegy') that 'This is elegy'. But this is a type of elegy that remains open-ended, full of gaps and contradictions, like Karen Green's *Bough Down*, which closes with the line, 'I can't wrap this up'.¹⁶

I, Afterlife opens with a 'Preface' written in prose which purports to tell the 'facts' of Prevallet's father's death, a suicide that occurred three days after he began taking the antidepressant medication Paxil. It begins: 'The narrative goes something like this'. 'Something like' is key. The story of Prevallet's father's death is not straightforward because she and her family cannot prove that his suicide was linked to the medication, even though 'There are numerous studies that link Paxil to suicide'¹⁷ and he had not been suicidal prior to taking it – but it is also not straightforward because death is never straightforward: we always fail, on some level, to comprehend it. The story of her father's death is not the story of Prevallet's grief; by opening her 'Essay in Mourning Time' with the phrase 'The narrative goes

¹³ Ibid., p. 52.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 58.

¹⁵ Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, p. xi.

¹⁶ Karen Green, *Bough Down* (Los Angeles, CA: Siglio, 2013), p. 184.

¹⁷ Prevallet, *I, Afterlife*, p. xv.

something like this’, she seems to indicate that the narrative is dispensable, unreliable, something to be got out of the way quickly. And yet these details matter – they are presented first. I was reminded of a passage early on in Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking*, in which she offers a brief description of her husband’s death:

Nine months and five days ago, at approximately nine o’clock on the evening of December 30, 2003, my husband, John Gregory Dunne, appeared to (or did) experience, at the table where he and I had just sat down to dinner in the living room of our apartment in New York, a sudden massive coronary event that caused his death.¹⁸

The precision and apparent directness of Didion’s syntax and of the details offered belie the fundamental hesitation at the centre of this passage around the circumstances of her husband’s death: the facts are not the whole story. When Didion writes that her husband ‘appeared to (or did) experience’ a ‘coronary event’, she demonstrates the way in which language ‘falters’ – as Denise Riley has noted – when it comes to death, just as the cognition of an individual falters at such proximity to it. Didion, despite being present as witness, is unable to finally confirm what happened at the moment of her husband’s death: ‘Clearly I was not the ideal teller of this story, something about my version had been at once too offhand and too elliptical, something in my tone would fail to convey the central fact of the situation.’¹⁹ ‘The whole story’, as Prevallet acknowledges, ‘is gaping with holes. The “hole” story is conflicted, abstract, difficult to explain.’²⁰ Throughout the book Prevallet repeatedly reminds the reader of the unreliable nature of language and narrative, of the inability of certain forms of language to convey ‘truth’ (personal narrative testimony, for example, let alone institutionalised forms of language, such as police reports), even at times seeming to reject the reader by insisting that there is no place for them in this text (‘beware of being absorbed by an essay that is grieving, because you will lose your place and be eradicated’²¹). And yet the notion of elegy

¹⁸ Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (London: Fourth Estate, 2005), pp. 6–7.

¹⁹ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, p. 6.

²⁰ Prevallet, *I, Afterlife*, p. xviii.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

appears to offer a kind of container – one of infinite proportions – for the unwieldy experience of grieving and of writing about that experience. It gives language room to falter. The ‘Preface’ concludes: ‘Regardless, the story has many possible forms and many angles of articulation. This is elegy.’²²

‘Only space itself occupies empty spaces’

Sacks has contended that ‘poetic language operates most powerfully within the spaces of absence or dislocation’, allowing a reconciliation between language and loss via ‘the elegist’s reluctant resubmission to the constraints of language’.²³ As such, the work of art – the elegy – becomes a kind of substitution for the loss, ‘filling the gap’ they have left behind. While he acknowledges that this ‘replacement’ is never a thoroughgoing one – ‘it remains at an essential remove from what it replaces’²⁴ – he nevertheless persists with the idea that it does have some sort of conclusive function, placing a necessary distance between the elegist and their loss: ‘The dead, like the forbidden object of a primary desire, must be separated from the poet, partly by a veil of words.’²⁵ By contrast, Prevallet writes, ‘Never fall in love with a text that [...] / makes you feel distant, aloof, removed from the scene.’²⁶ Sacks’s emphasis on ‘forbidden’ and his use of the imperative places his view of the elegist in an interesting light. Since he also compares the process of resolving grief with the resolution of the Oedipus complex in childhood (entailing ‘a detachment of affection from a prior object followed by a reattachment of the affection elsewhere’),²⁷ there is an undercurrent – which aligns with the distinction occasionally made between ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’ mourning – suggesting that to hold on to grief, to seek to reduce rather than increase the distance between oneself and one’s loss, is inappropriate, pathological, impermissible (in the same way that an ‘unresolved’ Oedipus complex was thought by Freud to result in ‘deviant’ behaviour). Sacks is conscious of what he calls the ‘question of gender’, admitting that his emphasis on Freud and the alignment of loss with castration might seem to skew his argument

²² Ibid., p. xviii.

²³ Sacks, *The English Elegy*, p. xi, xiii.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 9.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Prevallet, *I, Afterlife*, p. 10.

²⁷ Sacks, *The English Elegy*, p. 8.

'into exclusively male domain'.²⁸ Indeed the elegies he consults are all by male poets, with the exception of Amy Clampitt's 'A Procession at Candlemas', which he only turns his attention to in the epilogue. He spends some time trying to address this imbalance, quoting Jacqueline Rose's proposal that 'the status of the phallus is a fraud' and maintaining that it is therefore capable of symbolising 'for *both* sexes, what Juliet Mitchell describes as "an expression of the wish for what is absent"'.²⁹ He notes:

Longstanding sexual discrimination has impinged on women's experience of mortal loss; and the difficulty in identifying with predominantly male symbols of consolation greatly complicates the woman's work of mourning. But we should not lose sight of how such symbols also relate to a sheer lack – man's or woman's – and how the genetic power that they represent could in many respects be of either gender.³⁰

This rather hopeful attempt to spin phallic symbols as universal seems to come from the same school of thought that considers 'he' an acceptable generic third-person pronoun; which is to say that whatever applicability such terms or symbols may have to the female (or indeed neutral) gender is completely effaced by their dominant association with the masculine and the dissonance this creates. The most significant difference between Sacks's position and the kinds of elegy that this thesis explores, however, is that for Sacks 'lack' figures as something that must be overcome, filled in or covered (with of course a phallic substitution: 'the oedipal resolution actually governs the child's "entry" into language, an entry that the work of mourning and the elegy replay'³¹); while for Prevallet (and as we shall see later, for other female elegists such as Denise Riley and Mary Jo Bang), the elegy is a site that makes space for lack, that allows it to persist.

Whatever we make of phallic symbols, we might consider the notion of consolation – when consolation is synonymous with resolution – as incompatible with an elegy like Prevallet's, which, as she acknowledges, is 'gaping with holes'.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 12 and 15.

²⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 12.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 13.

³¹ Ibid., p. 9.

Prevallet's text, as if in tacit acknowledgement of positions such as Sacks's, is determined, even truculent at times, in its commitment to resisting a kind of resolution that seems to negate loss by insisting on the power of language to overcome it. Prevallet's project is to allow language to reveal, rather than 'veil' loss, by acknowledging the gaps immanent to it. She writes, 'Through the words that are in me I tried to decipher the night, and then I remembered that darkness has its own resolution.'³²

When she says 'resolution' here I think of how we use the word to talk about high-quality images, conjuring up, for me, a particular kind of extreme visual clarity. Prevallet's 'darkness' does not need to be deciphered, it is already clear in its own way – not 'clear as day', but clear as night. There is a more specific definition from which this use of 'resolution' emerges, where it means 'the smallest interval measurable by a telescope or other scientific instrument: the resolving power'³³ – in this sense it is also (like mourning) about unfilled gaps, however small: and the gaps are intrinsic to the resolution. For Prevallet the 'spaces of absence or dislocation' are unfillable, and to think otherwise is to trick oneself. She writes, 'Believing that holes can be filled with language is dangerous—only space itself occupies empty spaces.'³⁴ At the end of the section that follows the Preface, a series of short poems titled 'The Sublimation of Dying', she concludes:

It is key to know that these words are written to dis-

APPEAR³⁵

By breaking the word 'disappear' at its prefix – the part that reverses the verb's meaning ('dis-', among other definitions, means 'apart', 'asunder' and 'away'), not just with a hyphen but over the line and by capitalising the second part of the word, Prevallet firmly marks out a contradiction – 'these words' are written to be both present and absent. This interrupted word (which recalls Didion's 'appeared to (or did)', her own interruption to an elegiac narrative) indicates that there is no 'reluctant

³² Prevallet, *I, Afterlife*, p. 5.

³³ Oxford Living Dictionaries, def. 5.

³⁴ Prevallet, *I, Afterlife*, p. 10.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

resubmission to the constraints of language’ as Sacks would have it – there is a kind of defiance of it; the space that has been revealed within this broken word (which after all was there all along, a hidden seam) allows the poet’s loss to inhabit the text, rather than being replaced by it.

Nine years after the death of his daughter, Freud wrote to a friend:

Although we know that after such a loss the acute state of mourning will subside, we also know that we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute, no matter what may fill the gap; even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else.³⁶

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Freud’s published theories on mourning were rather different, but his later personal comments on the subject are compatible with the notion that the ‘wounds of loss’ may never close completely. Referencing them in her paper ‘Time, Rhyme and Stopped Time’ (2014), Denise Riley argues that while the gap left by a loss ‘may be *filled up*’, it will ‘still remain detectable. It stays as “something else”. It’s noticeable – precisely as a filled gap. Which is as good as it gets.’³⁷ Prevallet’s elegies are doing something similar – drawing attention to her loss’s very perceptible trace. In ‘Marginalia’, she writes:

Note the crossing-out of the text on the sheet of paper.

Note the markings of black that erase words and remove them
from view.

Note that because certain words are removed from view, certain
words therefore appear...³⁸

In calling for the reader to bear witness to her ‘crossing-out’, Prevallet enacts ‘filling the gap’ and shows that it ‘remain[s] detectable’. Her poem brings to mind another elegy working with ‘crossouts’, Anne Carson’s ‘Appendix to Ordinary Time’, which

³⁶ Quoted in Dennis Klass, Phyllis R. Silverman and Steven L. Nickman, *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief* (Washington, DC: Taylor and Francis, 1996), p. 6.

³⁷ Denise Riley, ‘Time, Rhyme and Stopped Time’, *Psychoanalytic Poetry Festival* (The Freud Museum, London, 27 September 2014), p. 1.

³⁸ Prevallet, *I, Afterlife*, p. 8.

explores the recent death of the poet's mother via fragments of Virginia Woolf's diaries – including material Woolf herself had crossed out. 'Crossouts are something you rarely see in published texts', Carson observes. 'They are like death: by a simple stroke – all is lost, yet still there.'³⁹ Cross-outs acknowledge the existence of death, yet also act as a kind of denial of it, in Carson's case via the restoration of a dead author's dead (deleted) words. *All is lost, yet still there*. Priscilla Uppal remarked in her analysis of Carson's poem: 'If the cross-outs can be understood as the textual equivalent of a death, then death merely revises life instead of permanently erasing it.'⁴⁰ Riley, continuing her comments on the 'filled gap', adds, 'what is *re-placed* is never identical to what's been lost; it's the very action of *replacing* which stays so prominent in our minds.' That is, a cognition of the gap persists and indeed is even enhanced via the process of filling it. Elegies like Carson's and Prevallet's go against ideas about the closure or completion of mourning; here the elegy is a continuous process, 'workings', rather than, as Peter Sacks would have it, a 'working through'.⁴¹

'A habitable unknown'

Prevallet's elegiacs work towards creating a space in which the mourner's losses can be registered and retained *as loss* – without being subject to replacement or substitution. Her attentiveness to process, to the materiality of language itself, and the fluidity of her forms – as well as what her language expresses in more conventional terms – all contribute to this openness, which resists the traditional tendency of elegy towards 'closure'. In a passage in the latter half of the book, she writes:

Elegy is anti-afterlife. Afterlife presents itself as an assurance of a habitable unknown, a space that exists in time where the person being mourned is no longer invisible because he has been reborn. The hopefulness of the afterlife is the despair of the present—there is no proof that life-after-death exists, and this makes the suffering inflicted by the present intolerable. Elegy, on the

³⁹ Anne Carson, *Men in the Off Hours* (London: Cape, 2000), p. 166.

⁴⁰ Priscilla Uppal, *We Are What We Mourn: The Contemporary English-Canadian Elegy* (Montreal, Kingston, London, Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), p. 98.

⁴¹ Sacks, *The English Elegy*, p. 1

other hand, allows the difficulties associated with dealing with suffering—grief and loss—to be represented without closure. Afterlife is a tidy package that presents a simple truth. Elegy is the complexity of what is actually left behind.⁴²

If the notion of the afterlife is one means by which mourners might seek comfort, it is one that requires significant suspension of disbelief (in other words, *faith*); Prevallet's elegy functions as a more viable alternative since it allows 'the difficulties associated with suffering' to be acknowledged in the present moment – these are not recollections in tranquillity. But what is interesting is that although Prevallet seems to reject the notion of an afterlife, the 'habitable unknown', elegy's function is perhaps not so dissimilar. Indeed, by using elegy as a means to represent loss 'without closure', by allowing the gaps in the language to speak, she effectively locates the 'habitable unknown' in language itself, a space which the dead can occupy, *next to*, though beyond reach of, their bereaved.

This desire to retain an intimacy with those one has lost – both on its own terms and in defiance of received ideas about the appropriate trajectory of grief – is also explored by Riley in *Time Lived, Without Its Flow*, which closely examines 'an altered condition of life' following the death of her son.⁴³ She writes: 'If there is ever to be any movement again, that moving will not be "on". It will be "with". With the carried-again child.'⁴⁴ In this case, the loss, far from being filled in, is to be retained, *carried*. Riley's maternal language – whereby the loss of a child is translated into a second, metaphorical pregnancy – acts as a corrective to Sacks's emphasis on the phallic symbol, suggesting that for this elegist consolation comes in the form of intimacy with, rather than separation from her dead.

Riley's alignment of loss with pregnancy is comparable with Amy Clampitt's 'Procession at Candlemas', an elegy Sacks discusses in his epilogue, as an example of a 'feminine elegy' in which, as Ramazani puts it in an essay on her work, 'Clampitt redirects the elegiac quest towards the womb'.⁴⁵ Sacks's analysis of the elegiac

⁴² Prevallet, *I, Afterlife*, p. 41.

⁴³ Denise Riley, *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (London: Capsule Editions, 2012), p. 7.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁴⁵ Jahan Ramazani, 'Nucleus of Fire: Amy Clampitt's Elegies for her Parents', *Verse* (Winter, 1993) <<http://www.amyclampitt.org/essays/ramazani.html>> [accessed 9 May 2017].

tradition focuses largely on psychoanalytical readings of poetic imagery, and he interprets Clampitt in this vein as slightly revising but essentially confirming his theory that all elegists are driven by the ‘necessity as a mourner to detach’ from the object of their grief.⁴⁶ This is surprising, since much of ‘Procession at Candlemas’ can be read as expressing a desire to remain attached despite the facts – ‘to carry fire as though it were a flower, / the terror and loveliness entrusted // into naked hands’ – and that such closeness with grief might, paradoxically, be consoling: ‘people have / at times found this a way of being happy’.⁴⁷ While Clampitt and Riley approach the metaphorical womb from different perspectives – as a daughter and mother respectively – the analogy in both cases presents grief as something bodily, connected, and even nurturing:

[...] wrapped like a papoose into a grief
not merely of the ego, you rediscover almost
the rest-in-peace of the placental coracle.⁴⁸

Clampitt’s phrase ‘a grief / not merely of the ego’, like Riley’s ‘that moving will not be “on”’, deliberately draws a line between the speaker’s experience of grief and the detached, analytical model with which she has been presented. This is a kind of grief that wishes to ‘tarry’ with the body – to take up home, even, in the lost body. In a reversal of Riley’s image in which she ‘carries’ her loss like a foetus, Clampitt envisages the mourner as carried by her grief, whether by ‘papoose’ or ‘coracle’. In both cases the womb seems to figure as a place that halts or disarranges the expected trajectory of grief, so that rather than moving away from loss, the elegist becomes one with it.

Riley develops this idea further in a poem, ‘Little Eva’, from *Say Something Back*, which proposes a kind of movement ‘on the spot’ as a far more vigorous alternative to ‘moving on’:

Time took your love – now time will take its time.

⁴⁶ Sacks, *The English Elegy*, p. 321.

⁴⁷ Amy Clampitt, *The Kingfisher* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), pt 1, p. 23.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pt 1, p. 25.

'Move on', you hear, but to what howling emptiness?
The kinder place is closest to your dead
where you lounge in confident no-motion, no thought
of budging. Constant in analytic sorrow, you abide.
It even makes you happy when you're feeling blue.
Jump up, jump back. Flail on the spot.
I can disprove this 'moving on' nostrum.
*Do the loco-motion in my living room.*⁴⁹

Sacks's thesis that the role of elegy is to cover over the space of loss and thereby relieve the mourner of their grief, in the light of these texts, seems too tidy, glossing over the significance of the lost person and the persistence of relationships. In Riley's poem loss is cosied up to, becoming a kind of dance partner. 'Little Eva' in part takes the sentiments of *Time Lived* ('that moving will not be "on"') and expresses them in lyric form: 'I can disprove this "moving on" nostrum'. Instead the speaker finds a type of movement that doesn't take her anywhere, and in excerpting 'The Locomotion' – a pop song which describes the dance that accompanies it (originally performed by the American singer Little Eva, hence the title) – the poem seems to make a case for circularity over linear progression. By 'tarrying with grief' in this way, the poem throws into question expectations about how grief should be handled and by extension how elegy should be handled – this is a poem that (in the context of the collection) we take to be about what is often seen as the very worst kind of loss, the loss of a child; yet it is also a funny poem which can locate the ridiculous (and its comic potential) even in a space of 'howling emptiness'.

The poem can be read in the light of Riley's discussion of irony in an earlier prose work, *The Words of Selves: Identity, Solidarity, Irony* (2000), in which she explores the intimacy between pain and irony, arguing that there exists the most profound relationship between the two – comparable, perhaps, to the relationship between the living and her dead within the poem. In a section titled '*The political necessity of irony*', she writes:

⁴⁹ Denise Riley, *Say Something Back* (London: Picador, 2016), p. 57.

To begin with an invaluable exchange, from 1799:

Julius: I understand it. I even believe it. A joke can make a joke about everything; a joke is free and universal. But I'm against it. There are places in my being, the deepest ones in fact, where for that reason an ordinary hurt is unimaginable. And in these places a joke is intolerable to me.

Lorenzo: So the seriousness of these places is probably not completely perfect yet. Otherwise there would be irony there by now. But for that very reason irony exists. You'll only have to wait awhile.

These two speakers are among Friedrich Schlegel's protagonists in his polyphony of a novel, *Julius and Lucinde*. Although it's impossible to match Schlegel's clarity here, I take it that what his character Lorenzo is implying is that irony will arise spontaneously within that injury which has been compelled into an intensity of self-contemplation. That irony is not an effect of any leisurely distance, but of the strongest and most serious engagement with hurt.⁵⁰

By drawing together the things that traditional elegy might keep separate – sadness and humour, the living and the dead, even the ridiculous and the sublime, Riley's poem promotes an elegiacs that insists on intimacy rather than distance. The poem's allusion to 'The Loco-motion' – through both its lyrics and its singers (the unavoidable association for younger readers being with the perhaps more suggestive version performed by Kylie Minogue) – places the body centre stage ('Flail on the spot') and refuses to clearly demarcate living and dead. Here the 'habitable unknown' is a domestic space in which the living and the dead do not move away from each other but remain in close proximity.

In Part Two of her text, 'The Distance Between Here and After', Prevallet refers to the 'meaning' generated by the writing of elegy as 'splatter': 'Being open to

⁵⁰ Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identity, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 161–2.

receive this splatter of meaning hesitantly transmitted through difficult language is one way to practice living with uncertainty and doubt⁵¹ – in other words, there is nothing ‘tidy’ about elegy. As Riley indicates with the line ‘The kinder place is closest to your dead’, elegists (of course) continue to care for those they have lost and as such are likely to want to stay close by them, in whatever sense that might be possible. To do otherwise would seem a form of abandonment and an unkindness to both sides. It seems obvious to say this, and yet Sacks’s theory of elegy depends on a very abstract notion of loss, whereby the elegised have become ‘the lost object’ without any acknowledgement of their personhood as it existed in life and continues to exist in memory. Prevallet’s and Riley’s elegiacs, by keeping their loss – and lost persons – close by them, take a more dynamic approach. Riley’s quotation of the lyric ‘*It even makes you happy when you’re feeling blue*’ lightly underscores how this apparent contradiction is in a way quite straightforward (‘people have / at times found this a way of being happy’), that permanent grief is a more consoling prospect than the alternative. It is even, perhaps, an energising one (*‘Jump up, jump back’*). As Prevallet notes at the end of *I, Afterlife*, her losses ‘are filled with their own energies, force fields, and pulls’.⁵²

‘The economic problem of mourning’

Another contemporary elegist – and also a mother mourning the loss of a son – whose work indicates a disagreement with received notions of appropriate mourning or elegising is Mary Jo Bang, who bitterly sums up the ‘ideal’ role of elegy as put forward by Sacks, in her poem ‘The Role of Elegy’:

The role of elegy is [...]

To bow to the cultural

Debate over the aesthetization of sorrow [...]

To look for an imagined

⁵¹ Prevallet, *I, Afterlife*, p. 48.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 60.

Consolidation of grief
So we can all be finished
Once and for all and genuinely shut up
The cabinet of genuine particulars.⁵³

Bang's use of enjambment here is similar to what Prevallet does with 'dis-APPEAR'; her decision to break the line on 'shut up' in the third stanza above draws attention to the hidden places in language where one thing becomes something else – with this line break it is not just the 'cabinet of genuine particulars' but the elegist too who is being urged to 'shut up', reminding us of the cultural imperative on the mourner to 'move on', which Riley has also responded to above.

But the difference between these two 'shut ups' is grammatical as well as semantic: when we read 'shut up' as relating to the speaker, the verb is intransitive; once we read on – 'shut up / The cabinet' – it becomes transitive. If the line break jars partly because both forms of 'shut up' are evocative of violence – to 'all be finished / Once and for all and genuinely shut up' suggests a kind of death, or at the very least a forceful self-silencing, while to 'shut up' a cabinet would seem a heavy action ill-suited to a potentially delicate object (one might think of a display cabinet) – it is also the less visible but equally uncomfortable fissure in the grammar that brings us up short. This linguistic shock and allusion to violence highlights an aspect of elegy that Sacks overlooks: the painful relationship of the elegist to 'the aesthetization of sorrow'. For this elegist the 'role of elegy' turns out to be nothing but 'The transient distraction of ink on cloth / One scrubbed and scrubbed / But couldn't make less', a 'compulsion to tell'⁵⁴ which, like all compulsions, comes with its measure of shame – a desire to 'scrub out' its workings.

This discomfort has been highlighted by Tammy Clewell in her contemporary re-working of Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia', in which she raises doubts about Sacks's emphasis on the role of the artwork itself in enabling the elegist to overcome their grief. She writes:

⁵³ Mary Jo Bang, 'The Role of Elegy', in *Elegy* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2007), p. 63.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

That the traditional elegy transforms the lost other into the writer's own aesthetic gain raises certain political and ethical suspicions, at least from a contemporary perspective, about the redemptive function of art and the effacement of the other's absolute uniqueness it assumes.⁵⁵

Ramazani describes a similar unease in his study, calling it 'the economic problem of mourning – the guilty thought that they reap authentic profit from loss, that death is the fuel of poetic mourning'.⁵⁶ In reality, the weighing up of death against art can lead to some truly painful conclusions, as can be encountered in the remarks of the American critic Barry Schwabsky in relation to Denise Riley's work. He writes:

Now there is a cruel, selfish, and repellent thought that I am nonetheless going to set down here in the belief that the writing of criticism demands honesty more than it does good character. It is the thought that without her son Jacob's death, we who have been longing for the return of the poet Denise Riley might still be waiting. What becomes of the love of poetry when it takes *this* to create the conditions for its satisfaction?⁵⁷

By spelling out rather literally the relationship between elegy and bereavement, Schwabsky's troubling analysis seems to indicate that whenever we celebrate an elegy we are also (however inadvertently) celebrating a death. While his argument considerably decomplexifies the relationship between art and life, it nevertheless gets at a very real and painful connection that can both inhibit and enhance the art of an elegy. The only way to escape it would be to remain silent or to, in Mary Jo Bang's words, 'shut up'. The elegist's problem becomes how to bear this contradiction.

Agonising transformations

Prevallet engages with this question via her work's negotiation with absence – both the literal absence of her father and the numerous abstract absences that figure in an

⁵⁵ Tammy Clewell, 'Mourning Beyond Melancholia: Freud's Psychoanalysis of Loss', *Japan* 52/1, p. 50.

⁵⁶ Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, p. 6.

⁵⁷ Barry Schwabsky, 'Time Out', *Hyperallergic* (3 June 2012), <<https://hyperallergic.com/52399/denise-riley-time-lived-without-its-flow/>> [accessed 18 November 2014].

experience of grief. ‘The Sublimation of Dying’, the series of poems that opens ‘Forms of Elegy’, begins to reveal the problematic role of the elegist. In the Preface, Prevallet has defined ‘sublimation’ as follows:

when solid becomes ether without passing through the liquid state. When the overflow of negative psychic energy is rechanneled into writing, or art. When the distance between the living and the dying is filled in with language, objects, people, and mundane activities, such as doing the dishes. When something difficult to articulate finds its form in poetry. When death (silence) is brought back to life (mythology).⁵⁸

This passage appears between two short paragraphs quoted from the Preface previously, between ‘the “hole” story’ and the story with ‘many possible forms and angles of articulation’ that is elegy; which is to say that Prevallet credits the work of sublimation as the activity which transforms ‘the “hole” story’ into elegy. But her language acknowledges the violence implicit in such a process, an aspect that seems to underlie Sacks’s thesis when he uses the phrase ‘the elegist’s *reluctant resubmission to the constraints of language*’. What Prevallet relates above, whereby one state becomes another ‘without passing through’, via being ‘rechanneled’, ‘filled in’, ‘finding its form’, being ‘brought back to life’, describes painful, potentially agonising, transformations.

As a series the poems that make up ‘The Sublimation of Dying’ bear witness to these transformations, in particular the notion touched on in the last line of the quotation above that the making of elegy involves a movement from silence to mythmaking. How to convey the silence of grief in poetry, which we might conceive of as a kind of speaking, is central to *I, Afterlife*, alongside the misgivings voiced by Clewell and Ramazani that the work of elegy – using such material (to conceive of loss as ‘material’ at all) for ‘aesthetic gain’ – can feel gratuitous, immoral, shameless, and indeed violent.

Ulf Ollsson has written about the relationship between silence and violence in literature, and the ways in which literature can, paradoxically, give voice to

⁵⁸ Prevallet, *I, Afterlife*, p. xviii.

silence. The silent figure, he hypothesises, ‘must, perhaps, perform a violent dismembering in order to make the literary text speak about its silences’.⁵⁹ ‘The Sublimation of Dying’ can be read with this in mind. Prevallet frequently presents us with images that hint at linguistic or actual violence where an attempt to fill a space (which we might see as the work of elegy) or initiate a transformation occurs:

I remember my first attempt to pour concrete into a body gaping with
wounds.

I find this last sentence overly dramatic.

Please scratch it out.

(‘Will’)

I have placed your heart on a platter to preserve it.

When you wake up you will find the bed already made and your chest neatly
sewn.

(‘Fear’)⁶⁰

Such moments draw attention to the unspoken – the empty spaces yet to be articulated via language – exposing the processes of removal and covering up that might occur in the course of elegising, of ‘transform[ing] the lost other into the writer’s own aesthetic gain’. When Prevallet writes of attempting ‘to pour concrete into a body gaping with wounds’ and then of wishing to ‘scratch out’ this analogy (recalling Mary Jo Bang’s desire to ‘scrub out’ her ‘ink on cloth’), she is addressing two kinds of silencing – the silencing of her absent father (if we read the ‘body gaping with wounds’ as the spectre of her father’s death) and her own wish to be silenced – perhaps both for making this attempt and then for speaking about it. Of course ‘gaping wounds’ also call to mind mouths and thereby the possibility or absence of speech. However we choose to interpret ‘a body gaping with wounds’ it is evident that to pour concrete into such a space would be a violent (and futile) act indeed; it

⁵⁹ Ulf Ollsson, *Silence and Subject in Modern Literature: Spoken Violence* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 27.

⁶⁰ Prevallet, *I, Afterlife*, pp. 7, 12.

would also silence the body in the sense that its wounds would no longer be able to ‘speak’.

To use such language is arguably in itself violent, being ‘overly dramatic’ – just as being ‘overly dramatic’, in writerly terms, about such a subject might be to take some inappropriate aesthetic advantage from the circumstances; and yet for the writer to *care* about being ‘overly dramatic’ might suggest an unseemly preoccupation with aesthetics and/or ego. As such these lines both violently enact and disrupt notions of silence and speech, revealing the difficulty in reconciling the desire to honour the silence of grief with the impulse to relate and shape a painful experience in the form of art – what Mary Jo Bang, as we have seen, calls ‘The compulsion to tell’.⁶¹

In dramatising these silences as ‘a body gaping with wounds’ and then further dramatising her discomfort with speaking about silence – ‘I find this last sentence overly dramatic. / Please scratch it out’ – Prevallet enacts her predicament: that to wrench loss into a shape describable by language or fashion language into an approximate representation of loss (and thus to present something that might be read as ‘beautiful’) does violence to the original experience which is only adequately accounted for by silence.

The second quotation above can be read in a similar light – in this case the work of the writer/elegist is obliquely compared to that of a surgeon, and by implication not a trustworthy one: ‘There was never anything to fear except: who was the surgeon and did she sterilize her instruments?’⁶² The image of the heart clinically removed and the evidence of the removal itself tidied away, might be interpreted as a further rejection of the idea of elegy as a seamless, straightforward sublimation of pain into art – instead there is something heartless, even sadistic about the process; furthermore its ‘product’ is either too raw (the heart on a platter) or cold and empty (the neatly sewn up, heartless body). And in the same way that ‘Will’ seems to challenge and even attempt to alienate the reader by undercutting itself (‘I find this last sentence overly dramatic. / Please scratch it out’), ‘Fear’ too refuses to accommodate, keeping the reader at bay in a tone that falls somewhere between

⁶¹ Mary Jo Bang, ‘The Role of Elegy’, *Elegy*, pp. 63–4.

⁶² Prevallet, *I, Afterlife*, p. 12.

seduction and threat: 'Have I warned you not to fall in love with a girl who refuses to let go of grieving?'⁶³ Of course to fully accept or acknowledge the reader would be to admit that the silence had been broken. Instead Prevallet is cautious to preserve a distinct but indefinable space between reader and poem. In 'Art' the speaker describes using a piece of tape to smother a fly that has landed on her page, so that it almost becomes a part of the poem being written:

The outline is supposed to resemble a grave, or a hole in the poem
where the insect can rest comfortably.

There is a connection between the insect and my father that
goes beyond the physical presence of one and the absence
of the other.

I know precisely what the connection is.

But you, in reading this, may never know.

I may refuse to reveal the truth of what I am mourning.⁶⁴

In doing so, she manages to make a space for silence within the poem – as she acknowledges, the presence of the dead insect's body can stand in for the absence of her father's, but the neatness of this 'switch' is too clean; by alluding to other, unspoken connections she allows 'the body gaping with wounds' to speak for itself.

'The elegiac burden'

The 'workings' evident throughout *I, Afterlife* reveal that Prevallet's exploration of her grief and of the meaning of elegy do not add up to a neat conclusion; indeed her theories are often paradoxical, just as grief can be paradoxical – a person can be intellectually cognisant of a loved one's death and yet also *unable to believe* that they are dead, for example. As Joan Didion recalls in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, shortly after her husband's death in New York she found herself 'wondering, with no sense of illogic, if it had also happened in Los Angeles'.⁶⁵

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ 'Art', in *ibid.*, p. 9.

⁶⁵ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, p. 31.

The notion of the gap and whether it can indeed be filled by, as Sacks would have it ‘a figurative or aesthetic compensation’ is perhaps the biggest contradiction to be found among Prevallet’s workings, and is what we might consider to be the central question of elegy: whether language, ‘a tissue of substitutions [...] may cover a preceding lack’.⁶⁶ We have seen earlier the painful and ambivalent responses of the writer to such a process, and Prevallet reiterates several times her suspicion of any attempts to fill the gap with words:

Never believe maxims because all they do is comply with a sentence structure that is formulated in such a way as to come off as assured, wise, and mentally strong; they give those looking to fill empty spaces with words something to read. Believing that holes can be filled with language is dangerous—only space itself occupies empty spaces.⁶⁷

Language, according to this maxim, misleads us. But since this statement follows a warning to ‘never believe maxims’ we are already wrongfooted; should we believe the maxim that tells us never to believe maxims, and therefore disbelieve the second maxim; or vice versa? The poet does not seem wary of making concrete pronouncements so much as wary of definitive ones; indeed, much of the text is made up of imperatives, injunctions and dictums – ‘Don’t turn corners too sharply or you might run over something you once loved’; ‘Grieving is tricky because [...]’; ‘Never fall in love with a text that attempts to convince you that you are already dead’; ‘The sadness of this is [...]’, etc. – as though to send up the societal codes that (often oppressively) attempt to regulate grief and its management.⁶⁸ In a later section, in fact, she appears to contradict the above maxim, presenting language as precisely the thing with which to fill holes:

But it is the desire for time to be interrupted – by either a going or a coming back – that is the elegiac burden. Poets enter this space with language.

⁶⁶ Sacks, *The English Elegy*, pp. 5, 18.

⁶⁷ Prevallet, ‘Distraction’, in *I, Afterlife*, p. 10.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 8, 10, 11, 45.

Language fills in the desire to alter time. Time creates distance: using words even when it seems that there are no words that could possibly express the suffering associated with loss. Distance is not a means to “express” nor a means to “represent” what is missing – it’s a way to fill in the space when something that was once visible has disappeared and left a gap. What fills the gap: forms of elegy.⁶⁹

Prevallet’s frequent dogmatic statements, often at odds with one another, have the paradoxical effect of showing that ‘there is nothing certain about language, just as there is nothing certain about where a person goes after he has disappeared’.⁷⁰ David W. Shaw has suggested that paradox, and the possibilities it makes available, may in fact be essential to the elegist:

When we try to remove one of the contradictory elements – the consolation from the inconsolability; the remembering from the forgetting; the certainty from the uncertainty – we are in danger of making death noncontradictory or devoid of strangeness, which is the one thing it never really is.⁷¹

In these terms, paradox becomes a kind of coping mechanism for the mourner, whereby the impassable divide between each opposing belief enables the ‘holes’ or ‘empty spaces’ – the ‘habitable unknown’ – of grief to be preserved intact. Indeed, Prevallet’s confident engagement with paradox – confident to the point that the notion of paradox almost seems false (if things can and do co-exist, what then is paradoxical about it?) – seems to carve a silent space for grief within a language that is not always adequate, ‘using words even when it seems that there are no words’.

‘A certain kind of completion’

It is perhaps in this space (the space where ‘it seems that there are no words’) that language *does* accommodate grief, by allowing the point at which language breaks

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 73.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 42.

⁷¹ W. David Shaw, *Elegy and Paradox: Testing the Conventions* (Baltimore, MD and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), p. 6.

down to be registered. We have already touched upon Riley's discussion of the way in which language 'falters' when it comes to death:

The very grammar of discussing a death falters in its conviction in the same breath that the focus of talk, the formerly living person, himself disintegrates. Even the plainest "he died" is a strange sentence, since there's no longer a human subject to sustain that "he".⁷²

Something that 'falters' is not silent or invisible – it performs the moment at which it fails to express itself and in so doing becomes a marker of loss. The work of the elegists discussed here draws attention to such faltering in different ways – through the use of enjambment shown earlier, for example, where the gaps immanent to language (the join between 'dis-' and 'appear', or the invisible metamorphosis of an intransitive verb into a transitive) are momentarily exposed. 'Why do we blush before death?' Anne Carson wonders in *Nox*, reminding us of another kind of exposure, of faltering.⁷³

It is by giving absence its space rather than seeking to fill it or cover it up that these contemporary elegists manage to integrate loss into their works of mourning. And this in itself is a kind of resolution, what Prevallet calls 'open closure'. Halfway through the book she writes: 'There is no resolution to this story because emotional closure is impossible. "Nothing" is closure.'⁷⁴ This paradox, if it is a paradox, is reiterated in the passage that concludes *I, Afterlife*:

I'm filled with holes. I used to seek spackle in my relationships with people. And I still have a hard time holding on. But really, there is nothing to be filled in. Knowing this gives me some comfort because it means I have to live with my losses as one would live without an arm: being constantly aware of the phantom limb sensation that wants so desperately to connect, to be filled in, with flesh. But ultimately, I have to survive by rewriting the script that assumes that spaces have to be filled in. They don't—like the universe,

⁷² Riley, *Time Lived, Without Its Flow*, p. 54.

⁷³ Anne Carson, *Nox* (New York: New Directions, 2010), section 7.1.

⁷⁴ Prevallet, *I, Afterlife*, p. 15.

my holes are filled with their own energies, force fields, and pulls. The challenge is to recognize this anti-matter as some kind of sustenance; to find in holes a certain kind of completion.⁷⁵

‘Spackle’ is the North American term for a product used to fill cracks in surfaces (similar to Polyfilla, it is trademarked but also used generically); Prevallet’s use of this (almost literally) concrete image, unusual in this text, turns the abstract notion of a filled gap into a material one, and via this reification she draws attention to its deficiencies – a crack in the wall filled with plaster is still a crack in the wall. ‘It’s noticeable – precisely as a filled gap.’⁷⁶

Prevallet’s idea that relationships might act as a kind of filler recalls Freud’s theory in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ that mourning is completed once the desire directed at the lost person is withdrawn and reinvested in (the) living. But she has found that this system, though hard to let go of, is flawed (‘I still have a hard time holding on. But really, there is nothing to be filled in’). Instead, it’s the ‘nothing’ that the holes contain with which the mourner needs to engage, with absence *as presence* – like the ‘phantom limb sensation’. Sacks has speculated that, since elegiac couplets were traditionally accompanied by an *aulos* (an ‘oboelike doublepipe’), ‘there may have lain an earlier, more exclusive association of the flute song’s elegiacs with the expression of grief.’⁷⁷ This original link to a wind instrument is evocative because it touches on the relationship of ‘holes’ to elegy: for Sacks the instrument was key to the elegiac mode, ‘the pipe or the flute [being] appropriate to mourning, for it joins a sighing breath to hollowness’.⁷⁸ Perhaps this quality, which allows a lament to emerge from empty space, is one way in which we might make sense of elegy today: the ‘hole’ in the flute is not effaced by its song, but rather is essential to it. When Prevallet writes that ‘my holes are filled with their own energies, force fields, and pulls’, we might think of elegy’s origins in flute song, whereby it is precisely the space contained within the instrument that allows it to make a sound.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 60.

⁷⁶ Riley, ‘Time, Rhyme and Stopped Time’, p. 1.

⁷⁷ Sacks, *The English Elegy*, pp. 2–3.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 7.

'The blank'

There is a difficulty in talking about what isn't there, and this thesis is partly a homage to the endeavours of those who have found ways of doing so. Keston Sutherland has theorised that the writing of poetry always involves an engagement with what he calls 'the blank'; his thoughts on this subject offered me a way of approaching Anne Carson's *Nox*, an elegiac work exploring the death of her brother Michael, which takes the notions of nothing and negation and their relationship to loss and absence as its subject and strives to give them form. Sutherland writes:

Before it can seem possible to inscribe even the first word on the blank that poetry is expected to cover, a way must somehow be found into the pressurised state of feeling that potentiates the articulation of regulated meaning into the expression of wild meaning.¹

He glosses 'wild meaning' as 'the name that Merleau-Ponty gave to what he called "an expression of experience by experience", which might be interpreted as the power of experience to give voice to itself'.² He does not define 'the blank', which might stand in for almost anything – like the blank tile in Scrabble. Assorted definitions of 'blank' as a noun include 'The white spot in the centre of a target; hence *fig.* anything aimed at, the range of such aim' (we might think also of its relationship to the French *blanc*, meaning 'white'); 'An empty form without substance; anything insignificant; nothing at all'; 'An unprinted leaf of a book'; 'A vacant space, place, or period; a void'; 'A dash written in place of an omitted letter or word' ('_____'); 'A cartridge containing gunpowder but no bullet, used for training or as a signal'; 'a piece of metal or wood intended for further shaping or finishing';

¹ Keston Sutherland, 'On the Feeling that Poetry can be Written: "It's already your life"', *Evening Will Come: A Monthly Journal of Poetics*, 55 (July 2015), <thevolta.org/ewc55-ksutherland-p1.html> [accessed 6 June 2016].

² *Ibid.*

‘a plain metal disc from which a coin is made’.³ The latter two are interesting in light of my earlier discussion of the notion of a ‘placeholder’: the blank as an active space awaiting future developments – awaiting ‘the inscription of the first word’. I also read it as standing in for (or signalling, like the blank cartridge) the unnameable forces that work against the desire to communicate, as well as representing the very thing one is aiming to communicate – the indescribable. (Hence also the definition ‘target’ – ‘with what words shall I name my unnameable words?’ asks Samuel Beckett’s narrator in ‘Texts for Nothing’).⁴

As I understand Sutherland, the success of the poet in communicating something seemingly incommunicable is always a triumph against ‘the blank’ which is nonetheless a necessary pressure against which imagination must empower itself as a work of resistance. He writes:

During the extensive suspension of language prior to the inscription of the first word, the blank is active: it is exerted against poetic subjectivity, pressed up against the imagination as its primary generic defiance. Writing poetry has its outset in this confrontation that no relaxing or giving up can de-escalate, as though inscription were a compulsory pushing back against the blank in order not to be thrown down under it.⁵

Sutherland’s description unexpectedly evokes for me Ted Hughes’s much-cited interpretation of what we might call ‘the creative process’ – his poem ‘The Thought Fox’. Here the apparent nothingness that precedes the act of writing – what Hughes, imagining a lonely, starless night, calls ‘this midnight moment’s forest’, ‘this blank page’ – is in fact visited by ‘Something else [...] alive’: the fox, ‘set[ting] its neat prints into the snow’.⁶ This image of the blank snow being pushed back to accommodate the ‘prints’ of the fox seems a useful, if rather simplified, analogy for Sutherland’s more abstract theory, whereby the snow represents the ‘extensive

³ Oxford English Dictionary, def. 1.2a, 1.6b, 1.6c, 2.7, 2.12a; Oxford Living Dictionaries, def 2, 4, 4.1.

⁴ Samuel Beckett, ‘Texts for Nothing’, in *Texts for Nothing and Other Shorter Prose 1950–1976*, ed. Mark Nixon (London: Faber & Faber, 2010), p. 28.

⁵ Sutherland, ‘On the Feeling that Poetry can be Written’.

⁶ Ted Hughes, *New Selected Poems 1957–1994* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), p. 3.

suspension of language' (doesn't falling snow always have a peculiarly static quality, in its surprising silence?), the fox's prints the pressure of the word.

This unexpected point of contact between two very different writers invites one to conclude that the desire to describe the indescribable (and the difficulty experienced in attempting to do so) is widespread. It becomes particularly keen when the writer's subject is loss. One might argue that loss is not, in some senses, indescribable, unless the voluminous quantity of texts addressing the subject are all to be counted failures. By Sutherland's terms, the preponderance of elegiac writing might be unsurprising, that is, that the greater the force of incommunicability – the bigger the 'blank' – the more powerfully the imagination must push back. We might also wonder whether a work that explores an experience of loss, allows that 'experience to give voice to itself', is actually *describing*, or in fact doing something else. "Attempts at description are stupid," writes Carson, quoting George Eliot, 'yet one may encounter a fragment of unexhausted time. Who can name its transactions, the sense that fell through us of untouchable wind, unknown effort—one black mane?'⁷

'Words cannot add to it'

In *Nox* the work of elegy must contend with the bigger blank of a double loss, since we gather that Michael had been effectively estranged from his family for twenty-two years before he died, leaving his sister with only limited information about his life and death and very little, as it were, to work with. In this sense, the word 'brother' becomes a kind of placeholder for Carson's actual brother – how do you mourn someone you didn't really know? Central to *Nox* is another, similarly searching, elegiac text, the classical elegy 'Poem 101' by Catullus for his own brother: 'Many the peoples, many the oceans I crossed –' it opens in Carson's translation. As Charles M. Stang remarks, 'Carson seems to have known as little about [her brother's] adult life as we do about Catullus's brother from the first century BCE.'⁸ 'Nothing at all is known of the brother except his death', Carson remarks of 'Poem

⁷ Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost (Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan)* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. viii.

⁸ Charles M. Stang, "'Nox' or the Muteness of Things", *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* (Winter/Spring 2012), 40/1–2, <<http://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/articles/winterspring2012/nox-or-muteness-things>> [accessed 19 August 2016].

101'. Of Michael, she writes, 'My brother dies in Copenhagen in the year 2000 a surprise to me',⁹ with a lack of punctuation and flat affect typical of much of her work. This emotional scarcity seems particularly apposite in *Nox*: the blankness and puzzlement that characterise a condition of mourning someone close and yet hardly known makes Carson's elegiac work more than usually speechless: the brother lost to death was, in another sense, already lost. *Nox* comprises a lot of literal white (*blanc*) space, presenting its fragmentary texts and images sparingly on otherwise empty pages (though it should be noted that the pages themselves are not really white but rather the faintly smudgy grey of a photocopied page). From this semi-vacancy *Nox* emerges as a kind of reification of the blank, as though the 'extensive suspension of language' that Sutherland speaks of has, in this space, become a permanent state.

In keeping with all of Carson's output, *Nox* does not sit straightforwardly in any genre, being both book and art object, a collagistic elegy in a box. Craig Morgan Teicher has observed, 'the book [*Nox*] is an extraordinary object to behold, and more extraordinary to read, but it's hardly accurate to even call it a "book".'¹⁰ As mentioned in chapter one, the author refers to the work as a whole as 'epitaph' rather than elegy, a significant distinction which signals Carson's approach to her subject. The short text on the box (in place of cover blurb) reads: 'When my brother died I made an epitaph for him in the form of a book. This is a replica of it, as close as we could get.' The printed version of *Nox* is presented as an unbound set of pages (in fact a single sheet folded many times) in a sturdy box that evokes both book jacket and tombstone. Outside of their box for ease of reading, the pages feel vulnerable, uncontained, liable to spill apart if you aren't holding them tightly enough. Theoretically the entire book could be laid out flat, if you had enough space – each page being joined at its right-hand edge to the left-hand edge of the following one – indeed Carson encouraged one of her interviewers to try it ('Do you have a long staircase? [...] Drop it down and watch it unfold. I did').¹¹ In contrast the text itself

⁹ Carson, *Nox*, section 3.1.

¹⁰ Quoted in Tanis MacDonald, 'Night in a Box: Anne Carson's *Nox* and the Materiality of Elegy', in Thomas Allen and Jennifer Blair, eds, *Material Cultures in Canada, Material Cultures Now* (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015), p. 51.

¹¹ Parul Seghal, 'Anne Carson: Evoking the starry lad her brother was', *Irish Times* (19 March 2011), <<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/evoking-the-starry-lad-her-brother-was-1.577255>> [accessed 6 June 2015].

is sparing and emotionally constrained; the third page of the book, the first time we hear Carson's voice (other than the jacket quote), begins:

I wanted to fill my elegy with light of all kinds. But death makes us stingy. There is nothing more to be expended on that, we think, he's dead. Love cannot alter it. Words cannot add to it. No matter how I try to evoke the starry lad he was, it remains a plain, odd history.¹²

In common with many contemporary writers on the subject of loss, Carson disavows the consolatory potential of language almost before she has begun to write and dismisses the work we have yet to read: 'it remains a plain, odd history'. The flat delivery of this phrase is perhaps the more apparent because of the lyrical quality of the preceding 'the starry lad he was', its three beats reminiscent of the ballad form (which alternates four- and three-stress lines); it seems to tell us that in this case the author's attempts at lyricism have failed, or been deliberately aborted. In fact, it transpires that 'starry lad' is a borrowed phrase. Taken from a piece of light verse by the scholar Hugh Macnaghten, which he included at the end of a volume of Catullus translations, the original line runs 'Catullus is a starry lad'.¹³ Such unacknowledged borrowings are characteristic of Carson's work and add a layer of intrigue to the text, but they also have a distancing effect. Even as the speaker describes her attempts to capture her lost brother ('No matter how I try to evoke the starry lad he was'), she finds herself calling upon a kind of simulacrum – like *Nox* itself, which as a published book is only a 'replica' of the original.

In a review of *Nox*, Stephanie Burt has remarked, 'With its insistence on the visual, the material, the tactile, the circumstantial, on everything and anything but its mere words, *Nox* thus becomes a book, or an anti-book, about the futility of language in the face of death.'¹⁴ As this suggests, it is not possible to read *Nox* as

¹² Carson, *Nox*, section 1.0.

¹³ I am grateful to Jeremy Noel-Tod for alerting me to this. See Abigail Deutsch, 'From the Archives: Tribute and Farewell', *Open Letters Monthly: An Arts and Literature Review* (1 December 2012), <<https://www.openlettersmonthly.com/nox-carson/>> [accessed 23 October 2017], and Hugh Macnaghten, *The Poems of Catullus: Done in English Verse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1925), p. 148.

¹⁴ Stephanie Burt, 'Professor or Pinhead: Anne Carson's *Nox*', *London Review of Books* (14 July 2007), 13/14, <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n14/stephen-burt/professor-or-pinhead>> [accessed 6 June 2016].

simply text; in its ‘thingness’¹⁵ it is solidly present for all that it’s about absence, ‘a thing that carries itself’, in Carson’s words.¹⁶ That Carson is economical with language in *Nox* is certainly true; but I would argue that rather than exposing language’s futility, *Nox* wilfully represses language in order to make a *thing* of absence, uncovering the opportunities that can arise within and around language for loss to show itself – for that ‘experience to give voice to itself’ – without it becoming *unlost*. That language, or a skilled manipulation if it, might perform this trick: to both speak and be silent.

‘The little channel in between the languages’

Nox dwells in the space between opposing forces: presence and absence; silence and communication; dark and light; the hidden and the found; the tension between letting out and keeping in. Between imagination and ‘the blank’. That a text whose words are actually very sparing could be made to perform a literal outpouring, as per Carson’s suggestion to the journalist, is just one of its many contradictory features. This is reflected too by one of *Nox*’s most dominant modes and themes: translation. This is a central topic for Carson, whose career as a classicist is inseparable from her work as a poet – as well as publishing full works of translation such as *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* (2003) and books of classical scholarship, her poetry collections are full of references to antiquity and often feature real or made-up translations (the distinction between the two may be characteristically blurry). In *Nox*, translation – ‘all those little kidnaps in the dark’,¹⁷ as she describes it at one point – is bound up with ideas of absence, loss, occlusion and omission: it becomes a means of letting something get away. Susan Sontag has pointed out: ‘Originally (at least in English), translation was about the biggest difference of all: that between being alive, and being dead. To translate is, at least etymologically, to transfer, to remove, to displace.’¹⁸ Carson’s introduction to *If Not, Winter* also gives us some idea of the ways in which her mode of translation might intersect with the notion of the blank. In a passage subtitled ‘On Marks and Lacks’, she explains her use of brackets to denote textual

¹⁵ As described by MacDonald, ‘Night in a Box: Anne Carson’s *Nox* and the Materiality of Elegy’, p. 56.

¹⁶ Carson, *Nox*, section 1.1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.1.

¹⁸ Susan Sontag, ‘On Being Translated’, in *Where the Stress Falls: Essays* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002), p. 339.

absences (due to destroyed or illegible papyri) in the Sappho fragments as ‘an aesthetic gesture toward the papyrological event rather than an accurate record of it’, adding, ‘I emphasise the distinction between brackets and no brackets because it will affect your reading experience, if you allow it. Brackets are exciting [...] brackets imply a free space of imaginal adventure.’¹⁹

Nox opens with its own ‘aesthetic gesture toward the papyrological event’, a smudgy image of ‘Poem 101’ in its original Latin on crumpled, yellowed paper, which acts as a kind of structuring principle for the book. There follows on every left-hand page a lengthy translation – presented as the dictionary definition – of each word in the elegy in order of appearance. These translations are offset on the facing pages by obliquely related material revealing information about the life and death of Carson’s brother, including fragments of letters and photographs, drawings and marks of various kinds (words scratched into a cloud of scribble, for example) and commentary which draws on historical or literary references whose sources are often obscure (‘Autopsy is a term historians use of the “eyewitnessing” of data or events by the historian himself, a mode of authorial power. To withhold this authorization is also powerful’, she avers²⁰). Carson’s complete translation of Catullus’ elegy appears twice: at the very end where, again printed on a crumpled and water-damaged scrap of aged paper, it is illegible; and (legibly) about two-thirds of the way through.

There is something perplexing about the placement of these two translations given the book’s careful structure. It makes sense (perhaps too much sense) that the original ‘Poem 101’ and its translation would bookend *Nox* – the accordion format of the pages allows all the individual translations to be contained between them and either compressed or opened out (a translation explosion!), providing a physical representation of all that might lie hidden in the passage between two languages. Adam Phillips has observed, ‘The translator is both trying to stay close to the original language, and also quite literally, needing to get away from it’²¹ – the practice of translation is characterised by this interplay between distance and intimacy. Indeed the legible translation of ‘Poem 101’ faces the page on which Carson translates

¹⁹ Anne Carson, *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* (New York: Vintage, 2003), p. xi.

²⁰ Carson, *Nox*, section 1.2.

²¹ Adam Phillips, ‘On Translating a Person’, in *Promises, Promises: Essays on Literature and Psychoanalysis* (London: Faber & Faber, 2000), p. 131.

Catullus' word '*prisco*' as 'belonging to a former time, ancient'; in the full translation of the poem this becomes 'distant'. We gather that there is actually nothing straightforward or direct about translating a language, just as there cannot be anything straightforward about the communication of something as seemingly incommunicable as loss. The book appears to deliberately subvert the tendency of a reader of elegiac work to seek consolation or resolution, via an architecture that at a glance seems perfectly balanced but is actually somewhat off-kilter. Carson writes:

I never arrived at the translation I would have liked to do of poem 101. But over the years of working at it, I came to think of translating as a room, not exactly an unknown room, where one gropes for the light switch. I guess it never ends. A brother never ends. I prowl him. He does not end.²²

She has commented that she probably arrived at the structure of *Nox* from her familiarity with classical texts in bilingual translation, where the left-hand page features Greek or Latin and faces its translation in English, adding, 'you get used to thinking in that little channel in between the two languages where the perfect language exists'.²³ Like the blank that Sutherland sees as an essential starting point for the poetic impulse – and indeed like Carson's brackets denoting a 'free space of imaginal adventure' – this 'little channel', for the translator, figures as a space in which the imagination can expand, perhaps infinitely:

Prowling the meanings of a word, prowling the history of a person, no use expecting a flood of light. Human words have no main switch. But all those little kidnaps in the dark. And then the luminous, big, shivering, discandied, unrepentant, barking web of them that hangs in your mind when you turn back to the page you were trying to translate.²⁴

²² Carson, *Nox*, section 7.1.

²³ Eleanor Wachtel, 'An Interview with Anne Carson', *Brick*, 89 (Summer 2012), <<https://brickmag.com/an-interview-with-anne-carson/>> [accessed 7 March 2016].

²⁴ Carson, *Nox*, section 7.1.

‘There is something maddeningly attractive about the untranslatable,’ Carson remarked in a paper, ‘Variations on the Right to Remain Silent’ (2008), ‘about a word that goes silent in transit. [...] In the presence of a word that stops itself, in that silence, one has the feeling that something has passed us and kept going, that some possibility has got free.’²⁵

‘Seeing what is not there, and not seeing what is’

A broader understanding of the themes in *Nox* emerges from a reading of Carson’s *Economy of the Unlost*, a book-length essay published a decade previously, in which she begins to outline her thoughts on presence and absence, monuments to the dead and, in particular, the possibilities of ‘the negative’, via a discussion of Simonides of Keos and Paul Celan. It is in *Economy of the Unlost*, too, that Carson puts forward an analysis of the epitaph, these earlier thoughts throwing into relief the notion of *Nox* as epitaph. We know that ‘epitaph’ signifies ‘writing on a tomb’ (from the Greek) or a ‘funerary inscription or literary composition imitating such an inscription’.²⁶ It is evident from her work that Carson is interested both in classical epitaph and the contemporary possibilities for reworking or reviving the genre. Alongside the epitaphic/elegiac *Nox*, her earlier collection *Men in the Off Hours* (2000) includes a number of short, mysterious pieces she calls ‘Epitaphs’, as well as an earlier meditation on ‘Poem 101’ which one reviewer noted ‘reads like a recipe for *Nox*’.²⁷ The third chapter of *Economy of the Unlost* is devoted entirely to the subject of epitaph, and opens, ‘No genre of verse is more profoundly concerned with seeing what is not there, and not seeing what is, than that of the epitaph.’²⁸ For Carson epitaph is a form concerned with economy – because of the limitations, ‘measurable in cash’, of the space available on the gravestone into which the text would be cut.²⁹ It is also concerned with excision – that is, removal, negation, omission: ‘To carve an inscription on stone is to cut away everything that is not the meaning’, she notes.³⁰

²⁵ Anne Carson, ‘Variations on the Right to Remain Silent’, *A Public Space*, 7 (2008), <poems.com/special_features/prose/essay_carson.php> [accessed 27 May 2014].

²⁶ Roland Greene, et al, eds, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th ed. (Princeton, NJ and London: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 450–51.

²⁷ J. Kates, ‘Catullus by Night: Anne Carson’s *Nox*’, *Harvard Review Online* (23 July 2011), <<http://harvardreview.fas.harvard.edu/?q=features/lorem-ipsum/catullus-night-anne-carson%E2%80%99s-nox>> [accessed 26 August 2016].

²⁸ Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, p. 73.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

For me this calls to mind the apocryphal story of the sculptor of stone lions who, when asked to describe how he made his work, responded, ‘I chip away everything that is not lion’ (as we have seen, Carson is rather fond of stories that lack ‘authorization’).³¹ The epitaphs in *Men in the Off Hours* appear to illustrate the ideas discussed in *Economy of the Unlost* with regard to the relationship between the epitaph and negation:

EPITAPH: EVIL

To get the sound take everything that is not the sound drop it
Down a well, listen.
Then drop the sound. Listen to the difference
Shatter.³²

These few lines could be seen as a kind of maquette for *Nox*, in which certain themes central to the later text establish themselves on a much more limited surface area: ideas about the interplay between positive and negative, silence and sound, light and dark – and indeed the paradox at work in these interactions. Consider, for example, the phrase ‘drop the sound’. While it asks us to imagine something likely noisy (the sound that sound would make if it could be dropped down a well like an object), the request to *drop sound* is also an imperative to imagine or adopt a state of silence. In fact if anything makes a noise here it is the ‘difference’ between ‘sound’ and ‘not sound’, which we are invited to hear ‘shatter’. The epitaph then, as the place where life meets death, is a location where the distinctions between oppositions might be broken down: ‘Certainly death gives most of us our elemental experience of absent presence,’ Carson proposes, ‘and an epitaph might be thought of as a vanishing point – or a sort of concrete double negative – where the absence of life disappears into the presence of death and nullifies itself.’³³

³¹ Several versions of this story exist. The most frequently cited involves Michelangelo being asked how he made *David* and giving a similar response. I prefer the version with the lions, from ‘The Stone List’ (‘a resource for all who work in stone’): <comments.gmane.org/gmane.culture.stone/14570>; see also <thekingscorneratck.blogspot.co.uk/2014/10/lions-roar.html>; <quoteinvestigator.com/2014/06/22/chip-away/> [accessed 7 June 2016].

³² Anne Carson, *Men in the Off Hours* (London: Cape, 2000), p. 29.

³³ Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, p. 106.

Nox, of course, is not carved in stone, though it is contained within a box that does its best to look like a tomb; it also works with its own kinds of constraints – being entirely printed on what is essentially one very long page, for example. In its pared-back style, it does give the impression of a deliberate economy, and also of the physical labour required to produce such a work – the raised edges (either cut or torn) of paper and photographs, sometimes staples, are apparent in the reproduction, as is the texture of marks made with paint, or the imprint of pencilled lines pressing through paper. When Sutherland talks about inscription *pushing back* against the blank, he is speaking figuratively, but Carson seems here to provide a visual representation of such activity, which in her case appears to have been literal as well as figurative. This marker of the physical, analogous to the work of carving into stone, is also a reminder of the once-living body being commemorated – an insistence on their erstwhile physicality in the face of their ungraspable absence; here, at least, is something to get hold of. ‘An epitaph is something placed upon a grave’, Carson affirms, ‘a body that is made into a sign’.³⁴ There is violence entailed in such a passage (body becoming sign, presence disappearing into absence, life into death and vice versa), which the physicality of making – of *making a sign* – seems to gesture towards, insisting on the materiality of life in the face of its destruction.

A further, final epitaph appears in *Men in the Off Hours*, the closing poem ‘Appendix to Ordinary Time’, which responds to the death of Carson’s mother seemingly in ‘real time’ – it opens: ‘My mother died the autumn I was writing this’.³⁵ As with *Nox*, Carson approaches this personal loss somewhat obliquely, via another writer; here she appropriates fragments from Virginia Woolf’s writings, including material Woolf had crossed out, using another form of removal to illuminate her experience of loss:

Reading this, especially the crossed-out line, fills me with a sudden understanding. Crossouts are something you rarely see in published texts. They are like death—all is lost, yet still there. For death *although utterly unlike life* shares a skin with it. Death lines every moment of ordinary time. Death

³⁴ Ibid., p. 73.

³⁵ Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*, p. 165.

hides right inside every shining sentence we grasped and had no grasp of.
Death is a fact.³⁶

The entry on ‘epitaph’ in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (2012) has remarked of this piece, ‘Carson also discovers in ms. crossouts a new form of epitaph, where “all is lost, yet still there.”’³⁷ The poem concludes with this ‘new form of epitaph’:

Here is an epitaph for my mother I found on p. 19 of the Fitzwilliam Manuscript of Virginia Woolf’s *Women and Fiction*:

such
abandon ~~Obviously it is impossible, I thought, looking into those~~
ment ~~foaming waters, to~~
such ~~compare the living with the dead make any comparison~~
rapture ~~compare them~~³⁸

The crossed-out line, like an epitaph, becomes the ‘concrete double negative’, ‘a body that is made into a sign’. We can read the meaning of Woolf’s words, since they are struck through, as having been reversed: it is not after all impossible to ‘compare the living with dead’ – here they are, ‘shar[ing] a skin’. William Wordsworth, another writer for whom the epitaphic tradition was rather significant, drew links between epitaph and immortality, considering ‘the best epitaphs as the written embodiment of what he calls “a community of the living and the dead”’.³⁹ Perhaps there is also something oddly more alive about a cross-out in a manuscript in comparison with printed text, which is static; evidence of the body of the author intervening after the fact, making a sign. Elsewhere in the poem Carson writes: ‘Crossouts sustain me now. I search them out and cherish them like old photographs

³⁶ Ibid., p. 166.

³⁷ Greene, et al, eds, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, p. 451.

³⁸ Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*, p. 166.

³⁹ Joshua Scodel, *The English Poetic Epitaph: Commemoration and Conflict from Jonson to Wordsworth* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 385.

of my mother in happier times.⁴⁰ Like both photographs and epitaphs, cross-outs evoke the materiality of the once-living body. Carson's choice of the word 'sustain', leading to 'sustenance', is also interesting, since it presents such marks as paradoxically life-giving.

The poem concludes with a final, more recognisable, epitaph which seems to underline Carson's relationship to 'absent presence' – a black-and-white photograph of a woman and a child (Carson and her 'mother in happier times') captioned 'Margaret Carson 1913–1997' and followed by a phrase in Latin, '*Eclipsis est pro dolore*'. Sophie Mayer proposes a 'multiple choice' translation – 'It (she) is crossed out in the face of / because of / from / on behalf of sorrow / pain'⁴¹ – which elides the crossing out of text with death's crossing out of life, but misses the more obvious translation (given the context) of '*dolore*' as 'grief'. Jim McGrath points towards a likely source for the phrase, having discovered a single – arcane – reference to it in a study of medieval marginalia, where 'eclipsis' was a term used to highlight a 'defect' in the text being glossed.⁴² The scholar, Suzanne Reynolds, writes that the term was 'defined by Donatus as "a certain omission of a necessary word which is required for a precise meaning, as in, "She to herself" when "was speaking" is missing' – in other words, what we would today call 'ellipsis'. (And not unlike the 'dash written in place of an omitted letter or word', '____', that forms one of the definitions of 'blank'.) Reynolds encountered the phrase '*eclipsis est pro dolore*', which she translates as 'the ellipsis is because of grief', in medieval glosses to Horace's *Satires*, where it points to a verb missing from a phrase in which Ulysses is practising how to react to a death (one which he would be expected to grieve but is actually celebrating).⁴³ The implication is that the missing verb was a deliberate stylistic device to highlight the character's (performed) grief. One could easily disappear down a rabbit-hole when attempting to extrapolate upon Carson's allusions, but in this case, given her own classical scholarship and interest in marginalia and omissions, it would seem to be a convincing lead. Reading '*eclipsis est pro dolore*' in this light

⁴⁰ Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*, p. 166.

⁴¹ Sophie Mayer, 'Picture Theory: On Photographic Intimacy in Nicole Brossard and Anne Carson', in *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 33/1 (2008), p. 113.

⁴² Jim McGrath, *Borrowed Country: Digital Media, Remediation, and North American Poetry in the Twenty-first Century*, PhD, Northeastern University, Boston, MA (2015), p. 88.

⁴³ Suzanne Reynolds, *Medieval Reading: Grammar, Rhetoric and the Classical Text* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 123.

points to a kind of deliberateness on Carson's part, that, for all that her personal losses are beyond her control, the omissions and absences within her text are purposeful, performances even, that point to something unexpressed: *what is not there*. This approach is of course repeated in *Nox*, in which Carson inserts her own 'crossouts' such as letters torn into pieces or strips of photographs in which only shadows or backgrounds are visible. Asked about this approach in an interview, Carson responded: 'Realized that most photographs are better when cut. The more you cut, the more story they gather.'⁴⁴

'The noem'

Both Celan and Simonides, Carson argues in *Economy of the Unlost*, made exemplary use of the linguistic power of negation to represent what might otherwise be beyond representation, the 'not there': 'Words for "no," "not," "never," "nowhere," "nobody," "nothing" dominate their poems and create bottomless places for reading', she maintains.⁴⁵ Her own work seems to draw on their example. Megan O'Rourke has remarked upon the implicit negation in the title *Nox*, which – though the word is of course Latin for 'night' – also brings to mind the phrase 'no voice', since it 'both rhymes with the Latin word *vox*, or voice, and contains the English word "no"'.⁴⁶ *Nox* is interested in what happens when a voice goes silent ('I am looking a long time into the muteness of my brother', Carson tells us on one occasion; on another: 'And when he telephoned me – out of the blue – about half a year after our mother died he had nothing to say'⁴⁷); the brother's voice is missing but so, to a certain extent, is the author's. She writes of hearing his voice on the phone the last time she spoke to him: 'His voice was like his voice but with something else crusted on it, black, dense – it lighted up for a moment when he said "pinhead" (**So pinhead d'you attain wisdom yet?**) then went dark again'.⁴⁸ In fact we have a similar impression of Carson's own voice throughout the book, which

⁴⁴ Andrew David King, 'Unwriting the Books of the Dead: Anne Carson and Robert Currie on Translation, Collaboration and History' *Kenyon Review* (6 October 2012), <<http://www.kenyonreview.org/2012/10/anne-carson-robert-currie-interview/>> [accessed 7 September 2016].

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴⁶ Megan O'Rourke, 'The Unfolding: Anne Carson's *Nox*', *New Yorker* (12 July 2010), <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/07/12/the-unfolding>> [accessed 7 May 2014].

⁴⁷ Carson, *Nox*, sections 1.3 and 5.1.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, section 5.2.

glimmers infrequently between the grafted-together found materials which speak in other voices (letters written by her brother or mother, citations of other writers, the Catullus poem and so on) – as with her brother’s response to their mother’s death, she seems to have ‘nothing to say’. The smudgy ‘photocopied’ look of the book’s pages also recalls this ‘something else crusted on it, black, dense’. Since a photocopy becomes darker and smudgier the more times it is copied, the book’s aesthetics perhaps also reinforce a sense of distance or removal, though Carson has commented in an interview that this effect was actually brought about by ‘let[ing] a little light’ into the photocopier.⁴⁹ This is an interesting paradoxical feature, especially if we return to *Nox*’s opening – ‘I wanted to fill my elegy with light of all kinds’ – so it happens that she *did* fill her elegy with light, but only as a means of making it darker. The aesthetics of *Nox* frequently play with this kind of visual negation; it seems contrary, for example, that boldface becomes a typographical expression of ‘lighted up’, as in the quotation above, when it literally makes the letters darker – yet because it increases the contrast between the letters and the pale background of the page it *does* seem to have that effect.

This confluence between ideas of darkness and light, positive and negative, recalls Carson’s discussion in *Economy of the Unlost* of Celan’s poem ‘Weggebeizt’ (‘Bitten away’), in which he makes a comparison between his own art and the etchings of his wife, highlighting his increasing disillusionment with poetry – that ‘manycoloured talk of pasted- / on experience – the hundred-tongued lie- / poem, the noem’.⁵⁰ For Celan, in the wake of the Holocaust and the loss of his parents, language’s potential to bear witness became something to be regarded with suspicion, to directly represent unspeakable things a form of violence. This is a position often seen in post-Holocaust poetry, which has led to such work being described as ‘a literature of absence and silence contoured by language’.⁵¹ This negative, the *noem*, the poem that does not exist, is one way of satisfying the urge to speak while simultaneously remaining silent, which brings us back to the *no voice* of *Nox*. Carson explains,

⁴⁹ Wachtel, ‘An Interview with Anne Carson’.

⁵⁰ Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, p. 112. (Carson does not cite translators for the English versions of Celan’s poems she quotes, only German sources, so it seems the translations are hers.)

⁵¹ Ernestine Schlant, *The Language of Silence* (London: Routledge, 1999), quoted in Joan Boase-Beier, ‘Translating Celan’s Poetics of Silence’, *Target*, 23:2 (2011), p. 167.

an etcher has to learn to draw the sun black so that it will print white. [... Celan's] own poetic language shows a preoccupation with such ambiguity, with black suns and negative designs and with the dialectic of absence and presence that is implicit in negation.⁵²

Celan began to use fewer and fewer words in his poems, sometimes replacing them with asterisks denoting things that must remain unspoken ('the ellipsis is because of grief'); as Cathy Park Hong has noted, 'He wrote from negation, from an "eternalized Nowhere," from an identity of "no name," countering with the impossibility of testimony since testimony could be easily manipulated'.⁵³ *Nox* too, as I have suggested, is working with this conflict, of both speaking and remaining silent – though Carson is of course writing about a different kind of loss, in a very different historical moment). The 'black sun', though, does call to mind the relationship between dark and light at work in *Nox*, the significance of the shadow in pushing something forward, the negative producing a positive – both aesthetically and metaphorically, as here, where Carson describes the journey of 'the sacred phoenix' to mourn a father at 'the temple of the sun':

And in the shadows that flash over him as he makes his way from Arabia to Egypt maybe he comes to see the immensity of the mechanism in which he is caught, the immense fragility of his own flying – composed as it is of these ceaselessly passing shadows carried backward by the motion that devours them...

Stephanie Burt has written, 'In *Nox* [...] emptiness and apparatus surround short classical texts and explore their aura, so that we encounter a book full of spaces where poems cannot be, spaces that say what we cannot have.'⁵⁴ Or, as Carson elaborates in *Economy of the Unlost*: 'So: "noem," a poem that both is and is not, a verse

⁵² Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, p. 114.

⁵³ Cathy Park Hong, 'Against Witness', *Poetry*, 206/3 (May 2015), p. 160.

⁵⁴ Stephanie Burt, 'Professor or Pinhead'.

nothingness, a poeticized negativity. It is a word that makes use of the void to think to the full'.⁵⁵

“‘To be nothing – is that not, after all, the most satisfactory fact in the whole world?’ asks a dog in a novel I read once’, observes Carson in *Nox*, quoting Virginia Woolf’s *Flush*, a novel written from the perspective of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s cocker spaniel.⁵⁶ This detail recalls the first of Carson’s definitions of ‘mute’ – ‘(of an animal) that can only mutter, inarticulate; (as substantive) dumb creature’:⁵⁷ this animal, by contrast, is extraordinarily articulate. The allusion reminds us, perhaps, that silence or speechlessness (what we might think of as the aural manifestation of the negative) can still deliver revelations. Indeed the only time Carson really gives a sense of the grief occasioned by Michael’s death is when she describes the response of his dog – inarticulate and yet absolutely clear:

When my brother died his dog got angry, stayed angry, barking, growling, lashing, glaring, by day and night. He went to the door, he went to the window, he would not lie down. My brother’s widow, it is said, took the dog to the church on the day of the funeral. Buster goes right up to the front of Sankt Johannes and raises himself on his paws on the edge of the coffin and as soon as he smells the fact, his anger stops. [...] I wonder what the smell of nothing is.⁵⁸

Carson, we discover, was unable to attend the funeral herself, only learning of Michael’s death several weeks later – not unlike Catullus who, we infer from ‘Poem 101’, also arrived late to the scene. Since Carson could not experience first-hand the ‘fact’ of her brother’s death, we might think of *Nox* as her attempt to establish ‘the smell of nothing’. So there is a deliberateness in *Nox*’s engagement with nothingness, just as there is with Celan’s ‘noem’. ‘I said to myself as I have often done at moments of crisis since, “I feel nothing whatever”’, wrote Woolf in her autobiographical essay ‘Sketch of the Past’, recalling being encouraged, aged thirteen, to kiss her recently

⁵⁵ Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, p. 113.

⁵⁶ Carson, *Nox*, section 1.2.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, section 4.3.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, section 1.2.

deceased mother goodbye.⁵⁹ In *Nox* – visually through the sheer quantity of blank space the work contains, and in terms of its content and its disavowals of knowledge (whether empirical or personal) – nothing (‘what is not there’) is made manifest and gives voice to the mute but inescapable fact of Michael’s absence: ‘Eventually [my mother] began to say he was dead. How do you know? I said and she said When I pray for him nothing comes back’.⁶⁰ This ‘nothing’ that ‘comes back’ is what Carson finds herself grappling with:

I am looking a long time into the muteness of my brother. It resists me. [...] To put this another way, there is something that facts lack. “Overtakelessness” is a word told me by a philosopher once: *das Unumgängliche* – that which cannot be got around. Cannot be avoided or seen to the back of. And about which one collects facts – it remains beyond them.⁶¹

Something that cannot be got around is not nothing; conversely, it is so substantial it cannot be avoided: ‘the most satisfactory fact’.

That ‘luminous, big, shivering, unrepentent, discandied, barking web’

This making of something out of nothing provides absence with particulars, or parameters – it offers Carson something to work with. It’s not surprising that she chooses two fairly unfathomable words to allude to the most unfathomable phenomenon of death, and her phrasing, as often, is somewhat misleading. ‘Overtakelessness’ is not a straightforward translation of ‘*das Unumgängliche*’, which would be better rendered, literally, as ‘the ungetaroundable’ and is used to mean ‘unavoidable’. In fact Carson is conflating two words from rather different sources. ‘Overtakelessness’, the word told to Carson by ‘a philosopher’, is Emily Dickinson’s, from a poem that marks out the terms of the concept:

⁵⁹ Virginia Woolf, ‘Sketch of the Past’, in *Moments of Being: Autobiographical Writings* (London: Pimlico, 2002), p. 102.

⁶⁰ Carson, *Nox*, section 4.2.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, section 1.3.

The overtakelessness of those
Who have accomplished Death
Majestic is to me beyond
The majesties of Earth.

The soul her 'Not at Home'
Inscribes upon the flesh –
And takes her fair aerial gait
Beyond the hope of touch.⁶²

'*Das Unumgängliche*' can be traced to Martin Heidegger's essay 'Science and Reflection', where it appears amid a critique of Western modes of knowing, as a name for those things that science cannot encompass and which are characterised by their 'inconspicuousness'.⁶³ (I like the way Dickinson and Heidegger, in Carson's fusing of their language, are equally identifiable as the 'philosopher'.) Both words are confusing amalgams of the positive and negative; 'overtakelessness' combines two suffixes which almost cancel each other out – '-lessness' denoting a state of being less something ('*there is something that facts lack*'), in this case the ability (of the dead) to be overtaken. Similarly the combination of the prefix 'un-' and suffix '-liche' (cognate with the English '-ly' or '-able') in '*Unumgängliche*' offers a word with both positive and negative connotations. While both terms point towards the same thing, they seem to come at the phenomenon from different angles. I read 'overtakelessness' as giving a kind of agency to the dead, whereby it is they who possess this (negative) characteristic, the lacking of the capacity to be overtaken. By contrast '*das Unumgängliche*' – 'that which cannot be gotten around' in William Lovitt's translation – seems to point to the inability of those who might wish to overtake, or get around something: in this case, the living around the fact of the dead. Carson's compression of these two words points to language's trickery: by seeming to define 'overtakelessness' as '*das Unumgängliche*', by dissembling, she conceals something

⁶² Emily Dickinson, '1691', in *The Complete Poems* [1890] (London: Faber & Faber, 2016), p. 690.

⁶³ Martin Heidegger, 'Science and Reflection', in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York and London: Harper Colophon, 1977), pp. 177–79. I am indebted to John Mackay's PhD thesis 'Towards a Poetics of Overtakelessness: The Work of Contemporary Elegy in the Writing of Five North American Poets' (2015), Birkbeck, University of London, for alerting me to this allusion.

from us – the difference between the living and the dead. Like the Latin and English versions of ‘Poem 101’, the two sides do not quite add up: somewhere in the space between them ‘one has the feeling that something has passed us and kept going, that some possibility has got free’.

My attempts to fathom these two words and their relationship brought me back to that quotation of Carson’s regarding the impossibilities of translation – ‘prowling the meanings of a word [...] no use expecting a flood of light’ – with its evocation of the mind full of unexplained language, that ‘luminous, big, shivering, discandied, unrepentant, barking web’. I found myself returning to that compelling word ‘discandied’, which I had never come across before – something both sticky and abject about it, hard to get away from, like the ‘barking web’ it describes. I thought it might be a neologism – like Dickinson’s ‘overtakelessness’ – and Carson has this say about neologisms in *Economy of the Unlost*: ‘Why are neologisms disturbing? If we cannot construe them at all, we call them mad. If we can construe them, they raise troubling questions about our own linguistic mastery.’⁶⁴ In fact ‘discandy’, defined as meaning ‘to melt, dissolve. Chiefly *figurative*’, is thought to originate with Shakespeare and therefore was probably his neologism; its usage is described as ‘rare’ and ‘frequently with allusion to Shakespeare’.⁶⁵ An interesting feature of this word is that its definition seems to have foretold its own fate, since other than its appearance in *Antony and Cleopatra*,⁶⁶ it never found a foothold in general parlance unlike so many of Shakespeare’s coinages.⁶⁷ (Similarly, ‘overtakelessness’ does not seem to have come into use and only appears as a reference to Dickinson’s poem – it does not even appear in the *OED*.) Carson may be alluding to *Antony and Cleopatra* with ‘discandied’, although there is not an immediately obvious link between its preoccupations and those of *Nox*, beyond the broad theme of tragedy. It seems more likely that she is alluding to this word’s own discandying and the tendency of all words in that direction. The ultimate dispersal of the ‘barking web’. At the same time we might think of the word’s relationship to

⁶⁴ Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, p. 134.

⁶⁵ Oxford English Dictionary, def. 1.

⁶⁶ See IV.xii.22: ‘The hearts / that spanieled me at heels to whom I gave / Their wishes, do discandy, melt their sweets / On blossoming Caesar’. William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra* [1607] (New York and Scarborough, Ontario: Signet Classics, 1964).

⁶⁷ David Crystal, ‘Have I twice said well?’, in *Around the Globe*, 23 (2003), 10–11, <<http://www.davidcrystal.com/books-and-articles/shakespeare>> [accessed 6 June 2016].

‘candour’ and its obsolete definition, ‘brilliant whiteness’, or more current one, ‘frankness’.⁶⁸ To describe something as *discandied* might be to suggest that whiteness, or frankness, had been undone, presenting us with something altogether murkier (‘no use expecting a flood of light’).

For me the word recalls Carson’s work in *Economy of the Unlost* not just because of its significance as a neologism but also because of its visual and aural echoes of another word which is given prominence in that text in relation to a similar idea – ‘candled’. Carson subtitles her epilogue to that text ‘All Candled Things’; the phrase is taken from a translation of Celan’s poem ‘Die Ewigkeiten’ (‘The Eternities’), a deeply despairing poem that envisages a world in which the individual and everything else are gradually obliterated:

The eternities drove at
his face and
beyond it;

slowly a fire extinguished
all candled things...⁶⁹

The translation of the German ‘Gekertze’ for the English ‘candled’ adds a resonance not present in the original, for while ‘candled’ seems to suggest something aflame, the verb is defined as meaning ‘to test by allowing the light of a candle to shine through’⁷⁰ – to ‘candle’ an egg is to check its freshness or fertility. The poem’s evocation then of any lit (for which we might read vibrant, alive) thing being snuffed out by an all-ravaging fire, is given further poignancy when ‘candled’ also means fertile. In this sense, all life and all possibility of future life, are destroyed.

Though ‘candled’ and ‘candied’ are rather different words in the specificities of their definitions, to imagine their reversal – the discandied or dis-candled – is to imagine versions of the same thing: a progression towards an ending, towards

⁶⁸ Oxford English Dictionary, def. †1, def. 5.

⁶⁹ Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, p. 121.

⁷⁰ Oxford English Dictionary, def. 2.

nothingness. Of Celan's poem, Carson writes, 'a poet's despair is not just personal; he despairs of the word and that implicates all our hopes'.⁷¹ Has Carson too 'despair[ed] of the word' in *Nox*? Some critics have felt so. Stephanie Burt remarks: 'the text in *Nox* disintegrates to be replaced by images – stamps, photographs – or [...] by a blank or nearly blank page', arguing later, 'Words, for all their inadequacy, can do so much more complex work, as Carson knows.'⁷² Earlier in *Economy of the Unlost* she discusses another poem of Celan's, 'Keine Sandkunst Mehr' ('No More Sand Art'), in which it is the words themselves that begin to disintegrate. The concluding lines read:

Your question—your answer.
Your song, what does it know?

Deepinsnow,
Eeepinow,
E - i - o.⁷³

Like snow itself, these words, and all language, as Carson points out, 'melt away'⁷⁴ – the very definition of discandy. Hard not to notice too that 'discandied' contains the word 'died'. *Nox* does follow a similar trajectory. The last words in the book (apart from the illegible final appearance of the translated 'Poem 101') are '*He refuses, he is in the stairwell, he disappears*',⁷⁵ a phrase that almost seems to echo the disintegration enacted in these last three lines of Celan's, three steps towards a final and permanent vanishing. It seems to me that this disintegration, though, is not done in despair, but in provocation. It becomes a kind of performance – an immersive one. One thinks again of Carson's suggestion that *Nox* could be dramatically flung open down a set of stairs. Or of another comment, made in the same interview, 'Because the backs of the pages are blank, you can make your own book there. We did this with a class

⁷¹ Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, p. 121.

⁷² Burt, 'Professor or Pinhead'.

⁷³ Quoted in Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, p. 114.

⁷⁴ Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, p. 116.

⁷⁵ Carson, *Nox*, section 10.3.

of eight-year-olds. They loved it.⁷⁶ ‘*He refuses...*’ is faced on the left-hand page by Carson’s extended translation of ‘*vale*’, the final word in Catullus’ elegy which she renders in the poem as ‘farewell’. The longer lexical entry includes numerous elaborations, among them ‘Goodbye! (at the close of a letter); (in taking leave of the dead); [...] to bid goodbye; *valeat res ludicra* farewell to the stage’ and the concluding ‘*parem valent Graeci verbo* the Greeks have no precise word for this (but we call it “night”’). Thus *Nox* makes its way, theatrically, towards its own discandying.

‘Fundamental opacity’

We may begin to see how Carson stage-manages this work of loss, makes a kind of spectacle of it, while allowing some fundamental aspect of it to remain in the shadows. The structure of *Nox*, with its apparent harmony (between form and content, translation and source), through sleight of hand, omission and obfuscation, makes room for little pockets of silence – not unlike the historian whom Carson describes as ‘roam[ing] around Asia Minor collecting bits of muteness in its hide’.⁷⁷ Muteness is a recurring theme in *Nox*, originating in the translation of ‘Poem 101’ (‘*and talk (why?) with mute ash*’) and appearing most often in reference to Michael, who was almost as silent in life as in death (the few postcards he sent when he was alive had no return address): ‘I am looking a long time into the muteness of my brother’.⁷⁸ Michael’s muteness forms an impenetrable barrier – like the untranslatable word that ‘stops itself’, it cannot be got around – language is permanently suspended. It implies a kind of stubbornness too, a refusal to speak (the *OED* has a secondary definition of ‘mute’ meaning ‘intentionally making no articulate sound, refraining from speech, silent’⁷⁹), and this can be applied to Carson as much as to her brother, the mourner for whom talking seems pointless, since the subject of enquiry is anyway beyond reach – is themselves mute: ‘*and talk (why?) with mute ash*’. ‘Mute’ can also mean ‘hired mourner’;⁸⁰ with this definition in mind, we also might think of the deliberateness of *Nox* as a work of mourning, its rituals and performances.

⁷⁶ Seghal, ‘Anne Carson: Evoking the starry lad he was’.

⁷⁷ Carson, *Nox*, section 1.3.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Oxford English Dictionary, def. 4.2a.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, def. 4.3e.

There is muteness, too, in the way the text resists and tricks the reader. On the left-hand pages, for example, we encounter occasional interventions from Carson in the dictionary definitions – ‘The lexical entries are drawn from the lexicon but a bit fiddled with’, she acknowledged during one interview, ‘I did want people to gradually notice that and follow the clues of it; it’s a bit of a puzzle.’⁸¹ In another she commented, ‘Where the lexical entry didn’t relate [to the material on the right hand page], I changed it. So I smuggled in stuff to the left-hand side that is somewhat inauthentic. But it makes the left and right side cohere.’⁸² It would be quite a task to follow every cited idiom back to its source to establish authenticity, but what is clear is that many of the idioms listed (whether authentic or not) relate back to the themes of the book – night, silence, and nothingness. Asked about these sections of the book, Carson admitted, ‘Yes I manipulated them to put in more *nox*.’⁸³ Night becomes another kind of muteness: indeed, ‘*silentia muta noctis* deep speechlessness of night’ is one of the idioms cited under Carson’s definition of ‘*mutam*’ (‘mute’). Other idioms found in the entries that read like ‘clues’ (there are many) include, ‘*nox nihil donat* nothing is night’s gift’; ‘*nocte fratris quam ipso fratre miseror*: made sadder by the brother’s night than by the brother himself’; ‘*quod homo est non est hoc nox* a man is not a night!’; ‘*similiter atque ipse eram noctuabunda* just like him I was a negotiator with night’.⁸⁴

We might compare Carson’s process of putting in ‘more *nox*’ with her technique with the photocopier: both are interventions designed to, in one way or another, obscure – but in full view, in manner of a stage whisper. She writes: ‘Note that the word “mute” [...] is regarded by linguists as an onomatopoeic formation referring not to silence but to a certain fundamental opacity of human being, which likes to show the truth by allowing it to be seen hiding’⁸⁵ – another statement from which she ‘withholds authorization’. Unable to find any external evidence to verify this remark, I concluded that this might be another kind of trick – Carson is a linguist herself; she may as well be saying ‘the word “mute” is regarded by *me* as an

⁸¹ Wachtel, ‘An Interview with Anne Carson’.

⁸² Will Aitken, ‘Anne Carson: The Art of Poetry 88’, *Paris Review*, 171 (Fall 2004), <<https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5420/anne-carson-the-art-of-poetry-no-88-anne-carson>> [accessed 7 May 2014].

⁸³ Wachtel, ‘An Interview with Anne Carson’.

⁸⁴ Carson, *Nox*, section 4.3.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, section 1.3.

onomatopoeic formation...’ – thus she becomes ‘the historian’, “‘eyewitnessing” the data’.

The effect of Carson’s doctored lexical entries is not, as Carson slightly disingenuously proposes, coherence, but rather the opposite: since we cannot ‘trust’ all the entries, we cannot trust any of them. When the very place of meaning-making (the dictionary) becomes unreliable, we can no longer take the relationship between sign and signified for granted – something as unfathomable as imagination has come between them: the words become mute. Carson has remarked:

it is a mantle, the confidence that you can ever know what words mean because really we don’t. They’re just these signs that we pretend to nail down in dictionaries, tokens of usage, but frankly they’re all wild integers. Dissembling is a way of exposing that myth at the bottom of language.⁸⁶

‘Integer’ – a whole number, ‘complete in itself’; ‘wild’ integer – an integer ‘not tamed’, ‘uncultivated or uninhabited, hence waste, desert, desolate’, ‘uncultured’, ‘not under, or not submitting to, control or restraint’ (wildness, it seems, has more negative descriptors than positive).⁸⁷ So the word, the ‘wild integer’ (which recalls Merleau-Ponty’s ‘wild meaning’), for Carson is equivalent to the blank ‘cartridge containing gunpowder but no bullet, used [...] as a signal’, that is, there is nothing behind the sign. In his essay ‘The Task of the Translator’, Walter Benjamin quotes Stéphane Mallarmé on ‘the imperfection of languages’ (a quotation that comes to us, of course, via translation):

The imperfection of languages consists in their plurality, the supreme one is lacking: thinking is writing without accessories or even whispering, the immortal word still remains silent; the diversity of idioms on earth prevents everybody from uttering the words which otherwise, at one single stroke, would materialise as truth.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Wachtel, ‘An Interview with Anne Carson’.

⁸⁷ Definitions from the Oxford English Dictionary, see ‘integer’, def. B.3; ‘wild’, defs A.1.1, A.4a, I.1.6.

⁸⁸ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Task of the Translator’, in *Illuminations* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), p. 77.

Carson's diversity of idioms adds 'more *nox*' both literally and metaphorically; yet by making a fetish of night and of nothingness she perhaps protects us (or herself?) from something more truthful, from the bullet that a live cartridge might contain – or, perhaps, from an encounter with grief. 'It's not about grief,' Carson has said about *Nox*. 'It's about understanding other people and their histories as if we are all separate languages. That's what I was trying to explore. Exploring grief would have made it a book about me, and I didn't want that.'⁸⁹ It's a denial in keeping with *Nox*'s tendency towards obfuscation.

'A new idol'

The final page of *Nox* displays an image of the smudged and water-damaged translation of 'Poem 101'. None of the words are legible except perhaps the final 'brother' which, if you stare at it for long enough, seems to stand out a little more than the rest. 'You must gaze steadily at what is absent as if it were present by means of your mind',⁹⁰ writes Carson in *Economy of the Unlost*, a translation, she says, of the classical philosopher Parmenides. *Nox* explores the limitations of this approach by presenting us with a series of observations, glimpses and 'fragments of unexhausted time' that ultimately elude us, or are withheld from us. 'There is no / possibility I can / think my way into / his muteness' she concludes towards the end, continuing: 'God / wanted to make / nonsense of / "overtakelessness" / itself. To rob its / juice, and I believe / God has succeeded.'⁹¹ This is the first (and last) time Carson makes any reference to a higher power. Who is God in this instance? What does it mean to make 'nonsense of' a word that is already hard to make sense of? Charles M. Stang has attempted an interesting theological interpretation of this passage, in which he compares it to negative theology, a type of theological thinking that aims to describe God only in terms of what he is not, as befitting God's ineffability.⁹² The comparison could be applied to *Nox* in its entirety, which seeks to present the indescribable through a series of negations. According to Stang, there exists in negative theology

⁸⁹ Seghal, 'Anne Carson: Evoking the starry lad he was'.

⁹⁰ Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, p. 103.

⁹¹ Carson, *Nox*, section 8.5.

⁹² Stang, "'Nox" or the Muteness of Things'.

a pitfall where ‘precisely when one confesses God to be beyond everything, there appears the acute possibility that this “beyond” will be reestablished on a new pedestal, as a new idol’.⁹³ In the same way it may seem that *Nox*’s negations, by making a *something* of nothing, reduce or diminish their subject, because they allow us to begin to approach it – they try to overtake overtakeness. Better to make ‘nonsense of / “overtakeness” / itself’, that is, as negative theology recommends, to negate negation and ‘say “no” even to the beyond, to the muteness, to *das Unumgängliche*’.⁹⁴ In this way the blank might remain truly blank, the ungetarroundable forever impassable, the indescribable undescribed.

I am reminded again of Carson’s quotation of George Eliot, which appears in her ‘Note on Method’ near the opening of *Economy of the Unlost* – ‘Attempts at description are stupid’, which is taken from *Daniel Deronda* (1876). ‘Note on Method’ is an interesting read in relation to *Nox*, since it emphasises the importance of absence and negation to Carson’s writing, which ‘involves some dashing back and forth between that darkening landscape where facticity is strewn and a windowless room cleared of everything I do not know.’⁹⁵ Eliot’s text continues,

who can all at once describe a human being? Even when he is presented to us we only begin that knowledge of his appearance which must be completed by innumerable impressions under differing circumstances. We recognize the alphabet; we are not sure of the language.⁹⁶

In *Nox*, Carson’s project is not to map the boundlessness of grief’s terrain, or to sum up her lost brother’s character – or, if it had been, she realises the futility of the project. ‘A brother never ends. I prowl him. He does not end.’⁹⁷ Throughout her work, Carson has resisted offering up anything definitive or unambiguous, preferring instead to facilitate exchanges (such as that between Celan and Simonides, or ‘Poem 101’ and the loss of her brother) which cast light into dark corners but refuse to illuminate the whole. ‘Who can name its transactions, the sense that fell through us

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, p. vii.

⁹⁶ George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* [1876] (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2003), pp. 89–90.

⁹⁷ Carson, *Nox*, section 7.1.

of untouchable wind, unknown effort—one black mane?⁹⁸ Ultimately all her subjects are allowed to slip past us and get away, never to be overtaken.

⁹⁸ Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, p. viii.

'Life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation', wrote Wallace Stevens in 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', a poem, in part, about the mysteriousness of poetry.¹ For Stevens, poetry's mystery was essential to its nature and its 'meanings' could be discerned only by succumbing to the mystery.² 'And the wonder and mystery of art, as indeed of religion in the last resort,' he wrote in a piece called 'On Poetic Truth', 'is the revelation of something "wholly other" by which the inexpressible loneliness of thinking is broken and enriched.'³ As Stevens has pointed out, poems do not tend to make sense according to the laws of reason, yet 'they communicate their meanings to people who are susceptible to imaginative or emotional meanings',⁴ which is perhaps another way of saying 'life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation'. The phrase is a kind of paradox; whether we take 'relation' to mean 'the action of giving an account of something' or 'connection, correspondence', even familial connection, we can interpret it as saying 'life's nonsense makes sense to us, in a strange kind of way'.⁵ But it is a matter of debate what kind of sense may be made of a poem; Veronica Forrest-Thomson has argued that 'poetry must progress by deliberately trying to defeat the expectations of its readers or hearers, especially the expectation that they will be able to extract meaning from a poem';⁶ similarly Daniel Tiffany advocates 'com[ing] to terms with the phenomenology of unknowing, of unresolvable obscurity',⁷ while Stevens himself wondered, 'If the poem had a meaning and if its explanation destroyed the illusion, should we have gained or lost?'⁸ 'Don't make me your teacher', Noelle Kocot tells us in 'No Poem' (a title that recalls

¹ Wallace Stevens, 'Notes on a Supreme Fiction', in *Selected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1953), canto III, p. 88.

² See Wallace Stevens, 'A Comment on the Meaning in Poetry', *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library Classics of the United States, 1997), pp. 825–26, and Wallace Stevens, 'The Irrational Element in Poetry', *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), pp. 216–29.

³ Stevens, 'On Poetic Truth', *Opus Posthumous*, p. 237.

⁴ Stevens, 'A Comment on the Meaning in Poetry', p. 825.

⁵ Oxford English Dictionary, def. 1a and 2a.

⁶ From notes introducing 'Richard II' in Veronica Forrest-Thomson, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Barnett (London: Shearsman, 2008), p. 69.

⁷ Daniel Tiffany, *Infidel Poetics: Riddles, Nightlife, Substance* (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 6.

⁸ Wallace Stevens, 'The Irrational Element in Poetry', p. 223.

Paul Celan’s ‘noem’), one of many pieces in her collection *Sunny Wednesday* (2009) that seem to work towards obscurity rather than clarity.⁹

Kocot’s take on ‘life’s nonsense’ – in this case the non-sense of the sudden death of a husband – is certainly piercing, strange, and ‘wholly other’. If death itself is part of ‘life’s nonsense’, in that it is something that the living frequently find very hard to make sense of, then it is worth considering what role different manifestations of non-sense might play in elegiac writing – what happens when a refusal to name, as we see in Anne Carson’s work, is pushed to its limits, and becomes a refusal to mean. There are different ways of understanding what we mean by ‘nonsense’ – as well as different ways of understanding what we mean by ‘sense’. Kocot’s work, as we will see, shares much in common with the principles of surrealism, as espoused for example in Tristan Tzara’s ‘Dada Manifesto’ (1918) and later André Breton’s ‘Manifesto of Surrealism’ (1924) – particularly in her use of unexpected and seemingly incompatible juxtapositions. ‘What we need are works that are strong straight precise and forever beyond understanding’, is one of Tzara’s tenets.¹⁰ Elizabeth Sewell, a key theorist on the subject of nonsense, maintains,

The assumption that you know what sense is, and consequently what nonsense is, depends not on the acceptance or rejection of blocs of fact but upon the adoption of certain sets of mental relations. Whatever holds together according to these relationships will be sense, whatever does not will be nonsense.¹¹

Eleanor Cook, who has written on the ‘word play’ in Stevens’s poetry, rejects the term for her purposes: ‘After some thought, I have avoided the term “nonsense” in my discussion. Reading the commentaries on Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* books persuaded me that “nonsense” is too often a catchall term for strange effects.’¹² Yet the appeal of a word that can easily be reduced to its simplest and broadest meaning – *non-sense*

⁹ Noelle Kocot, *Sunny Wednesday* (Seattle, WA and New York: Wave Books, 2009), p. 41.

¹⁰ Tristan Tzara, ‘Dada Manifesto’ [1918], in Lawrence Rainey, ed., *Modernism: An Anthology* (Malden, MA, Oxford, and Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 483.

¹¹ Elizabeth Sewell, *The Field of Nonsense* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1952), p. 1.

¹² Eleanor Cook, *Word-Play and Word War in Wallace Stevens* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 18.

– is difficult to resist; and after all, I’m very interested in ‘strange effects’. In using the term, I am expanding it to its broadest definition to encompass a variety of manifestations: anything that operates to keep something from knowledge, or to complicate a poem’s relationship with ‘meaning’, such as obscurity, inaccessibility, mysteriousness, surrealism, uncertainty, and their close cousin, secrecy. *Sunny Wednesday* displays all of these features. To begin with, it does not advertise itself as an elegiac collection: Kocot has described the book in an interview as ‘just pure hard grief’,¹³ but because it is published without a blurb and is in some ways very abstract, this aspect of the work is far from overt. Walter Benjamin proposed, ‘That which mourns feels itself thoroughly known by the unknowable’,¹⁴ and this may be a useful way of interpreting Kocot’s work, which seems to speak with authority on matters that even so remain imponderable.

‘I don’t know which way is the right way’

‘[A]ll poets and poetry elude me,’ Kocot writes in ‘If the Earth Is a School’, ‘especially myself and my own’. Here she strikes a note of defiance rather than lamentation – when she says earlier in the same poem, ‘I don’t know which way is the right way, / Nor do I understand physics’, she is not asking to know or understand these things; some things cannot be known.¹⁵ A brief review of *Sunny Wednesday* remarks, ‘Throughout, there is the poet’s thwarted longing for an understanding that will not come’¹⁶ – a likely enough assessment of a book dealing with loss, but in this case, it misses the mark. Kocot writes:

And when I am lost,
Your scent wafts toward me
Like the notes of a vibraphone
And I shake off the muck of existence,

¹³ ‘The Rumpus Poetry Book Club Chat with Noelle Kocot’ (17 March 2011), <therumpus.net/2011/03/the-rumpus-poetry-book-club-interviews-noelle-kocot/> [accessed 11 October 2016].

¹⁴ Quoted in Jonathan Boulter, ‘Does Mourning Require a Subject? Samuel Beckett’s *Texts for Nothing*’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 50–2 (Summer, 2004), p. 50.

¹⁵ Kocot, *Sunny Wednesday*, p. 73.

¹⁶ ‘Sunny Wednesday: Noelle Kocot’, *Publishers Weekly*, <<https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-933517-39-1>> [accessed 10 October 2016].

An elegiac ox leaping feet first
Through an opening in a honeycomb
To remind you that before all else we are animals full of music
Tethered to the contradictions of this world.¹⁷

The ox in the above quotation isn't leaping into the honeycomb in search of something, it's the leaping itself (whose purpose is 'To remind you that...') that is the point. We might think of another of Tristan Tzara's Dadaist principles: 'Dada; elegant and unprejudiced leap from harmony to the other sphere'.¹⁸ *Sunny Wednesday* executes this leap into the 'other sphere' by thoroughly undermining or bypassing the notion of 'understanding': the idea of 'making sense of loss is, let's say, made a nonsense of.

While there is certainly a distinction between Kocot's surrealist style of nonsense and what we might find in say Edward Lear or Lewis Carroll, or indeed that which Stevens demonstrates in 'Notes on a Supreme Fiction' with the metaphor 'At night an Arabian in my room, / With his damned hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how',¹⁹ there are points of convergence too. If Stevens is talking about the way in which we might not understand a language (the incomprehensible 'hoobla-hoobla' of the 'Arabian'), and yet still be able to *hear* it, then Kocot is doing something similar. Anna Barton writes,

Nonsense is [...] literature that complicates or obstructs the relationship between word and world, or word and meaning, rather than using words as a conduit to the world they describe.²⁰

Kocot's image of the 'elegiac ox', at once evocative and hard to imagine, is typical of the collection as a whole, which all at once seems elegant and clumsy, exultant

¹⁷ Noelle Kocot, 'To You, the Only', in *Sunny Wednesday*, p. 12.

¹⁸ Tzara, 'Dada Manifesto', p. 484.

¹⁹ Stevens, 'Notes on a Supreme Fiction', p. 87.

²⁰ Anna Barton, 'Nonsense Literature', <<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199846719/obo-9780199846719-0099.xml>> [accessed 14 December 2016].

and bereft, exuberantly expressive and stubbornly opaque. It refuses to *make sense*, instead embracing ‘music’ and ‘contradictions’, those things that cannot be, in any straightforward way, made sense of. An approach that reckons with the strangeness of death and does not seek to make the impact of loss straightforward or easy to apprehend is one likely to be characterised by strangeness, obscurity and uncertainty – especially when that approach is via the medium of poetry, not a mode known for its accessibility.

‘An enigma too dense to be deciphered’

Various theorists have observed the tendency of some (or indeed much) poetry towards obscurity and hermeticism. Daniel Tiffany, in his extensive study of the subject, *Infidel Poetics: Riddles, Nightlife, Substance* (2009), argues that even so-called ‘accessible’ poetry might be considered ‘obscure by many readers’,²¹ while George Steiner notes in his essay ‘On Difficulty’, which explores the challenges of interpreting poetry: ‘There is [...] an undecidability at the heart, at what Coleridge called the inner *penetralium* of the poem’.²² Steiner attributes this ‘undecidability’ to a kind of wilfulness on the part of the poet – ‘This rich undecidability is exactly what the poet aims at’²³ – without exploring why this might be so, though the addition of the adjective ‘rich’ at least indicates a feeling that there is something added, rather than lost, by this uncertainty.²⁴ Tiffany’s project is, rather, to study the nature of obscurity itself, while resisting the temptation to decode it. Theorising obscurity, he points out, ‘risks ignoring, in a more rigorous sense, the absolute conditions of lyric obscurity: solipsism, inscrutability, meaninglessness’²⁵ – similar, perhaps, to the problem of negative theology discussed in the previous chapter, where the emphasis on negation might diminish the force of ineffability by getting too close to it. In aligning his understanding of obscurity with G. W. Leibniz’s concept of the monad (an indivisible, impenetrable unit – perhaps not unlike Coleridge’s ‘penetralium’,

²¹ Tiffany, *Infidel Poetics*, p. 3.

²² George Steiner, ‘On Difficulty’, in *On Difficulty and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 35.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

²⁴ It’s notable that after her husband’s death, as well as the poems, Kocot is said to have written ‘a 100-page nonfiction book called ‘An Archaeology of Grief: Breaking the Habit of Certainty’. She explained: ‘The first thing I wrote was “ontological certainty is a killer of the mind and spirit.”’ The book does not appear to have been published. See Elise Harris, ‘Fear and Trembling: A Profile of Noelle Kocot’, *Harp & Altar*, issue 1 (Fall 2008),

<harpandaltar.com/interior.php?t=r&i=1&p=11&e=12> [accessed 29 November 2016].

²⁵ Tiffany, *Infidel Poetics*, p. 9.

which denotes the innermost, most secret part of a building or place), Tiffany seeks to present the obscure as something irreducible and impenetrable. Monads, according to Leibniz, ‘have no windows through which something else can enter or leave’, and for Tiffany, a ‘poem that defies comprehension is windowless, one might say, at once inviolate and inscrutable’.²⁶ Yet, as Steiner acknowledges, it is possible for a seemingly obscure poem to nonetheless ‘mean’ a great deal to us, suggesting that mystery and obscurity can make themselves intelligible in ways we do not quite understand, or have no name for. ‘[Paul Celan’s] “Largo” is a profoundly moving statement,’ he writes, ‘though we cannot say confidently or paraphrastically “of what”’.²⁷

My exploration of Kocot’s work falls somewhere along the intersection of these two arguments, looking for ways of interpreting the mysteriousness of her poems that acknowledge their powerful capacity to communicate. Far from suggesting ‘meaninglessness’, I would argue, the obscurity of Kocot’s work is in fact its means of signification. I offer the analogy of the ‘psychic crypt’, a theory developed by psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok – whose work Tiffany briefly references – denoting a repressed trauma split off from and completely inaccessible to the self. An interesting counterpart to Tiffany’s notion of the poem as monadic and Coleridge’s ‘penetralium’, Abraham and Torok’s ‘metapsychology of secrets’²⁸ – their exploration of the way the ‘psychic crypt’ communicates its presence despite its windowlessness – provides a way of talking about poems that seem inaccessible but move us all the same. In a foreword to Abraham and Torok’s *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word: A Cryptonymy* (1986) – a text in which they apply their theory to a famous case study of Freud’s – Derrida describes the effect of the psychic crypt on the psychological landscape:

The crypt is enclosed within the self, but as a foreign place, prohibited, excluded. The self is not the proprietor of what he is guarding. He makes the

²⁶ Leibniz quoted in Joyelle McSweeney, ‘Slumming: Daniel Tiffany’s *Infidel Poetics*’, *Boston Review*, <bostonreview.net/mcsweeney-slumming-infidel-poetics-by-daniel-tiffany> [accessed 24 November 2016]; Tiffany, *Infidel Poetics*, p. 2.

²⁷ Steiner, ‘On Difficulty’, p. 46.

²⁸ This phrase is taken from the title of their paper ‘The Topography of Reality: Sketching a Metapsychology of Secrets’, in Abraham and Torok, eds, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 1 (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), trans. Nicholas Rand, pp. 157–61.

rounds like a proprietor, but only the rounds. He turns around and around, and in particular uses all his knowledge of the grounds to turn visitors away.²⁹

It may be useful to think of the topography of a poem in similar terms, where the ‘psychic crypt’ might represent a poem’s ‘meaning’ and the obscurity of its expression the self doing its rounds – and, like the psychic crypt, this ‘meaning’ may be essentially beyond discovery. I think of the not infrequent accusation levelled at poets by readers regarding poetry’s ‘wilful’ obscurity, but what I am interested in here is an obfuscation that occurs without intention, that is simply a response to a kind of topographical reality. In the same way that the existence of a psychic crypt might be news to the self it ‘belongs’ to, any ‘revelation’ of a poem’s ‘meaning’ might also be news to the poet, who never sought to deliberately hide anything. As Mary Ruefle writes in her ‘Short Lecture on Socrates’,

I am forever telling my students I know nothing about poetry, and they never believe me. I do not know what my poems are about, except on rare occasions, and I never know what they mean. I have met and spoken to many poets who feel the same way.³⁰

That Abraham and Torok’s ‘cryptonymy’ – their means of interpreting psychic crypts – could be of use to literary theorists as well as psychoanalysts is made clear in the translator’s introduction to the *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word*:

Cryptonymic analysis proceeds by investigating the ways in which certain elements in a text, which appear to obstruct interpretation, may be converted into readable entities. [...] Cryptonymy is a critical instrument that permits us to pinpoint areas of silence in works of literature as well as in the oeuvre of a human life and grant them the potential of expression.³¹

²⁹ Jacques Derrida, ‘Foreword’, in Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word: A Cryptonymy* (Minnesota, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), trans. Nicholas Rand, p. xxxv.

³⁰ Mary Ruefle, ‘Short Lecture on Socrates’, in *Madness, Rack, and Honey* (Seattle, WA and New York: Wave Books, 2012), p. 250.

³¹ Abraham and Torok, *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word*, p. lxvi.

My interest, however, has less to do with transforming poems into ‘readable entities’ than with exploring how we might work with poems that seem, if not unreadable, then unintelligible, and what such descriptions say about our ways of interpreting and means of communication, especially if we find that a poem that we cannot ‘understand’ still communicates something to us (as Steiner found with Celan’s ‘Largo’). Such an approach might be compared to Carl Jung’s work on dreams; unlike Freud, Jung did not believe that dreams were purposely cryptic, but simply communicating on their own terms: ‘to me dreams are part of nature, which harbours no intention to deceive, but expresses something as best it can, just as a plant grows or an animal seeks food as best it can.’³² Tiffany notes,

Attempting to characterize the extreme obscurity of the particular class of symbols they are investigating, Abraham and Torok write: “it is as if the sense of the words were shrouded by an enigma too dense to be deciphered by known forms of listening.”³³

Of course, there exist ways of listening that do not involve hearing, just as there are kinds of knowledge that are in some ways closer to not-knowing.³⁴ Kocot’s poems situate themselves in this realm of not-knowing, and they require their reader to do the same: they call upon us to access unknown – or indeed secret – forms of listening.

‘The secret they ardently wanted to hear’

In her lecture ‘On Secrets: Eight Beginnings, Two Ends’, Mary Ruefle argues that poetry’s function is to simultaneously reveal and keep a secret: ‘The origins of poetry are clearly rooted in obscurity, in secretiveness, in incantation, in spells that must at

³² Quoted in Kelly Bulkeley, *An Introduction to the Psychology of Dreaming* (Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 1997), p. 30.

³³ Tiffany, *Infidel Poetics*, p. 6, note 9.

³⁴ Julian B. Gerwitz and Rachel R. Kolb offer a very useful discussion of the limitations of metaphors around ‘hearing’ and ‘listening’ in poetry and its interpretation, inviting readers ‘to shake off our unthinking habits of speech and inherited patterns of thought to consider a wider range of possibilities for communication’. See ‘An Ear for Poetry: The Knottiness of a Prevalent Metaphor’, *Poetry* (8 September 2015), <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/features/articles/detail/70264>> [accessed 6 December 2016].

once invoke and protect, tell the secret and keep it.³⁵ She opens her lecture, in fact, by describing an unknown form of listening:

I want you to imagine for a moment something that is actually impossible to imagine – the unborn child in the womb perceiving through sound an outside world it has absolutely no experience of, no concept of, and no perception of except through sound. The experience of the fetal being is the experience of sound without sense; the fetal being is overhearing a secret, a true secret insofar as what it hears is not revealed as having a discernible meaning, and so is still *kept*, still remains a secret, all the while still being experienced, revealed, as sound, which is *not* hiding itself. So you might say our first “experience” of the world is of a secret. Our first experience of the world is that the world is a secret, that is, it *neither hides itself nor reveals itself*.³⁶

The peculiar pleasure of the unborn child (as imagined here, at least) is that they cannot understand what they are hearing, and cannot seek to, even supposing they had the will to. But after we are born, and grow up, we start wanting to know secrets. We forget the pleasures of, as Adam Phillips has it, ‘not getting it’, ‘the pleasures, for example, of listening to voices without understanding what they are saying’: we want to understand the ‘hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how’, get to grips with ‘life’s nonsense’.³⁷ Wallace Stevens, it should be noted, did not always decline to elaborate on his poems, as evidenced by his correspondence with Hi Simons, a close reader of his work, who – among other questions – asked him to clarify these lines about the ‘Arabian’:

We say: At night an Arabian in my room,
With his damned hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how,
Inscribes a primitive astronomy

³⁵ Mary Ruefle, ‘On Secrets’: Eight Beginnings, Two Ends’, in *Madness, Rack, and Honey: Collected Lectures* (Seattle and New York: Wave Books, 2012), p. 820.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

³⁷ Adam Phillips, *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life* (London: Penguin, 2012), pp. 37–38.

Across the unscrawled fores the future casts [...] ³⁸

Stevens explained, ‘The Arabian is the moon; the undecipherable vagueness of the moonlight is the unscrawled fores: the unformed handwriting’; but he added, ‘the fact that the Arabian is the moon is something that the reader could not possibly be expected to know. However, I did not think it was necessary for him to know.’ ³⁹ Though his explicit orientalism cannot go unacknowledged, Stevens manages to both answer the question and simultaneously insist on the significance of not knowing by implying that a reader’s understanding of a poem need not be contingent upon knowledge; indeed what the moon–Arabian seems to stand for is that very lack of knowledge, meaning, or understanding – the parts of a poem that remain ‘unscrawled’ or ‘unformed’. The pleasure of Kocot’s poetry is the pleasure of listening to a voice whose words we cannot always understand, but – like Hi Simons – we are also naturally curious. As Ruefle admits, ‘When the secret is hidden we try to see it.’ ⁴⁰ Indeed, the potential for revelation is encoded in the very idea of a secret, as Daniel Tiffany points out:

a secret, as Diderot defines it in the *Encyclopédie*, is “everything that we have confided to someone, or that someone has confided to us, with the intention that it not be revealed.” A secret, according to this view, is always engendered by an act of communication; no phenomenon characterized by secrecy, privacy, or obscurity can therefore be entirely closed or inscrutable. ⁴¹

‘Beyond Recognition’, the opening poem in *Sunny Wednesday*, concerns a secret. ‘Everyone who came to see the corpse / Of the holy man was struck by his or her own decay’, it begins. ⁴² It’s interesting that the very first line of this collection of ‘pure, hard grief’ concerns a dead body – the actual dead body that gave rise to

³⁸ Stevens, ‘Notes on a Supreme Fiction’, p. 87.

³⁹ Wallace Stevens, *The Letters of Wallace Stevens* [1966], ed. Holly Stevens (Los Angeles, CA and London: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 433–34.

⁴⁰ Ruefle, ‘On Secrets’, p. 88.

⁴¹ Tiffany, *Infidel Poetics*, p. 5.

⁴² Kocot, *Sunny Wednesday*, pp. 9–10.

the grief, as in much elegiac writing, being mostly absent (though of course we might interpret the ‘holy man’ as standing in for the body of Kocot’s husband). Robert Bly remarks, ‘A human body, just dead, is very like a living body except that it no longer contains something that was invisible anyway. In a poem, as in a human body, what is invisible makes all the difference.’⁴³ ‘Beyond Recognition’ imagines a ‘peanut-crunching crowd’ (to use Sylvia Plath’s phrase) paying homage to this corpse in hopes of enlightenment, of discovering a secret – of making the invisible visible. If the poem’s opening seems to implicate readers of elegy (*‘Everyone who came to see the corpse’*) as potentially voyeuristic (after all, to try to find out a secret is to be a kind of voyeur), it goes on to underwrite the concerns of the book as a whole, exploring with compassion a universal search for meaning and recognition: ‘They longed for a meaning more distinct / As they tried and tried in vain / To master the art of their spiritual trapeze.’ But the poem merely acknowledges this search, rather than offering a solution to it:

The ones who looked into it first
Saw that man’s face smiling beyond
Its melting eye sockets, leaking the secret
They ardently wanted to hear
Even as they could feel each of their own cells
Collapsing daily now, a secret that this man,
Henceforth the professor of all their days and ways,
Who would blow the scales from their eyes
Like a strong wind, the secret he would whisper
To them in the sorrowful music of fallen leaves
Sheeting the sidewalks like mirrors
Under their weary feet,
And it had to do with asking,
The secret had to do with simply asking.

⁴³ Robert Bly, ‘A Wrong Turning in American Poetry’, in *American Poetry: Wildness and Domesticity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), pp. 32–33.

Like the secret overheard by the unborn child in Ruefle's analogy, this is a secret that remains obscure even as it is told: 'whisper[ed] / [...] in the sorrowful music of fallen leaves', it is 'sound without sense'. Kocot's poem indicates how such a thing might nonetheless be a kind of epiphany, delivered as it is through a series of clauses that build suspense for the final reveal – which turns out to be yet another enigma. The holy man's secret seems simply to be a reflection of our desire to find it out. The point of the secret is really what we don't know about it.

'A poem that defies comprehension'

Perhaps then the point of Kocot's poems is also what we don't know about them. In 'Once Upon a Time in America', one of the few poems in *Sunny Wednesday* in which it is possible to follow something like a narrative (notably, the only poem in which the death being mourned is made explicit), she writes, 'I still have never let anyone see me cry', which seems to get at something important about these poems, that is, there is something in them that they do not allow us access to. Although the book arose, as Kocot has contended, as part of a 'necessary' grieving process, the poems do not express grief in the way readers of elegy might have come to expect, by frequently evoking the lost person or their absence and alluding specifically to grief or mourning; instead they are characterised by an acute and often painful perplexity.⁴⁴ In one piece an imagined future reunion concludes with the poet envisaging the sunset 'Incinerating me every night / Into the dawn's charred aviary, the word',⁴⁵ as though each day might begin with the speaker rising, phoenix-like, from their own ashes. The alignment of the rather spectacular image of dawn as a 'charred aviary' with 'the word', for which we might read *language*, or perhaps the word of God (Kocot is a Roman Catholic), captures the ways in which Kocot's work reveals its secretiveness, since the very purpose of an aviary is to both show and keep: a viewer can see the birds inside it, but they cannot touch them.

Even to glean a small interpretation from Kocot's poems, though, is no easy task. The same poem opens,

⁴⁴ 'The Rumpus Poetry Book Club Chat with Noelle Kocot'.

⁴⁵ Kocot, 'Hirsute Blossoms Crashed into the Season, Exoskeletons of Zeros Netted the Wind', in *Sunny Wednesday*, p. 46.

The answers are stuck like tiny eggs
Between my teeth, a cosmic arithmetic

Wending its way through depilation
And the subtle centrifuge of forgotten

Territories, which I oil and burn [...]

We can probably readily imagine the intricate physical labour of trying to extract ‘tiny eggs’ from our teeth: the mental labour of working with Kocot’s poetry feels similar. This work, though, even if we fail to come up with ‘the answers’, is not unsatisfying. As Tiffany has observed, obscure poetry nonetheless ‘somehow displays the inwardness of language, practicing a kind of naked hermeticism’:⁴⁶ its obscurity becomes its means of expression – as with the aviary, we can see something, but we cannot get to it. ‘[O]bscurity is a way of making things disappear with words’, notes Tiffany. ‘At the same time, disappearance becomes a legible material event through the verbal craft of obscurity.’⁴⁷ Kocot’s poems frequently display, and insist upon, ‘the inwardness of language’. In ‘Here, Kitty Kitty’, she seems to compare the workings of the mind to the process of coaxing a cat into an embrace:

[...] White hyphens
Of the conscious dash signals
Upon the waves of the unconscious,
And I’ll tell you frankly,

Right now I don’t care what any of it means.

[...]

⁴⁶ Tiffany, *Infidel Poetics*, p. 2.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Better that the glyphs of my imagining
See them off in the crammed

Rockets of my sense while the sky
Pours down a cider of my own devising
Over an arc of trees.
Maybe then the inside story

Will unfold, as primitive as the rain,
As you felt sure it would all along
If only you could just cajole it

So that finally it would leap up purring
Into your open hands.⁴⁸

The poem appears to be working towards some kind of revelation, the ‘inside story’ that, it is hoped, ‘will unfold’ – but significantly it remains an ‘*inside* story’. Each obscure metaphor is ‘translated’ into something equally obscure so that meaning is not brought to the surface but rather pushed further beyond reach. The ‘signals’ of the conscious – which we might take to be the more readily available aspects of thought – are ‘dash[ed]’ on the ‘waves of the unconscious’, that is, submerged or in some way thwarted, while the ‘glyphs’ of the poet’s ‘imagining’ see off the ‘crammed // Rockets’ of sense. So sense is made inaccessible, consigned to the deeps or shot into the skies. The words ‘hyphen’ and ‘dash’ of course primarily signify types of punctuation mark, aligning the process of wrestling with thought with that of wrestling with writing. If punctuation usually signals how a piece of writing should be read, and therefore understood, a ‘white hyphen’ might in most cases work counter to its purpose, being – on a white page, at least – invisible. And although the poem does end with a potential epiphany, the metaphorical cat ‘leap[ing] up purring’ (suggesting these wayward thoughts might somehow be harnessed), it is

⁴⁸ Kocot, *Sunny Wednesday*, pp. 13–14.

delivered in the conditional perfect tense ('As you felt sure it would [...] / If only you could [...] / So that finally it would [...]') – it speaks of a possible future that *might* occur if certain conditions are met. Besides which a cat remains, in its creatureliness, 'wholly other', its language untranslated – even when held in 'your open hands'. In other words, the 'inside story' is kept, folded, inside: it stays a secret.

'The name saying its own sense'

This refusal of clarity, whereby the 'answer' – the cat leaping into one's arms – only re-establishes the mystery, plays out in different ways throughout *Sunny Wednesday*, in which colourful and often jarring combinations of images and concepts resist the usual mechanisms of literary interpretation. It is a style very much in keeping with the surrealist tradition – 'a roaring of tense colors, and interlacing of opposites and of all contradictions, grotesques, inconsistencies'.⁴⁹ 'If You Can? What Do You Mean, If You Can?', for example, opens:

The daisies are running under an umbrella
Of French fries.
Into the mud, through the bush,
X sails screaming on a plate of asthma.⁵⁰

Another poem, '12th Wedding Anniversary', begins: 'Jailed and decreased, my doughnuts rise. / Have a feather, don't ask why, / There is a Coney Island in my eye.'⁵¹ The impenetrability of such images also recalls Gilles Deleuze's definition of nonsense and what he calls the 'blank word' or 'esoteric word':

It is a word that denotes exactly what it expresses and expresses what it denotes. It expresses its *denotation* and designates its own sense. It says something but at the same time it says the sense of what it says: it says its own sense. [...] We know that the normal law governing all names endowed with

⁴⁹ Tzara, 'Dada Manifesto', p. 484.

⁵⁰ Kocot, 'If You Can? What Do You Mean, If You Can?', p. 51.

⁵¹ Kocot, '12th Wedding Anniversary', in *Sunny Wednesday*, p. 47.

sense is precisely that their sense may be denoted only by another name. [...] The name saying its own sense can only be nonsense.⁵²

Deleuze's definition can be compared to Elizabeth Sewell's assertion that sense is dependent on 'the adoption of certain sets of mental relations'; here there are no 'mental relations' because a word that 'says its own sense' stands alone: the relationship between sign and signified has been collapsed. Anna Barton argues that 'nonsense presents a significant challenge to the power language has to name, know, and own the world',⁵³ but Kocot's work is about the power of *not* naming, owning and knowing. 'The poem is elusive. / And so are you' begins an untitled poem in *Sunny Wednesday*.⁵⁴ 'You' is doubly elusive because we don't know who it signifies; perhaps it's the poet's departed husband, but as the reader I feel addressed, and a little lost – *yes, who am I?* Mary Ruefle observes,

the unnerving force of naming casts a great spell over language and, in one very important sense, created poetry, since to invoke sacred powers, bypass words were employed, incantations without any meaning at all, such as *abracadabra*, words that of course became imbued with as much power as they were trying to invoke.⁵⁵

We can infer from this that there is a vital link between non-sense and poetry: that there is a type of meaning, distinct from what we might call 'rational meaning' (i.e. something we can describe by another name), which we might instead call 'power'. An obscure poem, as a whole, might be considered a larger form of '*abracadabra*' in that its meaning cannot be expressed in any way other than through the power with which it is imbued. It becomes an incantation. As Deleuze indicates, and Ruefle says, 'the metaphor becomes the thing itself'.⁵⁶ In '12/24/04', Kocot writes:

⁵² Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale, p. 67.

⁵³ Anna Barton, 'Nonsense Literature', <<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199846719/obo-9780199846719-0099.xml>> [accessed 14 December 2016].

⁵⁴ '_____', in *Sunny Wednesday*, p. 56.

⁵⁵ Ruefle, 'On Secrets', p. 81.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

To say I miss you, is to say that the sky
Is a paper cliff I leap from
In order to avoid the affluence of the starlight.
And yet I miss you.⁵⁷

Here the phrase ‘I miss you’ is exposed for being uselessly inexpressive, since such familiar words can hardly be expected to contain even an echo of the grandly nonsensical elaboration the poet offers, while at the same time its meaning is shown to be in some way inviolate: ‘*And yet I miss you.*’ Although stock phrases such as ‘I miss you’ and ‘I love you’ are easily parsed semantically and are not nonsensical in the way that ‘abracadabra’ is, they are also kinds of incantation: pieces of language that have both gained and lost meaning through repeated utterance – and yet remain uniquely powerful. In English, there is no other way of saying ‘I love you’: it says its own sense. Kocot frequently employs what we might think of as ‘everyday’ language and organises it in a way that makes it mysterious: ‘Anchored to a wood floor / Cheating the avenues, I potato / You, I potato you.’⁵⁸ Her images often recall Noam Chomsky’s famous phrase ‘colourless green ideas sleep furiously’, used to demonstrate the difference between syntax and semantics.⁵⁹ Secreting themselves behind a kind of semantic barrier, they may look sensible from a distance because they generally follow the rules of syntax, but on closer inspection they prove reluctant to deliver themselves up to the reader: ‘What legend inscribed on insect husks will be exacted / From ancestral thirsts in this tin exquisite whine of hours [...]?’⁶⁰ Their language is somehow unyielding, refusing explication ‘by another name’.

‘*An unknown language*’

Another way of conceptualising these ‘strange effects’ would be to say that they demonstrate a deliberate failure of *blending*. This is to follow the example of Jean

⁵⁷ Kocot, *Sunny Wednesday*, p. 48.

⁵⁸ Kocot, ‘12/24/04’, in *Sunny Wednesday*, p. 48.

⁵⁹ See Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1957).

⁶⁰ Kocot, ‘Light in the Hall’, in *Sunny Wednesday*, p. 16.

Boase-Beier, who uses the notion of blending to develop a discussion of the work of Paul Celan.⁶¹ A theory of cognition developed by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, blending describes the unseen process by which the mind creates and grasps new concepts through combining existing ones: 'For example, we might combine elements of a human and an animal to create a monster, and the monster may have characteristics that neither of the original creatures would have.'⁶² Encountering concepts that we cannot blend, Boase-Beier argues, is to experience a kind of cognitive dissonance. Using Celan's 'Esenbaum' ('Aspen tree') as an example, she demonstrates how the language of a poem might work to prevent blending, thereby evoking – at a cognitive level – the trauma that gave rise to it, which cannot be assimilated into the natural order of things. A poem of mourning for Celan's mother, who was killed by the Nazis, 'Esenbaum' alternates lines that emphasise his mother's absence and the abruptness of her removal from the world with lines reflecting the ongoing life of natural things such as an aspen tree and a raincloud. The first stanza, in Boase-Beier's translation, reads,

Aspen tree, your leaves glance white into darkness.
My mother's hair did not turn white.
Dandelion, so green is the Ukraine.
My golden-haired mother did not come home.

In this context the lifelessness of the mother who 'did not come home' even though 'the Ukraine is green, because spring returns' is made even starker: the reader's desire to see mother and nature 'conceptually integrated in a situation where they are indistinguishable and the mother lives on in nature' – for some form of redemption or resolution – is not met and it is in this way that the loss at the centre of the poem is made manifest.⁶³

Other theorists of Holocaust writings have described similar effects: discussing the work of the Polish writer and Holocaust survivor Tadeusz Borowski,

⁶¹ Jean Boase-Beier, 'Translating Celan's Poetics of Silence', *Target*, 23:2 (2011), pp. 165–77.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer concluded that the mechanics of Borowksi's writing, post-Holocaust, in and of itself demonstrated the limits of representation. Borowksi had been a poet but turned to prose after the war, believing that what he had to say could not be expressed in poetry: 'I wished to describe what I have experienced, but who in the world will believe a writer using an unknown language? It's like trying to persuade trees or stones.'⁶⁴ In her essay 'Against Witness', Cathy Park Hong describes Celan's work in similar terms. 'The only way', she emphasises, 'to get at that inalienable grief, is to disfigure song. Celan was a sadist with the German language, shredding it down to find the kernel, and from those shreds, he created a third language.'⁶⁵ Borowski's subsequent writing, Bernard-Donals and Glejzer note, features 'the comparison of objects and events and turns of phrase so unlike one another that they create an impossible equation'.⁶⁶ When I said earlier that Kocot's work leads to dead ends, this is in effect what I meant. Kocot's poetry refuses to assimilate her own experience of tragedy by juxtaposing images that baffle the reader's inclination to make sense via a process of blending. 'Everything is wrong,' she writes in 'Fortune Seals Itself Around My Breathing and All I'm Known by Dwindles':

The wursts have legs,
I sleep on a deathbed of arms,
I suffer a loss so anemic
My mind swims like an alarm.⁶⁷

Her use of rhyme and a regular three-beat line in this poem works to emphasise further the 'wrongness' of the images she describes. Hong's notion of 'disfigured song' plays out literally here: limbs appear in settings where they are unnatural and have no use. For Fauconnier and Turner, blending is an essential part of meaning-making: 'Blending imaginatively transforms our most fundamental human realities,

⁶⁴ Cited in Al Alvarez, *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), p. 273.

⁶⁵ Cathy Park Hong, 'Against Witness', *Poetry*, 206/3 (May 2015),

<<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/70218/against-witness>> [accessed 15 August 2017].

⁶⁶ Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer, *Between Witness and Testimony: The Holocaust and the Limits of Representation* (New York: State University of New York, 2001), p. 87.

⁶⁷ Kocot, *Sunny Wednesday*, p. 25.

the parts of our lives most deeply felt and most clearly consequential. Meaning goes far beyond word play.⁶⁸ One can infer that in the absence of the ability to blend, one would struggle to make sense of things.

'An immaculate beginning'

The urge to blend though, it seems to me, dies hard. We continue to ask, or, like the 'elegiac ox', to want to leap 'Through an opening in a honeycomb'. If one applies blending theory to the principles of surrealism, it might seem that there *are* ways to blend seemingly incompatible concepts. André Breton suggests in his 'Manifesto of Surrealism' that there can be great power – what he calls the 'luminous phenomenon' – in seemingly incompatible juxtapositions:

In my opinion, it is erroneous to claim that “the mind has grasped the relationship” of two realities in the presence of each other. First of all, it has seized nothing consciously. It is, as it were, from the fortuitous juxtaposition of the two terms that a particular light has sprung, *the light of the image*, to which we are infinitely sensitive. The value of the image depends upon the beauty of the spark obtained; it is, consequently, a function of the difference of potential between the two conductors. When the difference exists only slightly, as in a comparison [...] the spark is lacking.⁶⁹

With this in mind, I want to look in depth at one of Kocot's poems, 'Death Sonnet', to delve more deeply into the question of meaning and mysteriousness and this 'luminous phenomenon' – and to try to find out the poem's secrets. As Ruefle writes, 'To crack or press a word is to use its etymology to reveal its secrets, all still embedded in the direct action of ancient and original metaphor.'⁷⁰ 'Death Sonnet' has an emotional impact which somehow resonates without seeming to yield, as though it

⁶⁸ Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), p. 28.

⁶⁹ André Breton, 'Manifesto of Surrealism' [1924], in Lawrence Rainey, ed., *Modernism: An Anthology* (Malden, MA, Oxford, and Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 735.

⁷⁰ Ruefle, 'On Secrets', p. 91.

were encased in concrete. It is, though, in some ways one of Kocot's more accessible poems, perhaps thanks to its sonnet form and song-like rhythm which, along with the more 'intelligible' parts of the poem, give the reader something to grasp when the words make less sense. It is quoted here in full:

Electrolyte my vivid exile,
Swallow fizzy tongues,
Violet 6 and violent triage
When all has come undone.

Electrolyte me baby—
Exile from your tongue
Violent triage, there you go
We're vividly undone.

Toothsome lathe and lithesome tooth,
Syphilis on a rack,
Exile all the fizzies,
You're never coming back.

You're never coming back, my love,
You're never coming back.

The poem's emphasis on all having 'come undone' is striking given how tightly done up (formally speaking) and effectively impenetrable (linguistically speaking) the poem is. The title, the last three lines and the 'undone' refrain are so evocative – all the more so because they rise up out of language that (however exciting and surprising) does not easily 'crack', that is, give way to interpretation. What we can grasp about this poem is that between the 'Death' of the title and the desolate emphasis that the speaker's 'love' is *never coming back*, lies much that we cannot make sense of except

on a level that is somewhere beyond communication – perhaps what Stevens described in ‘Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction’ as ‘thought / Beating in the heart’.⁷¹ Writing, in canto III of that poem, that poetry creates a movement

[...] between these points:

From that ever-early candor to its late plural;

And the candor of them is the strong exhilaration

Of what we feel from what we think, of thought

Beating in the heart

he seems to say that poetry invites us to believe in order, sense and clarity, that it arises from these things and will deliver us back to them (‘It satisfies / Belief in an immaculate beginning // And sends us, winged by an unconscious will / To an immaculate end’). But since the substance of this ‘candor’ is apparently ‘thought / Beating in the heart’ – an image that makes me think of Tiffany’s ‘inwardness of language’ – we are inclined to wonder what kind of candour this really is, if it is drawn from something as *unclear* as the relationship between feeling and thinking. That Kocot is writing from a similar sensibility is evident throughout *Sunny Wednesday*. In ‘I Am Impatient’, she asks,

Do you remember how [...]

[...] everything was both

As encyclopedic and clear as the

Complex data of vision fashioned out of error

And the ravages of time?⁷²

For both poets, what is ‘clear’ is far from straightforward. Perhaps a suspicion of clarity is something with which poets are always reckoning. Mahmoud Darwish

⁷¹ Stevens, ‘Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction’, p. 87.

⁷² Kocot, *Sunny Wednesday*, p. 59.

observed in one of his poems, 'Extreme clarity is a mystery', while Paul Celan noted 'how clarity troubles'.⁷³ Stevens's emphasis on candour in 'Notes' (the word appears three times in three stanzas in addition to 'candid') seems to work to dazzle the reader rather than to shed light on anything – like Kocot's repetition of 'vivid'/'vividly'. As we saw in the previous chapter, the original meaning of 'candour' was 'brilliant whiteness, brilliancy'.⁷⁴ Even though Kocot's 'Electrolyte my vivid exile' is a bold and evocative opening – conjuring, for me, a sense of charged, bright absence – it feels somehow as though it works, paradoxically, to deflect or obscure illumination, akin to being blinded by a sudden flash of light. Could this be that 'luminous phenomenon'?

'Toothsome lathe and lithesome tooth'

Of course we can only read a poem in the way we might read our own dream, via the associations we make, and no two dreams are the same. As Stevens writes, 'That the meanings given by others [to poems] are sometimes meanings not intended by the poet or that were never present in his mind does not impair them as meanings.'⁷⁵ If one way of conceptualising dreaming is that it is in effect a process of blending, allowing us to sort through the events of our waking lives and make sense of them on a subconscious level, then we might think of reading a poem as a kind of waking dreaming, in which blending (or an attempt to blend) takes place consciously. Indeed for André Breton, who writes on the richness and significance of dreaming in his 'Manifesto of Surrealism', the work of surrealism itself seemed to arise from a kind of blending: 'I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, a *surreality*, if one may so speak?'⁷⁶ Dream researcher Kelly Bulkeley proposes,

⁷³ Quoted in Ilya Kaminsky, 'Of Strangeness That Wakes Us: On mother tongues, fatherlands, and Paul Celan', *Poetry* (2 January 2013), <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/69909/of-strangeness-that-wakes-us>> [accessed 13 January 2017]. The Darwish quote is from 'The Tragedy of Narcissus the Comedy of Silver', translated by Fady Joudah; the Celan from 'Zurück, the Stork Inn', translated by Michael Hamburger.

⁷⁴ Oxford English Dictionary, def. †1.

⁷⁵ Stevens, 'A Comment on Meaning in Poetry', p. 826.

⁷⁶ Breton, 'Manifesto of Surrealism', p. 723.

The complex stories and plots found in dreams suggests that dreaming allows people to exercise their powers of integration, making symbolic knowledge more easily accessible to the waking consciousness.⁷⁷

In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) – still a key text in the surprisingly finite field of dream theory – Freud repeatedly emphasises the ‘strangeness and obscurity’ of dreams, describing them as ‘incomprehensible and absurd’, and several times as ‘nonsensical’;⁷⁸ and of course it is their very obscurity, as with a poem, that drives the urge to interpret them. He explains:

“to interpret a dream” is to specify its “meaning”, to replace it by something which takes its position in the concatenation of our psychic activities as a link of definite importance and value.⁷⁹

This summary recalls George Steiner’s analysis of how we might read difficult poetry ‘by a sort of semantic approximation’,⁸⁰ even to the point of the acknowledgement that the interpretation can only go so far. Just as Steiner speaks of the ‘rich undecidability’ at the heart of the poem, Freud concedes, ‘Every dream has at least one point at which it is unfathomable; a central point, as it were, connecting it with the unknown.’⁸¹ And yet a dream – like a poem – however cryptic, is still understood as a form of communication. ‘Can’t the dream be used in solving the fundamental questions of life?’ asks André Breton.⁸² J. Sully, a theorist preceding Freud and quoted by him in a footnote, remarks in his essay ‘Dream as Revelation’ (1893):

The chaotic aggregations of our night-fancy have a significance and communicate new knowledge. Like some letter in cipher, the dream-inscription when scrutinised closely loses its first look of balderdash and takes on the aspect of a serious, intelligible message. Or, to vary the figure slightly,

⁷⁷ Bulkeley, *An Introduction to the Psychology of Dreaming*, p. 75.

⁷⁸ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* [1932] (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1997), trans. A. A. Brill, pp. 5, 10, 27.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁸⁰ George Steiner, ‘On Difficulty’, p. 40.

⁸¹ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 24, n. 10.

⁸² Breton, ‘Manifesto of Surrealism’, p. 722.

he may say that, like some pamphlets the dream discloses beneath its worthless surface-characters traces of an old and precious communication.⁸³

My dream of 'Death Sonnet' went like this: 'Electrolyte', which for me called to mind 'electrocute' and 'electric light', is of course a substance containing ions, such as that found in a battery (but also in the body). Properly, it is a noun, though here it seems to read as a verb – albeit a verb that doesn't really seem to make sense. If 'electrolyte' is suggestive of batteries, then 'fizzy tongues' recalls the sensation one might have on touching the tip of one's tongue to the end of a battery (a childhood experiment); to swallow a tongue or tongues is reminiscent of to 'bite your tongue' (indeed, 'toothsome', suggestive of biting, appears later), i.e., to keep silent; 'Violet 6', unexpectedly, is a brand of motherboard (the 'heart' or 'brain' of a computer, without which it could not function – another kind of thought beating in the heart?); 'triage' refers to 'the assignment of degrees of urgency to wounds or illnesses to decide the order of treatment of patients' – and though a literally 'violent' triage is an unsettling thing to imagine, perhaps triage is always to some extent violent, since it entails the imposition of rational order on something essentially primitive and beyond reason (pain). (In fact, an imposition of order on pain is one way of conceptualising a poem that arises out of grief.) 'Death Sonnet' in fact several times seems to bring together technological or industrial language with that of the body – see also 'Toothsome lathe' and 'Syphilis on a rack' – an uncomfortable clash that contributes to the poem's overall dis-ease. Many of the images in the poem suggest something both compelling and repelling, which might be a fair description of the poem itself. Picturing a 'toothsome' (delicious) lathe, for example, requires quite a violent feat of imagination, since to taste a lathe would also be to have one's mouth cut to pieces.

Kocot's use of language seems violent not just because of its subject – 'Death Sonnet' of course features the word 'violent' twice, almost three times if you include the visually and phonetically close 'Violet' – but also because of the proximity she creates between words and concepts that feel thoroughly inhospitable towards one another – that refuse to blend. 'Toothsome lathe' is quickly followed by 'lithesome

⁸³ Quoted in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 46, n. 2.

tooth'. 'Lithesome' is another word for 'lithe', meaning 'supple, limber, pliable' – such a tooth would surely be the worst kind of tooth imaginable. But this is a case in which it is just about possible to imagine the concept these signs point to. We would struggle much harder to picture 'syphilis' *on a rack*, or indeed 'the fizzies' being exiled. These kinds of combinations are particularly illustrative of images that might really be a challenge to blend and that perhaps bring us, in this 'dream' of the poem, to the point that must remain 'unfathomable' and 'unknown'. Boase-Beier maintains, 'But if creative thinking, triggered by the text, still cannot produce integration, the sense of frustration and loss is magnified.'⁸⁴ In this way, a poem like 'Death Sonnet' embodies the dissonance of the experience it is describing. It refuses, as Celan's work does, language's potential to console by showing that no other phrase can accommodate or make sense of the one clear refrain of the poem, which is irreducible: 'You're never coming back.' This is language at its most stark, like the lines in Celan's 'Eспенbaum' that emphasise the permanence of his mother's absence: '*Meine blonde Mutter kam nicht heim*' ('My blonde mother did not come home'). I am reminded of the opening lines of *Nox*: 'I wanted to fill my elegy with light of all kinds. But death makes us stingy. There is nothing more to be expended on that, we think, he's dead. [...] Words cannot add to it.' What these poems communicate, via their mysterious means, is that death is not an experience that can be assimilated, or in the language of dream interpretation 'replaced by something' – it is exiled from language ('Exile[d] from your tongue'), and can only say its own sense. But it is also inside language – in the space between two irreconcilable words, for example: like a secret.

'The hermit in a poet's metaphors'

'Death Sonnet' goes right down to language's very building blocks, its letters, to hide its secret in plain sight. It strikes me that there is something even about the feel of the words in the mouth, their phonetics, that feels violent, sharp, spiky, so that the impact of the poem is not just intellectual, but somatic (perhaps a poem's impact is always somatic). This is a poem that uses the letters 'v', 'x', 'y' and 'z' surprisingly

⁸⁴ Boase-Beier, 'Translating Celan's Poetics of Silence', p. 171.

often, given that they are among the least frequently used letters in English, (particularly ‘x’ and ‘z’ – as attested by their high value in Scrabble! – perhaps this is why the poem feels somehow extravagant). These are the last letters in the alphabet, and this is after all a poem about an ending. Thus Kocot manages to ‘tell the secret and keep it’: the fabric of her language, its letters, speaks of an ending, but the larger part of the poem remains mute. Boase-Beier observes something similar at work in ‘Esenbaum’, in which the repetition of certain sounds (the ‘ei’ of ‘weint’, ‘weeps’, is particularly frequent) is suggestive of the repetitive nature of grief.⁸⁵ Like the sounds heard by the unborn baby in Ruefle’s analogy, these things are communicated to us without us really understanding them, ‘life’s nonsense pierc[ing] us with strange relation’. Similarly, another of Kocot’s poems, ‘I Am the Arm’, includes a disembodied (because seemingly disconnected from what comes before or after it) line which reads simply ‘-ied -ied -ied’, and it’s only when read aloud that these apparently nonsensical letters begin to be audible: ‘—*iediedied*’.⁸⁶

Kocot’s poetry, it seems to me, reveals to us what Stevens also aims to demonstrate in ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction’ – that some things can only make sense if they do not make sense. That sense can at times be the enemy of true expression:

[A]nd yet so poisonous

Are the ravishments of truth, so fatal to

The truth itself, the first idea becomes

The hermit in a poet’s metaphors⁸⁷

Here Stevens gives expression to Ruefle’s idea of the poem as a secret that is both told and kept: the ‘truth’ of a poem, its ‘first idea’ must remain hidden in a poem; anything else would be a violent exposure. As we have seen, there are many ways in which a poem might keep its secret, and many ways in which we might attempt to

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 172.

⁸⁶ Kocot, *Sunny Wednesday*, p. 42.

⁸⁷ Stevens, ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction’, p. 86.

uncover it. But what a poem – if effective – yields to the understanding is greater than the sum of its parts, and what it has to tell us can sometimes be apprehended only as ‘unformed handwriting’, or ‘thought / Beating in the heart’. Kocot writes:

If it's truth you want,
Walk slowly down the street,

Shop for exotic pets,
Emulate skin-fire in a laughing

Gold box and wait for dusk
On an anonymous tightrope.⁸⁸

Which might be to say, truth may not be found in a way that makes sense to you. Craig Morgan Teicher observes,

there is a coded incident at the heart of the poems in *Sunny Wednesday*. Coded not because [Kocot is] forbidden to write about it, nor because she's afraid to say it, but because this particular incident has become so deeply woven into the fiber of her being that it's a part of everything she writes, though it's never the whole point.⁸⁹

This ‘coded incident’ might be another description of the ‘hermit in a poet’s metaphors’ and also hints at the urge to decipher that such work inspires. Teicher is referring specifically to the death of Kocot’s husband, but we might interpret this ‘coded incident’ in more general terms as signifying the elegiac impulse behind the

⁸⁸ Kocot, ‘Raving Urn’, in *Sunny Wednesday*, pp. 57–8.

⁸⁹ Craig Morgan Teicher, ‘Beginning with an Elegy: Interview with poet Noelle Kocot’, *Publishers’ Weekly* (20 April 2009), <<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/interviews/article/7562-beginning-with-an-elegy-interview-with-poet-noelle-kocot.html>> [accessed 10 November 2016].

poems – their ‘first idea’ – which can only ever be revealed obliquely. ‘Shall I make sense or shall / I tell the truth—’ asks Kocot, ‘choose either / I cannot do both.’

In this final section I wish to turn the lens towards my own creative work, the poetry collection *Stranger, Baby*, which, being written alongside this critical thesis, was profoundly affected by the reading I did for this study and is preoccupied by many of the same concerns. Indeed it was through my desire to embark on the writing of these poems that the central questions of my thesis began to assert themselves. At the most basic level I may have been looking for a kind of toolkit to facilitate my writing, and I was most interested in elegiac writing that was unlike the types of writing we have traditionally come to associate with elegy – writing whose elegiac nature was, to some extent, kept secret. In locating a general ambivalence around elegy among contemporary writers in the genre, such as those I have explored here, I was also identifying that ambivalence in myself. In seeking to name the kinds of poems I have written in *Stranger, Baby*, I have at different moments both resisted and embraced the term ‘elegy’. Here I wish to unpick this ambivalence a little, as a way of wondering what the future holds for this enduring and yet uncertain genre, and whether there might be any way of coming to terms with it. Whatever my instincts about the true ‘nature’ of my work, it began to seem as though writing exploring grief is always haunted by the ghost of elegy, whether it engages directly with that spirit or not. I noted that, whenever somebody asked me what I was working on, I would alternate between saying I was ‘writing poems about grief/mourning’, ‘writing elegies’, or ‘kind of writing elegies’ – none of which sat comfortably with me. I was embarrassed both by my subject and my inability to define it.

‘I think the forms are in chaos,’ Anne Carson has commented. ‘I seize upon these generic names like essay or opera in despair as I’m sinking under the waves of possible naming for any event that I come up with.’¹ This image of generic names as essentially arbitrary pieces of wreckage that we cling on to in order to save ourselves from oblivion may seem melodramatic, but it also emphasises our need for them – how else to divide up the vastness of feeling and thought from which a piece of

¹ Interview with Mary Gannon, ‘Anne Carson: Beauty Prefers an Edge’, *Poets & Writers* (March/April 2001), quoted in Thomas Allen and Jennifer Blair, eds, *Material Cultures in Canada* (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015), p. 53.

writing emerges? In fact the loss of confidence in naming can in itself give rise to a kind of grief, as Robert Hass indicates in ‘Meditation at Lagunitas’, a poem I reference at the outset of this thesis, which ponders the ‘notion that, / because there is in this world no one thing / to which the bramble of *blackberry* corresponds, / a word is elegy to what it signifies’:

We talked about it late last night and in the voice
of my friend, there was a thin wire of grief, a tone
almost querulous. After a while I understood that,
talking this way, everything dissolves: *justice*,
pine, hair, woman, you and *I*.²

By these terms, all words represent something gone and irretrievable, discarded, like the light from dead stars. Hass’s poem grapples with the same things I found myself grappling with in my work – how to keep words signifying in spite of these elegiac tendencies.

As for Carson in the above quote, for me the sea became a useful metaphor for the largeness (as it seemed to me) of what I was attempting to name and the seeming impossibility of reducing it. Throughout the collection I return to this theme, the question of how one might take hold of this largeness – get around the ungetaroundable. ‘Imagine trying to pick up a piece of the sea and show it to a person / I tried to do that’, I write in ‘Picnic’; in ‘Aqua’, ‘water / cannot hold / an imprint’. This is developed further in ‘Tidal Wave Speaks’:

This is what I did.
Laid it all out like tidal wave.
Thought you could in fact
lay out a tidal wave.³

² Robert Hass, *Praise* (Carcanet: Manchester, 1981), p. 4.

³ Emily Berry, ‘Picnic’, *Stranger, Baby* (Faber & Faber, 2017), pp. 4, 19 and 21 respectively.

In my case it seemed that the closest piece of wreckage was *elegy* ('A new _____ by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?') and yet to grab on to that word and to allow it to carry my writing (through to the other side) was also to permit it to carry me, to some extent, and this seemed – somehow – embarrassing.

'Begin with the blush'

Stranger, Baby addresses the death of my mother by suicide when I was seven; this is a topic I had previously barely explored in my work – the only poem on the subject in my first book is really about my determination to avoid it.⁴ The suicide itself is perhaps 'the coded incident' at the heart of the book (like Kocot's husband's death in *Sunny Wednesday*) in that it is never alluded to directly yet is arguably a 'part of everything [I] write'⁵ in this particular collection. 'Why do we blush before death?' Carson asks in *Nox*, later asserting, 'If you are writing an elegy begin with the blush'.⁶ Embarrassment and shame are feelings that have accompanied my own grief for as long as I can remember; they were much more familiar to me than the feeling of grief itself. Perhaps there was something about this kind of loss that was particularly embarrassing – suicide remains a taboo and suicide bereavement is usually complicated by guilt and blame; the loss of a parent in childhood is rare enough in the West, so no one knows what to say; children are easily embarrassed. The event marked me indelibly, and when one is marked, one feels ashamed. 'Now I too am someone who knows marks', says Carson in 'Appendix to Ordinary Time', seemingly comparing herself to lines of text that have been crossed out.⁷

Following the publication of *Stranger, Baby* I was interviewed by Ralf Webb for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*; thinking through my answers to the questions (and reviewing my answers latterly) helped me develop an understanding of my own work just as interviews with writers in this thesis assisted my understanding of theirs. One of the questions I was asked was, 'Why do you think we sometimes find death embarrassing?' I include part of my response here:

⁴ See Emily Berry, 'Her Inheritance', *Dear Boy* (Faber & Faber, 2013), p. 52.

⁵ To paraphrase Craig Morgan Teicher. See 'Beginning with an Elegy: Interview with poet Noelle Kocot', *Publishers' Weekly* (20 April 2009), <<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/interviews/article/7562-beginning-with-an-elegy-interview-with-poet-noelle-kocot.html>> [accessed 10 November 2016].

⁶ Anne Carson, *Nox* (New York: New Directions, 2010), sections 7.1 and 7.2 respectively.

⁷ Anne Carson, 'Appendix to Ordinary Time', *Men in the Off Hours* (London: Cape, 2000), p. 66.

I guess there must be some kind of connection between embarrassment and death – I mean, to be “mortified” literally means to be put to death. Personally, I felt huge embarrassment about my mother’s death when I was a child. She died when I was seven – it’s rare for kids to have a dead mother; when you’re a child, your parents are mentioned constantly, and I found it so embarrassing to have to explain every time. We’re still embarrassed as adults, because our particular culture hasn’t developed very sophisticated ways of responding to it – the language is very limited. Perhaps it’s also something to do with the way that death – and suicide especially – implicates the living. It reminds us of our own mortality, which is embarrassing, because everything to do with the body is embarrassing, and it shows us how thoroughly we have failed to keep another member of our species alive.⁸

The sense of being implicated by another’s death – as having failed to prevent them from dying – may be particularly strong in the case of suicide, as in the case of the loss of a child. In Denise Riley’s ‘A Part Song’, the speaker laments, ‘*What is the first duty of a mother to a child? / At least to keep the wretched thing alive.*’⁹ I offer a related sentiment via the found title of a short poem (taken from the writings of the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott): ‘I have already said that the baby appreciates, perhaps from the very beginning, the *aliveness* of the mother’. Similarly, the poem that prompted the interviewer’s question, ‘So’, projects the bereaved child’s sense of shame back onto the deceased: here I adopt what might be the voice of a scathing teenager, imagining their mother’s death as akin to her wearing an embarrassing outfit – something that reflects badly on both of them. The form of the poem – single-word lines – was influenced by Noelle Kocot, whose latest collection *Phantom Pains of Madness* (2016) is entirely made up of such lines. The approach seemed to give shape to the halting awkwardness of voicing shame, as well as playing with the idea that ‘the language is very limited’ (‘there are no words’, or few ones): ‘So / that / was / your / attempt / at / dying / which / I / am / still / embarrassed / by / is

⁸ ‘Spectacular Endlessly: Ralf Webb interviews Emily Berry’, *Los Angeles Review of Books* (7 March 2017), <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/spectacular-endlessly-an-interview-with-emily-berry/>> [accessed 28 July 2017].

⁹ Denise Riley, *Say Something Back* (London: Picador, 2016), p. 3.

/ it / not / so / terribly / gauche / to / die'.¹⁰ Almost twice the length of all the others, the word 'embarrassed' stands out in the middle of the poem as a sign of its irreducibility: as I discovered, writing about it does not dispel it. But it was nonetheless an attempt to engage with that shame.

W. S. Graham has written, 'Certain experiences seem to not / want to go in to language maybe / Because of shame or the reader's shame'.¹¹ I noted examples of various forms of shame in many of the elegiac works I consulted. Karen Green: 'The doctor says people back away instinctively. They don't want to get any on them'; Jacques Roubaud: 'I did not save you from the difficult night'; Noelle Kocot: 'I still have never let anyone see me cry'.¹² When I started this project I did, in a sense, 'begin with the blush', because I had to acknowledge and to some extent move past feelings of shame that had been in the way of all the other feelings that sought expression. In *The Shame of Death, Grief and Trauma* (2010), Jeffrey Kauffman, who argues that shame is central to grief, maintains:

Death and loss are prone, in various undertows of subjectivity, to be experienced as saying something (shameful) about oneself: shame of one's own mortality, shame at having lost a loved one, shame over not having loved well enough or been loved well enough, shame about one's grief and its vulnerabilities, shame at the self-absorption of grief, shame of being overpowered by grief, and, most remarkably, shame of shame.¹³

He notes further, 'For shame to express itself as a blush is an act of self-betrayal, disclosing what it wishes to conceal'.¹⁴ I would argue that there is an element of elegy that is essentially *blush* – an expression of something that one wished to conceal. Of course, published writing is not involuntary: it is generally worked on, thought-through and deliberately placed in the public domain; but the comparison may be a useful way of making sense of some of the conflict that can be encountered in

¹⁰ See Berry, *Stranger, Baby*, p. 26.

¹¹ W.S. Graham, 'What is the Language Using Us For?', in *Implements in Their Places* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977), p. 11.

¹² Karen Green, *Bough Down* (Siglio: Los Angeles, CA, 2013), p. 76; Jacques Roubaud, *Some Thing Black*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Elmwood Park, Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), p. 27; Kocot, 'Once Upon a Time in America', in *Sunny Wednesday* (Seattle, WA and New York, 2009), p. 49; Riley, 'A Part Song', *Say Something Back*, p. 3.

¹³ Jeffrey Kauffman, 'On the Primacy of Shame', in *The Shame of Death, Grief and Trauma*, ed. Jeffrey Kauffman (New York and Hove: Routledge, 2010), p. 5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

contemporary elegiac writing; consider Mary Jo Bang's desire to 'scrub' away her elegies and Kristin Prevallet's wish to 'scratch out' what she has written, discussed in chapter two. My own work includes a poem addressing the self-consciousness of mourning, 'Now all my poems are about death I feel as though I'm really living', which concludes, 'I knelt, I spoke, I cried, I wrote this down, regretted it', while the speaker in 'The End' wishes to remain in the shadows, asking several times for their identity to be concealed: 'I wish you would put some kind of distortion on my voice [...] // So people don't know it's me'.¹⁵ Just as elegiac writers may have a complicated relationship with their output, the exposing and involuntary nature of blushing might also point to an inner conflict in its subject; as Kauffman observes, 'It is also possible that blushing expresses a wish for relief from hiding'.¹⁶

Relief from hiding may be more elusive than it feels, however. 'The End', which identifies neither the speaker nor the interlocutor, and deals largely in abstractions, does not reveal anything particular about either an imaginary, or a real, *me*. In fact, what is revealed in a given elegy, or through a literal blush, is that there is much that isn't – cannot be – revealed. As we have seen in the works discussed here – with Prevallet's 'hole story', the 'noem' of *Nox* and the obscurity of *Sunny Wednesday* – something inexpressible lies at the very centre of the work (or of the person). In *Stranger, Baby*, the poem that comes closest to the actual incident of my mother's death is 'Winter' (in it I also allude to the relationship my creative work has had to the critical study undertaken for this thesis – '*In the course of my research I learned a new kind of love*'). But I still resisted relating the circumstances of my mother's death directly ('Because of shame / or the reader's shame?'). The poem, written in prose, is divided by an extra wide stanza break to indicate the 'overtakelessness' at its centre. It is a 'gesture of approach', which only reinforces the impossible distance between speaker and subject; the 'coded incident' remains undeciphered. The poem ends:

¹⁵ Berry, *Stranger, Baby*, pp. 22 and 12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 14.

I watched the white men in their pastel coats / Roll you up and put you
away / They put you inside their white box / With its clicks and locks / And
carried you far away¹⁷

‘This gesture of approach’, writes Prevallet, ‘is the closest you will get to the other
side.’¹⁸

‘*Saliva in a glass*’

If death is already shameful, elegising a death might compound the shame in
numerous ways. Being sufficiently introspective to spend time doing writing of any
kind might be considered shameful, let alone taking the time to dwell as deeply on
one’s own feelings as might be required in a study of grief. Ben Lerner, for example,
has noted in *The Hatred of Poetry* (2016) and elsewhere, that ‘there is a strong
relationship between writing and shame’.¹⁹ His ideas seem likely to have been
informed by a significant study by Gillian White, *Lyric Shame: The Lyric Subject of
Contemporary American Poetry* (2014), who argues that lyric poetry has a very intimate
relationship with shame, that ‘to work with and within the conventions of lyric is to
risk being shamed’.²⁰ I would argue that working within the conventions of elegy
compounds this shame still further, since it brings together the shame of the subject
with the shame of the form. Joan Didion examines ‘the question of self-pity’ in *The
Year of Magical Thinking*, that state of acute regard for one’s own suffering that is so
distasteful to oneself and others. ‘People in grief think a great deal about self-pity,’
she writes:

We worry it, dread it, scourge our thinking for signs of it. We fear that our
actions will reveal the condition tellingly described as “dwelling on it.” [...] The
very language we use when we think about self-pity betrays the deep
abhorrence in which we hold it: self-pity is *feeling sorry for yourself*, self-pity is
thumb-sucking, self-pity is *boo hoo poor me*, self-pity is the condition in which

¹⁷ Berry, *Stranger, Baby*, p. 14.

¹⁸ Kristin Prevallet, *I, Afterlife: Essay in Mourning Time* (Athens, OH: Essay Press, 2007), p. 6.

¹⁹ ‘You’re a poet, don’t you hate most poems?’: interview with Ben Lerner, *The Believer*,
<http://www.believermag.com/exclusives/?read=interview_lerner> [accessed 21 July 2017].

²⁰ Jo Gill, ‘Review: Gillian White, *Lyric Shame: The ‘Lyric’ Subject of Contemporary American Poetry*’, *The Review of
English Studies*, 66/276 (1 September 2015), pp. 803–4.

those feeling sorry for themselves *indulge* or even *wallow*. Self-pity remains both the most common, and the most universally reviled of our character defects, its pestilential destructiveness taken as a given.²¹

In a subsequent interview Didion observed that ‘there is no level [of self-pity] acceptable to the outside world’.²² Indeed, Kauffman notes, ‘The very preoccupation with death and oneself in mourning is felt to be shameful’.²³ Of course, little if any elegiac writing would exist were it not for the irresistible pull of ‘dwelling on it’, and Didion’s two memoirs examining grief are in their way refusals to submit to acceptability. I was drawn to such writers because I too found myself ‘dwelling on it’ and what’s more, dwelling on dwelling on it, just as Didion, Riley, Barthes, Prevallet and others do. In ‘Picnic’, one of the poems in the collection written earliest, I begin to set the scene for such activity, and the self-questioning and self-consciousness that attends it: ‘All that year I visited a man in a room / I polished my feelings’.²⁴ In using the word ‘polish’ I aimed to insert an implicit (self-) judgement: who but the most self-regarding, pampered person has time to polish (or have polished) anything, let alone one’s feelings. It sounds suspiciously like self-pity – like *indulging* or *wallowing*. The poem concludes with the lines,

I remember just one thing my mother said to me:
Never look at yourself in the mirror when you’re crying
I did not follow her advice²⁵

‘Picnic’ intends to touch on the combination of shame and compulsion that can accompany the writing of elegiac work or work that involves close attention to one’s feelings; if self-absorption wasn’t bad enough, how much worse to be self-absorbed in the act of grieving when one really ought to be preoccupied by another person’s tragedy – their loss of life. Yet actually grief could in some iterations be conceived of as one prolonged episode of looking at oneself in the mirror while crying, because

²¹ Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (London: Fourth Estate, 2005), pp. 92–93.

²² ‘Q: How were you able to keep writing after the death of your husband?’, *Guardian* (16 December 2005), <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2005/dec/16/biography.features>> [accessed 24 July 2017].

²³ Kauffman, ‘On the Primacy of Shame’, p. 3.

²⁴ Berry, *Stranger, Baby*, p. 4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

of course the person one really wants to be looking at no longer exists. ‘There is always in mourning the danger of narcissism, for instance the “egotistical” and no doubt “irresponsible” tendency to bemoan the friend’s death in order to take pity on oneself’, note Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas in their introduction to *The Work of Mourning*, a collection of Derrida’s philosophical eulogies.²⁶ In ‘Picnic’, the mix of shame and compulsion is complicated further since the person being elegised in my work is also the one who has warned against this kind of introspection, so that the elegy becomes a form of rebellion. Here the maternal injunction might also be seen as that of a wider authority as well as the speaker’s super-ego or inner critic, constantly hampering progress or passing judgement on the poems’ shameful self-involvement. Repeatedly the poems indicate that close inspection or exposure of the self can lead only to further mortification:

[...] Every time I say the word ‘I’
I am ashamed. When I say ‘I want’ I am triply
ashamed. I want my shame to be a kind of proof
that deduces the world, and that’s the worst
shame of all.

(‘Drunken Bellarmine’)

I told a story about my shame

It got cold when the air touched it

Then it got hot, throbbed, wept, attracted fragments with which it eventually
glittered

Till I couldn’t stop looking at it

(‘The End’)²⁷

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, eds Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 7.

²⁷ From Berry, *Stranger, Baby*, pp. 38 and 12.

To call my work *elegy*, then, is to own up to all of this discomfort – to admit the death that implicates me as a failure at keeping a loved one alive, to admit to dwelling on this death, to admit to self-pity, self-absorption and, what’s more, disobedience. Most uncomfortable of all it is to admit to capitalising on all of the above – to acknowledging that one’s work (in an ungenerous assessment of its processes) involves a kind of emotional cannibalism.

Nuar Alsaadir’s recent collection *Fourth Person Singular* (2017), explores, among other things, the question of ‘lyric shame’, the relationship of the poet to the ‘I’ of their work and the distancing strategies that may be employed. It is not an elegiac work, but Alsaadir’s interest in shame seems particularly applicable to my subject. Combining short verses, fragments, lists, lyric essay and sketches, *Fourth Person Singular* is formally diverse without seeming at all troubled by the question of form; it is as though its questions and observations about the exposures and evasions of the lyric ‘I’ simply kaleidoscoped out into the forms that wanted them – like Susan Howe ‘entering this open prose area’ in ‘The Disappearance Approach’.²⁸ Alsaadir’s speaker’s sense of re-encountering one’s ‘own’ ‘I’ in writing chimed with my experience of writing elegy:

Sketch 37

On the way home from a walk, my dog likes to return to spots he has pissed on to smell (& sometimes lick) his markings. Such joy goes into this sniffing, while Slavoj Žižek describes the revulsion most of us feel in perceiving our interiors erupt into the external world through the example of saliva, which we constantly produce and swallow inside our bodies. Imagine, he proposes, a scenario in which someone tells you to spit into a glass, then drink it. The thought is repulsive: your insides are to remain hidden, even from yourself. The lyric is that saliva in a glass, but what does it incarnate?²⁹

²⁸ Susan Howe, ‘The Disappearance Approach’, *That This* (New York: New Directions, 2010), p. 27.

²⁹ Nuar Alsaadir, *Fourth Person Singular* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), p. 47.

In asking what a poem's 'I', might incarnate – for which I also read *embody* – Alsadir seems to be asking what the relationship might be between the originally embodied *I* that writes a poem and the written I. As with the writing of elegy, what happens when 'a body [...] is made into a sign'? In elegiac writing the disembodied I is also always reaching after another disembodied I, the absent other, and so the poem becomes a kind of meeting point for these two vacancies, both striving towards embodiment. When shame interferes with the reading or writing of a poem, perhaps it's because of the encounter of one body with another (ghostly) body – it's an acknowledgement of a poem's extreme intimacy, its ability to travel (via its *meaning*) from one body into another. In 'Part' I allude to this relationship between text and body, the desire to reduce the distance between internal and external, between the inexpressible and the manifest:

I wanted to put my body into these words
I wanted this to be a part of my body
This part of my body³⁰

Though the 'saliva in a glass' analogy gets to the discomfort and shame attendant upon 'confessional' writing – resonating, in my own work, with the conclusion of 'Drunken Bellarmine' which runs 'I am a shitting, leaking, bloody clump of cells, / raw, murky and fluorescent, you couldn't take it' – it seems to underplay the significance of the poem as a site of transformation (though the question 'what does it incarnate?' perhaps alludes to this): what goes into a poem is (hopefully) not the same as the finished product. When I was asked about the relationship of my work to autobiography for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, I offered the following:

An autobiography is meant to be an account of a person's life, and, on the whole, you're not going to get a poem that is a straight description of a person's life – it's usually an essence of that. Say you're making a cake and

³⁰ Berry, *Stranger, Baby*, p. 15.

you have various different ingredients – you put eggs in it. But the cake is very different from its ingredients; you don't say that the cake is an account of the eggs. Yet you couldn't make it without the eggs.³¹

A poem, of course, is not a cake, but perhaps it too can find its way into the body of another and there become something different. I wanted to hold out the hope that the product of elegy (or indeed lyric) would be quite different from its process; cakes are often made for celebrations, and elegies too have traditionally been associating with celebrating – eulogising – a life. Perhaps what we might hope for is not so far off the experience of the dog in Alsadir's poem returning to sniff his markings with 'such joy'. As I write in 'Drunken Bellarmine', 'shame is also revelry, and a body / is a spillage, or an addiction'. When a poem is preoccupied with an absent, deceased body, the body's trace becomes ever more insistent. As Riley indicates, part of the elegiac impulse is of course to bring the dead back to life:

It's all a resurrection song
Could it ever be got right
The dead would rush home
Keen to press their chinos.³²

'This is the dream of all elegy,' comments Angela Leighton, 'that form, in its virtual reality, its empty room, will be able to house the beloved human form again, and to find its longed-for consolation.'³³

I recall an occasion on which a poet I know disparaged another poet's work by saying 'It's as though everything [they write] is elegiac'. I understood him to mean not that this poet was always writing about grief, but that they wrote in a highly poetic, sentimentalised style, every poem crafted to arc towards a perfect dusk, a flock of birds lifting to the horizon just as you turn to look. His implication was that this kind of writing was embarrassing. By these terms, elegy seemed to emerge as lyric's most heightened form. 'I'm a little ashamed that I want to end this poem /

³¹ 'Spectacular Endlessly: Ralf Webb interviews Emily Berry'.

³² Riley, 'A Part Song', in *Say Something Back*, p. 13.

³³ Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 225.

singing, but I want to end this poem singing’, writes Robert Hass in ‘Interrupted Meditation’, one of many examples that for Gillian White indicate ‘lyric shame’ in contemporary American poetry, the desire to ‘move from meditation to epiphany’.³⁴ I recognised that desire, and the repeated need to satisfy it. It began to seem as though any kind of lyric – maybe any kind of personal writing – but especially elegy, was driven by a kind of romantic imperative completely at odds with the messy, raw material of living and dying (‘I find the last sentence overly dramatic. / Please scratch it out’). I could not (cannot) reconcile my ambivalence about this mode with the persistence of my attempts to write poems that I have frequently described as elegy. In Freud’s words, ‘distance must remain distance’.³⁵ I will just have to do what I can with this piece of wreckage, this form that is not quite a form, this name that does not quite fit its subject and yet can more than accommodate ‘the complexity of what is left behind’ – this ‘wild integer’, elegy.

³⁴ Gillian White, *Lyric Shame: The Lyric Subject of Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 210.

³⁵ From a letter to Pastor Oskar Pfister, 27 January 1920, in *Letters of Sigmund Freud 1878–1939*, ed. Ernst L. Freud (London: Hogarth Press, 1960), p. 327.

[Please note, the creative part of this thesis, the poetry collection *Stranger, Baby*, has been redacted for copyright reasons]

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