LETTERS FROM JACK AND OTHER CADAVERS

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My dissertation, *Letters from Jack and Other Cadavers*, developed out of my interest in using persona, narrative forms, and historical details collected through thorough research to transform personal experience and emotions in my poems. The central series of poems, “Letters from Jack,” is written in the voice of Jack the Ripper and set up as a series of poems-as-letters to the police who chased him. The Ripper’s sense of self and his motivations are troubled by his search for a muse as the poems become love poems, contrasting the brutality of the historical murders and the atmosphere of late 19th century London with a charismatic speaker not unlike those of Browning’s Dramatic Monologues. The dissertation’s preface further explores my desire for a level of personal removal while crafting poems in order to temper sentimentality. Drawing on Wallace Stevens’s notion that “Sentimentality is failed emotion” and Tony Hoagland’s assessment that fear of sentimentality can turn young poets away from narrative forms, I examine my own poems along with those of Scott Cairns, Tim Seibles, and Albert Goldbarth to derive conclusions on the benefits distance, persona, narrative, and detail to downplay excessive emotion and the intrusion of the personal. Poems from the manuscript have appeared in *The Beloit Poetry Journal, Sybil’s Garage, The North Texas Review*, and *The Sheridan Edwards Review*. 
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Several of these poems have appeared, sometimes in slightly different versions, in the following publications:

The Beloit Poetry Journal:  “Celestial”
“Falling”

The North Texas Review:  “Littoral”

The Sheridan Edwards Review:  “Double Event”
“Field Trip: Cadavers”
“Leper’s Libido”
“Mary Kelly”
“To Mary”

Sybil’s Garage:  “Glass”
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In his essay “Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of Our Moment,” Tony Hoagland writes:

...it seems likely that narrative poetry in America has been tainted by its overuse in thousands of confessional poems. Not confessionalism itself, but the inadvertent sentimentality and narcissism of many such poems have imparted the odor of indulgence to narrative. Our vision of narrative possibilities has been narrowed by so many first-person autobiographical stories, then drowned in a flood of pathos-poems. (Hoagland 177)

Sentimentality, broadly defined, is “false or superficial emotion, assumed feeling, [or] self-regarding postures of grief and pain” (Cuddon 857). Wallace Stevens offers in his *Aphorisms* that “Sentimentality is a failure of feeling,”—a somewhat ambiguous comment suggesting both that sentimentality results from a flawed interpretation of feeling and that sentimentality is a possible shortcoming of feeling itself (Stevens 162). The common element here, and I believe the key word in Hoagland’s assessment, is “indulgence.” A work of art can easily succumb to indulgence by failing to supply what Eliot called the objective correlative, “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion” (Eliot 48). This trap is especially common among young writers who are often motivated to write by an excess of emotion but lack the experience, both in the act of writing and of meditation, to see past the immediate consequence of their feelings.

It is important to note, then, that sentimentality in poetry is not a failure of narrative forms but is rather a failure of the poet’s imagination.

While Hoagland’s essay goes on to observe that much of today’s poetry has become topically evasive and overly reliant upon irony and witty association (which can also, I believe, be attributed of a failure of imagination) what interests me most is that the reasons he gives for many poets turning away from narrative—fear of sentimentality and narcissism—are precisely why I turned toward it. One of the most significant drives to
my approach and crafting of a poem, how I negotiate between the triggering experience or emotion and how it is finally communicated and expressed, has almost always been guided by a self-consciousness and wariness of my own personal (and especially autobiographical) intrusion into the poem’s world. Looking back at my body of work, from the first poems I will still claim until now, I have continually returned to narrative in order to temper this relationship. The construction of a narrative architecture, especially in dramatic monologues that couple narrative with a distinct persona through whom I can speak, has allowed me to avoid, at least directly, the autobiographical pathos-poems that Hoagland suggests have turned so many others away.
A Certain Distance

I began writing, like many, during adolescence, and these early attempts at poetry had all the requisite hallmarks of such work: excessive and directly communicated emotion, perfect end-rhymes, mostly uninteresting language, and an almost bipolar shift between melancholy and angst. When I did begin to take on models, I began looking to the Beats, who did little to soften my emotional heavy-handedness. If anything, their work suggested a primacy of direct emotion, and, as I interpreted it, the idea that revision could be a form of insincerity.

What saved me from this path was a weekend-long workshop with Scott Cairns at my university’s Literary Arts Festival. I had just been introduced to Cairns’s work earlier in the semester and was especially impressed by his poem “Embalming”:

You’ll need a corpse, your own or someone else’s.
You’ll need a certain distance; the less you care about your corpse the better. Light should be unforgiving, so as to lend a literal aspect to your project. Flesh should be putty, each hair of the brows, each lash, a pencil mark.

If the skeleton is intact, its shape may suggest beginnings of a structure, though even here modification might occur; heavier tools are waiting in the drawer, as well as wire, varied lengths and thicknesses of doweling. Odd hollows may be filled with bundled towel.
As for the fluids, arrange them on the cart in a pleasing manner. I prefer we speak of ointments. This notion of one’s anointing will help distract you from a simpler story of your handiwork. Those people in the parlor made requests, remember? Don’t be concerned.

Whatever this was to them, it is all yours now. The clay of your creation lies before you, invites your hand. Becoming anxious? That’s good. You should be a little anxious. You’re ready. Hold the knife as you would a quill, hardly at all. See that first line before you cross it, and draw. (Cairns 18)

At first glance, “Embalming” appears to be exactly what the title promises—a study in the preservation of a dead body. “You’ll need a corpse,” Cairns begin, setting up what surely will be a somewhat irreverent, step-by-step, instructional piece. But, as the line concludes, we quickly become aware that Cairns is talking about more than just bodies: “You’ll need a corpse, your own or someone else’s.” In the first line, our expectations have already been established then shattered. It introduces a puzzle, for how can one embalm oneself? The answer places the poem in a long tradition of poems about writing, the poet attaining immortality (or, at least, a pretty corpse) through the act of self-preservation in verse.

Now that we know where we stand, the word “corpse” opens. It leads easily to corpus—a body of work, which an artist certainly needs if one hopes to be “preserved.” The rest of the line opens similarly, distinguishing, perhaps, but not commenting on the merits
of a personal corpus (“your own”) vs. that of tradition (“someone else’s”). Ultimately, and in Cairns’ characteristic and concise wit, the poem’s first line is a restatement of Eliot’s maxim that all artists must be set “for contrast and comparison, among the dead” (Eliot 38).

The poem describes the act of creating art, privileging both careful crafting (the “unforgiving light,” the “tools” of varying sizes and shapes) and spontaneous (the cloths waiting to be wadded into “odd hollows”). The idea or experience at the center of the “corpse,” the skeleton, may suggest a structure, but there is still much work to be done. An experience or idea, for instance, may be poetically suggestive in itself, but that does not mean it will translate poetically on the page without some careful reconstructive surgery.

As the poem concludes, Cairns mentions “those people in the parlor” who “made requests.” These people are the audience—critics, readers, or perhaps those involved with the poem’s triggering experience whose influence or expectations might cause the artist to become self-conscious of how he or she relates it, but should not, at least during the act of composition, consciously matter. “Whatever this was to them,” he writes, “it is all yours now.” The poet can have similar expectations based on their personal evaluation of the triggering experience, and to them I believe Cairns’s advice might be slightly altered to say “Whatever this is to you, it’s all the poem’s now.” Eliot describes this necessary humility for the poet to perform his or her “simpler handiwork,” writing that “What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (Eliot 40).

At the same time, Cairns also speaks of “anointing,” ambiguously casting both the poet and his or her expression of the experience in terms of the spiritual. Given this task, it is not surprising that the poet may feel a certain pressure. To quote Eliot again, “the more
perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passion which are its material” (Eliot 41). Cairns takes this anxiety as a sign of readiness, as it is within this resulting tension and its resolution that poetry is made. In the penultimate line, Cairns equates the literal action of the poem with the metaphorical, telling fledgling artists to “Hold the knife as you would a quill…,” then leaving them to mark their first line alone.

“Embalming” provided me with a welcome and much-needed new perspective on what writing was all about. Cairns’s conversational voice was calm, clever, believable, and vastly different from the Beat writers whose influence I was just beginning to outgrow. It was the voice of a teacher who did not take himself too seriously, but whose students should, and I was eager to work with him.

When deciding which poems to submit to the workshop, one choice was obvious. Two years earlier, my high school biology class had visited a cadaver lab. With only four students in the class, it was a very hands-on experience—feeling lodged kidney stones, tugging on ligaments to make fingers curl, and squeezing diseased lungs. All of this would have provided a wealth of detail for poems, and the fact that I wrote my commentary on all of it before I even entered the lab shows just how blatantly I betrayed Eliot’s call for digestion and transmutation.

The poem I wrote was a straight-forward description of what happened, sprinkled with some random line breaks and rather heavy-handed diagnoses of those I was watching into a vague “prepared for the world” / “unprepared…” dichotomy. But even this is giving my 17-year-old self too much credit. Basically, I saw some kids, called them “hick children,” mentioned that I was early, made a joke about how we were going to go to Spaghetti Warehouse for lunch afterwards, and wrapped it all up when one of my classmates arrived. I titled the poem “Observations on a Field Trip to Wichita State University to see Cadavers”: 
Are these hick children come to college?
What would that make me?
Alone on a bench in a new school,
Imitating an outfit of the great Lizard King,
Just so I can look at some dead bodies then go eat spaghetti.
My mouth’s watering already.

I could be somewhere else if I wanted.
I guess I could still be at my own school, my own world
with my friends and
my girl.
Instead I’m early and have been forced to watch this strange psychology
and wait for my own kind to arrive.
How old could they possibly be?
Now I’m alone again.

When we workshopped the poem, most of the comments coming from both from Cairns and from the other students were the helpful but common sort one hears in most workshops. We discussed places in the poem where language could be tightened, sections where the action was unclear, or words that could be changed or cut to help control rhythm. I had dutifully mentioned in the poem the fact that I was early, however, and there’s where Scott paused. “Aaron,” he said, “You’re sitting outside a room where they keep dead bodies. You’re early. Think about that.” Then, without saying much more, we moved on to the next poem.

For the first time I recognized the importance of separating the self from the experience. Though the circumstances of the cadaver lab experience are interesting,
“Observations…” is not in any way a remarkable poem. It falls into the adolescent trap of simple reportage, a diary entry with costume line breaks. What is interesting, though, is how that same adolescence reacts in the presence of death, and the revised poem, “Field Trip: Cadavers” attempts to explore this.

The first significant change between the two poems is how differently the speaker regards the other group of students. In the first, the speaker calls them “hicks,” and while he questions immediately his own place as an outsider on a college campus, the first line smacks with indictment. The new version begins instead with a curious compassion and a sense that the observer and observed are equally unprepared. The assessment shifts from simple self-deprecation to a calmer observation of adolescence in general—how outward “indifference” often masks the beginnings of what is really fear. They are rushing down to meet death, after all, and it is only when the labcoated and reaperesque professor comes to collect them that the students start to understand, and only at this point that the speaker consciously separates from them by not following. The self-analysis is not entirely gone, however, just buried. At the generative level, the “adolescence” comment was primarily a criticism of my younger self and the now-replaced first draft.

The language of the poem also changed significantly between the two drafts. Gone was the angst-fueled sarcasm and undeveloped irony of a bored teenager ready to be done with high school. The language in “Field Trip: Cadavers,” while undoubtedly an imitation of Cairns’s conversational voice, is comfortable taking its time to say what it needs to. For the first time, I felt like I was driving the language down a scenic road rather than shuttling it directly to the destination, and the journey was all the richer for taking the time to look around.

To the larger discussion of how a poet tempers and transforms experience, perhaps the most significant difference between the drafts is that almost none of the reported experiences from the first—the events of the experience that happened to me—survived
into the revision, and the few details that do remain now earn their place by serving a purpose. The speaker’s removed vantage point allows him both to comment on the other students and to pull back and reflect on his own reactions, to see their “‘indifference’ creeping its way toward caution,” (5) while at the same time acknowledging that the labcoat man’s “seduction is nearly enough to lure me” (19). While still an easy joke, the first speaker’s cynical and detached regard of his lunch becomes an ironic example of the students’ unpreparedness (they made reservations in advance, after all) for what they are about to see, and the speaker’s remark that he is early, of course, is at the heart of the poem’s entire shift in perspective. While just another in a series of observations in the first draft, it was the unpacking of this detail’s implications that finally rescued the poem from self-indulgence.
The revision process of “Field Trip: Cadavers” made me resolute in taking a step back from every triggering experience to try and find something larger than just my own personal attachments to it. My influences shifted fully from the Beats to more contemporary poets, and I was especially drawn to those who made use of narrative forms and personae in their work. Stephen Dobyns’s collection *Cemetery Nights*, for one, was filled with quirky characters and events—a group of dysfunctional bowlers, a man who finds his wife in bed with the milkman, Odysseus’ dog, and a central series on the afterlives of local cemetery residents. I met and workshoped with Tim Seibles a year after the workshop with Cairns, and fell in love with his reworking of *Looney Tunes* and *Rocky and Bullwinkle* characters. When adopting popular characters as speakers, less had to be done within the poems in terms of exposition, leaving more energy to play the narrative off of the particularities of character. A reader who is familiar with the absurd plots of Roadrunner cartoons, for instance, already understands the bird’s existential dilemma—his constant, Sisyphean running, a new threat from the coyote around every bend in the road—and so when he says of the sun in the beginning of “Commercial Break, Roadrunner Uneasy” that, “If I didn’t know better I’d say / …that somebody just pasted it there / and said the hell with it,” (1-4) then wonders in the poem’s last line whether the entirety of his existence depends on being “just fast,” (75) the reader’s foreknowledge of the character causes the lines to resonate even further than had they approached the poem without it (Seibles 9).

Having grown self-conscious of my emotions and how they entered my poems, I instantly recognized the persona as a means to further diffuse the defects of sentimentality. Developing a character as speaker and a separate world through which he could walk, by
donning a narrative mask, I found that writing in a persona allowed me to remain in the poem just enough to make greater use of my emotions without the attendant worry of being overly transparent or indulgent with my feelings.

Many of the oldest poems in this collection were early experiments with this. An attraction to a girl at the supermarket and my nervousness to approach her led to “Leper’s Libido,” in which the eponymous leper confesses his own, awkward reasons for not approaching women. “Bond in Love: Letter to Moneypenny” speculates as to what the famously promiscuous secret agent might say to his devoted secretary if he ever decided to settle down. Each of these poems is ultimately a profession of love, a type of poem that can more easily than any fall into excessive sentimentality, but the quirkiness of the leper’s lovesickness and 007’s double entendres kept me tied to the humor and concrete details to keep them grounded.

It was during a trip to England that I stumbled upon the persona who would guide the next stage of my development. On our last evening there, I boarded a half-filled bus and rode to Whitechapel to follow the path of Jack the Ripper. As with the cadaver lab, the atmosphere of the area was an almost overwhelming inspiration in itself—the meat-smell of the butcher shop down the road, the shadowed alleyways, the feel of the cobblestone streets. The tour guide did not hold back, either, stopping at the location of each murder and giving us graphic detail of exactly what the Ripper did and where the entrails were strewn. Though a parking garage had been constructed over the spot of one murder, an adult novelty shop over another, the history of the events still haunted the area as palpably as the thick, East End fog.

When I returned home, I picked up a number of books on the Ripper case and started looking for an angle. I started with Mary Kelly, the final victim. While all accounts are muddy, she is the one victim who was supposedly beautiful. She was also known for her singing, and was last heard singing an old English ballad called “A Violet Plucked from
Mother’s Grave as a Child.” Since she was born in Limerick, Ireland, I wrote a nasty limerick for an epigraph. I had already come up with the series title *Letters from Jack*, and meant to suggest that these were among the number of letters sent to police during the murders in the Ripper’s name. Ready to plunge into grisly detail, I began writing to the police: “Let me tell you about Mary. First, she was born / in Limerick, as you know...” (1-2).

I was distracted here by the sound of singing. Maria, a classmate with whom I was wholly enthralled, was walking toward me, singing to herself and holding a purple flower she’d picked elsewhere on campus. Without thought I continued the line, “but what clues / the scene showed couldn’t have told / how gaslamps glittered off her hair like pyrite” (2-4). The Ripper had suddenly fallen in love, and there was nothing to do but let him.

I continued as if writing a love poem to Maria, filtering, as I went, my own feelings through the Ripper’s details. Inspired by the connection between Mary Kelly’s and Maria’s singing, I continued a musical strain throughout the rest of the poem. The lovestruck Jack says Mary “sang violets” through breath that would’ve assuredly reeked of cheap rum, her song “slicing the Whitechapel mist,” that “Even / her name—Mary, Maria—seems to sing itself...” (5-8). The doubling of name here is the only explicit intrusion of mine and Maria’s relationship in the series, but I justified it to myself in that the added emphasis and phonemic variation in Maria’s name was itself a swell of musicality.

Mary Kelly was the only victim killed indoors, and the Ripper had all night with her. The link, then, between the murder and the act of lovemaking was an immediate association, but one I felt was both too simple and, having seen the crime scene photo, too vicious to focus on. I did want the suggestion to linger there a little, though. Apart from the standard Freudian connections whenever knives are mentioned, the break of line 18 at “she could only drink me” was one suggestion the reader could take if he or she were so inclined, as was the emphasis in line 21 that Jack “knew her.” In the end, the poem remains focused on courtship and profession, both from Jack to Mary Kelly and from myself to
Maria, with whom I began a relationship shortly afterward.

With Jack I had, for the first time, developed a sustained voice of a wholly separate character. Each persona poem I’d written before still felt like it was just me trying on somebody else’s life, but Jack was the first who acted without my asking, often against my wishes. My role in writing him was often more passive than forced, and because of this I was able to concern myself less with voice and more with the larger structure of the series, images, line breaks, and other elements of craft I had previously been rather lax with. In the end, Jack did more to develop my voice more than I sometimes think I did to develop his, and among my poems, “Mary Kelly” is the best example of one in which I consciously filtered my own strong emotions through a mask to eliminate sentimentality.

That said, “Letters from Jack” also supplied the best example of a poem in which excessive emotion and lack of removal ended up getting the best of me. Perhaps a bit early in the relationship for such professions, I told Maria I loved her. Looking back, I believe my focus on the Ripper poems and the idea of Maria as muse is largely to blame for how fast I fell for her—while I managed control of Jack’s sentimentality within the poems, he was meddling with mine in real life. Maria and I separated, and for a while I naturally took it hard. One night at a bar shortly after the breakup I became upset watching other men flirt with her. I drank a few hasty beers to dull myself and went home. Stopping at the computer to check email, I opened a blank document and started writing. It broke my rule of letting some time pass between the triggering emotion and the writing, but I wanted to vent and told myself I would not save whatever I wrote.

I was surprised to find, though a number of months had passed and a handful of other poems were written since I finished the Ripper poems, that Jack started talking again in “To Mary.” I looked up at some now-forgotten artifact of our relationship sitting on the shelf above my monitor, but Jack saw Mary Kelly’s heart still preserved in a jar. Staring at it, he wonders what would have happened if he had loved her properly, had his “smiles been
of lips and not of steel,” (6) a reference back to lines 17-18 of the first “Mary Kelly” poem in which his knife “smiled / her neck.” My emotion and his voice seemed to intertwine. I thought of Maria practicing those songs as I wrote by the fire, and so Jack thought back to the song Mary Kelly sang before she died (12-13). I thought of my impatience with our relationship’s development and my too-soon profession of love, and Jack confessed “it was your heart I was after—I just tried / to take it too quickly...” (24-25) In the end, Jack’s knife was “dulled, given way / to quill and scroll;” his only wish is that they could start again knowing what he knew now (27-28).

The initial scene of Jack looking at her preserved heart years later is a potent premise for a poem, I think, and could conceivably further the narrative arc of the series. Could the guilt over murdering his true love explain why the Ripper historically just disappeared? Does he feel remorse or contrition for his murders? Instead, the poem fails to do anything but attempt to rehash the sentiments of the other “Mary Kelly” poem, and the language is full of forced emotion and clichés. That memory of how he “nearly swam the tear-glazed / rims of [her] eyes” (4-5), as well as his wondering if her heartbeats could “have sung so sweetly for me?” (9), smack more of self-pity than of true feeling, and his comment that “it seemed / your voice could make worlds disappear” (13-14) is a cliché 80s “power ballad.” Though the mask still removed me physically from the poem, the lack of emotional distance overtook its benefits. Jack was full of self-pity because I was full of self-pity. That his voice seemed to summon itself shows the degree to which I internalized his voice, but the respective success and failure of the two “Mary Kelly” poems proves that persona is not in itself a cure-all for sentimentality.
The persona is nothing without the details of the world through which it walks. I was able to filter my feelings for Maria in “Mary Kelly,” and draw upon my desire for a romantic relationship to color Jack’s search for a muse. The structure of the series and the events and speculations that filled it, though, came through research and historical details, the diffusing of my experience not just through a voice that was not my own, but an entirely different world.

The use of concrete details, historical or otherwise, provides crucial grounding for a poem’s loftier feelings and abstractions which could otherwise become self-indulgent. Returning to Eliot’s “objective correlative,” these details are the events, objects, and situations he called for which enable emotion to be resonant rather than be simply on display. The interplay of detail and emotion creates a tension through which a poem must continually navigate, and a successful handling of this tension is one way a poem can ultimately derive its power.

One of the most detail-driven poets I know of, and certainly the most eclectic and exuberant in his use of them, is Albert Goldbarth. His poems rely heavily on the exploration of a single concept through an almost ecstatic combination of science, history, anthropology and any number of other disciplinary lenses. In one poem, “In the Bar in the Bar,” a woman overheard drunkenly proclaiming “I can see right through you” launches a consideration of Flemish oil paintings, how radiography allows us to see figures the artists painted over and turned into new figures, and from this leap the poem becomes a consideration of lives within lives, persons within persons, and how the self can be both hidden and painfully transparent. In another, “Powers,” the speaker contrasts his reading of golden-age superheroes as a child against the story of his father’s dealing with financial
hardships and refusal to let his son see him break down, all colored with a larger notion of “secret identity.” Goldbarth’s erudition is dazzling, but beyond entertainment it also serves to complicate the poem’s underlying emotional current, which is often revealed to be a rather simple and, if it weren’t for all the setup, sentimental moment.

The emotional centerpiece of his poem “Away” is his friend Dolores’s sudden realization that her husband of seven years is foreign to her. He begins by reworking the cliché “in the blink of an eye” by taking us through what can actually happen during that span of time, expanding from the clever observation that a blink is “the size of all of our eyelashes,” to it being all the time needed for a meteor to “rub out City Hall,” a favorite, vintage comic book peril that resurfaces throughout his work (2-3) He finally ties the blink to the biological, the fact that a blink is evidence of “a brachiate maze of human evolution going back / past protozoa,” and from all of this, derives that “pain enough / to fell us like a hammer can fit on a pin (8-11). Next, and in typical Goldbarth fashion, comes an explosion of associations. He moves from a cockroach scuttling to safety on a kitchen floor to the vanishing of Mayan cities, troubling the sense of size and time by intoning the “god-faced Mayan stones” and suggesting that these cities disappeared in the blink of “a stone’s eye” (27-29). After all this setup, with all its implications and expansiveness, Goldbarth claim his topic isn’t meant to be this vast, that he only meant to mention his friend Dolores and her blink-of-an-eye realization that her husband had changed. The conceit, however, is that everything preceding has been working towards this revelation, and Goldbarth’s downplaying of it simply adds force to the blow.

When he is on his game, Goldbarth’s ability to assemble associative leaps and seemingly disparate situations eventually finds a cathartic resolution in which everything comes together, not unlike discovering the murderer in a densely-plotted whodunit. When he is not, the flurry of details and facts he gathers along the way can become overwhelming
and overly flashy—falling into its own sort of self indulgence—and through eventual desensitization to this barrage of details, the sentimentality they are meant to soften can ultimately be made even more apparent.

Of my own work, nowhere can Goldbarth’s influence be felt more than in “Celestial.” Conflating voices from three historical ghost ships into one narrative arc and framed by the budding relationship of two students, the poem is full of nautical and astronomical details, nods to other works of literature, and hidden personal experience and emotion. The poem was inspired by the death of the golfer Payne Stewart, whose private jet depressurized mid-flight killing everybody on board, then flew for six more hours on autopilot before finally running out of gas and crashing. I remembered reading an article weeks before about a Dutch freighter during World War II that met a similar fate, sailing for months with a dead crew after a leak sprung in the nerve gas it was smuggling. Returning to the article, I found both a third a ship to add as well as my emotional entrance into the poem. It referred to the ship as a “modern day Mary Celeste,” perhaps the most famous of all ghost ships, and “Celeste” was Maria’s middle name.

The scope of the poem was much larger than in Letters from Jack and had a smaller space to work with. I wanted the ships to be the focus rather than any particular persona, and knew I wanted the ships to somehow merge into a single, larger story. I gave each ship its own section, but to suggest their conflation into one larger narrative, I broke each section mid-sentence, a trick I stole from Goldbarth. Two sections on Maria and I would act as bookends, and a ghostly character from each ship would focus its own section on a particular aspect of our relationship.

A line from a news article about Stewart’s death mentioned that the plane was flying too high, which immediately brought the story of Icarus to mind. I realized that, along with the historical details of the ships, allusions to other works of literature could help chart the course of my composition as place the poem in a dialogue with other works. The first line,
“There was a ship,” is the first line of dialogue spoken by Coleridge’s mariner. I knew that few readers if any would catch it, but it was there if anyone did. I wanted my poem to have a similar sense of foreboding as Coleridge’s Rime, and the allusion helped me find the tone of the voice. Other allusions in “Celestial” are more obvious. That Stewart’s plane flew “too close to the sun that couldn’t melt / the frozen dew of its wings” (20-21) is the nod to Icarus, somewhat ironic that unlike Icarus’ melted wax it was the freezing of the Stewart’s wings that doomed him. In the same section, Stewart’s wife “wishes / she could be the calm Penelope, weaving towards return” (23-24) a reference to Odysseus’ wife and the tapestry she weaved then unraveled in a trick to stave off suitors, all the while faithful that her own lost sailor would return.

How the allusion to Orion entered the poem is of particular note to the larger discussion of the transformation of personal experience and emotion. My own emotional tie to Orion myth came from a night Maria and I spent in an old A-frame cabin in the woods. We had been drifting closer then farther apart from each other, unsure what would come of the relationship. That night we were on an upswing, and as she fell asleep on my shoulder I looked up to see, past the dead and waving limbs of trees, that the skylight above the bed framed the constellation Orion, the full moon, and nothing more. In the Mary Celeste section, the ship’s navigator searches for the constellation to orient himself. The lines following this give an incomplete version of the Orion myth—how he was banished to the heavens and eternally chased by the constellation Scorpio for falling in love with Artemis, the goddess of the moon. For a few nights each winter, though, Orion’s constellation falls back in line with moon and the two lovers appear in the sky together again. Drawing on the rockiness of my own emotion at the time, the navigator sees himself in this story, always having to sail away from his wife after a short time together, always promising as he’ll return for her.

Ultimately, the image does its job well enough, allowing the navigator to express
his feelings for his wife while allowing the poem to keep moving, but each time I revisit “Celestial,” this image sticks out and I always try again to decide if it works or not. In some ways, I know my feeling that it does not is tied to my personal attachment to it and my desire that it be more than just another image in the poem. I wonder, also, if by focusing so much on trying to obscure myself in the image I failed to fully explore the image’s potential, couching it in dense language rather than allowing myself to meditate on it more calmly. It is here that a few of the poem’s flaws begin to surface. As in Goldbarth’s less successful poems, the density of detail and language overwhelm the emotional content in places, calling attention to my desire for personal rather than obscuring it, and in doing so, makes the return to sentimentality in the poem’s final section even more evident. The couple “kiss the way waves might” in line 72, and the poem ends with a bit sappily as they fall asleep together. In a poem full of doom and fate where people navigate by the ghosts of burnt-out stars, this ending is as unbelievable as it is underdeveloped, and is evidence more of my own emotional wish-fulfillment than it is of good crafting. The poem was eventually published in *The Beloit Poetry Journal*, suggesting that it is ultimately more successful than not, but that it was an issue dedicated to poets under twenty-five years old makes me wonder how much of my youthful sentimentality was forgiven.

* * *

The creation of a distance between the self and experience, the adoption of a persona, and the use of concrete detail are all ways for a poet to soften the sentimentality of their experience and emotion. There are of course many more. Just as there are stale emotions there are stale words, and the poet’s use of specific and unexpected language can add nuance to an otherwise common topic. Writing in a poetic form such as a villanelle or sestina can further trouble the poet’s relationship to experience, emotion, and language.
Each of these merits further discussion, but I’ve chosen in this preface to focus on distance, persona, and detail because each corresponds most directly to three of my most significant stages of poetic development.

To return one last time to Eliot, he writes that the difference of mind between mature and immature poets derives “not precisely in any valuation of ‘personality,’ not [by] being necessarily more interesting, or having ‘more to say,’ but rather by being a more finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations” (Eliot 40-41). These new combinations are what I have always sought after while writing. My own realization during the workshop with Cairns that my experiences and emotions were rather uninteresting in themselves until transformed to give them an external relevance, combined with the wariness of my personal tendency toward excessive emotion and the tools I have developed to soften them, remain vital as I continue to mature.

Though I did not happen upon Eliot’s essay until long after writing “Celestial,” his assessment of the poet’s mind was reassuring, suggesting, at least in terms of my relationship to emotion and experience, that I was headed in the right direction. Because this preface has focused on development, the poems that follow are arranged more or less chronologically. The most recent of them, “Alibi Store,” “Exotic,” and “Long Shadows,” are still written in personae and informed by the history of the American carnival, but they feel much less forced into settings and voices than some of my older poems. With them, and the planned collection they are to be part of, I feel much more in control of the poems themselves—their voice, setting, and implications—and less like I am fighting my own personal intrusion. As this new collection takes shape, I hope to continually find and use new combinations of voice, thought, and craft to handle the tension between my personal experiences and how they are ultimately expressed.
Works Cited


Field Trip: Cadavers

I can’t say they’re truly frightened
by the prospect of what they are about to see.
It seems from my angle, watching from the anteroom
of the lab, that it’s more about adolescence, that
trademark “indifference” creeping its way toward caution.

Still, they don’t quite know what to make
of the smell: the type that gives one’s throat cause
to pinch in tighter, quelling the stomach’s more
explosive urges. Later, their table for ten
at Spaghetti Warehouse will not have been

the best decision. But how were they to prepare
for ligaments, the suggestion of rigatoni
in the proper lighting? An image especially dreadful
when the lifeless and nameless are reunited
with history. Down there

“lives” are rarely spoken of. So when
the labcoat man appears, smirking “You know,
many wait their whole lives to come here,”
his seduction is nearly enough to lure me
into their company. He continues, “but if you don’t

have anywhere to go, I’ll take you down now.”
Shrugging, they follow through chamber
doors into formaldehyde clouds, glancing back
at me with something now more than caution.
But I know that I’m here early. This is not my call.
Leper’s Libido

When it comes down to it, I haven’t got the balls. Sure, I’m well enough equipped, the question is for how long? Think of it. If I should pass my disease off as, say, a bad rash obtained from squatting beside the wrong kind of bush at the lake, or hives reacted from a quite untimely bee sting, or any number of such excuses, the real test would be in the performance. I can see it now….

Slow music, candles. Both a bit romanced by the evening, both very romanced by the wine. And then the act itself. Her face telling me I’m a god, and I feeling as if, when pop….

Granted, my condition is such that I would probably feel no more pain than normal, but the whole thing could be a bit too much for her to bear. And what would I say?

Play the old joke and reply, “Keep the tip?” No, that would be insult to an injury already too deeply planted. I could jump from the bed yelling “Surprise, it’s detachable!” and hope the residual shock would give me a running start. But this is all fantasy best left unrealized. Someday I’ll have my chance. Until then, I’ll content myself with stolen glances as she bends to lift her newspaper in the morning, chance meetings in the produce aisle or at the bank, constantly trying to keep it all together.
Ghost Tour

“Some nights you will see him in that corner, busy with his handiwork. He likes people, and especially their shoes.”
—Edinburgh Ghost Tour Guide

It makes me wonder. If he’s a friendly ghost—you say he likes shoes, used to make them for all the townspeople and is probably examining our feet as we speak—then where is he? Surely we’re an amiable enough group. Shouldn’t he be drawn into our presence by such an international array of footwear.

True, there are those whose stories will oppose my skepticism. Take, for instance, the Yorkshire girl who swore to hearing muffled thumps, perhaps of wood striking leather. Or last month’s group of schoolchildren; twenty-two pairs of Reeboks enigmatically tied to one another. This as the guide spoke of the specter’s disdain for tennis shoes.

Our better judgment reminds us that such affects would be part of any good show. But suppose our apparition could choose to offer a moment’s manifestation, simply to pause eternity’s tedium. Is it this possibility that truly haunts us? The sounds of his mallet, the slight shift of a shadow on the cavern wall, this apprehension; this is the reality as we choose to tell, laced in lines like these which give him life to walk again.
Smoke—Steam—Space

“I like the way fire feels, tamed
between my fingers.” Nodding
as he takes his last drag, he thinks
he too is like a cigarette though he,
lacking smoke but teeming with wind,
wants nothing more than a flame
to ignite him. He tells her about
California, how you can walk
until you hit ocean, then go
farther until the tides feel
strong enough to drag you down.
“You move as the waves command.”
Watching as her breath unfolds into air, he catches
a lyric from Difranco’s Diner. “I ordered two coffees,
one is for you. And the cups are so close
that the steam is rising in one stream…."

Later he takes a new woman
to his hotel—makes coffee. If it could speak,
perhaps the dwarf machine would someday tell
of this executive; how he wanted
his coffee dark as the inner spread of virgin thighs.
How the woman he asked to his room took cream
now and then, but every morning, sitting
outside with the breeze of sunrise
softly scarring her cheek, took hers
black as a night with no fire.
In bed alone he watches the steam
mix with air the way a child worries
its novice notions of experience.

“It looked like a cow,”
his brother, then six, remarked about the mythic
beast on the Elmer’s glue bottle. White: like milk.
Cow: milk comes from cow. Glue: (therefore) dairy product.
One bottle and one sickly sticky stomachache later
and as Mr. Ed suddenly graced the television airways
that night, none could help but disrupt conversation
by hanging winds of laughter in its place.
During his flight home

our businessman begins to think of his wife
less as something to be fled, now more
a child who (his mother forbidding his crossing
the street) hoists a pillowcase full of precious
child-stuff over a shoulder, bids his farewells,
then runs three sullen circles around the block
as if these simplest rebellions are enough to appease
our hunger. For him the weekly tos and fros
recall Dante’s lovers in their hell-circle,
winds blowing them apart, then together again.

And in space, objects drift until they strike something,
then they move together. In his orbits,
he escapes her narrowly with each pass.
“If this were space,” he thinks, “at least
there would be no wind.”
He looks to the stale air-jets on the console above:
No smoking, it says, Fasten seatbelts.
Fawning

It wasn’t until later, after the bruises healed, that the more important threshold was crossed. The blueness of your eyes lost its seduction and you resembled Faunus, the true terror of you found waist down. When you took me by the waist, the nights my more obvious brooding began, began to take me, to fiddle me, to fuck me as I thrashed to escape…let’s call this intrusion the last straw, your whispers boring through me as you made me yours. The blue curtains on the wall made waste of the days light, hiding your sin, how I shunned the bitter taste of that newest brew on your breath, the quiet song of the thrush on the branch outside, silencing fauna of my silent cries. I found myself a fawn, helpless to you, the hunter in gray-blue autumn mornings, who would thresh the fields, find me awaiting you. Awake in this shadowed room, the new bruises covering older scars, recollection of our years together, my strained illusion of you, our history, became something less fondly remembered as my thoughts turned to brooding. This figment now dissolved, the blue of my bruises turned black as your eyes, scars on my waist became my own as they lifted me past the thresh-

hold again. I thought of thrashing in return, offering retaliation the way you taught me never to waste such opportunities. But for now the fawn will not fight back, the black and blue
blotched on my skin has taught against my brooding.

Still these nights the thrush sings its wasted warning as I fawn to you, the blue curtains concealing my submissions, my bruises.
Bond in Love: Letter to Moneypenny

It’s not as glamorous as you’d think. Sure there are the gadgets, explosive bubble-gum, cufflink choke-chain, the over-haywired Jaguar…. But when I have to dress myself on those mawkish Moscow mornings, I have to wonder, telephone or satellite shoes?

Yes there are certain perks. It’s nice that even the Dehli bartenders know the way I like my martinis, and the women—Honey Ryder, Ms. Pussy Galore—come quickly to mind. But other times, dodging Oddjob’s razor-brimmed hat, straddling Goldfinger’s laser, trying to keep whole the halves of me, I tend to reconsider recent career moves.

Sometimes I think of you and I, sparking spy-cars through Leningrad streets, taking in Bath together—maybe Modena’s Cross—or simply retiring to Edinburgh, graying together under Castle Rock. What of the women, you ask? Let me assure you, Pussy means nothing to me.

It’s always you, Good Penny, turning up at the beginning and end of my missions. You, M’s right hand, ready to ring my bowler with secretarial skill to the corner coat-rack, begging me to stay my more missionary endeavors.
Sacred

“Every other song someone’s trying
to write angels into the world."
—Ani Difranco

You told me we should go where the music was,
that you moved your radio into the bedroom, lending
space to your soon-to-be roommate. There
was a mattress cornered on the floor, and when we laid
there where even darkness couldn’t see itself, you said all
we missed were candles, as if flame were innocence,
as if it would have mattered. It was the night
of the lecture, poetry and the sacred. We
talked about angels then. You
swore they were a simple bicameral flittering, an impulse
over man’s anterior commisure improperly decoded.
I suggested they may be words themselves. We made them
there—learned how lips can run together in halos,
how hands can trace over hips like the arc of wings, saw
with what intimate an exhalation souls render
between us. And in the wearied, worried breaths
we allowed darkness, you told me if you could
believe in a soul, you’d give me yours,
but that this, none of this, could be. That
night we spoke of different angels, the spirits
that will weakness to flesh, those we grant
lives to explain our own—all that we hold sacred
yet deny the name. What passed
there, however, was more than flesh,
more than that cautious communion
two angels might share if given frame to form
their passion. This is how we learned
some other can linger like breath in air,
how the dead can dance when we let them.
P.H.O.B.O.S.

“The big question is whether the planet will disappear in the twinkling of an eye. It is astonishingly unlikely that there is any risk—but I could not prove it.”

—John Nelson, team head on Brookhaven’s “Big Bang” Experiment

I can tell you how to make
gold burn brighter than 10,000 suns, how to race
it just under the speed of the light that shines its shape.
And after this, perhaps I can say
how worlds are made, the silence
that bangs them into being the way couples make
love after arguments. After the collision
resolves itself, the only tremors
will be those inside us, those we feel as we see
our infancy, how we appeared
when our universe was born the size of our world.

Some speak of darkness, of black
holes boring out from “perturbations
of the universe.” But this would be nothing more
than an annoyance, the size of a needle
pinned into earth. The world
won’t end with this singularity, this event’s
horizon is too vast. We may find little—
foresight is blindest in times like these—
but for this glimpse, this solemn stare
into anything, who would blame us for trying?
Busy Skies

“All the prophets, from Jesus to Mohammed, were space aliens, and these superior beings are ready to return.”

-Raelian Church, quoted in Skeptic Magazine

It’s not the second coming we’re waiting for.
It came and went with the first australopithic step, when They saw and approved our ambitions to grasp more than those limbs we swung from. Our thumbs

aching to bend, the needs of our newest evolution pressing, they came again, diagramming our course in the geometry of wheat fields. In time we learned speech, and through voiced and breathless pauses, these untamed vernaculars, we re-invented them

in fables of flight and flood, mastered their missions—Mecca, Jerusalem, Roswell—always pieced from just enough evidence. We see their faces in moon-rocks, traces of them in sky and soil, always searching for them in ourselves. Now, our gaze

fixed forever on their busy skies like sunflowers aching to the star that feeds them, we wonder where next they will lead us—and what rough beasts these may be, swooping through the solarsphere towards earth to be reborn.
The Duke
- *after Robert Browning*

You stare me from this wall
as if paint could be alive, calling
me a wonder to any guest who listens.
Yes, Pandolf worked me, drew my lines
truer than you could have known them,
showed how light can dance off my skin
when I let it. You point them
to the blush of my cheek, knowing it
his, not yours. When he drew
the mantle over my wrist, you could not know
it was to hide the pulse that raged there for him,
how that half-flush redness was teased from my neck
by his lips. Maybe you could guess
at some fool stealing from your orchard, but the way
he dipped his brush through that stolen fruit,
finding the juice to paint me with,
seeps through my lines as quiet as color.
It’s the gift that haunts you, the thought
that the prize of name should exceed those
a beggar could grant. With you I was little
more than this plane I’m captured in, something
to adorn you when other trophies seemed less
fair. I can’t blame you
for the bows you felt could win me. I returned
them with the respect my smiles could give
but knew the rhyme of us could never sustain
the form you set. He knew enough to let me
shine beyond the frame, the way blurring lines
lets the figure blend better into background.
How even this freedom must trouble you.
But look there on the facing wall, your other
Pandolffian prize, the nude reclining
on the shore. Notice her shape, her wrists
bared to the waters as if waiting for the flood,
her neck, her breasts and their shade. Now imagine
Neptune in the waters below, how his trident commands
a legion of sea horses towards her. Can you imagine
with what intensity she craves the crash of the coming wave?
After his death in 1896, the police emptied the small apartment of Dr. George Bagster Phillips. He had served as divisional police surgeon during the Whitechapel murders of 1888, instrumental both as a surveyor of the crime scenes and as the post-mortem examiner. His friend Walter Dew said of him, “He used to look for all the world as though he had stepped out of a century old painting.” Under his bed, police found a small wooden box containing five letters addressed to the mortuary and what appeared to be a page from Phillips’ own journal. These papers were padded on both sides by six small velvet squares, purple but with hints of bloodstains.
I. Mary Ann Nichols—2 September 1888

It began, as these things do, with conversation. There was some talk of her children, five of them and a husband estranged in the West End. How her allowance was cut when he learned she sold herself, how she spent her day’s fare on gin and now needed more. When she left the lodger she told him this would come easily, that her new “jolly bonnet” would lure four shillings more, asking attention from her childhood scar and missing teeth, and I guess in that light, the only light we had, she was prettier. But this was not my interest. When she left the Frying Pan pub, the Shadwell Docks were burning. That ember-glazed sky made me think of what the Great Fire must have looked like—that 1666 scorching that seared the city apart. Now the only fires are in the East, the ones that rise over the Thames and wash us out of our sewer-slums like rats. We were at Buck’s Row, across from the Jews’ cemetery. There I took her, steadying her neck for my knife then sliding it through her stomach, the cut which dubbed me a surgeon. I watched from the corner-cast shadows while the coachmen found her body. One said it still felt warm, as though her heart pulsed for more. When I read the Times days later I learned her husband had been called to identify. I was glad to have left her face untouched. But how much had those eight years apart blend into death to change her? The story ended with him: “Seeing you as you are now, I forgive you for what you have done to me.” I knew this reunion was mine as well, this forgiveness from my hands.
II. Annie Chapman—13 September 1888

“The eyes of Annie Chapman were photographed by the police putting hope in the belief that when a person dies, their last view of life, in this case probably the Ripper himself, is indelibly printed on the pupils.”

-clipped from the London Times, 13th September 1888

After she died her stomach opened like legs
to me, the isopropyl odor of rum rubbing itself
into air, inviting further injections, burning
itself second-hand into my nostrils, seeping
sieve-like into the bladder I took, intoxicating
even her uterus where, were there life, I’d have stolen
that too. I left her rings at her feet, burned
brass shining like mud under stars,
two farthings, two tablets taken
from an earlier doctor, meant to save her
lungs, left these mementos
to mark her grave. And when I vanished,
my cloak concealing my own treasures,
I thought of the picture you’d find. Would you blame me for the eye she blackened in a pub brawl?
The thumbprints you’d find beneath blood closing her neck?
Would you look for me there in the shadows
looming from lamplight, or in those black
eyes, the ones that barely caught me coming?
It’s true. She saw me form from the walls
of the Close, that passage from Brick
Street to Commercial. But she never saw
my knife before it took her. This clipping says you shot her eyes, and I can see you
with your glasses looking for me in the empty glint
of light the new moon fed those black windows—
but do you think I’d burn that much
of myself in her? That there was time enough
for her to stare me into shape?
III. Letter—30 September 1888

Most nights aren’t as engaging
as others. I walk the cobbled East End wynds
by lunar light—so much is lost in the shine
the sun provides. Bury
this city in rays and you can’t see
anything. Even the etched abbey edges of Westminster
blur into each other when your gaze raises
its spires. Tower Bridge is safe,
you can pass with eyes fixed as blood
to those dull stones, yet even then the Thames-shimmers
will intrude.

I dodge light nimbly, quickly
ducking into pubs for pints, and there I hear
my stories. Thirty-first of August, the first.
A good night, though a bit dry. They say
I took nothing from her, and I wonder
if my cuts that evening perhaps were too gentle.
Seventh of September, second day of the new
moon. You see, it was darker then. I could see
what I had to work with.

But you know
these details. Yesterday on Tower Hill
clouds kept the sun from baking blood
of countless years’ executions from the soil. I noticed
the guards, those rubber-soled shoes made for the Sneakers
sent after me every night. I wonder if I could use
a pair. Would I move as silent as the moon?

Mostly, I try not to think of my work. Not that I don’t
take pride, I just wish to avoid the attention
it calls. I tire of hearing
my name, “Ripper,”
raised by criers on every street corner,
drenched in dramshop discourse
over every ale this city serves. Sometimes
I want those nights to pass as easily as lives.
Sometimes I want that dark.
IV. Double Event—1 October 1888

There are times I feel like music
drives me, as if a siren sings
me through these streets. The Times
called that night’s first “Lucky Liz,” told how
my knife never knew past her throat, said
something shook me from more.
But I wasn’t scared—just finished. With her
the notes faded too quickly,
like starlight sulking through fog. I do remember
kissing her, the way two workers joked
that I might be “The Leather Apron,”
as if that butcher could love his meat
like I do mine.

Perhaps this is why I watched
the coachman bend over her, take her
pulse, look for life between bone and skin.
But when fog fell to rain’s cadence, I moved on.

Later, I heard another crying
from prison-steps. She told me
of her arrest, how she was taken
for calling fire like a siren on High
Street. When the police asked Kate
her name she said it was “Nothing,” then lied
“Mary Kelly,” and I thought maybe she was
the muse who called me to cut.

We walked,
I could hear the rain drumming our bodies,
the beats crescendo from clouds, begging
for melody. I started with her throat,
hers breasts, measured bars of flesh
with my blade, stabbed an arpeggio
in her womb—and when the beats fell
from rhythm, when the coda crashed
to finale, I found myself moving again
like a man carrying song in his head, my opus
played and silent behind me.
V. Mary Kelly—10 November 1888

Let me talk of Mary. First, she was born in Limerick, as you know, but what clues the scene showed couldn’t have told how gaslamps glittered off her hair like pyrite. How she sang violets through rum-breath, the ballad of “Mother’s Grave” slicing the Whitechapel mist. Even her name—Mary, Maria—seems to sing itself as she would have.

When I gave her thirty shillings, enough to appease her livid landlord, she took me back to her room—13 Miller’s Court—the room I bought for her; took me as if even the truest favors beg favors in return

She never screamed, never altoed “murder” though it was in the air. Even when my knife smiled her neck, she could only drink me through the swelling whole notes of her pupils. And there, in the East End silence, in that peace, I knew her—the most beautiful of these muses I’ve made myself.

I stole her heart, may send part of it to you later. The rest I’ll keep, as much a part of me as she was. And when I see it I’ll think of how I courted her till morning, her songs in my breath even after her last note dimmed itself from hearing, how she wore death, becoming as new jewels. What a couple we made in those final hours. What a pretty necklace I gave her.
VI. To Jack—9 November 1893

I felt guilty sewing them back to shape,
as if pulling the dangled thread of some canvas
you’d just given life. I took
time with them, admiring your cuts—left
handed like mine—noted
their cleanness. I traced them
with my fingers, starting where I knew
you had, the lines you said
made smiles of their throats, seamed
the stitches from sternum to stomach,
followed them further, learning
how easily we’re torn.

I was the first
in Kelly’s room, saw the mosaic you made
of her. I remember sifting the ash
of her hearth, looking for the heart
you stole. When I pieced together the presents
you sent, six segments of the child
she carried, wrapped in velvet—violet
like her song—I felt like you
must have when you made her,
giving form where life had taken it.
I found you in all of them, the way
you find artists between brushmarks.
You were the master, and I the eager apprentice,
shading the shapes of the corpus you left behind.
To Mary—14 February 1900

Sometimes I just stare
at your heart, the heart I took,
cured. I gaze almost through it
the way I once nearly swam the tear-glazed
rims of your eyes. And had I left it,
had my smiles been of lips and not of steel, if
I had waited to hear the final breaths
of the coda you composed, could the beats
have sung so sweetly for me?

I remember
how, before I revealed my desire,
you rested by firelight in my arms, how you sang
ballads to the air and the smoke, how it seemed
your voice could make worlds disappear.
I should have known then to hold
back the blade from the flesh that could
nearly have torn itself, left life for the heart
I wanted to call my own. You
know I searched the only world I knew
for you, looked months through that fog
for the only muse that could give my words the weight
they begged for. I thought I could take
a part of you and call it forever—
and it was your heart I was after—I just tried
to take it too quickly, too fast to know
if its beats could keep pace with my own. Now
that the knife has dulled, given way
to quill and scroll, I wish the poem
we were could hold a new epigraph,
could start with a man, a woman,
and a song they both knew the words to.
Celestial
—*for Maria Celeste*

“These stars, long burnt out, in whose light we make our truce."
—Lise Goett

There was a ship, there always is
in tales like these—some ventured vessel adrift
on whatever wave will carry it. A couple,
two students in an all-but-seedy boardwalk bar,
are sharing their own tales over ale. He, a poet,
knows too well these seafaring conventions—how
a glimpsed flotsam flipper suggests serpents, knows the stones
the sirens sing him towards—but still he listens, follows
the semaphore of lids over eyes ice-glazed and glittered
as a midnight sea. She pauses to drink a moment’s silence
through her cigarette—smoke lingering between breath and word—
before heralding the morning’s news. She leans closer,
takes his hand, tells him, “This needs to be
a poem.” She read once that distance recalls
a face “faded, like a favorite dress washed
too often,” learned from countless epics the way
lovers idle themselves while the other is missing.
On the news a man says the golfer’s jet
flew too high over six states of maize,
too close to the sun that couldn’t melt
the frozen dew of its wings, the crystal condensation
over glass—says, at that height, the air is too thin
to breathe. In the next room, she wishes
she could be the calm Penelope, weaving towards return.
Instead, she speed-dials his cell phone, persistently thumbing
one ear shut against the newsman’s words.
“Only the autopilot is calling,” he says, “constantly
begging response.” At times she thinks she hears him
answer dimly, before the signal fades
lost. Through all of this, a chaos of shimmer and wave swept past even the horizon’s unfathomed glimpse into everything—even here we plead order from above.

In 1872, on the bridge of the *Mary Celeste* the helmsman gazes through the last uncast sky he’ll know to find Orion’s belt. His place, he might tell us in an equally windless voice is found there, in that light-pricked intrusion of order—the Hunter damned to sail the sky for love of Artemis, mother of moon and monster, pursued by a scorpion of stars. Every seaman knows this tale, but as our navigator narrates his own rending, he thinks of his wife waiting at every port he’s promised to ply the seas back to, watches the first black breath of cloud cover Castor, Pollux—Gemini’s twins—until even the sky is silence. “The heavens hold a star for each of us,” he wants to tell her as distant lightning warns the storm, “and mine will shine for you if even here
I die.” As this final morse-murmur flitters into frequency, the radio operator begins to breathe the gas-tainted air with something like acceptance. After the bomb, he thought the sea would be safest, always lingering between destinations. He couldn’t have known the poisoned breath his ship, the Ourang Medan, had waited miles to exhale. This is the revelation of Shakespeare’s dead, he thinks, the desperate awareness of knowing too much. He barely feels his teeth clench, his body surging to stiffness. In a phosphene gleam he sees his wife, the day she threw her ring into the grass after their last fight. Alone he searched for it, lost in waves of bermuda. Now he manages his hand to his pocket, fingers past compass and coin, and finds it there. Having breathed these dreams too deeply, he thinks he sees her standing past the fumes. He reaches the ring towards her as if tempting the softened light to shine, whispering to nothing, “It’s found,
it’s found.” They kiss the way waves might, standing outside the bar. With his free hand the poet moors a loose strand of hair behind her ear, knowing how intimately the past is lost in these first breaths of affection. They search through the glow of streetlights to find the Hunter’s belt, the middle star. He tells her how the light falls fifteen hundred years before it finds us here, how no one can say its source still burns. That night he lies awake beside her, watches the sheets rise and fall calmly with her windless breath. He remembers the Mary Celeste, almost her namesake—promises her silently she’ll never have to search again. He closes his eyes, his arm still holding her as they sail together towards morning.
Falling

Something about the way black pours
like night over your shoulders—
it makes me wish, on nights like this,
that I could beg so much of ink,
could ask such ease of words
to let them wander the page in waves.
But ink can never mimic the migrant fall
of blackbirds trailing tresses through clouds,
or climbing wisps of wind with something
so like persistence, we cannot help
but think it metaphor. Their dance
reminds me, sometimes, of the way
two people can slip casually,
entirely into each other, then continue
down as one—tentative at first, eager—
but soon, grasping calmly for nothing
but each other and the whispered
promise of wind to hold them,
they begin to carry each other
as blackbirds do, knowing the difference
between falling and rising
depends on something so simple.
Tonight I watched my niece gaze waves
from her father’s shoulders, calling their crash
with the spread of year-old arms. She would aim
her newfound feat of crawling towards them,
if she could, trailing the swashmarks of every ebb
over wrack and cusp, eager to be
carried by the next embracing rise of tide—cradled
in the steady womb-sway silence of ocean.

I wanted to tell you this—the way sand lit
like fallen grains of stars…
at least that was my excuse for calling.
The truth is, I was alone by then.
The coast’s constellations were mere hints washed
with my brother’s footprints back
to the black space of water. I held my phone
over waves, bent for you to listen—
thought all of this could carry me away
as easily. Who of us hasn’t stood on such a shore,
eyes anxious, wild as a child’s taking
that first fumbled step towards anything, only to feel
the tug of sand sifting tiny oblivions from under us?
For a moment, I wanted to dive, as I knew
my niece would—unburying my sunken feet to swim
for the horizon I couldn’t separate. Another wave
crashed as I closed my phone. More sand.
Elegy
— to Minnie Anderson (1870-1891)

The angel above your grave holds flowers, dangles one stone bloom in air so delicately it seems a breeze slight as that which waves her sculpted gown could loose it from her grasp. And though her arm has stretched a century beyond your passing, physics confirms this— the potential is there for everything to slip from stasis into nothingspace. The leaves have landed over you, and tomorrow rain will begin decaying them to dirt—a kind of falling. The moon which lights your grave tonight is falling, the way our electrons plunge their orbit, the way we fall through life and for each other. One night after a few drinks, I came to tell you about the girl I met that summer. Standing above the ground that still sinks you, above your bones now settling back to dust, I stared up to your angel’s offered hand, the flower outstretched, and thought I saw a petal quiver. Closing my eyes, I could just begin to catch myself swaying.
Your husband does not lie next to you,
though there is space for one more grave.
You were the second rested here, just
days after your stillborn child, and over decades
your family fell around you. I imagine them below
your angel’s gaze setting simpler stones
over barrows, and after every burial,
how their eyes must have shifted
from earth too newly filled to look upon
your monument and the plot beside
they did not choose. His absence
tells a distance I knew the night she fell
asleep beside me, my arm around her but still,
it seemed, we were not touching. She’d said
she wanted time. Maybe this is why
when I talk to you, so often I find myself
standing above the ground that should be his,
knowing time a distance we cannot close by trying,
and cannot help but want to.
She was scared, at first, to follow,  
but soon her grasp let loose my own  
and she, calmed, trailed alone  
among the graves. She paused  
at some, traced two fingers over epitaphs  
smoothed by time—lightly, as if even  
this tender touch could erode them further. So when she came to you,  
it was your age she noticed first,  
that you were hers when you slipped  
this earth for the ground that asked you back.  
Your angel’s arm swept shadows,  
mooncast, over its sculpted stare; the flower  
I once thought poised in nothing  
but possibility now hung above her as if anointing  
as she reached toward your stone.  
Behind us a blackbird rattled elms in flight.  
Holding her hand, she watched it rise  
past tree and mausoleum before it turned,  
trailed the cemetery’s edge, and disappeared.
The flowers I left you are still
here, petals stiff and dimmed by months
of slow decay. Now, I see your angel
dropping them. The stone she holds breaks free
and, falling, effloresces into hues of red,
gasping what it can from air and light
before landing over you. As they wither
in this dream, I imagine the dust of them
burying back to soil and hope just one
small grain will sink its fragrance down
to find you. Sometimes during these visits
the blackbird leaves the same tree, fades
into the same spot of sky. I remember
how she turned to me, raised her eyes to mine
as if to say she knew into what distance
it disappeared. Each time I watch it,
standing on the empty ground where I have so often;
there, where one night she took my hand
and led me out from among the stones.
Necropolis Nights
—*Stephen Dobyns*

In the gloaming they hear the fading shrill
of the last train to Kircaldy and, like thistles,
rise. They gather at Knox’s monument, and can see
from this Glaswegian peak past the luminous
grade of Mungo’s kirk into, on clearer nights,
the blanket oaks of Kelvingrove. Each departs
as quietly as resurrection. Some are chosen
to stay behind, guarding against skag-boys,
the random vandal. Before leaving,
one of the elect tries to kick the somber cenotaph
but his incorporeal frame prevents. He falls,
unnoticed. The dead forget these things
as they visit old haunts, old friends. The former
pubowner checks his bar, renamed twice
since his passing. The junkie and his elsewhere-buried
contact meet in Paucil’s streets then swagger together
to the close they both OD’d in, needle-armed,
eyes gaping. On Sauchiehall, many await the Uni girls’
exodus from clubs to take-aways,
longing for the soft breath of hair on skin,
the smooth of hipcurve. A husband looks in to see
his children asleep and, in the next room, the friend
who promised to “take care of them.” For a moment,
he believes he can feel his arm where his friend’s is—
remembers the moonlit sheen of his wife’s silk chemise,
how it shifts with the breast-heave of inhalation.
And one, the longest dead, sits alone on the outer wall.
Gazing into his foreign city, he watches the first morning
buses stirring on High Street. He tries to remember
his name, his life. All he knows is night. The overnight
from London whistles in the south, calling him back,
and he cannot bear to hear it or to leave.
Her Embrace

By Aidan MacKenzie (Áedán MacCoinnich)

As she died, we made love one final time. That night on Machrie Moor, the moon hung full too soon in its season, buried us in the shadow of the standing stones. I tasted in her blood the disease she didn’t know courséd there, the murmur of quieting heartbeats swelling against my lips until the final throes shook her beneath me and I, unable to bear her death, bade her drink my own.

Her last breath rattled vows I could not hear but understood—when her eyes gasped open in terror to a darkness clearer than the night she left, asked the same of mine, I could not meet her gaze. Her damnation filled them already like the mists that dimmed her vanishing. I could not follow—the last of my passion spent inside her, the last of her blood still rapture in my veins.

I raised a cairn where we’d lain, offered prayers that burned my tongue with their utterance until the first new blues of dawn. I hoped to find her sheltered in King’s Cave, resting below an ancient web. In my dream

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1 MacKenzie (1563— ), was born in Ayrshire, Scotland, to a working family. In his early 20’s he moved to Glasgow, but found the city too distracting and moved again to Blackwaterfoot on the Isle of Arran where he worked odd jobs to support his writing. The woman of the poem is identified in his journals as Ciara Muir, a resident of nearby Siskine.
2 Moors just north of Siskine, Isle of Arran
3 In a journal entry dated just after visiting Lord Byron at the Villa Diodati in 1816, MacKenzie writes “After seeing Byron and his friends cavort the night in lunacy, I am no longer perplexed at why, that grim night long ago, the moon that guided my hunt so long in accuracy so easily led me astray.”
4 Cave near Drumadoon Point on the Isle of Arran where Robert the Bruce hid after Wallace’s loss at Falkirk. Legend says the King was encouraged to try a seventh time to defeat the English after seeing a spider try to stretch a web across the cave six times before finally accomplishing it the seventh.
I laid beside her, kissed her neck’s fresh wounds. She stirred at my touch, whispered, “I cannot live these nights with you, but here our ashes could unite forever if only you would follow me into the burning light.”
Why I Don’t Write Prose
--with nods to Amos the Stormchaser

I know you favor the deluge—prefer
words left like hailstone sheets stormed
on the page. But my Kansas childhood reminds
how easily such areas are termed disaster.
Why this when a word’s natural ambiguities
can say as much? I guess I prefer my words
cloudy, not overcast. Not that
I’m faulting your work. It’s just, I like
line breaks, to be in control of how much
I’m marginalized. And tradition—that snow
glazing the icecaps of history, accumulated since Aristotle.
Poet: maker, creator—like the watchmaker winding
the winds of literature.
Vs.
Fiction: an untruth, a deception. Novel: like x-ray
glasses and “over the hill” t-shirts. And Prose—
sounds like how one might lie down as the watchmaker
stands before them. Derived, perhaps, from prosody?
(you weathermen might prefer “meter-ology”). But then,
there’s no application. Maybe “prosaic,” given the genre’s
more ordinary language, it’s lack of flash. Come on, Amos,
you can’t tell me sometimes the lightning doesn’t excite
you almost more than the funnel…
But this discussion must wait for its end. As I write, a red cell
is building on my semester’s radar—Moby Dick.
It’s reasonably entertaining, but I can’t help thinking,
as I round page 460, that all he needed to say was:
“The whale is larger than me, so I must chase it.”
The McNasty in Glasgow

The window to our flat seeped a stiff Necropolis chill, roused a lust for warmth beyond that our shared bottle of Talisker could provide. Those nights, settling like Guinness foam into sleep, it was you I thought of as my hand slipped to ritual below the duvet. But I was never sure enough to act, your words always seemed to reverse themselves. One night you would tease me with pet names—call me your little frozen Burns turd, say you wanted to pleasure me with myself; the next I’d see you professing palindromic passions to a clubgirl on Sauchiehall. So how was I to react when you stumbled into my room late one night, still flushed from the fondlings of some Berwick byrd? What to think as you described the licking of red hair over milky breasts? We drank too much absinthe and nearly came to blows, though not the kind I’d longed for.

But McNasty, my solemn sodomite, it doesn’t have to be this way. Let’s go back to Glasgow. In my dreams I see you standing knee deep in the Clyde, playing squeezebox shanties only you and I could know the words to. Sing my midget lullabies until it grows to please you. Let’s go back to the graveyard where it all started, look again for the femur I picked from the ground and do with it all the things you whispered. Put on your funny little gimp mask, the one dangling baby-socks. This time, I promise, I’ll wear my kilt correctly.
After Absinthe

“*Keep always this dim corner for me, that I may sit while the Green Hour glides...*”

—Aleister Crowley

Another night has passed without a word
for her—my bitter muse, wild as ink
amazed with madness, loosed and lured

by doubt too sweet to keep her ghost immured.
I ready this evening’s baptism and dream
of another to pass the night with, a word

to urge her stay. When she comes, figure blurred,
diaphanous in her pale shift, she’ll sing—
muse-made, a likeness louched in lurid

blossoms as oils suffuse—ask me sip her
numb succor until, alone, the hour greens
another night. I pass out with a word

on my lips—a name repeated, heard
in susurrant waves dissolving. My opaline
muse, mad and luminous, lures

illusions from deeper veins than blood
knows. I prepare another glass, beg her to reveal,
for one more night, the passing gifts of word
and muse—how madness blooms, allured.
Occultation

The sound your shadow
hangs on the doorframe

as you pass coolly
into the evening’s air

is not the soft assumptive
sigh I’ve penned to clearer

nights, but a breath barely
spent and hesitant

as the stars you name.
For a moment, let it all smooth away, 
the way a first sip of single malt will lure 
you to the smoky ethereal. Forget 
childhood, everything attached to this. Nothing 
but nostalgic bar-tunes and winter, nothing 
but the breathscratch of the pen on coarse paper.

You see, the winds came today, and outside, 
the Texas leaves fail at changing, veins 
curling like a corpse’s fingers, without 
color. The boldest ghosts you’ll stain 
your own shades, paint them on skeletal 
branches as an effort against winter’s silence.

And because the stars, tonight, are stars 
you miss, you’ll stare that clichéd 
constellation down until you’re drawing swords 
against its story, find there another 
lost sailor to share the night’s pints with 
and breathe the cold smoke of imagined harbors.

Light will fall, and wind will scatter the scraps 
of Autumn, and you’ll walk. On the park bench, 
two ghosts close the bar and talk of meeting 
again. Traffic dusts the air with history, 
a streetlight flickers, and you pass as if nothing 
were so sacred as what you thought you saw.
There are moments when you pause
for a sip and turn into the light that holds
you, and everything I could say falls
away and is there—and so I say, I might
love you. The world turns so slowly
these days, and each night I trade my soul
for ghosts, but if granted enough time,
every shade will turn their restless head
and find a point to linger upon, our stories
so like theirs, and they’ll break their heartfelt
and longed for wanderings for a hint
of new wind, some blown leaf they’ll follow
randomly until, as the streetlight turns, another
longing one will choose to follow. There are stars
that have painted this for ages, but still we urge
to stifle the lesson. All I know is that
the moon is full, and that you listen
as I stare, and no matter how fully
I set you there against whatever occultation,
yours is the glowing from behind
that gives the ghosts their license
to turn from Purgatory, to take ethereal hands
under lamplight and charge eternity with laughter.
Glass

I know how to name the nights I wake mid-dream
to see, in that green, alarm-clock glow, the phantom ring
of the water-glass I poured for her then didn’t move
for months. There are ways bodies can intertwine

without touching, and when she heard
my profession as proposition, the sheets between
my arm and her waist were miles even the felt rise
and fall of her breathing couldn’t compass back.

It can happen, and will. Years later she calls
during a half-drunk drive between bars, a band
on the radio whose occasional lines seemed to soundtrack
the long months of her disappearance; years later,

I’d considered every way to say “I miss you” except
the one where I’d feel nothing. But then, driving home—
the graveyard I walked her through, the bar
where we drank our Mondays, and so the glass

is there when I close my spinning eyes in bed, its green
nimbus lighting half the room and the memory
of pale skin like a ghost too warm to turn from.
"Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss
though winning near the goal—yet do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou has not thy bliss....”
—Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”

On the streets below, every parasol shades
the slim listing of her hips, recalls her morning walks watched from his next-door room back home. And if then contagion felt like continents rising between them, now Rome was months and miles of silence beyond even that ravishing separation. He returns to his desk—to another in a hearth of unsent letters—begins with lines from his Urn. He knows them now, finally understands the lovers’ gaze

through lathework left for centuries, their caught promise. The years have faded her, and though she still smiles the warm aplomb of anticipation, slowly, time will flake her cheek-blush and brightened eyes until her stare asks who he might have been, why so pale and drawn, this stranger staring back. What remains of him is longing, forever young and panting for that soft assurance her lips could offer if given more time. Keats paces,

and all we need to know is he’s dying. With each cough he daubs more blood, fingers the smooth carnelian kept to remember her. He knows theirs is clay on a slowing wheel, this painted stone just another tale. Still, he turns it in his damp palm and feels her hand pressing. They’re walking, perhaps. Somewhere beneath the trees he’ll stop her, whisper something quiet, leaning nearer until all is promise. He licks his pen—tastes the sweetness there of what could only be her, savors for a moment the mingling of blood and ink.
Alibi Store

By now you know the gaff, been with it long enough to wedge the odd, winning duck out of circle, shorten a few choice strings to keep the flash. But kid, you’re still First of May, just above the Ride Boys clutching shake machines for cushion change, for the swoon of any preacher’s daughter more in love with sweat and grease than passing a needle’s eye. This ain’t no Hanky-Pank, kid. You’re past those brat-games. You’re an Agent now. First lesson Ol’ Spencer taught me, you gotta leave your heart in the trailer, or the Alibis start playing you. Hard, at first, not paying attention to the sobs of some chump’s girl watching you run a month’s wage, everything ugly in him rising against her faith that this man was different, everything on that one pin he can’t seem to hit, and you, you just keep selling him hope. “Bad luck, sir. Try leaning in more. Here, I’ll show you how it’s done…” Everything for a stuffed bear cost you a dime and she never wanted. Did her a favor, really—best she sees through him now than through swollen eyes later.

And anyway they ask for it. These marks are all the same—every day the same fields farmed, the same cow’s teat squeezed, the same Sunday sermons. We bring them a new world, something to stir them up, to believe in, imagine, remember…. They like being fooled. Why else would they stick around to lose so much? So we gaff the game, miscount, short
change, so what? We give them hope, make them feel lucky. Spence’s last advice? Give them something to walk away with even if it seems like nothing, and especially if it is.
Exotic

I’ll show you how I like it, so pay
attention to how I weave phantom arms
along my costume, all my hidden places
and the gasps they rouse. For now, I’ll pretend

you’re not there, so go ahead and ogle
while I loosen this boa, slip it down
my shoulders, my back, tickling like midnight.
I laugh, sometimes, thinking of your open

eyes and hanging jaw when I turn, one thumb
curling this slack strap, the other plunging
under waistline fringe to finger the fragile
button that undoes me. One touch

and my skirt swirls off like a matador’s cloak.
Come now, give me those eyes, the ones you flashed
your first time. Remember her name? Did you
fumble with her clasp when you unleashed her?

I used to be a farm girl, too. I danced
behind barns, in the back of flatbeds parked
by fire-lit ponds, working my legs and hips
until, with one sharp thrust, the sky would shake

and fall over me, the stars like tassels.
Every girl you see on the midway, your next—
strip them down and you’ll find they hide nothing
but flesh: pink nipples, mussed up hair, not this

glittering aureole awing you,
my immaculate badge. I want to show
you everything, what you won’t see at home,
how the angels dance when God turns away.
Long Shadows

“Men think of me
As solid girders—a massive
Ponderous thing of steel—”
—“The Bridge,” Jack Earle, the Texas Giant

I am no Goliath, no beanstalk
thing, though the banners paint me
so. I do not eat whole hogs
for brunch, dip my bread in the blood

of trespassers, or summon thunder
with my steps. The only grinding
bones are my own, gravity
strained and bowing over time.

But at night, as the genny hums down
and all the joints have dropped their awnings,
then, I walk the lot under country stars—
the only big-top I’ve ever loved—and feel

as small as anybody. A midget
friend once said there are more freaks
among the rubes than ever walked
a carny stage, that they watch, heads tilted,

because they can’t bear their own secrets.
I am a monster, but only because a man
dressed in slick talk and a matching vest
once asked if I could fill the shoes.

So when I dress in skins, eyepatched
and grunting at some dwarf Odysseus,
know I even love you—my staring
crowds who next to me all seem

as children, my conjurors
of small shadows and laughter.