“Comic self-consciousness”: Oblique approaches to the elegiac

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Kim Jennifer Fulton
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Abstract

This thesis, composed of a collection of poetry and a critical essay, explores the contemporary elegiac poem. Whereas traditional elegists focused on death, contemporary elegiac poems deal with loss in a broader sense. The challenge contemporary elegiac poets take on is to engage with feeling but without veering into sentimentality. In the critical portion of this thesis, "'Comic self-consciousness': Oblique approaches to the elegiac," I explore how two contemporary poets, Billy Collins and William Matthews, approach loss indirectly to evade sentimentality. Specifically, I argue that Collins and Matthews, both of whom are noted for their elegiac orientation and their use of wit, engage with loss through three strategies: the postponement of acknowledging the loss central to the poem, the use of incongruities manifesting as humour and irony, and by gaining the reader's complicity through the use of metapoetics. In the creative portion of the thesis, "Farewell, My Lovely," I have drawn inspiration from the strategies modelled by these two poets to engage with at times light-hearted or ironic approaches to loss—via wit, irony and at times metapoetics—to produce a collection of elegiac lyric poems that approach loss indirectly.

Table of Contents

"Comic self-consciousness": Oblique approaches to the elegiac

The elegiac has become perhaps the predominant mode and mood of lyric poetry. Morton W. Bloomfield identifies the elegiac as a poem whose emphasis is on sadness, depression and grief, with alienation having more recently found a place in such poetry as well (Lewalski 148). As John B. Vickery notes, contemporary poems of the elegiac mode differ from more traditional elegies in that they focus on loss rather than death and he argues this representation of loss can take a range oforms: "Whereas renaissance, Romantic, and Victorian elegists hewed pretty sedulously to death as their prime subject, one finds a distinct tendency in the modern period to broaden the focus to include loss of all kinds as the basic stimulus and concern" (1). Even texts that concentrate on the conventional elegiac triad of lamentation, confrontation and consolation, he argues, explore themes previously only marginally related to the elegy. For example, he argues, they extend the concept of death from living creatures "to include institutions, cultures, forms of authority, ways of thinking" (2). But beyond an expansion of subject matter, stylistically, too, contemporary poems of loss differ from predecessors. Vickery argues that contemporary elegiac poems tend to be oblique, indirect and sometimes ironic and so tend to repress the impact of the loss (6). One explanation for such a shift is a concern among poets to avoid sentimentality. One reason is suggested by poet and critic Kevin Prufer's distaste for sentimentality, which he proposes is the enemy of emotional complexity. For example, it can ask us to feel outrage and sadness, but not ask us to examine those emotions. "Sentimentality, it seems to me, reduces our complex responses to the world; a poem ideally ought to expand those responses" (79). However, when contemporary poets retreat from strong emotion in order to avoid sentimentality, they misunderstand the term at the expense of a powerful force for their writing, he argues. "Instead of retreating from emotion, we should retreat from emotional, ideological, political *simplicity*. That's a better way to avoid sentimentality" (79). That is, sentimentality is not the same as feeling. Benjamin Myers notes that an abundance of emotion isn't a bad thing in itself. Sentimentality has been defined as "emotion in excess of its object" (45). Myers argues sentimentality is not simply too much emotion, but an imbalance of it. He argues sentimentality is a defect in the quality, rather than quantity of feeling in a poem. "Sentimentality offers us the dubious chance to feel while bypassing the messiness of any real human engagement: not too much feeling but too thin an experience" (46). He believes sentimentality permits emotional satisfaction without emotional connection. It is an agreement between artist and audience to skip straight to gratification, "which, due to the skipping, is not so gratifying after all" (46). This assertion echoes Oscar Wilde's famous observation that emotions must be paid for. "We think we can have our emotions for nothing. We cannot. Even the finest and most self-sacrificing emotions have to be paid for. Strangely enough, that is what makes them fine" (111). In sum, the challenge contemporary elegiac poets take on is to engage with feeling but without veering into sentimentality, hence their "indirect" approaches. In this essay, I will explore

in more fine-grained detail how such indirect approaches work by looking at the way two contemporary poets evade the risk of sentimentality. Specifically, I will argue that Billy Collins and William Matthews – chosen because both are known for their use of wit and for engaging in the elegiac mode – engage with loss through the postponement of acknowledging the loss central to the poem, the use of incongruities manifesting as humour and irony, and at times by gaining the reader's complicity through metapoetics. Postponement refers to the way poets initially focus on an object or subject emotionally removed from the loss at hand and then come to the central feeling of loss in a surprising way. Incongruity functions in a similar way. It can manifest as humour, which encourages the reader to derive pleasure from a speaker's comic observations, then be shocked by the feeling of loss the humour deflects from. It can also manifest as irony, which allows for an oblique approach to loss, in that we must read between the lines to fully appreciate the speaker's feelings. Complicity between speaker and reader can be created through metapoetics, which allows an author to acknowledge their limitations and also to acknowledge their audience's scepticism about poetry's emotional sincerity and work to counter that distrust.

Postponement

Collins and Matthews frequently postpone feelings of loss in their poems by beginning with a subject seemingly unconnected to any serious emotions, such as the weather, a train trip, or notes in the margin of a library book. They go on to use these seemingly innocent subjects as a gateway into serious ponderings. In a PBS interview, Collins touches on this shift from the casual to the serious. If the poem "starts out with a kind of – casual straightforward tone, trying to just get the reader engaged in the first stanza by not making too many demands on the reader" he hopes the poem as it goes on becomes "a little more demanding, a little more ambiguous or speculative, so that we're drifting away from the casual beginning of the poem into something a little more serious" (PBS). Poems of this sort might seem at first blush to retreat from emotion. As they progress, however, we recognize they are asking us to see loss not just in the obvious places but in the most unlikely things.

Matthews postpones his expression of loss by focusing first on the mundane topic of rain in "Our Strange and Loveable Weather." The speaker shifts eventually from an ostensible focus on the weather to a deeper point about the passing of time and the ways in which we can misinterpret our pasts. The poem is about the predictable way seasons pass in Seattle.

> Mostly we have
> cool rain in fog, in drizzle, in mist
> and sometimes in fat, candid drops
> that lubricate our long, slow springs. (96)

The speaker claims that winter, though just beginning, will soon pass and bulbs will swell – a familiar image, not unique to Seattle. The speaker is aware that his observations are not unique but are clichés of life and poetry:

Here you can fill in the bad jokes
about weather and change, about
mixed feelings, about time, about,
not wanting to die. . .” (96)

The speaker then returns to clichéd observations of people clearing their gutters, turning off outside faucets, and questioning how the year has gone so fast. However in the final lines of the poem the speaker widens the piece’s significance by expressing his concern at our tendency to extend these sorts of harmless generalisations to more significant things:

Time to clear the clog of wet leaves
from the gutters, time to turn off
the water to the outside faucets.
And time to think how what we know
about our lives from watching this
is true enough to live them by,
though anyplace lies about its weather,
just as we lie about our childhoods,
and for the same reason: we can’t
say surely what we’ve undergone,
and need to know, and need to know. (97)

The speaker suggests that it is not just the weather we make generalisations about; we also generalise when we make seemingly profound observations about our lives. We need to understand our pasts in order to move forwards but we lie to ourselves about them. While it starts out as a poem praising Seattle’s weather and its predictable changes of seasons, then, the poem goes on to show that many of the generalisations we make about our lives are unreliable. A feeling of loss comes with this new understanding that our pasts may not have occurred exactly as we recall. This feeling hits us hard because we hadn’t seen it coming, thinking we were reading a poem about the weather. The weather is merely an example or a metaphor for wider experience and memory, however. The speaker invites the reader to see his clichéd observations as clichés and therefore unreliable. He extends this notion to memory in general, suggesting conclusions we draw about the world on their basis are often faulty. The speaker thus asks readers to question the lies they tell themselves about everything from the weather to their pasts and hence extends the loss to more than a passing season or the passing of time, but to the way the past is lost even more fully than we realised because our recollections of it are unreliable – we will never truly know what we “need to know” about our lives. Matthews thus works indirectly via an initial focus on that most mundane of topics – the sort we would discuss with a stranger – then via metaphor and an aware use of cliché he leads the now complicit reader to a larger sense of loss.

Similarly, it is through a focus on a train trip that Collins approaches the theme of loss in "Velocity". The speaker begins with scenes he passes on a train, referring to them as "things you see once and will never see again" (5). For instance, he describes "cows spread over a pasture, / hay rolled up meticulously. . ." (5), images that are never seen again both because they move out of his line of sight as he passes a location on a journey he might not take again and because they are temporary in themselves: The hay will be eaten soon and the cows perhaps slaughtered. The latter implication builds the potential for a sense of loss – the transience of phenomena – on the more neutral statement that one simply passes things on a train. Once he has linked loss to movement – albeit a philosophical loss, one that has no particular weight for the speaker, who has no emotional investment in cows and hay – he shifts to the topic of stillness. Stillness is suggested first through the mention of the train whistle, which signifies stopping and starting – again, beginning with an emotionally neutral description that arises from his train trip – but he then represents each stop as one in his movement through time, not just space: "Omaha and whatever lay beyond Omaha / for me, all other stops to make // before the time would arrive to stop for good" (6). In both cases, then – movement and stillness – he moves from a literal, localized application of the term to one that has a broader significance. But his primary interest is in the way we all speed through time – through our lives – even when not moving through space, and he applies his descriptions of movement and stillness to this idea. He recalls the convention of drawing speed lines to suggest an object or person in a still picture is moving. The speed lines make literal sense when he applies them to the motorcyclist and the train, which move through space. But they take on a different meaning when he applies them to a man reading by the fire, a woman on the beach and a child asleep. The speaker suggests these people are speeding through time despite their apparent stillness and in doing so he suggests the brevity of lives, which rush by without our realising. Even the child in bed has "speed lines flying from the posters of her bed, / from the white tips of the pillow cases, / and from the edges of her perfectly motionless body" (6). The images Collins presents us with in this poem are not indicative of loss in themselves – cows, a motorcyclist, a sleeping child. They began simply as things the speaker passed and thought about on his trip. It is, when he imposes the perception of speed first described on the train to these people at rest that loss, or a racing through life, is suggested. In this respect Collins approaches the theme of loss indirectly by inviting us to see everyday images from a different, fleeting, perspective.

A similar emotional shift occurs in "Marginalia", where notes discovered in the margins of texts become symbols of loss as the speaker internalises them. The speaker starts out by making observations about the notes: "Sometimes the notes are ferocious, / skirmishes against the author / raging along the borders of every page," (107), he writes, while "Other comments are more offhand, dismissive - / 'Nonsense.' 'Please!' 'HA!!'" (107). These observations set the poem up as a set of light-hearted transcriptions. Collins makes use of humour, as he works to convince us that this is just a poem about scribbles in texts. "One scrawls 'Metaphor' next to a stanza of Eliot's. / Another notes the presence of 'Irony' / fifty times outside the paragraphs of *A Modest Proposal*" (107). The humour

here arises from the fact that the metaphors and irony in these pieces probably go without saying. The collaboration of these two indirect techniques – humour and postponement of loss – is disarming. We seem to be reading a light-hearted poem, taking pleasure in Collins' jokes. But a sense of loss is gradually revealed through the speaker's perspective and his internalisation of the situation. This deeper meaning first comes across when the speaker observes:

> We have all seized the white perimeter as our own
> and reached for a pen if only to show
> we did not just laze in an armchair turning pages;
> we pressed a thought into the wayside,
> planted an impression along the verge. (108)

This observation suggests a belief that these people making notes in the margin are trying to leave something of themselves: some proof that they were here, engaging with a particular text. This subtly signals an awareness of the way time passes and of how people try to transcend time and leave proof of themselves, of their significance. This sentiment is expanded upon in the final stanza when the poem becomes not just about notes we leave in a margin but about the connections we make across time and place. Collins reflects on the copy of *Catcher in the Rye* he borrowed from the library at the beginning of high school.

> and I cannot tell you
> how vastly my loneliness was deepened,
> how poignant and amplified the world before me seemed,
> when I found on one page
>
> a few greasy looking smears
> and next to them, written in soft pencil-
> by a beautiful girl, I could tell,
> whom I would never meet-
> 'Pardon the egg salad stains, but I'm in love.' (109)

This bit of marginalia stands out in that its author seemed to transcend time and space to address the speaker directly. The loss is also intensified here in that he'll never meet this girl who recorded proof of her presence and her feelings, all those years ago. This is perhaps why he says his loneliness was deepened. As with the other poems, the true emotional centre here – a futile desire for significance – is postponed by a focus on seemingly trivial observations. Viewed with some distance or humour these observations seek the reader's complicity in order to arrive at a place of feeling.

Incongruity

It is worth, in fact, seeing humour as a distinct approach poets can use to express emotion while bypassing sentimentality. Poems which use humour to achieve their emotional ends work in a similar way to those which postpone loss. Both approaches achieve their effects through an emotional shift. In the poems that postpone loss, this shift occurs gradually as the piece progresses. In humorous poems, it comes in the way of more sudden cognitive shifts driven by 'incongruities'. The dominant theory of humour in philosophy and psychology is founded on the notion of 'incongruity', John Morreall notes. "The core meaning of 'incongruity' in standard incongruity theories is that some thing or event we perceive or think about violates our normal mental patterns and normal expectations" (11). In humour we experience a sudden change of mental state – a cognitive shift. It can be achieved by shifting the audience's attention from one thing to something very different or by making the audience suddenly change their interpretation of a word, phrase, or story (50).

Some poetry works this way as well. David Yezzi argues that poets ignore the likeness between a good joke and a good poem at their peril: "The similarities are both technical and rhetorical, as well as psychological" ("These are the poems" 73). Yezzi believes jokes are frequently tinged with the opposite of comedy, something close to tragedy (72). Most people would agree that jokes routinely treat all manner of human failings, he writes, and in that way resemble poems in their ability to apprehend hard-to-handle truths. Jokes can use irony, sarcasm, word play and other devises to achieve their ends. Many conclude with a summary line that cements what has come before it or turns it on its head – all at times true, he says, of poetry. Yezzi argues poems and jokes also handle language at times in similar ways and to similar ends: "Both sift experience and convey it to an audience through techniques of wordplay and compression" (76). The precise mechanics of expression is the poet's "bread and butter" and also the primary business of humour (76). Almost every verbal element in joke telling has, Yezzi argues, a corollary in poetry: plays on words, flipping expectations, exaggeration, and bisociation – joining unrelated or conflicting information in a new way.

Collins is known for using humour to enhance the emotional potential of his poems. He has been the recipient, for example, of the Mark Twain Poetry Award, which recognizes a poet's contributions to humour in American poetry in the belief that humorous poetry can also be seriously good poetry (Poetry Foundation). In presenting the award, Poetry Foundation president John Barr said "Billy Collins has brought laughter back to a melancholy art. He shows us that good poetry need not always be sombre poetry." But the strategy is not just for the sake of a joke. Kevin Young argues that "Collins gains his readers' trust through humour; it's a way of descending the perch of authorial authority and sitting down next to you" (108). Devotes may come for his jokes, he says, but they stay for the weightier asides. Collins explained his use of humour. He says if he writes a poem with humour in it, "I'm probably trying to make them laugh to disarm them. Because humour is a strategy, not an end in itself" (Aspen). A poem can start out funny and then shift into something very dark, or

vise versa. “So humour can be deployed as a strategy in a poem, and it can be part of a tonal and emotional manipulation or shift” (Aspen). What I will suggest is that Collins uses incongruity in his poems to create the humour that allows him to evade sentimentality even while expressing a feeling of loss. Often he creates this incongruity by presenting speakers with unusual perceptions of the world and their place in it. These complex reactions to the world help Collins avoid the emotional simplicity central to sentimentality.

Consider, for example, “The Sandhill Cranes of Nebraska.” The speaker presents a series of natural spectacles he has missed by being at the wrong place at the wrong time: the sandhill cranes in Nebraska, the azaleas bloom in Georgia, the autumn foliage in Vermont. The humour in this poem arises from a cognitive shift. We assume the speaker will be disappointed at missing these events, but he seems not to mind. This ambivalence comes across when the speaker recounts that he “nodded and put on a look of mild disappointment” when told what he has missed (173), by those who have seen such spectacles, suggesting that he feigns this disappointment for the other party’s benefit. The speaker avoids sentimentality by refusing a familiar lament about the ephemerality of nature. This unexpected image of a poet feigning interest in something he ought to be moved by gains its humour by turning on the incongruity between what we expect and what we get from his response. The speaker continues to create humour by deliberately overplaying the beauty of the missed natural events. He mentions the “astonishing spectacle” of the sandhill cranes, the “spectacular annual outburst” of azaleas and the “magnificent foliage” of Vermont (173). The unusual use of such predictable and effusive adjectives – and repetition of “spectacular” – suggests these descriptions have come from somebody else, probably those bragging to him about what he was missing. But if he gently mocks the importance of these specific spectacles, downplaying his missing of them, he nevertheless finds something poignant about having done so. In the final stanza he describes himself drinking coffee in a motel lobby. He says the peak of the foliage of Vermont is:

> a phenomenon that occurs, like the others,
> around the same time every year when I am apparently off
> in another state, stuck in a motel lobby
> with the local paper and a styrofoam cup of coffee
> busily missing God knows what. (174)

Even in this final line Collins chooses humour rather than a sentimental lament on all he’s missed. His observation that he is “missing god knows what” brings back the humorous image of a poet unfazed by loss. The image is even more unexpected, and hence funnier, this time around as we expect some sentimentality, or at least seriousness, from the final line of a poem. This image of the speaker in a motel lobby is comedic also in that it contrasts sharply with the natural images. At first the scene seems less significant than those of natural beauty. Despite this, it indirectly hints at a larger loss, the passing of time. He will never be in that motel lobby, drinking from that disposable coffee cup, reading that day’s paper again. The disposable cup and the daily paper are images of transience,

like the natural scenes, but in this case they won't return. A motel lobby is a place of less apparent beauty or significance than the landscape of Vermont, but it is the only chance he'll ever get to experience that moment in time. Here humour is created through another sort of incongruity, the placement of contrasting images – the beautiful landscapes and the commonplace motel lobby - alongside one another. Through a speaker's reactions to a mundane experience as well as several missed extraordinary ones in this poem, Collins puts the experience of drinking coffee in a motel lobby on par with the natural events. In doing so he suggests his feeling of loss is present in even the most seemingly insignificant moments, and perhaps more so for being aware that even his mundane experiences are transient. It is not a lament for missing the many beautiful spectacles but for the fact that all moments will pass.

In "Tipping Point" it is an unexpected attituded toward the passage of time which creates the incongruity that allows Collins into the serious topics of death and the brevity of life. The speaker has just heard that the jazz musician Eric Dolphy, who was thirty-six when he died, has been dead for thirty-six years. He then starts ruminating on time in terms of a measurement he calls the "Eric Dolphy lifetime".

I wonder-
did anyone sense something
when another Eric Dolphy lifetime
was added to the span of his life, (28)

The notion of an "Eric Dolphy lifetime" is incongruous in that we do not generally measure our lives in terms of the lifespans of others. By presenting this comically absurd measure of time passed, however, the speaker raises the larger issue of mortality. He moves away from Dolphy and toward what these measures mean for the rest of us. He asks us to think about what an "Eric Dolphy lifetime" looks like in terms of our own life:

when we all took another
full Dolphy step forward in time,
flipped over the Eric Dolphy yardstick once again? (28)

Collins allows the poem to retain its humour as it moves from being about Eric Dolphy's life to being about the way all of our lives pass. He persists with the absurd idea of a Dolphy lifetime, now turning it into a physical measure, a yardstick that can be flipped. The speaker continues to personalise the passing of time, by comparing the flipping of the Eric Dolphy yardstick to "the sensation you might feel / as you passed through the moment // at the exact centre of your life. . ." (28). This is presumably the "Tipping Point" the title of the poem refers to. It seems the speaker's concerns aren't about Dolphy at all but about his own life and significance. He opened the poem by observing that:

At home, the jazz station plays all day,
so sometimes it becomes indistinct,
like the sound of rain,

birds in the background, the surf of traffic. (28)

Dolphy has become background noise, fading into insignificance as we all will. If at first the speaker's persistence that we recognise a Dolphy lifetime seemed humorous, it now takes on a larger meaning. The speaker wants to resist the loss of legacy, his own more so than Dolphy's, that comes with the passing of time. His focus on Dolphy enables him to bypass sentimentality by feigning selflessness. The speaker doesn't openly lament his own impending insignificance but expresses concern for Dolphy's instead. It is through the incongruity in the poem– an absurd preoccupation with a long-dead jazz musician - that we are unable to uncover the speaker's true fears about what will become of his own legacy.

As with Collins, William Matthews is known for his use of wit: "Whether he's judiciously punning, mixing high and low diction, twisting famous lines for his own ends, or pulling fanciful etymologies out of a hat, Matthews understands, like any comedian worth his grease-paint, the ways in which surprise captivates an audience" (The Sorrow of Thought, Yezzi xlix). And, again, as with Collins the humour is not the end in itself. Reviewer Mary Jo Bang calls Matthews "a poet of ironic wisdom and sly comic detachment, a diligent investigator of large and elusive concerns like love, lust, depression, the dissolution of bonds with its consequent loneliness and the ever hopeful but weary recommencement" (161). She characterizes Matthews as a polished practitioner of the art of wry exaggeration, unafraid to make the occasional shallow dive into a whimsical form of surrealism. Like Collins, Matthews puts incongruity to use in creating humour in his poems. In his case the incongruity is often created through his seemingly light-hearted reactions to tragic circumstances that deflect yet, ultimately, point to the elegiac centre of these poems.

In "Dire Cure," for instance, Matthews characterizes his wife's tumour in a humorous way, describing it like a character in a bad horror movie.

I couldn't stop
personifying it. Devious, dour,
it had a clouded heart, like Iago's.
It loved disguise. It was a garrison
in a captured city, a bad horror film
(*The Blob*), a stowaway, an inside job. (291)

The incongruity is created by subverting our expectations that grief is something that should always be treated seriously. Matthews' light-hearted descriptions are thus tonally at odds with the real stake of the poem, the speaker's sick wife. This humour works to distract us from the seriousness of the situation as the speaker tries to distract himself: "If I could make it be like something else, / I wouldn't have to think of it as what, / in fact, it was: part of my lovely wife" (291). This sentence works as an admission of feeling and also works to draw us back to the real subject of the poem – his wife's illness, a sudden shift from comedy to tragedy. Matthews continues with his personification of the tumour after it has gone:

I like to think of it in Tumour Hell,

strapped to a dray, flat as a deflated
football, bleak and nubbled like a poorly
ironed truffle. (292)

Through this description he evades a direct expression of his fear – implicit, instead – that it might return. In another humorous twist, he compares the takeout joints around a hospital to brothels around a gold strike, again distracting from the seriousness of the situation, deflecting questions of mortality by raising those of morality. Business owners see the unwell people as a sort of gold strike; they are making profits off the ill. By turning these businesses into the enemy, the speaker deflects from the tumour, which he has already established as the true villain of his story. Before we know that his wife is in the clear the speaker inserts a joke about her hospital roommate who died:

the room-
mate (what do 'semiprivate" and "extra
virgin" have in common?) who died, the nights
she wept. (292)

The joke again draws the speaker – and the reader - away from the tragedy before him for a moment, until we remember our amusement stemmed from a death. Critic David Smith argues that Matthews' poems acknowledge but resist the temptation to elegize pain and suffering (777); "The sound in a Matthews poem, especially early, is quick, terse, barbed, an off-the-tongue remark with the sting of wit that, maybe, he hopes, can carry wisdom's heavy weight" (778). We see Matthews resist that temptation to elegize pain and suffering in "Dire Cure" as he continually deflects from the tragedy through his observations of things which are seemingly distant from the topic at hand such as a horror movie and a gold strike which he addresses with a wit that is incongruous in context, an incongruity that implies his fears and loss without engaging it.

Matthews also uses humour derived from incongruity to deflect from the tragedy at hand in "The Waste Carpet", a lengthy poem about an ecological apocalypse. In the poem, he imagines a "grotesque parody of the primeval muck" (49) oozing out over America. At times, his humour works through exaggeration. He claims, for example, that the U.S. had hoped it would get off easy in this impeding disaster, losing only California which would "crumble into the ocean / like Parmesan" (52). It is a funny image in playing on much of the country's mixed responses to the state of California, a point he presses with a humorous tribute to California:

We were ready with elegies:

O California, sportswear
& defense contracts, gases that induce deference,
high school girls with their own cars,

we wanted to love you
without pain. (52)

But while we might laugh at this feigned pity regarding an unrealistic loss, not all loses in the poem are this unlikely. Throughout the poem the speaker hints at subtler but more real losses. The speaker recounts places he grew up and imagines them seething:

First we lived on Glade Street, then
on Richwood Ave. I swear it.
And now all Cincinnati –
the hills above the river,
the lawn that sloped toward Richwood Ave.
like a valley of pleasant uncles,
the sultry river musk that slid
its compromising note
through my bedroom window –
all Cincinnati seethes. (51)

We're unlikely to see a literal ooze covering the country or the loss of the entire state of California, but it is clear that the speaker sees the world and its landscapes changing for the worse. His extreme and humorous observations were perhaps a metaphor for, or a satirical take on, the true loss occurring. The exaggerated loss deflects from the true loss as the speaker jumps directly from earnest memories of places of his childhood to the comical ode to California. The speaker also describes abandoned cars in a paddock in a humorous way, assigning them the characteristics of livestock: "The amiable cars wait stilly in their pasture. / Three Edsels forage in the southeast corner. . ." (50). He says he'd hoped to describe the scene as an "industrial autumn", however "now they are covered, rolling and churning in the last accident." The cars are not likely to be literally covered by a primevil ooze but they are lost to history in their own way. The cars he mentions - Edsel, Mercury, Pierce-Arrow- are all classics and becoming obsolete. The speaker continually returns to exaggerated losses throughout the poem, deflecting from smaller, genuine losses. This could be seen as an evasion of sentimentality. To express the lament he feels at the changing of his old streets, or classic cars rusting in a paddock would be overkill, or emotion in excess of the object. So, the speaker instead laments a humorous, exaggerated account of loss. The poem's exaggerated loss and the true loss come together again in the final stanzas where:

The Jayhawk plummets in mid-flight,
drawn down by anklets of DDT.
Now we are about to lose our voices
we remember:
tomorrow is our echo.
O the old songs, the good days:

strip mining & civil disobedience,
sloppy scholarship, heart attacks.
Now the age of footnotes is ours. (53)

While the birds aren't literally falling from the sky, it is clear the speaker believes the good old days are passing. The current age is just a footnote, an add on, less important than what came before. Tomorrow will just be an echo of what has been. The life and landscape the speaker knew are coming to an end. His underlying emotions are suggested through his exaggerated deflections. If Collins employs humour to draw a reader in before steering the poem to its more serious concerns, Matthews uses humour to deflect from its source of loss and therefore to point indirectly to it.

Irony is another approach poets use to evade excessive emotion through incongruity. Critic Kenneth Burke has made irony into a kind of synonym for comedy, according to Wayne C. Booth (ix). Still, while the approach is similar to humour technically, it achieves its ends in a different way. Irony allows poets to access emotions indirectly by requiring their reader to uncover their real meaning through careful attention. Booth writes that a certain amount of inattentiveness may be necessary to survive all the words that sweep over us daily. "It is the virtue of irony – perhaps its supreme moral justification – that it wakes men by punishing them for sleep" (224). Booth writes that at one extreme "stable irony", or irony where the speaker's meaning is clear to the reader, can be seen as useful for strengthening an argument that could be made in non-ironic terms. These works can be translated into literal meanings with no great loss. The addition of irony is merely an "ornamental gesture" (138). As I will show below, in the work of Collins and Matthews the inclusion of irony is not simply an "ornamental gesture" but is used for what Booth would call "self-sufficient literary ends" (139). He writes that as soon as an ironic voice has been used in these sorts of pieces, readers begin to take an interest and pleasure in that voice:

> I am not thinking here of the mocked voices that the ironist may take up for a time – the various unreliable narrators that may be given a single poem or a part of the novel or play to tell. Rather I am thinking of the reliable but ironic authors who convince us that they are pretty much the real man or woman speaking to us. (176)

Collins and Matthews succeed, as we will see, in being reliable despite their ironic voices in this way. They do not come across as untrustworthy despite the fact that their true intentions are not immediately obvious. Joseph Milner says it has been argued the downside of irony is that directness may have been replaced in our culture by cynical afterthoughts and immobilizing doubtfulness. However, he argues, we need to counter this stance with the recognition that literary irony attempts to indirectly capture the rich complexity of life. It can show that things are not as simple as they appear to be (254). Collins and Matthews both use irony to this ends in their poems – to capture such complexities. Jeffrey W. Murray believes irony is a "perspective of perspectives" (29). This means it results when two or more perspectives converse, he writes. "Irony is not a way of seeing; it is the montage that results when two or more ways of seeing overlap" (29). It exists only when the world is

viewed through different perspectives. He writes that Burke believed rhetorical devices such as irony functioned not only epistemologically in the discovery of truth, but also ontologically in the very constitution of truth. He seems to be suggesting irony can function as an "ornamental gesture" and a "self-sufficient literary ends", at the same time, to use Booth's terms.

D.C. Muecke writes that irony is a double-layered phenomenon. At the lower level is the situation as it appears to the victim of the irony or as it is deceptively presented by the ironist. At the upper level is the situation as it appears to the observer or the ironist (19). He argues there needs to be some kind of opposition between the two levels. That opposition can take the form of contradiction, incongruity, or incompatibility. Muecke distinguishes between simple irony and double irony. He writes that in simple irony the opposition is solely between levels. In such cases a statement is placed in a context that will invalidate it. In double irony there is also a more obvious opposition within the lower level (20). In such cases two equally invalid points of view can cancel each other out. Mueke illustrates this using a passage from Voltaire's *Candide*: "When all was over and the rival kings were celebrating their victory with Te Deums in their respective camps" (24). There is opposition at the lower level in that both rival kings claim victory. Muecke further identifies three grades of irony – overt, covert and private. In overt irony the victim or the reader or both are meant to see the ironist's real meaning at once (54). Covert irony is not meant to be explicit but rather to be detected (56). Private irony is not intended to be perceived by the victim or anyone else (59).

Collins uses covert irony, for instance, to suggest indirectly a sense of loss and loneliness in "Old Man Eating Alone in a Chinese Restaurant." This irony suggests a speaker's refusal to acknowledge his true emotions. The piece is unsentimental in part because of its mundane setting, one not connected to feeling - the speaker is reminiscing not about a beautiful natural landscape but about his local Chinese restaurant in which he eats alone. In previous years, he observes, he would have felt sorry for someone in his position. When he was young he perceived an old man eating in the restaurant as someone to pity: "the poor bastard, not a friend in the world / and with only a book for a companion" (121). The speaker claims that perception would have been "all wrong" and suggests it has changed as he himself has become the old man. He appreciates his book, the light falling through the windows and the soft brown hair of the waitress. There are, however, hints that what the speaker says is not what he means: "So glad I waited all these decades / to record how hot and sour the hot and sour soup is" (121). It is difficult to take seriously his suggestions that he is glad he waited decades to record such a mundane experience; this in turn casts doubt on the contentment with aging that he has expressed. This, in turn, would seem to invite us to re-think the other assertions. Perhaps the speaker is in fact lonely, and is trying to kid himself that he is not the "poor bastard" he would have pitied years earlier. To employ Muecke's framework for irony: At the "lower level" we are presented with a content older man enjoying a meal alone. At the "upper level" the ironist presents a man who is not as comfortable with his solitude as he pretends to be. The speaker, who acts as the ironist here, works to convince us he is content with his situation. This however is invalidated by

context - small hints that he is fooling us and himself, such as telling us he's glad he waited decades to tell us about his soup. This loss in the poem comes across obliquely through our understanding of the speaker's irony. We are invited to pity him not just for his lonely situation but also for his failure to be initially honest about his feelings of loneliness. It is possible to see this as an instance of "covert" irony in that it is not immediately obvious but can be detected through careful reading, and this covert aspect is important for the oblique – that is, indirect – expression of loss in this poem, a loss of companionship and awareness of his loneliness and the effects of age.

An opposition that develops between perspectives also creates irony in "Aimless Love", in which Collins deploys it to show the way love and loss are always connected. As in the Chinese restaurant poem, there is an element of self-deception which the speaker comes to realise in this poem too. The speaker begins by praising commonplace things, such as a wren and a mouse his cat brought in. He claims he loves these things and it is "the best kind of love" because it comes "without recompense, without gifts, / or unkind words, without suspicion, / or silence on the telephone" (9). Again, he presents us with an assertion that is emotionally suspect. It is unlikely he really thinks love for these things is better than romantic love, though it might be more convenient. To use Muecke's terms, at the lower level the victim of the irony, a hypothetical reader who does not understand the irony, sees a speaker who loves commonplace things. At the upper level the ironist, the speaker here, presents somebody wary of the potential for pain or loss that comes with romantic love. As "Aimless Love" progresses, a double irony emerges. On the one hand, love for commonplace things (the lower level) is in opposition to pain associated with more significant loss (upper level). But we begin to see opposition at Mueke's lower level, as well. As was the case in Mueke's example of two rival kings celebrating victory, two invalid points of view cancel each other out here. The speaker presented his love for commonplace things as protection from the pain that comes from romantic love, but in the end he experiences this pain even in response to the loss of these commonplace things.

> No waiting, no huffiness, or rancor-
> just a twinge every now and then
> for the wren who had built her nest
> on a low branch overhanging the water
> and for the dead mouse,
> still dressed in its light brown suit. (9-10)

Even these commonplace things, it seems, become sources of loss as he transfers his love to them: He begins to fall in love with a bar of soap "so patient and soluble" but even this is disappearing as the speaker feels it turning in his wet hands. As it does so, however, he catches its scent, "of lavender and stone" suggesting there is beauty even in loss. Collins' use of double irony seems to suggest we cannot guard against loss by carefully selecting the things we chose to love; rather the potential for pain comes along with love. The approach to loss is indirect in this case because Collins succeeds in making a point about love in all its incarnations by focusing solely on seemingly insignificant things

like a wren and a mouse, and a bar of soap. Sentimentality is not evaded entirely but scrutinised. The praise he piles on the wren and the mouse and the soap would seem to be sentimental, or emotion in excess of its object. Through the irony in the poem, however, we realise that praise was never fully sincere, that it was always meant to be excessive. Such sentimental praise is exposed as a less honest sort of love. The irony in this poem is "covert" as it was in the Chinese restaurant poem. It requires close reading to detect that the true emotion in this poem doesn't relate to the sentimental love for arbitrary things but rather the inevitability of loss regardless of our efforts to protect ourselves from pain.

Matthews' "A Happy Childhood" gets at a feeling of loss through ironic observations about a childhood. As the poem progresses we realise the speaker's memory is so clouded by subjectivity that he is unsure whether his childhood was happy or not. At the "lower level" a speaker initially claims he had a happy childhood, but at the upper level observations undercut the simplicity of that claim. At first, the speaker describes tranquil scenes such as singing to himself all day "like a fieldful of August / insects" (150). He goes on to discuss darker things, however, such as death and falling asleep against a street lamp, having woken at 4am to work. An ordinary school day isn't entirely happy, but two thirds so: "two triumphs and one severe // humiliation on the playground" (151). Further irony arises through the faultiness of memory – as in a passage where recollections of breakfast with his mother are called into question:

> He'll remember like a prayer
> how his mother made breakfast for him
>
> every morning before he trudged out
> to snip the papers free. Just as
> his mother will remember she felt
>
> guilty never to wake up with him
> to give him breakfast. It was Cream
> of Wheat they always or never had together. (152)

Partway through the poem he decides his childhood was in actuality "awful," but this characterisation is just as unlikely as his claim that it was happy. Later the speaker acknowledges this: "It turns out you are the story of your childhood / and you're under constant revision" (152). He talks about all of the selves he's been, each with a childhood. It's possible some of them were happy and some were not. We are not all one thing, the speaker realises by the end of the poem, playing against the halcyon memories at the start of the piece with the now ironic title. He decides "There's no truth about your childhood, / though there's a story, yours to tend, // like a fire or garden" (153) and instructs us: "Make it a good one, / since you'll have to live it out, and all / its revisions, so long as you all shall live" (153). At the lower level of the irony we have a sort of absoluteness, and at the upper level a rich

complexity. This conflict is illustrated through the speaker's memory of the sixth-grade book reports where you had to say if a book was optimistic or not. There is irony in this notion. We know a book is not all one thing as a life, or a childhood, is not all one thing. In the final stanza, the speaker concludes it is impossible to know if the child is happy or not. The truth is it is probably more complex than that. "A child is all the tools a child has, / growing up, who makes what he can" (155). In this way, the speaker has chosen to try to remember a happy childhood regardless of the complexities of reality. The poem deals with the countering perspectives, or overlapping points of view, which Burke considered an important feature of irony. These countering perspectives result in the sort of "montage" that Burke believes functions in the discovery as well as the creation of truth. The speaker openly discusses his own conflicting perspectives. In this respect, the irony here is more "overt" than in either of the Collins poems discussed. Despite the overt nature of the irony, the poem takes an indirect approach to its emotional core, or the truth Burke refers to. This truth must be inferred through an appreciation of the conflict between the perspectives. This truth - or emotional core - seems to be a loss of nostalgia itself. The speaker is not undercutting the idea of a happy childhood exactly. Rather the idea of emotional simplicity, which Prufer described as central to sentimentality, which in turn seems fundamental to nostalgia, is questioned through the contradictions that produce the irony here. The loss at hand is pleasure we take in the purity of memory, which comes with such emotional simplicity.

Complicity

Metapoetics is a less common oblique approach to loss. It differs from the other indirect approaches discussed in its technical features. Yet it shares with them what Matthew J. Marr would call an underlying "comic self-consciousness", which liberates poetry from its traditional seriousness and allows for more surprising approaches to emotion. Marr argues modern verse is tied to a legacy of vocational seriousness which has a long history in the genre. "Beginning in the nineteenth century, poetry is locked in a sort of symbiotic relationship with somberness" (422). In recent years, however, the institutionalisation of this solemnity of purpose has been challenged by the forces of humour (423): "Indeed, a prominent though understudied aspect of literary postmodernism is its drive to defame and topple the burden of vocational seriousness cultivated by the modernists" (423). One way of carrying this out, he argues, is through "a playfully irreverent and self-derisive strain of metapoetic humor" (423). Marr describes this metapoetic humour as "a comic self-consciousness". Whether humorous or not in its effect, the use of metapoetics—of self-commentary, of acknowledging the poem's artifice and its process of creation—permit in elegiac poems for the evasion of heavy-handed lament or sentimentality while at the same time acknowledging the legitimacy of loss.

Margaret Persin writes that poets let their texts reflect and comment on the process of writing, when they see the act of writing as a gradual process of discovery. Such poets have "much less disposition to produce a static work and to obscure the steps taken in its creation, and much more

willingness to reveal the process followed in the writing of it" (298). The resulting poem might contain comments on the act of writing and on the text being written, which would make the text "metapoetic" (298). Persin further distinguishes several ways that texts can reflect on the writing of poetry. In some cases, a text will derive its effect from its juxtaposition with another text to which it refers. In other cases, a text explicitly comments on the act of writing in general. But the pieces "we can most easily label metapoetic" are those which comment on their own production, in which "the reader's experience derives from the internal play between the text as writing and the text as commentary upon that writing" (300). Such poems break the convention of separating what is inside the text from a commentary on it – "the line of demarcation between the text as artistic construct and the text as a critical examination of that construct" (300).

Collins uses metapoetry in Persin's first sense in "Lines Composed Over Three Thousand Miles from Tintern Abbey" to acknowledge the familiarity of the elegiac sentiment he expresses. In doing so he works to set himself apart from all who have expressed the sentiment before in familiar and perhaps seemingly insincere ways. He builds complicity with his reader by presenting himself as somebody who does not take his vocation too seriously. Collins playfully draws attention to the poem as a poem to acknowledge the shortfalls of poetry and thus gain the reader's trust. First, Collins pokes fun at the tendency of poets to lament the way places change over time:

> I was here before, a long time ago,
> and now I am here again
> is an observation that occurs in poetry
> as frequently as rain occurs in life. (127)

In this stanza we see the self-derisiveness to which Marr refers. Collins is not criticising himself but his vocation. Marr argues the role of this self-derisive metapoetic humour is to "topple the burden of vocational seriousness" traditionally associated with poetry. In this poem Collins questions that traditional seriousness around loss. In his title Collins makes reference to the famous William Wordsworth poem "Lines Written a few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," which deals with a speaker who revisits a site five years after his last stay and reflects on the changes in his surroundings and himself. Collins' poem addresses the way poets often reflect on changes in this way: "Something is always missing- / swans, a glint on the surface of a lake, / some minor but essential touch" (127). In mocking the lack of originality among poets lamenting lost time, Collins nevertheless draws attention to the universality of that sentiment. The poem suggests Wordsworth felt it two hundred years ago and Collins feels it now, and many poets and readers have felt it in between. Through what Marr would call his "comic self-consciousness" Collins laments a loss larger than that of a single location such as Tintern Abbey, or the dark Bavarian forest that the poets who he mocks lamented. Collins' speaker is lamenting a more collective, more universal loss - the passing of time itself. Collins, however, does not make sweeping generalisations about time's passing, as his predecessors might have. Wordsworth explicitly lamented the way the world and himself changed while Collins engages with loss less

directly. He zooms in on everyday specifics such as "the glossy gardenia drooping / in its chipped terra-cotta pot" and "the browning core of an apple". There is mockery present when the speaker says: "Nothing will be as it was / a few hours ago, back in the glorious past / before our naps" (127) but the poem also genuinely laments the way time passes. The speaker acknowledges that his predecessors he was mocking are long dead now:

> We have heard the poets long dead
> declaim their dying
> from a promontory, a riverbank,
> next to a haycock, within a copse. (128)

He does so mockingly through the use of many old fashioned, almost obsolete terms such as promontory, haycock and copse. Yet he realises he too will eventually become one of these "long dead" poets, imagining himself in a "long, coffin-shaped room, / the walls and windows now / only two different shades of gray" (128). So if early on he seemed to be mocking his predecessors purely for our amusement, as the poem progresses such references suggest the speaker's own fears about change and death. Collins thus expresses a loss similar to Wordsworth's and his many imitators indirectly by placing himself, metapoetically, in a tradition that he initially mocks but, in the end, joins.

The use of metapoetics allows Collins to comment on the temporary nature of things in "Lines Lost Among the Trees." The piece is an elegy to forgotten lines which came to him on a walk, when he was unable to write them down:

> They are gone forever,
> a handful of coins
> dropped through the grate of memory
> along with the ingenious mnemonic
>
> I devised to hold them in place - (132).

He puts irony and humour to use in this poem too - he has forgotten even the trick he devised to remember the lines. There is also self-mockery here, an acknowledgement of his shortcomings which helps him gain the reader's trust and sympathy. Light-heartedness arises through the use of metapoetics in the piece. The speaker does not seem to be genuinely upset that he's forgotten the poem, despite the fact he talks the forgotten piece up:

> those six or eight exhalations,
> the braided rope of the syntax,
> the jazz of the timing,
>
> the little insight at the end
> wagging like the short tail

of a perfectly obedient spaniel
sitting by the door. (132)

The speaker seems to feigns cockiness about his poem. It is hard to believe that the speaker can remember all the things the piece had going for it - the jazz of the timing and the insight at the end - when he can't remember the piece itself – whether there were six exhalations or eight and what the final insight was. This overplaying of the merits of his forgotten poem helps to invite the reader's complicity in that Collins presents himself as somebody who does not take himself or his work too seriously. While he might feign his disappointment at forgetting this particular poem, some genuine remorse does come across in the piece. His true remorse seems to be for the temporary nature of all things – epic works of art, forgotten names and dreams - which now dwell in

some airy limbo,
home to lost epics,
unremembered names,
and fugitive dreams
such as the one I had last night,

which, like a fantastic city in pencil,
erased itself
in the bright morning air
just as I was waking up. (133)

He expresses the dream as a work of art, temporary and vulnerable to being lost. "Lines Lost Among the Trees" seems at first to be a poet's light-hearted elegy to one forgotten poem. Through the casualness which arises from a metapoetic technique, however, the poem manages to comment on the larger loss - the temporary nature of all things which disappear "off to some airy limbo" (133). The metapoetic technique allows Collins to expand the emotional stake of this poem. By subtly mocking himself - through exaggerating the merits of his lost lines - the speaker shows us that the ostensible focus of this piece, the forgotten poem, is not the only stake but part of a bigger picture, a more collective loss.

Matthews uses metapoetics to express a surprising loss in the poem "Search Party" – a loss of faith among readers in the sincerity of art. The stake at the surface – the narrative - of the poem is a child's life: The poem is about a group of parents searching for a lost child. It adheres to Persin's definition of texts most easily labelled metapoetic in that there is play between the text as writing and the text as commentary on that writing. Matthews accuses the reader of scepticism by addressing us in the poem: "Reader, by now you must be sure / you know just where we are, / deep in some symbolic woods." He assures us that is not the case, as though believing the poem were merely art would reduce the stake somehow. The speaker claims the search is not symbolic and argues that a child's life was in fact at stake:

"You're wrong, though it's
an intelligent mistake.
There was a real lost child.
I don't want to swaddle it
in metaphor. (3)

The true loss in the poem derives from his need to persuade us. Behind his self-awareness is a fear that the reader doesn't believe in the poem's sincerity. The speaker builds trust with the reader through these direct addresses by acknowledging the reader's intelligence manifested as cynicism. Toward the end of the poem he accuses us of not really being as indifferent as we might suppose:

You've read this far, you might as well
have been there too. Your eyes accuse
me of false chase. Come off it,
you're the one who thought it wouldn't
matter what we found. (4)

In his closing lines he expresses confidence in the job he's done relaying this tale in a manner his reader will care about:

Though we came with lights
and tongues thick in our heads,
the issue was a human life.
The child was still
alive. Admit you're glad. (4)

Perhaps he is also expressing a confidence in his reader, who has, after all, stayed with him for the entirety of the poem. He leaves his reader hanging for a moment ending the second to last line with the word "still". The reader might worry that "still" refers to the child being dead. The word takes on a second meaning, however, moving from adjective to adverb in the final line, when the speaker reveals the child was "still / alive". It was a poetic trick that had us worried. There is, then, some hope in the ability of poetry to move us. When the speaker asks the reader to admit they were glad, he suggests they are being dishonest in their indifference. The poem takes an indirect route to loss in that it repeatedly jumps away from the lost child, which is only the ostensible potential loss at stake in the poem. The metapoetic technique, however, allows it to move toward the real, arguably greater loss: our perceived loss of faith in the ability of poetry to engage in feeling.

Conclusion

Contemporary elegiac poetry succeeds in evading sentimentality without reducing its emotional stake when poets take an indirect approach to loss. Collins' and Matthews' elegiac pieces show that this bypass of sentimentality can be achieved through postponement of loss as well as through incongruity manifesting as humour and its subspecies irony. Poets can also achieve this result

by using metapoetics to build complicity with a reader. These two poets postpone loss by beginning with a quotidian topic unfreighted with emotional connotations and so surprise us with the true loss at the centre of the poem. They use the incongruity of humour to shock the reader with the loss, having set up a casual and comic scene. They use irony – a distance in opposition to sentiment – to imply loss. And both poets at times use metapoetics to acknowledge the reader's scepticism about poetry's reliability and thus build a complicity from a reader that is necessary to present a loss that is otherwise too familiar to readers.

My interest in the way poets evade sentimentality in elegiac poems yet engage with loss stems from a concern about how I can achieve this effect in my own poems. Billy Collins has described the way permissions can be passed from poet to poet:

> Phillip Larkin, Kenneth Koch, some L.A. poets…the New York poets, William Matthews is another one. Quite a few of them had a humorous edge to them. They weren't 'funny guys' in a way, in that sense, but they were playful, and particularly Kenneth Koch. He has a poem that begins, 'You were wearing your Edgar Allen Poe satin blouse.' And I just stopped there when I read that. I didn't realize that a blouse could be a poet's name. And then I thought – this is the way permission slips get handed from poet to poet – I thought, well then I could have a John Greenleaf Wittier t-shirt or socks or something. (Aspen Words)

I have taken permissions of this sort from Collins and Matthew in my own elegiac collection, drawing inspiration from the ways their pieces can be light-hearted, funny, or casual, yet serious at the same time. For example, the first poem in my manuscript, "Cassio and Desdemona" works to postpone the loss at stake. Using the circumstance of a high school production of Othello - it goes on to explore the intersections of life and art, and our struggles to fully understand the world we live in when we are young. My poem "I kind of thought the Alpacas were a metaphor until we got there" puts both humour and metapoetics to use as the speaker travels across country to an alpaca show with a companion who claims to think the alpacas they are going to see are metaphorical. I hope this poem goes on to explore deeper themes around friendship and the way relationships end and time passes. Metapoetics plays a role as well – a more foundational one – in "April in Paris": The speaker builds complicity in this poem by commenting on her scepticism of travel writing and acknowledging her sentimentality. And I employ irony at times, as well, as in "Curse of the Colonel," a poem about a Japanese belief that a curse was put on a local baseball team when a statue of KFC founder Colonel Sanders was thrown into a river following a competition victory. The speaker claims to be sceptical about superstition – or the way we misunderstand the relationships between things - though as the poem progresses I hope it is implicit that the speaker has her own misapprehensions. My work is not an imitation of Collins or of Matthews. But they have given me permission to play with such light-hearted subject matter in my poems and have shown me the tragedy that can be seen in such mundane moments. This seems to be what an effective contemporary elegiac poem does: It draws us in with its humour or light-heartedness, gets us invested or interested in a subject that is amusing or familiar or

without a necessary connection to the weight of the emotion, then shifts to its more serious stake. At a time of great familiarity with the poems of the past and a time that seems to guard against excessive emotion these strategies permit an entry into the sort of deep feelings for which we have traditionally turned to the elegy.

Farewell, My Lovely

Cassio and Desdemona

The scene is eight o'clock English in our final year of high school.
Cassio and I have come straight from cross country training
to read aloud the final act of Othello. I am Desdemona.
Yesterday Bianca handed Cassio the handkerchief that would end my life
and I recalled his terrible hay-fever the afternoon we pulled the trucks
from our skateboards and used the decks to ride the craters of the city's dormant volcanoes.

I feel sorry that it will be over soon, the play, this class, a group thrown
together each weekday morning to live out multiple realities.
Earlier in the year we tracked the Ace of Diamonds Gang
in Owen Marshall's short fiction and watched Anna Paquin earn
her Oscar in The Piano. Last month we prayed together for
our schoolmate who'd died on the football field outside.

Cassio puts on an impassioned performance during his final fight scene
perhaps still coasting on the adrenaline of that morning's run.
Sitting side by side on desks in our school uniforms I remember visiting him
in hospital after Roderigo put a hole through his lung
at taekwondo. I brought him a pot plant.

Our teacher lectured us on the many manifestations of
grief the morning the news spread of the football captain struck
down. The team saw out the season in black arm bands then normality returned,
cruel as it seems. The field was blessed, a tribute match played,
a truck arrived to take away the flowers piled at the flagpole.

"That death's unnatural that kills for loving," I read, then lose my place,
distracted by the sound of shuffling coming from a gym bag at the back of the room.
Emilia and Iago started dating last summer and have shared custody
of a rabbit. Its handover occurs in eight o'clock English
while the rest of us work to keep our teacher oblivious to the fact.
"Soft you; a word or two before you go," Othello reads, as the ghost
of Roderigo threads a fennel stalk through a small opening by the zipper.

Physics department, Avondale College

Rumour was he didn't have a university degree
but rode a pushbike across the southern states in the sixties
which was qualification enough to teach the fundamentals
of quantum theory to twenty-five impressionable teens
staring out windows. Nobody knew why
he played the opening credits of Gilligan's Island
at the beginning of every class and nobody asked.

We calculated how fast the earth would have to
spin before it propelled us off and what the length
of a day would be. You didn't have to understand
the maths. It asked only a kind of faith
in the man who once worked a suicide hotline.
He said he told a caller who wanted to kill himself
to wash the dishes, which had something to do
with grounding him in the world.
It's good to help others, he concluded. It didn't
take a university education to understand that

physics was no more than the study of
matter and energy – that which occupies
space and its capacity to move. I thought
of his class as I passed the phone booths at
the foot of the Golden Gate Bridge, advertising
crisis counselling for those who had come this
far but hadn't made up their minds yet.
Before he stood at the head of a classroom
spouting stories and expounding equations
he was the voice at the end of a line, a sound
transmitted as signal and wave
and received over a great distance.

Maungakiekie

We silently stalked the first spring lambs
and chased wild rabbits back into their burrows
the day Princess Diana died.

Later our parents watched the news coverage upstairs
while my brother and I played snooker in the basement

and I asked him how I was supposed to feel about all of this.

He said it was okay to feel sad,
and it was okay not to, we did not know her after all.

That was all I needed to know
to distinguish the experience in my mind from the morning we woke
to find a stray dog had torn into the chicken coop.

At Princess Diana's funeral
Elton John re-appropriated a song written for Marylyn Monroe,
whose death shook me more, long after the fact.

How do you find your way back in the dark,
were her last words on the silver screen before she took her own life.
I guess the drugs didn't work, the work was too demanding.

We are not taught how to process our emotions
I am told in a doctor's office twenty years on from
the day at the park. So, I set about learning,
fill her prescription and quit my job.

I do not mention the conversation with my brother that
contradicts her premise, wisdom offered as he
beat me at snooker on the last day of the winter
of '97, when the nights were lightening
and I took defeat in my stride.

A pirate once

Looking back, he never explicitly claimed
his father was a pirate but the suggestions were there,
the eye patch, the story he told of the message
in a bottle he once found washed up on some foreign shore.

A cheeky kid, we assumed he had it coming
the morning the staunch Samoan from the year
above chased him around the playground
with violence in his eyes.

I wish I could remember more than the occasional instance
where our lives intersected, the day he convinced a group
of unruly boys to listen to my solution to the math problem
set out before us. She's the smart one, he had said.

In court they agreed to call it a sickle,
but it was clearly a scythe, the weapon that killed him
the night he left a party in a suburb not far from
the one where we both grew up.

My newsroom eagerly awaited
the verdict of the alleged killer of the son
of a senior member of the Head Hunters gang.
He was dating a socialite, the daughter of the country's
most respected broadcaster. She held him as he lay
dying. It was website traffic gold.

As we waited, I recalled the afternoon his father asked me for
the whereabouts of his youngest daughter. I pointed him
in the direction I had seen her walk ten minutes earlier with a friend
while I stood as a road warden just outside the school gates.
It never occurred to me to be afraid of the man with one eye.
He was a pirate once, but that was in the past.

Scotts landing

It didn’t seem dishonest or
underhanded at the time -
scouring the rocks under the
wharf for tackle after the
tide had receded and the
fishers had gone.

It was how I understood loss then.
Everything was retrievable with
enough care and attention.

Barbs of hooks glimmering,
sinkers and swivels buried by seaweed,
and one cool night near
the end of autumn a translucent and gold
lure that looked
like a piper swimming scared

over a seabed of
shells of mussels and paua.
This is what remains after the flesh
has been consumed,
a cracking case,
a fading sheen.

Queen's Day, Hilversum

You took us to the house you ran away from
when you were a child here, packed your small
bear and money for chips in your little brother's
suitcase. He still hasn't forgiven you, not for leaving
but for leaving with something that belonged to him.

There was a carnival on when we visited. We ate
sugar waffles for dinner, were woken by the church bells
chiming a special tune for the crowning of the new king.
The queen would abdicate that day, pass the
throne along to her eldest son.

I joined you for breakfast and you translated the
early coverage out of Amsterdam for us.
"Maybe we should wave a little bit," the new king
had said to his family on the deck of the palace.

You laughed about the suggestion
with your brother that afternoon. We took
a train to Utrecht for the party,
met up with all of your friends
and celebrated in the way people like to
celebrate the end of things

until festivities wound down,
the bands played their final sets
and the vendors packed up. We dropped
our plastic cups in the street
where we stood and prepared to move on
to our next European city,
said goodbye to your friends I hardly got to know
yet who persist in my memories

of the days where every arrival was a
a celebration each departure a willing abdication.

Play it again, Sam

is an immortal line
never actually spoken in the movie but
retroactively invented - a reminder of the
way we misremember,
Ilsa's plea for Sam to turn back time,
the nights we spent in the makeshift jazz bar
in the garage of our first flat.

I think of it most as I see summer
in and out, him asleep on an overgrown lawn,
her playing Hupfeld on the piano
we'd wheeled in from two streets over.
The drug dealers next door
threw rocks at the corrugated iron roof and I
ate the first strawberries of the season
sitting on a second-hand sofa.

It was our local version
of a Casablanca gin joint created
in Burbank, California, a bar in a film
we watched over and over that year
on the off chance Rick would choose
love over duty this time around.
Here six-packs of beer replaced brandy
and hand-painted portraits passed
as art. It was always summer
but I know that recollection to be as false

as the line never spoken in a place that never existed
in a film I wish I could play again
in the flat with fairy lights on the walls
and a piano in the garage,
but we were gone too soon
to another house on the other side of town,
a family suburb, an upgrade,

a roof that didn’t leak and a sensible spot
between the kitchen and the living room
for the piano.

Fireworks on a field by the Manawatu River

There are entire landscapes
I haven't seen by the light of day,
a cave where we slept beneath glow worms
at the end of a long tramp,
foreign cities approached from above
on quick airport stopovers,

a field where a match ignited a candle
held to the wick of a ten shot,
launched at a river I might describe as
hypothetical if not for my faith
in reason and the fact that

it took the life of a police officer
some years after I had left that city.
He had gone in after the family dog.
I interviewed witnesses from a desk
in a newspaper office up north,

scouring the street directory for the
names of the people who lived in
a neighbourhood that wasn't mine anymore
and was a long way from a candlelit field
I couldn't find my way back to
if I tried,

some memories
existing as darknesses
punctuated by quick bursts of light.

Eighty-four

Before I was old enough
to own a cellphone or a credit card,
to be identified by a series of numbers
I couldn't remember, I wore eighty-four
pinned to the back of my shirt.
The fifteen hundred metre was my race,
the only event I could beat the Samoans in.
I was afraid of the high jump bar
and the hundred metre starting gun
but fearless here at the most distant corner
of the track where the trains passed.

We all rushed to watch them
while we waited for the race, running barefoot
up the asphalt incline of the cycle track
that lined the field and held the day's heat
as the air cooled. The thing about trains is
you know exactly where they're going.
Perhaps that's what I liked
about the fifteen hundred – the game never changed,
three and three-quarter laps of the track
in an anti-clockwise direction
then home for tea, rubber
and sand between my toes from the long jump pit.
I never gave much thought to the people
on those trains, where they were travelling to
and from and the lives they passed
along the way.

I pass them now in the second carriage of the
seven forty-two on the Western line.
A homeless man wakes in the alley
outside the office of the local MP
as we squeal by. This train is
his urban alarm - even vagrancy begs order.

Two thirty-somethings argue on the balcony
of an outer city apartment, perhaps an account
overdrawn, a bill unpaid.
An empty athletics field lies cloaked
in morning's dew, halcyon drops
dissipating with the advancing day.

Farewell, My Lovely

Athens

It was thirty-two degrees, warm for May.
You were on a bus to Syntagma Square.
I waited in a moonlit hotel room.

Double doors opened to a balcony
with a view of the acropolis
where that afternoon I'd seen a tortoise
evade the feet of thousands of
tourists, all looking up.

Call it indifference or defiance.
We all have our reasons
for choosing the places
we do to spend our days.

They say a spur-thighed tortoise
can live a hundred years
in its natural habitat.
I don't know if this is it
ruins two thousand years old,
a stray dog asleep under an olive tree.

Maybe it's not a question of place but of pace.

Midnight conversations rose from a courtyard
below while Farewell, My Lovely played in Greek
on a television set with rabbit-ear antennae.

For the first years of our childhood
we shared a room in a house
half a world from here.
It wasn't as though it could have lasted.

We move across this foreign continent
together and apart as interests dictate
(you care no more about the café
where Hemingway ate lunch than I do
the pathology of the spleen).

In a week, I will take
five flights back to the
rural town where I live and you will
continue on to Crete and Thessaloniki.

Until then we will sit together
at an outdoor restaurant overlooking the agora,
grounds for gathering lacking their former lustre
but more alluring for their resilience.

Critics would say it strayed from
the original tale at times but
retained its essence, the nostalgic film
following the convoluted but familiar
story largely suggested by its title.

Eden Park, Kingsland

I don't remember the last time I spoke to the boy
I sat alongside the night Chris Cairns retired.
The game was tied at the end of the second innings.
He'd choked at the crease then again in the bowl-off.
At 11pm we were still in tee-shirts as we walked
to the train station sipping cokes.
I couldn't tell you who won that night
the first leaves of autumn crackled beneath our feet.

The foliage would be green again
by the time the new playing season started,
regenerated through a chemical process I once learned
and have since forgotten. I wonder what happens to all
the things I have forgotten - the names of players
once chanted, heroes reduced to answers to trivia
questions printed on the undersides of beer caps.

He never drank – the boy who'd stay
onboard an extra stop to see me home then
backtrack through his troubled neighbourhood on
foot. He said he could tell a person's character
by looking at them but never saw anything other
than good. Shielded by his fighter's physique,
and faith in human goodness, we travelled fearless
through those nights, fading from memory like
the conditions that make a hardened bud bloom.

A box of Led Zeppelin cassettes

The mural of dogs playing poker on the brick wall
of the pool hall didn't bring to mind Coolidge,
who I'd never heard of at fourteen,
but Orwell, whose novel about an anthropomorphic
animal revolt was on that year's reading list.
Earlier in the day a stranger had stopped me
on the Margan Ave stretch of my paper round
to offer me a box of Led Zeppelin cassettes.
I like that detail because it places the poem

in suburban west Auckland at a time
when cassettes were no longer of value
to someone like him but were to me, fourteen
and lugging a backpack of real estate ads around
my neighbourhood to pay the bills,
the bills being my share of the ten-dollar
charge for an hour of pool, another dollar or two
to programme Zeppelin into the juke box.

I had a snooker table at home
and, now, a box of Led Zeppelin cassettes
and so I didn't really have reason to work
for spare change to spend inhaling carcinogens
at local dives. Of course, if I'd stayed home
I never would have come across the cassettes
in the first place or had the opportunity to
ruminate on my half-grasped understanding
of Orwell's ideologies around work.
Our lives are miserable, laborious and short,
he said. It seemed an exaggerated notion to me
or at least outdated. The world had moved on
from his tales of oppression.

Coolidge's poker dogs were commissioned
to advertise cigars but became a symbol of working

class culture. They hung in the kitchens of
homes across America in 1978
as Robert Plant recorded “All of My Love” –
his tribute to a son dead at five while he was on tour.

I did not know the context behind it on those
slow afternoons inside smoky pool halls, his insistent
expression of fading love drowned out by the clatter
of the break and the voices of my friends
but I hear it now, on my long daily commute home,
through headphones famed for their ability to
cancel out the sounds of the world.

I kind of thought the alpacas were a metaphor until we got there

She tells me one of the weirdest things
I ever asked her to do was drive across
country to an alpaca show.

I kind of thought the alpacas were
a metaphor until we got there, she says.
I say what for. She says I don't know,
just definitely not alpacas.

It was mid-July,
our warm breath sat in the air
of the hay-lined arena. The hair styling
of a black and white alpaca got us talking
about Elvis.

He began as the face on the covers
in my best friend's dad's record collection,
whose song about a Hound Dog
we were forced to howl
on the hard wooden floors of
our primary school days.

I only grasped
the symbolism of it many years
later – the way time passes
and relationships fail.

The alpacas were just alpacas
at the time
and had nothing meaningful to say
about our youth or friendship,

as they posed for snapshots
capturing the absurdity of it all,
oblivious animals thrown

together briefly.

A campus at night, Palmerston North

We weren't the first to fall in love with Yeats
or drink vodka straight from the bottle here
but perhaps it never occurred to anybody else
to risk a trespass charge to play Chopin,

whose notes rose from the piano in the basement
of the humanities building through empty midnight floors
while outside spring was just beginning
in the same way it always did,
cherry trees blossoming with
the bikes intoxicated boys in rugby jerseys
lodged into their branches.

"We sometimes go there at night,"
a new acquaintance had whispered to me
during an eight o'clock lecture on cell biology.
"The two of us have classical backgrounds,
she plays mean jazz piano."

I tried to imagine them
diligently practicing as children,
thought of the lives we lived before this
moment and would live after

campus security ramped up
and the rugby boys scattered
to office jobs in surrounding cities,
while bikes rested among
fresh foliage, a late summer
breeze catching the wheels,
turning spokes on an axle
this way, then that.

April in Paris

I have always been sceptical of travel
writing, the way we claim closeness to places
that are not ours.

That's why this piece is about distance,
the woman photographing the man painting
the pianist playing on the walls of the Louvre.

I left the museum after an hour.
Snapped a photo of the Venus de Milo
and made my way to the bridge where
lovers hang locks
then throw away the keys
so they'll always
belong to this place.

It seems sentimental
but I was thinking of you.
I stopped there

and realised
we'd never have Paris,
like a line cut from the first
draft of a love story
I once thought to write.

It's funny how thoughts of things
that didn't happen
come out of the blue like that,
the story you once told me
about sitting on top of the Arc de Triomphe
with your brother watching the
near misses on the roundabout below.

Shortcut through a churchyard

The shortcut from the skatepark where the
intercity buses arrived to the flat with the piano
in the garage wasn't worth the blood on my hands
from the barbed wire lining the fence we climbed
using a beer crate the last wayfarers left behind.

It seemed an apt metaphor for growing up, though,
scaling a churchyard fence and bleeding.
Out on the street a couple who hasn't been home
for the night kiss against the bumper of a ute.
Inside I imagined Sunday school children reading
the picture book about the Tower of Babel I once found
among stacks of used bibles at an October church fair.

The images depicted a world of one language
coming together to build a tower to heaven and
being scattered by race in punishment for their efforts.
At the time, and still, it seemed a warning
against resourcefulness or ambition.

That's what I'm thinking about as I commit this
victimless crime on a Sunday morning, a depiction
of retribution among dozens of cast-away bibles,
each representing a death or perhaps a loss of faith, a choosing
of a life of small trespasses over the gates of god.

When the planes hit the Twin Towers

It was my generation's John F Kennedy moment but
when the planes hit the Twin Towers I was sleeping.
Mr Moskowitz taught us maths in a room with pi around the wall
the next morning. It was hard to understand that worth could be
conditional as I learned to solve for X. Besides, my mind was on
football as it usually was, the ball I'd placed in the top left hand corner
of the net the previous week after riding my bike to the game
with the central defender from the opposing team.

After the match, we played Sonic the Hedgehog in the living room
of the unit with the shag pile carpet, handing the controller over to her
middle brother when we reached the paths we couldn't pass ourselves.
The smell of dolma cooking drifted in from the kitchen and her other brothers
played in the driveway with the cricket set they'd received the past Eid.

Many years later the story emerged of a Muslim woman removing
her hijab on Sydney's public transport. A siege was taking place at a
nearby café, hostages held a black flag with Arabic letters in the
window. We were all momentarily moved by an internet campaign
assuring Australian Muslims: I will ride with you.

We'd shortcut to her high school fields through a walkway
the new residential builds backed onto, boots wrapped around our handlebars,
the early spring air hitting us with evening smells of gardenia
and queen of the night, of barbeques and chicken shawama cooking.

Raspberry picking, Turitea

Had I been sober I would have declined the invitation
to scavenge for wild berries at sunrise.
They told me to wear long sleeves, I remember only now,
reaching through thorns for another ripe fruit.
I'm covered in those surface scratches that sting
a little then fade, not the person who stopped calling
but the one who wasn't interested in the first place.

My first memory of pain takes place at a camping ground
a long way north of here where I stood barefoot on the spine
a hedgehog left behind. I still don't know why my parents
rubbed coffee on the wound but the smell of the drink
has brought with it a kind of comfort ever since,

rising from mugs by an open fire
in the dimly lit bar on the main street of a
town where we both once lived. We'd sneak in
through the back so as not to disturb the band
playing tired tunes that were new to us then.

I never learned the art of manufacturing a situation,
like the friend who asked for a minute alone
with a new acquaintance at the end of a party
then married her. What occurred in between
was a mystery to me. Still, it was not a major
failing that saw us go our separate ways night
after night and eventually for good.

The window for picking is brief and
they say the thorned varieties are sweetest.
I would not stay sober, if I could do this
weekend again, nor would I wear long sleeves.
It's already twenty degrees and the sun is just
beginning to break through the trees.

Back to the Future Day, October 21, 2015

The date came and went without
the help of a flux capacitor and I still don't
have a hoverboard. A battered but not beaten
Michael J Fox plays a lawyer with
questionable morals on a drama for CBS,
a profession abolished in the cult classic.

Meanwhile, I spend my weekends at a hobby I'm
ten years too old for - riding an off-road
skateboard across local pasture preparing for
the day Mattel works out how to defy gravity.

The Cubs almost made it to the World Series
as the film foretold, but fell short in autumn of
their promise in spring – a destiny laid out before
them disappearing like a fly ball lost to the sun,

setting now behind a long dormant volcano clothed
with grass on which sheep graze and I
ride more cautiously than I once did, fearing not
an eruption but more minor and immediate threats,
a loose rock, a stray branch, unforeseen obstacles in my path.

At a pub on the outskirts of Dublin

The owner of the inn across the road buys me a Guinness
with blackberry juice to cut the bitterness he thinks I can't handle.
He says I can pay him back when he passes through my country.

He requests an Irish ballad the band doesn't know the words to
then appoints himself lead vocalist. Of all the cities where I've
never paid for a drink I think this is the most resilient.

I am befriended at the bar by an American who looks like
Kate Hudson and is as new to this city as I am. We're going to have
so much fun, she says. Maybe, I think, but not together.

It's nothing personal just that I'm sceptical about her enthusiasm
for life in a country so humbled by its history. Best to stick with the inn-keeper,
singing the stalling rendition of The Rising of the Moon

as rain begins to fall on this Dublin roof and on the minus
three-degree street outside where a gypsy woman begs for
change, a new born baby strapped to her chest.

Temp work, Bethells's Beach

That summer we spent chasing spinifex
seed heads through sand dunes in steel-capped boots
wondering why we'd want to spend
working hours anywhere else
was ten years ago.

I thought I'd be forever bound
to the group of misfits drawn together
by vacancies at a local temp agency
after I'd moved on, to jobs with steady wages
in air-conditioned office buildings,

the former convict with twins on the way,
the teacher in training
who helped him find God,
the recent widower whose garden
we all drank in come Friday.

As it turned out we left the past where it belonged
just like we always do,
the sand we emptied from our boots
before we left the beach,
the spinifex that eluded us
bouncing over windswept grass
and shifting dunes.

Koshien Stadium, Nishinomiya

Tonight the Tigers play the Hiroshima team
with Cincinnati logos on their caps
in the last game of a season
that started when the cherry blossoms
were in full bloom. I saw them from the top
of Mount Yoshino, after a hard day's walk
preceded by a train trip from a rundown hotel
in town you've never heard of,
sat on the peak and thought about the way
fleeting beauty is lost most fully
when it is lent. I was only passing
through this place, resting temporarily
on a mountain top in a foreign continent.

Thousands of baseball fans breathe
air into balloons at the bottom
of the seventh innings, release them
to deflate in a momentary spectacle,
to hang in the breeze then fall like petals
on the field below, the girls selling beer
out of kegs on their backs, and the mascot
bearing an uncanny resemblance to that of the
Philadelphia Phillies. This is a borrowed love,
taken and displaced like air inside
a balloon, savoured and given up
in a collective exhalation.

The old Presbyterian church, Eketahuna

The skateboarders didn't reject the religious element
as much as the religious objected to the skateboarders,
when one of them converted the old Presbyterian church
turned ping pong club into a gallery of artwork
inspired by nineteen-eighties deck graphics.

The place carries reminders of its former incarnations,
pews between canvases, a hymn book still sitting by an
old wooden bat at what used to be the altar.

He planned to put up a halfpipe inside and attract
competitors from all over the world.

I was comfortable there, with a board in my boot, a dusty
bible on my bookshelf back home. A skatepark always
felt more like a church to me than a church did anyway.
I should confess here I borrowed that sentiment

from the absurd Kinsella novel where a corn farmer
from Iowa travels across country with JD Salinger
gathering ghosts for his baseball team. A ballpark at night
is more like a church than a church, he says.

But I digress. The building housed the local jazzercize club
for a time and I'll bet nobody complained, current
objections having more to do with the nonchalance of youth
than the misappropriation of a place intended for worship

of a different kind. Call it envy of their prowess in a sport
linked with rebellion since the days the pioneers took surfing to
the streets. It was not an abandonment of the old ways,
simply an adaptation to calm seas. Hymns no longer resonate

from the grand piano in the centre of the church, if you could
call it a church anymore. The lid of the instrument is a canvas

now, sporting the sort of artwork found on the bottoms
of our boards when we were young, worn away over
summers spent carving concrete slopes and grinding
metal rails, falling and rising with bloodied palms.

Safeco Field, Seattle

A mother and child hold hands
over hearts while they wait
in line for nachos
served in plastic helmets.
Somewhere in there this was dubbed
America's pastime.

At the end of the third inning
a child races a man in a moose outfit to first base
for a discount on chilli fries.

I'm not sure what chilli fries are,
but still I'm rooting for the child
over the moose, like I root for the home team
even though this is not my home.

Safer to side with the masses,
I say. Call it risk aversion – that human tendency
underlying the business plan of the insurance company
this field is named for.

We are willing to give more than we get
to guard against loss.

In the event of my death
my travel insurance will pay for the
return of my remains to my home town,
according to the darker part of the
policy wording that we tend to
skip over for the most part.

Suffice to know they
will shell out for lost baggage
or a missed connection.
White Sox strike out with bases loaded,

I watch the Mariners make
their way back to the dugouts
from a seat I have carefully selected,
close enough to feel the fervour
but far enough out to seek shelter
from the sun during the hottest
part of the game.

This is it, Ruahine Range

These winding roads always recall
Thriller, which was playing
as we drove them
the winter we were twenty-two.
Michel Jackson was just three weeks dead then.
Still, no more alive than he is today.
Snow settled on signs marking
our route.

I wasn't a big fan of MJ before he died.
I guess that's always the way
we mourn a loss that isn't ours,
we discover more than we remember.
His roots were in soul but
he'd become the biggest selling pop
artist in the world when he passed away
three weeks ahead of his comeback tour.

Tonight it's a Kanye cover
of a Ray Charles classic, an improvement
on the aging original in my pragmatic opinion.
You sit beside me again, your life
in my hands where you'd left it all those years ago.

You flinch as a car coming in the opposite direction
overcorrects on a turn, crosses the centreline,
regains control.

I remember why I left this place
as darkness falls and the temperature drops
well below zero. It was the same reason you stayed.

It was always too damn hot back home,
you said. You hope there will be
snow again tonight, but for me

the romance is only in the memory
of it, melting on the roadside
on the trip home.

Coastal Pacific Railway

My train winds past
montbretia
and fishermen soaking up the
salt spray
on the rocks,
vineyards where rain and
sun and soil
are harnessed
in a sort of industrial alchemy.

Last night I sat on the deck
of a pub with a Swiss stranger
cycling the country
and told him about my newsroom job,
on the opposite coast,
the old printing press in the
adjoining shed and
the nights it failed, the courtroom
across the street
where a softened criminal
sobbed on the stand
for the son whose grave he
defied a driving disqualification
to visit.

It all sounded quite
beautiful, he said.
I assumed something had been lost
in translation. It is clear to me now,
how things are distorted
not by distance
but proximity.

We shared a sav
made with the grapes grown

on the hills north of the town,
which we would pass
tomorrow on our respective
journeys onward.
The sight of the vines
would trigger the memory of an evening
already distant enough to
recall fondly

as I can now fondly
recall for you
the stories I once heard and
recorded on newsprint,
fading now in the
archives of an office
on a faraway coast.

Ko Maungakiekie te Maunga

The steps where I sit are the location
of a family photo that's been adorning my
grandmother's wall for twenty years.
All of us on a summer's afternoon, everyone who mattered then.
That circle hasn't changed a lot.
A handful of people have been added.
Others have passed away but persist in the memories places keep,
like the rules to a childhood game
after those who played it have gone.

The Maori way of introduction
allows us identify ourselves by our landscapes.
Ko Maungakiekie te Maunga,
Maungakiekie is my mountain,
but it is the first of many spanning
regions and decades, like the central North Island
giants we slept beneath during summers
of our teenage years, or the peak with a view
of the Nara prefecture
at the height of the cherry blossom season.

These steps and terraces were erected in 1954
from a bequest by Sir John Logan Campbell,
according to a plaque at my back.
As a young man Doctor Campbell arrived from Scotland in 1839.
In the founding of Auckland, he gave this park to the people
of New Zealand for their enjoyment and benefit.
He died in his ninety-sixth year, and now rests on the summit
of Maungakiekie, known as One Tree Hill,
which he loved dearly.

I can't help but admire
his resolution to rest eternally on the summit of a mountain
in a park shaped by larva flows on a volcanic field tipped
to erupt again in the next thousand years -

someone drawn to movement and stillness in equal parts,
a place's push as much as its pull.

The kids in their game call these steps home,
which means different things in their language and mine
but in both represents something to gravitate towards,
something to run from.

Playing for keeps, Sausalito

I am taken back by the names of our marbles
as much as the
glistening colours, the connotations
the names carried then: *Sunbursts* like the
yachts my older brother perfectly manoeuvred across
the Manukau Harbour and *Cat's Eyes* like the
marine snails I pulled from rocks
as I watched him.

It was unthinkable then that language
should mean anything other than what it
meant to me, an *Oily* recalling a slick on a rainy
street the night we picked up my brother from
sea scouts all those years before he left home to
box for a living in Chang Mai,
a *Galaxy* like a line out of a William Blake poem.

Some names have held across seas
and years for me to rediscover on the shelves of this quiet store
in Sausalito. Others I have left behind, the *Katipo* named for the
native spider, the *Upside Down Crystal Cat's Eye*
I can find no record of
ever having existed outside my school gates.

I realise now the *Sunburst* was more likely
named prosaically after the setting sun, while *Galaxy*
reminds me of how different the night-sky
looks from here to the educated eye,
constellations the wrong way around, dimmer,
and no longer confined to the palm of a hand.

Social network

The owner of the wallet dropped in a downtown carpark
is a Samoan who loves Holdens and eating outdoors.
His friend count reveals he is no more or less gregarious
than me and I wonder what else we have in common.

This is how people fall in love these days,
not that I have any intention of falling in love
with the man in the photo on the pub table in front of me.

I wonder if the last person ever to write
their phone number on the back of a beer-soaked bar coaster
knew they were seeing out the epoch
where the speech Bogart delivered to Bergman
beside the plane at the end of Casablanca was possible.

And there would come a day when we could
no longer really lose a person while they were breathing,
when we'd know exactly where the one who got away
got away to and what they had for breakfast.

Hotcakes, it turns out, with maple syrup in an
antique-looking glass bottle that lends itself well
to Instagram's vintage filter. It's a scene manufactured like
something out of an old-fashioned film,
a man sitting outside a central city café, sporting half a smile,
not for the face behind the camera but some
point in the distance that only he can see.

Smoko, Glen Road

Nobody's been able to afford a pack of smokes
in five years but vernacular is harder to shake than habit.
The temp with the do-it-yourself tattoos across his chest insists
on calling me bro but I don't mind. You've got to
get a good conversation up here or the hours drag until
knock-off. We talk rap and poetry and their likenesses.
He tells me the great love story about the girl he met
in rehab and their twins on the way.

I wonder if I will stay here long enough
to become an auntie to them as I have to a
number of children I did not know a year ago.
Such is the Polynesian convention of offering up
the intimate term to colleagues and friends,
a cause of confusion in my culture where signs are
more securely fastened to their referents.

He pulls the lever on the outdoor shower whose
sign says it should be reserved for chemical emergencies.
Overalls rolled down to the waist, he raises his arms
to the sudden surge - a momentary distraction from the
February heat, the smell of the ducks that died of
botulism rotting in a freezer with a broken seal,
beside a poster in the smoking zone edited
to read "smokers please
stop."

He served five years in Mount Eden prison
while I was working toward a double degree.
"I didn't even go to school," he brags as I struggle
with a half-finished cross-word puzzle, sucking on a juice box
in steel-capped boots and a high-vis vest.

Half-asleep on an airport bench, Kuala Lumpur

I think I'd like to come back here.
The promotional video on the aeroplane really sold the place.
It must be thirty degrees out and
I've always been a sucker for city lights.

There is nothing to stop me from staying, of course.

I could drift off to sleep and miss my connecting flight
but then I might never see
the house where Marcel Proust composed
In Search of Lost Time.

I've heard a plaque is all that marks the site
of the cork-lined room where he sat a hundred years ago.

Not living exactly, but dying with more urgency than the rest of us.

It's not going anywhere,
the plaque or the street or the city.

The volumes of the novel wait
patiently among stacks in central city
library basements.

Restlessness
is for the mortals
who forever feel the need to prove they were here.

He spent his final years
recording memories
in a room marked by a plaque
I once saw
on a flying visit,
captured in a photograph
I keep in an

album on the shelf.

Cape Foulwind, West Coast

I'd think no one else had seen
the sun set from this secluded spot
but for the shards of glass
at my bare feet collecting its
December rays.

Tonight I'll settle
for the absent company
of unknown revellers and far-off
fishermen.

Don't get me wrong this isn't about
loneliness - the broken pieces people
leave behind - but summer days
stretching out like set nets
cast for sustenance, drawn in empty

as a stretch of coastline
accessed only by foot
over tough terrain.

Curse of the Colonel

Superstition said the Hanshin Tigers wouldn't have
another series win until Colonel Sanders was retrieved
from the canal where fans threw him after
their team's 1985 victory.

The statue of the Kentucky Fried
Chicken founder was apparently the doppelganger of first
baseman Randy Bass and so had to go in the canal
along with the real-life lookalikes of all the other players
on the winning team.

The urban legend gets a bit murky
after that. Fans seemed to believe it was the colonel's fault
their team was on an eighteen-year losing streak.

What is superstition after all but a miscomprehension
of the relationship between two things.

Surely we've all been there,
caught ourselves wondering where we would be right now
if not for the minor misdemeanours of our pasts,
a high paid job in an office with views of the city or together
at a bar on the edge of a Mediterranean beach.

Certainly not sauntering from a train station
to a stadium to watch a losing team play, a single ticket
in my back pocket. Maybe this will be the Tigers' year, I think to myself
as I pass the fast food outlet housing the remains of the statue
construction workers pulled from the river in pieces.

Park Road, Hamilton

Of all the streets that blur in to the sunset,
There must be one (which, I am not sure)
That I by now have walked for the last time
- *Jorge Luis Borges*

I said you didn't need to walk me the block and a half
to my house. It felt a bit old fashioned, a bit
in the face of the pursuit of gender equality.
You told me to listen to the leaves rustling beneath
the streetlights in the early summer breeze.

You asked me who my favourite utilitarian philosopher
of the nineteenth century was. It wasn't a conversation
I wanted to have at midnight on a Friday.
You asked me about my favourite scene from Blackadder.

You drove me to every service station
in town the rainy the night I had a craving
for Cherry Coke, then returned my forgotten
umbrella to my doorstep before sunrise.
It was what I expected of you.

There are things we will never understand
about each other - my tendency to wander,
why you've never tasted strawberries.

I think we really believed paths that cross once are bound
to do so again through common interest or chance
the day we said goodbye in the shared driveway
and pretended I'd be back and you'd be waiting
to show me the latest philosophy books in your collection,

while I'd made myself at home in your living room
logging onto your laptop with the date of your brother's
birth - your password for everything, then mine so

I remember it even now, six years after I saw him for the last time,

and Blackadder would resume where we left off
the night we came home early from a party, as was our habit,
your brother just waking, as was his - Hugh Laurie young again
or still and strawberries in season, the elms in full foliage
on the street that joined our flats.

A newsroom after deadline, Westport

The rolling door's drawn down on the printworks
where paperboys and girls line up on slow summer afternoons,
their teenage conversations entering open office windows.

Isn't that what you got into this industry for anyway,
snippets of the lives of others drifting into your days?

Besides, their lives are more interesting than those of the
athletes and artists and bureaucrats you've interviewed,
whose names you'll drop in bars ten years from now,
the big stars who once graced a small town fleetingly.

Noah likes Kelly and Kelly likes Noah back
they report while the receptionist punches holes in
that day's edition and carries it to the archives out back.

I'd spent hours there scouring the files for the identity
of an eroding aircraft spotted in bush thirty kilometres north of here.

Perhaps that was the cause of my demise in the industry
– always being more drawn to the old than the new.

The plane almost certainly wasn't the Brougham lost without
a trace attempting to make the first successful crossing of the
Tasman but might have been, according to my investigations.

The bush was dense but many had stumbled upon the
remains over the years from the local businessman
whose sons grew pot there in the nineties to the elderly tramper
who said it was like something out of the comic books

that sustained him in this town when he was no older than
the kids generating distractions outside my window.

I think they'll stay with me - the paperboys and girls,

waiting for work to give way to more pressing tasks,
an image lingering on the periphery of memory,
a single engine plane rusting in a valley.

Grace Cathedral, San Francisco

Stained glass windows depict
human feats of science and philosophy
alongside stories of the scripture and
the legends of the saints
and let the light in just the same.

San Franciscans sit silently
remembering what faith felt like
before it was a choice
to be made, before the Scopes Trial
and the Stonewall Riots.

Perhaps I'm projecting,

and for them this is nothing
more than a temporary shelter
from the June wind,
a stopping point on a journey
to a bustling pier.

The coldest winter I ever spent was a summer in San Francisco,

is the quote I recall
seated in the light cast
by Einstein and Descartes
and the son of God, saviour of man,
as the fog rolls in over the bay.

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