Dark Lyrics
Studying the Subterranean Impulses of Contemporary Poetry
&
Hoard
Jaime Carla Robles

For Doctor of Philosophy
In English
2013
Dark Lyrics
Studying the Subterranean Impulses of
Contemporary Poetry

Hoard

Submitted by Jaime Carla Robles, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English,
June 2013.

This thesis is available for Library use on the understanding that it is copyright
material and that no quotation from the thesis may be published without
proper acknowledgement.

I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been
identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for
the award of a degree by this or any other University.
Abstract

This thesis is composed of two parts: *Hoard*, a collection of poems, and *Dark Lyrics: Studying the Subterranean Impulses of Contemporary Poetry*, an inquiry into the metaphor of darkness in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Anglophone poetry.

*Hoard* includes four series of poems – ‘Red Boat’, ‘Hoxne’, ‘Quatrefoils’ and ‘White Swan’ – which use the Hoxne hoard as a metaphor for lost love. The second series is titled ‘Foundlings’, and is based on archival tokens from children who were abandoned to London’s Foundling Hospital in the mid-eighteenth century. The third series includes ‘Elegy’ and ‘Decorations’, and uses descriptions of the Staffordshire hoard along with eyewitness accounts of global conflict in the late-twentieth century to the present day.

*Dark Lyrics: Studying the Subterranean Impulses of Contemporary Poetry* examines the theme of loss presented in the poems *Hoard*, progressing from orphans to silenced women to bereavement to war to ecological disaster. The book is a series of mediations of a central topic and includes close readings that show how an individual contemporary writer uses the topic within his or her work. Meditation One posits that forms of loss appear in poetry as metaphors of darkness, and proceeds historically through the work of Dante, Shakespeare and Elizabeth Bishop and Charles Wright; the chapter ends with a close reading of John Burnside’s prose poem ‘Annunciations’ (*Common Knowledge*). Meditation Two looks at the mythological uses of the concept of darkness, especially as it represents ego loss, and discusses Joan Retallack’s ‘Afterimages’; the chapter closes with a discussion of Rusty Morrison’s *Whethering* and *when the true keeps calm biding its story*. Meditation Three looks at the emotions of lost love, both familial and romantic, and includes a discussion of Martha Nussbaum’s theory of emotions and ethics. The chapter includes close readings of Elizabeth Robinson’s *The orphan and its relations* and Susan Howe’s *That This*. Meditation Four discusses the pain caused by war and the form of my long poem ‘Decorations’; it includes an examination of Seamus Heaney’s *North*. The chapter concludes with an essay on Maxine Chernoff’s book *Without*. Meditation Five discusses objects and how they become a part of the body and therefore become a potential locus for both pain and loss; the chapter closes with a close reading of Brenda Coulta’s *The Handmade Museum*. The themes and ideas are reiterated in the Conclusion.
## Contents

Acknowledgements 7

Dark Lyrics:
- Studying the Subterranean Impulses of Contemporary Poetry 9
- Hoard 131

Bibliography 245
Acknowledgements

The poems in the section ‘Hoxne’ were inspired by the Hoxne treasure, which is housed in the British Museum. In the chaos of the late Roman and Anglo-Saxon periods in Britain, valuables were buried as a means of keeping them safe. The Hoxne treasure is a hoard of gold and silver domestic items—jewellery, plates, spoons, spice boxes and coins—a cache likely assembled by women. The poems in ‘Decorations’ refer to items in the Staffordshire hoard currently housed at the Birmingham and Stoke-on-Trent museums. I thank the Arts Council and the staff of the Birmingham Museum for allowing me to see and handle key items of the collection. The Staffordshire poems also contain images and texts from eyewitness accounts of conflicts from Kosovo, Bosnia, Darfur, Afghanistan, Libya, Homs and the United States. The witnesses, which include journalists, were all non-combatants. The quotation on page 85 is from HD’s Trilogy.

I would like to thank the following individuals whose help was invaluable in the writing of this thesis. My supervisors at the University of Exeter: Drs. Joanna Gill and Andy Brown. I especially thank Joanna Gill for her suggestion that burial could also be read as placing something into a place of security, like that of the womb. My examiners: Dr. Robert Hampson of Royal Holloway and Dr. Emily Bernard-Jackson of Exeter.

Thanks also to Susanne Dyckman, Dr. John Hall and Hazel White, who spent extensive time reading the poetry and commenting. Their comments shaped the poetry that was published under the title of Hoard, by Shearsman Books in January 2013. The Shearsman version of Hoard was published without the sections ‘Elegy’ and ‘Decorations’. I thank Tony Frazer for publishing Hoard, and for his patience while I wrangled with the cover files. Dr. Alan Munton made many helpful suggestions in the preliminary drafts of Chapters 1 and 2 in the critical theory section, Dark Lyrics. Nick Jones, Clare Green and Mike Rose-Steel worked ancient magic on that text, checking that my American English had been adequately transformed into British English.

My sincere thanks to the editors of these magazines where versions of several essays in the critical theory section appeared, including:

Mission at 10th: Chapter 1: ‘On the Dark Lyric’
Agenda: ‘In the Shadow of the Ineffable: John Burnside’s “Annunciation”’
Jacket: ‘Navigating the Interior: Rusty Morrison’
Jacket 2: ‘The Orphan and Its Relations: Elizabeth Robinson’

Ommidawn: ‘On the Transmigration of Objects: Barbara Coutlas’. The essay is part of anthology, Quo Anim, currently being organised and edited by Elizabeth Robinson and Jennifer Phelps, which examines contemporary American women writers in relation to mysticism and spirituality.

Jacket 2: ‘How We Define the World Outside: A Review of Maxine Chernoff’s Without’

The essay ‘In the Shadow of the Ineffable: John Burnside’s “Annunciation”’ was first presented at ‘Myths and Fairy Tales in Film and Literature post-1900’ at the University of York, March 2011. The essay ‘The Pain of Conflict’ was first presented as a research seminar presentation at the University of Exeter, February 2013.

Poems in the creative part of the thesis first appeared in the following journals:

*Agenda*: Foundlings 2275, 220, 453, 13287 (published under the title ‘Threads’)

*New American Writing*: ‘The Hunt’ and selections from ‘Decorations’

*Partbenon West*: ‘Diatrita’

*Shadow* *Train*: ‘Red Boat’


*Stride Magazine*: ‘White Swan’

*The View from Here*: ‘Gold Body Chain for a Small Woman’

*Volt!*: ‘Four Matching Gold Bangles’, Parts 3 and 4

*Foundlings* and *Four Matching Gold Bangles* were first published as Woodland Editions Exeter pamphlets. *Foundlings* 12052 and 13287 were published in *Tokens for the Foundlings*, Tony Curtis, ed., Bridgend, UK: Seren Books, March 2012. ‘Decorations’ was a finalist in the 2013 Ahsahta Press Chapbook Competition.

And on a personal level, I thank my comrades of exEgesis: Canadian wild woman and poet Suzanne Steele, the debonair and witty British thinker Mike Rose-Steel and his lovely partner with the scintillating lyric soprano voice, Tamsyn Rose-Steel. They livelied-up my stay at the university.

With boundless gratitude and respect, I thank Linda Brownrigg, without whom this journey into darkest England would not have been possible.
Dark Lyrics

Studying the Subterranean Impulses of Contemporary Poetry
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table of Figures</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: Methodology and Themes</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meditation One: On the Dark Lyric</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• • Elucidation One:</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the Shadow of the Ineffable: John Burnside’s ‘Annunciations’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meditation Two: Burial and the Crossing of Boundaries</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• • Elucidation Two:</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navigating the Interior: Rusty Morrison</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meditation Three: Subterranean Love</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part One: On the Family</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• • Elucidation Three:</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Orphan and Its Relations: Elizabeth Robinson</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part Two: On Romantic Love</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• • Elucidation Four:</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layering the Past with the Present: Susan Howe’s Elegy, <em>That This</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meditation Four: The Pain of Conflict</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• • Elucidation Five:</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Personal and Political in Maxine Chernoff’s ‘Without Without’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meditation Five: Objects, Lost and Sought</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• • Elucidation Six:</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the Transmigration of Things: Barbara Coultas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figures

Figure 1: Gold Body Chain, Hoxne Treasure 52

Figure 2: Page 145 from Hoard 54

Figure 3: Page 157 from Hoard 55

Figure 4: Page 10 from ‘Afterrimages’ 57

Figure 5: Zoomorphic Figure, Staffordshire Hoard 101

Figure 6: Page 217 from ‘Decorations’ 104
Introduction

Themes and Methodology

The essay, with its capacity to accommodate interruptions and digressions, may be the chief prose-based experimental instrument of humanistic thought. At its best it detaches itself from the epistemology implied by narrative grammars, a tone of certainty that pervades even the most provisional material. (It may be happening right here.) By contrast the distractible logics of the essay are, or should be, attempts at nothing other than productive conjecture.

– Joan Retallack,

_The Poethical Wager_ 4

It was my intention at first [...] that the thoughts should proceed from one subject to another in a natural order and without breaks. After several unsuccessful attempts to weld my results together into such a whole, I realised that I should never succeed [...] And this was, of course, connected with the very nature of the investigation. For this compels us to travel over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction [...] I should not like my writing to spare other people the trouble of thinking.

– Ludwig Wittgenstein,

_Philosophical Investigations_ ix
My interest in the topic of Dark Lyrics began with a statement a poet friend of mine made over twenty years ago, when she commented that she had learned to distrust the emotions that compelled her to write. She went on to explain that it had always been feelings of melancholy, loss and sorrow that had been the emotional wellsprings for her poetry. Ultimately, she found that these emotions, while compelling, had not necessarily led her to say what she thought was worthy or even very interesting.

As a young woman and developing writer I felt I understood exactly what she was talking about. I had never heard anyone (and that is some measure of my inexperience at the time) question the emotional events that led her to write, but what she said ‘sounded right’, and I resolved in that moment to stop reacting to my emotions with writing but instead to write from other sources. I had also become interested in experimental writing – an approach to poetry that emphasised formal innovation, eschewed narrative and viewed confessional writing as narcissistic and suspect. This approach to writing well served my intent to escape using emotions that I felt were ‘dark’, or negative, as ‘inspiration’.

Recently, I’ve felt compelled to re-examine the nature of negative emotions and how they function as a catalyst to the practice of writing. I use the broad term ‘dark’ to cover a range of emotions that are thought of or experienced as negative – for example, depression, anger, envy and loss. The term ‘dark’ allows me to explore these emotions without limiting them in number or affectual complexity. My one clear and unwavering criterion for ‘dark’ emotions is that they are created by or experienced as pain, either physical or psychological or some mix of the two. I realise this encompasses a blandly wide range of emotions. For the sake of containing the subject within the required length, this thesis looks at only a few dark emotions, those that might be thought of as inhabiting the ‘bluer’ side of the emotional spectrum, such as loss and sorrow. Some authors discussed in Dark Lyrics may inhabit other emotions as well: John Burnside, for example, also writes about anger and rage. I have narrowed my discussion of his work to his use of loss and absence as major themes within his writing.

Dark Lyrics, which is an inquiry rather than an argument, tries to pinpoint what darkness is metaphorically and how it is useful within poetics. This critical part of my thesis also looks at the ethical qualities of emotions, an idea developed in fine detail in Martha C. Nussbaum’s Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions.
In the course of my studies, I found that in traditional intellectual argumentation the word darkness signifies a concept that is dual in essence:

DUALISM: Pythagoras said that all things were divisible into two genera, good and evil; in the genus of good things he classified all perfect things such as light, males, repose, and so forth, whereas in the genus of evil he classified darkness, females, and so forth.

– Thomas Aquinas, ‘On the Power of God’ 84
(quoted from Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* 117)

This form of dualism, which exists in both European-based and Asian cultures, seems likely rooted in the physical experience of night and day, although it is difficult to say why darkness aligns with negative emotions, except that it partakes of night’s obscurity and the fear that strikes in the human heart. The link between dark and evil may, in the West at least, be simply a historical and patriarchal convention. Darkness is also suspect because it shuns intellect’s defining impulses.

In her fascinating and entertaining study of Gothic writing, *Art of Darkness*, Anne Williams spends some time examining categorization based on the dualism referred to by both Pythagoras and Aquinas. Williams suggests replacing what is usually labeled as Aristotelian dualism with the logical process developed in George Lakoff’s *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Human Mind* as a method of analyzing literature:

Most deceptive is the supposition that individual items necessarily ‘belong’ in categories because they share some essence – or alternatively even a ‘family resemblance’ – as Plato or Wittgenstein, respectively, argued. But this principle, Lakoff argues, is not borne out by investigation of cognitive processes. Instead, categories are developed through the use of several predictable principles. These include the notion of ‘centrality’: that some members of a category are ‘basic,’ more authentically belonging to the group than others; that complex categories are organised by ‘chaining’ – ‘central members are linked to other members, which are linked to other members, and so on’ (p. 95). Moreover, these complex categories may be affected by basic domains of experience, which are often culture specific; and ‘idealised models’ of the world, such as myths may also characterise links in the chain. These principles, taken together, will predict the structure of a category but not its specific content. (18)

This theoretical stance – that categories are not hard and fast, that they are fluid and shifting – is basic to the approach of the critical part of my thesis.
The writing strategy and methodology behind the critical commentary, began as an echo of Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, in which Benjamin brought together thousands of quotations, original texts and notations, which he then cross-referenced, to construct a web of information that was less conclusive than interpretable. About his methodology Benjamin says the following:

Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them. (460)

Similarly, I have woven together several different styles of perception and writing in *Dark Lyrics*. They include philosophical and literary reflections; quotations from poetry and prose; explanations of the poetry within *Hoard* and its accompanying series, ‘Decorations’; reviews of work by authors whose work I find relevant to the ideas I am exploring; and anecdotal memories from my life. This multitéxtual approach resembles most scholarly writing but, unlike most scholarly writing, the text’s multivocal technique emphasises personal memory. This personal approach to the topic was used throughout Martha Nussbaum’s philosophical study of emotions and literature, and it is also found in some poetic commentary, such as Lyn Hejinian’s *The Language of Inquiry* and Robert Hass’ *Twentieth Century Pleasures: Prose on Poetry*. It is not unusual to think of personal memory as a kind of arcade – a path or passageway – through which one repeatedly passes through the past and towards the future. Following Benjamin and unlike Nussbaum, I have made the thesis a series of literary events coursing around a topic rather than a linear argument: not all of the paths move the same direction, and others lead elsewhere. Unlike Benjamin but following Nussbaum, I have connected some of the paths of the thesis together in order to assist the reader in following my short exploration of dark emotions in the land of poetics.

Exploration is the correct and pivotal word here. This thesis is an inquiry, it is not about developing a theory that can be proven like a scientific or mathematical hypothesis. Over the years, I’ve read many theoretical works – Marxist, feminist, Freudian, Jungian, structuralist and post-structuralist. While all of them are useful and truthful in their way, none of them has ever seemed to me to be the literary equivalent of contemporary physics’ Theory of Everything, which as yet has not (and perhaps significantly) been delineated to anyone’s satisfaction. On the other hand, there seems to be an *implicit* attempt to invest
each theory with a kind of universality, especially through the practice that others have of using them for analysis in fields outside the parts of cultural phenomena that they are specific to. It is no wonder that Benjamin never ‘completed’ the Arcades project with its ambition to present a cultural gestalt: the number of elements was too vast; it is always too vast. Similarly, the examination of any individual’s poetics embarks on the task of describing a potentially limitless world that is circumscribed only by death or loss of memory. That being said, if I have a theoretical preference, then it leans towards the cognitive sciences, towards the linguistics of George Lakoff, the neurological studies of language development by Michael A. Arbib and Nussbaum’s philosophy, which favours cognitive research. These approaches study processes of thought rather than determine categorical definitions.

•

The thesis is structured in two alternating parts. The chapters, which I’ve named ‘Meditations’, are general thoughts on the topic and also discuss aspects of my poetics and analyze specific poems in the creative part of the thesis titled Hoard. There are content threads that flow between the ‘Meditations’ from the beginning to the end of the book. Within these ‘Meditations’ are analyses of six writer’s work – including John Burnside, Rusty Morrison, Elizabeth Robinson, Susan Howe, Brenda Coultas and Maxine Chernoff. These analyses, which I’ve called ‘Elucidations’, take one or two written works by an individual writer and examine them in close readings. A short paragraph or two introduces and contextualizes each writer, several of whom may not be well known on this side of the Atlantic. These introductions also explain how the writer’s work is linked to the ideas discussed in the preceding ‘Meditation’. The ‘Meditations’ are set typographically in a paragraph structure that is flush left with a line space between paragraphs; the ‘Elucidations’ follow standard indented and justified paragraph formatting.

I have tried to present as many poems by other writers as possible as epigraphs, which float before each chapters and are not explained or analyzed at all. My reason for leaving them unexplained is so that the reader can enjoy them for what they are: beautiful texts that shimmer on the page and are evocative and often inexplicable. They are my best examples of the indecipherable allure of poetry. I invite the reader not to interpret them but simply to experience them.
The thesis contributes to the field in several ways. First of all, although it looks at the writing of several well-known and well-discussed poets, such as Seamus Heaney and Susan Howe, the work of most of the poets whose work I present has not been closely examined except through the occasional published review. This has caused some difficulty in finding critical commentary, and so I have had to approach these writers ‘slant’, as Heaney might say: using theory that approaches concerns of the poetry but which does not address the specific writer. However, I feel the work of these writers deserves greater attention within scholarly circles and writing about them introduces them to the field. Placing these writers in conjunction with each other is also a useful way of looking at the practice of poetry in general as it continues to evolve through the late twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Unfortunately, given the circumscriptions of thesis requirements, I could only describe the work of a handful of poets. I am looking at a very small percentage of writers in the anglophone world, and the decision to choose both American and British writers has complicated the choice about which of a worryingly few number of writers I should look at. I wanted to include both American and British writers, though there are more Americans simply because this is my background. As is often asserted, there is not only a difference in language between the two cultures but also a difference of attitude towards language. This goes much farther and deeper than the I-write-neighbor-and-you-write-neighbour arguments. My intention here is not to delve into linguistic differences, however. Rather, it is to accept the work of both cultures as equally interesting (and interested) in the writing of poetry in what is at root a common language.

Finally, I have tried to choose writers who are exemplary of the lyric in the two dominant poetic practices, experimental and mainstream. I use the term ‘experimental’ rather than ‘avant-garde’ (thought the latter is the preferred term in the UK) because the poetry designated as such is part of a practice whose poets use ideas and devices developed over the past hundred years or more. This poetry has its own traditions and as such cannot really be considered avant-garde, or at the forefront of great social change. It is experimental, however, because it allows the poet to develop idiosyncratic forms that he or she feels are related to specific intellectual and emotional modes that are being explored and expressed,
and thereby to see how form ‘works’ as a means of expression. Critic and literary historian Marjorie Perloff has often been quoted as saying that she doesn’t like the term ‘experimental’ because it implies the possibility of failure. However, I’m not sure failure comes into it. Any experiment, whether its results are expected or not, yields information. The gathering of information is at the heart of experimentation, and I believe the gathering of information about language is the ongoing project of poetry. Experimental is my preferred term for any current poetic practice that deviates from traditional forms, which include metric and rhyme forms and free verse, and which attempts to develop new forms based on the writer’s needs.

In an indirect way, this thesis asserts that understanding both mainstream/ traditional and experimental/ avant-garde poetry is a matter of reading practice. My own work favours the experimental. I studied with both Kathleen Fraser and Maxine Chernoff, two of the preeminent experimental writers in the United States, and for seven years I ran Five Fingers Review, a nationally recognised American literary journal that emphasised innovative and experimental writing. I realise that the above statements beg the question of my poetic affinities: it suggests that whether one is an experimental or a mainstream poet is largely a matter of education and connection. I believe this is true in a substantial way.

As an editor, I was fortunate to have worked with the renowned museum director Dr. Pontus Hulten on the formation of The Surrealists Look at Art, a collection of key essays by the principal surrealists, including Philippe Soupault, Tristan Tzara and André Breton, and translated by American poets Michael Palmer and Norma Cole. Surrealism was the first widespread and undeniable art practice to acknowledge negative impulses within the psyche as a rich source of creativity, separate from the unconscious preoccupations of Christianity with death and sin. Of all the many explanations that have been enumerated by art critics for the originality of the surrealist imagination, none has been to my mind as interesting as Hulten’s assertion – one he conveyed to me over the lunch table and in the editorial office, as well as in the Introduction of The Surrealists Look at Art – that the reason their art developed and took on such vivid contours was because they met and spent hours in each other’s company every day, discussing and arguing, bringing to the table a wide range of idiosyncracies and information. We tend to think of writing as a solitary practice, but surrealism, Hulten was quick to insist, was a writers’ art before it was a visual one and one dependent on its communal affiliations. The sort of daily communality the surrealists
enjoyed is no longer available to us in the anglophone world, except through the internet, which provides a thin version of human interaction. But I believe that ‘connection’ remains a primary source for habits of literary and artistic preference.

I also believe that the proclivity towards one form of writing or another is a matter of where in the complicated structure of verbal expression the reader and the writer like to puzzle out meaning. How we think and how we respond emotionally to events and words are tied up with issues of nuture and nature. I have no preference as to which of these is dominant; that determination lies beyond my knowledge and, so far, beyond everyone else’s knowledge. We do form intellectual biases, which are formed in the more remote areas of our personal history and bound into genetics, and because of them we drift into understanding and connection. Or not. I hope in my writing to bring experimental writing further into the arena of mainstream writing because I believe it to have value to that readership. I hope, by looking at both mainstream and experimental writing, to show affinities between the two.

All that being said: Onward, into the dark ....
Meditation One

On the Dark Lyric

From India to the shores of the Atlantic, though in the most varied forms, there is expressed the same mystery of Day and Night and the same mystery of the fatal struggle going on between them inside men’s breasts. There is a god of uncreated and timeless Light, and there is a god of Darkness, the author of evil, who holds sway over all visible Creation.

– Denis de Rougement, 
\textit{Love in the Western World} 63

And I returned to ‘Dark’s’ exegesis. Which if ever finished I shall deliver No. 3 in the series of ‘Evenings Of and About Literature.’ Transforming the wild evenings of Alaska into something less raw, translating the kayak noise into black clefs, white floes into Dark. Don’t tremble Miriam when I put the bandage over your eyes; we shall only slide into the underground. And we can read standing up the gold emblems of Dark. A nest of swallows clinging to the sooty bridge.

– Barbara Guest, \textit{Seeking Air} 25
When my stepson Emmanuel was about nine, ten years old, I bought two Aracana chicks, destined to become layers and pets. The breed is more personable than most: they like to be picked up, they’ll follow you around, they will even come when you call. As the chicks fledged it became clear that one would be golden feathered and the other would be a dark reddish brown, resembling the wild game birds they were. Naming them was given over initially to Emmanuel, who promptly decided that the darkly plumaged hen should be named Shadow. Ominous and elemental names had precedents in the household: the rat, long gone, had been named Thunder, and the irascible cat, Lightning.

The golden-feathered hen was more of a problem. Emmanuel wanted to name her Jaguar. The name didn’t resonate with either his father or me, and under our influence the hen was named Daisy. This was a frustrating decision for Emmanuel, who wanted his pets to have more imposing names.

I entered Emmanuel’s life when he was eight, and I watched him as he grew, fascinated by his need to engage with the murkier, more sinister aspects of life – killers, monsters, violence. He was also taken by the inhuman – robots and cyborgs, machinery that, while resembling humans, is free from the grip of emotions. And often free of any accompanying dilemmas of morals and ethics.

His need to watch and absorb these darker impulses bordered on obsession. That was also true of his playmates, who were equally preoccupied by ideas of violence. I don’t remember the concerns of my own childhood, short of familial tensions, and even though I have carried, internally, a sombre mood for most of my life, I veer away from seeking depictions of darkness in the outer world. I cannot watch horror films, which fill me with anxiety. Once an avid watcher of samurai films, I now find their violence unbearable, though they are more tolerable in black and white, a medium which is closer to the world of dreams and therefore more distant from reality. Nonetheless, I believe darkness remains a characteristic of my writing and characteristic of many of the poets that I know and read.

This poetic proclivity is summarised, perhaps, in one aspect, by Charles Wright in the poem ‘In Praise of Thomas Hardy’. In these lines Wright attaches darkness to the ‘soul’ – a shaky concept in these secular days. Darkness, he suggests, is the metaphoric and
psychological place that poets seek in order to ‘realign’ themselves from the battering energy of everyday experience:

Each second the earth is struck hard by four and a half pounds of sunlight.

Each second.

Try to imagine that.

No wonder deep shade is what the soul longs for.

And not, as we always thought, the light.

No wonder the inner life is dark.

Sounding, and sicced on like a dog, they all go down and devolve,

Vowel-dancing, heart-sick,

Hoping for realignment and a space that won’t shine.

(A Short History of the Shadow 27)

In Wright’s perception, darkness is misapprehended and mistakenly defined: its alignment with what Anne Williams calls ‘some of the most ancient categories of otherness in Western culture’ is in error. In her study of Gothic writing, The Art of Darkness, Williams points out these millennia-old categories:

Consider, for example the following paradigm attributed to the Pythagoreans by Aristotle, who quoted it in his Metaphysics. According to this scheme reality consists of the following ten pairs of opposites:

- male  female
- limited  unlimited
- odd  even
- one  many
- right  left
- square  oblong
- at rest  moving
- straight  curved
- light  darkness
- good  evil

These two columns, once commonly called ‘the line of good’ and ‘the line of evil’ were familiar in intellectual discourse well into the Renaissance. (18–19)

Williams goes on to elaborate how these categories have affected literature (and psychological studies) up into the twentieth century. Wright avers, asserting two other attributes of darkness: that it shifts emotions from negative to positive and that it compels one to action. Darkness, he suggests, is finally the source of the poet’s creativity.
I'm remembering a moment in my past: I've told someone that I write poetry and in response she tells me, ‘Oh, I love poetry’. I'm taken aback. In my memory, the speaker of this perplexing statement is a young African-American woman, fresh and glowing. I remember her distinctly, or at least I believe I do; I have so completely attached her statement to a memory of a particular physical person that she has become iconic. Other women and men have told me something similar, only perhaps not as directly. They have been less startling in their clarity, and perhaps because of that, my memory of their faces, the shapes and positions of their bodies has disappeared. I remember only that I have heard this same passionate declaration on several occasions.

Even in this very moment, her statement makes me wince: Has she read the same poetry I have? I wonder. Has she read postmodern poetry, the Language poets, for example? It seems unlikely. My own feelings about poetry are less definite. There is some poetry I love, some that I hate, and much that I dislike or am unmoved by. For me, the problem with this young woman’s professed love is that it’s generic. What I imagine she loves is an idea of how poetry should be, of how it should function in the world. She seems to me like any entranced lover who has projected her desire onto the impassive face of the unknown beloved. If I were to place her sense of poetry in a world of dualistic discourse it would be ‘good’ and therefore ‘at rest’ and ‘light’.

Such lovability, poetry’s lovability, seems entwined with the musicality of the lyric, whose function – because it is fuelled by eroticism – is to uplift, to present a world awash with beauty and optimism, even while lamenting love. Lyric poetry seems to eschew the dark side of life – those aspects that are attached to injury – and are found in cruelty, the impulse to hurt others or the self – or it uses these darker impulses as a plaything, a rhetorical device to enlarge its stance and throw its imagination of love into high relief. Consider Shakespeare’s many cleverly framed sonnets, some playful and others philosophical, even mystical, such as Sonnet 53 with its collision of metaphysical and modern viewpoints in which multiple perceptions of those who surround his beloved become images or ‘shadows’, or death-like shades, and the lover the locus of some intangible but dark substance:

What is your substance, whereof are you made,
That millions of strange shadows on you tend?
Since everyone hath every one, one shade,
And you, but one, can every shadow lend. (93)

The use of sonic lyricism to lighten sorrow or pain is also found in Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘One Art’, her well-known poem on a lost love. For the reader, her wit and careful use of the villanelle form mediate the pain that she feels over that loss. Besides the sounds that soothe, the formal techniques of irony and a complex traditional structure of rhyme require and suggest intellectual detachment, which in turn competes with the emotional chaos intrinsic to deep loss. The lines may be laced with ache but the self-consciousness of the piece as art suggests that the pain is managed, converted into a rhetorical device. There is something almost insouciant in the overall metaphor, the repetitions of the third line of the last stanza and the repetitions throughout the poem. In the last stanza the irony is kept on the side of sorrow only by the parenthetical remarks, which break into the rhythmic expectations of the lines by their implied *sotto voce*:

– Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan’t have lied. It’s evident
the art of losing’s not too hard to master
though it may look like *(Write it!)* like disaster.
*(Poems, Prose, and Letters 166)*

In her book, *American Poetry: The Rhetoric of Its Forms*, Mutlu Blasing comments on ‘One Art’, suggesting that the poem, which depends on repetition, is linked to loss because of its formal need to devise distinctions within words that are the same. Every word contains within it, Blasing remarks, shapes of Otherness:

Writing and losing are one art because the formal repetition of loss, which promises mastery, simultaneously finalizes disaster: ‘*(Write it!)* like disaster.’ Repetition duplicates and divides, both masters and loses, and thus makes for ‘disaster.’ The division-by-duplication of the ‘aster’ is the ill starr that governs poets. (112)

As seductive as Blasing’s idea is, it doesn’t address poetic forms that use repetition and its potential for shifting lexical meaning into humour and play, such as limerick and children’s nursery rhymes. Nor does it address current linguistic theory, such as that described by Michael Arbib in *How the Brain Got Language*, which posits that recursion (168–169), which is the structural repetition used to create complex syntax, is intrinsic to all language grammar – poetry or prose, Indo-European or Hmong-Mien – and that repetition is a feature of the neurological basis of learning and the development of language. What the
success of Bishop’s poem’s emotional tenor depends on, I believe, is not the lyric form or repetition but the reader’s experience of loss in love, which allows for a shared emotional experience – a sympathy for the pain of lost love and the seeming impossibility of assuaging the grief caused by that loss. This is not to say that a reader needs to have experienced the exact same kind of love that Bishop has lost, but rather needs to have known the loss of something loved – an experience than can be written into much more removed incidents, such as a child’s despair over the loss of his pink blanket when his mother temporarily confiscates and condemns that blanket to the laundry room. Our childhoods – and life in general – give us a thorough enough understanding of potentially dire situations, especially when they are placed relatively on the spectrum of experience. That is to say we have the imaginative capability of extrapolating painful moments. Form, also, mediates the reader’s experience. For example, I find Bishop’s poem cold and unfeeling because of her form.

Other’s would disagree on both the effect of form and its influence the reader’s empathy. Neither stance can be denied by the other, really. What I believe is accurate in Blasing’s implied understanding of poetry is not about the effects of form but rather that the poet is most often engaged with and compelled by darker emotions, and that loss is primary among them.

One of the more elaborate mappings – as well as the clearest – of lyric poetry’s movement from darker to lighter emotions is found in Dante’s Commedia, which though epic in its scale is lyrical in its language and devices. To a contemporary reader like myself, Inferno is the more engaging and compelling sequence of the poem, not simply because it is the first book in the Commedia but because it seems more lively and exotic, filled with Dante’s coiling snakes of revenge and burning anger, and sketching out the poet’s panoply of human failings. Hell is fascinating because I don’t believe in it. Our contemporary understanding of the world is that everything is limited, that change and death occur inevitably. During my late twenties I lived in Exarchia, the neighbourhood near the university in Athens, Greece. One evening the head of the police was assassinated, and the military swept through Exarchia picking up known leftists and unknown foreigners. I spent two hours in a gruelling interrogation; though I was never physically touched I could hear the screams of a man being tortured in the room above me. Later, I discussed the event with a Cypriot lawyer, and he told me, ‘The thing to remember if you are ever tortured is that it ends. It
either stops because they grow tired or you die. Either way, it ends.’ The experience of suffering – our life-on-earth experience of hell – is that it ends.

Hell loses power in limitation, and that is another characteristic of darkness: that it is ephemeral. Darkness is meant to be shed, escaped, and therefore is understood as temporary. On the opposite end of the spectrum, most love poems suggest love, once attained, is infinite, is ever-after, even though there may be a lengthy struggle in the attainment, even though the attainment may be never be reached and may remain in the imagination, as it does for Dante. Love’s very presence in the imagination is sufficient.

In _La Vita Nuova_, Dante dreams a personification of Love:

I shut myself in my room where I could continue my lament without being heard. And there, asking pity of the Lady of courtesy, and crying: ‘Love, help your faithful one’, I fell asleep in the midst of my weeping, like a little child that has been beaten. About half-way through my sleep I seemed to see beside me in my room a young man dressed in the whitest garments; from his bearing he seemed to be thinking deeply, gazing at me where I lay. [...] Then I seemed to recognise him, because he called me in the way he had often called me in my sleep. As I looked at him again I saw him weeping piteously and he seemed to be waiting for me to say something; so, taking courage, I began to talk with him as follows: ‘Lord of nobility of soul, why do you weep?’ And he replied: _Ego tanquam centrum circuli, cui simili modo se habent circumferentiae partes: tu autem non sic_ [I am like the centre of a circle, to which the parts of the circumference are related in a similar manner: you, however, are not]. (42)

The poet dreams of Love dressed in the whitest of white, the colour attributed to light, and dreams himself as not that, as white’s opposite in the logical rendering of A or not-A. As not-light he identifies himself as dark, lacking balance and subject to pain and error. Dante’s description of Love in geometric terms with the attribute of pure white – itself reminiscent of geometry’s abstract perfection – repeats itself in the allegory of _Paradiso_. Unlike _Inferno_, with its clear grounding in physical pain, Dante’s _Paradiso_ is detached and abstract, a parade of symbols and allegory that seems hollow, suggestive but intangible, light-soaked and as out of reach as the alphabet.

In order to believe in paradise, though, the poet and the reader must sink past the parameters of the body as defined by the intellect into inchoate desire. Desire is not a resolved state; it is one of suspension, experienced as much in the psyche as the body: drifting mist-like it can suddenly overwhelm thoughts and emotions, settle in the planes of the face, the clump of
the heart, the folds of the groin. Lovers hunger for some resolution, but often desire simply subsides. Other demands take precedence. Or even more rending, the loved one disappears, and because desire and object are so closely wound, the disappearance becomes loss and the body and mind lapse into grief. It is here that light shifts back into darkness (although Dante would have it otherwise). The emotional qualities attached to both lightness and darkness are transitional, though if we follow Aristotle’s classical dualism we believe that only darkness is consistently mutable.

•

Despite the desire for everlasting love, loss is preeminent in our current world. It pervades: the loss of species, at a terrifying rate, and the loss of the known quantities of climate and landscape are more than theoretical and take place on a global level. Whether consequent of the degradation of the planet or not, loss seems to have become an ingrained feature of contemporary poetry, which often assumes the outcome of desire is loss rather than love, or abandons the question of love altogether. What complicates the direction of a poem and our understanding of its qualities and characteristics – whether it be lyric or dark lyric – is sound, for all poetry entangles eroticism, those urgings towards light, with sound. This is more basic, more fundamental than anything we may impose over the intellectual meaning of the poem. Or over the tangled movements of light and dark within the mind.

•

The Los Angeles Opera recently premiered the Mexican composer Daniel Catán’s opera Il Postino. Based on the movie based on the novel, the opera traces out the story of a young Italian man’s relationship with Pablo Neruda during the poet’s exile from Chile in 1952. The opera, which is in Spanish, uses only a few of Neruda’s poems as part of the libretto, and repeats key phrases from those poems as motifs. While the libretto doesn’t expand on Neruda’s writing, either on its range of intellectual questioning or its bounteous imagery, what it does do is make clear how someone can fall in love with words, especially with the way a word’s sonic presence suffuses its abstract meaning – its existence as a signifier – with an erotic charge. Catán achieves this through his music, which is both lush and innocent, which is to say lyrical, as hazy as that word has become. Il Postino, unusually and to its credit, makes clear the sonic power of language. That power is there when the music falls away, leaving only words.
It would be difficult to deny that the Scottish writer John Burnside writes poetry and fiction that consistently address life’s darkest side. From deviant personalities in novels that use murder as a backdrop, such as The Locust Room, or as a central inevitable event, as in The Dumb House, to memoirs of his alcoholic and violence-prone father, A Lie About My Father, and his own alcoholic, drug-filled young adulthood, Waking up in Toy Town, his writing seems obsessed with the worst in human behaviour. His poetry also takes part in this dire outlook. Interestingly, his books of poetry have consistently won awards in the UK: Feast Days (1992), winner of the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize, and The Asylum Dance (2000), winner of the Whitbread Poetry Award and shortlisted for both the Forward Poetry Prize (Best Poetry Collection of the Year) and the T. S. Eliot Prize. The Light Trap (2001) was also shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize. And in 2012, Burnside won both the Forward and the T. S. Eliot prizes for Black Cat Bone.

Although Burnside’s vision seems to differ radically from what some might consider ethically acceptable, obsessed as it is with murder and deviance, his formal style is marked by a musically attractive clarity displayed in free verse and suggestively confessional in approach; he would not be considered experimental or innovative in form. What is characteristic about both his subject and style, however, is his repetition of themes and phrases, which gives his writing an obsessional quality; his prolific output also implies compulsion, and his return to religious topics implies a spiritual quest. All of these suggest that Burnside is working from an uneasy and troubled psyche. The following essay examines these ideas as they appear in an early long prose-poem, ‘Annunciations,’ and tracks their history throughout his writing. The essay also looks at the poet’s most frequently used devices, which enhance the creation of his dark and abruptly startling imagery, and by doing so reveals how the author uses his own interior darkness as a catalyst for his imagination and writing – a practice similar to that described in Charles Wright’s poem ‘In Praise of Thomas Hardy’.
In keeping with anglophone literary tradition, John Burnside builds much of his poetry on various mythologies: Christian, classical and folk tale. Among the myths he most frequently uses is the Annunciation of Christ’s birth to the Virgin Mary. His early long prose poem ‘Annunciations’ (Common Knowledge) shows how Burnside uses that myth radically, combining it with a personal and idiosyncratic mythology to realign its conventions. Western religion and philosophy’s long association of divine creation with light – *fiat lux* – and its ‘line of good’ reassembles itself in Christianity with the Annunciation, an event associated pictorially with objects of light such as white lilies, the Holy Spirit manifest as a white dove, and a more-often-than-not blond Virgin. Beauty is also ascribed part of the spiritual dimension of light. As the central movement of his poem Burnside subsumes the Annunciation’s lightness into dark imagery, and his incorporation of darkness into light becomes part of a theme consistent throughout his work: the individual’s ongoing struggle for identity, which requires seeing what exists, what operates, just beyond the world’s unseeable arenas. His exalting of the struggle to drag the unknown out of ‘darkness’ is achieved in ‘Annunciations’ by colouring the light dark – melding the two qualities and thereby confirming their inseparableness.

At the beginning of his ‘Annunciations,’ Burnside focuses on the angel rather than the Virgin, indirectly emphasising what is uncommon to most portrayals of the Annunciation: that the moment is an encounter, rather than a Christian metonym for humanity’s alliance with its god in the struggle between good and evil.

One could argue that in this encounter, the angel is simply a factotum; and for centuries, the pictorial renderings of this encounter have reinforced that idea through their portrayal of the event as a physical happening within the mundane world: the angel and the Virgin substantial in their thick robes as they face each other, unsmiling, reverential, a thin lily in a pot nearby, the garden behind them lush, or architectural. The source for these portraits of angel and Virgin has always been the artist’s sense of human beauty moderated by his or her cultural milieu. Burnside’s sources are multiple but primarily they come from Renaissance paintings:

> I spent a few weeks in Italy, studying Annunciation paintings. Simone Martini and Botticelli, as mentioned above; also a gorgeous Baldovinetti Annunciation mural in a chapel on a hill outside Florence […] Many of the paintings I looked at were in Florence, a city that seems to love this subject matter. (From a personal email, March 2, 2011.)

Into his contemplation of Renaissance iconography he weaves classical mythology and European folk tales, all of which are then refracted through his personal mythology, which in
turn is a transformation of his own troubled history, refracted through his profound sense of the infinite.

Let’s examine this further, beginning with a walk through the opening prose poem of the series: ‘At first, the angel is almost invisible. He has been a mental phenomenon, an idea; now, gradually, his physical presence can be discerned’ (Common Knowledge 17).

In these first lines the angel inhabits an area between the visible and the invisible, and he remains in various liminal states throughout the poem. The angel comes out of nowhere; or, rather, he appears to be simply a matter of perception. These first two sentences bring up several questions, which because they remain unanswered throughout the poem are intrinsic to the poem’s emotional impact on the reader. First, if the angel is a mental phenomenon, in whose mind does Burnside place him; whose idea is he? And second, what is the nature of his physical being? Why, given his purpose on earth, is materiality a necessity? And corollary to that: what is the nature of the crossover between thought and physical manifestation?

The description continues:

He has just completed a movement of some kind; his muscular wings are still flexed. There is no question of his sharing the Virgin’s indecision or reluctance: his energy is new and pure; he participates in the grace he carries. (17)

The angel has gone through his own form of birth, metaphysically downsizing from ‘a mental phenomenon’ into a physical manifestation, which aligns with the Virgin’s humanness as both a physical and philosophical state. The angel’s wings, which logically separate him from the Virgin’s humanness, make him more animal: they are ‘muscular’ and ‘flexed.’ And the quality of his appearance, or birth, aligns him with the Virgin’s insemination, which is also both numinous and physical.

The Virgin in her first appearance in the poem has no real physical presence but rather is reduced to ‘indecision or reluctance’ – she becomes a metonym for emotions in flux. Even given his materiality – his alignment with the human and animal, the angel’s purpose in the world is divine: ‘he participates in the grace he carries’ and his physicality is, at this point in the poem, a matter of energy. Nonetheless: ‘As it materializes his body feels strong and light; he tastes a cool, almost liquid air, sweet and thick as seed’ (17). The angel is capable of feeling sensation and savoring sensuality, which is encompassing and fecund. It is as if sex, ‘thick as seed,’ is a kind of medium in which the angel now stands or floats: ‘Though there is a danger that this strength will wither, or become too swollen to contain, he is, for this moment, possessed of an absolute beauty’ (17).
This liminality, which presages a coming into being of an idea that has momentous impact, appears over and over in Burnside’s writing. In the poems, it is almost always connected with the narrator’s understanding of what is essential and crucial to his life or to life in its greater sense.

and somewhere behind it all, in private realms
of gulls’ eggs and stones and things I couldn’t name,
another world of charge and borderline,
[…]
some seventh sense that recognised
a deeper pulse, the tug of things at rest,
the tension in a table, or a vase
of goldenrod […]
(‘Sense Data’, The Asylum Dance 12)

This liminality behind which lies an unseeable unknown charged with potential realisation is also a common feature of the characters in Burnside’s novels. His novels could more accurately be called philosophical meditations on individuation and the impulse towards revelation; they lie closer to the realm of poetry than prose, and the ideas in his poems are frequently more completely examined in the novels. His novels are far from plot driven: although events occur and time passes, characters and subplots can simply disappear without resolution, and the lines between characters’ identities are often blurred by the fact that they share the same impulses and metaphysical leanings. The character’s search is about finding the ineffable as it exists behind the real world:

Everywhere she looked, there were clues. A flicker of shadow, a shaft of light, the sound of rain at the windows in the small hours when Marc was on night shift: it all added up to something and Alma knew that she was close to that something that it would take no more than a slight shift of attention to find what she was looking for. It was so close, just a matter of inches, just a heartbeat away. (Living Nowhere 134)

This need to perceive the fleeting is identified with Burnside’s childhood:

Be quick when you switch on the light
and you’ll see the dark
was how my father put it: catch
the otherlife of things before a look
immerses them.
(‘Fields’, The Asylum Dance 42)
The ability – or inability – to ‘see’ the ineffable rather than ‘experience’ it is also associated with the physical quality of darkness. This unseen ‘otherlife of things’ is what exists on the other unseeable, or dark, side of the liminal; its presence is both essential and somehow crucial.

And so the first section of ‘Annunciations’ ends: with the angel and the Virgin linked; the divine becoming more and more manifest and therefore more vulnerable, more sexual and more mortal. The capacity in the angel’s nature that remains divine seems to chime with how a believer would conceptualise the Virgin at this reflective moment: ‘he is, for this moment possessed of an absolute beauty’ (17). Beautiful not because of his divinity but because of his humanness and its encounter with divinity. Hovering behind this transcendent, yet physical beauty, is the ineffable, the force that lies under the skin of the material world and that remains subject to perception but beyond description.

The questions posed by the opening of the poem – In whose mind does the angel appear? Which can also be stated as: what is the significance between a mental and a physical manifestation? – resemble the paradoxical conundrums put forth by the faithful throughout the ages in their descriptions of God. By encompassing oppositional states of being, the angel appears to embody all states of being and thereby assumes the dimensions of God. But how can the angel be in the mind of God and be God at the same time? Burnside’s admission that he once had ‘an hallucination of St Augustine, in a cardigan, making tea’ seems amusingly apt, though perhaps not as aesthetically moving.

Burnside, however, is not posing a devotional conundrum for believers to contemplate; instead he is creating, as he does in many of his poems, a tension between what is predictable, traditional and habitual in our thinking and what is unexpected, contrary and ambiguous in his own thinking. No synthesis of these two outlooks is achieved, nor does one supersede the other, rather an enigmatic and shivering sense of possibility is suggested and maintained throughout the poem, which gives the writer’s words an aura of ominous under-meaning because, among other things, they lack resolution. Syntactically, the words are easy to follow; the lucidity of Burnside’s writing and its lyricism create an emotional world that the reader can participate in, whether or not the poet’s meaning is accessible, and his writing, especially that which deals with the numinous, brings up the question of how meaning-driven – how transparent in its conclusions – poetry needs to be in order for it to have an impact on the reader and therefore value as writing.

* • *

In the second section of ‘Annunciations’ Burnside reveals something of his writing process. It suggests answers to the questions posed in the first prose poem by placing the
angel as ‘mental phenomenon’ firmly in the mind of the writer: ‘For any event there are two images: the one I choose and the one I cannot avoid’ (18).

The first of these images is the well-examined and often-presented image of the Virgin as a woman in a domestic setting, performing daily tasks and devotions, interrupted by the sudden presence of a robed and winged angel. The second, ‘unavoidable’ image, is a series of obscure metaphors that border on the deviant: an eye, dark, glittering, reminiscent of moonlight, Egyptian, and the imagined owner of that eye, a woman whose head and body have been shaven.

The distinctness of the ‘I’ throughout this passage, without any association to a thing or an other, suggests that the two images represent the duality of the conscious and unconscious parts of Burnside’s mind: the traditional image sited in objective consciousness, and the eye of the shaven woman arising outside the writer’s control from the subterranean forces of his mind. The latter is the vehicle that turns the ‘idea’ of the angel into something other than what is traditionally imagined as angelic, for surely this shaven woman is an analog for the angel: occult, exotically foreign, her bare body newly exposed to the planet’s elements and hairless as the embryo forming in the Virgin’s womb. The development of her presence resembles the angel’s: her appearance is gradual and fraught with a strange portentousness. She goes from a shadowy eye peering through a gap between curtains to the woman’s head that contains the eye to the naked body of the woman.

Once these images are established the poet’s thoughts veer off into a meditation on the soul, about which he shares the Virgin’s ‘reluctance’: ‘To begin with, there is some resistance, but at last I succumb to the idea that the soul exists. Or rather, not the soul, but souls’ (18).

There is not a novel or a collection of poems that John Burnside has written that doesn’t mention the soul at several points; its existence and its definition are of primary concern to him. It’s equally clear that what he defines as the soul is not that non-physical fragment of being associated with the spirit posited by the Catholic religion he was raised in. Although he offers no thorough and complete definition of his concept of the soul, he does propose the following: first, that the soul is connected to the liminal; it is what lies in that crucial darkened region beyond the seeable. In The Locust Room, the young artist Paul imagines photographing a scientist’s site for researching moths, a room draped with nets of cloth:

From the photograph, no one would be able to tell what form of life lived in that space, but that was entirely the point the moths moved about in their private light, like spirits, and if Paul’s plan was successful, if he managed to take the picture he wanted, it was their spirits, not their physical presence that he would – not capture,
like an anthropologist capturing a pygmy’s soul, but reveal, the way beauty is revealed in a magic trick, or a circus act. It was a form of magic he was after now, a form of alchemy. (174)

Second, Burnside indicates that the soul is not innate and singular but multiple, its many facets created by the relationships of human beings to each other.

Because we aren’t born with souls, we become souls, and that becoming is a process of mixing, of one person becoming another, or becoming two, or disappearing into thin air. (Living Nowhere 246)

In ‘Annunciations’ he links his idea of multiple souls to his own sense of himself, looping back to the imagined owner of the dark, Egyptian eye:

A shaven woman is the soul of my Spring nights. She has always been there, but I only discover her now. Her complement – my daytime soul – is, on the other hand, something I have often suspected: an old satchel. (‘Annunciations,’ Common Knowledge 18)

Burnside ends this second section of the poem with a detailed description of the items in the satchel of his soul; these items are precise, counterintuitive, seemingly metaphoric and physically white (light) and black (dark): ‘there are books inside […] the pictures are always changing and the pages smell of raw milk, or ink, or burnt sugar’ (18). What is surprising, but typical of Burnside’s process, is that his imagined soul and counter-soul are oppositional in some way – in this case, the one is animate, the other not – while both are suggestively and precisely detailed. As before, when the angel oscillated between human and divine aspects, the oppositions catch the reader in the fluctuation between the habitual and the unpredictable. This time, however, it’s as if the poet had reached the bottom rung of some neo-Platonic ladder, descending from ideal to thought to being to thing.

•

The satchel is one of the iconic objects from Burnside’s personal mythology. It appears in The Mercy Boys as well:

It was only after the old man died that Sconnie found what he really treasured, packed away in an old suitcase under the bed. A cheap leather bag, crammed with photographs and old letters […] The bag was decorated with ibises and jackal-headed figures, and Sconnie realised that it must have been made in Egypt for the tourist trade. (45)
It appears again in a simpler manifestation in the possession of another character from *The Mercy Boys*, Cathy, who is later brutally murdered by her husband:

She’d had the box for years – ever since she was small: it had all kinds of stuff in it, but mostly it was just postcards, pictures of places she had been, or places she would like to see; paintings from galleries she had gone to on school trips, photographs of harbour towns, or gardens, or little villages in the Cotswolds, where she’s never been but planned to see some day, as soon as she got the car. (96)

The source of this Egyptian case, in which are kept the photographic emblems of unrealised yearnings and the iconic resolutions of emotions and memories – both of which comprise elements of what Burnside believes constitute a person’s soul – is revealed in his memoir, *A Lie About My Father*:

My mother’s pictures – photographs of her family, of her friends, of herself on days out with fellow workers from the Co-op, all the scraps and images she treasured – were kept in a large, shabby handbag that my father had brought her from Egypt, when he was stationed out there. (30)

Within this second prose poem, the writer forges a circle of identification and connection between angel, Virgin and writer, through imagery that seems imaginative but which is a composite of cultural mythologies refracted through salient imagery from his early personal history. This practice gives these traditional myths emotional vibrancy by unsettling their familiarity and overwriting them with a set of otherwise highly personal references.

•

In the third section of the series, Burnside reverts to the encounter of the Annunciation, although he remains as a commentator, in the narrative ‘I’. The third part opens with a description of the environment surrounding the angel and the Virgin. They are no longer creatures of the air or earth, but denizens of a watery and dark world: ‘It is morning, the sun is rising towards noon, filling the garden with vapour, dissolving the wet shadows’ (19). That world is both generative and decaying:

[…] a night-time green, damp and cool, rooted in leaf-mould and seed. The angel arrives suddenly, from some near-liquid state, clutching an olive branch or a lily, or mantled in the perfume of cut grass. (19)
Burnside often focuses on the natural world, a practice that seems to place him categorically among nature poets. However, his use of nature seems less about conservation and the politics of the environment and more about his strong tendency towards sensory description in concert with a general disconnection from the inhabitants of the world – whether human or environmental – that he seems to feel. Overcoming this disconnection hovers as one of the motivations behind his writing, and his strategy in realizing that urge is to approach his desired subjects vertically rather than horizontally. By examining the subject in a series of increasingly unfamiliar metaphors, he goads emotional reactions from the reader, creating an affective web within the language, rather than pursues a narrative that explains and resolves. His instincts are poetic rather than rhetorical, and nature is an easy partner to this study: it has the virtues of slowness and cyclic repetition. And it is, finally, pervasive: the uninterrupted state of being that through the forces of evolution demands that we are inextricably a part of it. His concentration on nature fulfils his need of belonging, which overrides the nightdark mystery of human isolation.

and you sit
quiet
amazed by the light
aware
of everything
aware of shoals and stars
shifting around you
endlessly
entwined.
(‘Ports’, The Asylum Dance 3)

Because their particular sounds, smells, movements and visual textures are perceived, elements within nature, the owls, foxes, grasses, and rain that inhabit Burnside’s poetry, are in concert with human perception and form an entirety. The material world thereby becomes what Burnside calls pleroma, the Gnostic concept of the totality of the Divine, or, as Burnside interprets it, the ‘possibility of wholeness,’ even though he records the experience of it as an intensely private exchange:

I could imagine we lived on an island, surrounded by something I could almost feel on my skin, a medium the light or the wind could enter and roam in at will, sliding in to touch me then moving away again, leaving only the faintest afterprint on my
skin, as if something had gripped me gently then, just as suddenly, had let go.
(‘Ether’, *Burning Elvis* 77)

The natural world that introduces the third section of ‘Annunciations’ also recognises other artists’ contemplative portrayals of the encounter in a continuation of the poet’s journeying between his conscious and subconscious perceptions as he fabricates a ‘story’: ‘This is one version of the Annunciation, but there are others’ (19). The descriptions of the setting of the Annunciation seem ekphrastic up until the moment when the poet enters the poem in the first person as a mediating and creative force:

And I cannot help imagining her mind is on something else. In fact, I have an idea that, a moment before the messenger arrived, the girl found an ivy leaf pressed between the pages of the book. (*Common Knowledge* 19)

This book held by the Virgin echoes the image of the books and cards enclosed in the satchel that is Burnside’s daytime soul: ‘The paper was old, and smelled partly of dust, partly of sugar’ (18). The ivy leaf quickly morphs into the image of a ‘dried frogskin,’ and the frog, the angel. The images are in the mind of the Virgin who is in the mind of the writer:

I have an idea that the woman cannot separate this image of the frog from the creature she sees before her: the same colours are present in his wings, the same near-transparency at the hem of his robe. Perhaps to her eye, the angel appears to glisten or blink absurdly; perhaps he seems almost bloodless, and what moisture he contains is mephitic, fenny, a green that is changing to black. (20)

Burnside brings this encounter from an ethereal high to a marshy low. The mythology has moved from a central moment in Christian doctrine to, finally, the folk tale of the princess and the frog, also a story of sexuality and the acceptance of fertility. This is another downsizing of a sort – though arguably the two mythologies have equal emotional impact on contemporary readers – but it is also a continuation of the dialectic that is intrinsic to the poem and Burnside’s writing in general. He melds the light-filled characteristics of the angel, as near-transparent or bloodless, with blackness.

•

In the fourth section of the poem Burnside moves to a meditation on sex and gender. He continues to observe and interpret a painting, or a series of paintings, of the Annunciation,
moving back and forth between those visual images and his re-visioning, thereby emphasising a kinetic rather than static relationship:

Tradition says the angel is male, though it seems unlikely that angels would possess one sex or another [...] In the best pictures, it only appears to be male; on closer inspection we see it is neither male nor female, nor can it be called hermaphrodite [...] (21)

Within this section of shifting sexuality, Burnside identifies the Virgin with kore figures from Greek mythology: ‘it is easy to think of her as any soul, just as one might think of any soul as Persephone, or Eurydice’ (21). These kores, however, become women of the underworld, with all its implications of desolate darkness. But again, they are seen and interpreted through his personal mythology:

I was then, and still am, interested in the myth of the young girl or woman who encounters a ‘supernatural’ force (death, the angel, Dis) and the ways in which that moment is represented in art. It seems to me that these myths are particularly male stories and that the female figure represents back to us that part of the self a boy loses as he passes (with or without the appropriate rituals) into manhood. The loss is not of ‘innocence’ or even of ‘the feminine aspect’ of the male, or not to my mind at least – I think it has more to do with a loss of soul, as such, a separation out and confinement of the soul, as boys perform socialised masculinity. (From a personal email, March 2, 2011.)

The dialectic between the images and the author’s interpretations, sexuality and spirituality, the physical and the ineffable, continues until the end of the poem, which is neat and circular; the poem, which opens with the appearance of the angel, ends with the disappearance of the Virgin, completing the equation between the two:

The Virgin looks up. This is her moment [...] Darkness is coming. There is no sound, no sweetness. For a moment she thinks of a dawn, happening somewhere else, before she disappears. (24)

Her resolution, a form of annihilation, occurs while dawn recedes and darkness approaches.

Most readers sustain multiple understandings while reading any text: there is the principle, often linear, reading, which carries the central argument of the text and there are sec-
ondary readings, or subtexts, which include not only the writer’s intended interpretations but also the reader’s internal commentary, private understandings – or misunderstandings – of individual word’s connotations, as well as more emotional readings that are perceived on a subtler and not necessarily conscious level. These simultaneous understandings are especially present in poetry, which depends on metaphor, a practice that requires multiple simultaneous readings and comprehensions. What Burnside does not address in the poem is the central event of the Annunciation: the announcement of the engendering of Christ, which in most narratives is the principle text. Burnside has no need to make this narrative central because the narrative is so well known; it simply hangs in the reader’s mind as a secondary reading, a backdrop, rather like an obsessive musical refrain. Burnside needs, however, to explain his use of the story and he does that by placing his own metaphoric subtext foremost. He places contradictory imagery within the story and shifts away from telling the event as a linear story with a beginning, middle and end. He enhances the subtext by using imagery meant to evoke emotional uncertainty and darkness. He loops back, moves forward, and loops back, over and over, drawing multiple connections between the actors of the story and himself, and continuously moving between different moments in the event as they relate to various metaphysical and personal, iconic mythologies.

A similar form and process are followed in ‘Ether,’ a short story in the collection Burning Elvis, which begins as the narrator’s recollection of home and his mother telling her children stories: ‘sometimes she’d just talk about things, like how our lights would go on travelling into space and never stop’ (67). The narrator goes on to say he wants to tell a story as well, and, after relating several stories from the local community of his childhood, he settles on the story of Lazarus because, unlike the real-life stories that surround him, it contains a ‘resurrection’. What follows closely resembles Burnside’s formal structure in ‘Annunciations’: the narrative ‘I’ weaves back and forth between variations of the Lazarus story, which the poet embroiders with vivid detail and believable psychology, and short memories of his childhood, none of which move through a linear narrative arc: ‘I remember being at home, then I remember being somewhere else, but I have no memory of leaving’ (76). But both the narrator’s memories and his retelling of the story of Lazarus are laced with a sense of myth, stories told about first creation and essential being arising out of the nigredo of death.

It is possible to read the Lazarus story, like the ‘Annunciations’, as a story about birth, or rather rebirth. In the former, Lazarus is reborn but not as a form of reincarnation; his rebirth is a taking up again of life. It’s a transformation through a series of extreme states of being – life, death, life – during which Lazarus’ personal history remains nevertheless intact. Similarly, the
conception of Christ and his subsequent birth can be viewed as a transformation, one of the many manifestations of a supernatural energy that is woven into the fabric of creation; it cannot truly be viewed as a birth, even though Christ is born without personal history, and his conviction of his connection to god is a later realisation. In this sense Burnside’s understanding of the larger mysteries of creation is a hybrid of animistic perceptions and Christian aseity.

And it is an understanding that Burnside returns to over and over in his writing, not only in this poem but also over a range of poems and prose works, as he tries to tease out the details of what sacredness and creation mean to him, to bring them out of the unseen and into the realm of perception.

•

Birth – and its subsidence, death – as a form of story telling is more often associated with a singular, iconic moment in which being passes from one state or another, one of which is imperceptible and unknowable. For the imaginative, that moment of passage is too laden, too fraught with mystery to be simply a historical moment, or a piece of data. In *The Locust Room*, the young Paul, on the edge of becoming an adult, expresses this:

[...] he had been mulling over the story of Orpheus – not so much the tale of his descent into Hades, or the recovery of Eurydice, as that element of the myth which said that Orpheus could make things – rocks, trees, even animals – come into being merely by singing [...] It wasn’t that Orpheus actually created animals and plants out of nothing, like the Christian God [...] It was more that the essential creative act was one of seeing, and making seen, for the first time, the true nature of the world [...] (174–5)

In Burnside’s work, perception is birth. And his poems especially are often lists or series of perceived detail, each of which seems of highest existential significance.

•

It would be easy to ascribe Burnside’s perception of ‘the true nature of the world’ – as a shifting field of ‘something’ sacred at the edges of perception – to his experimentation with drugs in adolescence and early adulthood. Certainly Burnside has linked them in his biographical writing:

LSD-25 is a sacrament; by which I mean, something that allows the celebrant to win back some participation in his environment. [...] acid did what the host failed to do [...] It connected me back to the world, it re-attuned me to the subtler, deeper
frequencies of the material. It made me see the possibility of wholeness, of what the
alchemists called pleroma. (A Lie About My Father 177–78)

He has also fictionalised the experience in a form that clearly links it to other liminal mo-
mments in his work that are charged with a sensation of the sacred. Here is the character Alina
during her first acid trip in Living Nowhere:

She was aware of something glittering in the dark, something wet, or metallic,
glittering close by, but she couldn’t quite fix on it. It was there, and it was real; she was
sure of this. [...] An idea was beginning to form, not in her head, not in her thoughts,
so much as at the surface of her skin, that this object, this glimmer, was something
important, not just a piece of litter, say, or a fragment of scrap metal [...] (11)

This experience is not confined to the perception of objects but also to broader sensations,
such as taste.

my body is wired
to the flavours
of childhood:
aniseed
and mint
(‘Desserts’, The Asylum Dance 19)

Or colour:

Alina had been trying not to notice how black it was, a deep black in the green of
the yew trees along the graveyard walks, a blackness, even, in the falling snow. She
had imagined it would be something terrible, thinking about that blackness here
among the dead; but then, all of a sudden, she was struck with a dark, vivid sense of
it, of the black in the green of the sap, the black in the white of the snow, like
something from a treatise in alchemy, black: nigredo, the true energy of the world
that wasn’t dark at all, or at least, wasn’t malevolent, no matter how dangerous it
seemed. (15)

While LSD was hailed in sacred terms by the counter-culture throughout the ’60s and
’70s, few writers have so consistently used memories of adolescence in their depiction of its
ability to evoke a sense of the divine as Burnside has done throughout his early novels, in
which may be found so much explanatory information about his personal mythologies. But
youth, with its coming into being, its passage into consciousness, mirrors the finding of the
sacred within subtle changes of the encompassing world. And Burnside’s earlier childhood was a matrix for these perceptions: his Catholicism, his ‘hypersensitivity,’ and the violence of his parents’ lives bear weight in his revelatory sense of the world.

Further, it’s easy to imagine that Burnside, like most children with a volatile and dangerous parent, needed to develop the ability to read small signs on the surface of his father’s body and movements, signs that would warn him of impending violence, verbal even more than physical, so that he could forge a protection of mental displacement: ‘My father was one of those men who sit in a room, and you can feel it: the simmer, the sense of some unpredictable force that might, at any moment, break loose and do something terrible […]’ (A Lie About My Father, 31–32).

One question that his father posed to him as a form of unrelenting cruelty and that lingered in his child mind, was whether or not Burnside should have lived once he had been born:

‘You know you had a sister once.’

[...]

I nodded dutifully. I knew all this. I knew what was coming. I just didn’t understand why.

‘And she died.’

Once upon a time, there was a little Indian boy who lived by himself in a cave in the mountains. He was all alone in the world, except for his friend, the timber wolf –

‘But you know what?’

This boy had no parents, only the wolf, whose name was –

‘It could have been you that died.’

Mungo. Chano. White Fang. I would try names out in my head, but I could never find one I liked.

‘It could have been the other way around. You could have died, and she could have lived.’ (34)

Burnside seldom uses italics in his writing, and in this passage they do not signify an interior voice or emphasis. Rather, they signify an escape into storytelling, into forging a mythic world in which his young life is safe, protected by a friendly animal. Birth, death, and stories of an elemental nurturing of a solitary child are hard-wired into Burnside’s world; writing, the making of stories, is his life jacket.

Equally, however, his creative process is linked with isolation and with an obliteration of the self, especially that identity of personal history, the accumulation of commonplace events, which are the result of interaction with others:
I never worked first thing in the morning. After a night's painting, I would have a pot of tea, then go for a walk. There was a process going on that I didn’t think too much about, a process of erasure, where everything that had happened the day before […] everything extraneous was erased and forgotten. It was a necessary ritual, this process of erasure: I had to become myself again, a non-person, someone with no defined identity, without family or friends, or fixed abode. (Living Nowhere 317–318)

The disappearance of the Virgin at the end of ‘Annunciations,’ is not a reference to her future death, but rather her subsidence, like Burnside’s, into a state of creativity, signified by his search through darkness and his reworkings of the conventions of light and dark. The ultimate encounter in this long prose poem is not the one between the angel and the Virgin, or Burnside and his past, but the one he offers up to the reader: the encounter between the soul of the writer and the soul of the reader.

He wanted something akin to that moment at the end of Zabriskie Point, where Daria Halprin sees the house in the desert exploding. The critics, his friends, so many people he knew had failed to appreciate that moment, because the beauty of it was too remote, too detached from what people thought of as narrative. Yet, for Paul, it had signaled the beginning of a long process […] towards the impossible which was, in every meaningful sense, the fundamental ground of whatever he could think of as reality […] (The Locust Room 27)
Meditation Two

Burial and the Crossing of Boundaries

Turning the soil the plough-shares
slice under the turf and
lifting it free from the ground
twist it over

all the grass disappears under the top-soil
it is lost
everyone knows what will happen
it is held together with the root-systems of couch-grass

– John Hall, Couch Grass 90

Water looked up through the lawn
Like a half-buried mirror
Left out by the people before

There were faces in there
We had seen in the hallways
Of octogenarian specialists

[...] below us
The dark, peopled water

Was leaning and listening
[...]

The Drowned Book 4
When I describe to someone how the Romans and Anglo-Saxons buried hoards of precious metals and gems in order to keep them safe, I often hear the same question: Why did they bury them? People cannot fathom why anyone would bury gold jewellery, elaborately decorated weapons, or silver spoons and plates. Their bafflement goes deeper, I believe, than a misunderstanding caused by being unable to imagine a world other than the one we live in: a world without safes and safe deposit boxes. Perhaps their question arises from a queasy understanding of burial, which recognises that committing something to the interior of the earth is to condemn it to a category of waste and hazard, or, more forebodingly, to the realm of the irretrievably dead.

The idea of the underworld in our culture is rooted in Greek mythology, one variant of the proto-Indo-European body of stories that, according to comparative philologist Georges Dumézil, underlies most European mythologies. Dumézil’s ‘tripartite ideology’ – a particularly concise and lucid description of which is found in Udo Strutynski’s Introduction to Camillus, A Study of Indo-European Religion as Roman History – defines these myths as having cognate deities that are engaged in a battle between the castes of a tripartite hierarchy. These individual castes combine to form two competing – but related – divine groups: one group composed of sovereign and military castes stands in opposition to a challenging caste associated with fertility. The conclusion of their battle results not only in a dualistic world – the one found in Western philosophic discourse from the classical Greek period on – but also in hierarchical and patriarchal social systems. The lineaments of this tripartite ideology are found in creation myths that configure an overworld, an underworld and, between them, the created world in which humans exist both reflecting and mediating the caste stratification of these multiple worlds.

In the often contradictory Greek myths, the underworld, which is divided into multiple realms, appears only slightly changed in its later analog, Christian afterlife. Prominent among the sub-realms of the Greek underworld are the Elysian Fields for the blessed and heroic, the land of the dead with its Asphodel Meadows, where those who are equally good and evil exist, and Tartarus, a deep, remote area of pain and torture, which lies beneath the others. In Hesiod’s Theogony, Tartarus is not only the abyss but also one of the first creations to separate out from primordial Chaos:
At the first Chaos came to be, but next wide-bosomed Earth, the ever-sure foundations of all the deathless ones who hold the peaks of snowy Olympus, and dim Tartarus in the depth of the wide-pathed Earth, and Eros (Love), fairest among the deathless gods, who unnerves the limbs and overcomes the mind and wise counsels of all gods and all men within them. (Hugh G. Evelyn-White, trans., ll. 116–124)

In his study of the Eleusinian myths, Persephone Unveiled, the poet Charles Stein emphasises Hesiod’s portrayal of the early Greek belief that light emerges out of darkness, thereby giving darkness both a temporal and psychological primacy. As creation continues, this primacy of darkness continues: Aether – ‘the bright, untainted upper atmosphere, as distinguished from Aer, the lower atmosphere of the earth’ – is born out of night, not vice versa (6).

This elemental order of appearance in the material world seems more than the mythologizing of a human society that bases its chronology on the moon rather than the sun. It’s as if the myth implies that three elements – the material world, darker impulses, and erotic longings – are linked as sequential organizing devices within the creation of being. If myth is reflective of the interior world of the individual as well as the outer material world, a metaphor widely accepted from at least Hesiod on, then we can say that the chronological order of creation suggests that within the human mind, it is darker impulses first, followed by erotic longings, that organize perception and feeling into thought once the self is established in the ‘home’ of Earth’s materiality. In Europe millennia later, Freud would switch the order: making erotic longings primary in a chain of cause-and-effect that leads to dark impulses. He would amend that order once again by theorizing the death drive.

Stein studied the Eleusinian Mysteries for over twenty years and believes that, finally, he understands not only what the actual ritual of the Mysteries was but also what its significance and its psychological power were. The Mysteries are known to have centred on the myth of Demeter and Persephone as they were practiced in Eleusis. In the ‘Homeric Hymn to Demeter’, Persephone, the virginal daughter of Demeter, is carried off by Hades and imprisoned as his consort in the underworld:

It [the narcissus] was a wondrous thing in its splendor. To look at it gives a sense of holy awe to the immortal gods as well as mortal humans.

[...]
She [Persephone] was filled with a sense of wonder, and she reached out with both hands to take hold of the pretty plaything. And the earth, full of roads leading every which way, opened up under her. It happened on the Plain of Nysa. There it was that the Lord who receives many guests made his lunge. [...] He seized her against her will, put her on his golden chariot, and drove away as she wept. (Translated by Gregory Nysa, ll. 10–19)

The bereft Demeter searches the world for Persephone, and during this period neglects her divine duties, so that the natural world subsides into barrenness. Eventually, Zeus returns Persephone to Demeter, but the girl has eaten pomegranate seeds in the underworld and is obliged therefore to return to Hades for a portion of the year. Though the myth is often interpreted as an early explanation of seasonal cycles, its temporal setting is misaligned with the Mediterranean agricultural year, a variance that adds to the myth’s enigma and makes questionable its role as a Just So story for the seasons.

Stein describes the Eleusinian rituals as a ritualized means of exploring death and the dissolution of the ego. The rituals were comprised of two ceremonies: the Myesis, or Lesser Mysteries, and the Epopteia, or Greater Mysteries. Myesis is ‘derived from the same verb that gives us ‘mystery’ – myein – and it means to cover or close in.’ Epopteia is ‘literally ‘the things that have been seen’’. He explains the ritual as follows:

The rhythm of the cycle of the Mysteries would then be: 1) an initiatic inwardness and darkness, a ritual death of sorts, a descent into the underworld, perhaps mimetic of the abduction of Persephone, but also of Demeter’s grief and her turning away from the luminosity of the god realm; and, finally, the dearth of nature under the magical withholding of the power of the seeds; followed by 2) an opening to the light, the return of Persephone to the daylight, the return of Demeter to the gods, the return of the world of nature to life and bounty, and the opening of the initiate’s eyes to her true being and its relation to the divine. (61; my italics)

Stein emphasises not only Persephone’s disappearance into the underworld and her subsequent return to the overworld and daylight, he also claims her abduction was intrinsic to her nature rather than simply a rape. In other words, Persephone in her ‘adult’ manifestation was meant to be the Goddess of the Dead – she was meant to encompass death, to be confined and limited by it even while ruling over it. Throughout the myths her function of rule is
never revealed. Stein further proposes that Persephone's descent into darkness is analogous to what happens when the ego's boundaries are disrupted and the self merges with the surrounding world. In other words, Stein sees darkness as described in ancient poetry and ritual as a dissolving of the ego, a loss of boundary between the self and the external. As in confirmation, the Homeric Hymn depicts Gaia (Earth) as a collaborator in Persephone’s abduction. Ultimately, posits Stein, this kind of ego dissolution, once experienced, causes a profound acceptance of death in the initiate. And this, he believes, was the true purpose of the Eleusinian Mysteries. Stein’s view of the Eleusinian Mysteries also subscribes to a sense of dark death as a renewer and re-creator of humanity within life.

•

Another noticeable feature of the Theogony – this first ‘story’ that lies along with Homer as the basis of our Western literary tradition – is the ‘deathless’ attribute of the anthropomorphic gods, which by implication describes humanity as physical and fragile. While the gods are immortal, humanity is not. Unlike the impulses of the subconscious, which rise into thought, nothing human returns to life from the underworld. Death as we understand it on a physical level is a stratum of existence that means the end of change and therefore possibility. Death is a set and inflexible state of materiality. Eurydice, another kore figure, slides away from the gaze of Orpheus not because he has transgressed by trying to look at her but because she has been given over to non-existence. What he sees when he looks back is not the empty space into which Eurydice has vanished, it is Eurydice. What dwells in the underworld is not simply a shade of itself, or a shadow but, as Rilke suggests in his poem ‘Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes’, rooted in non-existence:

She was already loosened like long hair,  
poured out like fallen rain,  
shared like a limitless supply.  
She was already root.  
(The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke 52)

Rilke’s use of ‘root’ here connects the idea of death back to the natural world, taking her out of the mythological and placing her within the movements of the natural world. The underworld lies below the living world. It is dark because it is unseeable, but Eurydice lies within that darkness like a root that contains the flower, the plant’s raw potential of growth – a more specific analog and anthropomorphized version of Hesiod’s chaos. She is also a
repetition and an affirmation of the story of Persephone. Rilke’s poem accurately describes Greek mythology’s conflation of death, darkness and the vitality of the natural world. A disruption and contradiction to dualism.

And so we have more qualities of darkness: darkness is connected to death, or, in a wider sense, non-existence. It is also subterranean and as such linked to the earth as well as the psyche. These two aspects dwell in contradiction; our metaphoric re-visions of death as a dark underworld is not as stable as the physical realities of death. Although darkness has been defined, in the preceding chapter’s look at Pythagorean ontology, as mutable and tending towards change, again linked in some fuzzy category with chaos, nonexistence is permanent. Further, the idea of an underworld below the earth contradicts what we know actually exists underground: the thin layer of soil that covers the planet, laced with its own blind creatures – worm and mole – can be cultivated. Seeds that disappear under its surface push forth, grow, nourish and reseed – suggesting that, if there is a life beneath the planet’s surface, it is a rich and fertile one. The contradiction between ancient ideology and physical reality lies unquestioned in mythology; humans of divine beauty, such as Adonis, were part of this cycle of growth and imagined redeemable from the underworld of soil and decaying vegetable matter in the form of flowers and plants. Contrasting tribal beliefs divided and merged, allowing the mind to complicate metaphors of being.

Even so, the human body, once placed under the ground, has never returned in any form that was recognizable or familiar to the species. The miracle of growth severs its links to humankind once the body is buried. It is perhaps here that our fear of loss of self and merging lies.

One of the virtues of objects is that they remain separate and contained. Their material integrity is intrinsic to the definition of their objecthood. We prize artfully crafted objects and assign value to them, which would not be possible if they were constantly changing. In evaluating them, especially jewellery, the ornaments of the body, it’s as if we still hold to the medieval sense of beauty dwelling justly in light, and that, further, our sense of beauty being inextricably wound into light is an aspect of divinity within human life and pleasures of the
body. In his essay ‘The Aesthetics of Light’, Umberto Eco quotes St. Bernard:

‘When the brightness of beauty has replenished to overflowing the recesses of the heart, it is necessary that it should emerge into the open, just like the light hidden under a bushel: a light shining in the dark is not trying to conceal itself. The body is an image of the mind, which, like an effulgent light scattering forth its rays, is diffused through its members and senses, shining through in action, discourse, appearance, movement – even in laughter, if it is completely sincere and tinged with gravity.’ (Sermones in Cantica, LXXV, 11 (PL, 183, col. 1193))

This brings us back to the question that opened the chapter: Why, if we identify human burial with the irretrievable, would anyone bury the bright, beautiful objects that serve to decorate and intensify the beauty of the human body? Or the silver plates and spoons that bring it nourishment? Or the elaborate and precise ornaments of weapons, the objects dear to the warrior because they protect as well as destroy? Why consign these objects imaginatively to the underworld when nothing human returns from there? Is this simply a contradiction, like the mythological contradiction between the realms of the vegetation god Adonis and Persephone, Queen of the Dead?

•

It isn’t burial, though, so much as boundary that defines our sense of the ‘underworld,’ both as the realm underneath the ground and the realm on the other side of the moment of death. The impassability of a boundary is a concept anchored in the physical. Daily our feet flatten the surface of the planet. Immobilize it. The planet’s density places us above ground but our imagination suggests intricate possibilities in the subterranean. It is as if we have some intuition of the scientist’s understanding of soil as a medium more like water than stone; our own stability is linked to enforcing its sturdy firmness. Its planetary solidity is a metonym for gravity and the irreversibility of time, which is recognizable only in the abstract calculation of mathematics and the aging face that stares back at us in the mirror, as it moves towards individual death.

Burial is linked also with boundary and death: to be buried is to be placed on the other side of an intractable boundary. Even breaching that boundary is metaphoric for suffering a loss, which on the individual’s level includes one’s placement in the world of space and time. This loss has its subtlest and least definable consequences in the realm of emotions, which I address in Chapter 3.
It was the brightness of its jewellery and domestic objects that first attracted me to the Hoxne treasure that has been lodged in the British Museum since its discovery in Suffolk in 1992. Their brightness, however, is not the gleam of shiny coins and glittery diamonds; pure gold glows and appears warm, as does silver of equal purity. The inlaying of garnets and amethysts, a combination characteristic of Roman taste, also conveys a feeling of warmth. The garnet-inlaid parts of sword hilts in the Staffordshire hoard, though from the Anglo-Saxon era, newly converted to Christianity, have an organic, bodily presence, as if the garnets were droplets of blood lying on human skin.

What also attracted me to the jewellery was its intricacy: its maker’s craftsmanship. The Hoxne treasure’s long body chain (see Figure 1), an unusual find, is fashioned in a chain-making technique called loop-in-loop; each strand is composed of hundreds of small rings of gold made by winding a thick thread of gold around a uniformly shaped dowel. The circles are cut to remove them from the core, then soldered and flattened into ovals. These ovals, or loops, are inserted into each other, stacked, to configure long chains. It’s a time-consuming task by hand, requiring care and persistence. It’s a task that has its philological mate in the careful winding and weaving of sound and language in poetry.
In *Hoard* I’ve used earth, darkness and love throughout the poems, not so much to follow Hesiod’s classical model as to follow a personal proclivity. The idea of boundary is most clearly apparent in poems such as ‘Gold Body Chain for a Small Woman’ and ‘Four Matching Gold Bangles’ in the section titled ‘Hoxne’. To suggest boundary, I’ve used a horizontal line to divide the poem into two parts. This line acts like a graphic representation of the surface of the Earth. In this way, it partakes abstractly of the conventions of concrete poetry.

How the two halves of the poem function in relation to each other varies in each poem. In ‘Gold Body Chain for a Small Woman’ (see Figure 2, page 54) the upper part of the poem describes a narrative of desire and loss between a young woman and a man in a fictional courtship, while the stanza beneath the line is a description of the rare and exquisitely crafted gold body chain found in the Hoxne hoard, written in a contemporary adaptation of Anglo-Saxon alliterative rhyme. These italicized words emphasise features of the body chain that are both physically characteristic and metaphoric. The third section of this poem is a metaphor that parallels the main ‘plot’ of the poem: sexual pursuit and loss. It describes the flight of a bird into a glass window – where it sees its reflection and that of the surrounding sky – as it rushes to meet an illusory partner.

‘Four Matching Gold Bangles’ (see Figure 3, page 55) is also a poem of pursuit and sexual longing, which is driven by speed in the language in the upper half of the poem and slowness in the lower. The lovers’ chase described in the upper poem takes place in the natural world:

> Pushed rustling into the earth, wrapped, the horizon a whirlpool. The soft shush of breath and heart’s outward flight quelled, fallen earthward turning – slowly, sound withdrawn. (157 below)

The line below this upper half of the poem represents the surface of the earth and becomes like the boundary of skin – breachable. Words of the upper poem appear below, but what has occurred to them is what occurs to collections of objects that are buried: they separate, shift, and disappear. In their fragmented state, the words create a second narrative related to but different from the original narrative. In these poems the boundary between upper and lower halves of the poem is both definitive and ambiguous. The metaphoric breaching of boundary is physically achieved through a schematic rendering of burial as a poem set under a straight line which represents the emotional actions of both love and loss.
*Gold Body Chain for a Small Woman*

Have mercy and pity on me and let me rest my heart in you.

– translated from French and incised in a twisted gold brooch, 14c. (Scottish National Museum):

1

Cross my heart. Drop the long X of woven chain across the clavicle’s horizontal bones: four-petalled; an ornament marks the junction with stones – front and back, roped: such discs serve as calculations of the heart’s orbit.

In the midst of tumult a man’s voice curves – carves lines of gold – across her body’s turfs.

________________________

*seam settling* over the seized heart
*as an amulet* amethyst and garnet
*resplendent pearls* passed into dust

Figure 2. Page 141 below. (*Hoard*, Shearsman Books, 2013, p. 24)
Four Matching Gold Bangles

After four gold bracelets, Hoxne treasure, c. a.d. 400

1

Clay clasping the wrist thumb and finger; manacled, mute.
the tongue a basket – forest of gold corrugate: scuddering
cries, muffled, fallen reeds, network of plaid. Speech stopped
at the first gate; in the background, disaster: a procession of doors,
each closed each to be opened. Pushed rustling into the earth
wrapped; horizon a whirlpool. The soft shush of breath and heart’s
outward flight quelled, fallen earthward turning – slowly
sound withdrawn. Indwelling the coat of flesh the muscle of tongue

clasping wrist, thumb and finger:
the circumference of forest.

leaves mute

– gold: chuddering

Speech contracts

rustling
Comparing the body and the planet as locations of loss is not arbitrary, it compares to Hesiod's choice of the planet, Gaia, as primary in the creation of the universe of gods. The use of landscape, the natural world, the ground beneath our feet is not merely a poetic convention, though the frequency of its use as metaphor makes it seem like a convention; it becomes conventional only when the choice of language used is also conventional. We are limited in our options for metaphor, we can use only what we know.

About a year after writing the ‘Four Matching Gold Bangles’ I came across Joan Retallack’s *Afterimages*, which includes six series of poems. In the eponymous series, ‘Afterimages’, the poems seem to have an identical structure to the two *Hoard* poems described above: the poem is divided into two parts with a graphic line separating them into upper and lower halves. Retallack’s upper poems are composed of fragments from a variety of writings taken across our cultural history. Marjorie Perloff describes this in her essay ‘Afterimages: Revolution of the (Visible) Word’:

> Each page serves as a kind of afterimage for the other, the lamination of citations from Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, from the notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Lilly C. Stone’s *English Sports and Recreations*, or from ‘Genre Tallique’ herself, creating a set of tantalizing ‘language graphics.’ (340)

Figure 4 (page 53) shows page 10 of the ‘Afterimages’ sequence. The lower half of the poem was created by dropping a set of paper clips onto the upper (original) poem and then transcribing the words, or parts of words, that were circled by the wire loops of the paper clip into the poem that lies below the line. Here is some of Perloff’s analysis of the poem:

Although she draws on remarkably varied sources (Chaucer, Mrs. Charles H. Gardner, the Vatican Library Book), all the ‘events’ in Retallack’s sequence go together; they really are a ‘thicket’ (that etymologically rich word) of ‘CO……………………...INCIDENTS. [...] William Carlos Williams wrote a poem called ‘The Geometry of Trees’; Retallack’s poem refers to that title, embedding it in the phrase ‘nature’s soft geometry.’ [...] ‘Strees’ seems to contain the ‘riddle of the three sleeves.’ And that riddle actually makes good common sense: nature has a rinse cycle, culture a spin cycle. But what is it that comes out of this washing machine? Another ‘thicket’ in the form of ‘TIGHT LITTLE GREY CURLS.’ [...] No wonder the after-echo in this poem is cycl
Uncle Herbie’s last words: ten o’clock

but only one etc.

(thik’it) / ME thikket (unattested) < OE oiccet
[thiccet, thikket] <oicce [thiccet] thick. tegu-.
Thick. Germanic* thiku. [Pok. tegu- 1057.]

natures soft geometry trees
riddle of the three sleeves

natures /rin /secycle

culturess / pin / cycle

TIGHT LITTLE GREY CURLS

cycl

GR

Figure 4. Joan Retallack. *Afterimages*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, p. 10.
The cycle has run down, ending with the mere growl of ‘GR.’ (343)

The startling thing about Retallack’s poems and the ones in Hoard – besides the fact that we independently devised similar structures, albeit ten years apart (though somehow I find that difficult to believe; it seems more likely that a previous quick reading buried Retallack’s structure in my mind to be recalled at a later date, its connections forgotten) – is that the lower poem is meant be a form of the upper poem after chance has re-rendered it. In Retallack’s case, the chance falling of paper clips on the upper poem ‘writes’ the lower poem; in the Hoard poem’s case, intuitively but consciously selected words from the upper poem ‘reenact’ in the lower poem how the chance mechanism of movements under the surface of the earth displaces buried objects.

For Retallack, who studied with John Cage, chance is as primary to intellectual endeavor as it is to life:

> Life is subject to swerves – sometimes gentle, often violent out-of-the-blue motions that cut obliquely across material and conceptual logics. If everything were hunky-dory, it might not be so important to attend to them. As it is, they afford opportunities to usefully rethink habits of thought. (*The Poethical Wager* 1)

Framing a poetics of swerves is her writing mission, which is focused on ethics and politics: what she calls ‘poethics’, because the old ‘geometry of straight lines in the sand (‘we dare you to cross’) is obsolete’ (1). By this she means not only the political sword-rattling of the United States government but also established categorical thinking in general. For Retallack, this unpredictability, which takes place in realms below our conscious perception – this disruption of boundaries and destabilization of entrenched habitual behaviour – is a good thing, despite the discomfort it causes, because it forces us to feats of greater attention:

> What [unpredictable forms of change] have in common is an unsettling transfiguration of once-familiar terrain. They tend to produce disorientation, even estrangement, by radically altering geometries of attention. (1)

Chance is pivotal in the world of emotional darkness. It is the event over which we have no control, and as such it has the potential to reveal to us our vulnerability in the world.
Navigating the Interior:
The Poetry of Rusty Morrison

Working within the American experimental poetic tradition, Rusty Morrison’s first collection *Whethering* won the 2004 Colorado Prize for Poetry, and was followed a few years later by *the true keeps calm biding its story*, published in 2008 as part of the Sawtooth Poetry Prize from Ahsahta Press. This second book went on to win the James Laughlin Award from the Academy of American Poets. Her most recent poetry book *After Urgency* won Tupelo Press’s Dorset Prize (2012). Morrison has also received the Poetry Society of America’s Alice Fay Di Castagnola Award, the Cecil H. Hemley Award, and the Robert H. Winner Award.

*Whethering* uses as its central poetic device a form of personal identification that conflates the poet’s self with nature – the skin and psyche of the poet seem permeable to the surrounding world, she becomes what is immediately around her. The boundaries between the poet and elements of her surroundings – whether those are the natural world, kitchen appliances, or other humans – are constantly breached. This continual falling-into-merging is linked to anxiety, which in turn is linked to a vocabulary of darkness. The instability of language seems at the heart of her wavering identity, a profound dilemma for any writer, but also, I would suggest, a primal region of poetic creativity.

Boundaries are also of primary importance in her second book, *the true keeps calm biding its story*, which is an elegy to her father. But another relationship is investigated: that of the gap – the missing and absent, which through the vehicle of memory continues to haunt the writer’s thoughts. Morrison’s third book, *After Urgency*, is likewise an elegy, this time to her mother, who died shortly after Morrison’s father.
Looking from the east bay hills of the San Francisco Bay area towards the Pacific, you see the bay’s flat disc of water surrounded by the coastal hills glittering as if it were a silver mirror. The sky’s reflection on the bay, the sun’s play on the wavelets and the distant glow of sun along the Pacific’s vast horizon make light the predominant natural feature of the landscape. This light and the bowl-shaped environment give the observer the sense that the surface of the landscape is impermeable. In the past forty years, incursions of population with attendant shopping malls and freeways, have heightened this sense of impermeability, paving over the earth’s crust with its own thin asphalt and metallic layer. Even so, the environment continues to shape itself into a huge, spherical, and embracing space. It partakes of what Gaston Bachelard calls ‘immensity’. The view of the San Francisco Bay from its surrounding hills confirms his phenomenological position that ‘immensity is a philosophical category of daydream’ (181).

Rusty Morrison, who was born and raised in the Bay Area, began the poem cycles of Whethering during her stay at Djerassi, an artists’ residency located in the coastal hills of the mid-peninsula. The landscape there is unadulterated coastal California, and as such can evoke all the natural elements that lie buried beneath the region’s urban/suburban sprawl; it is a kind of laying bare of the underworld, and primal for the native San Franciscan. Being primal, it acts both as a grid within which the anxieties of the individual can be exposed and charted, as well as a reality that the self can anchor within. The form of darkness that appears in Morrison’s writing is, unlike that in John Burnside’s writing, infrequently described in terms of colour – blackness and shadows. Morrison more often describes darkness through the uncovering of subterranean thoughts and perceptions; her darkness is found in the emotionally covert and the psychologically buried.

There are four cycles within Whethering: Climate Conditional, which describes the passage of time through the day, as well as a kind of conditionality of the self in relationship to nature and language; the Sequences, which describe various emotions of anxiety and emotional transits; the Field Notes, short descriptive pieces that use small, easily overlooked details of the natural world as catalysts for philosophical speculation; and a set of more randomly named and connected pieces. Rather than keep the cycles distinct, Morrison has broken them apart and rewoven them into a whole of alternating parts.
Morrison makes no attempt at dramatic monologue or poetic personae, the ‘I’ that inhabits the poetry is neither the wise poet imparting learned understandings about the connection of nature and the divine, nor the poet whose daily life is filled with horrors beyond that of everyday human experience and complacency. Rather, the ‘I’ of Whenbering is caught in a state of indeterminacy, of uncertainty fled into anxiety. Some of this uncertainty, which is carefully and credibly examined by the writer, is caused by the quality of language, both spoken and written, to be changeable and therefore unlimited. Language’s mutability, which can take on the quality of deceptiveness, is not a matter of semiotic slippages created by the connection of arbitrary sounds to meaning but, rather, is the movement of language across the boundaries of time and memory and into the imagination. Taken out of the moment and susceptible to the imagination, words shift in meaning, especially when the ‘I’ becomes solitary or isolated. Bachelard explains this event:

[daydreaming] always starts in the same way, that is, it flees the object nearby and right away it is far off, elsewhere, in the space of elsewhere. When this elsewhere is in natural surroundings, that is, when it is not lodged in the houses of the past, it is immense [...] Immensity is within ourselves. It is attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts again when we are alone. (184)

Although Bachelard connects this idea of immensity in the natural world with the forest, it can easily be applied to other vast territories in nature: ‘We do not have to be long in the woods to experience the always rather anxious impression of ‘going deeper and deeper’ into a limitless world’ (185). Here a lapse of boundary is linked to separation and falling. The solitary poet surrounded by primal nature falls into an isolated and ambivalent relationship with the word.

The cycle of Sequences most directly deals with this ambivalence. In the poem ‘Risk Sequence’ the word diminishes the details of the moment, a phenomenon which Morrison depicts as ‘a heavy, sheeting kind of rain’ (15) that puts the present moment and the self at ‘risk’. The word’s power lies in ‘more articulated/points of reference’. Behind much of this examination of linguistic anxiety lies the poststructuralist stance that language mediates all experience. It’s a stance Morrison plays with but never fully subscribes to.

Most of the Sequences are given titles that are connected with states of anxiety: Escape, Risk, Lost, Mistake, Caution; however, ‘Sky Sequence’ and ‘Morning Sequence’ also trace emotional states that are connected to the anxiety of being lost and being directionless within
the unknown as it is created by the quixotic character of language. In ‘Sky Sequence’, a writer’s block places the writer within a mental landscape that is vast and difficult to navigate:

Just ink-stray and stalled thought in the sky part of the sentence.
Vertigo, the full rotation. What word can face that
Standing up? No ladder
Like the eye. (24)

Morrison’s escape, her means out of the abyss of stalled thought, is the eye, which can counter the pull of imagination by connecting the self to the now moment found in a reality farthest from the individual’s darker thought processes – the upper regions of the physical world, the luminescent sky.

In ‘Morning Sequence’, the projection of human attributes onto domestic surroundings cannot save the human lost in an unfamiliar setting dominated by language:

Place self here, but where exactly, qualifiers coquettish.

Even transforming setting into language cannot move the self in a willed direction:

Sentences busily bracketing, but really there’s no getting any farther inside the house or out. (49)

Language again fails and confuses. But throughout Whethering, it is precisely writing and poetry that Morrison uses to form a map, an external construction wrested from the immensities of imagination that will place her within an emotional, and therefore physical, security. The struggle continues throughout the book.

The various Field Notes present poetic language in its most rendered-down form; they are observations presented as syntactical fragments, hence ‘notes’. They have only a slight connection to narrative, and therefore suggest a kind of falling apart, as well as the feeling that what is recorded is what is essential. They suggest an answer to the question: what remains?

‘Field Notes: 7-12’, which are set during the day’s darker and more quixotic times of dusk, twilight and night, play with the changeability of time and light through words like ‘resemblance’, ‘suggestion’, ‘shadow’, ‘hidden’, and ‘capering’.

Whethering’s final poem, ‘Field Notes 17-20’, resolves the book’s discourse on anxiety. It begins with an epigraph quoted from Rosemary Waldrop: ‘Perhaps the most important word is “and”’ (52). The idea is reminiscent of E.M. Forster’s ‘Only connect’, positing that it is in re-
relationship that we find a path out of immense wilderness of our imaginations and the improbahilities of language, both of which absorb and recast ‘nothing’ into the resiliency of nature. The book ends with:

– lichen the fungal body

dense bewilderments call it purpose

to anchor and as if from nothing

absorb

(52)

It is within the single poems, those unattached to a series, that we come across the various permutations of Waldrop’s (and Morrison’s) ‘and’, which signifies the poets in relation to others, whether that other is a lover or a book, nature or word. In all cases the other is an ‘at least equal to’ being and not subordinate to the conscious mind of the writer as lover or reader, human or writer.

In the multipart ‘Making Space’, Morrison conflates the human body with nature; implicit within the concept of conflation is the opposing concept of boundaries, which in this poem are continuously breached. This merging is not pathetic fallacy but rather a recognition of the indivisibility of the human body from nature and a realization that within that undivided state the body is fragile and vulnerable. Further, this body is capable of the dark emotion of fear: ‘we are thick/with the foliage of the body’s fright//roots endlessly orienting’ (9). At moments Morrison escapes the loss of boundary between self and nature and becomes a separate being: ‘perspective is glass/on a world I neither//occupy nor contain’ (25). The longing expressed in ‘Window (closed)’ for a more than ‘illusory’ entrance into the natural world, however, is ‘unrelenting’.

In preparation for writing ‘The sporadic-proverbial Grasp’ Morrison read through Nietzsche’s lectures on pre-Platonic philosophy, and the poem records how the essays affected her emotionally and intellectually. Also entitled ‘notes’, the various sections of the poem take fragments from Nietzsche’s lectures and make them part of longer syntactically linear musings on life and the divine – ‘to bring two/stones together/makes a god, the surfaces/perpendicular’ (20) – that at times seem metaphysical: ‘in every pour is spill/tasted’ (21). In order to subvert the hierarchy between the poem’s titles and its text Morrison embedded the section titles
within the text of other sections of the poem. As throughout most of *Whithering*, boundaries are breached, willfully, as if to work against language’s tendency to attach and discriminate.

‘Of Angle, More than Matter’ finds the poet in relation to the lover: the tongue of language becomes a tongue of intimacy, and the question posed is one of distance: ‘Our oldest arithmetic being the shortest distance between our distances’ (30). The confusions – and the anxiety – here involve how much the relationship between lovers is one of equivalence, especially when at any moment either could feel subsumed in the other.

The trope Morrison uses is that of mathematical physics with its equations, measurements, and ‘endless counting’ – acts of discrimination and particulate boundaries. Even as she places the movements of the couple on a grid of angles and squares, the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ merge with the surrounding world, and their world of domesticity is charged with emotion: ‘Scour the coffee stains on our nerves. Glue the veins in our cracked porcelain. Turn every wind-up key in our toy silences’ (30). Her final understanding is through the physics of the body: ‘Always an idea in our midst, we name it flesh’ (31). But the flesh has its own mind in relation to the abstract: ‘Easily enough, print articulates in columns, but body never fits its word’ (33). The idea is similar to that in ‘Climate Conditional (evening forecast)’ in which language becomes the I’s division from nature, and the body similar but fractious: ‘call it time/invert body to invent a word’ (14).

•

When confronted with death, however, specifically the death of her father, Morrison takes a different formal tack. In *the true keeps calm biding its story* she continues to move eligibility between the natural world and her interior world. The relationship is complex, marking out a spectrum. At first, the poet is an observer and as such implicitly separate, but often the world she observes is active, seething, suggesting that the poet’s mind is somehow linked to the environment, but whether her thought affects nature or is being affected by nature is unclear. What is clear is that she is aware of lapses and merges into the surrounding environment; she is conscious of her oscillation between separation and merger, and the challenge of retaining boundaries between her emotions and the exterior physical world:

- a breeze can’t re-ascend its sublime escalator stop
- oscillate but don’t gadfly between out- and in-wardness stop
- mics as well as head phones hidden in a field of wild flowers please (7)

- Basin of hills polished with the pour of sunset please
  
  Easing down on one knee to touch the oak leaf trapped in a footprint stop
  I neglect then compromise the vision I’ve hidden between eye movements stop
The poems’ frequent reference to measurement of both space and time are also noted and held separate; they are part of the action and intention of observation. Part of the desire to maintain the individual within the dark world of loss:

look up into a starless patch of night and watch it expand stop
stand in its corridor as if in motion stop
as if all four directions had let go of their point of interlocked origin please (14)

Again, language shares the poet's friable condition: ‘here I place father as if the word could mend itself stop’ (38). The problem with language here is linked to the unspoken words between humans who have loved each other: ‘first will I need to write any one of the letters that neither of us wrote to the other stop’ (38). But as in her previous collection, instability is most often intrinsic to language, and even the several definitions placed within the text seem to lack a permanent definitive quality. She is assailed with actions that seem random and obsessive: ‘peeling off strips of wallpaper because I have abandoned other languages stop’ (37).

The darkness, that is to say the origin of the emotion of anxiety and pain, is not just about shifting boundaries or the poet's inability to maintain separateness and ego within the confusions of language, nature and life, but rather about a gap within her world – a lost presence that is identified with her self even while not being that self.

Seemingly holding together the poet's perceptions of changeable nature and language and the emotional pain she feels from the loss of another's live presence is the central continuous metaphor of the poems: the house with its multiple stories and rooms: ‘my father’s dying makes stairs of every line of text seeming neither to go up or go down stop’ (36). The house contains discrete units, connected by a larger structure, each capable of vacancy. This is not the locus of comfort and intimacy that Bachelard describes so lovingly in *The Poetics of Space*. This is a house that having lost its inhabitant spins out into immensities of loss.

What actually holds these many levels of language and perception together, however, is the overall structure of the book, which is unvarying. Each of the poems is constructed of nine lines, grouped into three tercets, one poem per page, and each line ends with repetitions of the telegraphic clichés: please, advise, stop. Each poem begins, with the request ‘please advise stop’ in the top left corner, placed as a title to the poem, although in the table of contents the poems are listed by first line. The poem is flush right, as if when trying to escape from the title phrase the lines ran into a wall of urgent ‘stops’:
please advise stop

I was dragging a ladder slowly over stones stop
it was only from out of my thoughts that I could climb stop
not from the room please

my father's dying offered an indelicate washing of my perception stop
the way the centres of some syllables scrub away all other sound stop
his corpse merely preparing to speak its new name at the speed of night falling stop
please

each loss grows from a previously unremarkable vestigial organ stop
will I act now as if with a new limb stop
a phantom limb of the familial please advise

The telegram, once a harbinger of emergencies and bad news, provides a grid for the poet's over-spilling emotions and anchors them in repetition and rhythmic predictability. In this way, the form creates a boundary between the grieving daughter and the lost father, overriding the chaos of fear and loss that is set in motion by death.

The consistent but non-traditional form based on repeating words, sounds and/or structure suggests how poetry is able to hold emotions in check, rather than to emphasise them, which is its assumed and most often characterized function. Repetition can defuse the instabilities of emotional expression and language by using the force of predictability: if the reader, and even the writer, know what to expect, whether in ideas or sound, the worst of human terrors becomes manageable; a boundary has been drawn between one's self and the abyss. A precise and easily recognizable repeating structure is especially crucial in an elegy that does not provide uplift by praising the dead, but rather examines and lays bare grief. For the true function of elegy, finally, is to divide us from the amalgam of fear and sorrow set in motion by death. Elegies partake not of the dark but of the light.
Meditation Three

Subterranean Love

Autopsychography

The poet is a man who feigns
And feigns so thoroughly, at last
He manages to feign as pain
The pain he really feels,

And those who read what once he wrote
Feel clearly, in the pain they read,
Neither of the pains he felt,
Only a pain they cannot sense.

And thus, around its jolting track
There runs, to keep our reason busy,
The circling clockwork train of ours
That men agree to call a heart.

– Fernando Pessoa
Translation by Edouard Roditi
Poetry, October 1955, 26
**Part One: On Familiar Love**

We now have an understanding of how the term ‘darkness’ might function in poetry as it portrays our lives mythologically, or metaphysically, in an effort to represent and explain the fundamental relationships that lie behind the functioning material world. In that way, poetry’s darkness appears to be a metaphor: standing in for another. Because that other is so intangible and difficult to discern, poetry defines it by indirection, building sets of chains of meaning.

These chains of meaning may be realized directly in physical and visual aspects in the perceivable world: among these are colour. Dark colours are those that have a predominant amount of black mixed into their hue. The neutrality of these colours as features of natural objects in the world – night, brown eyes, the depth of the ocean beyond the penetrating rays of the sun – are readily associated with the metaphoric features of darkness that are linked to the unknown, the frightening, or the intractability of death and the pain it causes. It is also possible to use the term ‘dark’ as it is used in music as a component of sound, sonically associating, for example, the alliterative ‘w’s coupled with the covered vowel sounds of the ‘o’s in a verse ubiquitous to the internet – Poe’s ‘The Raven’ – with the ominous and oppressive meanings of the words: ‘Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary,/ Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore’ (*The New Oxford Book of American Verse* 157).

A third aspect of darkness is also attached to physical phenomena, although its sensory identity is less obvious: darkness can be evaluated relative to time, or rather, to inaccessible areas of time. The future because it is unknown is dark, unforeseeable, and the past as its parts dissolve in memory is also susceptible to darkness. The former is unseeable; the latter, lost. Time, ultimately, is an aspect of inescapable mortality – darkness in its most prototypical form – and our fears of ignorance and lack of control within a universe, the forces of which are overwhelmingly large.

•

A question that hasn’t been asked, though it has been lying in ambush, its shadowy presence underlying every supposition, is: Is darkness connected to emotion? And, if so, how? Further, is that connection of importance to the existence and meaning of poetry?
Martha C. Nussbaum’s extensive philosophical study of emotions, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, defines emotions as cognitive acts akin to thought, rather than simply impulses, neurological reflexes or feelings disconnected from rational thought. And she connects emotions to the system of thought traditionally assumed to be part of one of the higher levels of cognitive reasoning – ethics:

Instead of viewing morality as a system of principles to be grasped by the detached intellect, and emotions as motivations that either support or subvert our choice to act according to principle, we will have to consider emotions as part and parcel of the system of ethical reasoning. [...] We will have to grapple with the messy material of grief and love, anger and fear, and the role these tumultuous experiences play in thought about the good and the just. (1–2)

She puts forth and convincingly argues the following: that emotions ‘are about something: they have an object’ (27); that how the person views this object is not only internal and often inaccessible to thought, but also ‘embodies a way of seeing’, a perspective that characterizes how the person lives within the world (28); and that emotions ‘embody not simply ways of seeing an object but beliefs – often very complex – about the object’ (29). Finally, she claims, and this is her most salient observation about emotions being a form of thought, that ‘[emotions] are concerned with *value*, they see their object as invested with value or importance [...] The value perceived in the object appears to be of a particular sort. It appears to make reference to the person’s own flourishing’ (30). These arguments make logical sense of the power of emotions, suggesting that the more we value something, the stronger our emotions entailed with that something will be, and the greater our emotional tumult when that something is harmed, lost or simply endangered.

•

Intuitively, we would describe darkness as a ‘shade’ of emotion, rather than an emotion itself. Emotions can be ‘dark’, they can be ‘light’, they can be any shade of hue and greyness in between. They are not the thing itself but rather a quality of the thing. Among the many emotions that Nussbaum lists are: grief, joy, envy, compassion, spite, anger, sorrow, and so on; some of these we would list as dark, others not. Interestingly, I find I can refer to dark emotions and dark thoughts more easily than I can refer to both emotions and thoughts being cognitive acts. I don’t think I’m alone in this discomfort – an inhibition that shows how deeply the early dualistic proposition of thought versus emotion (with emotion being the lesser) is a part of our understanding of the world.
What interests me most about Nussbaum’s discussion is its insistence on emotions being based in an individual’s sense of ethics and its accompanying concept of *eudaimonism*, or ‘human flourishing’. The system of ethics that Nussbaum unfolds with careful scholarly precision answers the question, ‘How should a human being live?’ – beginning with a key acknowledgement that ‘emotions are forms of evaluative judgment that ascribe to certain things and persons outside a person’s own control great importance for the person’s own flourishing’ (22). Within these she includes one of the very darkest of human emotions: grief. It would not be too much to say that her book originated as an antidote to grief, set in motion by the unexpected death of her beloved mother.

With Nussbaum’s argument we move into the more personal aspects of poetry, pursuing how poetry functions most effectively for the individual practitioner and reader. One of the more difficult practices of poetry is to make a statement of ethics without lapsing into sentimental or rhetorical writing – though both of those terms are relative and defined more by what the writer feels to be, or what she may fear the reader will find to be, sentimental or rhetorical, than by hard and fast rules of writing. It’s especially difficult when writing about close relationships such as the one between a mother and infant, where the emotional ties are bound to issues of survival at cellular and instinctual levels, with no mediation of logic or even speech. This was the problem I faced in my poem series titled ‘Foundlings’. The poems were inspired by a show at the Foundling Hospital in London in 2010–11: *Threads of Feeling*, curated by Dr. John Styles, in which some one hundred intake forms of abandoned infants were exhibited from the enormous archives of the Foundling Hospital. The hospital, established in the mid-eighteenth century by a former sea captain, Thomas Coram, was the first charity for ‘exposed and deserted’ children in England. During its first fifteen years, the hospital accepted only infants less than two months old; even so, more than 4,000 babies were left at the Foundling Hospital between 1741 and 1760. The infant mortality rate of children on the streets was nearly 90%, and many impoverished parents sought the hospital’s resources for their children, forcing the administrators to select children by lottery. Mothers were asked to draw a ball from a sack, a white ball promised acceptance, if the child was healthy, and a black ball signaled rejection. Even in this simple functional act, darkness in the form of the colour black represented not only loss but probable death. Because most of the women giving up their children were
unable to write, the hospital clerks would ask each mother whose child was accepted to leave a token – often a ribbon or a square of cloth from the child's clothing—as a means of identification should she return to reclaim her infant. Few mothers were able to return for their children.

Writing from these tokens was similar to writing from the objects found in the Hoxne and Staffordshire hoards. It required imagining a human life – a possible personality within a possible social situation – based on very slim visual data. Ruth McClure's intensive study, *Coram's Children: London Foundling Hospital in the Eighteenth Century*, notes that there was very little information maintained about the children who grew up in the hospital. In a stringently class-structured society the foundlings had been born into poverty, and the mission of the hospital had been to save children in order to raise them for entry into the country's servant class; although this may not have been the founder's intent, it was the argument Coram used to persuade donors and the crown to support the hospital. Most of the children disappeared into anonymity. Just as their clothing had been replaced with institutional uniforms, the names their mothers had given them were disposed of as well.

I took a different approach in writing the foundling poems than I did for the hoard poems: all but a few poems of the series are written in the first person, assuming the imagined voice of an imagined child. Notes from the intake forms and the hospital administrative notes are used as epigraphs, and two of the poems, ‘How you are fed’ and ‘Duty undiluted cannot be long endured’, were taken from the records kept by the hospital’s governing fellows. The series of poems ends with my variation on an eighteenth-century children’s counting rhyme, one the foundling children themselves might have sung. Because I wanted to tie these children’s plight into a more contemporary setting, I included two poems called ‘Orphans’: the children in these two poem are AIDS orphans, their stories appeared in the 2010 film *Zimbabwe’s Forgotten Children*, produced by Xoliswa Sithole and directed by Jezza Neumann.

To this day I feel uneasy about claiming these children’s voices.
Elucidation Three

Loss of the Loved One: Elizabeth Robinson’s

*The Orphan and Its Relations*

Elizabeth Robinson is the author of twelve collections of poetry, most recently *Counterpart* (Ahsahta Press, 2012). In 2001 she won the prestigious National Poetry Series award for *Pure Descent* and, in 2002, the Fence Modern Poets Prize for *The Orphan and Its Relations*. A publisher as well as poet, she has coedited 26 magazine and, with Colleen Lookingbill, the EtherDome series, which publishes chapbooks by emerging women poets. Currently, she co-edits *Pallaksch* with Steve Seidenberg and Instance Press with Beth Anderson and Laura Sims. She has won many awards, including a Fund for Poetry award, the 2008 Foundation for Contemporary Arts, Grants to Artists Award and the Gertrude Stein Award for Innovative Poetry in 1994, 1995, 2006.

A strong part of her poetic practice is the development of community and the pursuit of the role of the poet as a public and social commentator:

> Being a poet is just one way of being a citizen. I write this on November 3 [election day], so I will say that in the current, and apparently ongoing, miasma of our national identity, it’s crucial for poets to take an active role in doing what they do best: be curious, imaginative, articulate, and reflective. Those qualities are healthily disruptive. Put your work in the public sphere, as part of a public conversation. Fight cliché, especially the very disturbing violence and imperialism that has become the American cliché. (From an unpublished interview with Lance Phillips.)

Her work, which follows the persuasion of American experimental poetry, is often concerned with the family, ethics and Christianity, making her approach to poetry both personal and philosophical. In *The Orphan and Its Relations* she explores the topic of loss, and how the sorrow it causes is projected outward by the sufferer, darkly colouring perception and identifications within reality. In these poems, family and lover are looked at, lost, longed for and transformed.
To be an orphan is to suffer loss on the profoundest level. The sources not only of nurturing but also of the child’s very existence have disappeared from his or her life through death. We always think of orphans as children, innocent and helpless in a world that takes advantage of those states. To be an orphan also implies extreme solitude. It’s as if, with the death of the parents, the surrounding human community falls away, leaving the orphan standing on a precipice separate from other people. Although orphans are gathered into orphanages, they are envisioned as solitary within their selves, aware of each other but intractably isolate, encapsulated in personal emotions and loss.

In *The Orphan and Its Relations*, Elizabeth Robinson strives to show that it is possible to unloose the primal loss of the orphan and apply it to most kinds of losses – from a strip of fabric to a tooth to a father to one’s humanness – so that the world becomes a nexus of loss – a categorical oxymoron. Although it’s easy to define what it means to lose an object, or perhaps another person, a generalized state of loss is an ambiguous entity, which is difficult to assess but notable for the sombre colouration of its emotional tenor. However, with the separation intrinsic to loss come benefits, such as individuality and independence, which may dissolve the state of loss and transfigure its sorrows. Throughout Robinson’s collection, the theme of the family is returned to over and again in order to examine the nature of boundaries because the family is the domain of merging: we develop merged within our mother’s womb, birth and our childhood is the history of separation into individuality. Is this the possible explanation for the story of Persephone and Demeter? Would the abduction of the kore have gone unnoticed without the sorrowing mother? Would death lose its impact without the family grieving its missing part?

In the book’s opening poem, ‘Critique of the Orphan,’ Robinson presents a vivid snapshot of the physical distances and emotional closeness between a child and her mother and the tensions these create. A child in a playground calls for her absent mother as the child tries to place herself within the centre of the mother’s attention. She then ‘picks up the absence’ (of her mother), polishes it like an apple, turning it into a tangible object. Like all children venturing to know the world, the child ‘puts it in her mouth’:

*Critique of the Orphan*

It’s not that presence is glib, but colloquial. Hear the child call, ‘Look at me, Mom!’
The words reverberate across the blank playground.
The kid jumps off the swing and picks up the absence which she then polishes on her shirt and puts in her mouth.

Whoever would have been there to say *Don’t put that in your mouth* is already in her mouth.

Plaintive: look, look.

‘Look at me’, says the mother who does not exist and sits like a wad of gum in the cheek of the child.

The girl has flossy, uncombed hair. She gulps and the gap in her throat distends for good. (1)

The mother isn’t entirely absent from the poem or from the child’s consciousness: rather, the mother is a double of the child, and when she – the mother ‘who does not exist’ – speaks, she repeats her daughter’s request, ‘Look at me.’ The need for the reflecting other extends both ways between child and mother, and in doing so causes the separation between the two to fade. At the end of the poem, the child swallows the mother, and the gap created suggests not only the absence of the mother, but also reconstructs the child’s throat, through which words form and reel out into the physical world. The child’s ability to speak is enlarged by her loss and by the ingesting of her memory and desire for her mother. Loss of the mother, as Julia Kristeva might assert, becomes the mother of language.

‘Brothers’ opens a series of poems that use Biblical references but that also focuses on the familial within those iconic references. The names of the brothers, Cain and Abel, are presented as a verbal merging: ‘If you put our names together, it spells something like “cannibal”’ (15), which in turn conjures the word ‘voracious’. Although one brother has disappeared from the physical world through fratricide, he remains *within* the survivor: ‘one inside another inside another inside another inside another inside another’ (15). Their union is multilayered: inward moving like the horizontal axis of the psyche, and thereby metaphorically obliterating death. In the course of the poem the brothers morph into Jacob and Esau, two other Biblical brothers, twins, one close on the other’s heels in birth, who are also locked in a struggle for separation and dominance. The difference between the brothers’ struggles is that one signifies lack and the other loss. Lack is more ambiguous than loss: it may be a thing or quality that is lost, that disappears, or it may be a thing or quality that was never owned by the person and therefore cannot be lost. Nonetheless, both terms refer to an absence, which can be connected to an ongoing hunger or craving.
In the poem ‘The Pietà of Cosme Tura’ the narrator struggles with the pain of a rotten tooth, which even when pulled out can be felt, so deep is it a part of her body: ‘A phantom tooth grew in its place and ached as much’ (33). Interwoven with this small personal drama is the image of Mary in the Italian early-Renaissance painter Cosme Tura’s ‘Pietà’. Mary has become a generic ‘she’ whose skirts drape unbeautifully: the folds fall awkwardly over her lap like the large-boned body of her son, heavy with death. In her meditation on the painted image, the poet reveals the motivation behind her study of loss: ‘I believe what I am trying to do is record a history of the scant./ Record what relation beauty has to privation, scarcity, departure’ (34). Robinson believes that loss creates a vacuum but that the universe of objects has an ethical drive: ‘In my theology, when one thing is taken away, another thing has the right to come in and replace it’ (34). This belief in replacement describes a yearning for a balanced and moral universe.

The formal equivalent of these replacements is easily discovered in the repetition that occurs within these mostly prose poems and throughout the overall structure of the book. Images appear, disappear and reappear as motifs: the lost tooth, the open mouth, the flow of sea water among them. In the poem ‘Mermaid’, the surfaces of the world and a woman’s body lose their boundaries:

The atmosphere overhead gives off jade salt, dessicated starfall.
Skin absorbs darkness.

Compromise, a meeting foreign to itself, below the diving light.
Her sturdy legs absorb each other, greening.

Two arms, discrete and even, bend in supplication: that straddling by which ‘fuse’ is both a verb and a noun.

The single green sinew of her hips. The skin on the water gives way, a seal which narrows the silhouette, for this is the function of the fuse, to be lit from its interior.
Scaly starlight. (81)

‘The skin on the water gives way,’ and as a consequence the woman, who has lost her humanness, re-forms, metamorphosing into a mermaid, a less-than-human, mythical being, which, being green, is full of growth within that transformation. The boundary between humanness and the surrounding natural world dissolves, but it begins with the dissolution of parts of the physical body. This change isn’t about legs transforming into a tail, rather it’s about losing separation as it is described by the individuality of limbs. Even the sky and sea,
like oddities of language, ‘fuse’. Robinson’s imagery, not only in the variability of its repetition but also in the poet’s unusual interpretations, presents loss and lack as the two mirrors within a kaleidoscope, through which the reader peers in order to see the world broken into geometric bits that reform continuously into striking abstract patterns of beauty that maintain symmetry and integrity, recreating a whole.

It is not simply imagery, however, that repeats as motifs throughout the book, but also the structural forms of relationship. As the arc of the book moves through childhood, adolescence, love and death, modules of relationship repeat and change, giving the book’s philosophical argument the action of growth and development. The motifs of the murderous sibling and the ambiguousness of his actions reappear in the poem ‘Crow & Robin’ in the presence of the construction worker who asks his co-worker, ‘Have you ever killed a man?’ (82) and the three-and-a-half-year-old brother whose play with his sister is enigmatic, his shiftiness suggesting unwholesome motives: ‘Griffin running up the empty sidewalk looking back over his shoulder. As though, I think with amusement, there was someone following him’ (87). The boy’s air of guilt fills the surrounding air with monsters of pursuit born out of his deeds, imagined or performed.

The motif of the rivalrous siblings is coupled with Robinson’s thoughts about the struggle between a crow and a robin. The crow, as a usurper clothed in black feathers, takes over the role of Cain for Abel and Jacob for Esau, obliterating or assuming the other’s life. The poet reads herself into the struggle:

I wanted the crow to be ashamed, to leave the branch ashamed that it had forced itself on another bird’s home. Then I realize that I am the crow and you are the robin and a sense of adoration and admiration spreads through me like a new version of the weather. (85)

This struggle ultimately resembles the condition of the orphan, for in the relationship between parent and child the orphan becomes the metaphor for survival. Between those in close relationship, in which each individual loses parts of his or her identity to another, the weaker – the least formed as an individual – usually surrenders a larger share of separateness and self. In the case of the orphan, this is not true. Whether the orphan is responsible or not for his parents’ death, his life has prematurely usurped theirs by taking over the future and all its potential. The orphan’s life is a continuous interplay of losses and gains.

The relationship the poet wants with the distant ‘you’ of the poem, though, is not the same. For her, merging with the other is not a question of loss of self or individuality, or sim-
ply an erotically tinged exchange, but rather a way to gain new understandings of what it is to be human by inhabiting the thoughts and sensations experienced by another:

I think about you. Rather I imagine that I am you. What would you make of the ragged peonies, and why hasn’t the neighbour cut them back as they die?
From inside your body, how do peonies smell? I am embarrassed by the limits of imagination. That is, how my desire fails as empathy and settles into voyeurism.

In this poet’s world where lost things are constantly replaced, this impulse to ‘take the place’ of the other, imaginatively, is the basis of human empathy. This is the ideal that the poet hungers for, even in the moment of failure. Our psychological loss as humans is not of our selves merged into each other but, rather, of our selves’ inability to merge in thoughts, emotions and sensations so that our understanding of each other is complete, even while our own thoughts, emotions and sensations remain intact and mediating. Viewed thus, the orphan’s relations are legion.

•
I would like to return now to the discussion of emotions that opened the chapter, briefly examining darkness as it applies to love, but moving away from familial and social love to romantic love, which is often disengaged from the social, considered instead to be private, personal and often in opposition to the stability of the individual and society.

In his 1940 study, *Love in the Western World*, Denis de Rougemont posits that romantic love, for all its purported desirability, is doomed love, and its implicit failure is meshed with and increases its desirability:

> Happy love has no history. Romance only comes into existence where love is fatal, frowned upon and doomed by life itself. What stirs lyrical poets to their finest flights is neither the delight of the senses nor the fruitful contentment of the settled couple; not the satisfaction of love, but its passion. And passion means suffering. There we have the fundamental fact. (15)

De Rougemont's argument leads towards what he sees as the conflict between the Cathars of southern France and Christianity; consequently, much of his argument has the flavor of a religious grievance. Nussbaum, however, also acknowledges the association of erotic love with spirituality throughout her examination of various artistic strategies on the topic of human flourishing. The writers she studies, from Augustine and Dante through Emily Brontë and Mahler (as lyricist and composer) to Whitman and Joyce, are all concerned with the entwining passions of spirit and sexuality.

It might seem that passionate love, like religious connection, allows us to pass across the boundaries of mind and body that divide us from each other. Isolation and separation are terms that carry negative and, depending on their extremity, dark connotations because they suggest social pathologies. A Greek friend once explained to me the origin of the word *idiot*, which is derived from ἴδιος, which means ‘the self’ and is linked to ideas of privacy (a negative concept in Greek culture) and self-absorption. Passionate love, like death, draws a boundary between the self and others, but it is a boundary that encloses two people into singularity rather than inexorably separating them from each other and those who surround them: as one boundary is erased, another is drawn. The existence of passion that takes over the self and demands, unrelentingly, that the lovers are compelled to pursue erasure within each other's arms and in the eventual loss of one another through death is still a driving force...
within poetry and other forms of art. This new boundary promises – duplicitously, de Rougemont insists – the sexual fulfilment and emotional affirmation of the fairy tale conclusion of a happy-ever-after, with an accompanying banishment of loss, pain, sorrow and evil: in other words, love is a means of sustaining human flourishing.

Hans Christian Andersen’s story, ‘The Little Mermaid’ (‘Den lille havfrue’), has continued to have a worldwide cultural impact ever since it was first published in 1837, crossing into almost fifty languages from Albanian to Vietnamese, and appearing in a slew of artistic forms including symphonies, opera (Dvorak’s 1901 Rusalka), a Russian film, Japanese animé and songs and a Disney remake in 1989, which like all Disney travesties eliminates the story’s sad parts and confirms that everyone does indeed marry and live a flawless future of sun-filled contentment. Most recently, a more accurate interpretation of the story appeared in a San Francisco Ballet adaptation, choreographed by John Neumeier, an artform that perhaps more accurately than others embodies the dilemma of lost speech and inexpressible desire: ballet despite its emphasis on physicality always retreats from sexuality, symbolically reworking its emotive drives through gesture rather than act – it holds sex at arm’s length, marvelling at its aesthetic contours.

The story of ‘The Little Mermaid’, written by a nineteenth-century sentimentalist with an extraordinarily oblivious sense of subtext and a remarkably unhappy love life (could those possibly be linked?), tells of a mermaid who, when rescuing a drowning prince, falls in love with him. Gripped by her desire, she goes to a sea witch who in exchange for the mermaid’s beautiful voice gives her human legs. The mermaid’s resulting dilemma is representative of the condition of unhappy lovers: she is speechless, born of another ‘species’ and dependent on the object of her love to transform her difference into sameness through acceptance and marriage. The prince, in turn, is driven by illusion: believing that the woman who rescued him was someone other than the mermaid, he falls in love with this imagined saviour, giving her instead his fidelity and love. What is relevant here is not the sentimentalist’s sorrow over failed love but rather Andersen’s use of mutability and its implicit belief that love is connected to painful shifts in identity. The mermaid’s change into a human being is accompanied by endless piercing physical pain. When, at the end of the story, the mermaid has failed to convey her love to her prince and loses him to her rival, she undergoes a spiritual transformation, dissolving into sea foam and transmuting into a ‘daughter of air’ who after 300 years of good deeds will ‘fly in the kingdom of heaven’ (48).
In her study *Gender and the Poetics of Excess*, Karen Jackson Ford looks at how some feminist theoreticians use the story of Philomela, a story similar because of its central motif of the woman unable to speak:

The mythic weaver Philomela has long fascinated feminist literary critics, who recognise in her predicament the situation of many women writers in a masculinist culture traditionally suspicious of women’s words and desirous of their silence [...] Cheryl Walker’s important 1982 study of American women poets, *The Nightingale’s Burden*, emphasises Philomela’s need to communicate her oppression: ‘Both as a defiled woman and as an artist urgently desiring to communicate through symbolic forms, Philomela is the type of American women poets in the nineteenth century’. (1)

There are notable differences between Andersen’s story and Ovid’s. Most important is that the mermaid chooses to give up her voice for the opportunity to achieve love, whereas Philomela’s tongue, in Ovid’s particularly gruesome description, is cut out by her rapist to prevent her from publicly accusing him of her violation. Even so, both tropes are applicable to women: speech is both taken from them and given up by them. Susan Howe, whose work is discussed below, has examined the lives and work of women writing in the first two centuries of American history, addressing the fact of women’s silence in her writing, not only as social criticism but as a way to resurrect the women from America’s early history. She pulls the voices of women out of the darkness of the past; even as she does, however, she inhabits a writing that has been characterized as dark in its spiritual leanings.

Because love poetry is often a form of confessional poetry, what Deryn Rees-Jones states in *Consorting with Angels* as typical of confessional poetry becomes even more problematic in love poetry written by a woman:

’The woman who confesses is, however, frequently read as testifying only to her own anguish and her own ‘weakness’; she is simply revealing the awfulness of femininity which was ‘known’ to be there all along, and which, in the most simplistic terms, has led to her oppression in the first place. In speaking what she believes to be a personal truth she is making a spectacle of herself, throwing an already precarious subjectivity into a heightened state of prominence and vulnerability. (25)
Love as a subject is built into favoured traditional forms such as the sonnet, which was originally a two-voice song re-enacting the exchange between two adoring or quarreling lovers. With the advent of the Language poets in the Bay Area – their focus on the inscrutability of language mixed with feminism and psychoanalysis, and their abhorrence of the political strategies behind narrative – the traditional love poem’s longings became one of the writing practices under critical review. All of this was in the back of my mind when I began to plan out the Hoard poems.

The first poem, ‘Gold Body Chain for a Small Woman’, described above (Chapter 2, page 53), sets the imaginative world of Hoard. There are a man and a woman: two would-be lovers. I imagined her very young and him older; perhaps there was an arranged marriage involved. And there would be a boundary of difference between them that would manifest in gaze, touch and language, but the attributions used are not unusual for either sex in the contemporary view of traditional poetry: gaze is ascribed to the man, and the body of the woman is envisioned in terms of the natural world. Time would also mark the two lovers, and I wanted the poetry’s temporal setting to shift back and forth between Roman Britain to the present. Here and there, throughout Hoard, the contemporary world comes to the forefront, then disappears, the poem ‘Translation’ is set in a world using the internet: ‘Within the archive of letters that flowed/ from his fingers across the keyboard/ she reads hindrance, recalling the not yet unfolded musk/ of moth-white flowers’ (155 below).

The point of view of the Hoard poems is always a woman’s, and her dilemma is the interpretation of the man’s acts. Because of the failed communication between the two lovers, the affair describes a love enacted in time but with a lost narrative. This is an archeological moment: one that requires the reader to reconstruct the interaction between the man and the woman, much as the scientists working with the Hoxne treasure must devise a narrative to explain the abandonment of such an appealing personal and valuable treasure.

•

Among the difficulties around the understanding of emotions that Martha Nussbaum cites in Upheavals of Thought are two that stand out as relevant to the writing of poetry in general. The first is that language is an inadequate medium because it lacks, among other
things, the richness of the manifold forms of expression that humans are capable of, and because it is the most familiar and everyday form of expression available to us:

When we go about our daily business, language is the form of symbolic representation on which we overwhelmingly rely. For this reason, the linguistic expression of feeling must use a medium that is in many ways shopworn, or blunted – by our habitual use of the words themselves, by our habits of narration, by our very at-homeness in a world of narration and verbal representation. (268)

The second difficulty of emotions is that the sources of their power are often buried deeply in the darkness of forgotten childhood memories:

And since language has a complex syntactic and semantic structure, it will be especially difficult for language to capture without distortion the primitive and extremely intense emotions of childhood, which remain deep in the personality in archaic and not fully propositionalized form. (268-69)

Poetry approaches and assuages these difficulties. Its function in the world is to revivify language, which may, given the subterranean nature of emotions, explain its deep and ongoing attachment to feelings. Poetry’s connection to sound – its affiliation with music, which is an artform connected to the nonverbal qualities of emotion – is part of this interconnected triad of emotion, the vitality of language and the human need of expression. Poetry is our means to put our deepest emotions – especially those connected to emotions such as de Rougemont’s doomed romantic love and its associations with the spiritual and with death – into the world of speech.
Traditionally, poets have used the elegy as a formal lament for the beloved dead, whether the person who died is either an intimate or a public figure. A substantial amount of Susan Howe’s poetry is elegiac, commenting on the losses of those closest to her in her personal life: her mother, father and two husbands. Absence and a non-rational approach to religion have also shadowed her writing, especially as it pertains to American women writers from the early settlement of New England to the nineteenth century, whose writings have also suffered a kind of death. Howe’s 1985 study of Emily Dickinson, *My Emily Dickinson*, was instrumental in re-establishing Dickinson’s unedited texts and making them part of the American canon.

The daughter of an Irish-born actress/playwright and a lawyer from a Boston Brahmin family, Susan Howe began her life as a visual artist, and her poetry often partakes of strong visual elements. She has often been associated with the Language poets, although her writing deals with subjects, such as theology and lyrical poetry, that are normally not considered part of Language poetry’s central concerns. Since the mid 1990s her work has been published by New Directions in eight collections, the most recent of which is *That This*, a meditative elegy, parts of which were written after the death of her third husband.

Formally innovative, combining paratactic poetry with the prose essay, Howe claims that poetry reaches into parts of the speaker and reader that cannot be otherwise reached:

> I think that when you write a poem you use sounds and words outside time. You use timeless articulations. I mean the ineluctable mystery of language is something … it’s just … it’s like earth from the astronauts’ view – that little blue film. A line floating around space sheltering all of us. *(Birthmark 172)*

Howe won Yale University’s prestigious Bollingen Prize in 2010.
My writing has been haunted and inspired by a series of texts, woven in shrouds and cordage of classic American nineteenth-century works; they are the buried ones, they body them forth.

— Susan Howe, Birthmark 45

Susan Howe’s book That This is divided into four parts. The first of these is a 24-page prose piece, ‘The Disappearance Approach,’ which centres on the death of her husband, philosopher Peter Hare, beginning the moment she wakes at 8 a.m. after ‘a good night’s sleep’ on January 3, 2008, to find that the house they live in is ‘too quiet’. It is the persistence of this quiet, this stillness, that leads her to discover his body:

He was lying in bed with his eyes closed. I knew when I saw him with the CPAP mask over his mouth and nose and heard the whooshing sound of air blowing air that he wasn’t asleep. No. (11)

She reveals his death, delicately, in that single negative, but she doesn’t linger over this description or elaborate on her feelings. What she writes next is a cryptic and abstract phrase that just barely misses being a sentence and could have been drawn from Eliot’s later philosophical poetry: ‘Starting from nothing with nothing when everything else has been said’ (11). There is no full stop at the end of this final sentence of the paragraph.

Before describing the moment when she realises her husband is no longer alive, Howe unfolds a restrained and careful description of the couple’s early morning domestic habits: who gets up first, what breakfasts are eaten, whether the morning paper is gathered in, is the occasional walk a possibility. It’s a companionable but separate life – no shared bed or even shared room – of two people in their seventies, who while in the midst of small predictable gestures of domesticity are also aware of the imminence of their deaths. The black void of nothingness has been at the back of their minds all along: ‘We had a running joke that at seventy anything might happen so if one of us didn’t appear in the morning by nine, the other should check’ (11).

Once her husband’s death is revealed in the solitary word ‘no’, Howe shifts to a short paragraph that begins with a quotation by Sarah Edwards from a letter written to her daughter about the death of Sarah’s husband, the eighteenth-century Calvinist theologian Jonathan Edwards: ‘O My Very Dear Child. What shall I say? A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud’ (11). Howe goes on to say that both Jonathan and Sarah were devout believers and that the sureness of their belief allowed them to read every action and event as part
of a vocabulary of divine language. Placing herself in comparison to the Edwards family’s faith, Howe concludes: ‘I read words but don’t hear God in them’(12). There is a bleakness in that statement that reveals more grief than overt descriptions of the emotional state induced by her husband’s death would have. Howe has long been concerned with the idea of ‘nothing’, an attention that defines her work as dark because its preoccupations fall into conceptual negativity, even though the missing end stop that ‘closes’ the beginning paragraph described above gives nothingness – and her husband’s death – an open, unfinished, or even infinite, quality. Howe’s Catholic upbringing reverberates not only in her attraction to theology and philosophy but also in the emptiness she seems to feel, and that suggests a painful spiritual loss: her falling away from gods of any sort borders on despair, evoking constellations of shadowed emotions.

The paragraph also makes evident Howe’s commitment to written language, to words of various sorts as they have developed and been used throughout the history of American language. In the pages that follow in ‘The Disappearance Approach’, descriptions of language – how it functions and what it means – arise continually. The metaphors she uses describing language are often odd:

Somewhere I read that relations between sounds and objects, feelings and thoughts, develop by association: language attaches to and envelops its referent without destroying or changing it – the way a cobweb catches a fly. (13)

This analogy associates language with predation while also describing its ability to preserve the objects and events it captures. The implication is that language is separate from the individual speaker – a quality we usually applaud in theoretical constructs that maintain integrity – but that language dominates the objects it refers to, changing them externally while preserving their form internally. Does this tendency of language – the sets of sounds that are interpretable as representational or referential because of their mostly consistent usage – also assure its referent’s death? The metaphor seems extreme.

Howe continues to link language and death:

Now – putting bits of memory together, trying to pick out the good while doing away with the bad – I’m left with one overwhelming impression – the unpresentable violence of a double negative. (13)

Howe does not elaborate or explain this paragraph. It simply floats between the metaphor of a fly and a cobweb and the description of how she found her husband ‘lying with his head on
his arm, the way I had often seen him lie asleep’ (13). The reader can only guess at what the ‘double negative’ refers to: the most likely meaning seems to be death and its negation of living. Another possible meaning seems to refer to aspects of memory and how we select between good and bad memories. In that case, is the double negative both the bad memories and excising of the bad memories? Surely, any rejection of one’s memories, even bad ones, is also a kind of death, because it is only through memories, finally, that we live. We construct ourselves out of our pasts, and it is the memories that others have of us that retain us, although faintly and ephemerally, among the living when we are dead.

The most common meaning of a ‘double negative’ has to do with language, in which one negative cancels another, transforming it into a positive. This logical glitch within a realm as abstract as language does affect – though not as devastatingly as the fact of death – a kind of violence within our thinking. It is impossible to say, without asking, if Howe is simply borrowing the phrase ‘double negative’ from grammar as a metaphor, but it is clear that its use firmly locks her ideas into the world of language rather than the material world of objects, things and events. She uses a negative form of the smallest intelligible units of language – a word – to describe her husband’s death as well: ‘That night or was it early morning, Peter took eternal wordlessness into himself’ (14; my italics).

Inconsistent verbal logic has long been a feature of ‘mystical’ writing, as are apophatic and aphaeretic negation: sentences that describe someone or something through delineating what that someone or something is not: a rose is not without thorns, for example. In his essay ‘Towards a grammar of the ineffable’, Mike Rose-Steel examines the ways in which descriptions of the ineffable are expressed verbally and considers the following poem that opens The Mystical Theology, a section of the writings known as the Pseudo-Dionysian Corpus, attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite but more likely the neo-Platonic writings of a fifth- or sixth-century author:

Where the mysteries of God’s Word
Lie simple, absolute and unchangeable
In the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.
Amid the deepest shadow
they pour overwhelming light
on what is most manifest.
Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen
They completely fill our sightless minds
With treasures beyond all beauty. (135)

Dark and light are primary metaphors in mystical writing, symbolic not only of God but also of knowledge and spiritual understanding. As Rose-Steel notes, ‘In trying to grasp the metaphor
of something so full of light that it precludes vision, and so perfectly dark that it is luminous, the reader is caught in a motion between two polarities, unable to achieve stability’ (6). Howe’s use of these conceptual poetic forms – what Rose-Steel calls ‘conflictive metaphors’ – puts her in the tradition of mystical writing, but hers is less a Christian-based mysticism than an existential spirituality, oscillating between an outside abstract metaphysics and her own very personal feelings and embodied perceptions.

‘The Disappearance Approach’ continues as a series of short paragraphs separated by em-dashes used like ornaments or bullets. It veers between descriptions of the necessary acts of organization after someone’s death; simple daily events such as going to see an exhibition of two Poussin paintings; the presence of forced paperwhite flowers; memories of her husband’s annoying habits of speech; a dream in which her dead husband seems deceptively alive; more notes on the Edwards family, who are simultaneously the subject of Howe’s literary excavations and muses for her own writings; and the everyday events preceding Hare’s death, including the wedding dinner of Howe’s son. These ordinary acts always lead back in Howe’s perception to larger more abstract themes: time and its human interpretation, history; death and its omnipresence within life as irrevocable absence; and love as it manifests in memory and in human institutions such as friendship and marriage. In all of these interpretative perceptions is the ‘mirroring’ that Howe finds at the centre of human relations: her philosophical poetry walks arm-in-arm with her late husband’s life as a philosopher and scholar.

Stylistically, Howe’s language is invariably succinct while at the same moment lyrical, creating an emotional response in the reader similar to what might be felt while looking out over a field of new fallen snow: there is space, calm and a sense of the infinite. Spareness in written language, like silence in the natural world, allows us to fill in something indefinable within the surrounding gaps, whether on the page or in the landscape. Blankness is not simply void, because our experience of the world is as an unbroken continuum; our training, and perhaps our instincts, require us to fill in the blanks. The ways in which a poet is able to charge that indefinable quality characteristic of absence with meaning create various emotive and, in the case of Howe, spiritual nuances. The dreamlike quality of her pared-down language with its strong connection to visual imagery and its understated observations drops a tender veil over the grief she feels over her husband’s death:

In an early morning half-waking dream you were lying on the bed beside me in a dark suit. I recently touched your black jacket, the one you loved we bought together on sale two years ago in Barney’s. We were thinking about getting another this month because you had worn the original to pieces – it’s in the closet now, an
object of storage beside your ashes. Maybe the jacket was in my mind as distant
dream knowledge of the way one figure can substitute for another with a cord
attached so what is false gives life to what is fair. I thought you were really you until
I woke up back into myself. (19)


•

About half way through ‘The Disappearance Approach’, Howe reveals the poetic genre
that this poem and the majority of her work falls under – elegy:

Looking over autobiographical fragments he wrote during the years following his
first wife’s death every one of them begins with his shock at her absence. If you
looked through my papers until now, you would find a former dead husband at the
centre. We had almost stopped needing to summon the others – not quite. Not if
you rely on written traces. (15)

The above passage can be read as outlining a belief in an abstract existence – like that of lan-
guage, the predator and preserver – apart from the material one that surrounds the grieving
poet, but it also reveals the function of her writing as a conversation with the dead, which
both preserves and sustains.

In his 1994 study of elegy, The Poetics of Mourning, Jahan Ramazani presents the recent
history of the elegiac form by examining the ways in which elegy has changed during the pe-
riod of Romantic to mid and late twentieth-century poetry. Much of his analysis examines
grief through the lens of Freud’s theory:

Most clinical psychoanalysis has adopted ‘normal,’ ‘healthy,’ or ‘successful’
mourning as a therapeutic ideal, often hypostatizing mourning as a rigid step-by-
step program that leads from shock to recovery, and some literary applications of
Freud’s essay [‘Mourning and Melancholia’] have transferred his abstract norm to
texts, sifting them through predictable narratives in which artistic compensation
redeems personal loss. Yet Freud admitted in letters and other writings that
mourners typically remain inconsolable, never filling the gap of loss. (28–29)

Nineteenth-century writers, Ramazani posits, follow an earlier model of elegy in which grief
of the mourners is transformed; theirs are the literary applications of Freud’s theory of the
healing process of loss: ‘The joy of earlier elegies and many nineteenth-century lyrics had
been grounded in the well-founded expectation of renewal’ (39). Among these lyrics,
Ramazani includes Tennyson’s In Memorium and Keats’ ‘Ode to the West Wind’ and the ‘Ode
to the Nightingale’.
This is an attitude more easily assumed when the writer and the culture at large believe in God or a god that comes attendant with a heaven. For believers, death is not loss and absence but a passage into a new and better life; for those poets writing elegies to comfort the living, the possibility that life after death might be worse than life during life worked against elegy’s function as a means of solace and was an unthinkable topic. Elegy, then, was a kind of shadowed celebration far from critical scrutiny.

According to Ramazani, elegies, beginning in the twentieth century, increasingly reveal the writer’s ambivalence and anger: ‘In [psychoanalyst] Melanie Klein’s view, such ‘pining’ and idealization shield mourners from their own anger and paranoia, including fears that they may have destroyed the lost object’ (45). Discussing *Poems of 1912–13*, Thomas Hardy’s elegiac series to his wife Emma, Ramazani poses a number of possible ambivalences, created by the writer’s feelings of guilt for making aesthetic capital (and very real financial earnings) from his wife’s death. In the twentieth century, the elegy begins to reveal a highly contradictory set of feelings and motivations between the mourning writer and the mourned.

With the advent of Freud’s observation that other sources of thinking and being (the subconscious and the conscious with their strangely ‘other aspects’ – id, ego, super-ego) may exist seemingly separately within the individual, the idea of metaphoric and psychological deaths became a possibility: one could write elegies, for example, to lost innocence. Ramazani examines in some detail the elegies of Sylvia Plath, along with what he calls ‘American Family Elegies’, in which the poet uses the form not for consolation but for vindictive accusation:

In the family elegy, American poets duel fiercely with the dead, refusing to temper their belligerence and sometimes deliberately inflaming it. … It is in their parental elegies that Lowell, Plath, Sexton, Ginsberg, Rich, and Berryman most forcefully revise the displaced family romance at the heart of the elegy, denouncing, mocking, ravaging and exposing their parents in stunning poetic acts of confrontation. (222–223)

In the case of Plath this anger spills over into her marriage, in which her husband takes on the lineaments of her despised and desired father. This confrontational poetry could be viewed as part of a larger movement away from the consolation that, according to Ramazani, is demanded by the culture’s social interests:

Under the social commandment to repress the dead and deny grief, many Americans have encrypted their responses to the dead in the symbolic privacy of the
lyric poem; under the commandment to be open and candid, they have articulated more anger and illicit desire towards the dead than ever before. (224)

Ramazani also finds a confrontation to death-based commercialism entwined in these poets’ elegiac anger:

Radio and TV companies sell an endless series of instantly available wars, atrocities, murders, griefs, and natural disasters from around the world. With little self-consciousness, the commercial media capitalize on fears of death by nuclear or conventional warfare, profit from converting into marketable discourse the extinction of species and destruction of habitat. … The commercial panorama of death threatens to alienate us still further from an intimate relation to our own deaths and the deaths of loved ones. (225)

Ramazani’s book argues that the modern elegy has moved away from the traditional form of elegy, in which consolation is provided by exalting the dead, reaffirming thereby the presence of divinity and justice, while at the same time allowing the poet a congratulatory stance as the transforming artist. Contemporary poetry often eschews praise of the dead but allows poets to transform the pain caused by loss through the rejection of their dead and a reshaping of both personal history and a new form of identity, which each poet is enabled to claim through that rejection. That reshaping, that new self, is the poem’s consolation.

Howe’s poetry does none of that. It does, however, provide consolation. And it does so by not assuming a narcissistic stance towards the dead: her husband Peter’s death is not an abandonment but simply an absence, taken on by him almost as if he had chosen a personal identity that included a distillation of his physical self into the metaphysical (though not divine, despite the suggestion of an infinite) state of ‘eternal wordlessness.’ Howe’s grief is clear but unstated – it inhabits her language like a fragrance – and it is not accusatory. No demands for recompense are made on the dead, and consolation is possible because her language lacks the fraught emotions of sorrow, recrimination, and anger. What is left to Howe – and the reader – is the recognition that death is the destiny that baffles humankind, that we will never understand, and that, further, our memories allow us to continue to love the dead one’s fantasimal presence until we ourselves are dead and no longer need ‘to summon the others.’

So, how does she manage to shed the customs of both traditional and contemporary elegy and maintain this philosophical balance? I’m tempted to say, simply, practice. All of Howe’s
writings, from her meditations on personal loss to her examinations of the various historical movements and figures of early New England, are elegiac in this way. Her poems collaged from old texts and shaped into visual objects on the page's white field are also visual representations of this sense of elegy.

Like most poets considered experimental, Howe's earliest books appeared as chapbooks, which were later gathered into larger collections. New Directions' 1996 publication of Howe's work, Frame Structures: Early Poems 1974–1979, was the first major compilation of her work by a mainstream publishing house – one known for its commitment not only to experimental work of the twentieth century beginning with the modernists Eliot, Pound and Williams, but also known for its early recognition of seminal American poets. The Frame Structures collection includes two chapbooks by the New York mimeo press Telephone Books, Hinge Picture and the Secret History of the Dividing Line, along with two other small press chapbooks, Chanting at the Crystal Sea (Fire Exit, 1975) and Cabbage Gardens (Fathom Press, 1979). What is unusual about Frame Structures is that it begins with an essay written in 1995 – that is to say, sixteen years after the poems gathered for this specific edition. In an interview with Edward Foster, Howe comments on this addition and how reorganization is part of her writing process: 'I begin with fragments and bits and pieces, and they take me to what I find, and then I write an introduction to anchor the poem. The beginning is usually the end' (165).

Composed like ‘The Disappearance Approach’ in short, evocative paragraphs that are closer to prose poetry than discursive prose, the essay weaves Howe’s personal history with British and New England American history. In a mere two paragraphs she can move from Longfellow’s wife, Frances Elizabeth Appleton, to Lizzie Borden to Sundays with her great-aunt Muriel to B.F. Skinner, landing at one point with a radically lateral comparison made by Skinner, whom she quotes verbatim, in an essay celebrating I.A. Richards:

“'The linguist's 'deep structure,' like Freud's 'depth psychology,' is a spatial metaphor which serves several functions. It is useful in referring to the visibility of behavioural processes and their effects and the role played by visibility in the determination of behaviour; it should not, of course, be used to suggest that an analysis is profound rather than superficial.' (10)
The first sentence of the quotation could be linked to Howe’s practice of visual poetry, just as the rest of the quote could be read as an assertion of the ironic edge characteristic of her portraits of the individuals who comprise a kind of neighbourhood to her family and her self. Critic Will Montgomery in his study *The Poetry of Susan Howe: History, Theology, Authority*, finds her polyvocalism variable and destabilized rather than unifying and solid:

> Her poetry is so populated with the voices of others that it is more appropriate to characterize it as a mobile structure of overlapping tendencies than to impose a univocal critical narrative. (35)

And while there is truth to the claim of a wide diversity of voices, it is also true that Howe brings each voice, eventually, back to its relationship to her and her family. She is at all moments mapping out in detail the individuals and the locales that are inextricable to her personal past and to the formation of her personality. *My Emily Dickinson*, the title of her critical study of the work of Emily Dickinson, could not be more aptly named. Glimpses also appear in the poetry:

> our house
> formed
> of my mind
> to enter
> explorer
> in a forest
> of myself
> (‘Cabbage Gardens’ 85)

Ultimately though, Howe places her attention and her explanation of her intentions outside herself by implying a metaphysics that exists abstractly apart from interior and physical self – that metaphysic applies to the dead, to language and to her formulation of poetics and method. It can be summarised in what Montgomery accurately points out as central to Howe’s identity and work as a poet – her engagement with ‘absence’:

> Although the lyric ‘I’ was anathema to many of Howe’s contemporaries among language writers – the ‘guard’, if anything, of the specious claim to coherence of the poem’s speaking subject – for Howe, despite the polyphony of her writing, the I appears to guarantee an ethics of poetic ‘vision’ [...] ‘vision’ is organized around absence and, moreover, overseen by the paternal imago, which appears to guard the perimeters of symbolization. The ghostly fathers of Howe’s writing represent an absence, an identificatory chasm, that is both traumatic and enabling. Howe appears to link paternal absence, and absent divinity and lyric poetry. (28)
Although the early poems collected in *Frame Structures* contain extensive reference to both Howe’s mother and father, the idea of paternal absence is immediately introduced in the first paragraph of the book’s opening essay, which begins with a description of the four-year-old Howe and her father at the Delaware Park zoo on December 7, 1941 – Pearl Harbor Day. The moment signifies her father leaving, he will soon join the military and be deployed to Europe: ‘I was never sure what my father was doing in the army’ (6), but the text of the essay soon grows wayward – moving from the bears at the Delaware zoo to John Adams. From the moment of her father’s absence, the essay reveals, she and her mother and sister take up a more nomadic existence, moving between relatives and friends, from upstate New York to Boston. These movements are like Howe’s many movings through the text of multiple voices that inhabit not only the opening essay of *Frame Structures* but her work in general. This movement is not stream of consciousness for, with each shift of topic, Howe develops an idea through to some sort of conclusion, some philosophical pronouncement.

A later collection of poems, *Pierce Arrow*, was compiled after the death of Howe’s first husband, the sculptor David von Schlegell in 1992. And although there are no directly conventional elegiac references in the collection to his death, it is easy to imagine that her two husbands’ deaths are woven inextricably with the early disappearance of her father in 1941, and, as Montgomery suggests, that these absences are the structure on which her poetry hangs. Absences are not restricted to the men – both familial and intimate – in her life, however. In her article ‘Blackwork: On Susan Howe’s *The Midnight,*’ Kate Lilley points out that the collections that comprise the New Directions edition of *The Midnight* are also elegiac but that they refer to the death of Howe’s mother: ‘*The Midnight* is a work of maternal elegy and family history in the female line’ (12). At the centre of the book lies another essay of family memories, and surrounding this section are the series *Bed Hangings*, 1 and 2. Lilley explains that, in these poems, Howe uses the curtains for beds as metaphors for the boundary between life and death:

In sacred contexts both ‘veil’ and ‘valance’ are often used to intimate divine mysteries and life after death, beyond the vale of tears. At the beginning of ‘Bed Hangings I’, Howe draws attention to the book as the stage of a live encounter in space and time, a space of reanimation, and to our anticipation of what lies within its covers and between the sheets: ‘Listen, quick rustling’. (15)

Howe’s studies of genealogy run through both sides of her family, and are often placed, as in *Frame Structures*, one after the other. Howe offers another form of genealogy, however, one which is also elegiac but that lies apart from that of the lives and deaths of her family
tory: a genealogy of American women writers, who because of their gender have died a second death within history. Their lives and their spiritual passions – from the antinomian Ann Hutchinson to the poet Emily Dickinson – are embedded in Howe’s writing as she rediscovers and reorganizes these women’s thoughts, which were written during the formational years of New England up until the twentieth century. Although she is also deeply involved in the work of male writers – such as Melville and Emerson – during these several hundred years, an emphatic part of her project is not only to recover women’s lost voices but also to identify those voices with the remaking of British English into American English. Howe sees these women’s voices as they are shaped through their faith-based – rather than religion-based – perceptions of the world as part of the wilderness that confronted the colonists settling into the new world: ‘During the 1630s and 1640s a mother tongue (English) had to find ways to accommodate new representations of reality’ (Birthmark 48).

Wilderness itself is a darkness. It has conventionally stood for being outside Christian grace, as well as standing in for the unknown, the untamed and that which is fraught with danger. This is a place that Howe willingly inhabits because she senses it as a place not only of readjustment but of reformation. The disintegration of known identities occurs simultaneously with the reintegration of identity. This is rather like Elizabeth Robinson’s theory of the scant, when the vacuum of the lost is quickly filled by others through life’s eager energy.

Finally, by inhabiting poetry, Howe also inhabits the wildness of language itself through the process of her writing:

So I start in a place with fragments, lines and marks, stops and gaps, and then I have more ordered sections, and then things break up again. That’s how I begin most of my books. I think it’s what we were talking about in history as well, that the outsidedness – these sounds, these pieces of words – comes into the chaos of life, and then you try to order them and to explain something, and the explanation breaks free of itself. I think a lot of my work is about breaking free: starting free and being captured and breaking free again and being captured again. (Birthmark 166)

Like all of Howe’s compiled books, This That is a complicated structure. Besides the opening essay about her husband’s death and its surrounding events in her life, the collection continues with two series, ‘Frolic Architecture’ and ‘That This,’ and ends with a solitary untitled poem, which is a collage of two short fragments from books:
Language and poetry frequently spill over into radical visualizations in Howe's writing. The flowers in this ending poem-collage hark back to the paper whites of her husband's life, as well as to Howe's own attempts to neglect nothing crucial in her account of her husband's death.

This collage form is used throughout ‘Frolic Architecture’, a series that continues her engagement with the Edwards' family:

Much of the material in ‘Frolic Architecture’ is collaged from the ‘private writings’ of Hannah Edwards Wetmore, copied by her daughter Lucy Wetmore Whittelsey, now among the Jonathan Edwards papers at the Beinecke Library. (iv)

Hannah Edwards Wetmore was the daughter of Sarah Edwards and Jonathan Edwards, whose writings act as consolation throughout ‘The Disappearance Approach’. Jonathan Edwards is a figure of interest for Howe because he implemented a New England revivalist religion which allowed for God's ‘good pleasure’ and ‘arbitrary grace’ to grant faith that would move a believer towards holiness. His revival moved mid-seventeenth-century New England to pervasive religious fervor and controversy. As mentioned earlier, Howe points out how life's events form a divine language for the Edwards family, but she also designates Sarah and Jonathan Edwards' language as a form of poetic instruction, mixing her admiration for their linguistic spirituality with her admiration of their stylistic usage of words:

'I love to read her [Sarah's] husband's analogies, metaphors, and similes.

For Jonathan and Sarah all rivers run into the sea yet the sea is not full, so in general there is always progress as in the revolution of a wheel and each soul comes upon the call of God in his word. (12)

The poem-collages that comprise ‘Frolic Architecture’ are constructed from photocopies taken from books in the Yale library's collection. The series opens with a short enigmatic quatrain, which marks Howe's identification with what follows by enunciating her understanding of history as ‘a shadow that is a shadow of’ – a dark representation lacking detail, whose form is distorted and shifting:
that this book is a history of
a shadow that is a shadow of
me mystically one in another
Another another to subserve

The collages are typical of Howe’s typographic collage work, in which photocopies are shredded, overlapped, and layered into short poems. This ‘form’ comes out of Howe’s family archives; Howe’s uncle wrote and pasted into his books in multiple directions, much like Howe handles her pasted fragments of photocopied text:

The disruptions and elisions in the form are visual representations of the gaps – the absences – that predominate Howe’s more conventionally formed poetry and her metaphysic. The poems work less to reinstate the writing of Hannah Wetmore than to transform it into short prayer-like pieces of text, which are characterized by being torn out of context as well as out of the past. That they retain meaning, and even transform meaning by highlighting turns of phrase and small grammatical events is a tribute not only to language but also to the endurance of the smallest and most fragmented human gesture at communicating intimacy.

The section ‘That This’ continues the quatrain that opens ‘Frolic Architecture.’ Its seven pages are composed mostly of quatrains. They are enigmatic statements using ‘light’ and aspects of the natural world in disjunct lines that finish finally with a reference to solitariness within the material reality of being:

That a solitary person bears
witness to law in the ark to
an altar of snow and every
age or century for a day is
At this time of sorrow, Howe gathers together work that deals not only with the death of a loved husband but also with the question of being and immortality. And while not offering a conventional, religious doctrine of afterlife, or even a consistent theology, Howe substitutes a personal sense of the divine through her mapping of intricate genealogical and historical intersections and through her own interpretation of life as meaningful. Meaningful without consistent or logical explanation; it is perhaps here that we can claim most definitively her work as dark.

In her writing, Howe frequently designates the divine as ‘dark’:

Wheel of mutable time Fortune fabled
to turn
(known circumference attached to a frame)
Thoughts are born
posthumously
Dark as theology’s secret book
the unsphered stars
are touchstones at a gallop Dark
irrevocably dark
(‘Pythagorean Silence’ 2)

Kate Lilley writes ‘[Howe’s] darkness is mystical, inviting communion with what is hidden from plain sight’, and Will Montgomery suggests Howe’s divinity is ‘dark’ because it not only lacks the solace normally ascribed to belief in the existence of a godhead but because it is difficult to interpret and to name:

Darkness is an aspect of the divine for Howe, and revelation in her work is a fleeting and inscrutable occurrence. Howe’s work seeks to perform, through an encounter with the obscurity of language itself, the shadows at the fringes of philosophical language and the resistance of eschatological question to rational enquiry. (60)

Finally, Howe’s work offers neither the consolation of traditional elegiac convention nor the cathartic accusations and restructuring of identity through rejection that Ramazani posits are characteristic of contemporary elegiac poetry. It accepts simply that death is a fact of our existence, and rewinds moments of personal history and death into an idiosyncratic view of written history that attempts to reform monolithic institutional records with intuition, imagination and
the attractions of faith. All of her writing taken together forms a web – or perhaps lace or cut-work embroidery – of words that show the complexity of one woman’s life: its connection to history and the tender, remote and fragile emotions that she experiences through her love of those whose lives intersect intimately with her own.
**Meditation Four**

**The Pain of Conflict**

2.

White crows, abandoning the carcass, carry
Away the secret –

*First thirst, then*

*Burst* is announced by

the bloody blooms, the scored sky.

Blue wounds, blue winds –
A sun-cracked crust, the No of the known, the
gnom of noon.

– Andrew Joron,
from ‘White Crows (Vastation)’

*The Sound Mirror* 28

‘T Triple C tourniquet. 9-line. Role 3. jet to Germany. fight soldier fight. breathe.
hang on to different tubes and wires. not twisted trips in dust. cobra traps. lash. the
smash the bloody grab the blast the blast. hideous misstep. fuck. IED. fuck.
fucking fucking IED. your limbs bleed. out. almost gone. O₂, Sats, ICU chatter.
radio net. 9 liner 9 liner wheeze life-support. not Apache, Black Hawk, Chinook, whook
whook whook whook whook, fast air over KAF. out of there. over the red desert. out of
there. you must. hang on. son. breathe son. breathe. we wait we wait. will to live.
will you to live. will you live. hang on son. hang on. son. over the red desert.
you’re almost. gone. breathe son. breathe. hang. on. breathe. son. hang.
on.

– SMSteele,

‘9 liner’, for Cpl. D Fitzpatrick
Of all human practices, war seems one of the most obscurely motivated: rationalizations about any particular war fall short of a convincing explanation for why we are the only species on the planet to perform institutionalized murder on itself. In her exquisitely detailed study, *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry writes about war, its causes, its logic and its fictions:

> When the system of nation self-belief is without any compelling source of substantiation other than the material fact of, and intensity of feeling in, the bodies of the believers (patriots) themselves, then war feelings are occasioned. That is, it is when a country has become to its population a fiction that wars begin, however intensely loved by its people that fiction is. (131)

Several questions occur to me when reading the above quotation: Is it possible for nations – as changeable and as immaterial as their ideology forces them to be – ever to sustain ‘any compelling substantiation’ of their existence? And corollary to that: is it ever possible, as long as there are national and tribal identities, for war to *not* exist? Has Scarry provided an explanation for the continuing and escalating existence of war? For as global community becomes more and more a possibility, isn’t it true that our national ideologies become more and more destabilized, more and more fictional?

But the logic of war is one of its less compelling features. War is the ultimate source of physical and psychological human pain. For Scarry, pain is the ultimate definer of reality for humans. When we are in pain what is known as the ‘real’ world drops away: only pain exists. And when pain abates, the ‘real’ world floods back in to our perception, but we are never as sure of what exists or occurs in the real world as we are of pain. The tree that we see outside the window may or may not be there: it could be a representation substituted for trees we have seen before, or a figment of our imagination, an image projected from our memory, or any number of unreal possibilities. This is even more true of ideas, concepts, beliefs and ideologies. The pain of a wound, however, is undeniable. And it is here that we find ourselves linked once again to concepts of darkness. Not only are the motivations behind war obscure, but also the pain it causes is a threshold on the other side of which lie confusion, speechlessness, fear and death.

•

In his essay on September 11, 2001, American poet and critic Andrew Joron uses the
etymology of the word ‘emergency’ to link the inexplicableness of war to the equally inexplicable practice of poetry:

Where language fails, poetry begins. Poetry forces language to fail, to fall out of itself, to become something other than itself –

A kind of topological fold or failure (called a ‘catastrophe’ in mathematics) precedes the emergence – constitutes the emergency – of the New. If poetry ‘makes language new,’ then it must be defined as the translation of emergency. (1)

Emergency, he continues, is derived from Middle French émerger, originally from Latin emergere, which meant ‘rise out or up, bring forth, bring to light,’ from ex- ‘out’ + mergere ‘to dip, sink’. Once again we have the concept of darkness as a state from which something arises into birth. Joron suggests that this birthing is also fraught, that the painful passing through a categorical boundary becomes a transmutation. It is in this place – where the boundary holding us just outside of death dissolves and human categories waver – that poetry exists as metamorphosis.

On July 5, 2009, just before I left the United States for the UK in order to study and to write the series of poems about the Hoxne treasure, the Staffordshire hoard was discovered in a farmer’s field near the village of Hammerwich in Staffordshire. According to the Birmingham Museum website, there is no other archeological discovery comparable in terms of content and quantity in the UK or mainland Europe. Up until a few months ago, when a second group of the hoard was discovered, the Staffordshire hoard consisted of over 3,500 items that totaled over 5 kilos of gold, some 1.5 kilos of silver and 3,500 cloisonné garnets. The artifacts are provisionally dated to the seventh and eighth centuries. What is unusual about the hoard is that, unlike the Hoxne hoard of jewellery and domestic items, the Staffordshire treasure is almost exclusively war gear, with ‘an extraordinary quantity of pommel caps and hilt plates’ for swords. The discovery forced me to rethink my project. I decided to write two series: one based on the Hoxne hoard, which would pursue the question of love, and one based on the Staffordshire hoard, which would use war as its theme. It seemed to me that if I were to pursue the topic of how poetry is often born out of darker impulses within the psyche then I needed to look at war and how poetry can rise out of such terrifying and inexplicable human behaviour.
Writing about war brings with it a slew of ethical questions, most of which are encumbered with issues of moral stance, but the most pressing of which is: as a non-combatant living outside the physical reality of war and even disengaged from issues of a particular conflict, how can a writer comment about war with any authority or right? The answer to this question, which is really a form of self-doubt, lies in moral imperative: you write about war because you are compelled to write about war. In my case, I was compelled to write about war because war’s existence in the world causes me grief, and writing, no matter how obscure, is a form of action. The act of writing assuages and reconstructs the silences that grief builds within my mind.

Even though I live outside any current war zone, as an American I am forced by my culture into the role of a passive combatant. That’s an oxymoron, but it accurately reflects the dilemma that many Americans feel when facing the policies of its government. The United States has special forces in over seventy-six countries around the world. The War on Terror, under the military name ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’, continues as an active war in Afghanistan, the Philippines, Somalia, Sahara, northwest Pakistan and throughout the Middle East. According to the international news agency Reuters, ‘In the 10 years since U.S. troops went into Afghanistan to root out the al Qaeda leaders behind the September 11, 2001, attacks, spending on the conflicts [has] totaled $2.3 trillion to $2.7 trillion.’ These expenditures impact our lives, within the nation and globally. The U.S. government’s need to finance its wars means that its attention is turned outward towards sustaining conflict and inward to the development and maintenance of an economic structure based on war. The United States remains without an effective universal health care; though ObamaCare claims to alleviate some of the pressure of the healthcare system’s failures, it will be decades, if ever, before the U.S. has a health care system as effective as the one the UK government is currently trying to dismantle. Also, the U.S. supports corporate practices that are wasteful and exploitative, and fails to support education and other social services. All this is well known and has been discussed and documented in crushingly fine detail ever since the widespread criticism of government policy evoked by the war in Vietnam. But the social and political complexities that lie beneath the current wars in the Middle East, South Asia and Africa are really beyond my powers and knowledge to delineate. I had to approach writing about war from a more personal perspective.

*
What is most striking to me when I look at the Staffordshire artifacts is their compelling beauty. I also feel this quality when I look at the sleekness of fighter jets or the computer images that trace the paths of missiles towards their targets. Some of this beauty is an aspect of function: we apprehend the same in nature, feel its resonance within us, when we look at, for example, the curve of a bird’s wing or a dolphin’s body.

Another aspect of that beauty lies in our relationship to weapons. A weapon, when it destroys an enemy, protects our lives; it is our saviour. How can we not feel gratitude to and intimacy with the objects that are our lifeline in desperate times? How can we not see a weapon as an object of wonder – a wielder of death within life – and strive in its fabrication to make it elegant as well as functional? In the course of my research I came across many interviews with soldiers, one of whom, holding an automatic rifle close to his body, said: ‘I sleep with my gun. I love her. She’s my bitch.’

Then there is the random appearance of beauty in the world. Some years ago I was at the private showing of a film that showed the lives of political prisoners in Turkey. What baffled me at the time was that the cinematography was gorgeous. The movement of sunlight over plates and prisoner’s robes, over prison walls and sandaled feet was vibrant, almost transcendent in its purity. In the discussion afterwards, I expressed my unease about this visual beauty, and one of the other audience members commented that such
contradictory phenomena were an aspect of life: that loveliness and justice often exist side-
by-side with hideousness and confounding cruelty.

‘Decorations’ is a 24-page poem, which attempts to address how I experience war. The title
takes its name not only from the decorative quality of the artifacts of the Staffordshire
hoard but also from the military awards of medals for bravery and heroism. War poetry has
for the most part been about the soldier in battle, often celebrating militarism. Even in con-
temporary critiques of war, writers posit the potential of a ‘good’ war – one with honour,
idealism and bravery – while delineating the reality of ‘bad’ war – one with needless vio-
lence, cruelty and corrupt ideologies. Rather than comment on ideologies of war – its dulce
et decorum est aspects – I wanted ‘Decorations’ to portray instead the mood of war, to create
a kind of atmosphere. One of the most striking features of conflict zones is their localiza-
tion: you can be in a city street where there are smoke bombs, the sound of gun shots and
breaking glass, shouts, screams, running bodies, and when you turn a corner into the next
street everything suddenly goes quiet, reverts to a peaceful neighbourhood where daily life
goes on. I tried to capture some of that in the texts of ‘Decorations’, which are always shift-
ing, within poems and between poems.

Humanity continues to attempt to establish and enforce codes around war; and while most
of the laws of war cover its formal procedures and the treatment of soldiers, our most
recent international laws covering war also address the issue of civilians. Abuse of civilians
during military engagement constitutes a war crime, in distinction to humanitarian crime,
which is the abuse of civilians away from the theater of war. With the movement away from
conventional war into technological war, the spill over from soldier to civilian injury
increases and the divide between war and humanitarian crimes becomes less distinct. An
example was the fall of the Twin Towers on September 11. More often, however, the non-
combatants killed in war are those that cannot escape from conflict rather than those who
are taken by surprise from an outside attack.

It made sense to me to present war as it appears to non-combatants, though it is often hard to
separate soldiers and civilians, especially in civil wars and rebellions or wars like Vietnam and
Afghanistan, where outside governments are fighting for ideological and economic control.
over a country with a radically different culture. The outside texts used in ‘Decorations’ are from individuals in the midst of conflict: among them are war trial accounts given by civilians, journalists’ recollections and statistics from non-governmental organizations like Médecins Sans Frontières. Texts are taken from reports written about Kosovo, Bosnia, Darfur, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and the U.S. I have fragmented these texts to integrate the voices into the overall texture of the poem, but the fragmentation also serves as a more accurate portrayal of how we receive voices in war – through the media, through gossip, through our own inability to perceive and handle information objectively.

The first formal concern of ‘Decorations’ was to use sonic and metaphoric beauty conjunct to the awfulness of war. This is done first of all through the structure of the series. The majority of the poems are divided into three columns (see Figure 6, page 104). On the left-hand side of the page are descriptions of some of the most strikingly crafted items of the Staffordshire hoard: the text has been rewritten from museum catalog descriptions and poetic content has been added. On the page’s right-hand side are fragments from eyewitness accounts of conflicts beginning with Bosnia and ending with Afghanistan. Because of the aural and content differences between the two texts, a third column of textual fragments, the central column, mediates the two ‘voices’ through rhythm, sound and/or a bridging metaphor. The artifact used as the basis of the poem below, ‘Zoomorphic’, portrays two eagles holding a fish between them (see Figure 5, page 101).

In between the poems that refer to the Staffordshire artifacts are poems written in a variety of forms from sonnets to prose poems. Except for the long prose poem ‘Still’, these poems are from the point-of-view of either a commentator or an individual caught in the moment. ‘Still’ is taken from a witness account delivered to the BBC, which I edited heavily making it more grammatically and emotionally concise than the original translation. ‘Still’ recounts the families killed in Taldou village during the Houla massacre, in the region north of Homs, Syria, on May 25, 2012, and lists ninety-four of the people killed. The number of people killed during the massacre totalled 108, among them were thirty-four women and forty-nine children.

The remainder of the poems attempt to integrate my personal life into the life of war – that is to say, into a world of violence – and by association to place the reader into a world
Gold plate, one of two birds
twisted away, awry
traces of talons on the fish’s body.

*wild cranes and storks*

Likely it’s the decoration on a shield:
two eagles holding a fish between them.
The raptors’ hooked beaks,
following a circular and multiple path,
feathers flattened into a disc, a plowed field,

*a ghost house*

… deserting by twos and threes
every night

… rifles propped against
the nearest thorn tree …

the metal beaten into a maze
the paths of which never intersect:
one never leads into another,
even though there is a centre

*a succession of pestilential huts*

*and, separated by fields of corn,*
*carcasses of livestock*

I knew hunger briefly in a
prison in Darfur.

---

Figure 6. Page 212 from ‘Decorations’.
characterized by force and violence. Two sonnets are mythic and literary in content, which are avid concerns of my writing. Both are rhetorical; as is, perhaps, the entire poem when all the parts are placed side by side. One sonnet recounts the gift of Excalibur and the other the slaying of the Medusa.

There are also descriptions of local disaster: earthquakes and freeway accidents. The prose poem that relates the death of a deer on a California freeway is meant by association to pull the reader into the life-and-death arena of war. The deer is easily read as a dead soldier carried off the field, covered in blood:

We decided to move the body to a grove of young redwoods about 100 feet down the road. I backed up my truck and the five of us lifted her up and over the railing into the back of the truck. As she fell from our arms, her mouth opened and blood poured out – hemorrhage from all those ruined organs.

We returned her to her woodland. And I returned home, showered off the still warm red liquid, and hosed out her blood that was everywhere in the bed of the truck. (220 below)

Because the bulk of the hoard poems uses artifacts unearthed from British soil as its governing metaphor, it seems imperative to compare these poems with Seamus Heaney’s bog poems from North; the comparison works and doesn’t work on several levels. For one thing I am a woman and I believe strongly that my role as a writer is different than Heaney’s, or that of most men. Second and more important, the role of the U.S. in current conflicts is as an aggressor or as a combatant with superior technological powers. This is radically different from the Irish citizen’s position in the midst of the Troubles of the 1960s and ’70s. And although neither of these issues is addressed extensively in the course of ‘Decorations’ or North, I believe they are influences that affected our choices of form: for the most part Heaney writes in the first person, often adapting a persona, especially that of the mysterious bog people who have appeared throughout northern Europe, arising unpredictably from their acidic graves. Heaney’s poems are narrative and often follow traditional rhyme schemes, using his formidable poetic voice. This is radically different from the form of ‘Decorations’ described above, which emphasises sampling from journalistic and NGO reports and fragmentation with an implicit but unelaborated narrative.
Heaney’s collection is divided into three sections; the first section is an introductory pair of poems – one refers to Heaney’s childhood and a beloved aunt and the other suggests an ekphrastic relation to Breughel’s pastoral landscapes. Both of these poems look at the anonymity of peasants, detailing a homely life that is affectively rich, and possibly sentimental:

And here is love
like a tinsmith’s scoop
sunk past its gleam
in the meal-bin. (x)

But there is also a direct statement about art in the second poem, which places the individual poet and the artist Breughel in the role of judges of truth: ‘They seem hundreds of years away. Breughel, You’ll know them if I can get them true’ (xi). Heaney places the painter in the role of a mentor and himself in the role of a disciple attempting to imitate and please.

The opening and longer part of North moves through an archaeological history of Ireland combined with personal history: the poet appears as a young man shouldering a coffin, a man ‘returned to a long strand’, and a reader who excavates language. Half way through the poems the narrative I switches personas: at times it is the voice of an Iron Age man or woman risen from a bog, at times it is the voice of a contemporary man looking at the leathery skin and bones of a bog man newly retrieved from the bog’s peat. Occasionally, a comparison is made between the Iron Age corpse and a contemporary event, marking the poet’s present day as that of the early days of the Troubles in Ireland: a girl sacrificed and pinned into a bog is juxtaposed to the young Irish girls tarred and feathered for consorting with English soldiers.

In his 1974 essay, ‘Feeling into Words,’ published in Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978, Heaney expands on digging as an analogy for poetic process, and in doing so he again places the artist, himself, in the role of judge:

in those lines [of Wordsworth’s poem ‘The Prelude’] is a view of poetry which I think is implicit in the few poems I have written that give me any right to speak: poetry as divination, poetry as revelation of the self to the self, as restoration of the culture to itself; poems as elements of continuity, with the aura and authenticity of archaeological finds, where the buried shard has an importance that is not diminished by the importance of the buried city; poetry as a dig. (41)

Although a certain amount of ‘digging’ is necessary in most creative processes, or any process that requires ascribing language to complicated emotions, Heaney colours that process with an affiliation with one of poetry’s traditional roles: as a divinatory and shamanic
practice which reveals not only special knowledge akin to elemental truth but that functions as a restorer of cultural continuity. This seems a blend of the functions of Celtic bards, who sang of heroic deeds and were therefore responsible for the community’s sense of history, and the *vates*, whose functions were as seers. Except for the Beats and members of the San Francisco Renaissance, like Jack Spicer, who suggests in his Vancouver lectures (273–274) that writing poetry is like receiving radio broadcasts from Mars and it helps to be totally drunk at 3:00 in the morning in order to receive them, the American sense of the poet’s role seems to be more journalistic, confined to an examination of process and the recording of external details in order to reveal possible explanations of human experience. Our tradition, such as it is, favours science and reportage, a blend that at its most quixotic bubbles into the psychologies of confessional poetry. Even Susan Howe, who refers back to an implicit metaphysic of poetic process and who is willing to ascribe a quality of eternalness to others, denies her own role in belief. She retains her scholarly excavations as a kind of cut-and-paste assemblage, which are nonetheless meaningful in a profoundly personal way.

Heaney follows a phenomenological path, and it is a path connected to the etymology of language and the written word. Throughout all the poems in *North*, the semantic meaning of language is emphasised – through the use of unusual and regional patois, such as ‘a big-boned coulter’, which is the vertical cutting blade of a plough, or the poet’s meditation on individual words:

```
But bog
meaning soft,
the fall of windless rain,
pupil of amber. (34)
```

This linguistic emphasis underlines Heaney’s sense of himself as a poet; it tells us that he is constantly engaged with translating his feelings and observations into words. Heaney also claims that a certain level of objectivity is necessary within the observing poet before his emotions can be reconfigured into poetry that is divinatory, restorative and part of culture’s continuing narrative. But he finds that the closeness of instantaneous detail – the horror of the present – hinders what he feels is his connection to objectivity:

My emotions, my feelings, whatever those instinctive energies are that have to be engaged for a poem, those energies quickened more when contemplating a victim, strangely, from 2,000 years ago than they did from contemplating a man at the end of a road being swept up into a plastic bag – I mean the barman at the end of our road tried to carry out a bomb and it blew up. Now there is of course something
terrible about that, but somehow language, words didn’t live in the way I think they have to live in a poem when they were hovering over that kind of horror and pity. (Quoted in Parker 105)

Here Heaney veers away from a more journalistic impulse and into an area that is governed by personal preference within the poet’s conception of what makes his writing art. He regains it in the second and much shorter part of *North*, which is clearer in its contemporary affiliations: its poems delineating the conflict of Irish citizens with the state, and in these poems Heaney’s rage is more palpable, less contained and less self-conscious in its prosody.

Objectivity – and by that I mean the use and examination of observations that are not felt by the observer to have an emotional charge, or entangled with what Nussbaum calls a eudaimonistic object – gives one the sense that what is observed is clearer and undistorted, that it is in fact closer to some kind of truth in terms of physical reality. It has been some decades, however, since we have been able to accept historical accounts, objective or not, as bearers of truth: there is always a point-of-view and the distorting emotional persuasions that point-of-view bears. As Heaney states, his ‘emotions’, his ‘feelings’, must be engaged with the writing of poetry. However, Heaney is preoccupied with truth, especially the truth of the artist, who traditionally has been regarded as blessed with the ability to cut through cultural conventions into the heart of human action and its meaning to reveal the truth behind the appearance. Often in Heaney’s work, however, the questioning of his own personal motives as an artist and writer is what passes for hard-minded truthfulness. His sincerity passes for objectivity, and that sincerity also claims a kind of universal truth. Therein lies one of the conflicts between how Heaney identifies as a poet and how I identify as a poet. I would find it impossible to write a line like: ‘Breughel,/ You’ll know them if I can get them true’ – even if only to simplify the rhyme scheme. To me, truth is fraught with delusion; I can only present what others – including myself through a selection of multiple voices outside my own – think might be truth. I have a more challenged relationship with authority.

•

Unlike the bog men used by Heaney for personas in the first half of *North*, the artifacts that are used in the hoard poems are not substitutes for the people the poet sees around her, suffering within a violent world. Rather, these objects’ metaphoric meaning is couched in their spatial and visual attributes: their relationship to the earth they are buried in is an analogy for the
emotions that are buried within the feeling individual's body, and whatever emotional charge this metaphor carries is meant to be idiosyncratic and suggestive. The artifacts' significance as objects and the capacity of objects in general to define categories and therefore crucial relationships to boundary is something I will deal with briefly in the next chapter.

If there are any conclusions that 'Decorations' draws, they are meant to be generic and diverse as opposed to specific. The society discussed by Heaney in the following quotation is the Germanic paganism of the pre-Roman Iron Age in northern Europe. It is believed these tribes practiced human sacrifice to a goddess; the Germanic religions were, however, polytheistic, and the cultures were warrior aristocracies. Heaney mistakenly associates the Germanic Iron Age culture with Celtic religion, Catholicism and Irish Republicanism, suggesting that these partake of a mother goddess fertility religion, which none of them were or do:

You have a society in the Iron Age where there was ritual blood-letting. You have a society where girl's heads were shaved for adultery, you have religion centreing on the territory, on a goddess of the ground and of the land, and associated with sacrifice. Now in many ways the fury of Irish Republicanism is associated with a religion like this, with a female goddess who has appeared in various guises. She appears as Cathleen ni Houlihan in Yeat's plays; she appears as Mother Ireland. I think that the Republican ethos is a feminine religion, in a way. It seems to me that there are satisfactory imaginative parallels between this religion and time and our own time. They are observed with amazement and a kind of civilized tut-tut by Tacitus in the first century AD and by leader-writers in the *Daily Telegraph* in the 20th century. (Quoted in Morrison 63)

The topic of my national identity, which I don't feel is very strongly linked to my feelings about my country, which is to say I am neither patriotic nor nationalistic, is only one of several indicators linked to violence within 'Decorations'. What is of more significance, I hope, is the parallel the series draws between the violence of war and the violence of everyday life.

It is of little purpose to go through a checklist of differences between *North* and the hoard poems, however. What is more salient to the discussion is how Heaney has chosen to use what he believes is a primal human and cultural relationship to violence and death as a motivator for his writing. And in this very clear way, Heaney's work falls under the purview of the dark lyric.
**Elucidation Five**

**The Personal and Political in Maxine Chernoff’s ‘Without Without’**

Maxine Chernoff is the author of six books of fiction and fourteen books of poetry. Her most recent books of poetry are *Without* (Shearsman, 2012), *To Be Read in the Dark* (Omnidawn, 2012), *A House in Summer* (Argotist, 2012, online edition), and *The Turning* (Apogee Press, 2008). With Paul Hoover, she translated *The Selected Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin* (Omnidawn Press, 2008), which received the 2009 Pen USA Translation Award. An internationally known poet, her work has been translated into German, Spanish, Portuguese, Serbian, Romanian, Icelandic, Chinese, Vietnamese, Persian, and Arabic.

Her collection of stories, *Signs of Devotion*, was a New York Times Notable Book of 1993. Both her novel *American Heaven* (Coffee House Press, 1996) and her book of short stories, *Some of Her Friends That Year* (Coffee House Press, 2002), were finalists for the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award. She edits the long-running and award-winning journal *New American Writing*, an annual anthology in its thirty-first issue. Among her other awards are a PEN Fiction Prize, the Carl Sandburg Award in Poetry, The Chicago Sun-Times Book Award, and a Foreword Book Award for her novel *A Boy in Winter*.

Although humour and irony are a large part of Chernoff’s work, especially the earlier prose poems, all of her writing is driven by political concerns. In the backgrounds of her examinations of the personal loom larger social issues. Currently, her political attention has focused on present-day twin hazards – global conflict and ecological disaster – that she sees as the result of corruption within the American right and its attempts to manipulate the government. Her book *Without* is not about our struggle with the nature or the difficulties of providing food and shelter, or the human ascription of divinity in the face of cosmic mysteries, but rather how through war and exploitation we have disrupted and changed the natural world so that the fabric of the ecosystem is torn perhaps beyond repair. Loss of love exists within this fragile landscape as a force, but it is as invisible as radiation, as potent and as potentially harmful.
The cover photograph of Maxine Chernoff’s *Without* shows a scruffy western American landscape in the hallucinatory amber light of late afternoon. The black shadow of a porch cuts a geometric shape across the landscape, framing leafless trees and twisted stumps; in the distance lies a low hill covered in chaparral-like vegetation. The photograph, by Carolyn Guinzio, suggests a dry land lacking the moisture needed to sustain growth: it is a landscape without. But the photograph suggests something else: that ‘without’ means not only ‘lack of’ but also ‘exterior to.’ This is a crucial addition: for Chernoff’s book is a meditation not only on the loss implicit in the word ‘without’ but also on the poet’s (and, by association, every human’s) relationship to the exterior. It is a study in how we define the world outside – how our interior losses shape the exteriors that surround us – how inhabiting the exterior can be an exile as well as an excape.

In this series of sixty-four poems, each title is bracketed and begins with the word ‘without’. The opening poem, ‘[without resolution]’, sets the tone and the place of the poems, which is dominated by ambiguity. Resolution is not only a driving force, a commandment to the self meant to better one’s behaviour in social terms, but also an ending, the completion of a complicated and difficult situation. It’s as if the writer were not actually setting out to complete a discrete work of art but, instead, awakens in the midst of a chaotic and indefinite state. The poem’s first lines are true to the title’s implication:

```
consider our planet
woeful cauldron
far-fetched utopia
oiled by power
```

The poet asks us to join with her in her perception of the world’s improbable mess, which is both ‘sunlight’ and ‘jasmine’s/ March-night scent/ which slightly reeks’: we exist on a generic planet where ‘all the deaths/ we are counting’ form a ‘titanic excess’. Our Earth is a ‘woeful cauldron,’ a blackened pot where witchy potions are brewed – potions that create doubtful and dangerous states of being, linked with elemental and crass political and economic power. In this case, the brew is a mixture of sorrow, loss and anger. Linked to the personal loss of relationship, her separation from her husband, that appears throughout the book – ‘one ran/ and one followed/ one fell/ one called after’ – is the degradation of the planet and furious wars of the Middle East.

This intimacy between the self and the planet is most closely revealed in the poem
‘[without pain]’ in which the ending metaphor guides the poem from the mind – ‘she signals rejection/ he signals loss’ – to the terrain of the Earth:

who can say
what a gesture means
surveyors have
their job to do
locating where
it used to hurt
(41)

An animistic sense inhabits Chernoff’s understanding not only of nature but also of both the body and language:

all this hurts
the ocean suggests
as if waves
could privilege
ear’s dumb gestures
or a ghost of a sentence learn
to read its
own dried ink
([without a listener], 14)

The ending metaphor intimates that language creates a material object with a separate existence. And that separation from the speaker or writer is also a type of loss.

The series of poems is a systematic stripping down of the world. Each poem suggests a view of the world as it would be without the particular emotional or mental feature stated in the poem’s title. But throughout, other words reappear that weave a web of association between the particular worlds: this multiverse may in fact be a universe. ‘White’ repeats, substituting categorically for the role that black normally takes in poems about grief and loss: in ‘[without light]’ occupying a funeral, appearing as a summer night in ‘[without design]’ and as the colour of a monster – a sickness that goes by the name of radioactivity – in ‘[without substance].’ White signifies also relief as the colour of the uniforms of the clean-up crew at the Fukushima reactor in the poem ‘[without intention].’ And white variously inhabits bones, the ambiguously planetary moon, snow and ice, ash and salt, clouds and ghosts. All of which stream back to the writer’s blank page, which is endlessly capable of silence. The reappearing aspects of white ties the multiple worlds of the book together – each is somehow familiar, each a possibility of the other.
Among white’s many shades and hues is the colour silver: a colour vibrating between white and black, illusory in its indefinite character, as illusory as the poems themselves:

what we tried
to understand
receded
from our view
like the sheen
you see
on roads
when summer
knows you
swelter
just to know
([without a view] 72)

Throughout the book the ability to forget or to select wavers, and the reader must constantly decipher where the writer is placed in regards to the text. Does she pronounce the words or do they describe her? Is she subject or object?

what to forget
when knowing
leeches out like
oil buried
in sandy ground
...
laments unmute
their billowing song
their edges
taut with recognition
([without erasure] 13)

The quality of the language is vaporous, escaping definition and giving the words the features of a hallucination. The writer – the poet spinning out words as if they were equivalences – assumes the countenance of someone inhabiting another, more ghastly, world. Thus loss becomes a doorway, a medial state like that time of day in Guinzio’s cover photograph: it exists in some time between day and night, a twilight zone with bleached colours. In Chernoff’s universe the sky is white, that absence of colour, milky as an overcast day, layered with strata of clouds.

The overall structure of the book is that of a list. A list, paradoxically, of absences. Within the individual poems lists make connections between things ambient and disconcerting:
birds on a wire
spycams winking
the floods of 1873
hairs of the elephant
the lipsticked
cup he used to kiss
([without number] 51)

The lists are surrealistic in their unpredictability, often pairing opposites that cluster in startling relationship to each other:

painless torture
painless denial
painless poem masking
its plan
([without pain] 41)

The poems are composed of short lines, most five to six syllables long; some, such as ‘[without movement]’, only two or three syllables in length. These short lines give the poems a breathless quality, which would move the reader through the poem quickly and comprehensively if it were not for the syntactical ambiguity caused by the poems’ lack of punctuation. Meaning gathers as you read through the lines, but it’s not always clear whether a line links to the line above or below, or is meant to be read separately, as its own image or idea. Thus, Chernoff compels two movements and two speeds in the reading. The first drives the reader forward as quickly as possible so that the lines can be gathered and interpreted. The second requires the reader to slow down, loop back and reread the lines in different configurations. ‘[without shadow]’ opens:

death stutters
in the voice of a judge
ostrich-headed
predilections
blatant and grave
the body asks
for frost [...]  
(17)

It is impossible to say with sureness whether ‘ostrich-headed’ modifies ‘the voice,’ ‘a judge’ or ‘predilections’ and the same can be said of ‘blatant and grave’, which could modify either ‘predilections’ or ‘the body.’ This device is not unusual in contemporary writing, but it is used
so unceasingly and it fits so snugly with the original and multiple worldview that Chernoff creates within the book that it’s worth noting; it is the central technique of the poems.

One of the implications of this technique is that the poems are oral in essence. Only through the poet’s speaking voice can the poems’ meanings be elucidated, crystallized (even though her performance may change with each reading). And it is here that Chernoff’s practice as a storyteller, both in novels and prose poetry, is revealed and transformed. There are stories behind these poems and a larger tale to be told, but like the more enduring of oral mythologies, they lie in a mysterious realm where sorrow compels the imagination to speak. Words rescue the lone human stranded, unleashing her from the arbitrariness of loss. And the listener and the reader are drawn in by the mystery, searching within its enigma for answers and resolution’s power to heal.

As the book closes, the poet offers the long delayed resolution: first apologizing to the dead that have vanished in life’s turmoil, then to the living:

I am sorry for
my slights of
everyone
my unturned cheek
...
i am only trying harder
to be what light
calls itself when
it enters a room
full of sorrows
([without without] 78–79)

In the closing and longest poem of the book, ‘[without without]’, she puts forward the image of art, following the mandate of her grandson – merged with the reader in an anonymous ‘you’ – to ‘draw a dowel/ draw a compass/ draw a kind of cup/ draw an old man’. She ‘would teach you nothing’ – for the ability to imagine and to create is innate: ‘you know the words/ you say them  you’. The only resolution is that sorrows, even death, are lightened by the human compulsion to speak and to create.
Meditation Five

Objects: Lost and Sought

There were ghosts that returned to earth to hear his phrases,
As he sat there reading, aloud, the great blue tabulae.
They were those from the wilderness of stars that had expected more.

There were those that returned to hear him read from the poem of life,
Of the pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the tulips among them.
They were those that would have wept to step barefoot into reality,

that would have wept and been happy, have shivered in the frost
and cried out to feel it again, have run fingers over leaves
and against the most coiled thorn, have seized on what was ugly

and laughed, as he sat there reading, from out of the purple tabulae
The outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its law:
_Poeisis, poesis_, the literal characters, the vatic lines,

Which in those ears and in those thin, those spended hearts,
Took on colour, took on shape and the size of things as they are
And spoke the feeling for them, which was what they had lacked.

– Wallace Stevens, ‘Large Red Man Reading,’
_Collected Poems_ 423–24
Before closing this inquiry into the nature of darkness and its functions in poetry, I’d like to make a few brief comments on the question of objects, which provide the principle metaphors used in the *Hoard* poems.

When my father died, my stepmother gave me two sets of items from the things that had belonged to him: his construction tools and the silk handkerchiefs that he wore in the breast pockets of the suits he wore during his working life. I gave most of his handkerchiefs to my stepson, and I was surprised at how impressed Emmanuel’s father’s parents were by this gift: such intimate, personal and luxurious items carried with them the mark of heritage, and the newness of my father’s death intensified this quality of inheritance. The tools I still have, though I will probably never use any of them. Throughout his life my father had given me his cast-off tools as he replaced them with newer items: drills, hammers, sanders, rotary handsaws. I was the child who spent the most time being his ‘assistant’ when he built things, and it was during those periods of companionship that he told me stories of his childhood, which was fraught and troubled. Besides suffering from a history of disinheritance, poverty and racial prejudice, both his parents had died by the time he was eighteen, when he took over the role of a parent for his two brothers, one of whom was only eleven. The tools my father left behind when he died, an old man of ninety-one, were derelict. The drill bits were stored in used haberdashery boxes with labels made of masking tape, his familiar, careful handwriting designating the type of bit. Objects are not merely commodities but exist beside us in complicated relationship.

* • *

Without the attachment of personal history, the main feature of any object is that it is contained, that is to say its boundaries are set; it is a discrete entity. But an object that is used and personal, especially one that we have manufactured, has what neurological scientists call ‘an enriched somatic presence’. We may have projected a range of emotional and intellectual assumptions onto its surface, or even into its interior. Elaine Scarry proposes the following:

> Artifacts are a making sentient of the external world. A made object is a projection of the human body. The relation between sentience and its objectifications is made compellingly visible by describing the phenomenon of projection in terms of specifiable bodily parts. (281)

We see this in the radiantly precious objects that make up the Staffordshire and Hoxne
hoards, in the jewellery, plates and spoons of the domestic hoard and in the decorative but functional pommels and hilts of warrior's paraphernalia.

•

In 2004 Angelo Maravita, of the University of Milan, and Atsushi Iriki, of the Tokyo Medical and Dental University, jointly published an article in *Trends in Cognitive Science*. In their abstract they proposed the following:

> What happens in our brain when we use a tool to reach for a distant object? Recent neurophysiological, psychological and neuropsychological research suggests that this extended motor capability is followed by changes in specific neural networks that hold an updated map of body shape and posture (the putative ‘Body Schema’ of classical neurology). (79)

What they go on to say and demonstrate is that the brain expands its sense of the individual's body when using tools so that the tool is recognised neurologically, in the brain, as part of the body, ‘as if our own effector (e.g. the hand) were elongated to the tip of the tool’ (79). Neurological response in the brain is reformed by objects that extend action; a passive interaction with an object does not affect neurological perception and response. The experiments that contributed to this article's conclusions were conducted with Japanese macaque monkeys and humans who had suffered lesions within the brain. Though it took a couple of weeks to train the monkeys in tool use, the effect of brain's recognition of the tool as part of the body continued to last over time, unless the tool use was dropped. In humans, there was little training necessary and the recognition was permanent. In the latter, an interesting result of tool use was that it could override the effects of damage within the brain. If the above experiments hold true with the average, functioning human, then the artifacts found in the hoards were not simply important objects for their owners but also intrinsic to their understanding of themselves within their bodies within the physical world. The care taken not only to create but to protect these objects then makes complete affective sense, and Maravia and Iriki's study suggests that my intuition about the appropriateness of using these hoard objects as a metaphor for emotions buried within the body carries validity. The idea that these objects can be understood and felt as vital parts of the body also puts forth other questions: is the interior, that place of darkness, also a place of safety, a haven? Is safety also an aspect of burial, devised when the Earth was perceived as a womb – inward, dark and nurturing?
Elucidation Six

The Transmigration of Objects:
Brenda Coultas and the Material Soul

Brenda Coultas was raised in Indiana, a fact that has significance to her identity, which is steadfastly American:

I was born between the free side and the slave side, my head crowning on the bridge. I fully emerged in an elevator traveling upward in a slave state. I have shopped in the slave state and eaten barbecue there. I have walked along the riverbank in the slave state and looked out at a free state. (*The Marvelous Bones of Time* 17)

She studied with Anne Waldman and Allen Ginsberg at Naropa University, and her work partakes of much of their concerns: visionary in its perception of the everyday and rooted in its compassion for the common man and woman on the street. She moved to New York City in 1994, and worked at the Poetry Project at St. Marks, one of the country’s foremost centres for poetry. Her first book, *The Handmade Museum*, was selected by Language poet Lyn Hejinian for the Norma Farber First Book Award in 2004. Her second book, *The Marvelous Bones of Time: Excavations and Explanations*, was published in 2007.

She has received grants from the Academy of American Poets and the New York Foundation for the Arts. She lives in the Bowery, where she is the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council artist-in-residence.
In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry puts forth two interlocking theories. The first, that pain eliminates speech, and that the greater pain becomes the more it defies language and description, and thereby ‘undoes’ the world for the human sufferer. For the most part, her theory discusses pain as it appears in its most extreme form: in war and in torture. Scarry seldom talks about the battles that exist on psychological levels: the wars of class, sex or racial difference, although those are implicit in her argument. Nor does she emphasise the pain caused by mere existence until she begins the second half of her book, in which she unfolds her second theory: that human imagination is an endlessly bountiful creator that works counter to the unspeakableness of pain.

Her most fascinating and difficult example of this proposal is her examination of the Judeo-Christian God, which, she posits, is the most radical creation of the human imagination, one whose function is a means not simply to soothe and banish pain but also – in contradiction to the human desire for a compassionate universe or deity – to threaten with pain. What the presence of God does, whether you believe him manufactured or manufacturer, is to define humankind in its mortality. And the implication – one that is undeniable – in Scarry’s idea is that a sense of external divinity is an innate feature of the human imagination: that it is the deification of our fear of pain.

It’s possible to miss that what Brenda Coulta writes about is pain, especially the pain caused by the psychological forms of class warfare, although it is clearer that mortality is a focus of her concern. For one thing, she presents the environment she inhabits with a droll self-deprecation that resolves into a deadpan sense of humour:

> A Bowery Bum asked ‘Can I talk to you for a minute?’ He burped loudly in my ear. Later he asked me to look up at the sun where he had written his name, then to hug him. I did both. Why do I listen to Bowery Bums? (*The Handmade Museum* 16)

The self that Coulta presents to the reader is that of the naïf, the innocent. Her stance allows her to assume, in a poetic version, the perspective and methodology of a journalist or scientist. Innocence, posed as non-judgmental curiosity, is the state of mind necessary to her gathering of what she calls ‘evidence’. She is the eternal observer: ‘That is what I do best, sit and look out windows’ (15).

* • *

The Bowery is the oldest thoroughfare on Manhattan Island and originally a Native American footpath before European colonization, which spanned roughly the entire length
of the island, from north to south. When the Dutch settled Manhattan island, they named the path Bouwerij road – *bouw*erij* being an antiquated Dutch word for ‘farm’ – because it connected farmlands and estates on the outskirts to the heart of the city in today’s Wall Street/Battery Park area.

In ‘The Bowery Project,’ which opens *The Handmade Museum*, Coulta examines a world that we in the U.S. conceptualise, and rightly so, as one of unrelenting deprivation, bodily abuse and spiritual degradation: the world of the homeless, represented by a neighbourhood where bums and junkies shamble and sleep in lean-tos made of old mattresses and cast-off plastic.

Coulta enters this world as a collector: she is there to accumulate the ‘goods’—the best that is cast off in our material world. In the Bowery, though, there are reasons why things are abandoned, and she veers back and forth between desire and disgust for these material objects. A Gap T-shirt she finds on the street is the same as the one she sees in glossy ads of ‘real people’: ‘thought I could wear this one. Was damp with a liquid, got repulsed, dropped it’ (14).

The airbrushed models in advertising photography are designated as ‘real’ – a label proved ironic by the factual physicality of poverty. It’s not a far leap from the cast-off clothes and furniture in the street to those who have lost their connection, their use and their beauty within the city they populate; they too are abandoned. Coulta, however, eschews moral judgment and clarifies her presence and her motivations by identifying with the drifting populations of the Bowery:

The intention is not to romanticize the suffering or demonize the Bowery residents but rather to comment on poverty, class, suffering and my own dilemma and identifications as a teacher and poet one paycheck away from the street. It’s the transparent medium I walk through with my own poverty. (‘Failure’, http://www.sfsu.edu/~newlit/narrativity/issue_two/ coultas.html)

Coulta is pacing out what Scarry suggests is the motivation behind the great religious books of our collective history – which is to counter existential and physical pain through the imagination. She recognises the religious analog that links her to the life of New York City’s homeless, and within that she senses a form of power in which a battle is fought for existence:

Needless to say that for me, the Bowery has taken on a metaphysical weight as a passage and frame of mind as well as a power spot where ghosts and the nearly living compete for space with the cell phonies who have come to replace them. (‘Failure’)

*
Scarry often designates pain’s lack of physicality as crucial to its unique power to obliterate speech:

Though the capacity to experience physical pain is as primal a fact about the human being as is the capacity to hear, to touch, to desire, to fear, to hunger, it differs from these events, and from every other bodily and psychic event, by not having an object in the external world. (161)

And although the experience of pain may be entirely contained within the human body and therefore objectless, Coulta’s poetry demonstrates that pain does leave physical markers. Tied to the imagination, these markers have both negative and positive aspects: they stimulate not only the creative act of writing in the poet but also evoke memories of pain within the reader. The compassion that rises within the reader in response to the writer’s words is also a creative act.

Coulta explains her Bowery project as a project of historical preservation, but her fascination with material objects is reminiscent of the Old Testament’s focus on multiplicity: the primacy of Genesis with its creation of all the objects in the universe, in their vast numbers and unreachable scope, and the human drive for begetting all manner of things, especially generations of its own tribe, creates a metatext for our culture that prizes the effusion of material objects. For us, bounty is good. Coulta pursues the bounty of discards:

I used to dream of yard sales, where I was the first person there and every collectable I ever desired was on the table, but I had to grab them before the others arrived. I trembled. I tremble before the good stuff. (16)

The oddity of the verb ‘tremble’ and the adjective ‘good’ serves to mark out the spiritual underpinnings of Coulta’s fascination with material objects. One trembles before God, not before chairs that have escaped being broken or clothing free of stains. Her trembling suggests that there is something divine, or at least supernatural, in objects – in particular, beautiful and valued objects – that escape damage.

Much of Coulta’s poetry is comprised of lists of things, notated not only with a description but also with the time, date and place of discovery. Though her approach emulates investigative science, her expressed desire for ‘stuff’ is charged and obsessional – she only stops collecting when she has no more room to stash the objects she wants. Failing physical space, objects collect in her writing. But where Coulta’s lists swerve from the material profusions of the Old Testament, which also lists and notates in order to confirm historical accuracy, is in
the decrepitude of the material world through which she travels, searching. Nonetheless, in either case replication equals aliveness and vitality.

In ‘Some Might Say That All I’ve Done Is Stack Up a Heap of Objects’ Coulta explains the metaphysics and the mission of her search:

Some will say it’s all been done before, and that others have done better but still I stack things up. I don’t think about it, I put blinders on but hope that through accumulation they’ll form a pattern out of chaos. I’ve stacked up twigs one by one, building a structure, weaving and shaping, forming a skeleton out of raw garbage transformed into beauty, maybe with something to say to any Bowery resident or reader of poetry. Please, I am intentionally writing this for you. (16)

Coulta’s dumpster-diving resembles a spiritual practice, in which she mines the broken remnants of our consumer culture as if it were both redeemable and hideous: capable finally of ‘alchemy’, of transfiguring the lost into the saved. Her collecting allows for reshaping, which is an imaginative act that provides order in an inexplicable world. The act is, finally, one that soothes and overrides pain, and is generously shared. Its sense of community, or communal sharing, is one lauded in Judeo-Christian religion.

Coulta has maintained in several articles and interviews that she is interested in narrative as a communal activity: ‘I use narrative to connect, also I’m a sucker for a narrative riff and for beauty’ (‘Failure’). It is the story rather than the attendant philosophies and psychologies that are her focus, which makes it difficult to derive a consistent theory about the ‘meaning’ of her writing. Perhaps that’s just as well. She tells her stories simply and cleanly; it is the movement of the tale from point A to point B that is primary, rather than decorations of language and device. The beauty within the stories is within each narrative as a recollection of a moment of life: one of those many ‘marvelous bones’ that could be uncovered if eternity allowed us the time.

Her stories are not merely her own. The ghost stories of the several sections of ‘The Lonely Cemetery’, found in The Marvelous Bones of Time, are collections of what other people have told her, confirmations of her sense of community and connection. And, in good faith with that community, she notes in the section’s epigraph: ‘Every word you are about to read is true or believed to be so.’ This impulse to collect refers back not only to the dumpster diving of The Handmade Museum, but specifically to two poems in that first collection: ‘A
Summary of a Public Experiment’ and ‘Bowery Box Wishes.’ In the first, she describes how she set up ‘a table and a chair and put up a sign that read, ‘Tell me a Bowery story.’ A friend films the stories, which are then retold by Coultas with her descriptions of the person and how the story was told. In the latter poem, which is a ‘film script for a home movie: 3 mins, b & w’ (34), she describes a box labeled ‘Bowery Wishes’ that she leaves in a public place. She describes, as if it were a film, the many people who come by to drop their wishes in the box:

‘Are you going to read them?’ someone asked.  
‘No,’ I said. But I wasn’t sure why, I had promised them nothing yet I felt that they had trusted me not to look, but maybe some of them hoped to be heard … what I felt was the need to protect them. So I did. (35)

What she suggests is that languages, especially personal stories, carry with them an obligation. Every story is a form of confession, even if it is unheard, and as such stories carry the innocence of the storyteller with them. Throughout her work, Coultas reverences not only those who suffer from poverty and prejudice but also the words they express as a salve to the wounds they bear.
Conclusion

Our sunrise was to them the Night giving birth to a brilliant child.

– Max Müller,
from Burton Feldman and Robert Richardson,
The Rise of Modern Mythology 481

This thesis is a series of mediations on the term ‘darkness’, or as I have applied it to poetry, the ‘dark lyric’. It begins with a wider and more general perception of emotional darkness as manifest in depression, anger, envy, and loss. The various meditations within the text posit that forms of loss appear as metaphors of darkness within Indo-European mythology, and suggest that these distant beliefs appear throughout Western poetry historically – they appear in Dante, Shakespeare, up through the Romantics and the Modernists, and into contemporary poetry. The thesis also considers the events that lie behind these emotions – among them ego dissolution, loss, bereavement, war and ecological disaster – in a series of close readings that show how six contemporary American and British writers use these emotional states within his or her work. John Burnside and Charles Wright stand as foremost practitioners of the dark lyric, both exulting in the psychological catalyst that these emotions create in them as writers. I chose John Burnside’s work as the first close reading of the thesis because he represents for me an author who uses darkness in of its many emotional forms – fear, anger, loss, pain – as a goad to his creativity. Perhaps more than any other author discussed in the book, his darkness is internal. Wright, however, finds darkness a resting place rather than a goad. His darkness is like that of sleep, which enables because it refreshes.

Three of the other writers – Rusty Morrison, Elizabeth Robinson and Susan Howe – write in order to abate the pain, which is their form of darkness, that is caused by lost love in the intimate realms of family and partner. And Seamus Heaney and Maxine Chernoff recreate their surrounding worlds by moving back and forth in time and space, settling on the pain caused by war and human social and environmental stupidity. Chernoff offers a humanist solution to pain in the form of art: hers is a more rhetorical offering than the other writers, whose various descents into darkness are often described but who offer no solution to the dilemma of pain caused by loss. Finally, the thesis connects loss to objects, explaining how objects can be recognized by the brain as a part of the body and therefore become susceptible to
both loss and pain. The thesis closes with a close reading of Brenda Coulta's *The Handmade Museum*, which examines the human-made object both as a form of identity and as a nexus of loss.

This concept of the object as a part of the self that is both vulnerable to damage and susceptible to loss was the initial concept behind the poetry that comprises the creative part of this thesis. My original inspiration for the poetry came to me while I was standing in the British Museum, looking at the Hoxne treasure. I had returned to look at it after almost fifteen years absence. During that time something was perhaps forming in the depths of my thought. The combination of lights, the color of gold and stones and the deft weaving of the Anglo-Roman body chain sparked the idea that these objects, which had been buried in the ground, were like the emotions we bury in our bodies. This was a poetic idea I was compelled to follow.

When the Staffordshire hoard was discovered the two treasures immediately fell into one of those dichotomies I so dislike because I find them simplistic and false. Hoxne equaled women equaled love; Staffordshire equaled men equaled war. I found the dualism so ridiculously corny that I decided to accept it as a form of constraint. Could I take on the dualism: use it but make it something other than cliché?

In the case of the Hoxne treasure, the domestic hoard that would represent love, the topic was the more susceptible to platitudes, formulas and abuses of overuse. To avoid these problems I used two basic strategies: the love portrayed would be inconclusive and the form would be devised rather than traditional. Consequently, the book has along with the Hoxne objects, three other series. ‘Quatrefoils’, a design pattern typical not only of the Hoxne jewellery but also of later medieval and Renaissance design and present locally in the form of the Tudor rose, depends on recursion for its form. Three elements appear in the ‘Recursives’ – in each poem one element is transfigured. The four leaves ultimately appear in the poem ‘Variation’ as the four chambers of the heart. The two series, ‘White Swan’ and ‘Red Boat’, mirror each other as ambiguous love poems at the center of which lie both loss and death. It is perhaps inconclusive love that wounds the most. Such love continues to suppurate.

The darker emotions and actions behind the objects of war that comprise the Staffordshire hoard was detailed in above in Meditation Four. The poetic dilemma with this series was how to avoid making the implicit criticism of war mere rhetoric. That is the most common fault of political poetry of the moment. My solution, besides setting up a historical parallel between the Anglo-Saxon objects and present-day conflicts, was to take text from...
non-combatant commentaries and to present that with little mediation. The choice of texts and the descriptions of museum objects were mediation enough and created their own form of persuasion, though not one obviously steeped in political jargon.

I began this project standing in the carefully lowered light of the British Museum. The critical theory part of this thesis was an attempt to explicate that original metaphoric insight that led me to connect the buried object with buried emotions. The two texts, poetic and analytic, were developed more or less simultaneously, although the poetry made it to the page first. That fact affected the critical work, shaping its final structure and topics.
Hoard
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Red Boat</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoxne</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(lasb of the tongue)</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>These spare objects</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gold Body Chain for a Small Woman</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spice boxes</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oak and iron locks</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diátrita (opus inerassile)</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Her upper arm, festooned</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Her upper arm, festooned</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translation</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not even bones</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four Matching Gold Bangles</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sieve</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Utère felix, domina Juliane”</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Utère felix, domina Juliane”</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cygni</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sieve</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Hunt</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trove</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quatrefoils</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Swan</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundlings</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elegy</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decorations</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Red Boat
You require me to read and by reading
to step into space as if I were haltered to the sun,

assume molecules of air beneath my feet;

to walk on water, only less so
Clouds mass and flow,
the gaps between them opening faster than the words you speak

My history is folded into a square of page and colored with childhood ink –
it's black faded to brown, a seepage away from shadow
and into contours of time –
The page – a packet – turns, escapes applied color, 
and what lies beneath my fingertips reduces to fewer words, 
insupportable and misplaced.

From what book has this page come?

I reach out for words, 
their path promised me.
Steppingstones or mosaic tile,
the sheets realign, re-collect into patchwork.

Wind-tossed,
a red boat rocks past, gone rusty from airy breaths
and the painter's imaginary hand.
We are reshuffled, slip like grass across the cheek of the face

“Like the random pattern of the robe dyed with young purple from Kasuga plain – even thus, the wild disorder of my yearning heart”

Letters curve like fingers and harden into a carapace:

a question forms on the white field, hesitations advance to black.
I believe you have sworn on a book with a brightly colored title page, made a pact between you and your gods. Your mouth a red boat.
Forces mold each volume – two figures wrapped in black weave into conductivity.

Out over the rooftops of London, lightning strikes.

You who met me half way,
there's no telling how words will be read:
they form a plasma

Or a red boat strung on copper curved across canvas. Only over pages will they peel away and the figures disrobe into utterance.
The silence between syllables hangs like a question mark
and, so, touch between us melts into a brief deferral of motion.
Fugitive ...

Our bones are hollow and the color of a quill
ink filled,
carved for flight:

birds rising from the water's surface,
a gleam of silver spilling down the feathered wing.
The findspot of the Hoxne hoard lies in the county of Suffolk, in eastern England, on the top of a spur ... between the valley of the River Dove to the west and the Gold Brook to the east.

– from “Discovery and Archeological Investigation of the Site,”

*The Hoxne Late Roman Treasure*
She steps back, carves away clumps of soil,
repaths a sentence in arachnid labor
and reveals the layered slope,
the strata of discard:

words retract into her mind, repeating,

hang back
struggle to renew
become abruptly vatic

resemble memory, or a spoon, locked beneath stone, bound into time
These spare objects

like love

– impulded out, slipping forward: fox paw on ice –

lie displaced from their close shelter

the worn rims
and bright faces of coins – unround
and irregular, shaved at the perimeter –

up from wet earth
Or, as when deterred, love revolves,
turns
in the womb – wraps inward: insistent ivy growing itself deep
into the ridged bark of a redwood.

Antipodal,
and heavy, it burrows in the body’s cells:

a splinter in a finger. Tangy like pepper. Floating
urgent under flesh, which folds
its molten sliver into a husk of hard winter.
Gold Body Chain for a Small Woman

‘Have mercy and pity on me and let me rest my heart in you.’
– translated from French and incised in a twisted gold brooch, 14c.
Scottish National Museum

I

Cross my heart. Drop the long X of woven chain
across the clavicle’s horizontal bones: an ornament marks the junction

with stones – four-petalled stones front and back, roped:
such discs serve as calculations of the heart’s orbit.

In the midst of tumult a man’s voice curves –
carves lines of gold – across the body’s turfs.

 seam settling     over the seized heart
 as an amulet       amethyst and garnet
 resplendent pearls passed into dust
Can the earth have corners? Bisected twice in perpendicular, 
long loops collapsed into the retangular – .

Her breast a globe hung from the shoulder’s 
cross, pressing flat against the cage of the lover’s 

chest. A cloven circle. Stealthy in its advance, the heart passes 
through gates, buries itself beneath the earth, unlooses 

the foreign. Her arms flow upward – a gold cord remakes 
their embrace – his arms sketch the legs of the X, 

across her back, fixed. Each feels the arc of other between 
them and the wide line of severance.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{three threaded} & \quad \text{thick seeming and} \\
\text{four fingered} & \quad \text{into a fulcrum each} \\
\text{strand strung} & \quad \text{from a single terminal}
\end{align*}
\]
The bird rushes into the window. It does not see
the glass but believes its flight forward will be unimpaired, free –
pursuing the mirage of sky on the utter surface, branches of trees,
an image smeared flat, highlighted and darkened, strangely:
the flyer’s reflection veers outward, hurtles head on.
Shifts in blue cloud its small eye, miniscule evidence
skims the black iris. The flyer plunges in.
His voice follows as precisely as a finger the chain
that paths under her arms, bright like a coin among many,
more than a thousand: edges of silver clipped, the gold
pliable, fluid. Her face, a cloth opened like a fold.
Surely something dreadful must have happened
for no one returned – the treasure left, never retrieved.

loop-in-loop  links of gold
terminals turned  toward the center
fused fracture  filleted into prior
Spice boxes

shattered

an ibex, glassy eyed,
its myriad small pieces uncovered
resoldered
in painstaking detail

a dog entwined with a rabbit

And Hercules’ struggle
reduced to three inches in height:
Gaia’s head
just below Antaeus’ foot
his mother Earth’s face

a mask, mute
Oak and Iron Locks

Once contained within the dimensions of a wooden chest
whose walls dissolved, slowly

Because the deep earth is vital as skin –
clay clinging to clay
small animals and fingers of gravity
moving beneath its liquid surface
**Diátrita (opus interassile)**

– After two gold bracelets, Hoxne treasure, Roman Britain c. a.d. 400

A sheet of gold
pierced: cut
into a wall of vines

•
curling vines
or tendrils –
the air adjoining
simply that

•
a simple piercing of gold,
banded, surprisingly workable:
the metal lace-like –
its past
unseeable, shifting

•
like a voice that shifts to echo
and locates us, sprung back
from brisk walls: as if
no morsels of background
were dropped out,
mislaid, gone

•
time lies flattened, 
stretched into a hoop: 
pricked
into lapsed
panoramas – chinks
among cracks crevices
openings so that

through the open work of tendrils
skin glistens – fine hairs
scattered and budding:
whose memory is reflexive
sited on the other side
of a punctured strip
sprouting vegetal strands
fiery vines, gold and coiling
Her upper arm, festooned

– Gold armlet, pierced and decorated. Borders are hollow cylinders.

Between borders are eight panels ornamented in opus interrasile in four designs, each repeated twice.

Under his gaze her upper arm, which seems only bone, barely fleshed,
is a pier stretching out into sea water and pleasure,
knobs at each end, planed, seeking ligature
and the hollow sound of his footsteps –
above the smell of sky, the capacious exile of snow

An arm wrapped. The tip of his middle finger touches his thumb, completes a current:

index finger a tube of gold, imperfectly round, scored
and imbricated with diamond shapes, scaly – battered –

and below: the smallest finger, nail pink and fresh as a sea shell

Vines, like kelp, sway in the palm of his hand, wending
toward possession and domestic habit. The never-ending
pull of tides, a drizzle of desire – oak and ivy, gold and gold
Her upper arm, festooned

glints of birds,

eyes

the rose leaf of tongue
Translation

Within the archive of letters that flowed
from his fingers across the keyboard
she reads hindrance, recalling the not yet unfolded musk
of moth-white flowers in the powdery air of dusk

There isn’t anything there, on second look,
only kerned curves and vertical strokes –
black on white – not, as she thought (the backlit
screen a veil, the image revenant),
a loss of focus behind the eyes lens,
decking the surrounding skin with lines
Not even bones

only

silver bowls or gold

the color of honey

whispered

confessions

singular,

inaudible
Four Matching Gold Bangles

1

Clay clasping the wrist, thumb and finger: manacled, mute.
The tongue a basket – forest of gold corrugate: scuddering cries, muffled, fallen reeds: plaid of stalks. Speech stopped at the first gate; in the background, disaster: a procession of doors, each closed, each to be opened. Pushed rustling into the earth, wrapped, the horizon a whirlpool. The soft shush of breath and heart’s outward flight quelled, fallen earthward turning – slowly, sound withdrawn. Indwelling the coat of flesh the muscle of tongue

---

clasping wrist, thumb and finger:

the circumference of forest.

leaves mute

– gold: chuddering

Speech contracts

rustling
corrugate

speech

nets the soft breath

wresting

flesh
Fixing a bond, crushing the hand: slipped over. Thoughts – urges – packed in fabric: press of soft mouth against careful mouth, short cropped grass stifled, branch dappled. Prized bits and pieces nested into each other; in the foreground, sentences: encircling gold lacing matter and sound, layered like onions, rattling up from the earth; wrapped, the perimeter of the wrist. Clink. Click. Clatter. The past’s forward flight looking back, always, turning often and again – reluctantly, folded, replaced, altered. Indwelling the rod of bone the shatter of tooth

a hand slips

across

his soft mouth

lacing reluctant matter and sound

– circle of gold
bits and pieces

clatter
Gold flickering the wrist, vein and artery: bordered, buoyant. Hinge of hand, jaw – molten crisscross congealed: vowel-sailing, a tattered venetian blind: unloosed. She summons, unlocking the gate, herding the heart: impatient, restless. Every escape lost in the river’s rising lineaments: tree, fading mist. Warbler rushing across earth, departure a whirlpool. Lips amend the nostril’s breath, and the outward thrust of words turns earward – hissing, sizzling touch and trill. Indwelling the disk of nail the blink of eye

---

adrift

a whirlpool

earward –

trill

of eye
buoyant

whirl

warbling eye
Seeding the future, a click: metallic wheels turning fingers that point.
Numbers tumble within a glass bowl, the glow of concave air sweet and acrid. Smoke, scented of pine, fur. Inevitably, limbs nest into each other, gold and silver. In the middle ground, silence: far under the body where the entrance to the underworld opens up, planets encircle the sun: a wrist, the perimeters of spoons. The bird sunk down in flight, or caged, a signal, interstices of a pomegranate; click of the lover’s teeth. Red gushes forth, lubricates past into future – an eternal rim spinning convex walls.
click
Sieve

Incised in gilt settled in the bowl
gathering into dapples on
a sheen of silver,

a bearded Oceanus, or the limbs of a marine creature, its shadows waiting
excavation –

a spoon meant to celebrate gods
and the body, full and
‘Utere felix, domina Juliane’

– Inscription on a gold bracelet, Hoxne treasure, c. a.d. 400

A hand thrust through the circle
of space drawn by a hoop of yellow gold,
telling of blood and bone
in the center of nothingness

.

The bracelet in turn wraps to the wrist,
garlands her skin
with leaves, doorways

.

Her bracelet slips up and drops
as her arm rises and falls.
A hand’s width holds it to the wrist.
Glimmer anchors it in the eye of an onlooker.

.

Who is to say words are without attraction:
wear this with joy, lady juliana

.

Gold circles endlessly,
and part of the world drops out again:
the penetration of cold
empty sky
gleam of the stream’s thin casing over stone’s surface
the thick paste of silt
all furrowing round paths
'Utere felix, domina Juliane'

– Inscription on a gold bracelet

Because he sees her as beautiful
he is pulled to the side
not joined but trapped in her gravity,
unbuttoning his momentum

•

Though beauty unconsidered
seems like light or distance
in relief: a flight

•

The sway would fall
magnetically inscribing a caress
across her thigh – inward spills,
an unhealed bifurcation

•

There is no symmetry here even though
bracelets encircle both wrists

•

Smooth surfaces form an ecosystem:
Her mouth like the forest floor is humid
indivisible, yes, teeming
The tongue’s movement more than muscular –
requiring a parade of vowels;
she pulls back the hair from her forehead
revealing a frame of white froth
Cygni

And spoons tapering into birds’ heads, crest,
or a sea creature, fin coursing back,
black nostril and oval eye,
the concave belly a body, slick and unfeathered:

his name *(golden or perhaps sunlit)*
punched into silver, floating

and cut loose from memory –

*Aurelius*

– flight follows from fingertips to mouth
Sieve

The bowl of a silver spoon is a mirror
this figure is you, staring back at yourself:
a bird, or dolphin, or griffin, that moves through
and across what the planet offers:  air  water  fire  earth.

Because there are two of you,
time springs open, just as now removes itself to then,

shedding on its way details –

patterns of light, and story-telling, absurd and restless.

Soup becomes clotted dirt and the color of flesh
glows thin and metallic, scintillating
to a blur, nested like day following day, night rounding
The Hunt

Decorated with frieze of running animals, arranged in pairs, two facing left and two confronted. Stylized trees between them; hunting. Perforated patterns form a background.
– Museum description of a repoussé bracelet

Round and round
limited by the yellow coils
of sky and earth
and unidentifiable plants

·

Size is variable here:
the long-eared rabbit as large as a tree or an ox
or the lion chasing

Their features hammered
out of soft flatness,
shaped by upheaval
their details woolly, or better, cloudlike

·

like love, a construct conjured from the body’s
hungers, or spun off
from the wholeness of the planet,

the mammal’s jigsaw
fitness.

·

A nereid
wearing necklace and bracelets, naked,
her bare feet small and crossed,
floats along
cleaved from tendrils of arteries, muscle fiber, tendons.

She hangs on the reins of a sea creature

There are fewer animals than believed, each sprung from small and intricate beats, or measures of time: footsteps and tracks, the collapse of wood under flames, the turquoise purity of mountain streams, the passage of thread and needle binding the wide grin of cut flesh to flesh, the smoke of stars.

He said he would call at noon and here it is: night.
Though carefully packed they were nothing more than extraneous. The precious stones prised from the rings and gone –

“There is no misfortune in the world equal to separation”

distance measuring absence

... counting ...
Quatrefoils

Decoration consists of alternating circles and lozenges with pierced work in centre and spandrels between. Circles have engraved star pattern, and centres of circles have pierced rosettes. Lozenges contain stylized foliate pattern and central quatrefoil.

– Description of an Anglo-Saxon bracelet,
  British Museum, online catalog, 2010
First quatrefoil

four

stem to stem

radiant
Quatrefoil recursive 1

their eyelids, thin and veined, fringed
at the edge, lashes knit, lying like wet leaves across two sets
of eyes (his blue, hers brown), where the real action happens:
Each lid a half, almond shaped, like a valentine split in two

stem to stem

radiant

*
four

fingers rooted into the pad of the hand, thumb wandering outward

rooted
four

stem to stem

a small umbrella broken: its ribs cracked, bent,

turning cool elegances of axes \((x, y, z)\) into the wing
of a sea bird discarded at tide line

wave-turned over and over

curious

dogs and children, led by the nose, worry its angles

higher on the beach
a faded umbrella sings of structure
indomitable wood and the steel ring at the center,
fabric unfurling from the upright pole,

the figures beneath leaning toward
Quatrefoil recursive 2

Children search through green grass
its wiry weave tenting pockets close to the ground
where pallid stalks hide small thoroughfares bypassing
the rare, the sought-after, the unfound

stem to stem

daystruck

.
one ... two ... three ...

two pairs of couples facing into a circle
right hands lifted, touching, forming a bridge or gate
their feet figure the wood floor with
zeros, finished and half-finished – a turn
less abrupt than expected – and eights

looping

they approach touch (flickering familiar, unfamiliar)
like the first days in May

or a glass of water before thirst,
the thin transparency an intervention

its recollection in one piece

radiant

•
four

stem to stem

arms of stars spun out, caught on film light years after
Variation

In the middle of a darkened room, a light on the nightstand
forms a globe soft at the edges,
and I pass through the chambers of my heart
following its blood’s flow.

The first is white and allows no privacy.
Walls smooth as the interior of an egg.

The second and third are blue and mirrors
of each other: the air is Alpine.

The fourth is dark and sticky: poplar leaves line
its muscular floor, yellow and resolute, the tissue
fallen away, leaving deft skeletons among bright flags
The rock at the heart of the clock cleaved into two perfectly matched halves, carved out. Two crystal discs with sawtooth edges, to which the clock's hands are attached, placed in the hollows, making them seem to float and spin around the dial of their own accord …
Final quatrefoil

heart

body

eye
White Swan
Out into the river Exe children sail in kayaks
their singular voices easy in shouts and laughter –
words zigzag into words

and gather into cloth.

It is easier for you to unravel them, speaking, as you do,
their language.
White swans cluster at the iron bridge, and the thin walkway suggests a passage from here to an imagined and fatal land.

“Why is it now
impossible for us to meet –
we who were bound together
like the strands of a close woven basket
impermeable to water”
Outside, the sky roils in gray:

a glint within tumuli becomes a mirror or key and, below, 
hanging from the bright trees, each leaf a stray declaration

lifted by wind

until the stem breaks loose from its lean connection –
spinning down to water, sidewalks, grass.
It was your paleness that struck me the other evening

like a match lit –
above us the ceiling catching fire.

•
The city’s fringe of lights wraps the edge of the hills, the woods night-dyed:
its vivid trees of red and yellow dropped into black.
A slurry of nouns tumbles across the page.
The window resists opening, allows only a quick wintery chill.
Scrap of paper, swanlike, float up
collecting color on their surfaces, the water shearing off, shuddering.

Like Persephone I have left my mother behind.
You, with your precision, would claim that she has left me,

but her death was neither her choice nor mine.

Still, she lives on, breathless, and I am caught between two lands,
hers kindness pursuing,

the immediate air darkening into night.
I enter the silence around me: its space grown large and doorless,
denser than fur
or feathers thick at the breast –
paths lead elsewhere.

Not all silence is retraction,
its intentionality allied with small cruelties;

the coat you knit me was incomplete –
I stand before you, head tucked beneath my one white wing.
And the planet veers through space, resembles an afternoon in Los Angeles, when we fashioned marbled paper on the patio: black, gray, red and gold tangled on the face of the pan’s water, oily and unmixable, baffled until combed into pattern.

Our fingertips stained, disappearing into the swirl-patterned surface.

Decorative paper, good for nothing but wrapping the pages of a book.

Swans glide by, their paddling feet invisible.
How many iterations must be written
– the curvatures of letters tracing a lip, fingers, the porch of the eye –
turning thought and sense into glass, clear and divisive?

I had forgotten the strength of silence – its mutability.

I was busy with the details of a bracelet lost many years ago
on a street filled with people walking north and south.
And you?

Love, too, is distant and fatal, requiring coins for the ferryman.
A viaticum of words carefully saved –

placed on the tongue
Foundlings

The Foundling Hospital, established in the mid-eighteenth century, was the first charity for “exposed and deserted” children in England. During its first fifteen years, the hospital accepted only infants less than two months old. Admission was by lottery. Mothers were asked to draw a ball from a sack: a white ball promised acceptance if the child was healthy, a black ball signaled rejection. The hospital clerks would ask each mother whose child was accepted to leave a token – often a ribbon or a square of cloth from the child’s clothing – as a means of identifying her child, should she return.

‘Of their deep and continuing concern for the children’s welfare
there can be no doubt.’
The Lottery

The Expressions of Grief of the Women whose children could not be admitted were scarcely more observable than those of some of the Women who parted with their Children.

White stained black or red, or plain, these ivory spheres outline the circular tick of clockfaces, the interchangeable pages of calendars.

Jostled, click clack, they speak of cloth cut from the undressed body.

Plucked from a sack, a solitary globe lies heavy in the hand.
**Foundling 1254, a girl**

A piece of blue silk pin’d on the breast.

The inside of a sack has no colors:
White, red, and black – revolve in a dusky smear where
mother’s fingers
seek difference, strive to feel what can only be seen,

know the future is round, white and
smooth, tight as a swelling belly

Draw out a sphere and it floats up to the sky:
The sun is a disc and shiny; this ball an ivory globe
My ball is black. It says no, finally.
Is the inside of a closed mouth,
unlit by arteries and wet tongue.

Drab ball as black as ink drying in a jar
forgotten in a closed cupboard, or the crack
between cobbles, where earth and ash settle.

My ball is black: like death rolled tight, and fetal.
My Name is Andrews

I have many names: the first my mother gave me –
unfamiliar and spoken elsewhere in sounds far-growing, like footsteps
down a corridor, the reverberant smack of shoe leather on slab

Another is the name I hear every day –
This name mutates by the second:

Jones, Bones, Barnaby Bones,
Barely Barnaby, Barely Bones
Foundling 2275, a boy

This Silver Ribbon is
desired to be preserved as
the Childs mark for distinction

This ribbon binds but also reaches,
observes the shortest distance between me and her,
maps the call of a bird –
tinsel and silky: each stitch a feather

The bleak streets are forested with pigeons and magpies,
starlings eke out a regime of seeds and pebbles,
dung and bitter water – their startling sheen
like the glitter of a tooth, or light caught in the corner of an eye.

Mama, I would have said. Mana.
I am teaching you to dig for bones.
That way you will never be destitute.

Father, who died, taught us to scavenge
the rubbish heaps of Harare, our dry home,
looking first for bottles, then for bones.

All day we drift through the stink
of broken things, winnowing scraps,
our backs curved like trees under wind.

Splintered bones fall in the red dust,
unloose alphabets, subtract past from future,
recite, write, multiply and divide.

The bottle man has no pula, no dollars, no rand,
The sugar man will not arrive today or tomorrow.
We wait, and the night call of animals

pulses through us, we nurse shriek and hiss,
savor the fire’s smell, its sweet hot trickle.
We too grow thin, grow thin, grow thin.
Foundling 13287, a boy

Speckled as a quail's egg
and regimental as braid, my cloth
was printed on a bed of nails.

Each twig on spriged cotton paths an arc,
red brown and thin as drool, sprouts
exits that stop, go nowhere, belie
growth's root and fervent increase.
These slim stems might have been a map
leading to a rich, exotic

land, or the lines etched on the palm
of my hand, telling of dark
strangers and letters bearing news
Foundling 13624, a girl

O linsey-woolsey,
blood colored,
smelling of mucous and sweat:
embroidered in purple and thirst, cravings of body heat,
the hankerings of weather –

To market, to market,
To buy a plum bun:
Home again, home again,
Market is done.
**Foundling 13476, a boy**

*Cock a doodle do!*

*My dame has lost her shoe,*

*My master’s lost his fiddlestick,*

*And knows not what to do.*

Quickly the past goes down birds’ gullets.
The forest floor left bald
under stars, minute and sparse.

If there were two of us we could have extinguished
ourselves in each other’s arms at night
Our daily conversation forming a third,
eager playmate, following

But there is only this cloth bird:
mute, frozen, torn from its flowery tree

How sky-bright its interior blue!
Orphans

Yvette, your heart is as hard as a man’s.

Mum’s voice knifes upward shrill as birds.
Her cries a flock of starlings, her body
deep night filled with angles of egrets, their red feet.

Mum is less substantial than the air beneath wings,
withering
leaves under sun, the sound of cloth, the smell of boiling water.

Change the baby, Mum says, she’s covered in feces.

Yvette cleans the baby, cleans mother. And when Mum dies,
leaves for the city again. Each day uncle locks the house,
baby and I wait on the doorstep for him to return.

There are only three of us girls.


*Foundling 12052, a girl*

A diamond of fitful squares flourishes a spray of paired lines on beige cotton: each bending toward the other to shape a bulb.

Pinned beneath: a tulip sketched in scant outlines: fugitive marks cling to the surface of slight paper. Burnt willow, ivory rectangle.

Her body was a cup I nestled in.
Wordless, the cup of this tulip.
Foundling 220, a girl

... pains should be taken to convince them,
when young, that subordination is
necessary in society ...

How can I remember what was never forgotten?
I arrived here festive, sleeves blue and white strip’d cotton.
My wrists cuff’d in white linen and purple flowers.

Catlike and stealthy, a narrow silk ribbon coils, pink,
through my dreams, recalling luxuries of breast and mouth.

The darkly wooded staircase winds into itself for three flights:
oily eyes look down, receding into the black surfaces of canvas.
Ascent favors the rich and wellborn, posits the rule of day.

But nighttime has hooves, is blushed with the memory
of streaky dawn caped in pigeons’ wings: the fresh spill
of unknown rivers runs beneath its grime-furred skin.
*How you are fed*

Upon Sundays Roast Beef
Mondays Stew’d Beef with Turneps and Carrots
Tuesdays Roast Mutton
Wednesdays Boiled Beef with Greens or Roots, or
    Pork with Pease Pudding in Winter, or
    Shoulders of Veal in Summer
Thursdays Stew’d Beef with Turneps and Carrots
Fridays Roast Mutton
And Saturdays Boiled Beef with Greens or Roots, or
    Pork with Pease Pudding in Winter, or
    Shoulders of Veal in Summer
Duty undiluted cannot be long endured

And if you are good:

a silver thimble
a pair of scissors
a silver three-pence
a special hat
a linen handkerchief
gingerbread
a Bible & Prayerbook, better bound than common,
with initial Letters of the Boys & Girls Names
in Gold Letters
There were ten in a bed
and the little one said,
‘Roll over, roll over’ —
So they all rolled over
and one fell out

There were nine in a bed
and the little one said,
‘Roll over, roll over’ —
So they all rolled over
and another fell out

There were eight in a bed
and one said,
‘Roll over, roll over’ —
So they rolled over
and one fell out

There were seven
and the little one said,
‘Roll over’ —
and they rolled over
and fell

Six
the little one said,
‘Roll over,
over
And one fell out
Five
the one said,
‘Roll’
over
and

Four
said,
‘Roll, roll’
and fall

Three
rolled
out

Two
fell

And one
Elegy

In Memorium
Tim Hetherington
1.
I look at the newsstands and see the large photo
of Tim Hetherington – now dead –
staring out from the front page of the Times.
There is a camera strap around his neck.

It is not clear from his gaze that he sees the photographer,
although he is looking directly into the camera.

2.
The world comes through the lens. Not backwards,
as you might imagine: an imposition of realities filtered or limited
by the rim of a mechanical window, shuttered.

But separately. Its content divided from the eye
recording shadows, nuances of muscles, angles of color
and light; the subject, desolate if not for smell and sounds,
or the soft, occasional touch of a breeze in these desert lands.

The world is in front of you: you only need to ask, why?

3.
I wasn’t there, says the photographer, I was busy
that morning, that afternoon, that night. I was working.

And in the afternoon, when I met a friend for coffee, I got lost
following the milk that poured into his cup, the stirring
of a spoon in brown liquid, the color of mud, of an oasis.

4.
The point I wanted to make is that the lens – eye or camera,
it makes no difference – records sleep and death as the same.
It is only later, shuffling through prints or watching the film,
that the evidence becomes clear, that these were moments
I lived through. And that I had lived.
Decorations

In the confusion of wartime in which we are caught up, relying as we must on one-sided information, standing too close to the great changes that have already taken place or are beginning to, and without a glimmering of the future that is being shaped, we ourselves are at a loss as to the significance of the impressions which bear down upon us and as to the value of the judgements which we form.

– Sigmund Freud,
‘Thoughts for the Times on War and Death’, 1915

The Hoard is remarkable for the extraordinary quantity of sword fittings. Most are of gold and many are beautifully inlaid with garnets.

– Online description of the Staffordshire Hoard, 2011
The arm lifting out of the water is a woman’s, smooth and pale. Clear water peeling from her skin like an envelope of blue air amid black. It could only be a woman’s: signifying the sword is a gift not a challenge. The arm, which has no body no face although we know the bearer of weapons is beautiful beyond resistance, slides under the surface of the water, which like silence is mutable. The story goes no farther, heading as it is along the wrong path.

• •
In Athens in 1980 I went with a group of Greek friends to the opening of *Apocalypse Now*. I was the only American. After, I asked my friends what they had felt and they said they were terrified. What I had felt was not terror but kind of shame.

Filmic image was projected over filmic image, to create a vivid palimpsest: illusory and charged – its individual parts ascribable but the whole intangible. The oversaturated blues and greens of the jungle, palm fronds crisscrossing through filtered sunlight (a matching strip of white bandage high on the assassin’s cheekbone), helicopters rising across the vivid backdrop of pink-streaked dawn stretched lusciously across the darkness of the near empty theater. Ochre filters, dust rising in gold clouds, flames globed and undulating. Children in pristine white fluttering cloth. Martin Sheen’s eyes cast with green, skin glowing under sweat and blood.

The soldiers chewed gum, swore or prayed and whimpered. As characters they were all oddly irrelevant within the shifting cinematic colors, iconic and dissonant – as dissonant as animé characters with their dimensionless features overlapping subtly colored landscapes, watercolor greens delicately graduated with finely brushed details.

It was only decades later after watching the grainy but ethereal films transmitted by computers guiding their missiles into targets in Iraq that I understood: we love war. Have fused it irrevocably with svelte form and transcendant trigonometries.
Gold plate, one of two birds
twisted away, awry

traces of talons on the fish’s body.

wild cranes and storks

Likely it’s the decoration on a shield:
two eagles holding a fish between them.
The raptors’ hooked beaks,
following a circular and multiple path,
feathers flattened into a disc, a plowed field,

a ghost house

… deserting by twos and threes
every night

... rifles propped against
the nearest thorn tree …

the metal beaten into a maze
the paths of which never intersect:
one never leads into another,
even though there is a center
a succession of pestilential huts

and, separated by fields of corn,
carcasses of livestock

I knew hunger briefly in a prison in Darfur.
A small stud,
surrounded by gold and garnets,
the central gem –
27 mm in diameter by 8.7 mm wide –

In one of the villages near by,
a house was in flames

fabricated of glass

… fired into the air

Its pattern a checkerboard – black and white,
white the color of bone, not snow –
the stud’s central core inverted,
as if the black-armed cross had its heart scooped out,
than became its opposite,
rotated through space and time:

sticks of charred wood
... soldiers everywhere,
some wore masks

... others didn’t ...

... we hid in the forests ...

a bone white cross on a burnt black field
Investigators in Kosovo have unearthed the bodies of seven ethnic Albanian children, aged between four and twelve, who had all been executed at close range.

An old man died of exhaustion
The earth rolls.

Small sharp upheavals

a jolt or jolts:

the movement edged

paper-like

explosive as a whistle

and thin

•
To be there a child in bed

at night floating
moving her feet
into forgetful pockets

of lush coolness

bell like

drawn down in
to sleep.

The morning’s quake
no disruption
only a comfort

time crisp and boned

and sleep a tremor

The slippage of earth
simply a matter

not of habit but
perhaps of expectation

...
All battles are fought reflected
in a shield, the warrior naked except
for helmet and boots, his skin impenetrable
as marble. The boots are magical.
The earth flows back from their touch
like a cushion of water loosed and vibrant,
suddenly blurred in the glow of such touch.
The target too is blurred: what is seen
in the shield is not what is seen in
a mirror, though the target and
the warrior are swappable, the one
twinning the other. When one looks at
the other face-on the stroke of the blade
freezes mid swing.
angular as arrows
straight legged
spears and swords

shields

breasts

a fragment of silver plate

In profile she looks as if
she tried to swallow an egg:
it got stuck somehow on the wrong
side of her teeth and sank,
the mound rising out of the jaw
half way between her chin
and ear. The top of the dome
is abraded, the whole area mottled
pink, flushed and dark

broken

from a helmet perhaps

and tarnished

• •
One afternoon driving into Berkeley I saw a group of people standing in a circle at the side of Highway 13 northbound, in their center was a deer lying on the shoulder of the road. I pulled over and walked back. The deer was still alive. I knelt down and laid my hand on her side.

No one knew what to do, the driver of the car that hit the deer had continued on, the four standing there had only been observers of the accident.

It wasn’t long before she died. It’s hard to describe that moment, though I hold the visual memory strongly in my mind. And I have seen this retraction before. In those moments of death, something like the soul, which can be seen through the moist partition of eye, seems drawn inward and away, fades (as good a word as any) and disappears. The eye continues to shine – but there is nothing behind the surface, behind the shining eye, the eye that allows the hunter to aim and hit. We all knew she was dead. I laid my head on her neck, as if I were searching for a subtle pulse. Finally, I stood up.

We decided to move the body to a grove of young redwoods about 100 feet down the road. I backed up my truck and the five of us lifted her up and over the railing into the back of the truck. As she fell from our arms, her mouth opened and blood poured out – hemorrhage from all those ruined organs.

We returned her to her woodland. And I returned home, showered off the still warm red liquid, and hosed out her blood that was everywhere in the bed of the truck.

...
The large red red stone, shaped and polished –
cabochon, named for the crown of the
human head – sits central,
at the intersection of the cross’ arms.

Twisted wires of gold curl outward.
Sprouting along each planetary direction.

They took her to the cemetery,
like the others,
at night.

... her name written
on the shroud,
Nuha al Manal

The red red stone flattened, as if the head were shorn,
tiny chips worn smooth.

Inclusions are visible
at 10 x 6 magnification and

thin lines can be seen at the back
of the red red stone,

possibly from a cracking paste below
They cluster around the wrapped body,
He sucks in her death like a bee –
Or is it his life that he tries to press into her,
through skin’s barrier?

In the green light of infrared film,
they bury their dead.
[The paramilitary told them,
We can come back at any time]

Birmingham Museum Accession Number: K0303

It is true:
people have been setting fire
to rubbish in the streets

The top arm of the cross detached,
torn from the other three rather than deliberately cut.

The decoration goes from the front
over the loop and finishes on the back.

My father went to open the door.

I told him, Don’t.
Run away.

He said, Why?
I haven’t done anything wrong.

He opened the door.
[They are called Shabiba, “the ghosts”]

They said:

• •
The books

stacked in orange crates

floor to ceiling

descending bird swift –

The blue lino floor breathing swells

Air a plume

And the earth the earth

folding under

.

‘our books are a floor
of smouldering ash under our feet’

. .
There were two massacres. The first on the Sadd road started at around 2.30 Friday afternoon. The second happened around 11p.m., on the road at the main entrance of Taldou, facing the military security point.

A van, two pickup trucks and a group of motorcycles came from Fulla, a village supportive of the regime, along the Fulla-Taldou road. They met a shepherd at the entrance of the neighborhood – Mahmoud al-Kurdi, and he was with his daughter-in-law and his four grandsons. They shot them, killing them all except the daughter-in-law. She was shot in the thigh and belly, but she is still alive.

They then entered the house of Samir Abdul Razaq. He was killed with his children – Sawsan, Houda, Jouzila, Nada – and his daughter-in-law, Halloum El Khlaf, six months pregnant, with her son Ala’a Abdul Razaq. And Samir’s sister-in-law, Khaloud El Khalaf, and her daughter Rahaf Al Hussein. Her daughter Zahra Al Hussein was shot twice but survived. Samir’s wife was hit with the back of the rifles; she fainted but is now still alive. Among the victims in this house were four kids whose father is Fadi al-Kurdi.

The next house they entered was the house of Qutayba Abdul Razaq. He survived. His one-year-old daughter was injured, but he lost his wife and five of his children. All of those I’m counting died by direct fire. They were gathered in one room and shot. There was one kid whose head was skinned with a knife.

The third house belongs to Nidal Abdul Razaq, his wife and four of his children were killed, but he and one of his children are still alive.

Mustafa Abdul Razaq was killed with his four daughters, his wife and his daughter-in-law.

Adel Abdul Razaq – his whole family, a wife and six children.

Ayman Abdul Razaq – all of his six children were killed as was his wife, one of the children was disabled.

Abdul Khalek Abdul Razaq – his wife and daughter survived gun shots but he lost six other children and his daughter-in-law and her three children.
Abdul Rahman Abdul Razaq lost his wife, his five daughters and 11 grandchildren as well as his six daughters-in-laws and four of his sons. He still has two who are still alive; one is called Firas and the other Rateb. This massacre was of 27 people in the same room.

Also killed were Yaacoub Hussein Abdul Razaq, Mohammad Shafiq Abdul Razaq, Mohammad Abbara and his daughter Amina and her family of seven.
This pomme of gold inlaid with garnets, cloisonné walls around the stones carved into scaly geometries, and underneath the clear and semi-precious red, a modicum of foil to bounce back light’s warmer tones: counterweight apple balancing the sword, poised at the end of the blade’s tang.

This is exactly how it happened.

On the 26th of July, I arrived in Zepa, about 3:00 in the afternoon.

On the 29th, Zepa fell.

... imagine all those voices
Years earlier, during the Soviet war, I had traveled secretly by foot with Shuaib across many of the precipitous mountain passes we could now see leading from Pakistan into the Afghan interior.

The interior of the pyramid, which is fashioned from gold, is difficult to discern through the cloisonné stones and blue glass.

*In the mountains your feet bind you to the earth, you drift – tumble upward into sky – and fall*

With our gear loaded onto mules and horses, we walked unfastened by day and by night, covering hundreds of miles.

A bar attached across the back, to tie to
– adorn –
a scabbard’s leather strap.

The straps lace over
the pyramid’s bar, wrap
around the handle of the sword,
to prevent the warrior
from drawing it
in sudden anger

You gotcher war
It’s a fact a life

You gotcher war
It’s a fact a life

... then I saw the young Afghan,
barely twenty yards away, crawling
along the ground. He had stepped
on an antipersonnel mine. His
mangled foot was amputated on
the spot by the French doctors, and
he was dispatched back to Pakistan
for medical care.

Such elaborate and expensive decoration
You gotcher war
It's a fact a life

You gotcher war
It's a fact a life

It's a fact

a life
And, driving down the freeway, I saw:

A dog running along the meridian
in the wrong direction

raccoons, skunks, possums, cats, dogs,

flayed,
caught between the roll of tire and asphalt,
unrecognizable creatures.

A car submerged in water pooling
from a broken main in the quarry

A car burning
grown immaterial in flames,
twists transparent and blue:

heat that turned
the dry landscape, hills and
suburban homes into
a curtain, wind-caught
Bibliography

Primary Works


**Secondary Works**


Links to the Staffordshire Hoard Images

[Zoomorphic]: BMAG Accession number: 2010.0138K0652

[Millefiori means one thousand flowers]: BMAG Accession number: 2010.0138K0545
http://www.staffordshirehoard.org.uk/staritems/millefiori-stud

http://www.staffordshirehoard.org.uk/staritems/sword-pyramid
[God is great] and [The paramilitary told them, We can come back at any time]: BMAG Accession number: 2010.0138K0303
http://www.staffordshirehoard.org.uk/staritems/petctoral-cross

[Rubber bullets]: BMAG Accession number: 2010.0138K0453
http://www.staffordshirehoard.org.uk/staritems/helmet-cheek-piece