

The Literary Anatomy

Lost and Found

Reading and Writing the Elegy

MICHAEL MORSE

*“There isn’t anything that makes grief better, and I think artists have to accommodate that fact, in their work. . . . That said, I truly don’t know how people survive grief without making something out of it. . . . And that is no small thing; . . . it can provide you with a place to stand, a margin that can save your life.”*¹

— Mark Doty

*“What elegy is, not loss but opposition.”*²

— C.D. Wright

ONE OF MY ALL-TIME FAVORITE POEMS doubles as one of my favorite teaching handouts—a two-sided document with the poem’s final draft on one side, its first draft on the other. The earlier incarnation lacks the poise and polish of its sibling, but illuminates the poet’s preliminary grappling with language and the complex subject matter of loss. At the top of the draft, typed in all-caps, is a working title: **HOW TO LOSE THINGS / ? / THE GIFT OF LOSING THINGS?**

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The draft is revelatory: enacting the process of poetic composition—a simultaneity of bold utterance (those caps!) and the gnawing doubt of early processes (the slash and its sharp embodiment of “or”; the question marks)—it documents the early steps that will one day evolve into Elizabeth Bishop’s masterpiece, “One Art.”

Bishop’s villanelle seems like a good place to begin our consideration of one of our most potent poetic forms, the elegy. Her easeful opening admission, “The art of losing isn’t hard to master,” seemingly casual and flip at first, appears again at the end of the second and fourth stanzas, accruing a heft and gravity that parallels the mounting emotional stakes in the poem’s catalogue of loss. The refrain’s understatement becomes devastatingly clear in its final instance with help from a slight, begrudging qualifier [*italics mine*]: “the art of losing’s not *too* hard to master. . . .” Loss is crushing and difficult; Bishop’s villanelle makes that struggle all too clear. And yet elegies like Bishop’s offer us one of poetry’s most appealing consolations: they transform loss—and even the threat of loss—into artful presence.

All lyric poems, in a sense, have elegiac codes of maintenance and survival in their DNA. They still and distill particular moments in time and make keepsakes of consciousness that survive the moment of

their making. Elegies, however, explicitly address loss and move towards consolation and transformation. These themes, and not strict formal patterns or requirements, are what shape an elegy. Ron Padgett notes that the word elegy comes from the Greek word *elegeia*, which translates to “song of mourning.”³ Mark Strand and Eavan Boland define the elegy as a lament that “sets out the circumstances and character of a loss. It mourns for a dead person, lists his or her virtues, and seeks consolation beyond the momentary event.”⁴ While classical elegies often begin by naming a specific loss, lament it, and finally move towards consolation, an elegy, as Strand and Boland note, “is not associated with any required pattern or cadence or repetition.” They define it as a “shaping form,” more akin to “an environment” rather than the “architecture” of a metrical form. The elegy can build a bridge between an individual and a more collective public, enacting “the struggle between custom and decorum on the one hand, and private feeling on the other.”

Peter Sacks, in his terrific study, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*⁵, outlines conventions of elegiac poetry, which can include:

- Mythological narratives as models where loss becomes the mother of poetic invention.
- Repetition and refrain—the poems can offer a musical or structural continuity in the face of the greatest discontinuity possible—death.
- Reiterated questions and/or emotional outbursts (anger, cursing) that can help liberate a speaker’s frustration . . . and allow the mourner to better move from the lost object/person towards the rest of the world again.
- A movement from grief to consolation that involves a self-conscious awareness of the work at hand.

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Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* offers us two mythological narratives that tap the wellsprings of elegiac poetry, the respective tales of Apollo and Daphne, and Pan and Syrinx. In the first tale, Apollo, having dissed Cupid, is smitten with unrequited passion for Daphne. He pursues her, and the nymph, fleeing, cries out to her father for help. Just as Apollo reaches out to grab her, Daphne is suddenly transformed into a laurel tree. Apollo, distraught at his loss, finds some consolation in the laurel wreath that he fashions out of her leaves. As Sacks describes it, Daphne, instead of becoming the object of a sexual conquest, is transformed into “something very much like a consolation prize—a prize that becomes the prize and sign of

poethood.”⁶ The tropes involved—Daphne’s turning into a tree; Apollo’s subsequent turning from the object of his affections to what is in effect a sign or symbol of her—parallel what happens in mourning and elegy. Similarly, in the other tale, Pan pursues Syrinx, who, having spurned his pleas, flees until she dead-ends at the river Ladon. She begs the water nymphs to

change her shape, and Pan ends up grasping not Syrinx but a handful of marsh reeds. Distraught, he sighs, and “the reeds in his hands, stirred by his own breath, / gave forth a similar, low-pitched complaint!”⁷ As with the laurel wreath, an object from the natural world is altered and yields a consoling instrument. Nature transforms to artifice, and loss, consolation. Troubling as their bad-boy behavior may be, Pan and Apollo find some comfort for their losses.

Contemporary Examples of the Elegy

Over time, elegies have come to express a more introspective and private grief. Despite this shift, good elegies refuse to be singularly idiosyncratic—they need to reach outside of a purely personal experience of loss

and grieving to allow for shared public sentiment, as with Ben Jonson's 17th-century classic, "On My First Son." What follows are three contemporary elegies that continue to highlight the form's power with both classic and contemporary machinations. Keith Althaus's "Little Elegy"^{*} is a good starting place from which to take a closer look at the form.

Little Elegy

KEITH ALTHAUS

Even the stars wear out.
 Their great engines fail.
 The unapproachable roar
 and heat subside
 as wind blows across
 the hole in the sky
 with a noise like a boy
 playing on an empty bottle.
 It is an owl, or a train.
 You hear it underground.
 Where the worms live
 that can be cut in half
 and start over
 again and again.
 Their heart must be
 in two places at once, like mine.

I love the clarity in this poem, its vertical track from the celestial right down to earth. And how delightful, given the history of the form, for a celestial experience to be grounded in a figure that recalls Pan's pipes—here, a boy's breath over an empty bottle. The simple-yet-deft earthworm analogy that ends the poem yields a moving simultaneity of feeling that fills our best poetry—one heart in two different places. I admire the eloquence and understated power of this poem: prior to its conclusion, there's little human presence here (a speaker, a figurative reference to a boy, and perhaps an implied "you") yet sufficient phys-

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[†]Reprinted from *What The Living Do* by Marie Howe. Copyright © 1998 by Marie Howe. Used with permission of the publisher, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

ical particulars lay bare a physical and emotional landscape of loss.

Here's another contemporary elegy that I love: Marie Howe's "What The Living Do."[†]

What the Living Do

MARIE HOWE

Johnny, the kitchen sink has been clogged for
 days, some utensil probably fell down there.
 And the Drano won't work but smells dangerous,
 and the crusty dishes have piled up

waiting for the plumber I still haven't called.

This is the everyday we spoke of.

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

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

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

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

I thought it again, and again later, when
 buying a hairbrush: This is it.

Parking. Slamming the car door shut in the
 cold. What you called *that yearning*.

What you finally gave up. We want the spring
 to come and the winter to pass. We want
 whoever to call or not call, a letter, a kiss—
 we want more and more and then more of it.

But there are moments, walking, when I catch
 a glimpse of myself in the window glass,
 say, the window of the corner video store,
 and I'm gripped by a cherishing so deep

for my own blowing hair, chapped face, and
 unbuttoned coat that I'm speechless:

I am living, I remember you.

Similarly matter-of-fact, there's an orientation in here that's the inverse of the Althaus poem. We move from the mundane to the sacred, building towards a desire and yearning that shapes the poem's conclusion. Everyday iniquities build and accrue, from bad plumbing to excessive heat to broken grocery bags to wobbly bricks, and yet with memory and desire comes a kind of salvation, a desperate love for what's present through the conciliatory memory of what's absent. The word "want" dominates the sixth stanza, want that shouts out its desire even as it echoes its archaic etymology of lack. At poem's end, the ability to remember feels like a reward, consciousness and its bright prize of presence, where even what we've lost can still accompany us.

I've mentioned that the elegy relies on figuration—on turns and metamorphoses—as part of its power. The materiality of the world and the resonance of objects, whether laurel wreath or empty bottle, can similarly evoke the departed and our ability to carry them forward or leave them be. Catherine Barnett's collection *Into Perfect Spheres Such Holes Are Pierced* is one of the most moving collections of poetry I've ever read. Poem after poem distills the loss of two nieces in heartbreaking and healing detail. Here's one poem in particular that I like to teach:

As by Giving or Letting Go*

CATHERINE BARNETT

How to tend to their belongings—

Mend them?

Spend them?

Send them to us who still have children

though we try not to speak of them,
frightened as we are.

Lent to my son and me:

four cartoon plates, a box for lost teeth,

and a homemade board game
with a sack of markers and dice.

For a child of six and a child of eight
it must have been ecstasy to count so high!

What my sister can't give away
let her break, remake,

take out of the closet the red velvet dress
her eldest wore one Thanksgiving in high fever

when we pressed our hands to her forehead
to cool her, fool the child to sleep.

I admire how the early rhymes parallel the speculative interrogatives—how on earth do we cope with such profound loss? The questions and sonorous links segue into a brief catalogue of physical particulars, followed by a remarkable moment of pathos in the short exclamation of the sixth couplet: the speaker enters the wonder that the girls must have felt in their experience of the objects—a shared-if-imagined experience with others no longer present. There's also a crucial move in the last three stanzas of the poem. Elegies might ostensibly deal with the departed, but they are for the living. And I love how the poem's conclusion makes a wish for the speaker's sister: that she might, somehow, even in the face of resonant associations and reminders, begin to move forward.

Exercises for Teaching the Elegy

This past winter I had the pleasure to live in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where I worked with both adults and high-schoolers on the elegy and its consolations: how reading and writing them might help us—young or old—to reflect on presence and absence in the lives we've led and will lead. The workshops—at the Provincetown Council on Aging and with all fourteen seniors at Provincetown High School—were both moving and invigorating—there were moments of seriousness and tenderness, and we were not afraid to laugh and have fun, either. I was delighted that any reservations about exploring loss as subject matter (with teenagers who might not have

*Reprinted from *Into Perfect Spheres Such Holes Are Pierced* by Catherine Barnett. Copyright © 2004 by Catherine Barnett. Used with permission of the publisher, Alice James Books.

experienced much loss; with older folks who had experienced plenty and might not wish for any further wading) proved misguided.

Each group initially discussed “loss.” Many of the adults had lost loved ones and friends, and the discussion unfolded naturally from these experiences. Only a few of the high schoolers, however, had experienced this type of loss, so we focused instead on change as a kind of loss. Their impending graduation was inspiring feelings of relief as well as anxiety, and we discussed the idea of both time and selves passing from one realm into others: not, perhaps, the true fuel of elegy, but ideas that got them thinking in elegiac fashion. After discussing the myths and some of the elements of the elegy, we were ready to try some writing.

The Apple Elegy

My favorite elegy exercise is one that my best friend and fellow poet Matthew Lippman developed, inspired by the following poetic fragment, originally from a Yiddish remedy book and reproduced in *Exiled in the World*, edited by Jerome Rothenberg and Harris Lenowitz.

Slice an apple in three.

Write a name on each slice & eat it.⁸

With both of my groups, I started by sharing Grace Schulman’s poem, “Apples,” which, in addition to references to Eve and Cezanne and ideas of beauty and exile, gives readers a nice catalogue of particular apples, including Blacktwig, Crimson King, Salome, Northern Spy, and Winesap. After some quizzical looks—what does this have to do with elegy?—and a brief discussion of the poem and its imagery, I asked my students to help me make a list on the board of any and all associations they could come up with involving the word “apple.” We came up with a huge list of items: Adam and Eve, Johnny Appleseed, Snow

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White, iPods and iPhones, sayings such as “an apple a day keeps the doctor away,” and even—with the older folks, of course—a reference to old Beatles 45s. I encouraged people to call out ideas, and we soon had a whiteboard filled with a delightfully messy and random list that we saved for later reference.

I then took out a bunch of apples and my favorite combination culinary and schoolroom tool, the apple corer/slicer. As I sectioned the apples, I asked each student to think about someone, some thing, or some place that he or she had “lost”—perhaps someone beloved who had passed away. Perhaps a pet. It might be a more figurative loss, say a friend whom one hasn’t seen in a decade, or perhaps one’s first home which has since been left behind. I asked the kids to think about the person, place, or thing and picture her, him or it in their mind’s eye with as much sensory detail as possible. As they mulled this over, I gave each student a slice, a napkin, and a toothpick. I then asked them to use the toothpick like a pen, and to “write” (more like punch, in staccato or pointillist fashion) the initials of their beloved person/pet/place into the skin of the apple. Then they got to eat the apple, all the while thinking of their chosen subject and balancing their thoughts with the sensory experience of eating the apple. Was it sweet and pleasing? Tart and sour? This mesh of memory and the palate’s present moment was the springboard off of which they would then leap into writing—what was this experience like? Could they begin to get on paper what it was like to ingest both this apple and the memory of their subject? What kinds of figures of speech, from the sensory experience of ingestion and the catalogue of associations we’d compiled on the board, could help the students to

make some figurative leaps in their poem about a specific being or place?

One of my Council on Aging workshoppers, Rita Burke, who recently lost her partner, wrote an elegy in the form of a letter which moved from an initially playful skepticism—“Dear Gail, Would you believe it? Here I am sitting in a class of mature adults chewing on an initialed apple. The initials are your initials—G.E.T.”—into a moving exploration of what her partner would have said in such a scenario:

“Like a town crier, you would proclaim, ‘I don’t like to eat apples. The skin gets stuck between my teeth. Sometimes my gums even bleed. It is an annoying and uncomfortable fruit to chew. By the way, the tartness upsets my stomach. So please, don’t put an apple in my lunch bag.’”

Rita’s epistolary elegy then made a lovely move, imagining her partner’s response if blueberries and not apples were part of the equation:

“I would have conjured up a different memory. A soft, gentle voice would have whispered sweetly into the air, ‘I love blueberries. I love blueberry pie. I love Maine blueberry pie, the pie where the blueberries are small, sweet, delicate, and delicious.’”

At elegy’s end, the actual and the imagined have combined to give a full portrait of the beloved—both bitter and sweet elements are remembered: “I will always remember you—apples, blueberries—both sides of you.”

With both groups of writers, older and younger, there were nice moments of protest, of antithesis, that felt fitting given the subject matter of loss. C.D. Wright’s notion of elegy as opposition seems important here, for Rita, and for Leo Rose, a 12th-grader who seemed to struggle with his apple elegy and turned in the following one-line poem about his grandfather:

An apple has nothing to do with him.

It’s easy to read Leo’s effort as lacking here, to suppose that he might have developed his poem with details and images. True—but there’s something

protestant about his one-liner that seems to capture an important aspect of elegy, its anger and opposition towards loss, and, in this case, any effort to take the memory of someone special and transform them, via metaphor, into something else. There’s an austere purity to Leo’s sentiment that seems right on the money. Just as we struggle under the constraints of mortality and our limited time here, so the elegist struggles and battles with the constraints of inherited language and tradition. Both poets, one older, one younger, sought, in Sacks’ words, “to balance [their] needs against [their] skepticism, [their] desires against [their] knowledge,” [performing] . . . an essential aspect of the work of mourning.”⁹

Here’s an untitled “apple elegy” by high-schooler Eddie Zawaduk:

Long summer days filled with nothing but joy

hiking through the woods with the curiosity
of a child,

long nights of talking truth passing around
liquid courage—

Loud so loud never wrong in his mind and
more stubborn than an ox.

Small and thin almost a twin of my kin,

loyal and strong, first to throw a punch and
ask forgiveness later,

unfairly taken from the ones he loved,

now partying with friends fallen in times of
the past

and probably saying hey, hurry up and move
your ass.

Us all like apples waiting to fall.

He fell sooner than the rest, almost plucked
before his time to pass

but like all apples each has a seed

that will grow into a strong tree.

I sit under it thinking of good times past.

I love how the experience of the apple slice, in Eddie's imagination, becomes a landscape in which he can remember his lost friend and evoke a final tree image that suggests sitting with him even as he remembers him.

The Heirloom/Object Elegy

After reading Catherine Barnett's poem, "As by Giving or Letting Go," above, and also reading Eavan Boland's fabulous poem, "The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me," I asked students to bring in a small, portable, and backpack-durable object that had emotional significance for them—the object had to be something that they received from someone else. I asked them to then use that object to explore their thoughts and feelings about that person—what kind of resonance did that object—that family heirloom, that small gift received from a friend about to move away—have for the writer? Before we wrote, I asked the students to come up with three adjectives that described their object, and, further, two corresponding nouns for each of those adjectives—nouns that didn't, immediately, have anything to do with the object at hand.

I then asked everyone to write about their object and their person, using their additional nouns as figures of speech to add imagistic complexity to their poems. T.K., a high-schooler who had recently lost his father, brought in his dad's treasured Tilley Hat. Here are his adjectives and corresponding nouns: tan (suntan, almond), worn (sword, boots), and round (discus, frisbee).

And here is T.K.'s poem:

My Father's Hat

T.K. DAHILL

My father was always with
a unique Tilley Hat.
One hat white as sand,

the other almond tan,
as if it was cooking in
the blazing summer sun.
Dad made sure the hats were worn.
Like the swords of Knights Templar,
they were quickly broken in,
the brim stained with dirt,
the buttons stained with rust
from toil in the ocean air.
He was rarely without
his round discus hat
when I saw him outside.
Never was he in the car,
without his Tilley Hat,
the hat was his trademark.
His symbol of who he was.
My father's spirit
has been inscribed into
his loyal Tilley Hat.

Past Lives/Time

Traditionalists might rightfully argue that elegies are about people. However, by broadening the range of the elegy to include writing that considers a loss of place, a shift in landscape, and even changes in ourselves over time, we open up doors for younger and older students to contemplate experience and loss in new ways. Here, then, are some additional model poems and exercises that can yield elegiac work.

Meghan O'Rourke's poem, "My Life as a Teenager," contains a lively look back at a very specific time in its speaker's life. The poem begins:

I felt "remorse for civilization."
My nostalgia was buoyant,
fat as cartoon clouds.
I sang teen-age French, sashaying down the
street:
"Bonjour, je t'aime, comment tu t'appelles?"
The apartment building leaned down at me.
I proclaimed my love for the past,
wearing fitted clothes from the Forties.
I came out against pointlessness.

I had students read Meghan's poem and then reflect back on a particular time in their own lives. The excerpt from The Doors' "Hello, I Love You" intrigued me, so I asked the writers to contemplate a time and a place where they'd been and reference music associated with that time. Here's what one high-school senior, Brianna, had to say about a childhood filled with frequent moves:

Backstreet Boys, Spice Girls

BRIANNA RUSSELL

Moved from school to school
different men in and out of my life
being dragged around no matter my feeling
about it. Never got the chance to speak
my opinion was sheltered from the world.
New friends every year.
Once I finally fit in up and moved away again.
Different strange men trying to be my dad
always up and left my mom to fend
for herself. No matter where we went
or who came in or out of our lives
we always had each other.

The pop-music reference not only locates a particular time and space in Brianna's life, but serves as a metaphor of sorts for her experience.

Elegy for a Place

The pastoral, a form that originally celebrated (often from some distance) the virtues of an idealized (often disappeared and not present) rural life, offers elegiac possibilities. Good results come from asking students to contemplate their relationship with a particular geographical place. As the fourteen seniors—Provincetown High's entire senior class—were all on the verge of that great exodus we call commencement, I thought it might be interesting to think about how their relationship to their town had started to change. We started class by reading poems by Jack Gilbert ("Searching for Pittsburgh"), Adam Zagajewski ("To Go to Lvov"), and Mahmoud Darwish ("I Come From There"). With Gilbert's poem, I prompted students to

pre-write, coming up with an animal whose attributes might match their own personalities, a list of four places in town that were, for whatever reason, significant and meaningful, and finally, two places in the world to which they'd like to travel. Hannah's pre-write list consisted of a raccoon; the Pearl Street beach at night, a spot behind her house, "the porch," and Whaler's Wharf; and Seattle and London. And here's her poem:

Searching For Provincetown

HANNAH JENNINGS

Raccoon scratch-scratching at the inside
lining of my heart.

"Make room," he says. "You have so much
here."

I shake my head, still longing for gray dreary
skies

Peeking through

Tall, bleak buildings

That seem to pierce the clouds.

"No." He brings me back, big beady eyes
locking with my hazel.

"Where else have you sat

on cold, wet sand

at half-past ten

only to find home, instead of solitude?"

I hang my head in shame, still dreaming of
flooded streets

Slippery with London's infamous rain.

His claws dig into my thighs, adding to the
scars.

"Make room in your heart for the cozy,
hidden nook

and the steps to your escape

and the third floor of a well-known two-story building.

Why leave such a place

You've just so recently

begun to embrace?

Many thanks to Diana Fabbri at the Provincetown Council on Aging and to Amy Rokicki and Margaret Phillips at Provincetown High School.

For another exercise and a list of elegies that will work in the classroom, go to www.twc.org/resources/ 

Endnotes

¹Wright quote: Wright, C.D., *Cooling Time: An American Poetry Vigil*, Port Townsend, Washington, 2005.

²"An Interview with Poet and Memoirist Mark Doty," part 1, Jen Betterley, Seattlest.com, Arts & Events, February 24, 2010. seattlest.com/2010/02/24/an_interview_with_poet_and_memoiris.php

³Padgett, Ron, editor. *The Teachers & Writers Handbook of Poetic Forms*, New York: Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 2000.

⁴Boland, Eavan, and Strand, Mark (eds.), *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2000.

⁵Sacks, Peter M. *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*, Baltimore & London: J.H.U. University Press, 1985.

⁶Sacks.

⁷Martin, Charles. *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2005.

⁸Rothenberg, Jerome, and Lenowitz, Harris (eds.), *Exiled in the World: Poems and Other Visions of the Jews from Tribal Times to Present*, Copper Canyon Press, Port Townsend, Washington, 1989. "Name Event One" is from a description in R. Patai, F.L. Utley, and D. Noy (eds.), "Two Remedy Books in Yiddish from 1474 & 1508," in *Studies in Biblical & Jewish Folklore* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960, pages 294–95).

⁹Sacks.