

The Idea of Elegy

For William Watkin

I have been rethinking the idea of elegy
 in the afterglow of William Watkin's book *On Mourning*
 it has been throwing out some new threads for me
 though sorting them is like TV surfing
 I have been wondering whether poetry will rebirth
 now that it is moribund
 and why I like to write multimodal poems
 and I have been brooding over the geographical scattering
 of my deceased friends tightly packed together
 in the technicolour menagerie of my head
 and whether memorials are for the silent or the living

I have been questioning if there is
 mileage in still being a poet
 or if by now I should be a novelist
 because everything is a terminus from which you depart
 and I have been wrestling with
 the western model of emotion as spontaneous feeling
 which is the cultural roadblock of our times
 and thinking of Hilary and how I must keep her memory alive
 I have been experiencing this as an urgent responsibility
 so pressing it has been difficult for me to undertake
 and I have been cogitating about
 whether I can hold death in a way
 which calms it before it kicks me over
 time is running out

each day I think about the difference between poetry and prose
 there often doesn't seem to be any
 only the line which has a limited life-span
 and (as William says) often refuses to lie down

Derrida implied that he never came to terms with mortality
 though he found words in which to talk of it
 nothing takes the route it seeks

history is always popping pills
and even the fates spin to the erratic
rhythm of the remote control
I thought I would write a poem about Hilary
in metaphors which would shoot themselves up
first they couldn't find the vein
then they overdosed

She cried 'you'll leave all that behind'
but the average life span of a book is tiny
Arthur Miller thought that bequeathing a trail
was the most telling experience you could have

but it has to beckon to someone
(usually its your progeny)
maybe I will have a great-great-great niece
who will be passionate about poetry
or curious about her heritage
or just interested in herself
she will dust off my volume *The Erotics of Geography*
and reinvent it as an Australian classic
a beacon of multimodal writing
an example of migratory ambivalence
or maybe she will simply read it
or someone else will
unrequested, unrelated

I wonder why some people
prefer my on-the-page works
to the off-the-page ones
seems phobic almost perverse
it never fails to surprise me
how the poem stalls and stalls
and then suddenly starts up like a freshly-tuned car
I have been craving for so long for mobility
and suddenly it zooms forward
a whirligig amongst the tottering hi-rise
a joyride through the hallucinogenic oblique
so many times I had thought of trashing
that stand-alone file on my computer

now caught up with others
in a knees-up of poetic sociality

every time I saw Hilary
she added more weft to the warp
I don't want to cram her into a story
William says that death forms
the outer limit of containment, categories and definition
yet it is also powerful and precise
the bull's eye of destiny
though I am never in the centre when it hits
if it's happening in Australia you can be sure I am in England
if it's happening in England you can be sure I am in Australia
I always miss out on the big day
perhaps even my own
which like all unpleasant but unavoidable appointments
I will need to prepare for though I do not know how
I must check first that Hilary is mentioned
in the major reference tomes on weaving
that Rory's book is on the road
that Kate's photos are pasted up in albums
and then make a note of it in my diary

The reader of my book

The reader is at a bus shelter waiting for a bus.
He sits with a book on his knee.
It is *The Erotics of Geography*.

I try not to stand in his way
or make a shadow. He sees me
but I am not transparent to him.

His appearance does not stand out.
It tells no stories, haunts no metaphor.
Slow minutes pass.
He opens the book and flicks the pages.
A poem at the end
another at the beginning.
If there is a logic to this process
it is one I miss.
The reader of my book
seems scarcely to be reading

is wayward and distracted.
But he is my only reader.
Soon he will be on the bus
taking my book with him
as he travels to another suburb
another town, another country,
or even into outer space.

The bus arrives
cutting round the corner
the reader rushes to it
jumps aboard.
I want to shout to him
'Don't leave me
you are all I have.'

the automatic doors begin to close
he hurls the book behind him

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more or less in my direction.

I can only keep my eye on it and catch.

Translations

All day the longing to redirect yourself has been puffing out its cheeks. You need to change the wind direction. You need a touch of ventriloquism. You need to visit a place that is not expecting you, and doesn't even know you exist.

Writing! Why are you always over the water, out of my reach?

My heritage, though you may not realise it, is tantalisingly mixed. I have a few loose ends in Lithuania. But I've never travelled there, and couldn't find my way around if I did.

She sank into a void where they only spoke an alien tongue. She could not follow the street signs, or go to work, or shop. So she starved and took to lying in bed, and waited for the end. But then, as death came debt-collecting, the foreign terms jumped out of her mouth. They tumbled down the stairs like unexpected guests. She was saved but had known she would be: it was the same as when she wrote. She couldn't, and she couldn't, and she couldn't, and she couldn't, and then suddenly she always found she could.

The translator sits at his table, turning over cards. He does not know the rules of the game, but can invent whatever he likes. He can choose any card that takes his fancy or chase cards from other packs. He can load the dice, refuse his turn, or show his hand to history.

A good poem is untranslatable, it depends on how one language needs to speak. In this way, poetry lags behind music, which says everything and nothing, usually in the same endurance-testing breath. Next to music, poetry is a little heavy, a little debased, a little awkward. But while music comes clean about this, poetry pretends it has definitive things to say.

Visitors from several countries came to him one night, dressed in brightly coloured rags. They danced for him and after that they started to undress. He said, I don't want you naked, but please try on each other's clothes. Don't be shy or fearful! Chose colours that you don't particularly like, don't feel you have to mate and match.

So they all took off their rags and exchanged, and exchanged, and exchanged. They kept it up till dawn, when they decided to depart. Everyone left fully dressed, but no one claimed the clothes they owned.

An ambassador came to meet me with a large hat and pointy shoes. He was on a world-wide promotional tour. He said, I am sure we can come to an agreement, and it is this: you will use *our* words in *your* country, then you can travel free in ours. I said, get lost, you unctuous imperialist, don't make me laugh. We aren't that short of cash, you know. *It's not just words, it's everything they carry with them.* He got up and quietly left. You can deal with these people easily, by throwing language back in their laps.

One day when I am old, I will lose my memory. It will be like a field with nothing in it, or strewn with too much junk. I will look at one object and then another, and I won't know how they interrelate. But the past will flow downstream while poetry tends its pitch. And maybe I will wake one day and find I can speak Chinese.