let go the ghost

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LET GO THE GHOST

by

Ashley Embry Clark

Bachelor of Arts
Beloit College
2003

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
Department of English
College of Liberal Arts

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ABSTRACT

let go the ghost

by

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The poems in let go the ghost seek to position themselves in the difficult middle-ground between internal and external, between content and form, between poet and poem. They seek the "in between," both literally and metaphorically. To this end, the poems straddle the line between opposites—yes and no, coming and going, you and I.

In terms of form, the poems rely heavily on a wide range of sources—Lorine Niedecker, Jack Spicer, and Andy Goldsworthy especially. In terms of content, they rely on the ideas of condensery, accrual, and seriality. In broad strokes, let go the ghost explores the process of letting go the past and moving forward into an unpredictable future.
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INTRODUCTION

In poetry, there is a difficult middle-ground between internal and external, between content and form, between poet and poem. There is an in between, where the internal is externalized, where form is the content, where the poem becomes an other—and vice versa. On this ground, the lines that so concretely mark one thing from another—a you from an I, for instance—blur until each thing is simultaneously itself and (at least partially) the other. Increasingly, as a poet, I work to position myself as close to the center of this in between as is possible to be in any given moment. I want to be in the middle of the middle. Because of this, I am not—or, really, have I ever been—a fan of holy grails, either/or propositions, or zero-sum games, which do not allow for the “in between,” which, furthermore, leave everyone and everything, quite simply, without—both exiled and incomplete. Yet, even in this, Reader, as you’ll soon see, even in this antipathy toward binaries, I am in between, which is both maddening and encouraging.

In Rivers and Tides: Working with Time, Andy Goldsworthy says, “In so many works that I’ve made, the thing, the very thing that brings the work to life is the thing that will cause its death.” While the sun acts as the catalyst, when the slivers of ice that Goldsworthy has affixed to a rock on a beach in Nova Scotia melt, it is the loosening of claustrophobically-packed molecules of water that precipitate the sculpture’s ultimate end. That is, the ice is never not (also) water—“the river and the sea made solid.” The ice is water, and water is the end of ice. Thus, the sculpture, which is “alive” in the sense of its (literal) upward thrust and its status as already melting—in progress, in motion—contains its own “death.” The thing contains its opposite.

This, then, is the rub: opposites. I have been obsessed with opposites and with the tension between line (as line) and thought. More specifically, I have been obsessed with the idea that a line can contain and/or imply the opposite of what the (larger) thought (or sentence)
intends. I first began self-consciously grappling with this in “subway #1,” but other (later) poems, such as “my beloved my” and most of the manuscript’s third section, bear out this obsession more successfully.

(Now, given that he perpetrated a radical shift in my poetics with a single sentence, you will not be surprised, Reader, to learn that it was Goldsworthy who helped me to extrapolate even further the initial obsession with opposites.)

In one of Rivers and Tides’ later sequences, Goldsworthy sits beneath a bare tree, constructing a spider web of sorts from reeds and thorns. “When I make a work,” he says, “I often take it to the very edge of collapse.” He continues to build the web outward, away from the tree. Eventually, the wind catches it, and the web collapses, falls down literally on Goldsworthy’s head. This then, this moment of collapse, is what my line wants to challenge.

Over time, what this has come to mean is that, at their most successful, the poems in this manuscript establish a (sometimes precarious) balance between form/content and the moment just before collapse.

There are myriad reasons why a poem might collapse. Sometimes, I hang on too tightly to the idea, the what-I-want-this-poem-to-mean. Sometimes, I don’t pay enough attention to what’s actually happening on the page. As Goldsworthy asserts, “Total control can be the death of a work.” But, regardless of the reason why a given poem fails, the site of that failure is (almost) always form. That is, the site of failure is (almost) always the line.

Take, for instance, the “subway” poems. It’s worth noting that although there were originally five poems in the sequence, only two have survived—the first and the fourth. Especially significant to these poems is the fact that they did not begin with an image or an idea. Rather, they began with a line. The poems dictated their own governance, insisted on their own modalities of address through form. Indeed, they were an entirely new kind of animal. And so, because the poems were propelled by line rather than image or idea, when I found myself stuck, I
simply remained stuck—until the *line* found its way, forward, to the next *line*. Eventually, the lines found their way to a poem.

Here, then, is where the notion of opposites-as-a-binary goes off the rails, where distinctions like this/that and either/or must collapse. I mean to say, I see now that a thing—any thing, every thing—contains its own opposite. Because if a thing can be defined by what it’s *not*, if that thing can be *implied*—brought *implicitly* into being—by what it’s not, then the two are bound together associatively. They are bound inextricably, inevitably. The thing *contains*, *possesses* within itself its opposite—and vice versa.¹ “Lacks one lacks both, and the unseen is proved by the seen, / Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in turn” (Whitman 27). Furthermore, if a thing and its opposite contain each other, then they do not *only* contain each other. Rather, they each also contain all the points *in between*—the distance traveled between the two. And so, if a thing cannot be wholly separated from its implied *not*, its intimated *isn’t*, then I have to accept that what I once thought of as *opposite*—especially as concerns line and thought—is, in fact, as opposite as the left eye is to the right.

In the second of his Vancouver lectures, Jack Spicer explains that “serial composition is the practice of writing in units that are somehow related without creating a totalizing structure for them” (50). Perhaps the most important of Spicer’s tenants for serial poems is that you don’t *decide* to write one, you just do. “[Y]ou have to go into [it] not knowing what the hell you’re doing. […] You have to be tricked into it” (52). I suppose it’s fair to say that I’ve taken this to heart. The entire manuscript is buttressed by the idea of seriality. The most obvious example, of course, is “addresses home,” but those poems were already well under way by the time I read Spicer. When I began writing the poems that eventually became the manuscript’s third section, however, I self-consciously adhered to Spicer’s principles of seriality. I purposefully refused to
re-read the (preceding) poems as I wrote. I threw each poem over my shoulder, always intending to come back, but *later*. I continued in this vein for over a year. *Later* didn’t come until I began putting together the manuscript.

My primary reason for such adherence concerns the process of accrual. I knew from the start that, in addition to all I could not anticipate, the figures of *father, ghost, you* would continue to appear—appear appear appear—and I wanted to bypass the often overly critical eye of self-editing. As in, here you is this, here the ghost is that, so t/her the ghost must be that. In “Against Closure,” Lyn Hejinian argues that “[r]epetition... challenges our inclination to isolate, identify, and limit the burden of meaning given to an event (the sentence or line).” It “disrupts the initial apparent meaning scheme. The initial reading is adjusted; meaning is set in motion, emended and extended, and the rewriting that repetition becomes postpones completion of the thought indefinitely” (369). In other words, repetition permits meaning to accrue. In “1,” *you* is the sister, the dog, the ghost. The *ghost* is the dog, the sister, a thing I couldn’t name, my father. In “3,” the ghost is the father and the daughter both. By “4,” *i* is the ghost, haunting herself with her own creation.\(^{3}\) Waiting for *later* allowed each of these figures to mean *more*. It allowed for continuation unimpeded by (efforts to maintain) continuity.

Indeed, any attempt on my part to establish a “totalizing structure,” where each thing was, if not nailed into place, then certainly limited to a small range of motion, would most likely have netted not just bad poems but perhaps no poems at all. The figures in the “quickening” poems have always been convoluted—difficult in their multiplicity. So much so that without the *series* of poems, and perhaps even in spite of all the variants the series allows, synthesis is

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1 In this context, I understand the word “possess” not as “ownership” but as *contact* of any sort. Possession, then, is an *understanding*, which—because of the finite quality of convergence—is necessarily fleeting.

2 In “cooking conversation,” I write, *let it in, take it on*, which at its core is a call to bypass or ignore the self-editor, to allow more to make it to the page.

3 In “The Glass Essay,” Anne Carson evokes Charlotte Bronte’s writing about her sister, about “Emily’s total subjection / to a creative project she could neither understand nor control” (10). Something of this, of Charlotte-cum-Carson’s belief that, somewhere along the way, Emily’s project turned on her, became
impossible. If I had tried in the beginning to establish a you, a ghost, a father, who was stable and/or singular, I think I would have ended up in such a snare that I would have abandoned the poems altogether. Instead, by approaching each (new) poem with only the hazy impression of the poems that came before, by subverting in this way my inclination toward the (at times) harsh economy of self-editing, by using my ambivalence and uncertainty as fodder, I’ve stumbled headlong into new territory. I sense a shift in my poetics I could not have anticipated. But then, that’s not surprising. “No one thinks these things when they are making,” Steins says, “when they are creating what is the composition, naturally no one thinks, that is no one formulates until what is to be formulated has been made” (516).

ii.

I have (also) taken to heart the notion that, until you have a formal reason for doing so, you shouldn’t break normative forms. Thus, I offer, dear Reader, formal reasons for the (most noticeable of my) deviations.

I don’t italicize foreign words because they are part of my available language. In terms of meaning, writing “but I no figuraba en esta tierra so stubborn” is not so different from writing “but I do not figure in this land so stubborn.” More to the point, my access to Spanish yields a far more musical line. The Spanish vowels create a glissando, which isn’t present in English. The repetition of the hard T in both “esta” and “tierra” helps to emphasize the hard T of “stubborn,” which, in turn, adds an element of onomatopoeia.

I can attribute this instance of “ear,” at least in part, to Pablo Neruda’s poem, “Casi Fuera Del Cielo” (Almost Out of Sky). In the poem’s second stanza, Neruda writes, “a veces fulgurece su mirada debajo del cielo,” which translates as “sometimes your glance flashes out under the

something she could neither recognize nor escape—something of this turn was in my mind when I wrote “4.” Also, Notley, who writes about “something we invented that sort of came true” (41).
Here again, the Spanish vowels lend a fluidity to the line that does not exist in English.

Too, there is a staccato cadence to the Spanish that can be registered as onomatopoeia—a flashing, sparking sound to match a flashing, sparking glance.

The distinction I make (in poems) between “i” and “I” is the distinction I apprehend between “truth” and “Truth.” Truth is singular; truth allows for plurality. So goes it with I; so goes it with i. I wants to establish a subject position of singularity. But, I cannot contain all identity. It collapses difference. And so, ultimately, I is not equipped to articulate all facets of self.

Furthermore, in poetry, I cannot contain all “the real and imagined exiles” that I, you, we choose. As yet, I know of no other way to point to this except use i. i, which cannot help but intimate, cannot help but contain I, resists the reduction of self to a singular subject position. From one poem to the next, i allows I to be different, new. Without any sense of loss or erasure, i allows I to be more. Meaning accrues.

While it is related to the i/I distinction, the general lack of capitalization is a slightly stickier discussion. Of the three reasons I can articulate, one is legitimate, one is suspect, and one is something I’d rather avoid.

LEGITIMATE: Because of how important line-as-line has become to me, because of how fixated I have been on pushing each line to function and/or read in multiple ways, it makes sense to me to dispense with normative capitalization. Adhering to normative capitalization interrupts the line visually. In Close to me & Closer... (The Language of Heaven) Notley writes, “Too many people... & stories... that are supposed to stay put. Stay true by being one way” (36). If, formally, I am working to allow more to enter each poem, then wouldn’t capitalizing the beginning of each “sentence” undercut that effort? Wouldn’t it privilege the sentence over the

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line in some way? As in, yes, I've broken the line here, but the enjambment is not as important as the idea. They are equally important.

SUSPECT: In much the way that I use *i* to indicate the way that identity shifts, changes, accrues, I eschew capitalization in order to point to an *in the midst of it all* quality in the work. “You know that... what you are, deep down... didn’t have a... beginning” (Notley 34). As in, just because a poem begins with “when the dog, my sister’s child” doesn’t mean that the dog, the child has only just then come into being. Furthermore, though the dog begins as a dog, by the sixth word of the poem, it is already something different. By the end of the first line, it is something different still.

WHAT I’D RATHER AVOID: As much as I’d like to argue that I eschew normative capitalization purely on the basis of form, I know it’s not quite true. Alongside any other more formal insistence, I have to admit that I avoid capitalization because it helps me to avoid taking on an authority that I’m not comfortable with. As in, *this* is what it is, *this I know for sure.* I know, Reader, I know. Ridiculous. And yet, there it is.

iii.

In his book of essays, *A Defense of Ardor*, Adam Zagajewski argues that poetry “can’t rely exclusively upon private experience.” Instead, poetry must also “[recognize] historical change, [stand] guard on the square before the president’s palace, [reflect] on the gradual or rapid metamorphoses of our civilization” (139). To this end, in “Against Poetry,” he asks, among much else, “Why do young American poets pay so much attention to their immediate family and neglect a deeper reality?” (141) Zagajewski’s question hits (unerringly) its mark, casting into bolder relief one of my own primary concerns with this manuscript, which is its insularity, its intensely personal and autobiographical content.

I first read Zagajewski’s essays while traveling in Eastern Europe. The majority of the books I read during that period treat the political and cultural history of Eastern Europe in the
twentieth century, including (to name only the most expected) the Second World War and its historical contexts, Communism and its eventual collapse. With few exceptions, these writers—Bruno Schulz, Stanislaw Szpilman, Zbigniew Herbert, Primo Levi, and Rszyard Kapuscinski—are Polish. After several weeks, however, of reading that detailed one mind-numbing atrocity after another, I laid these books aside. I turned instead to Jane Austen, Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, Nick Hornby, William Gibson, William Trevor. Even Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying, which treats a more familiar (to me) devastation, was a welcome change. At the time, I couldn’t help but think that my turning away proved Zagajewski’s point.

Yet, I return again and again to Zbigniew Herbert’s “The Envoy of Mr. Cogito.” The poem, which Zagajewski argues, is Herbert’s “great hymn” (47). “[Y]ou were not saved in order to live,” the poem tells us. “[Y]ou have little time you must give testimony[.]” Indeed, “keep looking at your clown’s face in the mirror / repeat: I was called—weren’t there better ones that I” (48). I return again and again to the poem’s last line, in which we are instructed to “Be faithful Go” (49). And so, too, I return to answer Zagajewski’s question.

Though perhaps these poems do not take on the “deeper reality” of wars, politics, the state of contemporary poetry, they do position themselves—that is, they are—part of a larger American context. There is (at times) a certain irreverence to these poems, which strikes me as especially American. They mix the high and the low—Andy Goldsworthy and Neko Case, sublimation and Motel 6, a calamity of the soul and Cadillacs, Emily Bronte and tattoos, “the variable and horrifying speed of birth” and “little honey honey, be-lieve me,” guerilla warfare and a wedding. They take on the country’s geography—swinging from New York to Mississippi, from Pittsburgh to Detroit, from Las Vegas to Phoenix, from rivers to mountains, from oceans to deserts. Whatever these poems are or aren’t—they are faithful. Whatever they do or don’t—they go.
I would like nothing more than to write a long and lovely section that carefully and neatly sews together all the writers and artists whose works have influenced my poetics. But, Reader, a section like that would be almost as long as the manuscript itself. So, here—in no particular order—is where it gets quick and dirty. Sometimes, the influence is specific, discrete—a poem, a book. Sometimes, the influence is more general, systemic. Bear with me.

Janet Kauffman: From Kauffman’s *The Body in Four Parts*, I learned multiplicity, and, by extension, I first began to understand the idea of being *in between*.

This is not a classic case. Nobody’s got a file of interviews. If you want the documentation of a disorder, multiple personality disorder, say, if that’s what you want to know, you’ll have to read the other accounts. Nobody’s driven their navy blue cars out to study this. But it may be, in its essentials, a commonplace phenomenon: a body in numerous parts—Dorothea, Jean-Paul, Jack, and me—male, female, brother, sister, water, fire, air, you name it, walking around on the ground, all-in-one. (10)

And later,

I can say this about myself, and it could be said across the board: she is piecemeal, she is not herself, she’s numberless, not numb, she cannot be counted out, she’s gusted air, open fire, she is not watered down, she’s dirt and debris. Also, she is a hank of hair, hacked. (18)

Jack Spicer: Refer to section one.

Andy Goldsworthy: Refer to section one.

Lorine Niedecker: Niedecker’s influence is more rhizomatic and so harder to specify. Certainly, “addresses home” owes itself to her. More specifically, it owes itself to her poem “Paean to Place,” which, at every turn, insists on Niedecker’s understanding of self in relation to place. But certainly, the spare style of the rest of the manuscript bears Niedecker’s mark. Her attention to water(s) resonates. Her tarred nets and squawking birds make multiple appearances. Perhaps the real mark of Niedecker’s influence on my work is in the distillation, the shearing down. “Grandfather / advised me: / Learn a trade // I learned / to sit at desk / and condense // No layoff / from this / condensery.”
Anne Carson: Like Niedecker, Carson's influence is a bit harder to qualify. Of particular importance are her books *Beauty of the Husband*, *Autobiography of Red*, and *Glass, Irony, and God*. Like Niedecker and Davis (see next paragraph), bits of Carson appear throughout the manuscript—the "whacher" poems, in particular. The (perhaps) most important idea I've taken from Carson comes from the twenty-second "tango" in *Beauty of the Husband*. "[N]ow and then," she writes, "it makes sense to say Save all you can." Indeed, I have internalized this at least as much as Niedecker's principle of condensery.

Olena Kalytiak Davis: Like Niedecker and Carson, Davis appears again and again throughout "addresses home." Beyond this specificity, however, I'm at something of a loss to explain her influence. Her work is marked by an at times sad self-understanding that says, "Please, don't misunderstand: / We still suffer, but we are / happy[,]" that says, Perhaps I'm not happy, but I'm not un-happy in that not-happiness. Perhaps, Reader, it will be enough to say simply that she is, at all times, talking in my ear.

Alice Notley: *Close to me & Closer... (The Language of Heaven)* offered me a viable approach for the "quickening" poems. In this book, Notley demonstrates how difficult it is to get at the thing, but, too, she demonstrates how to continue circling the thing, which enables you to draw ever closer. "Say a bad thing happens, and you live it, so hard, you don't even... name it. Not the moment itself. Someone dies. That's a moment. The word... is different... A word is a... fact... A moment... can feel like a... blunder... You haven't ever named, the moment when I died... You have named me... in a big whole way, lots of time—but not that... stupid moment" (26).

Stéphane Mallarmé: Combining the discussions of accrual and *Close to me & Closer* will yield a reasonable explanation of my response to Mallarmé's *A Tomb for Anatole*.

Gerard Manley Hopkins: From Hopkins, I think I've taken the density of my lists. Too, there is something in "mississippi (fishwife)," something about the middle of the poem—all those...
commas—that harkens back to Hopkins. And, it’s perhaps worth noting that, in moments when I am trying to steady myself, I recite “The Windhover”—repeatedly if necessary.

Paul Celan: In many ways, I feel like Celan is a leap I haven’t yet made. As yet, my reading has been cursory. But, part of that cursory reading was “Praise of Distance,” which resulted in the “mississippi” poems. The idea that “a hanged man strangles the rope” lead me to “fishwife or fish: the net had to fail someone.”

Robert Creeley: There is much to glean from Creeley, but for our purposes here, I’ll detail two specifics. In his essay, “To Define,” Creeley writes that “usage coheres value.” That is, meaning accrues. And, in his poem, “The Mountains in the Desert,” he writes, “Tonight let me go / at last out of whatever / mind I thought to have, / and all the habits of it.” Often, when I feel myself struggling to hang on, to control not just the poems but my life in general, this stanza comes to mind. Often, the hope in these lines seems like prayer and benediction both.

endnotes

The title of the manuscript is, I suppose, as good a place as any to end. Over the course of the last three and a half years, there have many titles. First, “addresses home” seemed apt. Then, I wrote “an (in progress) elegy,” and this became the title. As the final section began to take shape, one reader suggested that I use “quickening.” let go the ghost was something just shy of an accident, a joke, a throwaway line. Thinking about the final section, about how I’d become obsessed with the word, the idea of “ghosts,” I said, “That’s what I should call the damn thing—let go the ghost.” I laughed at the time, but then it stuck.

In the first of his Vancouver lectures, Spicer says that “the living are responsible for carrying out the desires of the dead” (1). But, I don’t kid myself that these poems have anything to do with honoring the dead. Nor do I quite agree that “poets exist within a city of the dead” (2). Rather, these poems are a (perpetually unrealized) effort to make peace—for my own sake. I don’t exist in a city of the dead. Rather, I exist in a city of ghosts, which I brought into being.

xv

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And so, ultimately, I see why *let go the ghost* has stuck. Because if the goal is to let go
all the ghosts that people these poems, then *let go the ghost* is both a reminder and a call to action,
both the explanation and the purpose. The epigraph from James Tate becomes especially
pointed in the face of this hope, intention, aim. “For the first time the only / thing you are likely
to break / is everything.” God willing, and the creek don’t rise.

---

4 Here, the word “goal” sounds alarmingly (given earlier arguments) close to “grail.” But here, too, is the
in between. Because while it’s true that I do not like Grails, as a writer, I must admit that grails exist. That
is, I have a goal, a something toward which I strive. This “something” is the grail. Keelan argues that
“identity shifts with the approach of subject” (13 April). Here, “grail” or “goal” seems a reasonable
substitution for “identity.” That is, what I want from and/or for a poem shifts—constantly. So, each time a
poem happens, the grail is momentarily achieved and/or realized, and then it shifts, evolves (again) into
something different, something new.
let go the ghost

For the first time the only thing you are likely to break is everything.

James Tate
an (in progress) elegy
in the beginning, i

start with a
set of keys.

start with a wall
of doors. opening
A, locks a
door down
the way. the key to
Q grinds itself a new
tooth, no longer a match.
in the beginning, i

start with a body,

a beloved. before

an after-

math endstops

you & i. start

to understand a yes

(yes) this body wants

to be. this

beginning to be. i

start with this

body (you

and i, a be-

tween) now.
subway #1

the terrible cradle

frees me from the hook

my decisions hang me

by. passing underwater

some woman wants

to apologize. and then some

man wants to be a bird. instead

train, track, inlet, islet,

island, island 1, 2, 3.
no boat yar enough for a net
fine enough to catch you close

enough. to name you now,
when the anchor won’t catch,

to praise distance now, when sad
beyond sad, girl, we might still be

mother and daughter. naming you
sinks the boat. maybe

it was me who gave you gills. but when
did you learn to outbreathe the hurricane,

this history-tarred net, my grip, regret?
one-sided conversation

i say it’s a tough ocean.

i say it’s a kind of calculus,
the calculus of islands.

i say, my poor mother.

if she, i say. i mean, if you—

in this house, i hang pictures of shoes, and you
as a girl—just one. plus one
when i was young and you were in the sun.

i say, when your mother picked the pistol, it meant you couldn’t.
i say, when mother picked the kitchen, it meant i’d see every kitchen in the aftermath.

sad daughter?

yeah, it meant that, too.

we’re a sad daughter, missy.

a calculus of islands.

some, one, body, beam lets go
and not bearing up, but not going down
means you’re afraid of vectors.

i say, on a tough ocean an archipelago can’t help

but yearn

for the continent before.
an (in progress) elegy

the violent kitchen spares
nothing. it is
spring longing to be back. but in winter
i come to
another prison. we are
nothing but this
kitchen. so, sweet-
heart, let’s say we
do nothing cruel. or just
let’s say we try
not to fight with knives in our hands—
i want to touch you, still.
my sleep was a record,
a contract of structure, some contact
i let go to slip
the hook, that valentine.
cooking conversation

if you were beautiful—

someone who used to—

send a letter, forget the phone.
there’s no common spring.
it’s fall. i’m allowed for awhile
to not wish for green.

ever only a garden i’m in
some chicken & hens, a snapdragon, a 40-lb elephant ear.

when mother was a girl, the dresser drawers were a stair.
a tow-headed girl—
the dresser a stair—

let it in, take it on

the fat woman’s curse: don’t fucking hang up on me
the old woman’s smile: a soldier beside her at the bank

    good luck with it all

if you were beautiful, he said, and walked to the sink.
telegram signals

hooked. above third rail.
again. leapt ledge. didn’t
get foothold. can’t say how
long i’ll be.

sister [went south]
[without shorthand]
twenty [years of morse]
[letters written to a windshield instead]

don’t go to [code]
[root]
don’t cling to [need]
[me]

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telegram signals

not lonely. sister. because
code. collapsed. code
collapsed. because. i'm lonely.

si-. se-. not sen-. to -.
so- sore. i -ever -for
a-. closed. close- door. -no- i
lo- -o-. yes. no. i- be her-. o-lo-. 
subway #4 (how to draw a bunny: a funeral)

i, the elegy

say no-
thing. go
now. go
away. a-
way. go.
say no-
thing. go.

ii, the after party

said no-
thing? no.
went? went
gone. way
gone? yes
there. to
see? may-
be. don’t
know? why
know? said
nothing. no-
thing. no.
i.

you burned. Lord, did you
burn. that house
can't be it.

you burned it
down to gold. i dreamt

i killed some.
i killed some. in the dream,

that house was

some thing we'd never seen.

ii.

honey believe me don't it?
little honey honey, be-lieve me.
green don't believe no other green.
and red, oh. honey, don't ever believe
red. don't believe no thing they say.

iii.

how'd you know it? didn't
recognize it.
my beloved my

my beloved my. undoing

possession is possible. sometimes

un-wanting is not. how

i let my my darling go.

river is

not river

because of water. crushed

stones become iron,
become red, snake

a path across the surface.

red takes my. all

my. balance depends on collapse. sometimes

i watch my collapse:

she is her own.
vowel list

He had never had a self that wished to continue in its own being,
survival meant ceasing to be what its being was.

Frank Bidart

an even sew
along the ampersand,
also ankle.

after the fall you let go
apples and amalgams
after all the annotation so careful
after accosting the
and a, what could you have said to You
and I, for that matter
in as much as pronouns can invent, i
I you, my love, i
Me you, i
You me, i
We you & i, or else,
You & I We us
excepting you & i,
excepting the
evasion of some
evening come, at last,
excepting the red
mountain face,
excepting thee, love, I have lost
entire days, gone
escaping at word speed
un-text
me, a word overdressed

this is us
undone, not gone
o, love, the black bird
on occasion flies through

on occasion a green apple
on occasion a dark plum

Occasion waltzes
Occasion bides

often we write letters, i and I
often I wants to be you
often i come to We

on occasion I is as right as s/he writes though
often we want different things
thanksgiving, las vegas

i.

driving fast along a curve, into a faultline of lights, i arrived home, unexpectedly.

ii.

at the river, there must be a choice—
drown, or swim out to be saved.

in the desert, snakes must suffice for rivers—
snakes beneath the rabbit hutch—

choose even the triangle-headed snake,
swim out to striking distance because.

when the end looks like what we imagined at our most hopeful,
forgiveness comes cheap.

i’m grateful for poison.

because.

because.
mississippi (fish)

floods happen at home
when highways give way.

because only one version of you had a boat,
because only one version of me knew the water’s south,
gills were enough to leave
no forwarding address.

fishwife or fish, the net had to fail someone.
addresses home

I am in a place called there and I am trying to make it into a place called here.

Juliana Spahr
a series of address

1, second late night

the kitchen light, a box of Dos Equis empties, a man and woman
of confession a/round confession

how long since s/he was touched
how long since s/he strayed from the lord

the thing she wants to be saying

home is Phoenix home is not
home is 39503 22003 06516 53511 11210 22554 Ecuador 11216 89119
home is not only zip codes

2, address

to say sister fears means
I fears they
all fear for me now Ashley
(now) Embry no longer know
how to go back

sister you’ll take after her and be
tall, thin though I (I am not)
don’t know if you too will ask those questions (like her)
or twit your now dark hair into loose coils

what mother question will(s) you (to) ask?

why the bed without sheets
why only the kitchen with light
why gone-away glaze again, mother why go weak again
why the beach in a hurricane
why weeds only in summer

does it make sense to say save all you can

why not Fadra, mother
why never Fadra

sister, the word is wanting to be made
between us us between
us will make us

but, sister, why my face so un-
like her

3, first early morning

your chewed lip a throbbing sound which you burned
with coffee and quit smoking again

if this table were an old white mustang
it might be possible to love truly

without recourse or reserve out in the open
without recourse or reserve I ask all the names you know

4, we discuss how seasons don’t die

q: this morning?
a: clouds don’t last
a: look east

q: in January?
say, find your way down to the Canyon
say, find your way back from the east

5, you & I address

I come going come going say me voy I go me voy

but I no figuraba en esta tierra so stubborn
where the sun’s limit gives way to brightness

in the red valley of the spiders in this red red valley
I know not nearly enough of the

6, after words

this name a piano you forgot
the last name remembered an endstop

a father, fisted palm closed
a father, dead hand nailed under ground
there is no Chopin for this sound
though this is
written (over and over) to you

7, address
Fadra, your daughter has finally gone west
in the desert she'll find her way listing
all your voices each name until her own
her own Fadra her own her
own this daughter of yours Fadra she tried
to find you
addresses home

dear lorine:

today, a cloud with rain.

no boats here though. no mud. just a valley. a place in the desert.

all the windows here have vertical blinds, except the kitchen.

the kitchen light wakes me.

and aeroplanes. aeroplanes overhead at all times.

what will sustain us, lorine?

a winter in this desert,
with no water and flashfloods? chemistry taught me
sublimation. solid into vapor. weather in the west.

a drag queen barbershop quartet performs nightly,
the Motel 6 boasts views of the Riviera,
the Brooklyn Bridge keeps to the sidewalk,
i’ve started to drink belgian beer.

mostly our mothers are dead now.
Daisy for the ground. you for the ground. only Fadra left.
only me to write it.

i don’t want to make wishes anymore.
the flayed crow is just a dead bird. i don’t want it to look like my palm
anymore, my palm reached out for Fadra.
though you see i’ve started to use my mother’s name again.

you see i save love for things.
a word, a touch, a vowel,
bottles of booze, letters from Phoenix, letters from Blackhawk.

in this place, things keep me afloat.
dear winterer:

today, yellow in that black bird’s bent wing. an ochre sheen.

the end of October.

we’ll begin to hunt the cold now—a scent on the wrist.

your last letter, winterer: yes:
the second bedroom is still empty:
i’m still smoking fit to sod:
still no lover: not yet, not quite

though sometimes i think of a man in Tucson.
sometimes i think a nest has knotted itself from my hair, lodged itself
between the third and fourth vertebra. i know

now the sentence won’t protect me.
that naming is

merchant, mechanic, metal heart.

if i break a thing, i’m a child.
if i keep a thing intact, i’m a politico, or a priest.

we should build a big oven, winterer, and burn all the things we know to remember:

biting your tongue a second time smart more than the first. scars
mean things can’t pass. if i love you,
it won’t protect me to use a different name.
dear david:

a yellow morning today. i hide in the pantry, listing out loud.

peach preserves, green beans, pecans graveled on the floor, an empty jar labeled kentucky.

a dividing line between the parallel and the perpendicular.

you tell me the mountain is North, and beyond Beyond North.

a loud black bird draws me back to the morning. insolent
pecking at the kitchen window. it wants
the yellow-pocked plant on the sill, the one (genus unknown) you think is dying.

this started as a yellow morning, not another negotiation
of geography. not another not yet, not quite atlas. until i understand the yellow,

think of the plant as a legend. until i understand
the yellow as assimilation or as death,
think of me as an appendix of streets you don't yet know
in a town where you've lived all your life.
last night another yellow dream of airplanes, and you
driving east into the lightning of November’s first storm.

when David and i argued about Orion’s rape of Artemis i knew
the squawking bird agreed with me but, like so much
to do with violence and the limiting tendencies
of pronouns, i could neither prove nor remain faithful to
Him or You or I. again.

i am desiring again.

islands, less dizziness, a way
away from of,
a way to within,
beyond furthermore.

David warns that letters must be read only once. only once, that black bird :
i know he wished for the certainty of a blue wing, the emancipation
belief’s grammar keeps us from. these yellow dreams

offer proof

of failings, inconsistencies, inconstancies, underpinnings, and pining.

pining—
dear olena:

i realized tonight after an ex called from a cab in New York
you’ve upped the ante
of my obsession with Detroit. (i talked about airplanes.
told her the mountains eclipse casinos, billboards, the wreckage of traffic.)

what is it about three, olena? about tercets and triplets and triangles?
let’s say we keep triptychs out
of the kitchen. let’s say we talk bodies.

wrist, clavicle, shoulder blade → moth, dragonfly, hummingbird →
Ford, Cadillac, Chevrolet → mustang, palomino, arabian → Sahara, Mojave, Death Valley →
peak, plateau, cordillera
→ rope, twine, thread
→ clock, pistol, dictionary →

sidewalks, tires, all those abandoned buildings. when did you leave Detroit, olena?
in the winter, there is a fear
of conjugation, you say. in the spring, a calamity
of the soul. we reduce ourselves to this-and-that, but remain
obsessed by this-that-and-the-other.

David says i’ve made him a watcher of clouds. i tell him it’s because i miss the Gulf of Mexico.
i meant for this to accrue no more than the weight of a postcard.

i drove over a dam
a plane in Orion’s belt
suicide lane nearly killed me
i didn’t stop until Wickenburg
wrist did all the work

dear david:

meaning doesn’t want another list

wants is, wants no name

in a shoebox, a generation of twine bracelets, letters i was too afraid to sign.
dear, i have been tyrannized by objects.
i come fleeing.
david:

tonight, i hate the presence, the absence of airplanes.

my mother’s fall smell is on me—cigarettes and the cold.

a daughter will only ever know the family story
of her name. she’ll say Embry happened
the night Smokey Nightingale tattooed an owl onto mother’s left shoulder.

with a turn of my wrist i could give her hours, but
we’ll betray the field just the same, like a horse.
dear fadra:

if the bird dies but you keep the cage

if only small things fit a cage

if i imagine for a minute, mother, that this denies the existence of airplanes

then all that’s left to prove
the desert in august is some old man’s busted sense of span.
olenia, i want your logical game for the unbeliever to work, but
it's November now. i've forgotten algebra.
all the equations escaped
at the variable and horrifying speed of birth. i've begun
to make matchbox caskets.
in one, a needle. in one, an opal
my grandmother warned me not to wear—bad luck.
in the reverend's last letter, he accused me
of guerilla warfare. the wedding is still on.
sometimes a tern will fly 12,000 miles
between one season and the next. David says he's never seen wild horses.
i tell him it's because horses don't often wade water.
dear alphabet:

though i eat apples, i never took to \( k \).
or to cooking,

though Grandmother willed me a stack of cookbooks.

her vegetables shriveled on the stove, according to the old recipes.
her begonias somehow survived summer.

Lily and i spent all of August rolling bali shag, peeling tangerines,

conserving light bulbs. Las Vegas was a joke we used
in order to distinguish Pittsburgh from Paris. i came west
out of ignorance.

the last time we spoke on the phone, alphabet, you admitted you hate diphthongs.
i told you i hate jukeboxes. mistakenly,
i thought this would console you.

“why would you say that to me?”
“why would you say \textit{that} to me?”

two quarters later, someone hung up on someone. (dear someone:

pronouns have always been worse.)

because for you, alphabet, as for any good roman, there is no difference
between conquering and yielding.
dear embry:

in the city, wear heavy boots, listen to headphones.

up Broadway and down into the subway. it takes sixty seconds to cross into Brooklyn underground.

in the desert, count the suicide lanes between Las Vegas and Phoenix. the atlas isn’t exact, but it’s hard to pinpoint the initial mistake.

after a smash-up, we’ll be able to try something new.
this is the weakness i associate with December.

Whacher.

if a weapon were required, would you
bring a pistol or a cage? what
would you pull from the pantry?

eye, ear, cock. each of the I's has gone brittle.

three pale hearts : this pathetic insufficiency.

*this*—
if i give her up, where will the ghost go?

if i give her up, is she still?

recognizing the ghost means recognizing me.

how does she recognize her?
olena:

they carpet-bombed the old tenements today, like churches in a war. afterwards, someone suggested bringing out the dead.

in the subway, a woman leaps the platform like a ledge—A to C, 1 to 3.

in the field, she tries to feed a crane.

when birds shy away, olena, their wings look like nets. like boats conducted along longitudes alone.

like me, in spite of latitude’s allowances, traveling a single line.
david:

even though we’ve come away with scars, the cactus won’t remember our names;

crickets, like boats listing on shoals, always offer something of mishap and consolation;

ribs comma the spine : crick-crack ankles period all departure;

i would never warn you to be fearful of shipwreck : don’t warn me against aircrash.
dear lily:

here, no birds. no anchors. counted planes.
been stealing the titles of paintings for awhile now.
seasonal shepherd, vicious lonesome, the lay of the land.
i’ve thrown this out twice now. each time i start with today.
you were always better at salvage:
even after the Bulgarian admitted how fucked up he is, you squatted down
gave birth in a field.
i don't suppose any letter can be every thing.
this means only this, but all the same
i still love you.
how do i explain that i want you as clearly as i do not?
quickening
to quicken

to give or restore to life; to make alive; to vivify or revive; to animate (as the soul or the body)
to give, add, or restore vigour to (a person or thing); to stimulate, stir up, rouse, excite, inspire
to kindle (a fire); to cause or help to burn up
to make (a curve) sharper or (a slope) steeper
to become faster, to be accelerated
to receive life, to become living; also, to recover life
to come into a state of existence or activity comparable to life
to grow bright
of a female: to reach the stage of pregnancy at which the child shows signs of life
when the dog, my sister's child, died, i wrote another—
the dog, my sister, which
you was the ghost?
dear heart sweetheart you
don't exist. this should be easier.
this need. this me. this
too-still-to-be-ghost. can't i incite you
at least to ghost?
the father: i’ll make it up. i’ll have to
imagine the you-before-you-died, who
wrote letters that mixed up my name with daughter, which
let me take up more space than i
know how to do alone. you taught me that
there’s no balm. i can’t believe
i’d know you if you called out.
when he called, i called
your brother by name. i recognized
an approximation of you
across the distance. one of too many
satellites too large to break
out of orbit. there's no comfort in knowing
you approximately. fatherishness
won't ever be enough. father,
you're my ghost today. daughter—
tell me your tattoos (your catalogue for mine)

you had chains on your wrists. left wrist, ∞
portraits of women on your arms. left arm, wrenches

they were good-looking pin-ups?
your mother? your first wife?
the other loves of your life?

(they were your work)

the unfinished frame of a mural on your back.
upper back, three chinese characters
left shoulder blade, a boy in a boat

tell me all your tattoos.
the rest of your catalogue for mine.

tell me why whiskey, why motors, why my mother.

why you really died.

tell me you’re talking to me. tell me you’re talking to me right now.
say you’re still the father, i’m still the daughter.

ink makes it so.
you should never have let go. the only fish of my kind.
i want to be your daughter.

the tattoos all mean i want to believe i’m still your daughter.

49
i find you where i look for you:

at the wheel of every fastback i see

the bottom of every jack daniels

each railroad track i cross, lifting my feet for luck

every mechanic i meet.

you’ve almost always been dead, but

more than before, you’re dead

again. i made it up.

i haunt me myself.
devotion in better times

about me is just timeline. you cracked
at last, said, *I'm Jesus' wife.* it was a mixed blessing.
loving you became a thing i don't know
how to (drive stick, make Rosa's rolls,
whistle). it's probably over-
wrought to say, what we did then is still our lives,
but this is written (over, over) to you.
what the crowd saw, or a repeating prayer

a tire exploded
the man died on a bridge
it was a love letter to the city:
a letter to a man:
the tire exploded: if he dreamed
the world was inside: underwater
things bend what you want
to hear it was another life:
he died in our hands:
can you hear me?
the easy devotion of distance (fragment)

crossing the Atlantic didn't make you
tenable again. easy to love you,

\textit{too} in postcards—no return address.
the building and the height

you turned in to me as if you couldn’t help it.
i was the building, you were the height.

the climb is a question of jumping. you couldn’t help asking, *keep me with you.* i couldn’t bend. past the edge, we couldn’t
tell the difference between you and me.

the building and the height, distance and devotion.
some morning when i’ve learned to want
simply, i’ll tell you the story
of you & me. there’ll be beginning, middle, end.
some morning that won’t come
i’ll love you. that’ll be it.
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